

# **IDOLATRY IN THE THEOLOGY OF KARL BARTH**

**William J. Brennan III**

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD  
at the  
University of St Andrews**



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*Idolatry in the Theology of Karl Barth*

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University of  
St Andrews

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of PhD  
at the  
University of St Andrews

14 March 2016

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### *Abstract*

This dissertation analyses and critically evaluates an aspect of Karl Barth's thought, the understanding of which is important to a broader understanding of Barth, his relationship to other (especially iconoclastic) thinkers, and his relevance for contemporary theology: his understanding and critique of idolatry and the idol. Chapter 2 argues that it was revelation which both drove Barth's idolatry-critique and determined his concepts of idolatry and the idol. It analyses Barth's idolatry-critique as it was levelled against natural theology, and offers an evaluation of the picture of Barth's thought which emerges. Chapter 3 analyses Barth's idolatry-critique in relation to the doctrine of God. Directives which, for Barth, had to be adhered to within the development of the doctrine of God for the avoidance of idolatry, are discussed. Finally, an evaluation and critique of Barth's critique of idolatry within the doctrine of God, and of his own adherence to these directives, is offered. Chapter 4 analyses the relationship of Barth's idolatry-critique to his discussion of religion. It is shown that Barth, in his mature thought, criticised both the essence of religion and certain theological uses of the concept of religion as idolatry. Barth's critique of religion as idolatry is itself subjected to critique, and the question of what bearing his critique of religion as idolatry ought to have for Christian, theological engagement with adherents of other world religions is taken up. Chapter 5 summarises and discusses further some of the findings and implications of this study. It is suggested that Barth's thoroughly christological critique of idolatry (which is not without its own problems), in that it stands in contrast to the less particularistic forms of idolatry-critique set forth by several other modern scholars, raises the question of whether an idolatry-critique like his own might be called for within contemporary theology.

*For Isabel, Liam, and Scotland*

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Abbreviations

- Barth – Thurneysen 1913-1921      Barth, Karl. *Karl Barth – Eduard Thurneysen Briefwechsel, Band I: 1913-1921 (GA V.3)*. Edited by Edward Thurneysen. Zurich: TVZ, 1973.
- CD      Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*. 4 vols. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-1975. Citations of the CD will be given in the following format: CD volume number/part-volume number, page number.
- Chr.D.      Barth, Karl. *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf, 1. Band: Die Lehre vom Worte Gottes, Prolegomena zur christlichen Dogmatik, 1927 (GA II.14)*. Edited by Gerhard Sauter. Zurich: TVZ, 1982.
- GA      *Karl Barth Gesamtausgabe* (Zurich: TVZ).
- GD      Barth, Karl. *The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion, Volume One*. Edited by Hannelotte Reiffen. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991.
- ‘Gott und die Götter’      Barth, Karl. ‘Gott und die Götter,’ in *Unveröffentlichte Texte zur Kirchlichen Dogmatik (GA II.50)*, edited by Hinrich Stoevesandt and Michael Trowitzsch, 9-113. Zurich, TVZ, 2014.
- KD      Barth, Karl. *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*. 4 vols. Zurich: TVZ, 1980. Citations of the KD will be given as follows: KD volume number/part-volume number, page number.
- KGSG      Barth, Karl. *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God according to the Teaching of the Reformation*. Translated by J.L.M. Haire and Ian Henderson. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938.
- Predigten 1913, 1914, etc.*      Barth, Karl. *Predigten 1913 (GA I.8)*. Edited by Nelly Barth and Gerhard Sauter.



*UCR II*

Barth, Karl. *«Unterricht in der christlichen Religion» Teil 2: Die Lehre von Gott / Die Lehre vom Menschen 1924/25 (GA II.20)*. Edited by Hinrich Stoevesandt. Zurich: TVZ, 1990.

## **Chapter 1: Idolatry in the Theology of Karl Barth**

The critique of idolatry and of idols formed a significant part of the negative aspect of Karl Barth's theology, from the time during which he was a liberal student of Herrmann until the end of his career. Indeed, everything which Barth would call sin in practical living, and which he sought to avoid in theology, he could also describe and critique as idolatry. Of course, this negative aspect of his thought, as with all negative aspects of it, was, and must be understood as, derivative of, and subservient to, his positive concerns: primarily, his commitment to rendering faithful testimony to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

### **1.1 The Value of Considering 'Idolatry in the Theology of Karl Barth'**

Nevertheless, the negative, iconoclastic aspects of Barth's thought, and especially his critique of idolatry and the idol, merit detailed analysis for a number of reasons. In the first place, their consideration simply helps to understand Barth, who by all measures was one of the most important theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more fully. Derivative though they were, they were both integral to the structure of his thought (because of the very fact that they were for him necessary implications of the attempt to testify to revelation) and of great prominence in his (both intra- and extra-theological) polemical strategy.<sup>1</sup> Any account of Barth's overall project is simply incomplete without a careful analysis of the logic and function of the negative, iconoclastic aspects of his thought and rhetoric, among which the critique of idolatry played a dominating role.

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<sup>1</sup> Within theology, one may point to the way in which the critique of idolatry was utilised by Barth within the doctrine of God as a form of self-differentiation from and criticism of the doctrines of God of Protestant liberalism (see chapter 3). As an example of the way in which the critique of idolatry and the idol played an important role in Barth's extra-theological polemical strategy, it is natural to think of Barth's criticism of National Socialism (see chapter 2).

Secondly, Barth's idolatry-critique must be understood in order that its cautions and admonitions to contemporary, constructive theology might be brought into view. If Barth by his idolatry-critique both explicitly and implicitly closed off certain paths, and pointed the way down other ones, for constructive theology (and he did), then the latter would do well to understand how and why he sought to do so, and to think carefully about whether and how these cautions and admonitions ought to be heeded. The present work will bring into view the explicit and the implicit warnings and admonitions of Barth's critique of idolatry, identify their internal logic, and offer an evaluation of them, with a view toward understanding what their implications are and should be for contemporary theology.

Thirdly, a consideration of Barth's idolatry-critique provides direction for theology in its attempt to understand the nature of the critical, prophetic role that it must play, in relation to itself, in relation to the Church and her worship, and in relation to the world at large. If theology must, at least at times, still say 'no,' to itself, to the world, to the church, and to the individual (and indeed it must) then it must think carefully about why it must do this, when it must do it, and to what end. And if the critique of idolatry must play a part in theology's exercise of this role (and obedience to Scripture demands this), then theology must seek to answer the questions of the nature of idolatry and the idol. Barth's theology, particularly in its critique of idolatry, is exemplary in its fulfilment of this critical, prophetic role,<sup>2</sup> and so a consideration of the negative aspects

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<sup>2</sup> Though this will be discussed further below, Barth's prophetic stances *vis-à-vis* both the events surrounding WWI, and National Socialism and WWII, often expressed in the form of an idolatry-critique, are widely (and properly) extolled, and he is often recognised as having taken such stands even when many of his theological contemporaries did not. See, e.g., Stanley Hauerwas, 'Remembering as a Moral Task: The Challenge of the Holocaust,' in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 331; Alister McGrath, 'Reclaiming our Roots and Vision: Scripture and the Stability of the Christian Church,' in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 77-78; Angela Dienhart

of Barth's thought, and of his idolatry-critique in particular, must surely form an important part of contemporary theology's attempt to think through these questions.

Fourthly, an analysis of Barth's idolatry-critique helps to situate Barth's thought in relation to a number of other important negative and iconoclastic thinkers who loom large in contemporary thought, both in philosophy and theology. In mind here are figures like Nietzsche, Derrida, Levinas, Marion and other broadly 'postmodern' and anti-metaphysical thinkers. Previous works have sought to describe Barth's relationship to these figures and others like them.<sup>3</sup> They have, however, (as Ward notes<sup>4</sup>) often focussed almost exclusively upon Barth's thinking as represented by *Romans II*. Often, they have not emerged out of a sustained analysis of Barth at all – his overall theological programme and his indebtedness to modern theology. Wood is right, in other words, to suspect that 'in much talk of the 'postmodern Barth' the adjective is of far more interest than the noun.'<sup>5</sup> Thus, the similarities which have been identified between Barth and these other thinkers seem (and perhaps are) rather forced, superficial and ultimately even trivial.<sup>6</sup> What is needed if one is to understand Barth's relationship

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Hancock, *Karl Barth's Emergency Homiletic, 1932-1933: A Summons to Prophetic Witness at the Dawn of the Third Reich* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> The major contributors to this effort include Richard H. Roberts (*A Theology on its Way? Essays on Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991)), Hans Küng ('Karl Barth and the Postmodern Paradigm,' *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 9, 1 (1988): 8-31), David E. Klemm ('Towards a Rhetoric of Postmodern Theology: Through Barth and Heidegger,' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55, 3 (1987): 443-469), Walter Lowe (*Theology and Difference: The Wound of Reason* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993)), Isolde Andrews (*Deconstructing Barth: A Study of the Complementary Methods in Karl Barth and Jacques Derrida* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1996)), William Stacy Johnson (*The Mystery of God: Karl Barth and the Postmodern Foundations of Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997)), and Graham Ward (*Barth, Derrida, and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995)); 'Barth, Modernity and Postmodernity,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 274-295).

<sup>4</sup> Ward, 'Barth, Modernity and Postmodernity,' 279-280. Ward specifically mentions the work of Roberts, Klemm, Lowe and Webb (*Refiguring Theology: The Rhetoric of Karl Barth* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991)).

<sup>5</sup> Donald Wood, *Barth's Theology of Interpretation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 2.

to these figures and the tradition(s) to which they belong is, rather, a careful analysis of the negative aspects, and particularly the iconoclastic aspect, of Barth's thinking, undertaken with careful attention to its place in Barth's larger theological programme and to Barth's indebtedness to quintessentially modern theologians like Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889) and Wilhelm Herrmann (1846-1922). The present work seeks, in part, to contribute to such an analysis.

### **1.2 The Aim and Plan of the Present Work**

In particular, it seeks to provide a comprehensive conceptual analysis of idolatry-critique, idolatry, and the idol in Barth's thinking across his career, and, at the appropriate points, an evaluation of the same. It emerges from a careful study of these concepts in Barth's works from the time of his very early, pre-Marburg days, all the way until the end of his life, including, as will be seen, texts which rarely receive attention, particularly within English-language Barth studies.

The present work will unfold across five chapters. This present introductory chapter will below analyse the most relevant secondary literature, and enumerate specifically some of the questions which this work seeks to answer which have, to this point, not been answered (or which have not been answered satisfactorily).

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 analyse Barth's understanding and critique of idolatry and the idol via analyses of the way in which Barth's idolatry-critique was related to, and deployed within, his treatments of the doctrine of the knowledge of God (chapter 2), of

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<sup>6</sup> It is, for example, a mischaracterisation of Barth's discussion of the theological use of concepts to describe God in the *CD II/1* to describe it, as does Ward ('Barth, Modernity and Postmodernity,' 285-287, 289), as a proto-postmodern critique of the correspondence view of language and affirmation of non-realism. Barth's discussion, as will be seen, is an explicitly theological attempt (with reformation roots, even if his position is a radicalisation of the reformation position) to testify to the fact that, according to revelation, the noetic effects of human sin mean that the human being cannot think concepts such that they apply to God. Apparent overlap between this position and a general critique of the correspondence theory of language is superficial, at best.

the doctrine of God (chapter 3), and of religion and the religions (chapter 4). These chapters also help to uncover and evaluate the cautions and directives for contemporary theological engagement with these topics which are either explicit or implicit within Barth's idolatry critique.

Chapter 2 will analyse the relationship of idolatry-critique (and Barth's thought on the nature of the idol and idolatry) to Barth's doctrine of the knowledge of God across his career. It will there be argued that Barth's idolatry-critique emerged, first and foremost, from his consideration of the question of the source of the knowledge of God – broadly understood. In particular, it will be argued that it was Barth's positive conviction that the knowledge of God comes solely by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ that drove his idolatry-critique, and that the fact that his idolatry-critique was so driven determined his understanding of the nature of idolatry and the idol. Because this is the case, in this chapter more than others, and especially in its discussion of the relationship between revelation and idolatry, a great deal will be said concerning the contours of Barth's concepts of idolatry and the idol. Furthermore, it will be shown that the formal relationship between revelation and idolatry was such that material changes to Barth's doctrine of revelation necessarily meant changes in the scope of his critique of idolatry. The chapter will also analyse Barth's idolatry-critique as it was levelled against natural theology. Finally, it will offer a criticism of Barth's idolatry-critique on the grounds that the understanding of revelation which drove it, and caused it to be levelled against all natural theology without distinction, cannot be fully accepted.

Chapter 3 will analyse the relationship of Barth's idolatry-critique (and his thought on the nature of the idol and idolatry) to the doctrine of God. It will be argued there that, for Barth, idolatry always contained both subjective and objective moments,

and that, within the doctrine of God, the subjective moment of idolatry (the utilisation of the wrong source for the knowledge and description of God) was called ‘speculation,’ and the inevitably resulting objective moment of idolatry (the possession of a doctrine of God of which God was not the object) was typically understood in terms of Feuerbach’s projection thesis. It will be argued that Barth held that *all* doctrines of God were, in the strict sense, idolatrous, but also that *some* – the ones which corresponded to revelation in the way proper to and possible for the created intellect – could avoid being only idolatrous. Several directives which Barth followed himself, which he implicitly or explicitly enjoined upon others, and which, according to him, had to be followed within the development of the doctrine of God for the avoidance of idolatry, will be discussed. Finally, an evaluation and critique of Barth’s critique of idolatry within the doctrine of God, and of his own adherence to these directives, will be offered.

Chapter 4 will analyse the relationship of Barth’s idolatry-critique to his discussion of religion, focusing upon the seventh chapter of Barth’s *Romans II* and especially §17 of the *CD I/2*. The understanding of ‘religion’ of liberal Protestantism, from whence Barth’s own definition of religion was drawn, along with the liberal Protestant theological use of the concept of religion, which provided the main impetus for Barth’s own theological engagement with it, will be described. It will be shown that, in *Romans II*, Barth considered religion to have the potential to reveal idolatry, while in the *CD I/2* religion simply *was* idolatry with no capacity to reveal itself, or anything else, as such. Thus, while in *Romans II*, Barth sought to criticise the idolisation of religion by liberal Protestant theology, in the *CD I/2* he sought to criticise not only that, but also religion itself as being a form of idolatry. Thus it will be argued that, contrary to much of the secondary literature, Barth’s evaluation of religion was much more

positive in *Romans II* than it was in the *CD I/2*. Barth's critique of religion as idolatry will itself be subjected to critique. Finally, the question of what bearing his critique of religion as idolatry ought to have for Christian, theological engagement with adherents of other world religions will be taken up.

Chapter 5 will discuss further some of the findings of this study. It will be suggested, further, that Barth's thoroughly theological, christological, critique of idolatry, which stands in contrast to the less particularistic forms of idolatry-critique set forth by several other modern scholars, raises the question of whether an idolatry-critique like his own might be called for within contemporary theology.

### **1.3 The State of the Question**

Idolatry-critique and the concepts of idolatry and the idol in Barth have never before been subjected to a full-scale conceptual analysis, whether in English- or in German-language scholarship.<sup>7</sup> Treatments of these themes, in whatever format, have always been very limited in scope materially and (with one significant exception<sup>8</sup>) chronologically (whether limited to the consideration of one or two of Barth's works, or to the consideration of Barth's works within a narrow window of time).

In English-language theology these themes have been taken up only rarely, and, for the most part, superficially. While there are numerous places in which English-language commentators have noted the importance of one or more of these themes in

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<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the closest thing to a full-length engagement with these themes is Sabine Plonz's, *Die herrenlosen Gewalten: Ein Relektüre Karl Barths in befreiungstheologische Perspektive* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald, 1995). Plonz's main goal is, however, to understand Barth's relationship to liberation theology, and not to provide a comprehensive systematic and conceptual analysis of the themes in question.

<sup>8</sup> The exception, it will be seen below, is van Wyk's article, but his ability to consider his theme across Barth's career came at the price of substantive engagement with Barth's texts. As will be seen, his was a highly descriptive, survey approach.

Barth in passing, sustained engagement with them of any kind may be found in only two works: David Clough's 2007 chapter 'Karl Barth on Religious and Irreligious Idolatry,'<sup>9</sup> and I.W.C. van Wyk's 2007 article "'God and the gods': Faith and Human-Made Idols in the Theology of Karl Barth.'<sup>10</sup>

Both of these works, but especially that of van Wyk, are quite descriptive in character. The overarching aim of Clough's chapter seems to be to show that, 'Barth's account of idolatry is significant in identifying three unlikely and unsuspecting groups of idolaters.'<sup>11</sup> Van Wyk's article is a survey of the occasions upon which Barth took up the theme of 'God and the gods,' which aims to demonstrate that obedience to the first commandment was of importance to him throughout his career. Both van Wyk and Clough were undoubtedly successful in their aims: they have established both that the critique of idolatry was of great importance to him throughout his career, and that he directed it against unlikely groups. Their work needs to be supplemented, however, by a more complete conceptual analysis of idolatry-critique in Barth, and by further attention to the questions of the nature of the human act of idolatry and of the idol in his thinking. The present work seeks, as far as possible within the constraints with which it must operate, to provide a comprehensive conceptual account of idolatry-critique (and its function), idolatry and the idol in Barth.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> David Clough, 'Karl Barth on Religious and Irreligious Idolatry,' in *Idolatry: False Worship in the Bible, Early Judaism, and Christianity*, ed. Stephen Barton, (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 213-227.

<sup>10</sup> I.W.C. van Wyk, "'God and the gods': Faith and Human-Made Idols in the Theology of Karl Barth,' *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 63, 4 (2007): 1587-1612.

<sup>11</sup> Clough, 'Karl Barth on Idolatry,' 226.

<sup>12</sup> Of course, it will not be possible for the present work to be comprehensive in the sense of offering a direct analysis of all the specific ways in which the critique of idolatry functioned in Barth. It will, rather, analyse Barth's understanding and critique of idolatry and the idol conceptually *via* analysis of Barth's idolatry-critique as levelled at three important and broad theological *topoi*, taking the judgments derived from these latter analyses to be representative and descriptive of main features of the

Furthermore, these two works do not engage substantively with many works of Barth's which are of importance to a consideration of the themes here under discussion. While Clough engages with Barth's writings substantively in a way in which van Wyk (whose survey approach prohibits such engagement) does not, the former limits that engagement mainly to Barth's *CD* I/2 and II/1 (especially §17), while at times also referring to *Romans II*. Clough was unable to engage, for example, with the important unpublished §42.1 of the *CD*, which is entitled 'Gott und die Götter,'<sup>13</sup> and which only appeared in print after his chapter was published. Van Wyk's article does speak briefly of the unpublished §42 but, once more, his survey approach does not allow for much substantive engagement with it. The little that he does say about it includes a crucial misunderstanding of its place in Barth's thought on idolatry and the idol which wrongly minimises its importance; he suggests, for example, that the reason Barth's unpublished §42 was not included in the *Church Dogmatics* was that he later realised (as evidenced by the doctrine of *das Nichtige* in §50) that gods and idols were "nothing" really, and without the capacity to survive.<sup>14</sup> The present work emerges from a comprehensive, sustained analysis of Barth's works, including the unpublished §42, and corrects this misunderstanding.

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way in which Barth's idolatry-critique functioned, and idolatry and the idol were defined in his thinking, more broadly.

<sup>13</sup> It was not until 2014 that §42 was published, under the title, 'Der Schöpfer und seine Offenbarung,' as a part of the following volume: Karl Barth, *Unveröffentlichte Texte zur kirchlichen Dogmatik (GA II.50)*, ed. Hinrich Stoevesandt and Michael Trowitzsch (Zurich: TVZ, 2014). It may be found on pages 5-304 of that volume. Through the present work this paragraph will continue to be referred to as the 'unpublished §42,' in reference to the fact that Barth himself chose not to publish it, and in order to distinguish it from the §42 which is found in the *Church Dogmatics*. 'Gott und die Götter' (9-113) and 'Der Glaube und die Weltanschauungen' (113-304) are the titles of the two sub-sections which comprise the paragraph. The former will be focussed upon in the present work, and will be cited as 'Gott und die Götter.'

<sup>14</sup> Van Wyk, 'Gatg,' 1595.

In spite of the differences between the present work and that of Clough and van Wyk, there are some basic material insights relevant to the former which emerge in the latter. These will be noted below.

The situation is slightly different within German-language scholarship, for there exists within it a slightly larger body of literature which treats of the relevant themes in Barth, some works within which contain more conceptual analysis than any works in English. Still, there exists no comprehensive, conceptual account of these themes within Barth. Of the relevant German literature – Fischer’s article ‘Götze des Bürgertums oder Herr der Welt? Die Theologische Revolution Karl Barths’ (1966),<sup>15</sup> Stoevesandt’s article ‘Gott und die Götter’<sup>16</sup> (1986), Plasger’s chapter ‘Das Bild und die Bilder: Im Gespräch mit Karl Barth zum Bilderverbot’ (2002),<sup>17</sup> and several works (or parts of them) by Hailer (2003, 2006, 2013)<sup>18</sup> – nearly all have a far narrower chronological scope, and a narrower or merely different focus materially, than the present work. The result is that a number of the questions that the present work will answer have not been answered previously, or have only been answered unsatisfactorily.

Fischer’s 1966 article, for example, was devoted to the description of a particular form of Barth’s idolatry-*critique*, namely his criticism of the idolatry of the bourgeoisie ‘*Bindestriche-Christentum*’ regnant between the two world wars. His

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<sup>15</sup> Joachim Fischer, ‘Götze des Bürgertums oder Herr der Welt? Die Theologische Revolution Karl Barths,’ *Estudos Teológicos* 6 (1966): 1-21.

<sup>16</sup> Hinrich Stoevesandt, ‘Gott und die Götter,’ *Evangelische Theologie* 46 (1986): 457-476.

<sup>17</sup> Georg Plasger, ‘Das Bild und die Bilder: Im Gespräch mit Karl Barth zum Bilderverbot,’ in *Du sollst dir kein Bildnis machen: Von der Weisheit des Bilderverbotes*, ed. Jörg Schmidt (Wuppertal: Foedus-Verlag, 2002), 49-73.

<sup>18</sup> These years are meant to denote the following works by Martin Hailer, respectively: ‘Gott und die Götter: zum nachgelassenen §42 KD,’ *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 19, 1 (2003): 60-79; *Gott und die Götzen: Über Gottes Macht angesichts der lebensbestimmende Mächte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupert, 2006); ‘Gott und die Götter: Auseinandersetzung mit einem heiklen Thema, beraten von Karl Barth,’ in *Gott - Götter - Götzen: XIV. Europäischer Kongress für Theologie (11.-15. September 2011 in Zürich)*, ed. Christoph Schwobel (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2013), 636-656.

consideration of Barth's works was largely limited to six, each composed between the years 1919 and 1922: *Romans I* (1919), 'Der Christ in der Gesellschaft'<sup>19</sup> (1919), 'Biblische Fragen, Einsichten und Ausblicke'<sup>20</sup> (1920), *Romans II* (1922), 'Grundfragen der christliche Sozialethik'<sup>21</sup> (1922), and 'Das Wort Gottes als Aufgabe der Theologie'<sup>22</sup> (1922). His account of matters, accurate as far its description went, but narrowly focussed as it was, did not attend sustainedly to the question of the nature of the idol or idolatry in Barth's thinking, nor was his consideration of Barth's idolatry-critique comprehensive, either chronologically or materially. This meant, further, that he did not engage seriously with the question of development in Barth's thinking on these matters across his career,<sup>23</sup> and that he did not discuss the way in which idolatry-critique functioned at a number of important theological *loci*.

The 2002 chapter of Plasger is similar in that it focusses upon a certain form of Barth's idolatry-critique, namely his discussion of the biblical prohibition of images, and that he does this through consideration of a small number of Barth's works during a

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<sup>19</sup> Karl Barth, 'Der Christ in der Gesellschaft,' in *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1924), 33-69. English translation: 'The Christian in Society,' in *The Word of God and Theology*, trans. Amy Marga (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 31-70.

<sup>20</sup> Karl Barth, 'Biblische Fragen, Einsichten und Ausblicke,' in *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1924), 70-98. English translation: 'Biblical Questions, Insights and Vistas,' in *The Word of God and Theology*, translated by Amy Marga (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 71-100.

<sup>21</sup> Karl Barth, 'Grundfragen der christliche Sozialethik: Auseinandersetzung mit Paul Althaus, 1922,' in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1922-1925 (GA III.19)*, ed. Holger Finze (Zurich: TVZ, 1990), 39-57. English translation: 'Basic Problems of Christian Social Ethics: Discussion with Paul Althaus,' in *The Beginnings of Dialectical Theology, vol. 1*, trans. Keith Crim, ed. James Robinson (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1968), 46-57.

<sup>22</sup> Karl Barth, 'Das Wort Gottes als Aufgabe der Theologie,' in *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1924), 156-178. English translation: 'The Word of God as the Task of Theology,' in *The Word of God and Theology*, trans. Amy Marga (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 171-198.

<sup>23</sup> He seemed to think that Barth's views were unchanged during and after this time period. Fischer, 'GdB,' 19-20.

narrow window of time: namely his 1935 sermon on Exodus 20.4-6, §17 of the *CD* 1/2 (1938), and, to a lesser degree, his *CD* 1/1 (1932). And while there is little in Plasger's presentation to contest, the limitations of his chapter do not allow for a conceptually or chronologically comprehensive account of idolatry-critique in Barth. It also does not treat sustainedly of questions relating to the nature of the human act of idolatry and the idol, nor does it give an account of Barth's development on the issues in question throughout his career.

Other works – namely, Stoevesandt's 1986 article and Hailer's 2003 article – are interpretations and evaluations of the unpublished §42.<sup>24</sup> While they are important for the present work, since the unpublished §42 is itself important, their limitations of scope mean that they only partially help to answer the questions that this work seeks to answer. Unlike Fischer and Plasger, Stoevesandt and Hailer in this article *do* treat sustainedly of the nature of the idol in Barth, though their chronological focus is again limited, and though they give very scant attention to the question of the nature of the act of idolatry, and the various ways in which idolatry-critique functioned within Barth's theology. Even beyond this, their treatments of the nature of the idol in the unpublished §42, and their accounts (or lack thereof) of the way in which Barth's understanding of the idol there relates to the ways in which he understood the idol at other points during his career, are problematic. The present work will provide a very different interpretation of what the unpublished §42 has to say about idols, and its relation to Barth's discussions of the idol (and, relatedly, of nothingness and the demons) elsewhere, than does either Stoevesandt or Hailer, and will thereby do greater justice to the details of Barth's writings and allow Barth's thought on idolatry and the nature of the idol to be

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<sup>24</sup> This is not, of course, meant to suggest that other works of Barth's are not also referenced (they are), but only that the interpretation and evaluation of this one work is the chief goal in both of these articles.

viewed as more stable throughout the *Church Dogmatics* period. In short, the work of Hailer and Stoevesandt differs from the present work not only in that it is narrower in scope (focussing upon the nature of the idol at a specific time in Barth's career), but also in that, where its concerns overlap with that of the present work, the latter will interpret Barth and his development very differently. Though the relevant sections of Hailer's 2006 book and his 2013 paper differ in some ways from his 2003 article (e.g., they consider slightly more of Barth's works than does the 2003 article) the present work differs from them in broadly the same way in which it differs from it.

Notwithstanding the fact that the relevant secondary literature differs in approach and (both chronological and material) scope from the present work, from the former a number of facts concerning idolatry-critique, idolatry and the idol in Barth relevant to the latter have emerged. First, as mentioned in the discussion of the work of Clough and van Wyk above, it has been demonstrated that idolatry was a matter of ongoing concern to Barth, and that he found and critiqued idolatry in a number of unexpected places.<sup>25</sup> Second, it has been generally seen, that in some sense idolatry-critique was for Barth the negative side of a more fundamental, positive concern, *viz.*, the concern to faithfully testify to revelation.<sup>26</sup> Third, it has been firmly established that, at least in the unpublished §42, Barth considered the idol or false god to be both *Nichts* (Hailer (2003)) and *Geschöpfe* (Stoevesandt (1986)). Fourth, it has been fairly well established that idolatry was in some sense a universal human reality for Barth.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See also Hailer, 'Götter,' 643-645.

<sup>26</sup> Fischer, 'GdB,' 9-10; Plasger, 'DBB,' 67; Van Wyk, 'Gatg,' 1588; Clough, 'Karl Barth on Idolatry,' 213.

<sup>27</sup> Hailer, *Götzen*, 279-280; Clough, 'Karl Barth on Idolatry,' 214.

It has not, however, been satisfactorily explained *how it is* that Barth could call idols both *Nichts* and *Geschöpfe* in the unpublished §42. Relatedly, the place of the unpublished §42 in Barth's thinking on the nature of the idol has not yet been determined. These questions are of great importance to any attempt to understand Barth's concept of the idol in general. Once again relatedly, the question of development in Barth's thinking on the nature of the idol during his *CD* period (especially across the unpublished §42, the *CD* §§50-51, and §78.2) has not yet been satisfactorily answered. More broadly, no satisfactory account of development in Barth's idolatry-critique, and the underlying reasons for it has been attempted. Numerous questions relating to the human act of idolatry: its relationship to sin in general, its relationship to *das Nichtige*, etc., have not been satisfactorily answered. The logic of Barth's deployment of his idolatry-critique within the realm of dogmatics (e.g., within the realms of the questions of the knowledge of God, the doctrine of God, and the theological evaluation of religion) has not yet been laid bare, nor has it (or the positive dogmatic decisions he made with the implicit or explicit argument that the alternative would be idolatry) been critically evaluated. What serious reckoning with Barth's idolatry-critique means (or should mean) for the development of theology (here, the doctrine of the knowledge of God, the doctrine of God, and the theology of religion) and for the life of the Christian, has not yet been satisfactorily settled. All of these unsettled or hitherto unaddressed issues, and, undoubtedly, others, will be addressed as the present work unfolds.

## Chapter 2: Idolatry and the Knowledge of God

Idolatry was, for Barth, an issue which emerged within discussion of, and was most fundamentally concerned with, the question of the knowledge of God, i.e., the question of the source of true *κοινωνία* between God and human beings.<sup>1</sup> For Barth, the answer to that question was exclusively God's special revelation in the person of Jesus Christ. This chapter demonstrates that and how Barth's critique of idolatry and his understanding of idolatry and the idol were derived from his understanding of revelation, how they were shaped by being so derived, how material changes in Barth's doctrine of revelation lead to changes in his critique of idolatry, and how his idolatry-critique was leveled against one form of what, for him, was a reality which *per definitionem* based itself upon an illegitimate source of knowledge of God, natural theology.

### 2.1 Revelation and Idolatry

In Barth's thinking from time of *Romans II* (1922) on (and, in many cases, even before *Romans II*), the basic features of the relationship between revelation on the one hand and his idolatry-critique, and his understanding of idolatry and the idol, on the other, remained constant. Section (2.1.1) analyses these mostly constant features in a largely synchronic fashion. As Barth's thinking developed during this time, he came to describe idolatry and the idol in relation to revelation in new ways, e.g., with reference to the

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<sup>1</sup> While knowledge of God was no doubt cognitive, and not merely affective, for Barth, it was also neither merely intellectual nor the answer to an independent epistemological question. Gustaf Wingren (*Theology in Conflict: Nygren, Barth, Bultmann* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), e.g., p.125) seems wrongly to think that it was these latter in his criticism of Barth's doctrine of revelation. George Hunsinger (*Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 170), by contrast, rightly argues that knowledge of God for Barth 'is essentially a form of *koinonia*.'

doctrine of *das Nichtige*. This did not represent a fundamental change in his basic way of thinking about these realities, but rather a deepening and further specifying of it. Works from before 1922 are also cited as they help to establish features of Barth's thinking which were constant throughout his career after this time, but not all of the section's claims apply to Barth's thinking during this time. Section (2.1.2) considers the ways in which, over time, changes in Barth's material understanding of revelation elicited changes in his idolatry-critique.

### 2.1.1 Revelation and idolatry in Barth in and after Romans II

#### **2.1.1.1 Revelation and Barth's idolatry-critique**

Barth's convictions about the nature of revelation, and about the proper role of revelation in theology, drove his critique of idolatry (most frequently: *Götzendienst*). Both his concern with, and his definition of, idolatry, were derived from what he believed he heard in revelation, and the Scriptures which testify to it.<sup>2</sup> For the vast majority of his career, Barth was convinced that theology must always firstly concern itself with being a witness to, and repetition of, revelation,<sup>3</sup> which takes as its basis the authoritative witness to that revelation, Holy Scripture.<sup>4</sup> The critique of idolatry was

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<sup>2</sup> Fischer, 'GdB,' 9-10; Plasger, 'DBB,' 67 and *passim*. Matthias D. Wüthrich's claim (*Gott und das Nichtige: Zur Rede vom Nichtigen ausgehend von Karl Barths KD §50* (Zurich: TVZ, 2006), 144) that, in Barth's late §78.2 in particular (an important text for the present discussion), 'entwickelt Barth in dieser Passage keinen explizit christologischen Erkenntniszugang zum Phänomen der herrenlosen Gewalten,' seems to be true as far as it goes, but given the broader context of Barth's theology, it ought to be assumed that such is implicitly present there, too.

<sup>3</sup> Barth, *CD*, 1/2, 814. According to Barth, dogmatics 'has to be a demonstration and proof, a sign and witness of the presence and validity of the Word of God, in whose service alone the human word can receive its qualification and attestation, if it is to receive it at all. Dogmatics cannot desire to be anything but a witness to this transcendent point of view...'

<sup>4</sup> Barth, *CD* 1/1, 16: 'Exegetical theology investigates biblical teaching as the basis of our talk about God. Dogmatics, too, must constantly keep it in view...Hence dogmatics as such does not ask what the apostles and prophets said but what we must say on the basis of the apostles and prophets. This task [that of exegesis] is not taken from us because it is first necessary that we should know the biblical basis.'

thus, for him, at no point an independent interest, but was rather always one which was secondary to, and derivative of this primary, positive interest. The following implicit statement of the necessarily secondary nature of idolatry critique is indicative of Barth's thinking throughout his career: 'How can Christian proclamation and theology wish to work even incidentally and on the left hand in this direction as well? Do they not need both hands for this one task: not to destroy false gods, but to prepare a free way for the one God...?'<sup>5</sup>

Yet Barth did believe that he heard within revelation, and in the Scriptures which testify to it, a vehement protest against all creaturely objects which hold for human beings the role that is properly and objectively held by God in God's revelation alone (the role of the source of 'knowledge of God' in the most inclusive sense). Implicit within the 'Yes' of God's self-revelation was a 'No' to, and displacement of, all that which usurped its proper position in human thinking, speaking and acting, an assertion of its own exclusivity as a source of true knowledge of God. Thus, as early as *Römerbrief I* (1919), Barth said that '...durch das Evangelium nicht weniger als *alle* Götter, *alle* Throne und Altäre in Frage gestellt werden...'<sup>6</sup> Later he spoke of revelation as that in which God, '...distinguishes himself from all gods and idols,'<sup>7</sup> and, later yet, he said that when God reveals himself he 'reveals himself as the sole god. God reveals

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See also Barth, *CD* 1/2, 821. Barth held this conviction at least as early as *Romans II*, as evidenced by the 'Selber-Denken' mode of theological speech which he employed there, according to which he sought to '[think] the thoughts of Scripture for [himself]' (*GD* 260, 254).

<sup>5</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 172.

<sup>6</sup> Barth, *Romans I*, 353.

<sup>7</sup> Barth, *GD*, 327.

all other gods as nothings. Their reality falls away before God's revelation.'<sup>8</sup> Barth saw that the writers of Scripture, in fulfilling their role as witnesses to revelation, were therefore compelled, along with their primary, positive testimony, to also level a secondary, negative protest against the human act of holding some object of created reality in a role or position that properly belonged to God alone in God's revelation. In their effort to repeat revelation, they had also to consistently repeat the 'No' implicit therein, and this they did, in their critique of human idolatry. That Barth saw the critique of idolatry to be an important, albeit secondary and derivative, concern of Scripture can be adduced from the plentiful references to the biblical indictments of idolatry which are scattered throughout his works, as well as from his sustained treatments of the biblical critique of idolatry, the most notable of which can be found in an important exegetical section in his *Church Dogmatics* §17.<sup>9</sup>

It was because of Barth's convictions about the duty of theology to repeat revelation, and revelation and Scripture's own concern to combat idolatry, that Barth himself was also compelled to level a forceful and persistent, though once again, secondary and derivative, critique of it. He did this in an *ad hoc* fashion throughout many of his works, but most pointedly and sustainedly in his polemic against the 'service of the No-God'<sup>10</sup> in *Romans II*; in his criticism of what he considered to be, at least potentially, the 'other gods' which held sway in theology in his 1933 essay, 'The First Commandment as an Axiom in Theology';<sup>11</sup> in his description of the idolatry of

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<sup>8</sup> Karl Barth, 'The First Commandment as an Axiom of Theology,' in *The Way of Theology in Karl Barth: Essays and Comments*, ed. H. Martin Rumscheidt (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 1986), 70. Cf. Barth, 'Gott und die Götter,' 9 and *passim*.

<sup>9</sup> Barth, *CD* I/2, 303-307.

<sup>10</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 47.

<sup>11</sup> Barth, 'TFC.'

human religion in §17 of his *CD 1/2*, in which he sought to demonstrate that what ‘revelation has to say of religion’ is that in it human beings have been ‘pursuing idolatry and self-righteousness’;<sup>12</sup> in his description of the ‘lordless powers’ (*herrenlosen Gewalten*), which he explicitly linked to idols which human beings worship and serve, in *The Christian Life*;<sup>13</sup> and in a sub-section of the works which he wrote for the *Church Dogmatics*, but which were not ultimately included therein, entitled ‘Gott und die Götter.’<sup>14</sup>

### 2.1.1.2 Revelation and Barth’s definition of idolatry

Barth not only adopted what he understood to be revelation and Scripture’s critique of idolatry in a formal sense; he also believed that his definition of ‘idolatry’ was derived from them. On the basis of texts like Romans 1.25,<sup>15</sup> Barth understood idolatry to be the *substitution, or replacement*,<sup>16</sup> of God in his revelation with some aspect of created reality.<sup>17</sup> In this act, the human being ascribes to an aspect of created reality, or created reality as a whole, a role, title, or attribute that properly belongs to God alone in God’s

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<sup>12</sup> Barth, *CD I/2*, 316.

<sup>13</sup> Barth, *TCL*, 222.

<sup>14</sup> Barth, ‘Gott und die Götter.’

<sup>15</sup> NIV: ‘They *exchanged* the truth of God for a lie, they worshiped and served things rather than the Creator...’ (emphasis added). Barth speaks of this text as a description of idolatry in *CD 1/2*, 307.

<sup>16</sup> As Barth speaks of idolatry, he expresses these ideas of substitution and replacement in a multiplicity of ways. At times he uses single words which convey these ideas, such as the terms *vertauschen* (e.g., in *Predigten* 1918, 252) and *Ersatz* (e.g., in *KD I/2*, 331). At other times he conveys it using phrases like the following: ‘an die Stelle des göttlichen Werkes ein menschliches Gemächte zu schieben.’ (*KD I/2*, 329)

<sup>17</sup> This definition is consistent with (though perhaps more precise than) the language of some of Barth’s interpreters when they speak of idolatry in him as being a ‘confusion.’ See, for example, Plasger, ‘DBB,’ 55.

revelation. He saw the first commandment as a prohibition of just such an action, in agreement with Luther:

What does [the first commandment] mean? What are ‘other gods’? According to Luther’s explanation which coincides exactly with the biblical view, a god is that in which human beings place their trust, in which they have faith, from which they expect to receive what they love and to protect them from what they fear. A god is that to which one gives one’s heart...Wherever the human heart is, in other words, wherever the foundation of our real confidence and hope, the *primum movens* of our vitality and the basis of the security of our lives, there also, in all truth, is our god.<sup>18</sup>

Barth, then, believed that what the first commandment prohibits is idolatry in the sense of substitution: it prohibits *substituting* for God in God’s revelation, who alone is worthy of being the object of human trust, faith, hope, confidence, etc., some piece of creaturely reality which is not God as that object. Idolatrous substitution can occur in a wide variety of ways, not only within the realm of personal piety, but also in the making of formal and material theological decisions. Barth’s concept of idolatry is thus highly particular in the sense that it is defined in close relation to the particular event of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, as its replacement. His concept and critique of idolatry are, in this way, firmly *theological* rather than, e.g., philosophical.

From a slightly different angle, idolatry was, for Barth, the opposite of the faith that is the human act which properly corresponds to God’s revelation. Rather than placing one’s faith in revelation, the idolater disbelieves it; but this disbelief takes the form not of an act of pure negation but rather of substituting that which is created for it. Thus, elsewhere, Barth cites the ninety-fifth question of the Heidelberg Catechism in an attempt to define idolatry: ‘What is idolatry? Instead of the one true God who has revealed Himself in His Word, or alongside of Him, to invent or have some other thing

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<sup>18</sup> Barth, ‘TFC,’ 69.

in which man puts his trust.’<sup>19</sup> This citation of Barth’s of the Heidelberg Catechism, along with the above-mentioned reference which he made to Luther, demonstrates that Barth considered himself to be essentially at one with the Reformation tradition in his basic definition of idolatry, and the Reformation tradition, in turn, at one with the Bible in its own.

As suggested both by the etymology of the English term idolatry, and by the connection between the German words *Götzendienst* and *Gottesdienst*, idolatrous substitution in Barth may be understood as a deviant and false form of *worship*.<sup>20</sup> This is the case, however, only if the word ‘worship’ is understood broadly enough so as to include all modes of human thought, speech and action whereby a title, role or attribute which belongs properly only to God in God’s revelation is ascribed or rendered to some object. It is not only the physical, cultic veneration of strange gods and their images with which much of the OT seemingly took particular issue that constitutes idolatry; so, too, does the act of holding *mental* images of God. For Barth, God in God’s revelation is simply other than everything human beings are capable of conceiving, and so the avoidance of idolatry requires the abandonment of all such images; if they are held to, they can only be substitutes for revelation.<sup>21</sup> Beyond the cultic veneration of false gods and their images and the holding of mental images of God in place of God’s revelation,

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<sup>19</sup> Barth, *CD* 1/2, 819.

<sup>20</sup> Barth, for example, links the terms *Götzendienst* and *Gottesdienst*, suggesting that he understood the former to be a perverted variety of the latter, at *Chr.D.*, 416-417: ‘Es kann so sein, daß Religion nicht Götzendienst, nicht Rebellion, sondern wirklicher Gottesdienst ist.’

<sup>21</sup> Barth, *Predigten 1914*, 645: ‘Um so klarer und reiner erhebt sich das wahre Bild Gottes überall das, sich die Menschen, auch die frommen Menschen, über ihn gedacht haben. Um so deutlicher zeigt es sich jetzt, wo die Welt voll ist vom Götzendienst...’ Thus it is the case that, for example, in theology, one must ‘alle Gottesbilder...von euch tut, um ganz frei zu werden für das Wort Gottes selber,’ (Barth, *Predigten 1921-1935*, 439), for those who hold to such ‘sind dem Kampf gegen Götzendienst nicht gewaschen, weil sie selber noch Götzendienst treiben.’ (Barth, *Predigten 1921-1935*, 439)

the false worship in which an act of idolatrous substitution is committed may also take the form of any and all kinds of human action or inaction, for in every case human action and inaction implicitly affords to some object the role of the principle of action. Since God alone in his revelation ought to hold this role, human action or inaction which has as its principle some other object is likewise idolatry. In an early sermon, for example, Barth spoke of the way in which idolatry is committed when money and the desire for it becomes the principle and driving force of human action.<sup>22</sup> All that a human being does, in thought, speech, or other act, in the sphere of either the ostensibly sacred or the ostensibly secular, is in the broadest sense worship, for all of it, even if only implicitly, renders or ascribes that which belongs to God to some object. Every occasion of human action or inaction, therefore, has the potential to be an occasion of idolatry.

For Barth, idolatry is not merely one deviant form of worship among other forms of worship, some of which are fitting and proper, having God as their true object. The worshiper is not in him- or her-self free to choose between the possibilities of an idolatrous form of worship or an anidolatrous one, for all possibilities of human worship, human worship in all of its forms, are, without exception, idolatrous. Idolatry is worship which renders to that which is not God that which properly and objectively belongs to God alone in his revelation; i.e., it is worship which has as its object that which is not God. But the otherness and hiddenness of God are, for Barth, such that God in God's revelation cannot be an object for human beings or their worship: God 'in keiner Weise Objekt ist.'<sup>23</sup> And so God must 'never be identified with anything which

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<sup>22</sup> Barth, *Predigten 1913*, 226. 'Götzendienst geschieht in der Stille. Der Geldgeist lehrt seinen Leuten das vielsagende Achselzucken und die zweideutigen Worte, mit denen sie verstecken können, worum es ihnen eigentlich zu tun ist.'

<sup>23</sup> Barth, *Chr.D.*, 291. Cf. *GD* 134-135.

we name, or experience, or conceive, or worship as God...'<sup>24</sup> If human worship is *de jure* incapable of having God as its object, then it is also the case that every act of human worship has as its object that which is not God, i.e., that every act of human worship is idolatry. Barth thus spoke of the 'unavoidable idolatry of all human worship,'<sup>25</sup> and in so doing, he did not except the worship of either Israel or the Church. In the golden calf episode, according to Barth, Israel revealed that one finds in it, too, the idolatry which is the universally 'human side of God's hiddenness.'<sup>26</sup> And it is also true, according to him, that 'our Christian conceptions of God and the things of God, our Christian theology, our Christian *worship*...in short, our Christianity, to the extent that it is *our* Christianity...is seen to be on the same level as the human work in other religions'<sup>27</sup> – in other words, it is seen to be, along with them, idolatry and works-righteousness.

All human worship is, intrinsically, idolatry. And since worship is defined in this context broadly enough to include all occasions of human thought, speech, action and inaction, insofar as they ascribe to some object a title, position, or role, that properly belongs to God in God's revelation alone – broadly enough, that is, that all human beings are to be understood as worshipers – all human beings must also be understood to be idolaters: 'The power to be in the world and a man, as man's own power, is identical with the power to devise and form gods.'<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 331.

<sup>25</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 125.

<sup>26</sup> Barth, *CD 1/2*, 90.

<sup>27</sup> Barth, *CD 1/2*, 327. Emphasis on the word 'worship' added. Emphasis on the word 'our' original.

<sup>28</sup> Barth, *CD 1/2*, 324.

Idolatry, in Barth, is in fact not only a universally human reality, it is also a reality which he oftentimes referred to in order to describe the totality of the human condition as fallen. Reference to ‘idolatry’ is reference to human sin *in nuce*: for from idolatry all other sins flow, and, in them, idolatry is expressed. ‘The transgression of the first commandment,’ according to Barth, ‘inevitably involves that of all others.’<sup>29</sup> This is not at odds, but is rather in accord, with the Reformers’ understanding of ‘unbelief’ as the most fundamental of all sins. Barth was in full agreement with Luther that one could also describe all sin as essentially an outworking of unbelief in God’s revelation:

The disobedience and therefore the sin of man was revealed at Golgotha as unbelief in this God – but only revealed, for in fact (in Israel or among the nations) it was never anything else but unbelief in this God, and whenever and wherever there may be men it will never be anything else but unbelief in the Word, the Son, in whom God made them His and Himself theirs, unbelief in Jesus Christ.<sup>30</sup>

The reason that Barth could consider *both* idolatry and unbelief to be descriptions of the totality of the human state as fallen was because they were, for him, mutually-implicating, one being the necessary obverse of the other – idolatry the positive side of unbelief in revelation, and unbelief in revelation the negative side of idolatry. As suggested above, in other words, unbelief in revelation was never an act of pure negation, but always, rather, an act of substituting for revelation that which is created.

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<sup>29</sup> Barth, *CD* 1/2, 314.

<sup>30</sup> Barth, *CD* 4/1, 415. See also Wolf Krötke, *Sin and Nothingness in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Philip G. Ziegler and Christina-Maria Bammel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Theological Seminary, 2005) 60, where the author describes unbelief as the most fundamental of human sins in Barth’s thought, and discusses Barth’s agreement with Luther on this point.

### 2.1.1.3 Revelation and the nature of the idol in Barth

From revelation,<sup>31</sup> it is seen that it is in the human act of idolatrous substitution that the idol or false god has its origin. In marked contrast to the true God who exists *a se*, its existence as an idol or false god is dependent upon human subjectivity – it has no existence apart from the human being(s) who worships it. '[Götzen] ihr leben nur darin haben, daß Gott nicht in uns ist.'<sup>32</sup> It is when idolatrous substitution or exchange takes place, when 'the qualitative distinction between men and the final Omega is overlooked,' that, 'the No-God is set up, idols are erected.'<sup>33</sup> Barth's use of the language of 'erecting,' 'setting up,' or 'giving birth to' idols or other gods refers to the same act of idolatrous substitution which constitutes their worship.

The idol or false god possesses real, and even quasi-objective, existence as such. According to Barth, 'The very remarkable fact is to be noted that (in harmony with the predominant 'henotheism' of the Old Testament) Paul not only did not deny the existence of many that are called (λεγόμενοι) gods and lords in heaven and on earth (1 Cor. 8.5), but actually affirmed it: ὡςπερ εἰσὶν θεοὶ πολλοὶ καὶ κύριοι πολλοί.'<sup>34</sup> Once erected through the power of human subjectivity, the idol, in Barth's thinking, slips from the realm of the purely subjective, in that it becomes a force which exercises real, objective, quasi-independent power, and must be reckoned with. So while, for example, the idol of mammon has no existence as such apart from the fact that it is worshiped, because it is worshiped and therefore does have existence as such, it exercises

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<sup>31</sup> The precise way in which revelation determines the nature of both idolatry and the idol will be seen in 2.1.1.4.

<sup>32</sup> Barth, *Predigten 1915*, 71.

<sup>33</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 50-51.

<sup>34</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 454. See also Barth, *CD I/2*, 389; *TCL*, 215.

undeniable power over the course of history and over individual human lives; to live in a world where it is worshiped is to be forced to reckon with its reality. Barth illustrates this process, by which the idol of human making escapes from the realm of human subjectivity and power, and comes to exercise its own power over and against human beings, by referring to Goethe's ballad *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*.<sup>35</sup>

Idols, which Barth refers to with the terms *Götzen*, *Götter*, and *herrenlosen Gewalten*, among others, are for him closely related to the faces of *das Nichtige*, the demons as described in the *CD* §51, but they are not identical to them. Several of Barth's interpreters, including Hailer,<sup>36</sup> Wüthrich,<sup>37</sup> van Wyk,<sup>38</sup> and McDowell,<sup>39</sup> seem to have not properly understood the relationship between idols and the demons, the faces of *das Nichtige*, in Barth's thought, claiming, assuming or implying that Barth intended to refer to the same reality with both terms. They have thus explained the differences in the way in which Barth describes the *Götter* in his unpublished §42 and the way in which he describes *das Nichtige* and the *Dämonen* in *CD* §50 and §51 respectively, and the differences in the way in which he describes the latter and the *herrenlosen Gewalten* in §78.2, either by downplaying them (McDowell speaks of the difference between §§50-51 and §78.2 as a mere change in metaphors<sup>40</sup>) or by reference

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<sup>35</sup> Barth, *TCL*, 214-215.

<sup>36</sup> Hailer, 'GudG'; *Götzen*, 275-303.

<sup>37</sup> Matthias Wüthrich, *Gott und das Nichtige*; 'Das »fremde Geheimnis des wirklich Nichtigen«. Karl Barths einsamer Denkweg in der Frage des Bösen,' in *Karl Barth im europäischen Zeitgeschehen (1935-1950): Widerstand – Bewährung – Orientierung*, ed. Michael Beintker et al. (Zurich: TVZ, 2010), 395-411.

<sup>38</sup> Van Wyk, 'Gatg,' 1595.

<sup>39</sup> John C. McDowell, 'Much Ado about Nothing: Karl Barth's Being Unable to Do Nothing about Nothingness,' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 4, 3 (2002): 319-335.

<sup>40</sup> McDowell, 'MAaN,' 334.

to purported development or self-contradiction within Barth's thinking on idolatry and the idol (Hailer, Wüthrich and van Wyk).<sup>41</sup>

There are indeed real, substantial differences between the *Götter* of the unpublished §42 and the *Dämonen* of §51, and between the latter and the *herrenlosen Gewalten* of §78.2, which cannot be explained by claiming that Barth merely changed his metaphors. On this point, one must agree with Hailer, Wüthrich and van Wyk instead of McDowell. The major differences are that (1) the *Dämonen* of §51 do not belong to realm of created being, but rather that of *Das Nichtige*, that which God did not will in God's creative act,<sup>42</sup> while both the *Götter* of the unpublished §42 and the *herrenlosen Gewalten* of §78.2 are somewhat paradoxically identified both as elements of the realm of 'nothingness,' and as creatures<sup>43</sup>; and (2) that both the *Götter* of the unpublished §42 and the *herrenlosen Gewalten* of §78.2 have their origin in sinful human subjectivity,<sup>44</sup> while the *Dämonen* of §51 have their origin (along with *das Nichtige* in general) in God's not-willing of them.<sup>45</sup>

These differences, however, do not, with Hailer, Wüthrich and van Wyk, represent a substantial change in Barth's thinking concerning idolatry, because Barth was not attempting to refer to the same reality in each of these three passages. When Barth spoke of the *Götter* in the unpublished §42 and of the *herrenlosen Gewalten* in §78.2 he was not referring to the same reality as when he spoke of the *Dämonen* in §51.

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<sup>41</sup> Hailer, 'GudG,' 62-63, 66, and *passim*; Wüthrich, *Das Nichtige*, 144-146, 224; van Wyk, 'Gatg,' 1595. In the case of van Wyk, he *suggests* that it was development in Barth's thought which accounts for the difference between the unpublished §42 and the *CD* §§50-51.

<sup>42</sup> Barth, *CD* III/3, 302, 352-354, 361, 366, 521-524.

<sup>43</sup> Barth, 'Gott und die Götter,' 9, 17; *TCL* 213, 218, 224, 233.

<sup>44</sup> Barth, 'Gott und die Götter,' 63-64, 84; *TCL*, 213-215.

<sup>45</sup> See Wüthrich, *Das Nichtige*, 145.

The *Götter* of the unpublished §42 and the *herrenlosen Gewalten* of §78.2 should be classed together as attempts on Barth's part to speak of the reality of 'idols.' The *Dämonen* of §51, while closely related to idols in Barth's thinking – as evidenced, for example, by the fact that Barth also speaks of idols as *Nichts* – are not the same as idols. This explains the major the differences across these three works. In the unpublished §42 and §78.2 Barth speaks of idols, which can also be called creatures and at least in some sense have their origin in human subjectivity. In §§50-51 he speaks of *das Nichtige* and the demons, which cannot and do not.

It is true that, at times, Barth's language seems to obscure the difference between idols and the demons. It appears, in some places, as if idols, like demons, belong wholly to the realm of *das Nichtige*; he can write for example, that, 'Die Götter sind die Exponenten der Selbstbehauptung und Offenbarung des Nichts.'<sup>46</sup> And demons are often mentioned in places where Barth is discussing the idol and idolatry, sometimes in such a way that it appears that the terms 'demon' and 'idol' are interchangeable for him.<sup>47</sup> It must therefore be explained precisely how it is that, in Barth's thinking, *das Nichtige* and the demons of §§50-51, on the one hand, and the idols (especially in the unpublished §42 and in §78.2, but also elsewhere), on the other, are related to one another in such a way that (1) idols may both be called 'creatures,' but also be closely related to *das Nichtige* and the demons which are clearly not creatures, and may in some sense even to be identified with the latter, that (2) idols are both 'creatures' of God and products of human subjectivity, and that (3) idols are understood as having their origin

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<sup>46</sup> Barth, 'Gott und die Götter,' 9.

<sup>47</sup> For example: Barth, *UCR II*, 340-341; *CD 3/3*, 408; *TCL*, 218-222, 224;

in human subjectivity, unlike *das Nichtige* and the demons, while still being in some sense identical to them.

Barth does not directly address the question of the relationship between the idol on the one hand, and *das Nichtige* and the demons on the other, but he does leave clues, on the basis of which the following proposal, which also has enormous explanatory power with reference to the three above-mentioned questions, may be made: *the idol is a piece of created reality, or created reality as a whole, which has been subjected to nothingness' manifestation, the demon, by the human being.* Barth speaks of the 'revelation'<sup>48</sup> of the demonic – the fact that the demonic kingdom of nothingness desires to 'reveal itself alongside of [God],'<sup>49</sup> and in this way, among others, to imitate God.<sup>50</sup> As the revelation of God occurs through creaturely media, so too does the revelation of *das Nichtige* and the demons, and the idol is one site of this occurrence. In other words: the idol is a piece of creaturely reality which is, in a particular way, demon-possessed. In still other words: the idol or god exists as such due to the perversion of its creatureliness which occurs through its subjection to nothingness, in the form, i.e., in the demon – for the demon is nothing other than nothingness 'to the extent that it has form...'<sup>51</sup> – of the 'divinity' that God denied it in making it to be a creature.<sup>52</sup> This explanation makes clear both how the demon and the idol are related and yet to be differentiated, and (1) why it can be said both that the idol is the 'Offenbarung des

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<sup>48</sup> Barth, 'Gott und die Götter,' 9.

<sup>49</sup> Barth, *CD III/3*, 525.

<sup>50</sup> Barth, *CD III/3*, 528.

<sup>51</sup> Barth *CD III/3*, 523.

<sup>52</sup> Barth, 'Gott und die Götter,' 17.

Nichts'<sup>53</sup> and that it is a creature. Idols reveal 'nothingness,' and it can even be said that they *are* 'nothingness' in that their existence *as such* owes itself to their subjection to a false 'divinity' which is a demon, a form of nothingness. Idols are creatures in that even this subjection, which perverts their creatureliness, can never truly be its transcendence or abnegation.

This subjection of the creaturely object to nothingness, in which it has its existence as an idol, is an act perpetrated by the human being – thus the fact that Barth can emphasise that the idol's existence is the product of human subjectivity and that the location of the idol's existence as such is the human imagination.<sup>54</sup> Thus, also, the fact that (2) the idol can be understood as both a creature of God and the product of human subjectivity. The human being, in the act of idolatry, subjects creaturely reality to nothingness by ascribing to it that which has been denied it in God's creative act, thereby making it an idol. Here it may be seen that this way of describing the idol and idolatry does not contradict, but rather complements the descriptions above of idolatry as the ascription of a role or title which properly belongs to God alone in God's revelation to that which is merely creaturely (making of it an idol). In slightly different terms: the human being, in the act of sin (rejection of grace) and idolatry which creates the idol, *yields* to the demons of §§50-51, allowing them to manifest themselves in idols. The rejection of grace is *necessarily* a yielding to the incursion of nothingness and the demons in the form of the idol in which they manifest themselves, because nothingness is nothing other than 'the antithesis to the grace of God.'<sup>55</sup> Thus the above

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<sup>53</sup> Barth, 'Gott und die Götter,' 9.

<sup>54</sup> Barth, 'Gott und die Götter,' 28; *TCL*, 214.

<sup>55</sup> Barth, *CD III/3*, 331.

discussion of the way in which both unbelief and idolatry can be understood as the most fundamental of sins, the one being the necessary obverse of the other. The *herrenlosen Gewalten* of §78.2 (and, one may also add, the *Götter* of the unpublished §42) are ‘no more than exponents of the rebellion that separates man from God,’<sup>56</sup> but this rebellion, the rebellion of sin, is itself ‘surrender’ to the encroachment of the ‘alien power’ of nothingness,<sup>57</sup> in which the idol is born. It is now also clear how it is that (3) idols have their origin and their location of existence in human subjectivity unlike *das Nichtige* and the demons, while still being closely related to them: it is the human being who ‘opens the door’<sup>58</sup> to the nothingness, rejecting God’s grace and revelation through unbelief, and allowing the advance of the nothingness which transforms creatures into idols.<sup>59</sup>

The *Götter* of the unpublished §42 and the *herrenlosen Gewalten* of §78.2 may be classed together and considered ‘idols.’ The *Dämonen* of §51 may not, at least not without careful qualification. It is notable in this connexion that the differences across these three works which Barth’s interpreters have noted have been almost exclusively differences between the unpublished §42 and §§50-51 and between §78.2 and §§50-51. Differences between the unpublished §42 and §78.2, while not absent, are few, and mainly matters of emphasis. The claim that all three works were attempts to speak of the same reality, *viz.*, idols, and that Barth underwent significant development between the unpublished §42 and §§50-51, only to in large part revert back to his original stance in §78.2 ought to be rejected in favour of the simpler and better evidenced thesis that the idol, as spoken of in both the unpublished §42 and §78.2, is for Barth differentiated

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<sup>56</sup> Barth, *TCL*, 233.

<sup>57</sup> Barth, *CD III/3*, 310-311.

<sup>58</sup> Barth, ‘Gott und die Götter,’ 78.

<sup>59</sup> Barth, ‘Gott und die Götter,’ 78-79.

from, but also related to, nothingness and the demon as enumerated above, and thus that Barth's understanding of the nature of the idol was largely unchanged during this portion of his career. The major objection to this thesis is that, once more, in certain places, the term *Dämonen* seems to be used interchangeably with the terms *Götter* (in the unpublished §42) and *herrenlosen Gewalten* (in §78.2). Each of these occasions, however, may be explained by the close relationship – one may venture to call it a relationship of ‘indirect identity’ – between the demon and the idol in which it reveals itself.

#### **2.1.1.4 Revelation and the overcoming of idolatry and the idol in Barth**

While all human worship is inherently the idolatrous worship of an idol for Barth there is nevertheless, for him, a victory over idols which renders true worship possible. While it has been expedient to leave the discussion of the overcoming of idolatry and the idol in Barth until after the discussion of his idolatry-critique and his understanding of idolatry and the idol, it must now be said that the order of Barth's thinking was otherwise: Barth defined idolatry and the idol, and engaged in idolatry-critique, only from the perspective of the knowledge that idolatry and the idol had already been effectively overcome.

But this is only to say once again, but in a different way, that Barth critiqued idolatry, and defined idolatry and the idol, from the perspective of *revelation*, since revelation was, for him, objectively the victory, and subjectively the knowledge of the victory, over idolatry and the idol. ‘Das war die Offenbarung, die Jesus brachte: der lebendige Gott, der über alle Teufel und Götzen triumphiert.’<sup>60</sup> The victory over idols

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<sup>60</sup> Barth, *Predigten* 1916, 87.

has, for Barth, already been won, objectively, in the objective revelation of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is himself objectively that victory, in that in him God asserts Godself as God, thereby, negatively, displacing false gods, and affirms God's creation as such, thereby, negatively, negating the 'nothingness' which God did not create, including the 'divinity' of the idol, revealing it, and therefore the idol as such, as what it is: 'nothingness,' 'fiction,' 'illusion,'<sup>61</sup> and causing the idol to be seen, once again, as what it in truth always was: merely a creature.<sup>62</sup> The subjective overcoming of the idol occurs in the event of God's subjective revelation of Godself in Jesus Christ to the human being. While the human destruction of an idol can only mean its displacement with another, Jesus Christ alone can overcome idolatry by displacing the idol with himself, he himself being not another idol but truly the revelation of God. The idol has been defeated objectively, and is now and will be in the future defeated subjectively, *as such* in the same way that nothingness has been defeated objectively and is now and will be defeated subjectively, because it is nothingness which made and makes the idol an idol; but this does not mean that the idol and nothingness are identical: when the idol is destroyed as such, a creature remains. For Barth, it is from reflection upon the idol's displacement and destruction as such (i.e., upon revelation), that its true nature (that of a mere creature subjected to the nothingness of creaturely divinity, i.e., substituted for

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<sup>61</sup> Barth, 'Gott und die Götter,' 89-91.

<sup>62</sup> It is particularly clear that this is the nature of the idol's defeat in 'Gott und die Götter,' where Barth writes, for example, that (9): 'Die Offenbarung Gottes des Schöpfers ist die Götterdämmerung, in der die Götter ihre göttliche Autorität verlieren, ihre göttlichen Ansprüche aufgeben müssen, ihrer göttlichen Macht entkleidet werden, in der sie sich als Götter auflösen, in der ihr unursprünglich nicht-göttliches, sondern kreatürliches Wesen wieder sichtbar wird.' The triumph of Jesus Christ over the idols means his triumph over their existence as such, i.e., his triumph over their supposed 'divinity' which is a demon, a form of nothingness. The creaturely object which had been perverted in its having been made into an idol, i.e., in its subjection to nothingness' demon, is restored to that which it always was. On this point see also Scott Thomas Prather, *Christ, Power and Mammon: Karl Barth and John Howard Yoder in Dialogue* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 51-52.

God's revelation, divinized, with no real existence as such) is understood, and that the true nature of idolatry (the act of so substituting created reality to the nothingness of creaturely divinity), must be defined and critiqued.

Worship is true worship in the event of revelation, and in it does truly have God as its object. This latter fact does not mitigate against the fact that this worship, too, is intrinsically idolatrous<sup>63</sup> in that it has God as its object not because it ceases to be intrinsically directed toward another god, but rather because God gives himself to be its object in spite of its inherently idolatrous nature. In this sense, the victory over idolatry is not its elimination but, in an ongoing fashion, its overcoming by God: '...there is a knowledge and worship of [the true] God and a corresponding activity. We can only say that they are corrupt. They are an attempt born of lying and wrong and committed to futile means. And yet we have also to say of them that (in their corruption) they do reach their goal. In spite of the lying and wrong committed, in spite of the futility of the means applied, God is really known and worshipped.'<sup>64</sup> God is truly worshiped in such idolatrous attempts only 'by the grace of God,'<sup>65</sup> who in his freedom, and on certain occasions, 'makes himself the object of human contemplation, human experience, human thought and human speech.'<sup>66</sup> It is the decision on the part of God, and not the selection of proper modes of worship, or even the proper intention of the worshiper,

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<sup>63</sup> The use of the language 'intrinsically idolatrous' worship is meant to indicate worship which, on the basis only of its own intrinsic characteristics, i.e., apart from God's miraculous self-giving to be its object, has not God, but an idol as its object. Relatedly, the language of an 'intrinsic object' of worship, which will be used later in the present work, should be understood simply to refer to the object which worship has naturally, again on the basis of its intrinsic characteristics, apart from God in God's revelation miraculously displacing that object with Godself.

<sup>64</sup> Barth, *CD* 1/2, 344.

<sup>65</sup> Barth, *CD* 1/2, 344.

<sup>66</sup> Barth, *CD* 1/1, 315.

which ‘distinguishes human speaking and hearing as worship of God in spirit and truth’<sup>67</sup> – as worship, that is, which, while not ceasing to be intrinsically idolatrous, *becomes* something more than mere idolatry. If true worship depends upon God’s revelation for its existence, then it follows that it is in the communities which are marked by the ongoing, regular, presence of God’s revelation – Israel and the Church – that one may expect to most consistently encounter and participate in it – thus the fact that, as van Wyk rightly notes,<sup>68</sup> the urgency of Christian missions is, for Barth, implied by his discussion of idolatry.

If the only possibility for human idolatry to be overcome (though never eliminated) is the ongoing decision of God to give Godself as the object of worship, then it also follows that human iconoclasm, whether of the skeptical-atheistic or the romantic-mystical variety, will always be ultimately unsuccessful in its crusade against the same. Neither the atheist nor the mystic may overcome idolatry, for they, too, are implicated in it. The atheist and the mystic, in their very iconoclasm, no less than the religionist, ascribe that which belongs to God alone in his revelation to that which is not God – the most that they can accomplish is to replace one idol with another. They too operate within the ‘magic circle of religion,’<sup>69</sup> i.e., within the sphere of idolatry and works-righteousness. It should be added that, for Barth, even the theological critique of idolatry considered in itself, since it too is an undertaking of idolatrous humanity, strictly speaking falls under this same judgment. A truly penetrating critique and

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<sup>67</sup> Barth, *CD* 1/1, 60.

<sup>68</sup> Van Wyk, ‘Gatg,’ 1605.

<sup>69</sup> Barth, *CD* 1/2, 324.

effectual overcoming of idolatry can only come from outside of humanity – that is, from God’s revelation of Jesus Christ,<sup>70</sup> though theology must repeat that critique.

The fact that Barth insists that idols and other gods *have* already been objectively defeated,<sup>71</sup> i.e., objectively revealed to be what they always were: merely creatures, in the person of Jesus Christ, clearly does not mean that they do not continue to exercise power. The objective triumph of Christ over them must be appropriated subjectively by faith or the human being will remain in important senses subject to them. It also does not mean that they only exercise power over those whose minds and hearts have not yet been penetrated by the truth of the Gospel (i.e., those who are outwith the church). Hailer’s criticism<sup>72</sup> that the unpublished §42 seems to imply the latter is fair; it may indeed be read in that way, and it may be the case that the fact that it can give this impression is what caused Barth to decide not to include it within the *Church Dogmatics*. But §78.2 clarifies any confusion when it affirms that the Christian and the church are ‘painfully enough exposed and even subject’<sup>73</sup> to the *herrenlosen Gewalten*. This fact may be attributed to the fact that the faith in which Christ’s objective defeat of the gods and idols is subjectively realised and appropriated is an *event* and not the static possession of even the believing person and the fact that societal idols have a power over society and its movements, the effects of which cannot be escaped by anyone who lives in it.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Barth, *CD* 1/2, 324.

<sup>71</sup> Barth, ‘Unterweisung II 1917/18,’ in *Konfirmandenunterricht 1909-1921 (GA I.18)*, ed. Jürgen Fangmeier (Zurich: TVZ, 1987), 240; ‘Gott und die Götter,’ 112-113.; *TCL*, 218.

<sup>72</sup> Hailer, ‘GudG,’ 77.

<sup>73</sup> Barth, *TCL*, 234.

<sup>74</sup> Barth, *TCL*, 216.

### 2.1.2 Changes in Barth's doctrine of revelation and his critique of idolatry

Changes in Barth's doctrine of revelation over the course of his career led to changes in what counted for him as idolatry. This very fact, however, was underlain by the constancy, throughout his career, of his formal definition of idolatry, and the formal relationship between idolatry and revelation implied therein.<sup>75</sup>

#### **2.1.2.1 From liberalism to *Romans II***

The changes which Barth's doctrine of revelation underwent at the time of his break from liberalism brought about a change in the scope of his critique of idolatry. Prior to Barth's break from liberalism, his doctrine of revelation was essentially Herrmannian. Herrmann understood revelation to be only the personal *self*-revelation of God,<sup>76</sup> which was mediated by the inner life of Jesus as found in the NT,<sup>77</sup> which was received in the realm of (and was nearly identified with) religious experience, and which was experienced, in particular, as the answer to the human *Anfechtungen*.<sup>78</sup> Barth's own doctrine of revelation during his liberal days was nearly indistinguishable from that of Herrmann, as seen, in particular, in his essays, 'Moderne Theologie und

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<sup>75</sup> A general understanding of idolatry as substitution is evident in Barth's thought from very early on in his career. In a 1913 sermon, for example, just after insinuating that obedience to the *Geldgeist* constitutes idolatry, he asked, 'Haben wir nicht alle samt und sonders schon den Geldgeist an die Stelle des heiligen Geistes gesetzt?' (*Predigten 1913*, 226-227) And there is no reason, textually, to believe that Barth's basic understanding of idolatry was not already in place even prior to 1913.

<sup>76</sup> Wilhelm Herrmann writes ('Der Begriff der Offenbarung,' in *Vorträge der theologischen Konferenz zu Gießen gehalten am 9. Juni 1887. (III. Folge)* (Gießen: J.Ricker'sche Buchhandlung, 1887), 10): 'Alle Offenbarung ist Selbstoffenbarung Gottes.'

<sup>77</sup> Wilhelm Herrmann, *The Communion of the Christian with God: A Discussion in Agreement with the View of Luther*, trans. J. Sandys Stanyon (London: Williams Norgate, 1895), 59, 77-78, 282.

<sup>78</sup> Herrmann, 'Der Begriff der Offenbarung,' 4-6.

Reichsgottsarbeit' (1909),<sup>79</sup> 'Ob Jesus gelebt hat?' (1910),<sup>80</sup> 'Der Christliche Glaube und die Geschichte' (1910),<sup>81</sup> 'La Réapparition de la Métaphysique dans la Théologie,'<sup>82</sup> (1911), and 'Religion und Wissenschaft' (1912).<sup>83</sup> Because Barth understood revelation in this manner, and because he understood idolatry to be the replacement of revelation with that which was not, he critiqued as idolatry the affording of a role which properly belonged only to revelation to any reality which did not fit this description, from metaphysics<sup>84</sup> to the '*Geldgeist*.'<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Karl Barth, 'Moderne Theologie und Reichsgottesarbeit, 1909,' in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1905-1909 (GA III.21)*, ed. Hans-Anton Drewes and Hinrich Stoevesandt (Zurich: TVZ, 1992), e.g., 342-343: 'Individuell bedingt ist das Erwachen der Religion, wie wir sie verstehen. Wo ein Mensch zur Erkenntnis gekommen ist, daß es ihm faktisch unmöglich ist, das als gut erkannte Sittengebot bei sich durchzusetzen, da kann er es erleben, daß ihm in der Überlieferung der christlichen Kirche oder in ihrem gegenwärtigen Leben eine Macht begegnet, der er sich in Gehorsam und Vertrauen gänzlich unterwerfen muß. Aber wann kommt er zur Erkenntnis jenes Bruches in seinem sittlichen Wollen? Und welche Seite der christlichen Überlieferung, welche Lebensäußerungen gegenwärtiger Religion werden ihm die Offenbarung, die ihn befreit und unterwirft? Alles Fragen, die nur er selber sich beantworten kann, es gibt keinen allgemeingiltigen ordo salutis, aber auch keine allgemeingiltige Offenbarungsquelle, die Einer dem Andern demonstrieren könnte. Individuell ist endlich das Leben der auf der Offenbarung beruhenden Religion.'

<sup>80</sup> Karl Barth, 'Ob Jesus gelebt hat? Eine nachträgliche Osterbetrachtung, 1910,' in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1909-1914 (GA III.22)*, ed. Hans-Anton Drewes and Hinrich Stoevesandt (Zurich: TVZ, 1993), e.g., 42-43: 'Das «Leben Jesu», das Grund des Glaubens ist oder das für uns Gottes Offenbarung bedeutet, ist nicht die Reihe von äußeren Tatsachen, die von ihm überliefert ist. Das wäre der Rahmen, um den sich jetzt der Streit erhoben hat. Sondern Grund des Glaubens ist das persönliche innere Leben Jesu.'

<sup>81</sup> For example, Karl Barth, 'Der Christliche Glaube und die Geschichte, 1910,' in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1909-1914 (GA III.22)*, ed. Hans-Anton Drewes and Hinrich Stoevesandt (Zurich: TVZ, 1993), 205: 'Das Problem der Offenbarung besteht aber im Sehen und Aneignen unmittelbaren Lebens, das uns zunächst in der Person eines Andern entgegentritt.'

<sup>82</sup> For example, Karl Barth, 'La Réapparition de la Métaphysique dans la Théologie, 1911,' in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1909-1914 (GA III.22)*, ed. Hans-Anton Drewes and Hinrich Stoevesandt (Zurich: TVZ, 1992), 336-337, where he speaks of, '...la voie de la foi, de la croyance, de la révélation, de l'inspiration ou quel que soit le terme dont nous nous servirions pour désigner l'expérience religieuse proprement dite...'

<sup>83</sup> For example, Karl Barth, 'Religion und Wissenschaft, 1912,' in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1909-1914 (GA III.22)*, ed. Hans-Anton Drewes and Hinrich Stoevesandt (Zurich: TVZ, 1993), 435: 'Die Gottesoffenbarung, die uns in dem Leben der biblischen Menschen entgegentritt[,] und die Gotteserfahrung[,] die wir erfahren, wenn wir uns unter ihre Wirkung stellen – das ist der Inhalt des Christentums.'

<sup>84</sup> Barth, 'La Réapparition.'

<sup>85</sup> Barth, *Predigten 1913*, 226-227.

In *Romans II*, after his break from liberalism, Barth's concept of revelation was specified in a way which affected the scope of his idolatry-critique. Barth's concept of revelation in *Romans II* was determined by his desire to understand it as radically separate from and, indeed, opposed to, all that belonged to the creaturely world, or which could be conceived or perceived directly by human beings.<sup>86</sup> Thus, anything which was placed in a position which rightly belonged to revelation, but which was not opposed to all that was creaturely, or which could be directly perceived, was an idol. Indeed, '...to be known directly is the characteristic mark of an idol.'<sup>87</sup> This meant, however, that the objective and subjective sides of what Barth had considered 'revelation – the 'inner life of Jesus' and 'religious experience' – had to be considered idols when they were actually held in roles which properly belong to revelation.<sup>88</sup> As creaturely, directly perceptible, realities they could be no more than substitutes for it. The liberal doctrine of 'revelation,' and the theology based upon it, including that of Herrmann, became for him, in this way, idolatrous.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 98, 103; Hart, 'Revelation,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 50-51.

<sup>87</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 38.

<sup>88</sup> Hans Frei (Giorgy Olegovich, ed., *Ten Year Commemoration of the Life of Hans Frei (1922-1988)* (New York: Semenenko Foundation, 1999), 149) rightly sees Barth's rejection of liberal Protestant 'relationalism,' i.e., its understanding of revelation and the experience of revelation as co-inhering in one another, as the most fundamental aspect of his break with liberalism.

<sup>89</sup> Barth did not directly critique Herrmann in *Romans II*, but it is clear that in Barth's numerous denials of the idea that religious experience and revelation could be identified, he had Herrmann in mind, at least in part. And while his direct criticisms of Schleiermacher (225, 258-260, 266-267) were not couched in the typical terms of an idolatry-critique, it is clear that Barth considered Schleiermacher to be a prime example of the entire theological movement which *Romans II* opposed, and which he described throughout as idolatry, the erecting and serving of a 'No-God.' (Barth, *Romans II*, 40) Even before *Romans II*, it had been evident that Barth conceived his new theological understanding, characterised by his new doctrine of revelation, as containing a critique of liberal Protestantism as idolatry. He famously wrote to Thurneysen in 1920, in close connection with a remark concerning Harnack, 'Es ist offenbar, daß der Götze wackelt.' (Barth – Thurneysen 1913-1921, 380)

In fact, because of Barth's understanding of revelation in *Romans II*, everything to which human beings ascribed titles or roles which properly belonged only to revelation (i.e., which they worshiped) was an idol. Revelation was, by definition, never an object to a human being in such a way that he or she could ascribe to it the titles or roles which rightly belonged to it. God can 'never be identified with anything which we name, or experience, or conceive, or worship as God...'<sup>90</sup> It is in this way that it came to be Barth's view not only that all human worship is, intrinsically, idolatry, but also that, since all human beings worship, all human beings are idolaters. As Barth's doctrine of revelation was specified such that it excluded everything created and perceptible to sinful creatures – including the inner life of Jesus and religious experience – his critique of idolatry was expanded to include all such realities when they were placed in a role which properly belongs only to revelation, i.e., made objects of human worship.

#### **2.1.2.2 From *Romans II* to the *GD* (1924)/*CD I/1* (1932)**

Further changes in Barth's doctrine of revelation between the time of *Romans II* on the one hand and that of the *Göttingen Dogmatics* and the *CD I/1* on the other (the doctrines of revelation in the latter two works were nearly identical) also led to changes within Barth's idolatry critique. These changes can be summarised by saying that, in the latter two works, Barth's doctrine of revelation was more thoroughly christological and Trinitarian than it had been in *Romans II*, and that, in those latter works, it was articulated in terms of the 'threefold form of the Word of God.'

In *Romans II*, Barth's doctrine of revelation was actually less focussed upon the person of Jesus Christ than had been his doctrine of revelation before his break from

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<sup>90</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 331. See also Barth, *Chr.D.*, 291, *GD* 134-135.

liberalism. In his absolute insistence that revelation could be neither identified with nor bound to any particular media, Barth relativised the importance of the humanity and (*contra* McCormack<sup>91</sup>) the events of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, such that these were ultimately merely a veil of revelation, among others, even if they were in some sense relatively higher or more important than others. The earthly life of Jesus was a ‘crater made at the percussion point of an exploding shell,’<sup>92</sup> which also exploded and left craters elsewhere. ‘In Jesus we have discovered and recognized the truth that God is found everywhere and that, both before and after Jesus, men have been discovered by Him.’<sup>93</sup> ‘We encounter in Jesus the scandal of an eternal revelation of that which Abraham and Plato had indeed already seen.’<sup>94</sup>

In the *GD* and the *CD I/1* it remained the case both that the content of ‘revelation’ did not include the human flesh and earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth and that revelation was not limited to them as its exclusive media.<sup>95</sup> But neither was Jesus of

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<sup>91</sup> Bruce McCormack argues that, in *Romans II*, ‘Jesus of Nazareth is the *locus* of revelation’ (*Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 253) and that, ‘In the strictest sense, revelation in *Romans II* is the resurrection of Jesus Christ and only the resurrection.’ (*KBCRDT*, 251; see also McCormack, ‘Revelation and History,’ 26) In the latter statement, it is clear that McCormack intends Jesus’ bodily resurrection. In actual fact, Jesus of Nazareth is not absolutely unique in *Romans II*, and when Barth equates the resurrection with revelation he is not referring to the bodily resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The word ‘resurrection,’ rather, most often functions in *Romans II* as a way of referring to the supra-historical, directly imperceptible event of revelation. (*Romans II*, 29-30; 37, 40, 44, 88, 94, 96, 97, 116, 166, 177, 185, 206, 211, 213, 218, 386, 419) It is not merely that the resurrection is non-historical because it is not produced by historical causation (McCormack, *KBCRDT*, 252); it is non-historical because it cannot be identified or bound to anything which occurs within history, including the bodily resurrection of Jesus - which, it should be said, Barth did believe occurred in history in its own right, as an *effect* of revelation (Barth, *Romans II*, 29-30). Link also errs, if he means to assert something near to what McCormack asserts, when he states that Jesus is ‘*das* authentische *Medium* der Offenbarung...’ (Christian Link, ‘Karl Barths Römerbrief (1921) als theologisches Signal,’ *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 23, 2 (2007): 149). Emphasis on the word ‘*das*’ added.)

<sup>92</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 29.

<sup>93</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 97.

<sup>94</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 277.

<sup>95</sup> Barth, *GD*, 90-91; *CD I/1*, 323.

Nazareth merely a veil of revelation among others; rather, he was the definitive veil, in that the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth became the *pattern* for all revelation.<sup>96</sup> In both the *GD* and the *CD I/1* Barth patterned his understanding of revelation from orthodox Christology rather than – as in *Romans II* – understanding revelation in Jesus Christ (and under all other veils) in terms of a more abstractly conceived doctrine of revelation. Because this was the case, he came to believe that – against his statements in *Romans II* – revelation can really and objectively exist in history, albeit still in such a way that it is incapable of being directly observed by human beings.<sup>97</sup>

Whereas in *Romans II* Barth's doctrine of revelation was not overtly Trinitarian,<sup>98</sup> by the time of both the *GD* and the *CD I/1* Barth believed it necessary to speak of the Trinity as both the subject and object (i.e., the content) of revelation. Revelation, in fact, was for him the event of human participation in the Trinity's self-knowledge, as in it the Holy Spirit, utilising the human cognitive capacities, knows the Father through the Son: '...we know insofar as God knows himself.'<sup>99</sup> In this way, the Trinity was for Barth the subject of revelation. The Trinity was also for Barth the content, that which is revealed, in revelation: '...the content of revelation is God alone, wholly God, God himself.'<sup>100</sup> Most immediately, the content of revelation is the Son,

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<sup>96</sup> Barth, *GD*, 152-167; *CD I/1*, 315-324. See also Paul D. Jones, *The Humanity of Christ: Christology in Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 23, 51.

<sup>97</sup> Barth, *GD*, 131, 148, 160-161; *CD I/1*, 325.

<sup>98</sup> McCormack (*KBCRDT*, 259-262) sees the doctrine of revelation in *Romans II* as being 'functionally Trinitarian.' While this analysis is questionable, McCormack allows that a 'Trinity of being' is not in view in *Romans II*, whether in connexion with the doctrine of revelation or otherwise, as it would need to be were revelation to have the Trinity as its subject and content. (*KBCRDT*, 262)

<sup>99</sup> Barth, *GD*, 329.

<sup>100</sup> Barth, *GD*, 88.

but knowledge of the Son was also, for him, mediately, knowledge of the Triune God.<sup>101</sup>

While in *Romans II* Barth had radically emphasised the continual, absolute freedom of revelation *vis-à-vis* particular creaturely forms, in the *GD* and the *CD I/1* he argued that revelation did exist in a special connection to particular creaturely forms, namely Scripture and Christian preaching. While this idea would receive its most mature expression in the doctrine of the threefold form of the Word of God in the *CD I/1*,<sup>102</sup> it was already present in substance in the *GD*.<sup>103</sup> Scripture and Christian preaching were not directly identical to revelation, but were indirectly identical to it, and could themselves be called ‘the Word of God.’<sup>104</sup>

These three changes in Barth’s doctrine of revelation caused changes in his idolatry-critique. The fact that revelation came to be conceived in more concretely christological terms meant that Barth’s rather abstractly conceived *Romans II* doctrine of revelation had to be rejected. Indeed, since Barth’s doctrine of revelation was in *Romans II* not christologically determined in the way in which he later believed that it must be, he would have to reckon with the possibility that, in *Romans II*, he had substituted that which was not revelation but an abstractly conceived idea of otherness, futurity, etc., for revelation. ‘It was necessary and right in face of the Immanentism of the preceding period to think with new seriousness about God’s futurity. But it was neither right nor necessary to do this in such a way that this one matter was put at the

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<sup>101</sup> Barth, *GD*, 154; *CD I/1*, 304, 309.

<sup>102</sup> Barth, *CD I/1*, §4.

<sup>103</sup> Barth, *GD*, §§2, 8.

<sup>104</sup> Barth, *CD I/1*, 117.

head of all Christian teaching.’<sup>105</sup> Once again, a specifying of Barth’s doctrine of revelation excluded a certain reality which he had once understood to *be* revelation, such that his critique of idolatry was expanded so as to implicate his own prior conception of revelation.

The fact that Barth’s doctrine of revelation came to be understood as having the Trinity as both its subject and content caused it also to become the case that he understood *non-Trinitarian* ‘revelations’ as *not* revelation; i.e., as substitutes for true revelation, and thus idols. In terms of the *ordo cognoscendi* the Trinity (both its being, and its *being as* the subject and content of revelation) was derivative of the event of revelation, but it was *necessarily* derivative of it.<sup>106</sup> The doctrine of the Trinity was, for Barth, ‘indirectly...identical with the statement about revelation,’<sup>107</sup> a ‘necessary...analysis of revelation.’<sup>108</sup> To speak of revelation which was not the revelation of which the Trinity was the subject and content was to speak of that which was not revelation, but a substitute. To speak of God in abstraction from the doctrine of the Trinity, even temporarily, was to reveal that one had substituted that which was created for revelation as the source of one’s knowledge of God, i.e., that one had already committed idolatry. Both those who Barth believed denied that God was Triune in God’s immanent life (Sabellius, Schleiermacher and much modern theology which followed him<sup>109</sup>) and those who spoke first of God as One, and then later added the information that God was also Triune (much of medieval theology and Protestant

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<sup>105</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 636.

<sup>106</sup> Barth, *CD* I/1, 308-310.

<sup>107</sup> Barth, *CD* I/1, 309.

<sup>108</sup> Barth, *CD* I/1, 310.

<sup>109</sup> Barth, *GD*, 101; *CD* I/1, 352-353.

Orthodoxy<sup>110</sup>), Barth believed, committed idolatry along these lines. Barth wrote: ‘We must keep vigorously aloof from this tradition, remembering that a Church dogmatics derives from a doctrine of the Trinity, and therefore that there is no possibility of reckoning with the being of any other God, or with any other being of God, than that of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as it is in revelation and in eternity.’<sup>111</sup>

Barth’s doctrine of the threefold form of the Word of God also implicitly re-shaped his idolatry-critique. Scripture and preaching were not included within the concept of revelation, strictly speaking, but they were loosely speaking in that they were held to be indirectly identical to revelation. This doctrine represented a willingness to understand revelation as in a certain sense bound – only, to be sure, by the faithfulness and constancy of God’s ongoing choice – to particular creaturely media in an ongoing way. In *Romans II*, Barth would have understood ‘revelation’ bound (even in this sense) to, or indirectly identical with, creaturely media as *not* true revelation, and thus an idol.<sup>112</sup> The doctrine of the threefold form of the Word of God meant that revelation’s being in this sense bound to particular creaturely media no longer *ipso facto* meant that it was not true revelation, and thus an idol. At the same time, it specified to *which* creaturely media true revelation was bound and with which it was indirectly identical, and, by implication, that ‘revelation’ ongoingly bound to other media was not revelation (and thus an idol). It also specified to which creaturely media the human being ought to look in expectation of revelation and the overcoming of his or her idolatry.

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<sup>110</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 261.

<sup>111</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 261.

<sup>112</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 66.

### 2.1.2.3 From the *GD* (1924)/*CD I/1* (1932) to the *CD IV/2* (1955)

Barth's later, implicit, doctrine of revelation demonstrated a willingness to bind revelation to Jesus of Nazareth in a way in which he did not in *Romans II*, the *GD* or the *CD I/1*. This is the case although many treatments of Barth on revelation do not acknowledge this significant shift in his later thinking.<sup>113</sup> The shift can be seen, with particular clarity, in the *CD IV/2*, §64 (1955). It is clear there, in particular, that Barth, by that time, had come to consider the human nature of Jesus of Nazareth, which was for him the *humanum*, human nature itself,<sup>114</sup> part of the content of revelation: 'The truth is that this human history, 'the earthly life of Jesus,' belongs with the act of God to that which is revealed.'<sup>115</sup> It became the case for Barth that the incarnation not only provided the pattern for revelation, but that it was also its content. The content of revelation was not merely God but the union of the human and divine natures in Jesus, and also, therefore, the union of God and human beings in general.<sup>116</sup>

In other words, for Barth at this time, a *logos asarkos* could not be true revelation, but only an idol: '[Jesus Christ] is God in the flesh-distinguished from all the idols imagined and fashioned by men by the fact that they are not God in the flesh, but products of human speculation on naked deity, λόγοι ἄσαρκοι.'<sup>117</sup> This stands in

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<sup>113</sup> Hart's essay on 'Revelation,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, for example, which is perhaps the most definitive recent treatment of Barth's doctrine of revelation, does not mention this change.

<sup>114</sup> Barth, *CD IV/2*, 48.

<sup>115</sup> Barth, *CD IV/2*, 35.

<sup>116</sup> Barth, *CD IV/2*, 100. While the matter cannot be pursued in detail here, there is validity in Wingren's criticism that Barth's doctrine of revelation meant that the incarnation held a more central place in his thinking than that of the crucifixion and resurrection, with questionable biblical justification. (Wingren, *TiC*, 109-122)

<sup>117</sup> Barth, *CD IV/2*, 101.

contrast to Barth's earlier whole-hearted acceptance of the *extra Calvinisticum*,<sup>118</sup> which was a corollary to his belief that the human nature of Jesus of Nazareth was not the only veil of revelation and that the content of revelation was the divine nature alone. Even in 1955 Barth was not fully rejecting the *extra Calvinisticum* – *contra*, e.g., te Velde<sup>119</sup> the *logos asarkos* undoubtedly had an ongoing ontological existence for him – but rather the idea that the *logos asarkos* could be known as such, apart from the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>120</sup>

The only revelation to which human beings had access was, for Barth at this time, the *logos ensarkos*, the revelation of the union of the divine and human in Jesus Christ. To afford to a supposed 'revelation' which did not have the human nature of Jesus of Nazareth as part of its content, a *logoi asarkoi*, a place that properly belonged to revelation alone, would therefore be to replace revelation with that which was not revelation, i.e., to commit idolatry. One must, therefore, according to the Barth of this time, hold to the *logos ensarkos* and the knowledge of the relationship between God and human beings disclosed in revelation if idolatry is to be avoided. Barth himself did not do this sufficiently, by his own later standard, in *Romans II*, in the *GD* or in the *CD I/1* (where he accepted the existence of the *logos askarkos* not only as an ontological reality but also as a noetically accessible one and understood the divine nature alone to be the

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<sup>118</sup> Barth, *GD*, 158-160.

<sup>119</sup> Dolf te Velde, *Paths Beyond Tracing Out: The Connection of Method and Content in the Doctrine of God, Examined in Reformed Orthodoxy, Karl Barth, and the Utrecht School* (Delft: Eburon, 2010), 360.

<sup>120</sup> Barth, *CD IV/2*, 101-102. Barth connects his denial of the *logos asarkos* to his denial of the possibility of legitimate natural religion, natural theology, and natural law. Yet as Barth does not deny the ontological existence of the *logos asarkos*, but only its *noetic accessibility* to sinners, so also (as will be seen) does he not deny the theoretical possibility of natural theology, etc., but only their impossibility in practice due to the human inability to access the *logos* apart from the *logos ensarkos*.

content of revelation), and was thus liable in those works to his own later idolatry-critique, i.e., to the claim that he substituted for revelation that which was not.

## **2.2 Idolatry and Natural Theology**

### 2.2.1 What Barth meant by 'natural theology'

Over the course of Barth's career, one phenomenon that he held, with remarkable consistency, to be based upon an illegitimate source of knowledge of God (i.e., one which replaced genuine revelation) was natural theology. Thus, from at least 1911 up until the end of his career he criticised natural theology as idolatry.<sup>121</sup> When Barth spoke of natural theology he meant the purported exposition of God, and/or creation in relation to God, which has as its source and/or norm, in whole or in part, *revelatio naturalis*, i.e., any purported source of knowledge of God other than *revelatio specialis*. This formal definition is reflective of Barth's own throughout his career, even in spite of material changes in his understanding of the terms which comprise it.<sup>122</sup> Further, 'revelatio specialis' was always, though in different senses throughout Barth's career, bound up with the person of Jesus Christ, such that Hüttenhoff is also right to say – at least from the time he came under Herrmann's influence on – that, 'Eine natürliche Theologie liegt nach Barth immer dann vor, wenn einer „Instanz" neben der

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<sup>121</sup> Barth, *GD*, 343-349; 'Fate and Idea in Theology,' 55; *CD* II/1, 86.

<sup>122</sup> This formal definition fits with both Barth's earlier (pre-Romans) thinking (though he did not expressly define natural theology during that time period) and the more material definitions which Barth would offer of natural theology between 1934 and 1940 (see below), but those later material definitions do not completely agree with all of Barth's pre-Romans thinking. It is also to be admitted that, as will be seen below, Barth held to a form of negative natural theology during a certain portion of his career which fit into this definition, but which he did not identify as natural theology at the time. He later abandoned it and identified it as such. This was not due to a change in his definition of natural theology, but rather to a more rigorous application of it.

Offenbarung in Jesus Christus, wie sie die Bibel bezeugt, eine selbstständige Bedeutung für die theologische Erkenntnis zugeschrieben wird.’<sup>123</sup>

In order for the first definition of natural theology offered above to be an accurate reflection of Barth’s own understanding over the vast majority of his career, it must be specified that the term ‘*revelatio specialis*’ has to be understood as referring to *actual* special revelation, and not merely to a principle or concept of such, to a reality which is claimed as such, or which satisfies an abstract, *a priori* criteria for being such. Thus, *revelatio naturalis*, because defined as ‘any purported source of knowledge of God other than *revelatio specialis*,’ must be understood to include not only not only the knowledge of God which is purportedly generally and statically available to the human being in nature and reason,<sup>124</sup> but also that which is called special revelation or meets an abstract criteria for being such, but which from the perspective of actual special revelation must be judged not to be.<sup>125</sup> By extension, even those theologies which have as their source and norm ostensible or purported, but not actual, special revelation, must be judged from the perspective of actual revelation to be instances of *theologia naturalis*. In spite of the fact that Barth seemed in his 1937-1938 *Gifford Lectures* to express agreement with Gifford’s own statement to the effect that natural theology is a science constructed, ‘without reference to or reliance upon any supposed special

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<sup>123</sup> Michael Hüttenhoff, ‘Im Kampf gegen die Einheitsfront der natürlichen Theologie: Karl Barth und seine Gegner 1932 bis 1935,’ *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 26, 1 (2010): 13. See Herrmann, *CCwG*, 59, 77-78, 282; Barth, ‘Religion und Wissenschaft,’ 434; ‘Der Christliche Glaube und die Geschichte,’ 203-205.

<sup>124</sup> Definitions like this one of that form of ‘revelation’ which is the ground of natural theology are common. See, e.g., John Macquarrie, ‘Natural Theology,’ in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia*, ed. Alister E. McGrath (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993), 402; Rodney Holder, *The Heavens Declare: Natural Theology and the Legacy of Karl Barth* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton, 2012), 35.

<sup>125</sup> Barth, *GD*, 91.

exceptional or so-called miraculous revelation,<sup>126</sup> he elsewhere understood even theologies based on ‘supposed’ or ‘so-called,’ but not actual, special revelation to be natural theologies.

A prime example of this is Barth’s critique of the ‘theology’ of National Socialism as an idolatrous natural theology.<sup>127</sup> Barr,<sup>128</sup> and Holder<sup>129</sup> and Grant<sup>130</sup> following Barr, criticise Barth’s identification of National Socialist ideology with natural theology,<sup>131</sup> on the grounds that it based itself on, as Barth himself said, ‘a specific new revelation of God,’<sup>132</sup> and thus would be better characterised as an instance of revealed theology. Their criticisms fail to take into account that Barth distinguished between natural and revealed theology not, as they do,<sup>133</sup> on the basis of a theology’s *claims* to special revelation or claims to a ‘revelation’ which might fit into such a category, abstractly defined, but of the objective presence or absence of actual special revelation. While Barth was fully aware that the proponents of National Socialism

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<sup>126</sup> Barth, *KGSG*, 3-4.

<sup>127</sup> See, e.g., Barth, *CD II/1*, 173.

<sup>128</sup> James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology: The Gifford Lectures for 1991: Delivered in the University of Edinburgh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 112-113.

<sup>129</sup> Holder, *THD*, 36-37.

<sup>130</sup> Colin Grant, ‘Why Should Theology be Unnatural?’ *Modern Theology* 23, 1 (2007): 95-96.

<sup>131</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 178: ‘The question [of natural theology] became a burning one at the moment when the Evangelical Church in Germany was unambiguously and consistently confronted by a definite and new form of natural theology, namely, by the demand to recognise in the political events of the year 1933, and especially in the form of the God-sent Adolf Hitler, a source of specific new revelation of God, which, demanding obedience and trust, took its place beside the revelation attested in Holy Scripture, claiming that it should be acknowledged by Christian proclamation and theology as equally binding and obligatory.’

<sup>132</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 173.

<sup>133</sup> E.g., Holder, *THD*, 35. According to Holder, in National Socialism’s ‘theology,’ ‘two very distinctive features of natural theology are quite absent... – namely, rationality and the tendency to universality,’ and thus it ought not be called natural theology.

claimed to be in possession of a ‘special revelation,’ he judged that their ‘theology’ was, in fact, wholly devoid of actual special revelation, and was thus by implication based on that which was merely, in the broad sense, ‘natural.’

For the vast majority of Barth’s career, and with especial clarity in his 1929 essay ‘Fate and Idea in Theology,’<sup>134</sup> and his 1933 ‘The First Commandment as an Axiom of Theology,’<sup>135</sup> Barth’s insistence that it was the presence of absence of special revelation in the relevant roles in a theology which determined whether it was a natural or revealed theology meant that there was for him a sense in which all human theology, including his own, was as such ‘natural theology.’<sup>136</sup> This was because *no* human theology – undertaken as it always was, by the natural human being with his or her natural concepts – could as such possess revelation and utilise it as its direct source or intrinsically conform to it as its norm – *finitum non capax infinitum*. Theology, for Barth, was not merely natural, but revealed theology only by virtue of God’s *election*, i.e., of God’s ongoing choice to give revelation to it as its (indirect) source, and to cause it to have God as its object, in spite of its intrinsic naturalness. ‘Real theology of God’s Word...gets underway only if, no, only when God is underway...If I am called to do this theology, then so I am...not because my dialectics are great, but because God condescends to make use of me and this my doubtful tool.’<sup>137</sup> Barth held that God’s

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<sup>134</sup> Karl Barth, ‘Fate and Idea in Theology,’ in *The Way of Theology in Karl Barth: Essays and Comments*, ed. H. Martin Rumscheidt (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 1986), 25-61.

<sup>135</sup> Karl Barth, ‘TFC.’

<sup>136</sup> Barth, ‘Fate and Idea in Theology,’ 59-60; ‘TFC,’ 77-78. Wolfhart Pannenberg’s criticism (*Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 105) that ‘Barth’s recognition of the validity of Feuerbach’s derivation of religion for all other human religions, but not for Christian proclamation and theology, is surely too facile’ seems to miss the point that for Barth the charge of idolatry (and ‘natural theology’) also applies to Christian theology, including Barth’s own.

<sup>137</sup> Barth, ‘Fate and Idea in Theology,’ 59.

election did leave intrinsic marks upon and within revealed theologies, but these could only distinguish revealed theology relatively, and never absolutely, from natural theology. Considered according to their intrinsic natures, the distinction between revealed and natural theology was not between truth and error, the knowledge of God and idolatry, but between two forms of idolatry.

Barth himself reserved the term ‘natural theology’ for those theologies which were only natural, i.e., which were non-elect, and which, therefore, did not bear the intrinsic marks of election. Even so, his definition of natural theology was very broad and inclusive. He showed little interest in discussing in detail the merits and demerits of the various forms of natural theology; for most of his career, instead, as will be seen, he simply rejected all natural theology as idolatry *a priori*. For this he has again been criticised by Barr.<sup>138</sup> This can only be a valid criticism, however, if Barth was, in the first place, wrong in his claim, to be discussed below, that obedience to revelation forces the theologian to reject all natural theology as idolatry *a priori*.

### 2.2.2 The formal relationship between revelation, natural theology, and idolatry

Idolatry, revelation, and natural theology were formally inter-related in Barth’s thinking throughout his career in such a manner that changes in Barth’s material understanding of revelation *ipso facto* brought about changes in his material understanding of natural theology and its relation to idolatry. This was true in at least two ways. In the first place, Barth’s answer to the question of whether or not true revelation included within it genuine *revelatio naturalis* controlled Barth’s evaluation of natural theology and his understanding of its relationship to idolatry. Since idolatry is the substitution of that

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<sup>138</sup> Barr, *BFNT*, 12.

which is not God's revelation for that which is, the nature of true revelation determines the scope of potential idols. The exclusion of a certain reality from being genuine revelation means the inclusion of it in the field of that which might be improperly (i.e., idolatrously) substituted for revelation; but the inclusion of a particular reality in the concept of revelation means that it is not a potential idol; it cannot be idolatrously substituted for revelation because it is itself revelation. The inclusion of a genuine *revelatio naturalis* – i.e., a source of genuine knowledge of God apart from *revelatio specialis* – in the concept of *revelatio* would mean that theologies could, while taking *revelatio naturalis* as their source and norm (i.e., while being natural theologies), truly have *revelatio* as their source and norm (roles which, for Barth, belong properly and objectively in theology only to revelation). If, on the other hand, the concept of revelation was specified to *exclude* all *revelatio naturalis* then all theologies which took *revelatio naturalis* as their source and norm (i.e., all natural theologies) would not have truly given those roles to *revelatio*, but would rather have committed idolatry – affording to that which is not truly revelation roles which properly belongs to revelation alone. Natural theology would be *de jure* idolatry.

In the second place, changes in Barth's understanding of what constituted *revelatio specialis* would necessarily affect the *scope* of what counted as natural theology. Natural theology is that theology which takes as its source and norm *revelatio naturalis* – defined broadly as a real or purported source of the knowledge of God other than *revelatio specialis*. Thus, the way that Barth defined *revelatio specialis* determined the scope of what counted as *revelatio naturalis*, which, in turn, determined the scope of what counted as *theologia naturalis*.

In both of these ways, it was Barth's understanding of revelation which demanded, drove, and controlled the idolatry-critique as it applied to natural theology. Specific examples of the fact that, and the way in which, changes in Barth's doctrine of revelation and his understanding of special revelation led to changes in his evaluation of natural theology (as idolatrous or non-idolatrous) and to changes in the scope of what counted as natural theology will be discussed below in detail.

### 2.2.3 Four early turns in Barth's idolatry-critique as related to natural theology

Despite great continuity in Barth's rejection of natural theology as idolatry across his career, four early 'turns' can be identified. These are (1) his initial rejection of natural theology as idolatry under the influence of Herrmann (2.2.3.1); (2) his expansion of his critique of natural theology as idolatry such that his liberal teachers and his own earlier theology was implicated in it (2.2.3.2); (3) his rejection of the negative natural theology, which he had previously accepted, as being idolatrous (2.2.3.3); (4) his grounding of his rejection of natural theology as idolatry as a consequence of the noetic effects of sin (2.2.3.4).

The first and third of these turns are material examples of the first way in which it was specified formally above that changes in Barth's doctrine of revelation necessarily affected his view and critique of natural theology, i.e., they are examples of Barth's narrowing of what counted as revelation, such that natural theology (first seemingly in general, with a specific emphasis on metaphysics, and then also, specifically, negative natural theology, which he had come to accept) had to be judged as idolatry. The second of these turns is a material example of the second way in which it was specified formally above that changes in Barth's doctrine of revelation affected

his understanding of natural theology, i.e., it is an example of Barth's specifying of what counted as *revelatio specialis* such that the scope of what counted as natural theology came to include that which it previously had not. These four turns were completed by the 1924 *Göttingen Dogmatics*, where the mature form of his rejection of natural theology as idolatry was solidified, and after which it remained constant.

### 2.2.3.1 Barth's initial rejection of natural theology as idolatry

Barth's first turn was from an early, critical acceptance of the legitimacy of natural theology to a rejection of it as idolatry. This turn was elicited by a specifying of his doctrine of revelation such that it excluded *revelatio naturalis*. It can be made visible by a comparative analysis of two of Barth's early essays: his 1907, 'Die Missionsthätigkeit des Paulus nach der Darstellung der Apostelgeschichte,'<sup>139</sup> and his 1911, 'La Réapparition de la Métaphysique dans la Théologie.' In the former essay, there is evidence of an early acceptance of the idea that genuine revelation includes *revelatio naturalis*. Barth could speak, for example, of, 'jener natürlichen Offenbarung, die auch [Paulus] anerkennt,'<sup>140</sup> and he could write that, 'Gerade die hier vorgetragene Auffassung von der vorchristlichen Religiosität bei Juden und Heiden war doch wohl auch die des [Paulus], nämlich: auch sie ist Offenbarung ὁ θεὸς γὰρ αὐτοῖς ἐφανερώσεν (Rom 1, 19).'<sup>141</sup> Thus, the preaching of Christ, according to Barth, was not opposed to, but was rather the 'fulfilment' [*Erfüllung*] of and 'supplement' [*Ergänzung*] to that

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<sup>139</sup> Karl Barth, 'Die Missionsthätigkeit des Paulus nach der Darstellung der Apostelgeschichte,' in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1905-1909 (GA III.21)* (Zurich: TVZ, 1992), 217.

<sup>140</sup> Barth, 'Die Missionsthätigkeit,' 217.

<sup>141</sup> Barth, 'Die Missionsthätigkeit,' 214. See also p. 213.

which could be known of God from nature.<sup>142</sup> In other words, because Barth's understanding of revelation was broad enough to include genuine natural revelation, natural theology was not *de jure* idolatry, although, to be sure, it could be *de facto*.<sup>143</sup> Theology, while having natural revelation at its source and norm – i.e., while being natural theology – could be truly have *revelation* in those roles, and could thus be non-idolatrous.

The 1911 essay shows that Barth had performed an about-face on these matters by that year. The difference was Herrmann. The 1907 essay was written in May of that year, while Barth was a student at Berne: just after he had become a serious reader of both Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Herrmann,<sup>144</sup> and just before he went to Marburg to study under Herrmann in April 1908.<sup>145</sup> Herrmann belonged to a tradition – to which Schleiermacher and Ritschl also belonged – which understood revelation in such a manner as to exclude the possibility of what they understood to be *revelatio* and therefore *theologia naturalis* (predominantly metaphysical theology). Schleiermacher did this by locating the reception of revelation in the realm of neither thinking nor doing, but feeling [*Gefühl*].<sup>146</sup> Ritschl, urging that revealed, religious knowledge came by way of value-judgments,<sup>147</sup> polemicised sharply against metaphysics in theology.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Barth, 'Die Missionsthätigkeit,' 214.

<sup>143</sup> Barth, 'Die Missionsthätigkeit,' 214.

<sup>144</sup> Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1976), 40-41.

<sup>145</sup> Busch, *Karl Barth*, 44.

<sup>146</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 22; *The Christian Faith*, trans. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (London: T&T Clark, 1999), 5.

<sup>147</sup> Albrecht Ritschl, *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation: The Positive Development of the Doctrine*, ed. H.R. Mackintosh and A.B. Macauley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1902), 212-213.

Herrmann was faithful to this tradition in his own way, holding that God was not accessible to human beings in nature or history as such, but only in God's own historical, revelatory act.<sup>149</sup>

In the 1911 essay, Barth appeared as a faithful follower of Herrmann and this tradition more broadly as he sought to combat the existence of metaphysics in theology, an issue which he closely linked to, if not identified with, natural theology.<sup>150</sup> In contrast to his 1907 essay, he insisted that special revelation was the only form of revelation that existed: 'La réalité de l'Absolu, de Dieu, est donnée par la religion, soit par la révélation historique.'<sup>151</sup> He therefore said of metaphysics/natural theology, 'c'est ériger une idole («einen Götzen aufrichten und anbeten») selon l'expression qui revient souvent sous la plume de Ritschl et de Herrmann...'<sup>152</sup> This change is an example of the first way in which it was specified above that a material change in Barth's doctrine of revelation would affect his view of natural theology; namely, it was a specifying of Barth's doctrine of revelation such that it was exclusive of 'natural revelation' which led to the belief that natural theology involved the substitution of that revelation with that which was not, and, therefore, to the critique of natural theology as *de jure* idolatry. Barth would continue to critique natural theology as being necessarily, wholly idolatrous in this way throughout the remainder of his career.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Albrecht Ritschl, 'Theology and Metaphysics,' in *Three Essays*, trans. Philip Hefner (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 167, 170.

<sup>149</sup> Herrmann, *CCwG*, 57.

<sup>150</sup> Barth, 'La Réapparition,' 340.

<sup>151</sup> Barth, 'La Réapparition,' 340.

<sup>152</sup> Barth, 'La Réapparition,' 350.

<sup>153</sup> Barth's position in relation to natural theology is made too soft in the presentation of Diller when he writes that, 'Barth is merely denying that created human capacities, even once renewed from the deleterious effects of sin, are ever in and of themselves sufficient' (Kevin Diller, *Theology's*

### 2.2.3.2 Barth's expansion of his critique of natural theology as idolatry such that his liberal teachers and his own earlier theology were implicated

A specifying of Barth's understanding of *special* revelation was the impetus for this second turn in his critique of natural theology as idolatry, which was an expansion in the scope of what for him counted, and by this time had to be critiqued as, natural theology, implicating not only his former liberal teachers in that critique, but also his earlier self. As has been suggested, since roughly 1908 Barth had in large measure accepted the liberal, Herrmannian conception of revelation. Under this conception, revelation was understood to include only special revelation, but there was a tendency toward identifying that special revelation with religious experience.<sup>154</sup> The core of Barth's break from liberalism, as Frei has rightly suggested, was his rejection of this tendency.<sup>155</sup> McCormack's placement of that break in the year 1915 is likely proper,<sup>156</sup> but it is in the 1922 *Romans II* that it received its clearest and most complete early expression.

In *Romans II*, Barth spoke of revelation as that which is totally free from, and wholly other than, all that is created and exists within the world of time including, crucially, religious experience and even the actual experience of being a recipient of

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*Epistemological Dilemma: How Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga Provide a Unified Response* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2014), 194-195), and that '...Barth's rejection of natural theology...should be understood only as a rejection of the possibility of an intimate and genuine knowledge of God outside of active, triune self-disclosure through gracious, personal and transformative encounter with Jesus Christ by the ministry of the Spirit.' (*Epistemological Dilemma*, 194) Barth's did not see the undertaking of natural theology as merely inadequate but, rather, as being an act of idolatry.

<sup>154</sup> See, for example, Barth's 1909 statement in *Konfirmandenunterricht 1909-1921 (GA I.18)*, ed. Jürgen Fangmeier (Zurich: TVZ, 1987), 15: 'Und was wir von menschl. Seite Religion nennen [,] ist von Seiten Gottes Offenbarung.'

<sup>155</sup> Hans Frei, 'The Doctrine of Revelation in the Thought of Karl Barth, 1909-1922: The Nature of Barth's Break with Liberalism' (PhD diss., Yale University, 1956), 111-115.

<sup>156</sup> McCormack, *KBCRDT*, 123.

revelation.<sup>157</sup> But if actual special revelation is wholly other than religious experience, then the ‘revelation’ of liberal Protestantism and the earlier Barth, could not be special revelation. It could only be something ‘natural,’ and their theologies which were built upon it natural theologies. Barth did not in *Romans II* specifically critique the theologies of Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Herrmann, or his earlier self as *natürlich Theologie*, and thus idolatry. He would, however, do so later, and the groundwork for that critique was already laid in *Romans II*.<sup>158</sup>

This turn was an example of the second of the two ways in which it was specified above that changes in Barth’s understanding of revelation would necessarily lead to changes in his understanding of the scope of what counted as natural theology, i.e., it was a specifying of what counted as *revelatio specialis* which led to the inclusion as *theologia naturalis* of forms of theology which he had previously not understood as such. In particular, Barth’s doctrine of special revelation was specified such that it excluded anything which could be identified, or even understood as continuous with, religious experience, making it merely natural, and the theologies based upon it idolatrous natural theologies.

Barr criticises Barth’s identification of Protestant liberalism as natural theology as ‘somewhat misleading’<sup>159</sup> because ‘one of the main features of Modern Protestantism – let us say, since the mid-eighteenth century – was its departure from the tradition of

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<sup>157</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 60, 230.

<sup>158</sup> E.g., Karl Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher: Lectures at Göttingen, Winter Semester of 1923/1924*, ed. Dietrich Ritschl, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 200-201; *GD*, 348; ‘No! An Answer to Emil Brunner,’ in *Natural Theology: Comprising ‘Nature and Grace’ by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the reply ‘No!’ by Dr. Karl Barth*, trans. Peter Fraenkel (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 101.

<sup>159</sup> Barr, *BFNT*, 105.

natural theology which had, in fact, been highly influential in Protestantism.’<sup>160</sup> While there is a kernel of truth in this – as has been seen, Barth did first reject natural theology because of his dependence upon the liberal Protestant tradition – it is unfair to Barth to call his rejection of liberal Protestantism as natural theology misleading. He did not deny that liberal theologians outwardly disavowed natural theology. He simply adopted a certain conception of special revelation which led him to see them as being also (unwittingly) implicated in it.

### **2.2.3.3 Barth’s rejection of the negative natural theology which he had previously accepted**

The third turn in Barth’s idolatry-critique as it related to natural theology was his subjection of negative natural theology – which he had for a time accepted as valid – to the same critique as the positive form of it. In *Romans II*, Barth believed in the existence of a genuine *negative* natural revelation – a negative knowledge of God, and self and world in relation to God available apart from special revelation, and in particular, in the realm of existential experience. Thus, while he completely rejected as idolatry all forms of positive natural theology, he accepted it in a negative form.

McCormack errs in stating that there is no truth in Stadtland’s claim that, in *Romans II*, ‘Barth ‘made a place for a ‘*negative*’ natural theology.’<sup>161</sup> Within *Romans II*, perhaps

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<sup>160</sup> Barr, *BFNT*, 105-106.

<sup>161</sup> McCormack, *KBCRDT*, 259. The quotation is McCormack’s quotation of Tjarko Stadtland, *Eschatologie und Geschichte in der Theologie des jungen Karl Barths* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1966), 116. Emphasis original. McCormack’s broader denial of the presence of a negative natural theology within *Romans II* is found on pp. 259-260. See also Attila Szekeres, ‘Karl Barth und die natürliche Theologie,’ *Evangelische Theologie* 24, 5 (1964): 320. Eberhard Busch (‘God is God: The Meaning of a Controversial Formula and the Fundamental Problem of Speaking about God,’ *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 7, 2 (1986): 109) also wrongly denies the assertion that *Romans II* contained or allowed for a negative natural theology, while Robert Jenson (*God after God: The God of the Past and the God of the Future, Seen in the Work of Karl Barth* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), 86-87) and

the clearest evidence of this is found in Barth's comments on Romans 1.19-21. These verses, which are often thought to provide warrant for natural theology, are in *Romans II* interpreted by Barth as allowing for only a *negative* natural theology. He writes, for example, that: 'By calm, veritable, unprejudiced religious contemplation the divine 'No' can be established and apprehended. If we do not ourselves hinder it, nothing can prevent our being translated into a most wholesome KRISIS by that which *may be known of God*.'<sup>162</sup> Other passages in *Romans II* confirm this interpretation.<sup>163</sup>

The later Barth also helps to confirm it. In his 1934 *Nein!* to Brunner he claimed that Brunner, in an earlier essay<sup>164</sup> held to a belief in a negative *theologia naturalis* along these same lines.<sup>165</sup> According to Barth:

It seemed, then, that Brunner was not speaking, as he is now, of a directly observable continuity between nature and grace, reason and revelation, but of a continuity which at the same time was discontinuity, which provided both a contact and a contrast. The latter was said to be so great that the continuity was subordinate to the discontinuity, the contact to the contrast...All natural knowledge of God is – so Brunner then said – essentially a knowledge of the wrath of God. And being subject to the wrath of God meant the same thing objectively as a bad conscience or despair subjectively...The 'contact' made in the natural knowledge of God consists in the fact that it involves 'a loss of certainty'...The question is this: has Brunner abandoned that merely indirect or negative significance of the natural knowledge of God?<sup>166</sup>

Barth went on to lament the apparent fact that he had, and then made the admission that, '...around 1920, and perhaps even later, I might still have succumbed to [this view].

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Rustin Brian (*Covering up Luther: How Barth's Christology Challenged the Deus Absconditus that Haunts Modernity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 66-67) rightly affirm it.

<sup>162</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 46.

<sup>163</sup> E.g., Barth, *Romans II*, 47, 245, 251.

<sup>164</sup> Emil Brunner, 'Die Frage nach dem 'Anknüpfungspunkt als Problem der Theologie,' *Zwischen den Zeiten* 10 (1932): 505-532.

<sup>165</sup> Barth, 'No!', 113-114.

<sup>166</sup> Barth, 'No!', 113-114.

And who knows whether one could not find passages in the *Epistle to the Romans* in which I have said something of the sort myself?<sup>167</sup> Barth did indeed say something of the sort; his above description of Brunner's negative *theologia naturalis* is very nearly a description of his own in *Romans II*.<sup>168</sup>

The idea that there existed a negative form of natural revelation contained within the idea of true revelation, represented an inconsistency within Barth's thinking in *Romans II*. If God and God's revelation were as wholly other as Barth held them to be at the time, then negative knowledge of them should have been naturally just as out of the reach of the human as that of the positive sort. It ought to have been the case, as it was for Barth later, that, in the words of Schwöbel, 'the 'beyond' of God is not the 'beyond' of the human mind,'<sup>169</sup> and thus that negative natural theology was no less idolatrous than the positive form of it. This feature of Barth's thinking fit poorly with the rest of it, and is likely a product of the influence of Kierkegaard (the influence of whom on *Romans II*, it is interesting to note, in light of the fact that McCormack denies the existence of a negative natural knowledge of God in *Romans II*, McCormack downplays<sup>170</sup>).

This inconsistency – which Barth likely simply recognised to be such – was largely corrected by the time of the 1924 *Göttingen Dogmatics*. This can be seen in §4, 'Man and his Question,' in which he made clear that God's 'answer' may in no sense be

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<sup>167</sup> Barth, 'No!,' 114-115.

<sup>168</sup> As Gilland shows, Brunner had also perceived a certain kind negative natural theology in Barth's earlier theology (David Andrew Gilland, *Law and Gospel in Emil Brunner's Earlier Dialectical Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 74-76, 266).

<sup>169</sup> Christoph Schwöbel, 'Theology,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 26.

<sup>170</sup> McCormack, *KBCRDT*, 216-217, 235-240.

conceived of as the answer to the human question conceived independently of it.<sup>171</sup> It can be seen, further in, §15, ‘The Knowability of God,’ and particularly in Barth’s treatment therein of Romans 1.19-20. In *Romans II*, Barth had interpreted this passage as meaning that human beings had access only to a negative natural knowledge of God. In the *GD*, by contrast, he interpreted it as meaning that as human beings we have the ability to, ‘be aware of the limit of our knowledge in relation to relation to God,’ but with the clear caveat that such negative knowledge is truly continuous with negative knowledge of God only in the event of revelation.<sup>172</sup> There being no negative knowledge of God available outwith special revelation, by the time of the *GD* negative natural theology was left in the same position the positive sort; it was considered to be, like it, idolatry.

Once more, this was a material example of the first way, described above, in which changes in Barth’s doctrine of revelation necessarily meant a change in his view of natural theology: his concept of revelation was specified, this time such that it excluded also *negative* natural knowledge of God, meaning that even a negative natural theology – that theology based upon negative natural revelation – had to be considered to be idolatry. Unlike the first two turns, this change was more the resolution of an internal inconsistency in Barth’s thinking than a fundamental change in Barth’s doctrine of revelation.

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<sup>171</sup> Barth, *GD*, 69. The thesis of §4 runs as follows: ‘God’s revelation, which is the basis of Christian preaching, is the answer to our question how we can overcome the contradiction in our existence, which we have to view not as our destiny but as our responsible act, and which we know that we cannot overcome. But we know ourselves in this regard only as God makes himself known to us. We would not ask about God had not God already answered us. Because of this, we can neither evade the question about God nor settle it in any sense.’ Elsewhere within the same paragraph Barth asks (the implicit answer clearly being ‘no’): ‘Can man know himself except as he is primarily known by God himself?’ (83)

<sup>172</sup> Barth, *GD*, 341-342; 325.

#### **2.2.3.4 Barth's grounding of his rejection of natural theology as idolatry as a consequence of the noetic effects of sin**

The fourth turn in Barth's idolatry-critique as it was brought to bear upon natural theology was his specifying that all natural theology must of necessity be idolatry *because of* the noetic effects of sin. In other words, it came to be made clear that the *reason* that purported natural revelation could not truly be revelation, and that the practice of natural theology must, therefore, by definition, be an act of idolatrous substitution, was not the fact that natural revelation did not in any sense exist, but rather the fact that it might as well not exist, because the human being as sinner could not subjectively appropriate it. This turn can once again be made most clearly visible through a comparative analysis of *Romans II* and the *Göttingen Dogmatics*.

As matters were presented by Barth in *Romans II*, positive natural theology necessarily constituted idolatry because supposed natural revelation was not true revelation, and supposed natural revelation, in turn, could not be true revelation *because of the absolute ontological distinction between God and nature*. For *this* reason, natural theology was necessarily the idolatrous substitution of revelation with that which was not. Barth did not state this in *Romans II* in so many words, but the radical ontological dualism between God and the world, which is so characteristic of this work, forces the conclusion that this was his thinking.<sup>173</sup> There was no positive likeness between God and the world, no ongoing analogy which could be the basis of positive natural knowledge of God and by extension a legitimate positive natural theology.

By the time of the *GD* Barth's view had changed: the world in theory could, and, in fact, objectively did, reveal God, though many interpreters – including Holder,

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<sup>173</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 36, 39, 53, 103.

Berkouwer, and Berkhof<sup>174</sup> – have missed the fact that this was Barth’s mature position. A non-idolatrous natural theology was thus, in theory possible. In actual practice, however, the natural revelation present in the world could never be subjectively appropriated by human beings, even in part, due to the noetic effects of sin.<sup>175</sup> According to Barth, special revelation:

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<sup>174</sup> Holder shows that he misses this shift when, in an attempt to speak of Barth’s thinking during the *Church Dogmatics* period, he writes that for him natural theology is impossible because, ‘God is unknowable because of the ontological difference – the ‘infinite, qualitative distinction,’ as Kierkegaard put it – between God the Creator and man the creature, and because sin has corrupted man’s nature.’ (*THD*, 27) This was true of Barth’s thinking in *Romans II*, but not in the *GD* and after. G.C. Berkouwer (*General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 30) wrongly claims that Barth, even in his mature position, is to be sharply distinguished from Calvin, in that the latter believed in the objective ability of the cosmos to furnish knowledge of God which was unable to be appropriated due to the noetic effects of sin. This was also Barth’s mature position. Hendrik Berkhof (‘Barths Lichtelehre im Rahmen der heutigen Theologie, Kirche und Welt,’ in *Karl Barths Lichtelehre* (Zurich: TVZ, 1978), 32-33) similarly errs when he writes that, ‘...die Lichtlosigkeit der Welt ist bei Barth nicht die Folge einer boshafte Blindheiten des Menschen, sondern einer grundsätzlichen Sprachlosigkeit der guten Schöpfung Gottes’ and claims that Barth’s position changed such that it aligned with Calvin’s belief in an objective general revelation only very late in his career. (‘Lichtelehre,’ 35) Similarly, Diller’s claim that, ‘It is safe to conclude that the fundamental difference between Barth and Brunner is not over their estimation of the noetic effects of sin...’ (*Epistemological Dilemma*, 191) should not be accepted; this was exactly the fundamental difference between them. John Henderson, for one, rightly sees this (‘The Controversy between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner Concerning Natural Theology’ (PhD diss., Edinburgh University, 1940), 123), as does George Hunsinger (‘The Yes Hidden in Barth’s No to Brunner: The First Commandment as a Theological Axiom,’ in *Evangelical, Catholic, and Reformed: Doctrinal Essays on Barth and Related Themes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 97). Terry Cross (*Dialectic in Karl Barth’s Doctrine of God* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 101) points to the years 1925-1927 as the time in which Barth softened the ontic dialectic between God and the world in his thinking, but this had actually happened, in the way described above, already by 1924. Cornelis Van der Kooi’s criticism (*As in a Mirror: John Calvin and Karl Barth on Knowing God. A Diptych*, trans. Donald Mader (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 277-278) of Barth’s (according to van der Kooi, unbiblical) absolute opposition of the *form* (e.g., the human flesh of Jesus of Nazareth) to the *content* of revelation, and the apparently consequent arbitrariness of revelation’s form misses the point that, for Barth, the form of revelation was not selected arbitrarily by God, nor was it absolutely opposed to revelation’s content. The creaturely form of revelation was, rather, at least to a certain degree unpredictable, and could not provide knowledge of God apart from God’s act, due to human sin.

<sup>175</sup> Clark Pinnock (‘Karl Barth and Christian Apologetics,’ *Themelios* (1977): 69) notes that this was Barth’s position in his *A Shorter Commentary on Romans* (trans. D.H. van Daleen, ed. Maico M. Michielin (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007)), and allows that this may have been his position prior to that commentary, writing that, ‘...there Barth acknowledges what he may always have believed concerning general revelation, though loathe to admit it earlier, that there is a witness to God in the world to which all people have access, though they have not profited from it.’ Cf. Barth, *A Shorter Commentary on Romans*, 14-15. In fact, the 1959 statements of Barth’s to which Pinnock refers were reaffirmations of what he had been happy to admit since 1924. Since this is the case, Bettis is perhaps misleading when he writes that Barth’s rejection of natural theology ‘arises as a direct result of who God is.’ (Joseph Dabney Bettis, ‘Theology in the Public Debate: Barth’s Rejection of Natural Theology and the Hermeneutical Problem,’ *Scottish Journal of Theology* 22 (1969): 389)

...takes place because of the *fall*, to reverse the fall, to redeem us from evil, from guilt and its penalty. It is because of man and his contradiction that revelation must be made objectively possible instead of simply *being* possible and actual. It is because of man and his contradiction that God must leave his self-resting deity for a second time after creation and come into action. Man as God created him, paradisaic man, needed no divine revelation or incarnation.<sup>176</sup>

Since, due to the fall, the natural revelation which was objectively present was subjectively inaccessible, the non-idolatrous natural theology which was in theory possible was in practice impossible.<sup>177</sup>

In close connection with Barth's belief in an objective natural revelation, which could not be subjectively appropriated due to the noetic effects of sin, he also, from the time of the *GD* on, implied the existence of a kind of ontological *analogia entis* which was noetically inaccessible to human beings. He implied this most clearly in §17 of the *GD*, in which he set forth his doctrine of the attributes of God. He wrote there that, 'there are...qualities of God of which we may see obscure vestiges, analogies and similar effects in the creature, for example, God's life, wisdom, will, power and goodness.'<sup>178</sup> Barth was (*contra* Brunner<sup>179</sup>) not a nominalist. Forms existed, for him, first in God, and then were participated in, in an analogous way, by created being. This, however, implies the existence of at least some form of an ontological *analogia entis* and the objective possibility of gaining knowledge of God through creation.

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<sup>176</sup> Barth, *GD*, 155.

<sup>177</sup> Barth, *GD*, 343-349. See also Karl Barth, *A Late Friendship: The Letters of Karl Barth and Carl Zuckermayer*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 42. Paul Molnar ('Natural Theology Revisited: A Comparison of T.F. Torrance and Karl Barth,' *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 21, 1 (2005): 81-82) notes that it was the fact that Barth took sin more seriously than T.F. Torrance in their respective discussions of natural theology which caused them to diverge.

<sup>178</sup> Barth, *GD*, 397.

<sup>179</sup> Emil Brunner, 'Nature and Grace,' in *Natural Theology: Comprising 'Nature and Grace' by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the reply 'No!' by Dr. Karl Barth*, trans. Peter Fraenkel (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 53-54.

The *analogia entis* was not for Barth, however, noetically accessible to the human being. In particular, the cognitive condition of the perpetually sinful human being was such that he or she could not think the concepts or forms properly – as they actually existed in God and were objectively participated in by created being – as he or she would have to do were the analogy to be noetically established. Barth spoke, for example, of the concept of ‘life,’ stating that, ‘The life of God cannot consist of participation in the reality of life in general. It must be the reality of the life in which all that lives apart from God merely participates.’<sup>180</sup> His juxtaposition of ‘life in general’ with ‘the life of God’ in which creatures participate has in view the necessary contrast between the form ‘life’ which exists in the sin-affected human mind and the form ‘life’ which truly exists in God and analogously in creation. If the human being could think the form ‘life’ (and the other forms) properly of his or her own volition, then he or she would have access to the analogy, and thus to natural knowledge of God, and would thus be capable of undertaking a non-idolatrous natural theology. In actual fact, under the conditions of sin, he or she can only think forms improperly, and is thus inherently incapable of knowing either God or, in the truest sense, creation.

That this was Barth’s thinking is made even clearer in his 1940 *CD II/1*, and particularly in his discussion therein of his *analogia fidei*. Though this paragraph was written significantly after the *GD* it did not depart from it on the matters under discussion, but rather developed the ideas which were already present (manifestly or latently) therein. Barth wrote in the *CD II/1* that human views, concepts and words are, as human, used, ‘improperly and pictorially,’<sup>181</sup> and are, therefore, inapplicable to

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<sup>180</sup> Barth, *GD*, 403.

<sup>181</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 229.

God.<sup>182</sup> In the event of revelation, however, he claimed that human concepts are elevated, and restored to their proper sense, so that the human being is *enabled* to think them such that they are applicable to God and, analogously, to creation.<sup>183</sup> The most natural way to interpret these statements is to say that special revelation, for Barth, enables the human being to do what he or she could not do naturally due to sin: to think concepts or forms such that the already-existing ontological analogy between God and created being can be noetically established; the *analogia fidei*, as von Balthasar rightly claimed, presupposed the *analogia entis* as its ontological basis.<sup>184</sup>

In spite of Barth's own later, well-known denunciations of the *analogia entis*, and in spite of claims within the secondary literature to the contrary,<sup>185</sup> the basis of

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<sup>182</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 182.

<sup>183</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 227-233.

<sup>184</sup> The following words of Surin may be helpful here: '...Barth gives us the eschatological dimension essential to a proper understanding of Aquinas' analogy of being, while the 'ontological' analogy theory of Aquinas' gives us the requisite ontological foundations for Barth's analogy of faith. Or to put it even more briefly: analogy from the perspective of God is analogy of being, analogy from the perspective of man is analogy of faith...' (Kenneth Surin, 'Creation, Revelation, and the Analogy Theory,' *Journal of Theological Studies* 32, 1 (1981): 420) See also Henry Chavannes, *The Analogy between God and the World in Saint Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth*, trans. William Lumley (New York: Vantage, 1992), 199-211 and *passim*. Understanding Barth in the way presented here helps to explain why, for Barth, knowledge of creation is given with knowledge of God. Created being participates in the forms which first exist in God. In order to understand created being then, one must be able to think those forms. The sinner, as such, cannot do so, and thus can not only not know God, but also cannot understand creation. In the knowledge of God given in special revelation, the ability to think those forms are given, such that through them the human being can both know God and, analogously, understand the created world. Further, understanding Barth in this way guards him against the insinuation of Jay Wesley Richards ('Barth on the Divine 'Conscription' of Language,' *The Heythrop Journal* 38, 3 (1997): 263-264) that his actualism is in conflict with his realism.

<sup>185</sup> Those who claim that Barth rejected the *analogia entis* in both its ontological and noetic senses and/or the objective reality of natural revelation either forever or well into the *CD* (through at least II/1) include Pinnock, 'KBCA,' 69; G.C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth: An Introduction and Critical Appraisal* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 181-195; Battista Mondin, *The Principle of Analogy in Protestant and Catholic Theology* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963), 164ff; Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 282; Wilfried Härle, *Sein und Gnade: Die Ontologie in Karl Barths kirchlicher Dogmatik* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1975), 173ff; Bruce McCormack, 'Karl Barth's Version of an 'Analogy of Being': A Dialectical No and Yes to Roman Catholicism,' in *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God?*, ed. Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 117; Keith L. Johnson, *Karl Barth and the Analogia Entis* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 178ff;

Barth's critique of natural theology as idolatry from the *GD* on was not the non-existence of natural revelation or even every form of an ontological *analogia entis*, both of which he accepted even if only implicitly, but rather the sinful human being's intrinsic inability to subjectively appropriate natural revelation and make use of that analogy. It is not necessary to prove that Barth was perfectly consistent on this point,<sup>186</sup> but this was certainly his main line of thinking. The *CD* II/1 has already been cited as evidence of continuity in Barth's thinking on this point and it could be cited further toward that same end.<sup>187</sup> Other works which came between 1924 and 1940 also provide evidence of this claim.<sup>188</sup> Of Barth's well-known rejection of Przywara's *analogia entis*, Roger White rightly observes that: '...when Karl Barth declared, 'I regard the *analogia entis* as the invention of the Antichrist,' it looks very much as if, under the influence of

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Trevor Hart, 'A Capacity for Ambiguity?: The Barth – Brunner Debate Revisited,' *Tyndale Bulletin* 44, 2 (1993): 296-297; Te Velde, *Paths Beyond Tracing Out*, 363. Wingren wrongly claims that, 'It is characteristic of Karl Barth's thinking that God and man are understood as two different kinds of being.' (*TiC*, 23; c.f. Barth, *CD* II/1, 242) Hans Urs von Balthasar (*The Theology of Karl Barth* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992), 97), Henri Bouillard (*The Knowledge of God*, trans. Samuel D. Femiano (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 122), Wolfhart Pannenberg ('Zur Bedeutung des Analogiegedankens bei Karl Barth,' *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 78 (1953): 18-23), Roland Chia (*Revelation and Theology: The Knowledge of God in Balthasar and Barth* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1999), 214), Chavannes (*The Analogy*, 210) and Stanley Hauerwas (*With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), e.g., p. 158), among others, seem to have seen at least some of the early signs of Barth's implicit acceptance of an ontological form of the *analogia entis*, i.e., of the fact that his *analogia fidei* necessarily had some form of *analogia entis* as its ontological presupposition (whether or not Barth admitted the same).

<sup>186</sup> Karl Barth, 'Church and Culture,' in *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings 1920-1928*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith, 334-354 (London: SCM Press, 1962), 342 may represent an occasion of inconsistency, as might his comments on p. 5 of *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life: The Theological Basis of Ethics*, trans. R. Birch Hoyle (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993). Yet, they also may be (and, in light of Barth's statements elsewhere, should be) interpreted in a way which causes them to conform with the main line of Barth's thinking set forth here. And indeed, even on p. 342 of the former work there are suggestions that natural revelation is an objective reality which simply cannot be subjectively appropriated as such. Barth speaks, for example, of the Word of God bringing to light the 'buried and forgotten truth of the creation.' It is by no means clear that Diller, for example, is correct in his suggestion that what Barth intended by this statement and others like it was simply that creation can be and is the media of special revelation, and is, as such, not unimportant. (Diller, *Epistemological Dilemma*, 180)

<sup>187</sup> E.g., Barth, *CD* II/1, 242.

<sup>188</sup> E.g., Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum: Anselm's Proof of the Existence of God in the Context of his Theological Scheme* (London: SCM Press, 1960), 117; *CD* I/1, 130; 'No!,' 108.

discussions with Erich Przywara, he was concerned with an *epistemological* issue...<sup>189</sup> And it is noteworthy that Barth had only positive words to say about the *analogia entis* of Söhngen, who had demonstrated it could coexist along with the *analogia fidei*.<sup>190</sup> Barth's 1940 rejection of the Quenstedt's *analogia attributionis intrinsecae* in favour of the *analogia attributionis extrinsecae*,<sup>191</sup> which has often been interpreted as a denial of the *analogia entis* (e.g. by Berkouwer,<sup>192</sup> McCormack<sup>193</sup> and Johnson<sup>194</sup>) should not be taken in this way. In the first place, this passage is unclear; as Roger White notes, Barth's use of terms in it does not seem to follow their historical usage.<sup>195</sup> For this reason, it should be interpreted in light of clearer passages, which indicate that Barth did accept some form of ontological *analogia entis*. And it is very easy to interpret the passage in this way, because, within it, Barth frequently gives the impression that his concern with the *analogia attributionis intrinsecae* is focussed upon noetic issues.<sup>196</sup> It is likely that when Barth opted for the terminology *analogia attributionis extrinsecae* he

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<sup>189</sup> Roger M. White, *Talking about God: The Concept of Analogy and the Problem of Religious Language* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 9. Emphasis original. Quotation of Barth from *CD I/1*, xiii. Cf. Barth, *CD I/1*, xiii, 41. See also Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace*, 80.

<sup>190</sup> Söhngen expressed his understanding of the doctrine of *analogia fidei* in two 1934 essays: 'Analogia Fidei: Gottähnlichkeit allein aus Glauben?', *Catholica* 3, 3 (1934): 113-136 and 'Analogia Fidei: Die Einheit in der Glaubenswissenschaft,' *Catholica* 3, 4 (1934): 176-208. English translations of these essays are available: 'Analogia Fidei: Likeness to God from Faith Alone?,' trans. Kenneth Oakes, *Pro Ecclesia* 21, 1 (2012): 56-76; 'Analogia Fidei: Unity in the Science of Faith,' trans. Kenneth Oakes, *Pro Ecclesia* 21, 2 (2012): 169-194. Barth wrote (*CD II/1*, 82) that if Söhngen's understanding of the doctrine of the *analogia entis* was a true expression of the Roman Catholic doctrine, then, 'naturally I must withdraw my earlier statement that I regard the *analogia entis* as 'the invention of the Antichrist.''

<sup>191</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 237-243.

<sup>192</sup> Berkouwer, *TTG*, 188.

<sup>193</sup> McCormack, 'Barth's Version,' 117.

<sup>194</sup> Johnson, *KBAE*, 187-188. Even von Balthasar, who sees Barth as holding implicitly to *analogia entis* is disturbed by this passage, and finds Barth to have involved himself in contradiction within it. (Von Balthasar, *TKB*, 110)

<sup>195</sup> Roger White, *Talking about God*, 154.

<sup>196</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 239-242.

meant only that the power that causes the creature to be an analogue of God *within the mind* is extrinsic, i.e., that the creature does not have the power to efficaciously communicate God to sinners because of their sin, and also, perhaps, that the essence of the creature is determined extrinsically by its relationship to Jesus Christ.

From the time of the *Göttingen Dogmatics* until the end of his career, then, Barth considered natural theology to be necessarily idolatrous *because* the natural revelation which was by definition its source and norm was not revelation at all, and was therefore a substitute for it. The purported natural revelation which was its source and norm was not true revelation not because of the objective inexistence of natural revelation or an *analogia* between God and created being, but rather because the natural revelation which objectively existed, and the *analogia* which was an ontological reality, could not be accessed by sinful human beings.

### 2.2.3.5 Consistency after the four turns

These four turns having been completed by 1924, Barth's mature idolatry-critique as it related to natural theology was in place. Thus the many scholars who argue that Barth's criticism of natural theology as idolatry was in some way a product of his involvement in the German *Kirchenkampf* of the early 1930s err,<sup>197</sup> even if the events of that time period led to Barth emphasising, and adopting a more urgent *tone* in, that criticism. 'The Barmen Declaration'<sup>198</sup> and *Nein!*, likely Barth's two most well-known anti-natural

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<sup>197</sup> E.g., Friedrich Wilhelm Marquardt, *Theologie und Sozialismus: Das Beispiel Karl Barths* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1985), 263; Webb, *RFT*, 168; Grant, 'Unnatural,' 99; Barr, *BFNT*, 116. Wingren also errs in asserting, more generally, that it was in 1932 that Barth 'began his attack on natural theology.' (*TiC*, 39)

<sup>198</sup> Karl Barth, 'The Theological Declaration of Barmen,' in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): Part I: Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly (PCUSA), 2014), 280-284. Barth (*CD* II/1, 172-178) stated that the Barmen Declaration was directed not only against the 'German Christians,' but also against natural theology more broadly.

theology documents, contained nothing substantially new;<sup>199</sup> they were applications of the same critique which had long been a part of Barth's thought to a relatively new phenomenon.

#### 2.2.4 Further aspects of Barth's mature idolatry-critique in relation to natural theology

##### **2.2.4.1 Barth's critique of natural theology as idolatry was exegetically driven**

That Barth believed that the subjection of natural theology to an idolatry-critique was demanded by revelation meant, in part, that he believed that it was demanded by the authoritative witness to revelation found in Scripture. For Barth, special revelation declares its own exclusivity as revelation, and, by implication, that that which it is not must not take the place which belongs to revelation; Scripture, according to Barth's exegesis, correspondingly understands true revelation to be exclusive of natural revelation and, as a necessary implication, criticises natural theology as idolatry. And Barth himself, *in an attempt at obedience to Scripture in its testimony to revelation as understood through exegesis* sought also to hold to special revelation as the only form of revelation, and therefore claimed that natural theology is idolatry.<sup>200</sup> Critics of Barth's rejection of natural theology, like Westermann<sup>201</sup> and Barr<sup>202</sup> have regularly argued that it was insufficiently grounded in exegesis, but this could not be further from

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<sup>199</sup> Barth's 1934 *Nein!* to Brunner in particular was the culmination of disagreements with him which had had been evident for a decade, as John Hart and McCallum have convincingly demonstrated. See John Hart, *Karl Barth vs. Emil Brunner: The Formation and Dissolution of a Theological Alliance, 1916-1936* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001); 'The Barth – Brunner Correspondence,' in *For the Sake of the World: Karl Barth and the Future of Ecclesial Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 19-43; J. Bruce McCallum, 'Modernity and the Dilemma of Natural Theology: The Barth – Brunner Debate, 1934' (PhD diss., Marquette University, 1994).

<sup>200</sup> Barth, 'TFC,' 77. 'The fight against natural theology...is a fight for right obedience in theology.'

<sup>201</sup> Claus Westermann, 'Eine Kontroverse um die Theologie Naturalis. Emil Brunner – Karl Barth (1934),' *Evangelische Theologie* 47, 5 (1987): 386-395.

<sup>202</sup> Barr, *BFNT*, 130.

the truth, at least from the early 1920s on. In important ways, *Romans II* set forth the groundwork for Barth's mature rejection of natural theology. It must be remembered, however, that *Romans II* was a biblical commentary, i.e., a work of biblical exegesis.<sup>203</sup> Further, for the rest of his career, Barth derived and substantiated his rejection of natural theology as idolatry from exegesis, including that undertaken in his other early biblical commentaries.<sup>204</sup>

Barth's exegesis of the passages typically understood to provide warrant for natural theology,<sup>205</sup> such that they were not so understood was truly biblical exegesis. It has been frequently argued that Barth's exegesis of these passages was spurious, i.e., that it was not exegesis at all, but, rather eisegesis<sup>206</sup> or that it was simply wrong.<sup>207</sup> Those criticising Barth in this way have failed to understand how Barth's interpretation of these passages could be anything other than eisegesis or mere error because they have not taken into account the ontology of Scripture and corresponding hermeneutical presuppositions which drove it.<sup>208</sup> For the same reason, they remain unconvincing.

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<sup>203</sup> This obvious, but often overlooked, claim is defended in John Webster, 'Karl Barth,' in *Reading Romans through the Centuries: From the Early Church to Karl Barth*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and Timothy Larsen (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 205-223.

<sup>204</sup> E.g., Karl Barth, *Erklärung des Epheser- und des Jakobusbriefes 1919-1929 (GA II.46)*, ed. Jörg-Michael Bohnet (Zurich: TVZ, 2009), 84-90; *Witness to the Word: A Commentary on John 1. Lectures at Münster in 1925 and at Bonn in 1933*, ed. Walther Fürst, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 39-40; 126-127.

<sup>205</sup> Esp., Psalm 19, Romans 1.19-20 (and its broader context), and Acts 17.16-34.

<sup>206</sup> E.g., Barr, *BFNT*, 20, 130; Bouillard, *Knowledge*, 30-31, 42-60.

<sup>207</sup> Hans Küng, *Does God Exist? An Answer for Today* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 526-527; Holder, *THD*, 44.

<sup>208</sup> Nothing approaching a comprehensive account of Barth's ontology of Scripture or hermeneutics can be provided as part of the present work. Several recent studies, however, have contributed to this task, e.g., Bruce McCormack, 'Historical Criticism and Dogmatic Interest in Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis of the New Testament,' in *Biblical Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective*, ed. Mark S. Burrows and Paul Rorem (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 322-338; Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period* (Grand

Barth understood Scripture to be a unified witness to God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, which had to be interpreted as such. That this understanding drove his interpretation of the supposedly natural theology-endorsing biblical passages can be seen most clearly in his discussion of them in the *CD II/1*,<sup>209</sup> where Barth interpreted the 'main line' of Scripture as testifying to the exclusivity of special revelation, and denied, on that basis and on that of the unity of the Scriptures in their testimony to revelation, that the exegete could allow for an independent 'side-line' testifying to the existence of a truly available *revelatio naturalis*.<sup>210</sup> Barth's interpretation even of the supposedly natural theology-endorsing passages was thus not the result of a merely willful eisegesis, but rather, of his broader exegetical project, as different as it may have been from that which is limited to the methodologically agnostic application of the various textual criticisms.

#### **2.2.4.2 The critique of natural theology as idolatry in relation to the doctrines of sin and salvation**

The entire question of the knowledge of God was, for Barth, mapped onto the categories, as Barth interpreted them, of the classically Protestant doctrine of salvation. That the human being could not know God at all of him- or herself was a product of his or her being a sinner. That God enabled the human being, in the event of revelation, to know God was an act of justification.<sup>211</sup> That the human remained always *peccator* even

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Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); Webster, 'Karl Barth,' in *Reading Romans*; Hunsinger, ed., *Thy Word is Truth: Barth on Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

<sup>209</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 101-124.

<sup>210</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 101-124.

<sup>211</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 213; 239-243.

in and after justification meant for Barth, however, that the knowledge of God never became a human possession: that the noetic effects of sin were never left behind such that either special revelation became his or her possession, or such that the forms could be thought properly, the ontological *analogia entis* noetically accessed, and non-idolatrous natural theology established as a possibility. The noetic effects of sin were, rather, only overcome by grace in the event of revelation, and even then not in such a way that they were, even in part, eliminated in an ongoing way in the human mind. Barth believed that it was the fact that he understood the noetic effects of sin to be absolutely devastating in this way and that Brunner did not, that was the root of their disagreement concerning the propriety of natural theology in *Nein!*<sup>212</sup> The human being remained, for Barth, always completely dependent upon the alien righteousness of God, which for him could only mean the ongoing occurrence of special revelation, if he or she were to truly encounter revelation, true knowledge of God. The attempt to know God apart from special revelation, i.e., natural theology, involved the substitution of revelation for that which was not, a refusal to cling by faith to God's grace and therefore works-righteousness.<sup>213</sup>

Because of the fact that human beings were, for Barth, always fully under the power of the noetic effects of sin, there was a sense for him in which the idolatry of natural theology was an inevitable human reality.<sup>214</sup> 'It is the one heresy which is

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<sup>212</sup> Barth, 'No!,' 87, 89, 98.

<sup>213</sup> Barth, 'Fate and Idea in Theology,' 55. As Brouwer rightly perceives, '...Barth conceived of his own struggle against natural theology...as the application of the reformational Doctrine of Justification to the topos of theological epistemology.' (Rinse H. Reeling Brouwer, 'Nowadays we are not Dealing with Pelagians in our Churches' Karl Barth and the Janus Face of the Doctrine of Justification in the Current of 'Reasonable Orthodoxy,' *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie Supplement Series* 6 (2014): 60.

<sup>214</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 141-142. See also Hailer, *Götzen*, 280.

necessary by its very nature.’<sup>215</sup> To be human was, for Barth, to have a ‘god’ and to that extent to be a theologian.<sup>216</sup> To be a human theologian, however, was to be a natural theologian, since no human theology could possess special revelation as its direct source or conform to it as its norm.<sup>217</sup> And to be a natural theologian was to be an idolater, since the natural revelation which ‘natural theology’ has as its source and norm is, due to the fact that the human being is a sinner and cannot possess true natural revelation, not revelation at all, but a substitute.

### 2.2.5 The consistency of Barth’s rejection of natural theology as idolatry

Barth’s rejection of natural theology as idolatry remained consistent both in general and in detail from 1924 up until the end of his career, though many of his interpreters have argued that he implicitly retracted it in his later works. Brunner<sup>218</sup> and von Balthasar<sup>219</sup> argued that this occurred in Barth’s *CD* III/2 (1948). The statements therein on which the substantiation of this claim depends, however, do not substantiate it. Some of the confusion seems to derive from a failure to recognize that when Barth spoke of ‘real man’ as capable of perceiving God, he was not claiming that actual ‘concretely sinful man’ could perceive God out of his or her own powers, but rather that the human being was created to perceive and in fact does perceive God in the event in which he or she is

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<sup>215</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 141.

<sup>216</sup> Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Grover Foley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 3.

<sup>217</sup> Barth, ‘Fate and Idea in Theology,’ 120-121; ‘TFC,’ 78.

<sup>218</sup> Emil Brunner, ‘Der neue Barth: Bemerkung zu Karl Barths Lehre vom Menschen,’ *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 48, 1 (1951): 90-91 and *passim*.

<sup>219</sup> Von Balthasar, *TKB*, 152.

the recipient of special revelation.<sup>220</sup> Barth remained clear that there is no capacity within the sinful human being as such for revelation, whether real or special,<sup>221</sup> and he did not allow the propriety of natural theology.

Barr,<sup>222</sup> Küng,<sup>223</sup> Anderson,<sup>224</sup> and Hart<sup>225</sup> point to Barth's *CD IV/3*, §69.2 – and, in particular, Barth's discussions therein of the true words which are spoken *extra muros ecclesiae* and of the 'lesser lights' – as evidence of a retraction of Barth's earlier criticism of natural theology as idolatry. These passages do not represent any such retraction, however. The first indication of this is that §69.2 begins with an extended re-affirmation of the idea that God is known only in the person of Jesus Christ in the event of special revelation.<sup>226</sup> Barth's discussion of the true words spoken *extra muros ecclesiae* had nothing to do with natural theology,<sup>227</sup> because Barth insisted that they are true only as God gives them truth, i.e., in the event of special revelation. Barth had always allowed that God could speak through media *extra muros ecclesiae*,<sup>228</sup> so what he said there was not new. Further, he reassured his readers that, '...in order to perceive that we really have to reckon with such true words from without, we have no need to

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<sup>220</sup> Barth, *CD III/2*, 399-406.

<sup>221</sup> Barth, *CD III/2*, 403.

<sup>222</sup> Barr, *BFNT*, 19.

<sup>223</sup> Küng, *DGE*, 527

<sup>224</sup> Ray S. Anderson, 'Barth and a New Direction for Natural Theology,' in *Theology Beyond Christendom: Essays on the Centenary of the Birth of Karl Barth, May 10, 1886*, ed. John Thompson (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 1986), 246.

<sup>225</sup> Hart, 'A Capacity,' 296.

<sup>226</sup> Barth, *CD IV/3*, 38-110.

<sup>227</sup> *Contra* Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 60.

<sup>228</sup> Barth, *CD I/1*, 55.

appeal either for basis or content to the sorry hypothesis of a so-called ‘natural theology.’<sup>229</sup> Barth’s discussion of the ‘lesser lights’ of creation, which he went so far as to call ‘revelations,’ likewise had nothing to do with the question of the propriety of natural theology. Barth spoke as early as 1927 of worldly ‘revelations’ which had to be understood as wholly different than the revelation of God,<sup>230</sup> and this is what he meant when he spoke of the ‘lesser lights’ of creation. They were intra-worldly lights, truth, or revelations (such as natural laws), which could provide no knowledge of God or creation in relation to God. Natural revelation, in the sense of a source of knowledge of God actually receivable by human beings under the conditions of sin, without special revelation, remained non-existent for Barth, and the practice of natural theology thus remained necessarily an act of idolatry.

### **2.3 Critique**

Previous criticisms of Barth’s complete *a priori* rejection of natural theology as idolatry and the doctrine of revelation which underlay it have proven unconvincing. It has already been argued that the biblical critique has for the most part foundered upon the unwillingness of its advocates to be attentive to Barth’s ontology of Scripture and associated hermeneutical principles. Some, most recently Holder,<sup>231</sup> have criticised Barth’s rejection of natural theology and its underlying doctrine of revelation on the grounds that it supposedly entails the irrationality of theology and thus the isolation of

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<sup>229</sup> Barth, *CD IV/3*, 117.

<sup>230</sup> Karl Barth, ‘Gottes Offenbarung nach der Lehre der Christlichen Kirche, 1927,’ in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1925-1930*, ed. Hermann Schmidt (Zurich: TVZ, 1994), 273.

<sup>231</sup> Holder, *THD*, 46-53. Others instantiations of this basic line of critique are found in David Jenkins, *A Guide to the Debate about God* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1966), 81; John Bowden, *Karl Barth* (London: SCM Press, 1971), 111; Pinnock, ‘KBCA,’ esp. 69-71.

theology *vis-à-vis* other disciplines. This critique also falls short because Barth's theology is 'irrational' only in the sense that Barth did not uncritically adopt a rationality derived in independence of theology's proper object and that for him extra-disciplinary intelligibility and relevance cannot be a first-order concern in theology, and because his theology did not actually imply theology's unintelligibility to those outside of the discipline. Its rationality, though perhaps distinct in many ways, was, unlike revelation itself, human and thus not 'wholly other' in relation to other forms of human rationality. Others, most recently Grant,<sup>232</sup> have argued that Barth's rejection of natural theology was itself based upon natural theology, namely (in Grant's critique) an *a priori* philosophical assumption of an ontological dualism between God and the world. As has been argued, however, it was not an ontological dualism of this kind which logically grounded Barth's mature rejection of natural theology, but, rather, his firmly theological convictions concerning the noetic effects of sin. Critics of Barth's rejection of natural theology typically have not addressed their criticisms to the decisions which Barth made in the doctrines of sin, salvation, and revelation which formed its logical basis, and which are also the points at which it is most vulnerable.

Indeed, Barth's complete *a priori* rejection of natural theology as always only idolatry should not be accepted because of problems with the decisions he made within the doctrines of sin, salvation and revelation which ground it. When these problems are corrected, it is seen both that idolatry is *not* an inevitable human reality in general and that a particular form of natural theology must be allowed as at least potentially non-idolatrous. This particular form is a Christian natural theology, i.e., a natural theology

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<sup>232</sup> Grant, 'Unnatural,' 96-98 and *passim*. Other instantiations of this basic line of critique are found in Paul Althaus, *Die Christliche Wahrheit: Lehrbuch der Dogmatik* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1952), 56; Wingren, *TiC*, 42-44, 108-109; Berkhof, 'Lichterlehre,' 38-39; Barr, *BFNT*, 128-132.

undertaken by a human being who *has been* a recipient of *revelatio specialis*.<sup>233</sup> It may be recalled that, for Barth natural theology is any exposition of God and/or creation in relation to God which has as its source and norm anything other than *revelatio specialis*. Christian natural theology may be defined as an exposition of God and/or creation in relation to God which has as its source and norm that which may be known of God and creation in relation to God from reason and the observation of nature and history, where the capacities for the proper exercise of reason and the accurate perception of nature and history have been bestowed upon the human being by God in the event(s) of *revelatio specialis*.

Barth could not accept a Christian *theologia naturalis* along these lines; he explicitly mentioned and summarily dismissed it.<sup>234</sup> It could be, for him, no better than natural theology of any other kind; like all natural theology, it, too, was for him idolatry. The reason Barth rejected Christian natural theology as idolatry was the same reason he rejected all natural theology as idolatry: the absolutely devastating noetic effects of sin, which, as mentioned above, were never overcome, even in the Christian, except in the event of revelation. The Christian and the non-Christian, the one who in the past had received special revelation and the one who had not, were on equal footing: both equally under the power of the noetic effects of sin, both wholly unable to think concepts or forms such that the ontological *analogia* between God and created being

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<sup>233</sup> This seems to be, at least in part, that which is desired by Brunner ('Nature and Grace,' 27; Gilland, *Law and Gospel*, 203), Thomas F. Torrance ('The Problem of Natural Theology in the Thought of Karl Barth,' *Religious Studies* 6, 2 (1970): 133; Alister McGrath, *T.F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* (London: T&T Clark, 1999), 192ff.); and McGrath (Alister McGrath, *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008)). Hauerwas (*WGU*, 142) wants a 'theological metaphysics,' which he equates with natural theology, and suggests that Barth provides this in the *CD*. His proposals lack the detail necessary to determine with any level of certainty whether or not Barth would allow them as prescriptive of a kind of theology of nature, or reject them as a call for natural theology.

<sup>234</sup> Barth, 'No!', 97-98, 122, 128; *CD* II/1, 98—140.

could be noetically established, both thus wholly incapable of apprehending natural revelation, and both thus wholly unable to practise natural theology without *ipso facto* practising idolatry. For both, only in the divine *justification* of their concepts in the event of special revelation could the noetic effects of sin be overcome and God be known.

The problem with Barth's line of thinking was that he spoke of the noetic effects of sin as never to any extent overcome in an enduring way within the mind of the human being, even that of the one who had previously received revelation, and, therefore, of revelation and the knowledge of God as never *given*, but always *to be given*.<sup>235</sup> He spoke, that is, of the *justification* of human knowing and its concepts in relation to God in the discrete events of God's self-revelation, but not at all of the *sanctification* (in the sense of the impartation or infusion of righteousness) of human knowing and its concepts by revelation. This is reflective of a broader problem within Barth's theology which will re-emerge at multiple points throughout the present work's interpretation of him: his strong emphasis upon divine justification was accompanied by a very weak doctrine of sanctification, and he openly protested against the idea of infused or imparted righteousness.<sup>236</sup> Sanctification, however, does involve

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<sup>235</sup> Barth, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life*, 5. Some have even suggested that, on Barth's account, there might not be any true human knowledge of God at all; see, for example, Leonard de Moor, 'The Concept of Revelation in Barthianism,' *The Journal of Religion* 17, 2 (1937): 145. This is too strong; though perhaps not as clear to de Moor at his time of writing in 1937, it is clear now that in the moment of revelation, for Barth, there is undoubtedly true human knowledge of God; the problem is that that same true knowledge does not endure in the mind of the human recipient outside of that moment.

<sup>236</sup> E.g., Barth, *Epheserbrief*, 84 (emphasis original): 'Gott segnet. Er *spricht* ein Verheißungs- und Gnadenwort. Das ist Alles. Keine *gratia infusa*.' Barth has a tendency to refer the dramatic NT language concerning the change which God works in the believer in sanctification to Jesus Christ. (CD IV/2, 583) In a certain sense, sanctification, like justification, was alien for Barth. (See Katherine Sonderegger, 'Sanctification as Impartation in the Doctrine of Karl Barth,' *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 18, 3 (2002): 313-314) Barth did not deny that revelation produced changes in actual, concrete human existence (and, in this case, thinking), but this was always a relative change, from one form of sin, idolatry, error, etc., to another and not a change from those to righteousness in the strict sense and the knowledge of God.

righteousness being imparted to and infused within the human being, the human being's liberation from sin and its effects. Sanctification does not leave the human being under the power of sin such that his or her concrete relationship to sin is ultimately no different than that of the unsanctified person. This is true both in general and in terms of the human being's cognitive capacities. If the noetic effects of sin are absolutely devastating for the human being who has not received revelation, they are so *no longer* for those who have been and are being sanctified by it. If human thinking is *justified* in the event of special revelation, such that human concepts are made to apply to God, then it is also *sanctified*, such that the human being is enabled, at least to some extent, to in an ongoing way think them in application to God. If knowledge of God and revelation are imputed, then they are also imparted, truly *given* and not always only *to be given*.

If, however, human beings are in special revelation truly *given* a perduring knowledge of God in revelation then human worship is not necessarily idolatrous, nor are all human beings necessarily idolaters – or, at least, they are not all such absolutely and therefore equally. Again, if human beings are truly *given* knowledge of God in revelation, i.e., if their minds are truly sanctified (the noetic effects of sin to some extent overcome) such that they can think concepts properly, as they apply to God and thus also to the real world which participates in God, then the sanctified human being has ongoing access to the *analogia* between God and created being, and therefore to real natural revelation. This means, however, that, *contra* Barth, natural theology as practised by those who have been and are being sanctified by revelation is not necessarily idolatrous.

### Chapter 3: Idolatry and the Doctrine of God

Many of Karl Barth's most important and salutary acts of self-differentiation from both the classical tradition and from Protestant liberalism took place within his doctrine of God, and were expressed negatively through his critique of idolatry within it. This is the case even though his material expositions of the doctrine of God did not always conform to the formal convictions he expressed concerning the way in which the doctrine of God had to be developed were it to avoid idolatry, and even though there are some significant problems with his critique of idolatry within it.

In order to demonstrate these claims, this chapter will analyse Barth's critique of idolatry within the doctrine of God, especially as found within the 1924 *Göttingen Dogmatics*, §§16-17, and the 1940 *Church Dogmatics* II/1, §§29-31. Barth's 1926 lectures on Feuerbach, his 1929 essay 'Fate and Idea in Theology' ['Schicksal und Idee in der Theologie'], and his 1933 essay 'The First Commandment as an Axiom in Theology' ['Das erste Gebot als theologisches Axiom'], will also be of particular importance to the analysis of Barth's mature thought on these issues. It will be shown that, for Barth, idolatry within the doctrine of God contained both subjective and objective components, and that all doctrines of God were for him intrinsically idolatrous, though not all were merely idolatrous. A number of directives in accordance with which Barth believed the doctrine of God had to be developed were it to avoid idolatry will then be described. Finally, an evaluation and critique of Barth's thinking on the topic of idolatry within the doctrine of God will be offered.

### **3.1 Subjective and Objective Components of Idolatry within the Doctrine of God**

For Barth, what may be called the subjective component of idolatry (the presence of, broadly speaking, an intrinsically improper *mode* of worship) necessitated the existence of what may be called objective idolatry (the fact that one's worship possessed intrinsically, as its object, that which was not God) and *vice versa*.<sup>1</sup> Idolatry was not, for Barth, a matter of either false worship of the true God, or of an otherwise proper mode of worship being directed toward a false god or idol.<sup>2</sup> It was, rather, *both* subjectively an act of improper worship (i.e., of worship which failed to conform to revelation) which was *ipso facto*, objectively, the worship of a false god, since the true God could not be the object of false worship, but suffers himself, rather, to be worshiped only in conformity with revelation.<sup>3</sup> In other words, idolatry was not for Barth the breaking of either the first commandment or the second commandment (broadly interpreted) and not the other, but rather always the breaking of them both, since the breaking of one necessarily meant the breaking of the other.<sup>4</sup>

This manner of thinking may be observed in Barth's idolatry-critique within the doctrine of God, in particular. The latter may be separated into two parts: (1) his critique

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<sup>1</sup> This is confirmed, for example, by Barth's interpretation of the golden calf incident in the *CD* IV/1, 427-432. Barth understood that incident to be archetypal of all sin and idolatry (418), and interpreted it as such. According to Barth's presentation, the Israelites, in the worship of the golden calf sought to worship Yahweh, but their false mode of worship (i.e., their worship which did not correspond to revelation (418)), meant that the object of their worship was not Yahweh, but, rather, a piece of created reality which 'replaced Yahweh.' (432)

<sup>2</sup> These are the two species of 'superstition' that Thomas names. (Aquinas, *ST*, II.92.2) For Thomas, the former is idolatry instead of the latter. (Cf. Clough, 'Karl Barth on Idolatry,' 214)

<sup>3</sup> Barth, *CD* I/2, 304. Barth's position has as its precedent the characteristically reformed assertion of the regulative principle of worship (and, in particular, its assertion that images must not be utilised in worship) and its assumption that the violation of the same constitutes objective idolatry. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Volume 1*, trans. John Allen (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1844), 97-113.

<sup>4</sup> Against, e.g., Aquinas (*ST*, II.92.2), and all who suggest that one can break one of the first two commandments without breaking the other, i.e., that one can worship the true God in an undue mode or a false god in an otherwise proper mode.

of subjective idolatry which, as manifest within the doctrine of God, he most frequently called ‘speculation’ (3.1.1), and (2) its necessary corollary, objective idolatry which, as manifest within the doctrine of God, he most frequently described in terms reminiscent of Feuerbach’s projection thesis, e.g., as the holding to a god who was merely a ‘hypostatized reflection of man’<sup>5</sup> (3.1.2). As in general, so too in the doctrine of God, subjective idolatry (speculation) always necessitated, and, indeed, was the root of, objective idolatry (projection).<sup>6</sup>

### 3.1.1 The subjective idolatry of speculation

Barth’s regular way of referring to subjective idolatry within the doctrine of God (especially in his most developed account of that doctrine in the *CD II*) was to speak of ‘speculation,’ whether with the noun *Spekulation* or the adjective *spekulativ*. An analysis of Barth’s uses of these terms demonstrates that he meant by them to indicate thinking or speaking (purportedly) of God’s immanent nature and attributes either wholly or in part without reference to God’s special revelation in Jesus Christ. Speculation is the failure, within the doctrine of God, to engage in, and limit one’s self to, ‘obedient reckoning with the One whom Jesus Christ called His Father, and who called Jesus Christ His Son.’<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Barth, *CD II/2*, 3. See also Barth, *CD II/2*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> See Barth, *GD*, 358-362, 373; *CD II/1*, 259, 261, 315, 329; *CD II/2*, 3. See also Hailer, *Götzen*, 279. Hector’s description (‘God’s Triunity and Self-Determination: A Conversation with Karl Barth, Bruce McCormack, and Paul Molnar,’ in *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, ed. Michael T. Dempsey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 31) of Molnar and McCormack’s thought is also true of Barth’s: ‘If claims about God are not based upon God’s work [i.e., are speculative], they are ipso facto based on a human projection of ‘God.’’

<sup>7</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 24. See also *GD*, 363, 427, 430, 432; *CD II/1*, 293, 316, 319, 457, 625; *CD II/2*, 69, 135. This conclusion is also supported by the helpful study of James Gordon (‘Is it Possible and Desirable for Theologians to Speculate after Barth?’ *The Heythrop Journal* (2013): 1-11. DOI: 10.1111/heyj.12060). Gordon mentions five ways in which Barth spoke of speculation (summarised on p. 33), all of which were forms of insufficient or inconsistent derivation of one’s speech about God

To the extent that a doctrine of God was, for Barth, speculative, it took not revelation as its source and norm as it ought to have done in obedience to revelation, but rather afforded those roles to some aspect of created reality. It was thus *per definitionem* an act of (subjective) idolatry: it was an act of worship in an undue mode, one disobedient to revelation.<sup>8</sup> Barth held (with particular emphasis in the doctrine of God found in his *CD II/1*) that a great number of scholastic and Protestant Orthodox theologians were, in their respective doctrines of God, guilty of the idolatry of speculation, in that they looked away from revelation (even if only temporarily), and to general, philosophical conceptions of deity, in constructing them. Barth wrote, for example, that:

When [Melanchthon] later decided to take up again in his *Loci* the doctrine of God, he began to create it from another source than from the revelation of God, namely, from an independently formed and general idea of God. He therefore began to consider the *mysteria divinitatis* apart from their connexion with the *beneficia Christi*. In this he fell right into the *magnum periculum* of which he had been afraid in 1521, and was all the more guilty of the very error which in his first act of rashness he had had a right instinct to avoid as opposed to late medieval scholasticism, thus affording a disastrous example to the whole of Protestant orthodoxy.<sup>9</sup>

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from revelation. He writes that speculation, for Barth, 'is not the act of talking about God in terms of metaphysical categories; rather, speculative theology for Barth is determined by which categories and concepts the theologian uses and whether (and how) she allows those concepts to be formed, shaped, and otherwise transformed by God's work in Jesus Christ.' (7) This statement is not in itself false, but it would have been clearer had he specified that 'which categories and concepts the theologian uses' determines whether or not a theology is speculative according to whether or not those categories and concepts are chosen in obedience to revelation.

<sup>8</sup> It may also be noted that speculation was an occasion of 'natural theology' as described in chapter 2, in that it was a piece of theology which took as its source and norm something other than *revelatio specialis*. In general, 'speculation' seems to be a term that Barth used to refer to natural theology as it was manifest within the doctrine of God in particular.

<sup>9</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 259-260. See also pp. 287-288, 339.

It was with a wariness of what Barth believed was the very prevalent speculative idolatry of the tradition which preceded him that he undertook the formulation of his own doctrine of God.

While Barth's most vigorous criticisms of what was for him the idolatry of speculation are found in his major dogmatic treatments of the doctrine of God, and especially in the *CD II*, he had long before the time of those treatments learned to criticise speculation as being and/or leading necessarily to idolatry. He learned this from his liberal teachers: from Herrmann, and, in large part through Herrmann, from Schleiermacher and Ritschl. All of these rejected speculation in the doctrine of God in its scholastic and Protestant orthodox forms.<sup>10</sup> As early as his 1910/1911 'Lebensbilder aus der Geschichte der Christlichen Religion,' Barth showed himself to be a true disciple of his liberal forbears on this matter, as he criticised speculation (closely tied, if not identified with, metaphysics there) as leading to a god who was not, in fact God; of Irenaeus, for example, he wrote: 'Irenäus hat in richtiger Weise die Einheit Gottes und [er] Offenbarung gegenüber der unrel. Spekulation der Gnost[iker] vertreten. Er spekuliert aber selbst unreligiös, sofern er von einem Gottesbegr[iff] ausgeht und zu einem Erlösungsbegriff gelangt, die beide physisch-metaphys[ischer] Art sind. Dieser Gott kann nicht Sache christl. Erfahrung sein.'<sup>11</sup> And Barth's 1911 essay 'La Réapparition de la Métaphysique dans la Théologie' is again important in this connexion; it is clear in that essay that the metaphysical idols that he was concerned to

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<sup>10</sup> Schleiermacher, *TCF*, 748; Ritschl, *TCDJR*, vol. 3, 225-227; Wilhelm Herrmann, 'Die Lage und Aufgabe der evangelischen Dogmatik in der Gegenwart,' in *Schriften zur Grundlegung der Theologie*, vol. 2, ed. Peter Fischer-Appelt (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1967), 33.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Barth, 'Lebensbilder aus der Geschichte der christlichen Religion, 1910/11,' in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1909-1914 (GA III.22)*, ed. Hans-Anton Drewes and Hinrich Stoevesandt (Zurich: TVZ, 1993), 100. The editors have completed some words from the original manuscript, as indicated by the parts of words which are enclosed in brackets. Barth went so far as to show sympathy with Sabellius and others over against early 'spekulativen Monotheismus.' (110)

counter were those which were produced by speculation ('...la notion de Dieu, que la science spéculative formule...'¹²). He spoke, further, in that same essay, of the 'spekulative Fälschung der religiösen Lehre.'¹³ Throughout Barth's career, he would never cease to criticise the speculation of the doctrines of God of the 'older theology' as idolatrous – this was an inheritance from liberalism which survived his break with the latter.¹⁴

Yet Barth would come to realise that it was not the older theology alone which was guilty of the subjective idolatry of speculation within the doctrine of God. Rather, he eventually came to consider the theology of liberalism, and Herrmann himself, as speculative, and therefore idolatrous, and this in at least two ways. In the first place, as argued in chapter 2, he came to believe that liberalism was engaged in natural theology, in that it actually looked away from Jesus Christ (though it would have denied this) and to human feeling (Schleiermacher), value-judgments (Ritschl), and experience (Herrmann) as the source of its theology, including its doctrine of God.¹⁵ When Barth came to separate radically revelation from (and, indeed, in the time surrounding *Romans II*, oppose it to) all that was human, he came to believe that the liberal doctrine of God, because it had its source in these realities, had as its source that which was *not* revelation, and that it was, *ipso facto*, speculative and subjectively idolatrous.¹⁶

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¹² Barth, 'La Réapparition,' 349.

¹³ Barth, 'La Réapparition,' 351. The text indicates that the editors completed some words which were abbreviated by Barth by putting their additions in brackets as follows: 'Spekulat[ive] Fälschung der rel[igiösen] Lehre.'

¹⁴ See, e.g., Barth, *CD II/1*, 261.

¹⁵ See 2.2.3.2 of the present work.

¹⁶ See 2.1.2.1 of the present work.

In the second place, Barth came to believe that the *nominalism* of liberalism's doctrine of God was also speculative. A particular way in which Barth's teachers ostensibly avoided older forms of speculation in their own theologies was by a retreat into nominalism, i.e., by focussing exclusively upon God's self-revelation to the extent that they refused to venture any positive claims about *Deus in se* at all. The relationship, for them, between *Deus pro nobis*, i.e., God as known in God's self-revelation, and *Deus in se* was unknown and unknowable. Theology had, therefore, to content itself with speech about *Deus pro nobis*.<sup>17</sup> Since speech about *Deus in se* could not be based upon the knowledge of *Deus pro nobis*, it could only be speculative; it had, therefore, to be avoided. The essence and attributes of *Deus in se* were, therefore, ever shrouded in mystery.<sup>18</sup>

Barth, during his liberal phase, followed his liberal teachers in this kind of nominalism. But he came to see that the liberal, nominalistic, doctrine of God was not a way of truly avoiding idolatrous speculation, but, rather, another form of it. It, too, was

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<sup>17</sup> This insistence represented a radicalisation of the early Melanchthon's focus upon the *beneficia Christi* to the exclusion of speech concerning God *in se*; see Philip Melanchthon, *The Loci Communes of Philip Melanchthon*, trans. Charles Leander Hill (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007), 67-69. For Ritschl's reception of Melanchthon, see his 'T&M,' 204-208. Samuel M. Powell (*The Trinity in German Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 103) and Rowan Williams (*Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. Mike Higton (London: SCM Press, 2007), 122) rightly note the connection between Melanchthon on the one hand, and Schleiermacher and the liberal Protestant tradition to which he was a father, on the other. Barth himself also noted this connection, citing the early Melanchthon's statement that, '*mysteria divinitatis rectius adoraverimus, quam vestigaverimus. Immo sine magno periculo tentari non possunt.*' (Barth, CD II/1, 259) Though liberalism could claim continuity with Melanchthon in its rejection of speculation by way of a focus upon *Deus pro nobis*, it, unlike that of Melanchthon, was driven, at least in part, by a Kantian epistemological scepticism.

<sup>18</sup> See Schleiermacher, *TCF*, 748; Ritschl, *TCDJR*, vol. 3, 204, 212, 219 (cf. J.H.W. Stuckenberg, 'The Theology of Albrecht Ritschl,' *American Journal of Theology* 2, 2 (1898): 275; Gerald McCulloh, *Christ's Person and Life-work in the Theology of Albrecht Ritschl: With Special Attention to the Munus Triplex* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990), 52-53; Bruce McCormack, 'The Person of Christ,' in *Mapping Modern Theology: A Thematic and Historical Introduction*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012) 166-169); Wilhelm Herrmann, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Nathaniel Micklem and Kenneth A. Saunders (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 97-98; Brian D. Asbill, *The Freedom of God for Us: Karl Barth's Doctrine of Divine Aseity* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 63-64.

an example of natural theology within the doctrine of God, though in a less obvious way. In refusing to make positive claims concerning the nature and attributes of *Deus in se*, it, even if implicitly, made *negative* ones: that *Deus in se* was unknowable, etc. These claims were themselves not based in revelation, and were thus natural, speculative and idolatrous. This was Barth's meaning when, at the time of the *GD*, he wrote of the way in which 'Schleiermacher and other modern theologians' held that behind God as known in the economy 'God's essence is concealed as something different and higher,' and that they were, therefore, guilty of denying revelation and 'inventing a God.'<sup>19</sup> And his liberal teachers were surely in mind when Barth inveighed against the notion of a *Deus absconditus*, calling such a concept, for example, an 'image of God which we have made for ourselves,'<sup>20</sup> i.e., merely out of our own resources, and not on the basis of revelation.

Barth's realisation that liberal nominalism was also speculative, and his own self-correction in light of it, did not occur instantaneously in 1915, the year most correctly connected to his break from liberalism, but rather, over a period of time between that year and the 1924 *GD*. Indeed, Barth's writings in the years immediately following 1915 display an ongoing reticence to speak of God *in se*, especially when they are compared with Barth's treatments of the doctrine of God in the *GD* and the *CD* II. An excellent illustration of this fact is Barth's 1917 essay, 'The New World within the Bible,' which was first delivered as a lecture in the church at Leutwil.<sup>21</sup> The final pages of that essay are dedicated to providing an answer to the question 'Who is

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<sup>19</sup> Barth, *GD*, 101. See also Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to his Early Theology, 1910-1931* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 115.

<sup>20</sup> Barth, *CD IV/1*, 52.

<sup>21</sup> Karl Barth, 'The New World in the Bible, 1917,' in *The Word of God and Theology*, trans. Amy Marga (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 15.

God?’<sup>22</sup> In those pages, Barth demonstrated a commitment – which, as will be seen, endured for the remainder of his career – to derive his answer to that question from the Bible.<sup>23</sup> Further, Barth demonstrated therein a commitment to describing God as a ‘new thing’<sup>24</sup> *vis-à-vis* the world. His answer to the question was even formally Trinitarian.<sup>25</sup> The difference, however, between Barth’s answer to this question in 1917 and his answers to it in his later treatments of the doctrine of God, is that in 1917 Barth restricted himself to speech about God’s economic acts, to the exclusion of direct claims concerning God’s immanent nature and attributes. He wrote:

Who is God? He is the heavenly Father! Indeed. But he is the heavenly Father on *earth* and on earth really the *heavenly* Father! The One who does not want to split life into ‘this side’ and ‘that side.’ The One who does not want to leave it up to death to set us free from sin and suffering. The One who wants to bless us with the powers of life not with the powers of the Church...He is the One who does not have just any old idea in his head but who constructs a new world.<sup>26</sup>

Thereafter Barth proceeded to describe the Son and the Holy Spirit in the same way, with reference only to the economy. His reluctance to speak of *Deus in se* in answering the question ‘who is God?’ was almost surely the result of his ongoing aversion to speculation in its older forms. It left him, however, within the realm of liberal nominalism.

What Barth needed, by his own later standard, in order to truly avoid idolatry, was a way to avoid the speculative idolatry of nominalism without resorting to speculation in any other form, i.e., without in any way looking away from Jesus Christ.

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<sup>22</sup> Barth, ‘TNW,’ 26.

<sup>23</sup> Barth, ‘TNW,’ 27.

<sup>24</sup> Barth, ‘TNW,’ 26.

<sup>25</sup> Barth, ‘TNW,’ 28.

<sup>26</sup> Barth, ‘TNW,’ 28.

In other words, if he was to avoid the idolatry of speculation altogether, he needed a way of truly speaking of *Deus in se* through reflection upon Jesus Christ, *Deus pro nobis*. This he found, at least by the time of *Romans II* (1922), in the ostensibly simple, yet weighty assertion of what Gunton calls the ‘realism of revelation’<sup>27</sup>: that *Deus pro nobis* is identical in content to *Deus in se*. Indeed, that identification was, according to Barth in 1922, the very ‘content of the epistle to the Romans.’<sup>28</sup> Thus, the immanent nature and attributes of God could be known and spoken of (avoiding the idolatry of nominalism, which, as mentioned above, he came to criticise as such by the time of the 1924 *GD*<sup>29</sup>) while not looking away from revelation (avoiding the idolatry of the older forms of speculation).

Even with the assertion of the realism of revelation formally in place in *Romans II*, however, Barth’s material claims there concerning the immanent being and attributes of God were insufficiently grounded in revelation (again by his own later standard<sup>30</sup>), as evidenced by his over-emphasis upon negative predications of God.<sup>31</sup> His doctrine of

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<sup>27</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *Becoming and Being: The Doctrine of God in Charles Hartshorne and Karl Barth* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 129.

<sup>28</sup> Barth, *Römerbrief II*, 408: ‘Daß der Deus absconditus *als solcher* in Jesus Christus Deus revelatus ist, das ist der Inhalt des Römerbriefes (1, 16-17).’ The rendering of the English translation (*Romans II*, 422) is questionable, but still conveys the basic idea: ‘The Epistle moves round the theme (i. 16,17) that in Christ Jesus the Deus absconditus is as such the Deus revelatus.’

<sup>29</sup> In addition to the above quotation from the *GD*, 101, see p. 359, where Barth distances himself from liberalism by asserting that theologians are ‘commanded to talk about God.’ The account of Barth’s development here, i.e., that he found the key to overcoming nominalism by the time of *Romans II* (and did overcome nominalism in an even fuller way in the 1924 *GD*), runs counter to that of Brian, who suggests (*CUL*, 82) that Barth’s *Anselm* represents his overcoming of nominalism, or was at least a significant step in that direction.

<sup>30</sup> See Karl Barth, ‘The Humanity of God,’ in *The Humanity of God*, trans. John Newton Thomas and Thomas Wieser (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1960), 44-45.

<sup>31</sup> Positive claims about God’s immanent being are scarce in *Romans II*. McCormack rightly notes, for example, that while it may be argued that revelation in *Romans II* had a Trinitarian *structure*, there was within it, ‘not yet a Trinity of being.’ (McCormack, *KBCRDT*, 262) And Heron (‘God,’ 80) rightly notes that, ‘What [Barth] emphasizes here [in *Romans II*], however, is less the nature of God than

God remained, therefore, to some extent, speculative, and, to that same extent, subjectively (and therefore also objectively) idolatrous. Though the formal key to overcoming speculation was present in Barth's thinking by 1922, it was in large measure not until the 1924 *Göttingen Dogmatics* (§§16-17), and even more fully in the *CD II/1* (§§28-31), that Barth (once again, by his own standard) overcame speculation materially, as will be described below.<sup>32</sup> It was a shortcoming of Barth's that he did not specify how strictly the identity of content between revelation and *Deus in se* was to be understood, and what it owed itself to. As will become clear below, this ambiguity became particularly problematic when Barth, in his later Christology, came to include Jesus of Nazareth within the content of revelation, and remains problematic for the current attempts at interpreting Barth's doctrine of election.

### 3.1.2 The objective idolatry of projections

The objective idolatry which was the necessary counterpart to speculation within the doctrine of God was most frequently described by Barth in the terms of the projection thesis of Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872).<sup>33</sup> For Feuerbach 'God' was a human creation which, lacking objective existence, was merely a conglomeration of the attributes of

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the antithesis between God and everything else...' Even the term 'freedom' seemed, as a predicate of God, to have a mainly negative content. (Barth, *Romans II*, 66, 342, 386).

<sup>32</sup> Barth's treatments of the doctrine of God between 1924 and 1940 are all undergirded by the conviction that God is in God's immanent being who God is known to be in revelation. The first sentence of Barth's thesis in his *GD* §16 ('The Nature of God') reads as follows: 'We know God's nature in his own Word to us.' (351) Cf. Barth, *GD*, 356. The first sentence of Barth's thesis in §9 of the *Chr.D.* ('Gott in seiner Offenbarung') states: 'Gottes Wort ist Gott in seiner Offenbarung.' (165) And the first sentence of Barth's thesis in his *CD* §28 ('The Being of God as the One who Loves in Freedom') reads as follows: 'God is who He is in the act of His revelation.' (257) See also the *CD I/1*, 479.

<sup>33</sup> See Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957). See also 4.1.2 in the present work.

hypostatized human being.<sup>34</sup> Barth was familiar with Feuerbach on some level very early on in his career. In his 1913 essay, ‘Der Glaube an den persönlichen Gott,’ for example, he demonstrated familiarity with the basics of Feuerbach’s thought, and even used it, as he would throughout his career, in order to criticise his own theological opponents: in this case, Siebeck and Lotze.<sup>35</sup> Barth lectured on Feuerbach in 1926, during his time at Münster, in the course of a series of lectures on the history of modern theology.<sup>36</sup> His response to Feuerbach was remarkably appreciative there. Though for Barth Feuerbach’s atheology was in a certain sense ‘almost offensively trivial,’<sup>37</sup> he believed that his critique of the idolatry of self-hypostatisation provided to theology a ‘most true reminder, most necessary also for the knowledge of true God.’<sup>38</sup> Both before and after these lectures Feuerbach made regular appearances within Barth’s writings. Barth’s major dogmatic treatments of the doctrine of God, in particular, made regular mention of him,<sup>39</sup> and Barth’s frequent criticisms of the idolatrous introduction of human self-hypostatisations and apotheoses into the doctrine of God bear witness to Feuerbach’s ongoing influence upon him.

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<sup>34</sup> See Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*. See also 4.1.2 in the present work.

<sup>35</sup> Karl Barth, ‘Der Glaube an den persönlichen Gott, 1913,’ in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1909-1914 (GA III.22)*, ed. Hans-Anton Drewes and Hinrich Stoevesandt (Zurich: TVZ, 1993), 545-547.

<sup>36</sup> The portion of these lectures dealing with Feuerbach have been published in English as, Karl Barth, ‘Ludwig Feuerbach,’ in *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings 1920-1928*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith (London: SCM Press, 1962). The historical background information in this volume (p. 217) wrongly states that these lectures were given in 1920. According to Busch (*Karl Barth*, 169) they should be dated to 1926.

<sup>37</sup> Barth, ‘Feuerbach,’ in *T&C*, 227.

<sup>38</sup> Barth, ‘Feuerbach,’ in *T&C*, 232.

<sup>39</sup> Explicit references to Feuerbach are made in Barth’s treatments of the doctrine of God in the *GD* (358, 361, 399, 400, 424 and 425), the *Chr.D.* (182), and the *CD II/1* (292, 293, 449, 467, 494, 612).

It was primarily Feuerbach who provided Barth with the categories through which he thought about the objective component of idolatry within the doctrine of God,<sup>40</sup> although, of course, he believed that what Feuerbach helped him to describe was also a reality described by Scripture. Barth clearly had Feuerbach in mind when he made statements such as this one: ‘Our starting-point in [the] first part of the doctrine of God was neither an axiom of reason nor a datum of experience. In the measure that a doctrine of God draws on these sources [i.e., is speculative], it betrays the fact that its subject is not really God but a hypostatised reflection of man.’<sup>41</sup> This statement, indeed, demonstrates not only Barth’s reliance upon Feuerbach in describing the objective component of idolatry within the doctrine of God, but also the necessary connection which existed in his thinking between it and speculation, idolatry’s subjective component.

If Barth’s break from liberalism involved a perception of its two-fold speculative idolatry, it also involved his perception of objective idolatry within it, i.e., of the fact that the god described by its doctrine of God was not God, but an idolatrous human projection. His well-known early tautology ‘God is God’ was meant, at least in part, as a protest against the ‘gods’ of human projection which he believed characterised liberal Protestant theology,<sup>42</sup> and he more or less explicitly criticised the liberal Protestant doctrine of God by appeal to Feuerbach throughout his career. The problem raised by Feuerbach, according to Barth in 1926, ‘can be seen as a general attack on the

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<sup>40</sup> This is not to say that Barth never used this kind of Feuerbachian language to describe the subjective act of idolatry; the *act* of self-projection or apotheosis was necessarily implied in the act of looking away from Christ, i.e., in speculation.

<sup>41</sup> Barth, *CD* II/2, 3.

<sup>42</sup> According to Busch (‘God is God,’ 101), Barth first used this phrase in a sermon in 1916, the year after his break with liberalism. Busch goes on to say that (107): ‘The equation ‘God is God’ seeks initially to avoid the equating of God and our concepts of God.’

methodology of the theology of Schleiermacher and of post-Schleiermacher theology.<sup>43</sup>

And according to Barth in 1940:

We can see how here the mystery of the modern doctrine of God – that the being of God is the predicate of the human subject – was long ago carelessly exploded by a philosopher who derived from the school of Idealism, but was no longer interested in the Church. We may well wonder that his objection did not make more impression on those who denied the personality of God in so far as he also and particularly attacked their positive assertions. But we must wonder even more how its defenders, with their references to the longing of the human heart, the infinite value of the human personality in spiritual and world history, with their quite open and express projection of human self-consciousness into the transcendent, could expose themselves so openly this objection of Feuerbach without apparently taking any account of its existence.<sup>44</sup>

To be sure, the doctrine of God of liberal Protestantism was not alone in being on the receiving end of this kind of critique. Any doctrine of God which looked away from Jesus Christ, i.e., which was speculative even for a moment, was also guilty, in Barth's mind, of describing a human projection.

It is not sufficient to say merely that Barth embraced Feuerbach and utilised him against his theological opponents, as true as this statement is. Barth's material response to, and appropriation of, Feuerbach was, in fact, more nuanced. Essentially, it was two-fold, and the two sides of his response to him correspond to a two-foldness in his critique of idolatry within the doctrine of God, which will be described presently.

### **3.2 Two Forms of Idolatry-Critique within the Doctrine of God**

A distinction must be introduced at this point between two ways in which Barth understood doctrines of God to be idolatrous, and spoke of them as such. For Barth, *all* doctrines of God were intrinsically idolatrous (3.2.1), while *some* doctrines of God were *only* idolatrous (3.2.2).

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<sup>43</sup> Barth, 'Feuerbach,' in *T&C*, 227.

<sup>44</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 293. See also *Romans II*, 36; 'Feuerbach,' in *T&C*, 223; *CD II/1*, 270.

### 3.2.1 The intrinsic idolatry of all doctrines of God

In the first place, for Barth, all doctrines of God had to be judged as completely intrinsically idolatrous.<sup>45</sup> Revelation, in the strict sense, was not, for Barth, a *datum* which could be possessed and exploited in the formulation of doctrine, including the formulation of the doctrine of God. Thus, all doctrines of God had as their source and raw material human images, concepts and modes of thought which were not revelation. Therefore, strictly speaking, every doctrine of God was intrinsically speculative, and also, correspondingly, intrinsically idolatrous objectively, the object of its description being that which is not God, *viz.*, a human projection. Even Barth's own doctrine of God was not exempt from this judgment, as he himself noted.<sup>46</sup> These ideas were implicit in Barth's thinking from at least the time of *Romans II* in which the absolute otherness of God *vis-à-vis* creation (including all created concepts) was stressed. Barth, however, presented them with particular explicitness in his essays, 'Fate and Idea in Theology' (originally delivered as lectures in 1929) and, 'The First Commandment as an Axiom in Theology' (written in 1933 near the height of his battle with natural theology and National Socialism). In the former, Barth asked rhetorically: 'How could my God-concept ever be a witness to God?'<sup>47</sup> In the latter, Barth argued that, without exception, 'Every theology has 'other gods' as well..., and that 'theology is never justified by what it intends to think and say as its work of right obedience, as fulfillment of the law, according to its best knowledge and conscience'<sup>48</sup>; in other words, that no

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<sup>45</sup> Barth, 'Fate and Idea in Theology,' 59-60; 'TFC,' 78. It is not true, as Chia (*Revelation and Theology*, 122) suggests, that Barth assumes human beings 'possess an adequate concept of God.'

<sup>46</sup> Barth, 'Fate and Idea in Theology,' 59-60; 'TFC,' 78.

<sup>47</sup> Barth, 'Fate and Idea in Theology,' 59.

<sup>48</sup> Barth, 'TFC,' 77.

doctrine of God has the true God as its object intrinsically, on the basis of its own formulations and characteristics.

This judgment that all doctrines of God are intrinsically idolatrous corresponds to one of the two sides of Barth's response to Feuerbach. For Barth agreed, on the one hand, with Feuerbach's judgment that every doctrine of God is without exception composed of idolatrous human projections. According to Barth, 'There is a test of whether or not we stand on this base [of revelation], of whether we are able to admit to Feuerbach that he was right on the whole line of his religious interpretation so far as it related to religion as an experience of men.'<sup>49</sup> Clearly, Barth meant by this statement also to affirm, in particular, Feuerbach's interpretation of the doctrine of God insofar as it was a doctrine held by human beings. If the discussion concerned human doctrines of God in and of themselves, Barth believed that Feuerbach's critique was simply universally applicable.

### 3.2.2 The complete idolatry of some doctrines of God

Yet Barth more frequently, especially in and after the 1924 *Göttingen Dogmatics*, censured doctrines of God for being idolatrous not when and because they were intrinsically idolatrous (though he never denied that they all were) but rather when and because they were *only* idolatrous. Not all doctrines of God were idolatrous in this sense. The theologian could avoid idolatry in his or her doctrine of God in this second sense by relating his or her thinking and speech concerning God's being and attributes to revelation in the way proper to and possible for sinful, created intelligence.

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<sup>49</sup> Barth, 'Feuerbach,' in *T&C*, 236-237.

The relating of one's thinking and speech to revelation in the way proper to and possible for created intelligence did not mean avoiding intrinsic idolatry. 'There are no exceptions! Every theology has 'other gods'...' <sup>50</sup> Simply, for Barth, a certain form of subjective idolatry – i.e., a certain form of the utilisation of a source other than actual revelation in one's doctrine of God – was the correspondence to revelation proper to and possible for the creature. <sup>51</sup> In other words, the relation of the created intellect to revelation proper to and possible for the created intellect was in the absolute sense improper; but it was improper in a specific way, i.e., in a way which (humanly) corresponded to and followed after revelation. <sup>52</sup> This is why, for Barth, the doctrine of God undertaken in 'right obedience' to revelation *still* had other gods, and 'Even this theology will never be justified by its work but only, if at all, by the forgiveness of sins.' <sup>53</sup> When undertaken in this way, the doctrine of God was still, in the strict sense intrinsically idolatrous, but it was at the same time something more than mere idolatry, even subjectively: it was idolatry 'put under the order of revelation.' <sup>54</sup>

The sense in which the doctrine of God developed in this way was for Barth something more than mere idolatry is made clearer still when it is asked what, in his

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<sup>50</sup> Barth, 'TFC,' 77.

<sup>51</sup> This is an aspect of broader problem Barth's thought: the fact that he did not distinguish adequately between creatureliness and sinfulness.

<sup>52</sup> Barth explicitly uses the language of theology – the doctrine of God in particular – *corresponding to* God's revelation at *CD II/1*, 287, but throughout Barth's main treatments of the doctrine of God in the *GD* and the *CD* it is clear that Barth was concerned to ensure that all that he said did so. Indeed, that *all* theology had to correspond to God's revelation by being a 'thinking after' it [*nachdenken*] was a principle in Barth's theology generally from at least the time of *Romans II* on, which he first expressed as such in the *GD*, 151. See also Eberhard Jüngel, *God's Being is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. John Webster (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 9-10.

<sup>53</sup> Barth, 'TFC,' 78.

<sup>54</sup> Barth, *CD I/2*, 360.

mind, its *object* was. Intrinsically, the object of its description could still only be an idol, i.e., a human projection. Since even doctrines of God which are, subjectively, developed in creaturely obedience to revelation remain in the strict sense subjectively idolatrous they also remain intrinsically, objectively idolatrous. But *because they conform to revelation subjectively* in the way possible for the creature, one may, according to Barth, have confidence that God will graciously give Godself to be their object, thus making them not merely idolatrous objectively. ‘When we are obedient, according to our capacity and even our incapacity, we have the promise that God Himself will acknowledge our obedience in spite of capacity or even incapacity, and this means that He will confer on our viewing, conceiving and speaking His own veracity.’<sup>55</sup> This is the meaning of Barth’s assertions that the ‘fight for right obedience in theology’ ‘can be fought properly only in common *hope*,’<sup>56</sup> and that, even more strongly, ‘...for theology there is no other justification than justification by faith. Or, to put it another way, theology is justified only by obedience.’<sup>57</sup> Thus, while doctrines of God which correspond to revelation remain intrinsically idolatrous both subjectively and objectively, they are not merely idolatrous; rather, they can be said to operate, ‘in the sphere of truth and not of falsehood.’<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 213.

<sup>56</sup> Barth, ‘TFC,’ 77; 78. Emphasis added.

<sup>57</sup> Barth, ‘Fate and Idea in Theology,’ 60.

<sup>58</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 336. Of course there always remained, in theory, the possibility that a doctrine of God could conform to revelation in the way proper to and possible for the created intellect, and God could *still* not give Godself to be its object. To assert otherwise would compromise the freedom of God’s grace. But Barth, certainly by the time of the *CD II/1*, came to emphasise the reliability and constancy of God, in such a way that had confidence that speech about God which was based upon revelation *would be* attended by God’s grace, and, therefore, have God as its object.

That Barth believed that *some* doctrines of God avoid idolatry in this sense (that of being only idolatrous) corresponds to the other side of his response to Feuerbach. For while, on the one hand, he agreed with Feuerbach that *all* doctrines of God are instances of idolatrous projection, he also held that the doctrine of God can, ultimately, escape Feuerbach's critique: '...so long as all talk 'of God being in man' is not cut off...we have no reason to disagree with Feuerbach.'<sup>59</sup> It is clear that *if* certain standards are adhered to within the doctrine of God, in at least a certain sense Feuerbach's critique will not ultimately apply. These two apparently contradictory responses of Barth to Feuerbach can be explained as suggested above: Barth believed Feuerbach was right in his judgment that all doctrines of God are, intrinsically, idolatrous projections, but that he was wrong to assume that the fact that doctrines of God are intrinsically idolatrous meant that they were only ever idolatrous. The error of Feuerbach's account, for Barth, lay in leaving out the reality of divine grace, which justifies the idolater (and the idolatrous doctrine of God such that it truly describes of God), and which can be counted on by the theologian who faithfully follows after and depends upon it.<sup>60</sup>

Barth took great pains to avoid idolatry within his own doctrine of God: not, to be sure, to avoid intrinsic idolatry, for he knew that idolatry in that sense could not be avoided. Rather, he sought to avoid idolatry in the second sense – the sense of being *only* idolatrous. This meant that he sought to propound his doctrine of God in a way that corresponded (humanly) to revelation, knowing that it was only in so doing that he could be confident that God would give Godself to be its object. The question of what

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<sup>59</sup> Barth, 'Feuerbach,' in *T&C*, 237. Emphasis added.

<sup>60</sup> Barth, 'Feuerbach,' in *T&C*, 236-237. For further discussion of how Barth's reckoning with Feuerbach affected his doctrine of God, see Jan Štefan, 'Gottes Vollkommenheiten nach KD II/1,' in *Karl Barth im europäischen Zeitgeschehen (1935-1950): Widerstand – Bewahrung – Orientierung*, edited by Michael Beintker, Christian Link and Michael Trowitzsch (Zurich: TVZ, 2010), 87-89.

this meant, both formally and materially, for his doctrine of God will occupy most of the remainder of the present chapter.

### **3.3 Barth's Directives for Avoiding Idolatry within the Doctrine of God**

Barth's concerns over idolatrous speculation and projection within the doctrine of God were addressed in a number of ways within his own treatments of the doctrine of God. In the first place, and most obviously, they contained asides directed against what he considered speculative approaches to the doctrine of God.<sup>61</sup> Secondly, and positively, Barth sought to avoid idolatry by setting his own doctrine of God in the relationship of proper creaturely correspondence to revelation. In order to answer the question of how Barth believed that the doctrine of God must be developed in order to avoid idolatry (and how Barth himself did develop his doctrine of God in an attempt to avoid idolatry) one must answer the question of what it meant to Barth for a doctrine of God to be developed, both formally and materially, in proper creaturely correspondence to revelation.

In an attempt to answer these questions, attention will be directed toward Barth's two most important treatments of the doctrine of God – that found in the *GD* §§16-17 and that found in the *CD* §§28-31 – though other of Barth's works will also be referenced when appropriate. At many points to be discussed, there is little difference between the doctrine of God in the *GD* and the doctrine of God in the *CD*. Unless otherwise noted, it should be assumed that the interpretation of Barth offered below is meant to be representative of his thinking in both. It will be seen that, for Barth, a number of directives had to be adhered to within the doctrine of God if the latter were to

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<sup>61</sup> E.g., Barth, *GD*, 365-366; *CD* II/1, 261, 293-294.

correspond to revelation in the way proper to and possible for created intelligence, and thereby avoid being merely idolatrous. The first two directives to be mentioned are formal, and the remainder are material, i.e., they are ways in which the doctrine of God *will* look materially if the formal directives for its development are adhered to, and it is not, therefore, speculative.

3.3.1 The doctrine of God must be derived by reflection upon revelation if it is to avoid idolatry

If, for Barth, a doctrine of God was to obediently correspond to revelation, and therefore avoid being mere idolatry, it had to be derived by way of reflection upon the event of revelation, i.e., have revelation alone as its source. This is the positive correlate to Barth's critique of speculation as idolatry. 'The ...object of any idea of God formed otherwise than in view of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, is necessarily other than He who is Lord and salvation, and therefore the object of the faith of the Church and the only true God'<sup>62</sup> – thus to avoid idolatry, one must develop one's doctrine of God solely from the source of God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

It has already been argued, however, that, strictly speaking, a doctrine of God could not be derived directly from actual revelation, or have actual revelation as its source. Its derivation could only be a matter of thoroughly human (and therefore wholly incommensurate) 'recollection'<sup>63</sup> of and 'reflection'<sup>64</sup> upon revelation. That is, it could be derived from, and have its source in, only a human *concept* of revelation, which as a

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<sup>62</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 298-299.

<sup>63</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 54.

<sup>64</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 4.

human concept was wholly other than actual revelation, though it was shaped by it.<sup>65</sup> Yet it was when the doctrine of God was so derived that it was elaborated in correspondence to *actual* revelation, and that actual revelation was allowed its proper place, i.e., that of source and norm, in human thinking about God's being and attributes, *in the way proper to and possible for created intelligence*. The statement that doctrines of God must be so derived if they are to avoid idolatry is the most general way of describing the manner in which for Barth the doctrine of God had to be developed if idolatry was to be avoided. The remaining directives concerning how, in Barth's mind, it must be developed if idolatry is to be avoided are all particular ways of adhering to this one. None of this is to say that the primary reason behind Barth's insistence upon the derivation of the doctrine of God by reflection upon revelation (Jesus Christ) was his aversion to idolatry; this was secondary to his primary desire to simply be obedient to revelation. Yet it was also true that disobedience to revelation in this manner necessarily meant idolatry, while obedience to revelation in this way meant the right to hope for the overcoming of it by God.

Barth's own treatments of the doctrine of God in the *GD* and the *CD* represent thoroughgoing attempts to put this principle – that 'we know God's nature [only] in his own Word to us'<sup>66</sup> – into practice. Barth helpfully offered insight into the way in which he arrived at many of the formulations which constitute his doctrine of God. It is clear,

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<sup>65</sup> To anticipate the next chapter, it is telling to note that Barth saw the fundamental task within the theological discussion of religion to be the reversal of the order of the *concepts* of religion and revelation. (Karl Barth, *On Religion: The Revelation of God as the Sublimation of Religion*, trans. Garrett Green (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 52) The concept of religion, in his mind, had usurped the role of the *concept* of revelation – and this meant idolatry. What is important, for present purposes, however, is that Barth realised that the most that could be done humanly, within theology, in the attempt to correspond to revelation, was to afford a human *concept* of revelation the role of source and norm in theology, rather than a different concept – though doing so was no less intrinsically idolatrous than affording that role to any other concept.

<sup>66</sup> Barth, *GD*, 351. See also pp. 368, 381; *CD* II/1, 261-262.

for example, that when Barth in the *GD* utilised the terms ‘personality’ and ‘aseity’ as the two determinants of God’s *nature*,<sup>67</sup> he did so because he believed that the attempt to reflect faithfully upon the event of *revelation* immediately demanded their employment. Barth wrote that ‘the first and decisive description of the nature of God [the description of God as ‘person’] arises out of the fact that God is knowable to us through his Word. Address cannot be for me a neutral thing. It involves a person.’<sup>68</sup> And the predicate of Lordship (or aseity) must be applied to God because ‘The I that addresses us in revelation is free.’<sup>69</sup>

The same line of reasoning lay behind Barth’s use of the terms ‘love’ and ‘freedom’ in order to denote the two determinants of the divine nature in his doctrine of God within the *CD II/1*.<sup>70</sup> ‘By the reality of the divine act we are summoned to give an account of the essence of this act, and thereby of the essence of God Himself. And led by Holy Scripture itself, we may and must venture to bring the concept of love...into the service of our present task, the declaration of the act and therefore of the being of God.’<sup>71</sup> Revelation:

...permits and indeed commands us to speak of a life and love, of a living and loving I, defining, attesting and proclaiming it. But permitting and commanding us to do so, He also requires us to understand and name Him beyond all our insights and ideas as the I who lives and loves in His unique way, to give Him the honour which cannot even remotely accrue to any but the living and loving being known to us, but which we must specifically deny to all other living and loving beings known to us, because it is properly and originally His honour alone...<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Barth, *GD*, §16; 351, 367-374.

<sup>68</sup> Barth, *GD*, 367.

<sup>69</sup> Barth, *GD*, 369.

<sup>70</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 272-316.

<sup>71</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 276. Emphasis added.

<sup>72</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 298.

The predication of ‘freedom’ of God was Barth’s attempt to obediently give testimony to this second aspect of revelation.<sup>73</sup> Even the fact that in the *CD II/1* Barth considered the perfections of the divine loving before he considered the perfections of the divine freedom was the result of his belief that this order of exposition followed the logical order of revelation itself: the way of treating the doctrine of God demanded by God’s being and revelation ‘can consist only in our thinking first of the love of God as it really exists in His freedom and then of His freedom as it really exists in His loving. But the ‘first’ and ‘then,’ the sequence, can be reversed only arbitrarily and at the cost of great artificiality and misapprehension.’<sup>74</sup> By Barth’s logic, it would have been idolatrous to consider them the other way round, because such an arrangement would not have been derived from reflection upon revelation.

The formal relationship between revelation, idolatry, and the doctrine of God remained constant in Barth’s thinking throughout his career: it was always the case that a (speculative) doctrine of God not derived from revelation was idolatrous. Thus, in that changes in Barth’s understanding of the content of revelation brought about changes in his understanding of what was and was not derived from revelation, they also brought about changes in the scope of his critique of idolatry within the doctrine of God. It has already been argued above that it was a change in Barth’s doctrine of revelation that caused him to perceive idolatry within the doctrines of God of Protestant liberalism.<sup>75</sup> It must be added at this point that another, later, change in Barth’s doctrine of revelation

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<sup>73</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 301.

<sup>74</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 352. Te Velde (*Paths Beyond Tracing Out*, 309) is right in saying that: ‘Barth discusses the perfections of the divine love emphatically in the first place, before the perfections of divine freedom. The reason is that the gospel of Jesus Christ preaches God’s love first and foremost, and that only by the love of God we learn about his freedom.’

<sup>75</sup> See section 3.1.1 of the present work.

caused another change in Barth's critique of idolatry within the doctrine of God. This occurred between the time of the *CD II/1* (1940) and the time of the *CD IV/1* (1953). During this time period, as noted previously, Barth came to include within the content of revelation the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth (and, therefore, humanity in general). Not only this: Barth also came to see a more positive relationship between the human and divine natures in Jesus Christ.<sup>76</sup> What this meant in practice was that events from the life of Jesus Christ, existing on the human, historical plane, were read by Barth back into the life of the eternal Trinity.<sup>77</sup> This new way of thinking is reflected in Barth's statement that, 'It is only the pride of man, making a god in its own image, that will not hear of a determination of divine essence in Jesus Christ.'<sup>78</sup>

So, for example, that Jesus Christ was, during his earthly life, subject to the Father became the grounds for Barth's late acceptance of some form of immanent, functional subordination<sup>79</sup> of the Son to the Father within the eternal Trinity. He wrote in the *CD IV/1*, for example, that, 'We have not only not to deny but actually to affirm

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<sup>76</sup> See section 2.1.2.3 of the present work.

<sup>77</sup> Paul Molnar (*Faith, Freedom and the Spirit: The Economic Trinity in Barth, Torrance and Contemporary Theology* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2015), 142, 333-339) perceives this in Barth and criticises him for it. McCormack also senses a change along these lines, given expression in the *CD IV/1*, but surely overstates this change when he says that, 'What is new in Barth [in the *CD IV*, *vis-à-vis* theological tradition], I think, is that he has identified the *human* subject, Jesus of Nazareth, as God...' (Bruce McCormack, 'Divine Impassibility or Simply Divine Constancy? Implications of Karl Barth's Later Christology for Debates over Impassibility,' in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 165) It is more accurate to say that Barth held that every aspect of the life of Jesus of Nazareth was grounded in some reality within the life of the eternal Son, and therefore, the immanent Trinity, and that Barth at times did not satisfactorily describe the correspondence between the aspects of the life of Jesus of Nazareth and the underlying reality of the life of the eternal Son in terms of analogy, thereby adequately holding the divine nature apart from the human nature, but rather slipped into univocity.

<sup>78</sup> Barth, *CD IV/2*, 84.

<sup>79</sup> Darren O. Sumner ('Obedience and Subordination in Karl Barth's Trinitarian Theology,' in *Advancing Trinitarian Theology: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 137-138) rightly argues that Barth's actualistic ontology allowed him to hold to an immanent and eternal but not ontological subordination of the Son to the Father.

and understand as essential to the being of God the offensive fact that there is in God Himself an above and a below, a *prius* and a *posterius*, a superiority and a subordination.<sup>80</sup> That Jesus suffered was also the grounds for Barth's rejection (at least to some degree) of the traditional doctrine of the divine *apatheia* and for his acceptance of a form of theopaschitism. According to Barth in the *CD IV/2*, '...the God who is operative and revealed in the acts of Jesus self-evidently places Himself at the side of man in this respect – that that which causes suffering to man as His creatures is also and above all painful, alien and antithetical to Himself.'<sup>81</sup> Further:

It is not at all the case that God has no part in the suffering of Jesus Christ even in His mode of being as the Father. No, there is a *particula veri* in the teaching of the early Patripassians. This is that primarily it is God the Father who suffers in the offering and sending of His Son, in His abasement. The suffering is not His own, but the alien suffering of the creature, of man, which He takes to Himself in Him. But He does suffer it in the humiliation of His Son with a depth with which it never was or will be suffered by any man – apart from the One who is His Son.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Barth, *CD IV/1*, 200-201. See also p. 211, in particular, and the rest of §59 more generally. This has been noted by a variety of interpreters, including Berkouwer (*TTG*, 304) and Paul Molnar ('The Obedience of the Son in the Theology of Karl Bart and Thomas F. Torrance,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 67, 1 (2014): 50-69; *Faith, Freedom and the Spirit*, 339-340), both of whom reject this move of Barth's, and by McCormack ('Divine Impassibility or Simply Divine Constancy?'), Jones (*THC*, 204) and Sumner ('Obedience and Subordination'), each of whom show some degree of agreement with it. Phillip Tolliday ('Obedience and Subordination in Barth's Trinity,' in *Trinitarian Theology after Barth*, ed. Myk Habets and Phillip Tolliday (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2011)) also believes that Barth's doctrine of election in the *CD II/2*, and the related change brought about within Barth's doctrine of revelation, led Barth to argue for eternal subordination, although he does not render a clear judgment one way or another on this move. Kevin Giles ('Barth and Subordinationism,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 64, 3 (2011): 346) argues that Barth's language concerning subordination in the *CD IV/1* cannot be taken at face value, and that Barth should not be read as endorsing an eternal subordinationism (even of the functional kind), but this does not do justice to Barth's statements.

<sup>81</sup> Barth, *CD IV/2*, 225.

<sup>82</sup> Barth, *CD IV/2*, 357. Gunton says simply ('Becoming and Being,' 202) that, 'Barth rejects the doctrine of impassibility.' Berkouwer also (*TTG*, 29-305) rightly sees this, and criticises Barth for it. John M. Russell ('Impassibility and Pathos in Barth's Idea of God,' *Anglican Theological Review* 70, 3 (1988): 221), on the other hand, perceives in Barth a denial of divine impassibility and an affirmation of divine suffering, and holds that this accords well with Scripture. He rightly argues that, for Barth, God is externally impassible, i.e., that God cannot be affected from without, but internally passible, i.e., that God can affect Godself with emotion and suffering. (226-228) Robert B. Price (*Letters of the Divine Word: The Perfections of God in Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 69-70) also expresses sympathy with this view.

Tendencies toward the rejection of the divine *apatheia* and the affirmation of subordination within the Trinity were already present in Barth's thinking in the doctrine of God set forth in the *CD* II/1,<sup>83</sup> but these tendencies received this new grounding in the inclusion of the humanity of Jesus in the content of revelation by the time of the *CD* IV/1.<sup>84</sup>

This change in Barth's understanding of revelation meant that it became idolatrous to claim that aspects of Jesus' human life were *not* indicative of closely corresponding (at times, it seems for Barth, nearly identical) realities in the life of the immanent Trinity. Continuing with the previous examples, it became the case that due to Barth's new understanding of revelation the *affirmation* of the divine *apatheia* or the *denial* of the eternal subordination of the Son had to be understood as being derived from a source other than revelation, and therefore as being speculative and idolatrous.<sup>85</sup> As a part of Barth's discussion of the relationship of super- and sub-ordination within the Trinity in the *CD* IV/1, he had, for example, this to say:

God is God only in these relationships and therefore not in a Godhead which does not take part in this history, in the relationships of its modes of being, which is neutral towards them. This neutral Godhead, this pure and empty Godhead, and its claim to be true divinity, is the illusion of an abstract 'monotheism' which usually fools men most successfully at the high-water mark of the development of heathen religions and mythologies and philosophies.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Barth, *CD* I/1, 412; II/1, 370-371.

<sup>84</sup> McCormack, in his essay, 'Divine Impassibility or Simply Divine Constancy?', carefully attends to Barth's various mentions of the concept of impassibility within the *CD*, and rightly argues that even in the earlier volumes of the *CD* Barth did not seem to approve of the concept of divine impassibility, and that the Christology of the *CD* IV/1 logically eliminated the possibility of any positive use of the concept of impassibility on Barth's part.

<sup>85</sup> Again, this was already the case to some extent earlier in the *CD*. The difference in volume IV is that there it was the case due to Barth's understanding of the way in which the human nature of Jesus revealed God, whereas in volume II it was due primarily to the Scripture principle.

<sup>86</sup> Barth, *CD* IV/1, 203.

For Barth at this time, a god in which there is not subordination is not God, but an idol, because such a god is not known from Jesus Christ, since Jesus Christ is known from his earthly life to be subordinate to the Father. In the *CD IV*, a god in whom there is no subordination can only be known by looking away from revelation, and therefore speculatively and idolatrously. This assertion will be taken up again below (section 3.5).

In spite of changes in his doctrine of revelation, and corresponding changes to his critique of speculation and idolatry within the doctrine of God, Barth's formal commitment to the derivation of the doctrine from special revelation, i.e., Jesus Christ, as the only means of avoiding complete idolatry never changed. Attention will now be turned to more specific examples of what it meant and looked like, for Barth, for a doctrine of revelation to be derived from revelation, and thereby avoid idolatry.

### 3.3.2 The doctrine of God must be derived from Scripture if it is to avoid idolatry

If a doctrine of God was to avoid speculative idolatry in the way possible for and proper to the created (and invariably sinful) human intellect, it had, for Barth, to be developed in obedience and correspondence to revelation. But for it to be developed in obedience and correspondence to revelation it had, for Barth, to be developed in obedience and correspondence to the authoritative witness to revelation, Holy Scripture.<sup>87</sup> In the case of those theologians whose doctrine of election Barth felt the need to contest, for example, he allowed that their formulations were 'meant to be an exposition of

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<sup>87</sup> There is no conflict between the idea that the doctrine of God must be derived from Scripture, including the OT as Gerhard Bergner notes (*Um der Sache willen: Karl Barths Schriftauslegung in der kirchlichen Dogmatik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupert, 2015), 104), and the idea that the doctrine of God must be derived from revelation, i.e., Jesus Christ, because all Scripture is, and must be understood as, a witness to Jesus Christ.

Scripture, and therefore a testimony to the revelation of the triune God.’<sup>88</sup> The beginnings of this formal conviction are evident in Barth’s thought both before and at the time of his two *Romans* commentaries, and it became even more solid and materially determinative in his thought as his career progressed.<sup>89</sup>

Barth’s particular way of understanding what it meant for the doctrine of God to be properly derived from Scripture differentiated him from many of his contemporaries and forebears. It may be both discovered directly, and read off of his material formulations, within his treatments of the doctrine of God within the *GD* and the *CD II*.

First, it meant for him the use of biblical *concepts* in the attempt to describe the nature and attributes of God. Within the doctrine of God in the *GD* Barth took it for granted that the concepts used to describe God must be biblical ones, as seen, for example, in his discussion of the attribute of ‘holiness.’ He wrote, for example, that,

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<sup>88</sup> Barth, *CD II/2*, 24. Emphasis added.

<sup>89</sup> In the wake of *Romans I*, Barth was charged with ‘biblicism’ – a charge which he was willing to accept if he was permitted to explain the term’s meaning. Barth understated the degree to which the label of ‘biblicist’ could be applied to him when he said in the preface to *Romans II* (12) that, ‘When I am named a ‘Biblicist,’ all that can rightly be proved against me is that I am prejudiced in supposing the Bible to be a good book, and that I hold it to be profitable for men to take its conceptions at least as seriously as they take their own.’ In truth, even before *Romans II*, it was Barth’s *a priori* assumption that the exposition of Scripture was the surest way to arrive at an accurate conception of God and creation in relation to God. This is evidenced both by the fact that Barth exerted so much energy in the task of expositing *Romans*, and by his earlier writings (it is an implication, for example, of his 1917 essay ‘The New World within the Bible.’) Nevertheless, Barth allowed in *Romans II* that there was a possibility of obtaining a conception of God which was at least to some degree true outwith the exposition of Scripture (though not in contradiction to it; see, e.g., p. 277). Furthermore, his over-emphasis upon negative predications of God meant a departure from Scripture. In the *GD*, as was claimed in section 2.1.2.2 of the present work, Barth understood there to be a strong ongoing relationship between Scripture and revelation, which meant that the development of a doctrine of God from revelation meant its development from Scripture (see, e.g., §§ 1 and 10). Barth’s doctrine of God in the *GD* was, in fact, a more faithful representation of the biblical picture than that of *Romans II*, because it dropped his *a priori* commitment to describing God as, above all else, other than the world. In the doctrine of God in the *CD II/1*, Barth is even more explicit that obedience to revelation means the derivation of the doctrine of God from Scripture, and that the alternative is disobedience to revelation and idolatry. See pp. 6, 8-9, 23, and *passim*. It may also be mentioned here that Barth’s definition of natural theology in his 1934 *Nein!* (and it should be remembered that the idolatry of speculation was for Barth nothing other than the practice of natural theology within the domain of the doctrine of God) ran as follows: ‘By ‘natural theology’ I mean every (positive or negative) *formulation of a system* which claims to be theological, i.e. to interpret divine revelation, whose subject, however, differs fundamentally from the revelation in Jesus Christ and whose *method* therefore differs equally from the exposition of Holy Scripture.’ (74-75)

‘We can continue at once and say that this will of God is a holy will. The biblical concept of the Holy is, as we all know, the concept of that which is distinct or that which is supremely positive in God...’<sup>90</sup> and went on to say, further, ‘We cannot expunge the more detailed OT definitions at this point.’<sup>91</sup> Barth, in fact, within the doctrine of God of the *GD*, offered biblical support throughout for his particular selection and definition of concepts. In the doctrine of God of the *CD II/1*, Barth is seen to be even more definitely committed to the utilisation of biblical concepts. ‘To attest and expound [the] biblical unity of the Lord with His glory is the business of the doctrine of divine perfections.’<sup>92</sup> Barth’s actual procedure in the development of his doctrine of God (e.g., the attempt to understand the meaning of the predicate ‘love’ as it applies to God through biblical exegesis<sup>93</sup>) also demonstrates this commitment.<sup>94</sup>

Secondly, it seems to be the case that properly deriving the doctrine of God from revelation meant for Barth a preference for the use of biblical *terms* to denote biblical concepts. This can be most effectively demonstrated by simply listing the terms which Barth used to denote God’s predicates; in the *GD*: personality, aseity, life, power, wisdom, holiness, righteousness, mercy, love, blessedness, unity, eternity,

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<sup>90</sup> Barth, *GD*, 418.

<sup>91</sup> Barth, *GD*, 418-419.

<sup>92</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 325.

<sup>93</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 276-283.

<sup>94</sup> That Barth’s doctrine of God, and in particular, his doctrines of the perfections of unity, constancy, and eternity, did in fact have their source in Scripture, with reason and tradition playing subservient roles, is, in part, the thesis rightly defended by Todd Pokrifka in his *Redescribing God: The Roles of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason in Karl Barth’s Doctrines of Divine Unity, Constancy, and Eternity* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010), see, e.g., pp. 41-42. And Bergner rightly states: ‘Hier [in his presentation of the divine perfections] arbeitet Barth mit etymologischen Untersuchungen der biblischen Begriffe und mit Konkordanten Aufzählungen von Bibelstellen, er zeichnet Charakterbilder biblischer Gestalten und erzählt – vor allem alttestamentliche – Geschichten nach.’ (*Um der Sache Willen*, 96) For a detailed consideration of the determinative role which biblical exegesis played in Barth’s presentation of the divine perfection of patience [*Geduld*], in particular, see pp. 94-119 of Bergner’s work.

omnipresence, constancy and glory; in the *CD II/1*: love, freedom, grace, mercy, patience, holiness, righteousness, wisdom, oneness, constancy, eternity, omnipresence, and omnipotence. To be sure, it was by no means an absolute rule that only biblical terms could be used in the doctrine of God. Other language indeed had to be used. And some concepts such as God's omnipresence, which were clearly present in the Bible, were, for Barth, best denoted by the use of non-biblical *terms*. When, however, there were satisfactory biblical terms available to denote biblical concepts, Barth demonstrated that he believed it important to use them; on the other hand, Barth held only loosely to non-biblical terms utilised in order to denote biblical concepts. This is the reason that though in the *GD* he utilised the term 'personality' to denote one of the two determinants of God's nature, in the *CD* he ceased to do so and admitted that its use was not ultimately important. The *concept* which it was meant to indicate remained important when describing God, but the term itself was not, for Barth, since it was not thrust upon the theologian by Scripture:

...everything depends upon the statement that God is the One who loves. But nothing at all depends on the statement that He is or He has personality. The second statement is unknown both to the Bible and to primitive and Reformation dogma...We can and must, therefore concede that we can do without it so long as what is intended in it is assured and accepted.<sup>95</sup>

If, on the other hand, the term 'person' or 'personality' was prominently used by Scripture to describe God, Barth would not have called it inessential.

To state matters otherwise, Barth believed that theology, including the doctrine of God, in order to be obedient to revelation, had to be a matter of biblical

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<sup>95</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 296. Christophe Chalamet (*Dialectical Theologians: Wilhelm Herrmann, Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann* (Zurich: TVZ, 2005), 30) rightly notes that Barth's preference for biblical terminology in the doctrine of God was even more pronounced in in the *CD II/1* than it had been at the time of the *GD*, stating that, by the time of the *CD II/1*, 'Barth has lost...any interest in such abstract, non-biblical and non-dogmatic terminology. He prefers to speak of God as the one who loves.'

‘interpretation,’ and not firstly of ‘illustration,’ where ‘Interpretation means saying *the same thing* in other words’ and ‘Illustration means saying the same thing *in other words*.’<sup>96</sup> True concern for biblical *interpretation* in theology is not demonstrated by the discarding of the Bible’s actual terms by immediately translating them into some other idiom – that procedure will always involve material loss – but, rather, in a sustained consideration of them.<sup>97</sup> A departure from the method of sustained interpretation which focusses upon biblical language to a method of illustration which immediately translates and discards it was for Barth a ‘desertion of revelation’ which stands under the ‘interdict’ of the second commandment, i.e., which commits idolatry.<sup>98</sup>

An implication of Barth’s belief that the doctrine of God had to be derived from Scripture in the way described above if idolatry were to be avoided was his conviction, most fully expressed within his doctrine of God in the *CD II/1*, that the corporeal anthropomorphisms and anthropoieticisms used by the Bible describe to God (i.e., those which suggest that God is or has a body), must not be ‘spiritualised,’ i.e., ‘arbitrarily translated into something spiritual.’<sup>99</sup> This assertion distanced Barth from most classical theologians, including nearly all scholastic and Protestant orthodox ones.<sup>100</sup> Even before

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<sup>96</sup> For more on Barth’s distinction between ‘interpretation’ and ‘illustration’ see the *CD I/1*, 345. See also p. 344 and Jüngel’s discussion (*GB*, 24-25) of this distinction in Barth.

<sup>97</sup> It is the *particula veri* of ‘postliberal’ accounts of Barth that, in general, they accurately depict this conviction of Barth’s – that theology must involve a sustained reckoning with the language of the Bible, rather than an immediate ‘translation’ of it. See, e.g., George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984), 135; ‘Barth and Textuality,’ *Theology Today* 43, 3 (1986): 365.

<sup>98</sup> Barth, *CD I/1*, 345.

<sup>99</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 266. Some of the information and arguments presented in the present work concerning the issue of biblical anthropomorphisms were previously put forth in the following unpublished conference paper by the present author: ‘On Speaking of God’s Body: Through Barth and Aquinas,’ presented at the Society for the Study of Theology Postgraduate Conference, Oxford, 6 January 2014.

<sup>100</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 221-223; 264-267.

the time of Christian theology, Greek thinkers like Xenophanes had worried over the use of corporeal images of God,<sup>101</sup> and the higher forms of Greek philosophy, including the Platonism so heavily appropriated by the early Christian tradition, criticised the obvious corporeal anthropomorphisms ascribed to the Greek pantheon by, among others, Homer and Hesiod.<sup>102</sup> The early Christian tradition – and Christian theology thereafter, with few exceptions – took up this aversion to anthropomorphic descriptions of God and the concomitant commitment to the doctrine of divine incorporeality.<sup>103</sup> The obvious problem with this position was that the Bible speaks of God with the use of corporeal anthropomorphisms and anthropoieticisms. Traditionally, the solution to this problem was the spiritualisation of these concepts and, within dogmatics, their discarding.

Barth rejected this approach to biblical, corporeal anthropomorphisms as a rejection of revelation, and thus as idolatrous. For him all human concepts and terms were equally inapplicable to God, and, indeed, were equally anthropomorphic, so that ‘the divine being must be allowed to transcend both spirit and nature, yet also to overlap and comprehend both, as attested in His revelation according to the testimony of Holy Scripture.’<sup>104</sup> There was thus no justification in revelation itself or in the Bible for the

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<sup>101</sup> See Grace Jantzen, *God's World, God's Body* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984), 1; Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ‘Anthropomorphism,’ in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Volume 1*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 136-138. See also Wolfhart Pannenberg, ‘The Appropriation of the Philosophical Concept of God as a Dogmatic Problem of Early Christian Theology,’ in *Basic Questions in Theology, volume II*, trans. George H. Kehm (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

<sup>102</sup> This according to Eberhard Jüngel, ‘Anthropomorphism,’ in *Theological Essays I*, trans. John Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 73.

<sup>103</sup> An outstanding example the classical position may be found in Aquinas, *ST*, I.3.1, the thesis of which is: ‘It is absolutely true that God is not a body.’

<sup>104</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 266.

principle of spiritualising corporeal anthropomorphisms. Obedience to revelation demanded, then, the utilisation of the concepts and terms that God had selected to testify to Godself, i.e., first and foremost, those (both spiritual and corporeal ones) found in the Bible. The application of the principle of spiritualisation was disobedient to revelation (i.e., speculative) because its practitioner looked away from Scripture (to ‘the philosophy of pagan antiquity,’<sup>105</sup> according to Barth), to find the foreign (i.e., non-revealed) notion that spiritual concepts are intrinsically better suited to speak of God than are corporeal ones, which he or she then imported into the doctrine of God.<sup>106</sup> With that foreign principle in place and on its basis the ‘spiritualiser’ *translated* a large amount of language used by the Bible to describe God into language amenable to a foreign conceptual system and then discarded it instead of holding fast to and interpreting it. Since the importing of this foreign principle of spiritualisation into the doctrine of God was, however, a looking away from Jesus Christ and Scripture, and thus an act of speculation, it is unsurprising, that Barth believed that its employment helped one to speak, not of God, but, rather, of an idol like ‘the highest ideal in Plato’s teaching, or the *πρῶτον κινούν* of Aristotle.’<sup>107</sup> While the spiritualisation of corporeal biblical anthropomorphisms within the doctrine of God was initially no doubt thought to be necessary in order to *prevent* idolatry, Barth believed that it had the opposite effect.

Barth’s position with regard to metaphysics, particularly within the doctrine of God, must also be understood within the context of his attempt to testify faithfully to revelation through the utilisation of biblical concepts and terms within it, and to thereby

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<sup>105</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 266.

<sup>106</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 266.

<sup>107</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 265. See also p. 222.

avoid idolatry. Barth's understanding of metaphysics and their place (or lack thereof) within the doctrine of God was more complex than is insinuated by those who claim that he was, without qualification, an anti- or post-metaphysical theologian.<sup>108</sup> It was also (in its mature form) more complex than the stances of liberal theologians like Ritschl, whose rejection of metaphysics within the doctrine of God took the form of a retreat into descriptions of religious subjectivity. Thus, Barth's position, *contra* Pannenberg, cannot be properly understood as a mere 'radicalisation of the Ritschlian rejection of metaphysics.'<sup>109</sup>

Barth understood 'metaphysics' to be any systematic attempt on the part of the human being to understand and expound reality, which has as its source that which is

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<sup>108</sup> See Bruce McCormack ('Beyond Nonfoundational and Postmodern Readings of Barth: Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology,' in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 155, n. 150; 'Seek God Where He May be Found: A Response to Edwin Chr. Van Driel,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60, 1 (2007), 76; 'The Actuality of God: Karl Barth in Conversation with Open Theism,' in *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives*, ed. Bruce McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 211; 'Election and Trinity: Theses in Response to George Hunsinger,' in *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, ed. Michael T. Dempsey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 122, 126). While his claims to this effect are potentially misleading, however, he is not materially in error, because he seems to use the term 'metaphysics' to denote what, as will be seen, Barth understood to be one particular form of metaphysics: that which is not primarily concerned with revelation and Scripture; Barth, of course, did reject this form of metaphysics within the doctrine of God as idolatrous. McCormack hints that he understands 'metaphysics' in this sense when he says ('The Actuality of God, 211) that, 'Traditional metaphysics held that it is not possible to speak of God without first speaking of something else. All talk of God begins as talk about something else – as talk about the cosmos, perhaps, or as talk about what it means to be a 'person' on the human plane. And the hope was that through a series of negations (removing from divine being the imperfections proper to creaturely being) and a series of analogies (making God to be like us in that he 'has' certain qualities or attributes that we also have but has them perfectly), one would eventually arrive at talk about God that was really talk about God and not just an endless chain of self-referential statements.' See also Louis Dupré ('Belief and Metaphysics,' in *Belief and Metaphysics*, ed. Peter M. Candler, Jr. and Conor Cunningham (London: SCM Press, 2007), 8), for an example of the view that Barth is anti-metaphysical. Robert Jenson ('Religious Pluralism, Christology, and Barth,' in *Dialogue: A Journal of Theology* 20 (1981): 34; 'Karl Barth,' in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century, volume 1*, ed. David F. Ford (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 38-41), Gordon ('Speculate after Barth?', 8), Hauerwas (*WGU*, 189), and Timothy Stanley (*Protestant Metaphysics after Karl Barth and Martin Heidegger* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010), 158-159) rightly perceive and convey the complexity of Barth's thought on the topic of metaphysics.

<sup>109</sup> Pannenberg, 'Philosophical Concept,' 121.

not revelation.<sup>110</sup> When metaphysics spoke of God as an element in its system it was, by definition, speculative and idolatrous. This did not lead to Barth's rejection of metaphysics within theology, because he knew well that all theology, and every doctrine of God, both utilises, and is itself a venture in, metaphysics. It is a major, if largely implicit, claim of Barth's essay 'Fate and Idea in Theology' that the use of metaphysics cannot be avoided within theology, and Barth made this conviction clear in various other statements throughout his career, such as this one:

The interpreter [of Scripture] cannot help this. Even in what he says as an observer and exponent, he will everywhere betray the fact that, consciously or unconsciously, in cultured or primitive fashion, consistently or inconsistently, he has approached the text from the standpoint of a particular epistemology, logic or ethics, of definite ideas and ideals concerning the relations of God, the world and man...Everyone has some sort of philosophy, i.e., a personal view of the fundamental nature and relationship of things.<sup>111</sup>

And in a place where the term 'Philosophie' is at least roughly equivalent to Barth's 'metaphysics,' he wrote that: 'jede Theologie bewußt oder unbewußt auch Philosophie wäre.'<sup>112</sup> It was, for the mature Barth, a matter of self-deception when liberalism, and especially Ritschl, held that their theologies, and their doctrines of God, were non-metaphysical. Ritschl in particular, according to Barth, erred when he suggested that by renouncing Hellenistic metaphysics within the doctrine of God, he avoided the problems of metaphysics altogether. This was Barth's meaning when he spoke of:

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<sup>110</sup> While Barth does not seem to have anywhere offered a formal definition of his own of metaphysics, it is only by presuming that he understood it in this very broad manner that one can account for Barth's divergent comments about it, which will be discussed below. See also, one of Barth's most important and direct discussions of the role of metaphysics in theology at *CD I/1*, 280.

<sup>111</sup> Barth, *CD I/2*, 728. See also, 'Fate and Idea in Theology,' 28-29.

<sup>112</sup> Karl Barth, *Die Theologie Zwinglis: Vorlesung Göttingen, Wintersemester 1922/1923 (GA II.40)*, ed. Matthias Freudenberg (Zurich: TVZ, 2004), 492. It can be surmised that in speaking of 'philosophy' Barth meant something near to what he elsewhere called metaphysics because immediately after this statements he went on to describe the 'philosophy' of Zwingli as 'eine Verbindung von Neuplatonismus und Aristotelismus.' (492) See also *CD I/1*, 165.

...the school of A. Ritschl, which was supposed to be so averse to every type of speculation and metaphysics. It is all very well to renounce the Platonism of the Greek fathers, but if that means that we throw ourselves all the more unconditionally into the arms of the positivists and the agnostics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we have no right to look for the mote in the eye of those ancient fathers, as though on their side is a sheer hellenisation of the Gospel, and on ours a sheer honest exegetical sense for facts.<sup>113</sup>

Barth believed that Ritschl's doctrine of God, no less than that of the early church fathers, emerged from within and as a part of a set of human, and therefore speculative, attempts to systematically understand the nature of reality (metaphysics) – such was simply unavoidable.

The universal intrinsic *idolatry* of metaphysical doctrines of God in particular was not a major theme of Barth's mature thinking. Yet the logic of his thought indicates that he believed that every description of God, in so far as it was metaphysical, was by definition idolatrous. In so far as a doctrine of God is metaphysical it does not have revelation, but a substitute, as the source of its description of the reality of God; and in so far as the latter is the case it is speculative, and idolatrous. Its idol is, at the level of theological method, metaphysics itself; at the material level, its idol is whatever concept is held by the particular metaphysical system to be communicative of God: whether 'Being,' the 'Unmoved Mover,' 'revelation,' or some other. In that Barth agreed with Ritschl that metaphysical doctrines of God were idolatrous *and* his understanding of what constituted metaphysics was far more inclusive than that of Ritschl, his critique of metaphysics within the doctrine of God was more radical than that of Ritschl.

Although all doctrines of God were for Barth metaphysical and therefore intrinsically idolatrous, they were not all so in the same way. Some doctrines of God were metaphysical in a specific way, namely, in a way which obediently corresponded

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<sup>113</sup> Barth, *CD* I/1, 728.

to revelation in the way proper to and possible for created intelligence. A doctrine of God was metaphysical in this way when it, ongoingly, utilised human attempts to understand and describe God as an element in a systematic understanding of reality in service of the attempt to testify to revelation and interpret Holy Scripture, i.e., when it was a venture in truly *theological*, christological, metaphysics.<sup>114</sup> In the *CD II/1* Barth wrote that, ‘There could be no objection to the logic, metaphysics and mathematics of these [ancient and Protestant orthodox] lines of thought if they had been used only to perform the service of explanation – a service which it is quite possible and even up to a point necessary to render in this way.’<sup>115</sup> Doctrines of God which were ventures in *theological* metaphysics were still ventures in *idolatrous* metaphysics, because they had their source not, strictly speaking, in actual revelation, but, rather, in actual revelation in the way proper to and possible for created intelligence, i.e., in a human concept or recollection of ‘revelation.’ But because of their obedient correspondence to revelation in the way proper to and possible for created intelligence, they could hope (like obediently ‘speculative’ doctrines of God more generally) for God’s self-giving to be their object.

Since within the doctrine of God metaphysics had to be used in service of the interpretation or explanation of revelation and Scripture if the doctrine of God were to be developed in creaturely correspondence to revelation and thereby ultimately avoid idolatry by God’s grace, metaphysical systems and concepts propounded *a priori* could not simply be accepted by theology *in toto* and without revision, one or more metaphysical concepts being identified with God. Using them in this way could not represent a true attempt to correspond to revelation, but could only mean the idolatrous

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<sup>114</sup> See Barth, *CD II/1*, 447.

<sup>115</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 447.

affording to metaphysics or one of its concepts the role that properly belonged to the Christian concept of revelation. Instead, if metaphysics were to truly *serve* revelation and Scripture, previously propounded metaphysical systems and their concepts, terms and modes of thinking had to be imported into theology and the doctrine of God eclectically, on the basis of how well they helped to explicate revelation and Scripture, and in such a manner that they were malleable. That previously propounded ‘metaphysics’ and their concepts had to be used in service of revelation, and thus be understood as malleable, if a theology or doctrine of God were to be developed in creaturely correspondence to revelation is undoubtedly what Barth had in mind when he wrote in the *CD II/1* that, within the doctrine of God: ‘...we shall have to divest of their original character the perhaps inevitable elements of a generally ‘metaphysical’ language structure, giving them a clear theological sense and by placing them in the theological context,’<sup>116</sup> and, in the *CD I/1*, that within the doctrine of God ‘the legitimacy [of the theological use of metaphysical concepts] must be decided by the context in which the concepts occur.’<sup>117</sup>

Barth’s own doctrine of God was itself an exercise in theological metaphysics which utilised concepts from previously propounded systems of metaphysics in service of revelation and the interpretation of Scripture. Not only was his theology self-evidently an attempt to describe reality, both created and uncreated, systematically; he also did not hesitate to utilise classically metaphysical concepts like ‘being’ to describe God in this effort, being careful, of course, to make known that for him ‘the concept of

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<sup>116</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 187-188.

<sup>117</sup> Barth, *CD I/1*, 280.

being is not to be understood in the sense of a general doctrine of being,<sup>118</sup> but that it must be understood, rather, as a concept of being revised that it might serve the interpretation of revelation and Scripture. Jenson rightly notes, with some surprise, that Barth's doctrine of God utilised in some places, the 'language of standard substance-metaphysics.'<sup>119</sup>

Of course, there was also the possibility that a doctrine of God could be metaphysical in a different fashion: it could be a venture in *non-theological* metaphysics. In such a case, correspondence to revelation and the interpretation of Scripture was not its chief concern. It was not, therefore, the concept of revelation shaped by actual revelation and Holy Scripture which was its source. Instead one or more foreign metaphysical systems or concepts usurped the role of revelation and Scripture as the primary source of theology and the doctrine of God, as in the case, for example, of at least certain types of onto-theology.<sup>120</sup> This could only be evaluated by Barth as idolatrous, 'the attempt to unite Yahweh with Baal.'<sup>121</sup>

Barth spoke of metaphysics and its relationship to theology negatively more frequently than he did positively. But on a number occasions when he did so – and perhaps on most – he used a qualifying word, in order to make it clear that he was speaking of a certain kind of metaphysics, namely a non-theological metaphysics: that which seeks to speak of God as an element within a systematic human attempt to understand reality which is unconcerned with revelation and Scripture, or in which

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<sup>118</sup> Jüngel, *GB*, 76.

<sup>119</sup> Robert Jenson, 'Karl Barth on the Being of God,' in *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: An Unofficial Catholic-Protestant Dialogue*, edited by Bruce L. McCormack and Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 44.

<sup>120</sup> Barth, *CD* II/2, 531.

<sup>121</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 84.

some other reality assumes the role of master over or alongside of revelation and Scripture. Such is ‘self-motivated and self-grounded metaphysics,’<sup>122</sup> ‘pure metaphysics,’<sup>123</sup> ‘a metaphysics that has nothing whatever to do with proclamation,’<sup>124</sup> ‘untheological metaphysical speculation,’<sup>125</sup> ‘an abstract metaphysics of God,’<sup>126</sup> ‘illegitimate metaphysics,’<sup>127</sup> ‘a metaphysics of being,’<sup>128</sup> or an ‘alien mythological metaphysics.’<sup>129</sup>

Barth’s critique of metaphysics was, on the one hand, more wide-ranging than that of Ritschl. He knew on the basis of revelation, which contradicted metaphysics that, as Ritschl had said, all metaphysics were idolatrous. He went beyond Ritschl to include within ‘metaphysics’ much more than just those of the Hellenistic variety. Yet Barth was, at the same time, ultimately much more positive than Ritschl concerning a certain, genuinely theological, use of metaphysics within theology and the doctrine of God. It was Barth who rightly saw that metaphysics are unavoidable within theology, and that if one is to speak of God at all, one must speak – in obedience to revelation and Scripture – metaphysically and idolatrously, and therefore in dependence upon grace.

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<sup>122</sup> Barth, *CD* I/1, 280.

<sup>123</sup> Barth, *CD* I/1, 280.

<sup>124</sup> Barth, *CD* I/1, 280.

<sup>125</sup> Barth, *CD* I/1, 416.

<sup>126</sup> Barth, *CD* I/1, 325.

<sup>127</sup> Barth, *CD* I/1, 422.

<sup>128</sup> Barth, *CD* II/2, 531.

<sup>129</sup> Barth, *CD* III/3, 414.

### 3.3.3 The doctrine of God must be consistently Trinitarian if it is to avoid idolatry

In order for a doctrine of God to correspond to revelation and avoid idolatry, Barth believed that it had to be consistently Trinitarian. There must, in other words, be no talk within it of God in abstraction from the prior understanding that God is the Trinity of Father, Son, and Spirit. As suggested in the preceding chapter, the doctrine of the Trinity was not for Barth, strictly speaking, part of the content of revelation. Its formulation was, rather, a product of reflection upon and interpretation of revelation. But it was for him a formulation which necessarily will be immediately made and consistently held in view if one truly begins and continues the development of the doctrine of God *via* the interpretation of revelation, such that Barth could understand the doctrine of the Trinity as ‘indirectly, though not directly, identical with the statement about revelation.’<sup>130</sup> If, however, the doctrine of God is undertaken, even if only momentarily, without having in view the Trinitarian nature of God, then it is not based upon revelation but (again, even if only temporarily) upon something else, and it is therefore idolatrous. Barth believed that Sabellius and Schleiermacher, with their ultimately non-Trinitarian doctrines of God, committed idolatry along these lines, taking an ‘unreal God seriously as God.’<sup>131</sup> But so, too, if only temporarily, did much of scholasticism and Protestant orthodoxy, because they began their doctrines of God with the consideration of God in God’s unity in abstraction from consideration of God’s tri-unity:

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<sup>130</sup> Barth, *CD I/1*, 309. As Thompson writes, ‘When faith reflects on [revelation] and seeks understanding of it, it leads *inevitably* to the Christian view of God as triune.’ (John Thompson, ‘On the Trinity,’ in *Theology Beyond Christendom: Essays on the Centenary of the Birth of Karl Barth, May 10, 1886*, edited by John Thompson (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 1986), 13. Emphasis added.)

<sup>131</sup> Barth, *CD I/1*, 353. See also Barth, *GD*, 101.

We have already mentioned the common practice in this doctrine of placing the doctrine of the Trinity after development of a concept of the nature and attributes of God in general. This arrangement led to the temptation of speaking of God apart from His revelation and therefore apart from His being as the One who loves, on the basis of a free appraisal of what can be called divine. The result was an involuntary movement away from the school of Scripture into that of heathen antiquity.<sup>132</sup>

This consideration of God in abstraction from God's tri-unity was not based upon revelation, and was therefore the consideration of the being and attributes not of God but of an idol, even though the information that this God was also triune was later added. Barth himself set forth his doctrine of the Trinity well before he came to the doctrine of God proper (i.e., the doctrine of God's nature and attributes<sup>133</sup>) in both the *CD* and the *GD*,<sup>134</sup> and urged throughout the doctrine of God proper (in both works) that it not be forgotten that the God under discussion was the Triune God.<sup>135</sup> It was because God's unity or simplicity was for Barth never to be discussed in abstraction from God's triunity<sup>136</sup> that Christianity could not be placed, alongside other religions, under the general heading of 'monotheism,'<sup>137</sup> and that those other non-Trinitarian monotheistic religions had, for Barth, to be judged as idolatrous from the perspective of Christian revelation.<sup>138</sup> Non-Trinitarian monotheism could be, for Barth, only 'the

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<sup>132</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 288.

<sup>133</sup> The terminology 'doctrine of God proper' is used here to denote Barth's doctrine of the nature and attributes of God even though te Velde (*Paths Beyond Tracing Out*, 364) is undoubtedly right that this has the potential to be misleading, because Barth would have affirmed that the doctrine of the Trinity was just as much a part of the doctrine of God proper as the doctrine of God's nature and attributes.

<sup>134</sup> In the *GD*, the doctrine of the Trinity is set forth in §5, while the doctrine of God proper is not addressed until §§16-17. In the *CD*, the doctrine of the Trinity is set forth in the *CD* I/1, §§9-12, while the doctrine of God proper is not addressed until the *CD* II/1, §§28-31.

<sup>135</sup> Barth, *GD*, 368, 370; *CD* II/1, 261, 265, 268, 288, 303, 323-324, 350.

<sup>136</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 329-330.

<sup>137</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 448-489.

<sup>138</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 448.

religious glorification of the number ‘one,’ the absolutising of the idea of uniqueness...’<sup>139</sup>

### 3.3.4 The doctrine of God must be ‘realistic’ if it is to avoid idolatry

Barth, further, believed that the doctrine of God had to be *realistic* when it came to the status of the divine attributes if idolatry were to be avoided. One aspect of ‘realism,’ as a traditional position within the doctrine of God, is the affirmation that the divine attributes in some sense objectively inhere in the divine nature. It has as its counter-position nominalism, understood narrowly: the view that divine attributes are merely names predicated of God without there existing a corresponding reality in the divine essence. If the nominalist position runs the risk of denying genuine knowledge of God, the realist position runs the risk of denying divine simplicity, i.e., the traditionally accepted claim that divine essence is without parts, composition, or distinctions (i.e., multiplicity). The solution for many realists who desired to maintain the doctrine of divine simplicity, e.g., Thomas, was to argue that the divine attributes do truly correspond to the reality of the divine essence, but each to the *whole* of the divine essence (and thus that each divine attribute is ultimately, in God, identical to all the others).<sup>140</sup> Thus, in the end, realists like Thomas ultimately affirmed simplicity, but not multiplicity, in the divine essence.<sup>141</sup>

Barth also held a realistic doctrine of God, i.e., one in which the perfections of God are understood to truly inhere in God’s being, as seen in his general discussion of

<sup>139</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 448. See also *CD* II/1, 329.

<sup>140</sup> Aquinas, *ST*, I, 13, 4.

<sup>141</sup> Aquinas, *ST*, I, 3,7; I, 28, 3.

the divine attributes in §29 of the *CD*. The affirmation of this kind of realism was, for Barth, an implication of the affirmation of the realism of revelation more broadly, i.e., of the idea that God is truly, in God's immanent being, as God is known to be in God's revelation:

...it is impossible to have knowledge of a divine perfection without having knowledge of God Himself – knowledge of the triune God who loves in freedom. For as the triune God, both in regard to His revelation and to His being in itself, He exists in these perfections, and these perfections again exist in Him and only in Him as the One who, both in His revelation and in eternity, is the same.<sup>142</sup>

If God is perceived in God's revelation to exist in a multiplicity of attributes, then such a multiplicity of attributes must be affirmed as inhering within the immanent being of God.<sup>143</sup> Realism in the broad sense, the realism of revelation, required the affirmation of realism in this narrower sense, and (by Barth's logic) both were required if idolatry was to be avoided. The alternative, the assertion that the perfections in which God is known do not actually inhere in God's essence, would mean that God is not in himself as God is known to be in revelation, which would, in turn, entail the denial of revelation as the source of one's doctrine of God and, necessarily, its replacement with that which was not revelation. Nominalistic doctrines of God (whether medieval or modern) were, for Barth, idolatrous in precisely this way: 'The whole wrongheadedness of the nominalistic treatment of the doctrine of attributes becomes apparent in [the] attempt of Schleiermacher and Schweizer. What is found is just what is sought, but only what is

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<sup>142</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 323-324.

<sup>143</sup> Though Price (*Letters of the Divine Word*, 57-58) rightly notes that Barth inconsistently and, at times, unsatisfactorily, described the way in which the attributes of God known in revelation were to be understood as descriptive of God's immanent being.

sought, viz., the gigantic reflections or projections of the human religious consciousness.’<sup>144</sup>

Barth, by the time of the *CD II/1*,<sup>145</sup> also criticised as idolatrous what he called the ‘semi-nominalistic’ doctrines of God of scholastic and Protestant orthodox ‘realism’ – for Barth did not believe that these older forms of realism were realistic enough.<sup>146</sup> This was because, as described above, they upheld the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity by finally denying genuine multiplicity within the divine essence, affirming instead that it was ultimately proper only to speak of the simplicity of the divine essence.<sup>147</sup> Barth wrote that, ‘We must reject out of hand the semi-nominalistic reservation that in the last resort we can speak of the *proprietas Dei* only *improprie*, that the most characteristic inner being of God is a *simplicitas* which is to be understood undialectically.’<sup>148</sup> Accepting semi-nominalism meant, for Barth, a rejection of revelational realism and the denial and idolatrous replacement of revelation as the source and norm of the doctrine of God, since revelation communicated that a genuine multiplicity of perfections inhered in the divine essence.<sup>149</sup> It entailed, objectively, the description of ‘a God who is extremely lofty in His pure simplicity but also quite empty

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<sup>144</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 339. See also Barth, *GD*, 378-379; *CD II/1*, 329 and 3.1.1 of the present work.

<sup>145</sup> In the *CD II/1*, Barth expresses opposition to the ‘semi-nominalism’ of the older orthodoxy, while in the doctrine of God in the *GD* he does not express this kind of opposition to the older doctrines of God. See, for example, Barth’s apparent agreement with the approach of Quenstedt in the *GD*, 380, and compare with his accusation that Quenstedt’s approach was semi-nominalistic and idolatrous in the *CD II/1*, 327-329. It is likely (though it is a bit difficult to determine, because as will be seen both presentations are a bit confused and perhaps even self-contradictory) that the change between the *GD* and the *CD II/1* was merely a change in Barth’s evaluation of ‘the older theology,’ rather than a change in his own approach to questions of God’s unity and multiplicity.

<sup>146</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 333-334.

<sup>147</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 333.

<sup>148</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 333.

<sup>149</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 322.

and unreal.’<sup>150</sup> In particular, Barth held that, at the point at which semi-nominalists denied multiplicity in God for the sake of affirming divine simplicity, revelation was replaced by Hellenistic metaphysics, reflection upon ‘the platonic-aristotelian idea of being.’<sup>151</sup> Correspondingly, their doctrines of God ‘falsely defined the being of God,’<sup>152</sup> and had not God but a god as the object of their description.

Largely for historical reasons, nominalism and semi-nominalism (and its associated denial of divine multiplicity) were Barth’s main opponents in the *CD* §29, but it is clear that, if he criticised them as idolatrous, he would have had to say much the same about *abstract* realism.<sup>153</sup> Abstract realism here is non-theological realism, a position founded not upon the desire to testify to and uphold the broader realism of revelation, but rather upon an independent desire to uphold an alien principle of realism or divine multiplicity.<sup>154</sup> Barth believed that a principle within theology could be detected as alien, i.e., as not derived from revelation, when it violated others statements which had to be made in faithful reflection upon revelation (see 3.3.6 below). Barth believed, further, that simplicity did in fact have to be predicated of God in faithfulness to revelation.<sup>155</sup> Thus one example of an abstract realism would be one that entailed a contradiction of the simplicity of God (just as the axiom that God is simple could only be a foreign, abstract principle if it was held to in such a way that it contradicted what

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<sup>150</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 333.

<sup>151</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 334.

<sup>152</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 335.

<sup>153</sup> ‘Abstract realism’ is not Barth’s term, but rather a term used by Asbill (*The Freedom of God*, 71) to describe a reality which Barth himself clearly and explicitly rejected (see Barth, *CD* II/1, 13, 325-326).

<sup>154</sup> Barth, *GD*, 379; *CD* II/1, 330-335; Asbill, *The Freedom of God*, 71; Price, *Letters of the Divine Word*, 36.

<sup>155</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 333. See also pp. 327, 442-446.

had to be said about God's multiplicity).<sup>156</sup> Once again, abstract realism – including any realism which contradicted the divine simplicity and unity – would mean the attempt to speak of God apart from reflection upon Jesus Christ, and thus the idolatrous, speculative substitution of Jesus Christ with a foreign principle.

Barth himself attempted to avoid not only nominalism and semi-nominalism (which denied multiplicity in God because of a commitment to an abstract principle of simplicity), but also the denial of the genuine simplicity of God which stemmed from an abstract realism by holding, at least in his formal statements, that the particular way in which God is simple is not incompatible with multiplicity, and that the particular way in which there are a multiplicity of attributes in God is not incompatible with the divine simplicity: 'We can only accept and interpret God's *simplicitas* and *multiplicitas* in such a way as to imply that they are not mutually exclusive but inclusive, or rather that they are both included in God Himself.'<sup>157</sup> Whether Barth was actually able to truly and coherently affirm both multiplicity and simplicity in God in the *CD II/1* materially is certainly debatable.<sup>158</sup> The most important point, for present purposes, however, is that whatever Barth's own actual practice, he believed in theory that in revelation there was seen to be a tension between divine simplicity and the multiplicity of the divine attributes which could not be resolved in favour of one side at the expense of the other.

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<sup>156</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 331.

<sup>157</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 333; see also p. 331.

<sup>158</sup> Te Velde (*Paths Beyond Tracing Out*, 373) is likely correct in saying that, though Barth clearly thought otherwise, the way in which he qualifies his assertions of God's multiplicity causes his treatment of the subject to be very much within the stream of thought of Protestant orthodoxy and its 'semi-nominalism.' In the end, for Barth, God *is* each of God's perfections, and each of his perfections are therefore identical to all of the others. (*GD*, 380; *CD II/1*, 333) Barth explicitly denied that only simplicity can be properly predicated of God, and multiplicity only improperly. (*CD II/1*, 333) He wanted, rather, to hold the simplicity and multiplicity in God together in dialectical tension. In actual practice, however, he tended in both the *GD* and the *CD II/1* to resolve that tension in favour of the divine simplicity. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, in spite of Barth's obvious efforts to differentiate his thinking from that of 'semi-nominalism,' he was unable to do so.

Instead, theological realism (which was itself demanded by revelation) demanded the upholding both sides of that tension. The alternative could only have its source in a looking away from revelation, and could thus only be an act of disobedience to revelation and of idolatry.

3.3.5 The doctrine of God must allow revelation to alter the meaning of its terms if it is to avoid idolatry

If the doctrine of God was to correspond to revelation and avoid idolatry, Barth believed it necessary not only to allow revelation and Scripture to select the terms and concepts to be used within the doctrine of God (and their arrangement), but also to allow revelation to determine (i.e., alter) the meaning of the terms which were employed.<sup>159</sup>

All those terms which could be used within the doctrine of God possessed ‘regular’ meanings, i.e., meanings which they possessed when used in the description of created reality. The utilisation of terms understood in their regular sense to describe God could only be an act of idolatry, because their utilisation in this way could not be act of faithful reflection upon, or, therefore, correspondence to, revelation. On the contrary, it could only be act of disobedience to revelation (i.e., subjective idolatry), which could only mean that the god described by them was not God, but an idol.

Of course, Barth did not deny that even when the theologian allows revelation to alter the meaning of the terms used within the doctrine of God, those terms *remain* unable to describe God in their own power. Even then, they could not conform to revelation in the absolute sense, and, thus, intrinsically, they described that which was

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<sup>159</sup> Barth’s idea that all concepts must be given their content by reference to Jesus Christ is labelled ‘particularism’ by Hunsinger. (*How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 32-35) The argument here is that particularism within the doctrine of God was for Barth, among other things, a way of avoiding idolatry.

not God. Nevertheless, when their meanings were altered properly by revelation, they *corresponded* to revelation in the way possible within sinful human thinking and speaking. One could thus hope that by God's grace, they would actually describe God objectively.

Barth's conviction that terms must, within the doctrine of God, be determined as to their meaning by revelation if one is to avoid idolatry was implicit throughout his doctrines of God in both the *GD* and the *CD*. An outstanding example of its outworking may be seen in consideration of Barth's discussion of the meaning of the term 'love' as it applies to God in the *CD* II/1, §28. Barth explained therein that when the term 'love' is utilised as part of the attempt to describe God's nature, one must not assume that one knows what that term means from any source other than revelation itself: 'If as our first step we take up the concept of love, it is not because we think that somehow we already know generally what love is as the content of an action which is genuinely good, and that on the basis of this knowledge we can equate God with this content.'<sup>160</sup> It must rather be 'mediated and clarified from God's being and therefore from God's act what the love is which can and must be legitimately identified with God.'<sup>161</sup> That the alternative – the use of terms with their 'regular' or 'general' meaning within the doctrine of God – constituted idolatry in Barth's thinking can be seen with particular clarity through an analysis of Barth's related discussion of 'grace in general'<sup>162</sup>; and his discussion of 'abstractly understood transcendence' reveals this same fact, as he alludes that its predication of God means idolatrous projection *à la* Feuerbach:

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<sup>160</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 276. Cf. Barth, *CD* II/1, 352.

<sup>161</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 276.

<sup>162</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 357.

...if we view the being of God in abstractly understood transcendence...then we have substituted for the biblical idea of God an idea which is easily recognizable as the highest idea conceivable to man. For what is the idea of the infinite, the unconditioned or the absolute but the idea of our own limits, which suggest to us both our transcendent goal and origin, but which in themselves can be understood only as our limits and therefore as the negation, the non-being of all that we are? If we interpret this our non-being as pointing to true being, if we make our limits the object of apotheosis, we are in no sense testifying to God...We are expressing the deep appreciation and esteem we feel for this our goal and origin, and for our own ideal image, carefully purged of all imperfection...<sup>163</sup>

3.3.6 The doctrine of God must not allow any of its terms or concepts to be thought in abstraction from the others if it is to avoid idolatry

By the time of the *CD II/1*, Barth believed that, in order to safeguard one's doctrine of God against idolatry, one had to make predications of God (and understand each of God's predicates) in such a way that each harmonised with all the others which had to be made in the act of faithful reflection upon revelation – or at least such that they did not contradict them. Within the *GD*, Barth showed a greater willingness to allow predications of God to stand in what appeared to be contradiction to each other without attempting harmonisation. For example, of the two determinants of God's nature, personality and aseity, Barth wrote there that 'we ourselves cannot combine aseity and personality,'<sup>164</sup> and spoke of the need to maintain 'paradox' within the doctrine of God.<sup>165</sup> By the time of the *CD II/1*, however, Barth insisted upon the need to understand all predications of God such that they harmonised with all of the others, and such that their meaning was, in this sense, controlled by the others. If one were to make

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<sup>163</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 303-304. Barth is suggesting that the employment of such a concept within the doctrine of God makes one vulnerable to Feuerbach (though he does not mention the latter by name here).

<sup>164</sup> Barth, *GD*, 371-372.

<sup>165</sup> Barth, *GD*, 373-374.

a predication of God which conflicted with other predications of God which had to be made in the act of faithful reflection upon revelation, that first predication would necessarily *not be* an act of faithful reflection upon revelation, and the making of it would thus be an act of subjective (and, therefore, also objective) idolatry. A hidden premise in this line of thinking is that the ectypal knowledge of God created in the human mind by revelation and faithful reflection upon it is *rational*, at least in the sense that it is not self-contradictory.

Barth's concern to understand predications of God such that they harmonise with all others, and to thereby avoid idolatry, is visible in the way in which he paired certain predicates of God with other, very different, and sometimes apparently opposite, ones, and sought to define each with reference to the other. For example, in Barth's discussion of the divine love and the divine freedom, he wrote that, 'Only 'in [God's] freedom [is God's loving] the divine loving. But we must also say, conversely, that only in this divine loving is the freedom described by us divine freedom.'<sup>166</sup> The alternative – understanding divine freedom in abstraction from and in a way that contradicts the divine love, or *vice versa* – was, for Barth, idolatry: 'If we abstract the love of God and therefore the purpose of God, however circumspect we may be, we describe only a world-principle.'<sup>167</sup> Or again, if one asserts the simplicity of God in such a way that it contradicts the divine tri-unity, or even simply in such a way that it is not understood in light of the divine tri-unity (and *vice versa*), then one commits idolatry; when this was done in the past, 'the idea of the divine simplicity was necessarily exalted to the all-

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<sup>166</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 321.

<sup>167</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 321.

controlling principle, the idol...'<sup>168</sup> To avoid idolatry, '[one] can only accept and interpret God's *simplicitas* and *multiplicitas* in such a way as to imply that they are not mutually exclusive but inclusive, or rather that they are both included in God Himself.'<sup>169</sup>

3.3.7 The theologian must be conscious of the relativity of his or her doctrine of God if he or she is to avoid idolatry

Even after abiding by these foregoing directives, if the theologian is to avoid idolatry within his or her doctrine of God, he or she must, according to Barth, be conscious of the intrinsic falsity and relativity of his or her own formulations therein and, therefore, of his or her need for God's grace. Revelation itself judges all human attempts to describe God as intrinsically idolatrous; thus, if the theologian is to formulate the doctrine of God in obedient correspondence to revelation, he or she must do so while confessing that his or her attempts are intrinsically idolatrous, relative, and dependent upon grace. Barth suggested this in his 1926 lectures on Feuerbach: 'There is a test of whether or not we stand on this base [that of revelation], of whether we are able to admit to Feuerbach that he was right...'<sup>170</sup>; in his 1927 essay, 'Fate and Idea in Theology': 'To determine whether a particular theology has as its object merely a deified concept or the living God, the first criterion might be whether this theology is conscious of its own relativity'<sup>171</sup>; and again in the *CD II/1*:

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<sup>168</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 329. See also the various pairings of the divine perfections in the *CD II/1*, §§30-31.

<sup>169</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 333; see also p. 331.

<sup>170</sup> Barth, 'Feuerbach,' in *T&C*, 236-237.

<sup>171</sup> Barth, 'Fate and Idea in Theology,' 58-59.

When we are obedient, according to our capacity and even our incapacity, we have the promise that God Himself will acknowledge our obedience in spite of our capacity or even incapacity, and this means that He will confer upon our viewing, conceiving and speaking His own veracity. *The obedience to the grace of God in which man acknowledges that he is entirely wrong, thus acknowledging that God alone is entirely right, is the obedience which has this promise.*<sup>172</sup>

And yet again in that same volume:

The humility which is not only demanded but induced by the veracity of [God's] revelation can certainly allow us to repeat our way, but it will accompany any such repetition with the warning and summons that, whether in repetition or in a new form of our work [of attempting to view, conceive and speak of God], we must reach out and explore for its object, i.e., for the grace of His revelation, from which alone it can ever become and be true.<sup>173</sup>

For the doctrine of God to obey revelation and thereby avoid being only idolatrous is for it to admit that it is intrinsically idolatrous.

Throughout his doctrines of God in both the *GD* and the *CD* Barth emphasised the relativity of his own proposals and the need for God's grace if they were to truly describe God. The doctrine of God is not given in finished form, according to Barth, once and for all, whether in Scripture or anywhere else; rather, one's choice and grouping of concepts to be predicated of God as God's perfections, 'can always have the basic character only of a trial and proposal.'<sup>174</sup> And, once such a proposal is made, no matter what relative advantages it may have over other such proposals, it is always the case that, 'the veracity of our knowledge of God is the veracity of his revelation.'<sup>175</sup> The making of these admissions and ones like them within the doctrine of God was not merely an expression of humility, but rather also an attempt on Barth's part to

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<sup>172</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 213. Emphasis added.

<sup>173</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 211-212.

<sup>174</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 352.

<sup>175</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 209.

correspond to revelation, and to thereby avoid idolatry – in this case, the idolisation of his doctrine of God itself.

### 3.3.8 Conclusion to directives for avoiding idolatry within the doctrine of God

The ways mentioned above in which Barth believed the doctrine of God must be formulated if idolatry were to be avoided is by no means comprehensive. The logic of Barth's thinking is such that *any* failure to correspond to revelation (and to obey the Bible as its authoritative testimony) within the doctrine of God is an act of idolatry. The specific ways in which the doctrine of God may veer off course into idolatry, and the routes which the doctrine of God must avoid if it is to avoid idolatry, are therefore infinite. The directives discussed above that Barth believed the doctrine of God must adhere to if idolatry is to be avoided are ones the adherence to which were particularly important for the development of Barth's own theology, and the violation of which he explicitly linked to idolatry.

### **3.4 Idolatry and the Debate over Election**

In recent years, there has been a great deal of debate on the question of how best to interpret Barth's mature doctrine of election, the most complete expression of which is found in the *CD* II/2, § 32-33. In particular, the debate has focussed upon the question of whether or not Barth's doctrine of election implies that God determined Godself to be triune in or as a result of God's act of self-election to be for human beings in Jesus Christ. Those who have answered in the negative have been called traditionalists, and those who have answered in the affirmative, revisionists.<sup>176</sup> Nothing like a

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<sup>176</sup> See George Hunsinger, *Reading Barth with Charity: A Hermeneutical Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), xi. The debate has been undertaken through an assortment of essays and books.

comprehensive interpretation of Barth on this and related questions can be attempted here. They are difficult questions to which no easy answer may be given, not least because significant textual evidence can be marshalled to support both positions. Nevertheless, this debate intersects with the discussion of idolatry within Barth, in that the question of what constituted ‘speculation’ in Barth is of great importance to it. It is from this angle only that these questions will be examined here.

Barth’s chief negative concern in his mature doctrine of election, as presented in the *CD II/2*, was to avoid speculation, and, therefore idolatry.<sup>177</sup> His quarrel with the main position which he sought to set his doctrine of election over and against, that of classical reformed theologians beginning with Calvin, for example, was essentially that

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Traditionalists understand God’s Trinitarian being to be logically prior to God’s election in Barth, while revisionists understand God’s act of election to be logically prior to, and determinative of, God’s Trinitarian being. Representatives of the ‘traditionalist’ position (with some of their relevant works cited) include George Hunsinger (‘Election and the Trinity: Twenty-five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth,’ in *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, edited by Michael T. Dempsey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 91-114; *Reading Barth with Charity*), Molnar (‘Can the Electing God be God without Us? Some Implications of Bruce McCormack’s Understanding of Barth’s Doctrine of Election for the Doctrine of the Trinity,’ in *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, edited by Michael T. Dempsey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity* (London: T&T Clark, 2002); *Faith, Freedom and the Spirit*), Edwin Chr. van Driel (‘Karl Barth on the Eternal Existence of Jesus Christ,’ *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60, 1 (2007): 45-61), Christopher R.J. Holmes (‘The Theological Function of the Doctrine of the Divine Attributes and the Divine Glory, with Special Reference to Karl Barth and his Reading of the Protestant Orthodox,’ *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61, 2 (2008): 217-218), Thompson, (‘On the Trinity,’ 25), Asbill (*The Freedom of God*). Representatives of the ‘revisionist’ position include Bruce McCormack (‘Grace and Being: The Role of God’s Gracious Election in Karl Barth’s Theological Ontology,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 92-110; ‘Processions and Missions: A Point of Convergence between Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth,’ in *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: An Unofficial Catholic-Protestant Dialogue*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack and Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013); ‘Seek God’; ‘The Actuality of God’), Jones (*THC*, 66), Matthias Gockel (*Barth and Schleiermacher on the Doctrine of Election: A Systematic-Theological Comparison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)) and Paul Nimmo (*Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Barth’s Ethical Vision* (London: T&T Clark, 2007)).

<sup>177</sup> As the early pages (e.g., 3-24) of the *CD II/2* indicate. It was because he believed that, e.g., the traditional doctrine of the *decretum absolutum* was speculative, i.e., not derived solely from reflection upon Jesus Christ, that he rejected it. Although this was Barth’s chief negative concern, McCormack (‘Grace and Being,’ 95-96) and Stanley (*PM*, 215-216) are right in claiming that Barth’s aim was not *merely* to avoid speculation; indeed, Barth’s ultimate aim is never a negative one. And though McCormack is right on this point, Barth’s texts do not substantiate his assertion (‘Grace and Being,’ 97-98) that ontological issues were at the heart of his critique of the doctrine of election of Calvin and the classical, reformed tradition more broadly. His chief negative, polemical concern was speculation, and, as a consequence, idolatry, not the failure to make election determinative for divine ontology.

it ought to have been ‘less speculative and more in accordance with the biblical testimony.’<sup>178</sup> Thus, as Hunsinger notes, the question as to what (would have) counted for Barth as speculation is important to understanding his intentions in his doctrine of election.<sup>179</sup> And, indeed, this has been a dividing line in the interpretative debate. McCormack, for example, believes that the traditionalist assertion that Barth held that God would have been triune even apart from the economy amounts to speculation.<sup>180</sup> Hunsinger himself argues that it is the ‘revisionist’ position of McCormack and others that Barth would have seen as speculative, because it implies the existence of a ‘pre-trinitarian’ god, i.e., a god who is other than God is in God’s revelation.<sup>181</sup> McCormack’s interpretation of Barth is safe-guarded from this specific line of critique, because there was never, according to him, a pre-trinitarian god since the priority of election over Trinity is purely logical, and not at all temporal.<sup>182</sup>

Which position, then – the traditionalist or the revisionist – would have constituted ‘speculation’ for Barth? There is no explicit, absolutely conclusive, piece of textual evidence. There is perhaps an argument to be made that both would have. Neither the counter-factual statement of the traditionalists (that God *would have* been triune even apart from the economy) nor the assertions of the revisionists concerning the logical ordering of election and Trinity can be directly derived from reflection upon

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<sup>178</sup> Barth, *CD* II/2, 18. See also pp. 59-60, 69.

<sup>179</sup> Hunsinger, *Reading Barth with Charity*, 33.

<sup>180</sup> McCormack, ‘Seek God,’ 76; ‘Grace and Being,’ 101-102; Hunsinger, *Reading Barth with Charity*, 35.

<sup>181</sup> Hunsinger, *Reading Barth with Charity*, 36. Molnar (‘Without us?’, 81) makes a similar judgment.

<sup>182</sup> McCormack, ‘Grace and Being,’ 101; ‘Processions and Missions,’ 211.

Jesus Christ. It is possible, therefore, that Barth would have considered *both* positions speculative, and, therefore, either consciously or unconsciously chosen to take neither.

It is more likely, however, that Barth would have understood the revisionist position to be speculative and not the traditionalist one – though not for the precise reasons Hunsinger suggests.<sup>183</sup> While neither position is directly demanded by revelation, reflection upon revelation must be rational, and it seems to be the case for Barth, that, e.g., as Molnar convincingly argues, the fact that God is free *is* known directly in revelation,<sup>184</sup> and that faithful testimony to that freedom rationally demands the upholding of a more traditional assertion of God’s aseity, and therefore the counter-factual assertion that God would have been the same God without creation.<sup>185</sup> God ‘loves us and the world as He who would still be the One who loves without us and without the world; as He, therefore, who needs no other to form the prior ground of His existence as the One who loves and as God.’<sup>186</sup> It is not difficult to see how an assertion of the traditional doctrine of aseity (in both its positive and negative aspects) could be a faithful (second-order) reflection upon revelation for Barth – and thus non-speculative.<sup>187</sup> On the other hand, there simply does not seem to be a clear reason why

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<sup>183</sup> Not, that is, because it is like Protestant liberalism in that it posits the actual existence of a ‘God beyond God’ (*Reading Barth with Charity*, 36) or is modalistic (*Reading Barth with Charity*, 37).

<sup>184</sup> In addition to ‘freedom’ being one of two determinants of God’s being in the *CD* II/1, Barth emphasises God’s freedom in the first paragraph (32) of the *CD* II/2; see, e.g., pp. 5, 9-11, 19, 21-30.

<sup>185</sup> Paul Molnar, ‘The Trinity, Election, and God’s Ontological Freedom: A Response to Kevin W. Hector,’ in *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, ed. Michael T. Dempsey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); ‘Without us?’. Similarly, Justin Stratis (‘Speculating about Divinity? God’s Immanent Life and Actualistic Ontology,’ *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, 1 (2010): 29-32) argues that faithful reflection upon the love of God known in revelation requires the claim that God’s intra-Trinitarian love precedes election, and thus that counter-factual statements can be the product not of abstract speculation, but of true reflection upon revelation.

<sup>186</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 280.

<sup>187</sup> Of course, McCormack would disagree that predicating ‘freedom’ of God means necessarily the denial of his own proposals, in favour of a traditional assertion of God’s aseity. His particular way of

revelation demands (directly or indirectly) the revisionist claim that election precedes Trinity,<sup>188</sup> and, thus, why Barth would not have considered it speculative.<sup>189</sup>

Approaching the debate only from this angle, the traditionalist interpretation of Barth is to be preferred over against the revisionist one.

### **3.5 Evaluation and Critique**

In some cases, Barth's material formulations within the doctrine of God did not adhere to his own directives for the avoidance of idolatry, and thus, by his own standard, participated in it.

A consideration of the issue of the 'spiritualisation' of the corporeal concepts which the Bible uses to describe God provides an example. It has already been recounted that, because of Barth's commitment to Scripture as the source and norm of the doctrine of God, he stood in his formal statements against the majority of the

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understanding what 'freedom' means when it is applied to God, such that it does not contradict his proposals, whether proper or not in itself, is an inadequate representation of Barth. In particular, McCormack's divine freedom seems to be freedom for, and hardly at all freedom *from*, creation. ('Processions and Missions,' 123-124) Hector, too, downplays to a great degree the fact that Barth wanted to maintain that God is free *from* creation. (Kevin Hector, 'God's Triunity and Self-Determination: A Conversation with Karl Barth, Bruce McCormack, and Paul Molnar,' in *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, ed. Michael T. Dempsey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 41) For Barth, God's freedom is *both* freedom *from* and freedom *for* creation (*CD II/1*, 301-303; see also Molnar, 'Trinity, Election,' 62).

<sup>188</sup> It is not the case, for example, that one must claim that the act of election has logical precedence over God's being triune in order to faithfully uphold the claim that God is who God in God's revelation. Hector aptly summarises McCormack's thinking as follows ('God's Triunity,' 32):

Because Christ reveals God, and because we see in Christ that God is God-with-us, we must conclude that, from all eternity, God determined to be God-with-us. 'The electing God', McCormack argues, 'is not an unknown "x". He is a God whose very being – already in eternity – is determined, defined, by what he reveals himself to be in Christ.' [McCormack, 'Grace and Being', p. 97.] If God reveals Godself, then we cannot speculate about a 'God behind God', a *deus absconditus*; we must trust that God is eternally who God reveals Godself to be.

It is, however, not true that to deny that God's acts in Jesus Christ in the economy *determine* the being of God in eternity is to introduce a *deus absconditus*. All that is needed to avoid such is the assertion that God does not reveal himself in Jesus Christ either partially or to be other than God is in eternity.

<sup>189</sup> The textual evidence seems, on the whole, to support this line of thinking (even in spite of ambiguity), especially since McCormack's thesis that Barth's thinking on the topic of theological ontology in general, and the ontological implications of election in particular, underwent a great deal of development between the *CD II/1* and the *CD II/2* is problematic both textually and historically.

theological tradition and rejected as idolatrous the procedure of spiritualising biblical corporeal concepts within that doctrine. Unfortunately, these formal convictions made very little impact on his own material explication of the doctrine of God. For Barth to have avoided speculation and idolatry, by his own standards, he would have had to have spent at least some time analysing God's corporeal predicates and utilising them in description of God. In actual fact, outside of his formal assertions that they ought not be arbitrarily spiritualised or neglected, he almost completely neglected them himself.

The theologian will need to pay more attention to the corporeal concepts the Bible uses to describe God within his or her own doctrine of God than Barth himself did if he or she is to avoid the charges of speculation and idolatry. Since the Bible is replete with the use of corporeal concepts in its description of God, the theologian must also utilise them within the doctrine of God if he or she is to be able to claim that his or her doctrine is not speculative, but, rather ultimately derived from revelation and Scripture *alone*, and not from a foreign spiritualism – i.e., an *a priori* idea, foreign to Scripture, that spiritual concepts are to be preferred for the description of God over material, corporeal concepts. This foreign spiritualism is idolatrous because, at the level of theological method, it is speculative; it takes the place of revelation, at a key point, as the source and norm of theology. Barth rightly denied, on the formal level, that theology should utilise a foreign principle of spiritualisation within the doctrine of God, but his material neglect of biblical corporeal anthropomorphisms within his own doctrine of God signals an implicit acceptance of such a principle.

Had Barth followed his own directive for the avoidance of idolatry, namely, that the doctrine of God must be derived from revelation and Scripture, and not, therefore, neglected corporeal anthropomorphisms, his doctrine of God would look much different

than it in fact does. Most obviously, it would have included the sustained analysis and interpretation of biblical, corporeal predicates of God, and the denial of the traditional doctrine of the incorporeality of God. Since the traditional doctrine of God's incorporeality is tightly intertwined with other doctrines within the doctrine of God, it would likely have affected Barth's treatment of those other doctrines as well. Above all, the traditional doctrine of divine incorporeality is interwoven with the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity, i.e., the assertion of the lack of composition, parts, or distinctions within God. The rejection of the traditional doctrine of divine incorporeality, in favour of the affirmation of God's corporeality, would have problematised the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity. Depending upon how, precisely, the corporeality of God was understood, it could have meant the necessity of leaving behind or substantially revising that doctrine. Even if it did not, it would have had to have been specified how God's corporeality was to be understood such that the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity was not contradicted by it. In actual fact, however, Barth largely accepted the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity without addressing the potential problems that the divine corporeality raises for it.<sup>190</sup>

Furthermore, Barth's criticisms of certain moves within the doctrine of God as idolatrous should not be accepted. Examples include his criticism of the affirmation of the divine *apatheia* and of the denial of eternal functional subordination within the Trinity as instances of idolatry. These criticisms were evoked by a change in Barth's doctrines of revelation and Christology as described above. Barth's inclusion of the human nature of Jesus within the content of revelation by the time of the *CD IV/1*

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<sup>190</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 447.

represented an advance over his earlier, pneumatocentric (in McCormack's sense<sup>191</sup>) theology in that it gave a more satisfying account of the uniqueness of the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth. Yet, surely, if the Creator-creature distinction is to be preserved, it must be affirmed that the way that Jesus reveals God according to his human nature differs infinitely from the way in which Jesus reveals God according to his divine nature: according to the former, indirectly and analogously; according to the latter, directly.

The problem with Barth's assertion of eternal subordination within the immanent Trinity and of divine suffering, and his charge of idolatry against those who deny the same, is that they seem to be based logically upon a closing of the gap between the ways in which Christ's two natures reveal God's being. Barth's thinking seems to be that since Jesus, in his earthly, human life, is seen to be subordinate to the Father, and since Jesus' earthly, human life is *also* revelatory, it is a speculative, and therefore idolatrous, denial of revelation to deny subordination within the immanent Trinity. But this assumes that the observable, human nature of Jesus reveals God in such a way that it can and must, in all its aspects, be read quite directly back into the immanent Trinity.

This assumption is highly problematic. There are aspects of Jesus' life which pertain directly only to his human nature, and which cannot be read back into the eternal Trinity. If the perception of subordination to the Father in the human life of Jesus necessitates the assertion of an eternal subordination of the Son to Father, then why would not the fact that Jesus of Nazareth ate fish (Luke 2.42-43) necessitate the assertion that from all eternity there has been fish-eating within the Trinity? Or, again, if

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<sup>191</sup> McCormack argues that Barth's theology, up until the time of the *CD II/2*, was not truly christocentric, though it was christological, but rather pneumatocentric. What he means by this is that while the logic of the incarnation undergirded, for Barth, all revelation, Barth problematically focussed more upon the event of revelation which occurs in an ongoing fashion than the historical events of the life of Jesus. (McCormack, *KBCRDT*, 328)

it is idolatrous to deny eternal subordination and suffering to the eternal Godhead because in Jesus' earthly life there is seen to be subordination to the Father and suffering, then why would it not be idolatrous to affirm that God does not grow tired (as the Bible does; Is. 40.28) – given the fact that Jesus grew tired (John 4.6)? One cannot and should not consistently apply the principle that each event within the life of Jesus reveals so directly something within the life of the immanent Trinity. There are thus no *a priori* grounds for arguing that a refusal to read a particular event within the historical life of Jesus back into the immanent Trinity is an idolatrous denial of revelation. Barth's apparent argument for castigating the denial of subordination and suffering within the Trinity as idolatrous thus cannot stand. It is not speculative to claim that certain aspects of or events within the human life of Jesus cannot be in any direct way read back into the life of the Trinity (like suffering or subordination), unless one begins with the highly questionable presupposition that the human nature of Jesus reveals the immanent life of God quite directly.<sup>192</sup>

The most basic concerns which drove Barth's affirmation of divine subordination and suffering and the levelling of his idolatry critique against those who denied them – the concerns to uphold the realism of revelation and the concern to affirm that Jesus' human nature is also revelatory – are in themselves legitimate. But they should be affirmed in a way that does not necessitate the direct reading of the events of the earthly life of Jesus into the immanent Trinity; in other words, it should be held that the events of Jesus' earthly life reveal God's immanent being by perfect human

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<sup>192</sup> Berkouwer (*TTG*, 302-305) argues to the effect that Barth's reading of events of the life of Jesus of Nazareth back into the life of the Trinity is itself speculative (in Barth's sense) – the exact opposite of Barth's position. The truth is that which one is speculative in Barth's sense – the reading of the events of the life of Jesus of Nazareth back into the immanent life of God, or the abstention from that same procedure – depends wholly on the underlying issue of whether, and in what sense, one understands the human nature of Jesus to be revelatory.

correspondence to it, and, therefore, indirectly and/or analogically. For example, even given Barth's most basic convictions concerning the realism of revelation and the revelatory nature of Jesus' observable, human history, it is not necessary to affirm that because Jesus suffered there must also be suffering in God. It may, rather, be affirmed that the suffering of Jesus reveals the immanent being of God both indirectly and analogically by saying something like the following: the suffering of Jesus according to his human nature is the pre-eminent example of human love, which corresponds (analogically) to the love of God. There would thus be a relationship of positive correspondence between Jesus' historical, human life and the suffering that took place within it and the immanent being of God, such that former is understood to reveal the latter. There would thus be no idolatrous denial of revelation. But the indirectness of this relationship and the manner of this revealing would mean it is unnecessary to affirm suffering in God, and inappropriate to, *a priori*, call the denial of suffering in God idolatrous.

A further critique must be levelled against Barth's understanding of idolatry within the doctrine of God. As described above, Barth believed that every doctrine of God was, strictly speaking, completely idolatrous intrinsically. Since the theologian could not possess revelation such that it could be utilised as the source of his or her doctrine of God, it had another source (even if that source was, as it should be according to Barth, a human concept of revelation) and was, therefore, speculative, and, therefore, had, intrinsically, an idol as the object of its description.

The over-arching framework within which Barth understood the question of the doctrine of God was once again that of soteriology. It was the reality of human depravity – *sin* and its absolutely devastating noetic effects – which necessitated the

assertion that no human being could by his or her concepts and terms possess revelation, and that all doctrines of God were therefore completely idolatrous intrinsically. If and when, at a certain time, a doctrine of God was made by God to testify to Godself, it was due only to God's gracious gift of Godself to be the object of that which by nature was, and remained, intrinsically incapable of having God as its object. It was, that is, an occasion of the divine *justification* of that doctrine – such that being permitted to effectively testify to God did not alter its intrinsic failure to do so, nor, therefore, its intrinsic idolatry. 'The veracity of the revelation of God, which justifies the sinner in His Word by His Spirit, makes his knowledge [and doctrine] of God true without him, against him...'<sup>193</sup> The theologian must ever depend upon subsequent acts of divine justification of his or her doctrine of God if it is not to be merely idolatrous.

If, as elsewhere, Barth is strong on depravity and the need for divine grace, revelation and justification within the doctrine of God, his account of sanctification is also again here woefully weak. Revelation and grace are never *given* to the sinner or the sinner's doctrine of God, but are, rather, always *to be given*. The *sanctification* of the doctrine of God, within Barth's thinking, could not mean that the doctrine of God came to possess revelation as its source and object; it could only mean its reconstitution in a way which corresponds to revelation in the way proper to and possible for the created intellect. But 'in the way proper to and possible for the created intellect' means in a way that leaves it being still, strictly speaking, intrinsically idolatrous. It can only mean: in creaturely 'obedience to the grace of God' in which the theologian remains still 'entirely wrong' (and in which the theologian acknowledges that fact).<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 213.

<sup>194</sup> Barth, *CD* II/1, 213.

If the doctrine of God can be justified by God's grace and revelation, then it can also be sanctified by God's grace and revelation; and, again, *contra* Barth, sanctification means something more than error, sin and idolatry merely being 'put under the order of revelation.'<sup>195</sup> It means namely, an essential alteration within the doctrine of God, such that it becomes no longer intrinsically sinful and idolatrous – or, at least, no longer *absolutely* intrinsically sinful and idolatrous. It means, in other words, the impartation or infusion of grace and righteousness to the doctrine of God such that it becomes at least to some degree an intrinsically true description of God, one truly possessing revelation as its source and object.

The affirmation of the sanctification (in the sense of the infusion of righteousness), by God's grace, of doctrines of God would not constitute, as Barth seems to have feared, a denial of the absolutely devastating effects of the fall or of the human being's absolute need for grace, i.e., of the fact that, in each moment the doctrine of God can be true (and something more than mere idolatry) only due to grace.<sup>196</sup> It would remain true that human intelligence is, and doctrines of God are, intrinsically, apart from grace, wholly fallen, sinful and idolatrous; that human concepts and terms are, apart from grace, totally corrupted by sin, and that they therefore, apart from grace, cannot describe God, but only an idol. It would merely mean that grace can be *received*, and is not always only *to be received*; that grace can truly *reverse* the effects of the fall; that one's concepts can be, in an ongoing way, no longer apart from grace, but rather, transformed by it in a perduring fashion such that they can, intrinsically, truly describe

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<sup>195</sup> Barth, *CD I/2*, 360.

<sup>196</sup> This fear of Barth's is made visible when, for example, he critiques Quenstedt's fairly traditional doctrine of the *analogia entis* by saying that he 'did not remember the doctrine of justification,' and that he did not remember that the *attribution* of the *analogia attributionis* had 'perhaps something to do with the grace of God.' (Barth, *CD II/1*, 239)

God. A gift which has been received is not for that reason any less a pure gift than a gift which can always only be received afresh; nor is it, for that reason, any less indispensable. A strong affirmation of the sanctification of doctrines of God would, rather, constitute a proper affirmation of the efficacy of God's grace and self-revelation – i.e., of the fact that God is able to, and in fact does by God's own gracious self-giving, not only justify and impute righteousness, but also sanctify and impart righteousness, to sinners and their thoughts and statements concerning God, such that they become truly thoughts and statements about *God* and not an idol.

## **Chapter 4: Idolatry and Religion**

This chapter considers the relationship of Barth's idolatry-critique to religion across three periods in his career. Its primary concern is the attempt to offer an interpretation and evaluation of Barth's idolatry-critique as active in his most mature and definitive statement on the topic of religion, §17 of his *Church Dogmatics I/2* (1938). Other works of Barth's will, however, be referred to, and through discussion of them it will be shown how Barth arrived at the mature form of his critique of the essence and improper theological use of religion as idolatry there. It will be seen that very important and practical consequences necessarily emerge from Barth's critique of idolatry within his discussion of the topic of religion not only for constructive theology, but also for the Christian life, and, in particular, for the engagement of the Christian with adherents of other religions.

### **4.1 'Religion' in Liberal Protestantism**

Before the relationship of religion and idolatry in Barth may be analysed, however, an important preliminary question must be answered: what did Barth mean by 'religion'? Most commentators have rightly perceived that Barth's concept of 'religion' was characteristically modern; from his days as a student under Herrmann until the end of his career, he consistently understood religion (at least broadly) according to the conception of liberal Protestant theologians like Schleiermacher, Ritschl and Herrmann, as he understood it.<sup>1</sup> This is made clear in Barth's writings on religion, and Barth

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<sup>1</sup> Among those who have rightly perceived this are Allan W. Loy ('The Theological Interpretation of the Relation of Christianity to Other Religions, with Particular Reference to Karl Barth' (PhD diss., Yale University, 1963), 95), Johannes Aagaard ('Revelation and Religion: The Influence of Dialectical Theology on the Understanding of the Relationship between Christianity and Other

explicitly stated in 1964 that: ‘...wenn ich von Religion rede, dann denke ich doch vor allem an Schleiermacher und an seine Folgen.’<sup>2</sup> Thus, any attempt to understand Barth’s thinking on the topic of religion, and the way in which religion related in his thinking to idolatry, must begin with an attempt at understanding the way in which he believed ‘religion’ was defined, evaluated, and employed within Protestant liberalism. Such an understanding will be pursued below through a consideration of Barth’s interpretation of ‘religion’ in six representative liberal Protestant theologians: Schleiermacher, Feuerbach,<sup>3</sup> Ritschl, Ernst Troeltsch, Adolf von Harnack and Herrmann. Brief allusions will be made to Barth’s reactions to the various elements of their understanding and use

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Religions,’ *Studia Theologica* 14, 1 (1960): 158), Garrett Green (‘Introduction: Karl Barth as a Theorist of Religion,’ in *On Religion: the Revelation of God as the Sublimation of Religion*, by Karl Barth (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 7), Hans-Joachim Kraus (*Theologische Religionskritik* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1982), 23), J.A. Di Noia (‘Religion and the Religions,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 45), Eberhard Busch (*The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth’s Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. Darrell L. Guder and Judith J Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 142) and Wolf Krötke (‘A New Impetus to the Theology of Religions from Karl Barth’s Thought,’ *Cultural Encounters* 7, 2 (2011): 29; English translation of: Wolf Krötke, ‘Impulse für eine Theologie der Religionen in Denken Karl Barths,’ *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 104, 3 (2007): 320-335). In apparent disagreement, Greggs writes that, ‘Barth is not [in §17] using religion as a concept by means of which to distance his theology from that of Schleiermacher, as had previously been the case.’ (Tom Greggs, *Theology against Religion: Constructive Dialogues with Bonhoeffer and Barth* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 24) He is certainly right to say that in §17 Barth had more in view than a simple polemic against the theology of Schleiermacher. But Barth’s discussion of the theological situation *vis-à-vis* the concept of religion, especially in his historical excursus in §17.1, pp. 37-46, makes it clear that he believed that the problem of religionism was what had necessitated his own critique of religion, and that Protestant liberalism provided the example of religionism *par excellence*. It was above all Schleiermacher and the liberal tradition to which he gave birth to which the post-1915 Barth sought to oppose his theology generally (Karl Barth, ‘Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher,’ in *The Theology of Schleiermacher: Lectures at Göttingen, Winter Semester of 1923/24*, ed. Dietrich Ritschl, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 265-266). Since this tradition, beginning with Schleiermacher himself, had employed a concept of religion, as it defined it, in a central and determinative place in its theology, Barth also felt compelled to contest its use of this concept in his own theology. There is no reason to think, furthermore, that Barth’s assumption of the liberal conception of religion was merely a strategic move; rather, he seems to have never left it behind.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Barth, ‘Interview von H.A. Fischer-Barnicol, Südwestfunk (5.5.1964),’ in *Gespräche 1964-1968 (GA IV.28)*, ed. Eberhard Busch (Zurich: TVZ, 1996), 145.

<sup>3</sup> It is in some ways strange and, indeed, improper, to include Feuerbach in a list of liberal Protestant theologians, but Barth himself regarded Feuerbach as a true (and in some ways the truest) representative of this tradition, and, indeed, at least in some sense, as himself a theologian: ‘...the position of Feuerbach the anti-theologian was more theological than that of many theologians.’ (Barth, ‘Feuerbach,’ in *T&C*, 217)

of religion; these allusions will be substantiated and elaborated upon later in the present chapter. All such allusions are meant to be descriptive of Barth's thinking at the time of §17. It is beyond the scope of the present work to consider whether Barth's interpretation of these thinkers' concepts and uses of religion was accurate in its details. Since the purpose of this survey is to be an aid in understanding *Barth's* concept of religion, attention will be focussed upon Barth's interpretative works, and not upon the question of to what extent Barth's interpretations accord with the primary literature.

#### 4.1.1 Barth on religion in Schleiermacher

In Barth's analysis, Schleiermacher, who was the father of German liberal Protestant theology,<sup>4</sup> understood religion to be the exercise of a human capacity which was located within the realm of feeling [*Gefühl*]. As such, religion was for him a thoroughly (and, indeed, essentially) human possibility: 'with religion [in Schleiermacher], it is a question of the realization of an original, universal and necessary disposition of mankind as such.'<sup>5</sup> While Barth would not contest this description of religion, and, indeed, assumed it, he would disagree with Schleiermacher's belief that in religion one truly had to do with God, and, thus, that religion was a human good, 'the highest value in life.'<sup>6</sup> It was also problematic, for Barth, that Schleiermacher, as he understood him, held religion to be the source of the knowledge of God, and the object, source and norm of theology. Schleiermacher's was a 'theology and philosophy *of religion*.'<sup>7</sup> According

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<sup>4</sup> Barth, 'Concluding Postscript,' 274; 'Schleiermacher,' trans. Brian Cozens, in *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 426.

<sup>5</sup> Barth, 'Schleiermacher,' in *PT*, 442; See also *TOS*, 245; 'Kant,' trans. Brian Cozens, in *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 306.

<sup>6</sup> Barth, 'Schleiermacher,' in *PT*, 442.

<sup>7</sup> Barth, 'Schleiermacher,' in *PT*, 427. Emphasis added.

to Barth: ‘What concerns him is not the substance, but the form, not the inner dialectic of Christian truth but the *phenomenon* of religion.’<sup>8</sup> For Barth, of course, the roles of source, norm and object of theology belonged properly only to God in God’s revelation; Schleiermacher’s affording of them to human religion was thus idolatrous.

For Schleiermacher, according to Barth, it was as instantiations of religion in general that particular religions and their respective (real or purported) revelations had to be both interpreted and evaluated by theology – and this included the Christian religion and its revelation, Jesus Christ. Barth held that Schleiermacher used a general, philosophical idea of religion to, ‘not only provide him[self] with a frame within which he established the nature of the Christian religion...but also with a yardstick by which its value [could] be measured.’<sup>9</sup> Barth no doubt agreed that Christianity could also be considered and measured as an instantiation of religion in general; but he disagreed that *revelation* could be so considered and measured. For him, within theology, revelation had to be the ultimate interpreter and measure of all things, including of particular religions and religion in general. To afford that role to a general concept of religion was, for him, once again, an act of idolatry.<sup>10</sup> Interpreters have sought to express Barth’s most fundamental critique of Schleiermacher (and, by extension, of the Protestant

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<sup>8</sup> Barth, *TOS*, 245. See also Karl Barth, ‘Schleiermacher,’ in *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings 1920-1928*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith (London: SCM Press, 1962), 160, 162; ‘Schleiermacher,’ in *PT*, 427, 454.

<sup>9</sup> Barth, ‘Schleiermacher,’ in *PT*, 449. Schleiermacher was, for Barth, one of those who assumed that, ‘that which we think we know about the essence and appearance of religion has to serve as the criterion and explanatory principle for God’s revelation.’ (*On Religion: The Revelation of God as the Sublimation of Religion*, trans. Garrett Green (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 37) See also Greggs, *TAR*, 21.

<sup>10</sup> It was Barth’s intention to indicate that it was religion as Schleiermacher defined it which held this role of source and object in Schleiermacher’s theology when he spoke of Schleiermacher’s (and his followers’) ‘consciously and consistently executed anthropological starting point,’ (‘Concluding Postscript,’ 270) and stated that, indeed, Schleiermacher, ‘brilliantly, like no one before or after him...thought and spoke ‘from an anthropological standpoint.’’ (‘Concluding Postscript,’ 279)

liberalism that followed him) in a variety of ways.<sup>11</sup> It was, in fact, this: the mature Barth held that Schleiermacher's theology was not christocentric, but religionistic; in other words, that in Schleiermacher's theology, religion usurped the role that Jesus Christ alone ought to have held; in still other words, that Schleiermacher's theology made an idol of religion.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4.1.2 Barth on religion in Feuerbach

According to Barth, religion was, for Feuerbach, the same kind of reality that it was for Schleiermacher: a human undertaking, a particular act of human psychological self-exertion, the exercise of a particular human capacity. Feuerbach agreed with Schleiermacher and others of his line that the task of the theologian was to 'make religion, revelation and the relationship with God a necessary predicate of man, or at any rate to demonstrate that man had a potentiality or a capacity for these things.'<sup>13</sup> Having accepted this understanding of the theologian's task, Feuerbach, according to

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, James E. Davison, 'Can God Speak a Word to Man? Barth's Critique of Schleiermacher's Theology,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 37, 2 (1984): 189-211, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0036930600016781>; Greggs, *TAR*, 20; John E. Thiel, 'Barth's Early Interpretation of Schleiermacher,' in *Barth and Schleiermacher: Beyond the Impasse?*, ed. James O. Duke and Robert F. Streetman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988); Ronald F. Thiemann, 'On Speaking of God – the Divisive Issue for Schleiermacher and Barth: A Response to Frei and Sykes,' in *Barth and Schleiermacher: Beyond the Impasse?*, ed. James O. Duke and Robert F. Streetman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988); Hans Frei, 'Barth and Schleiermacher: Divergence and Convergence,' in *Barth and Schleiermacher: Beyond the Impasse?*, ed. James O. Duke and Robert F. Streetman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 68-69; Daniel B. Clendenin, 'A Conscious Perplexity: Barth's Interpretation of Schleiermacher,' in *Westminster Theological Journal* 52, 2 (1990): 281-301.

<sup>12</sup> Later in Barth's career, as seen in his 'Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher,' he showed himself to be open to the possibility (however remote) of interpreting Schleiermacher in a way which would undercut many of his earlier critiques of him. (pp. 275-279) This, however, should not be taken as a revocation of Barth's earlier critique of religionistic theology, or even as an assertion that Schleiermacher could indeed be spared from being implicated in such a critique. (esp. p. 279)

<sup>13</sup> Karl Barth, 'Feuerbach,' trans. Brian Cozens, in *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 537.

Barth, ‘wanted to be a theologian himself.’<sup>14</sup> Even if Feuerbach diverged from Schleiermacher in that his particular way of claiming that religion had this character was by claiming that it was merely psychological projection, devoid of any truly objective pole,<sup>15</sup> Barth still believed that he was faithful to Schleiermacher’s basic way of thinking – and, indeed, that he brought it to its inevitable conclusion: ‘Was [Feuerbach] in fact completely wrong? Had not the theologians themselves tended to work in this same direction before him?’<sup>16</sup>

Barth perceived, further, that Feuerbach held human religiosity to be the source of the knowledge of ‘God,’ the proper object, source and norm of theology, and therefore the general category which ought to serve as the interpretative and evaluative principle for all particular religions and their purported revelations. With an objective God or revelation denied, it was only the religious human being which could fill these roles.<sup>17</sup>

Again, Barth accepted Feuerbach’s basic definition of the essence of religion and even his claim – against Schleiermacher – that there was no truly objective pole in religion.<sup>18</sup> Religion’s apparently objective pole, its God, was merely a ‘god,’ the conglomeration of the projections and wishes of the human subject – a conceptual idol. Feuerbach believed that religion was a good when the lie of an objective god was left

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<sup>14</sup> Barth, ‘Feuerbach,’ in *PT*, 537.

<sup>15</sup> Barth, ‘Feuerbach,’ in *T&C*, 223 (quoting Feuerbach, *Volksausgabe* (Leipzig: Alfred Kröner), 10: ‘Feuerbach epitomized his doctrine at the beginning of the third Heidelberg lecture. ‘Theology is anthropology, that is to say in the object of religion, what we call *Theos* in Greek and *Gott* in German, nothing is specified except the essence of man.’’

<sup>16</sup> Barth, ‘Feuerbach,’ in *PT*, 537.

<sup>17</sup> Barth, ‘Feuerbach,’ in *PT*, 536-537.

<sup>18</sup> The god of religion was an idol, and was thus only quasi-objective, in the sense described in 2.1.1.3 of the present work.

behind.<sup>19</sup> For Barth, however, Feuerbach's critique of religion was not radical enough, since idolatry could truly be overcome not by human self-exertion even of the negative kind, but only by revelation. In the end, though Feuerbach offered a valuable critique of and warning to Schleiermacher and his tradition by drawing out their thinking to its inevitable (atheistic) conclusion, from the perspective of revelation his supposedly purified religion remained idolatrous, as did his assertion that religious human being ought to be the object, source and norm of theology.

#### 4.1.3 Barth on religion in Ritschl

According to Barth, the 'religion' of Ritschl was, like that of Schleiermacher and Feuerbach, an anthropological reality; for him in particular, a human 'outlook on life and its morality,'<sup>20</sup> which was itself an attempt to answer the universal question as to how human beings could establish spiritual 'dominion over the world...against the limitations imposed upon [them] by the world.'<sup>21</sup> This outlook took the form of 'value-judgments' made by religious community,<sup>22</sup> which were, in turn, the source of the knowledge of God and the source and norm of theology.<sup>23</sup> The material centre of Ritschl's theology was likewise religion as the means of attainment to this human 'ideal of life' which was assumed independently of revelation.<sup>24</sup> Barth would have known well

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<sup>19</sup> Barth, 'Feuerbach,' in *PT*, 535.

<sup>20</sup> Karl Barth, 'Ritschl,' trans. Brian Cozens, in *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 658.

<sup>21</sup> Barth, 'Ritschl,' 660.

<sup>22</sup> Barth, 'Ritschl,' 661. It was in part the focus on the religious *community* which differentiated Ritschl from Schleiermacher.

<sup>23</sup> Barth, 'Ritschl,' 656, 661.

<sup>24</sup> Barth, 'Ritschl,' 656; Karl Barth, *Ethics*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), 79.

that Ritschl himself had stated that, ‘The form of systematic theology is bound up, first of all, with the correct and complete *idea of the Christian religion*.’<sup>25</sup>

For Ritschl, too, according to Barth, religion was a general reality, as instantiations of which all particular religions were to be understood and measured. Since all religions were, for Ritschl, ways of answering the dilemma of how human beings can exercise spiritual dominion over the world in face of the restrictions placed upon human beings by the natural world, the highest religion would be the religion which best provided a solution to that dilemma.<sup>26</sup> It was on the grounds that it was the Christian religion that did so that Ritschl afforded to the Christian religion a place of relative superiority over all others:

What distinguishes Christianity from every other religion [for Ritschl] is that it answers the question all religions ask...That is the meaning of an apologetics of Christianity: to demonstrate this significance of Christianity for the realization of the ideal of human life – to demonstrate that the Christian idea of God is the first to offer the necessary connexion of ideas between our outlook upon life, which is dependent upon the perception of nature with all its limitations, and our necessary moral self-judgment, and that therefore to this extent it fills a gap which philosophy leaves open, and must of necessity leave open.<sup>27</sup>

Barth did not deny, but rather assumed, broadly speaking, Ritschl’s anthropocentric *definition* of religion. Nor did he deny that religion was a general category of the kind that Ritschl described, as an instantiation of which all particular religions could be measured. Of necessity, however, he also assumed that Ritschl’s ‘religion’ was idolatrous. The God of religion was, for Ritschl, according to Barth, defined with reference to the human ‘ideal of life,’ and therefore speculatively. Barth believed, further, that affording to religion roles in theology (both methodologically and

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<sup>25</sup> Ritschl, *TCDJR*, vol. 3, 8.

<sup>26</sup> Barth, ‘Ritschl,’ 660.

<sup>27</sup> Barth, ‘Ritschl,’ 660.

materially) which properly belonged only to Jesus Christ – as Ritschl did – was idolatrous.

#### 4.1.4 Barth on religion in Troeltsch

For Troeltsch (1865-1923), according to Barth, religion was – as it was for Schleiermacher, Feuerbach, and Ritschl – a human capacity, or the exercise of that capacity. Troeltsch in particular referred to this capacity as the ‘religious *a priori*’: ‘in contrast to the Enlightenment theology, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century theologians focused their attention on one particular point in relation to all various world views of their time: man’s supposedly innate and essential capacity to ‘sense and taste the infinite’ as Schleiermacher said, or the ‘religious *a priori*’ as later affirmed by Troeltsch.’<sup>28</sup> While Troeltsch was somewhat reticent to describe the nature of religion any further, it is clear that he held it to be at its core the inward experience of the divine; in the words of Ogletree, the ‘most concentrated locus of the feeling for the absolute in human experience’;<sup>29</sup> and in the words of Troeltsch himself, ‘Die Grundvoraussetzung der Religion [ist] daß endliche Wesen seine Befäßtheit in dem Zussamenhang einer unendlichen Macht hingebend oder schauernd erfahre.’<sup>30</sup> Thus, Troeltsch’s general evaluation of religion was also positive.

Once again, Barth did not contest Troeltsch’s most basic definition of religion; he would merely have denied that the ‘absolute,’ the *unendlichen Macht*, with which the

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<sup>28</sup> Karl Barth, ‘Evangelical Theology in the Nineteenth Century,’ in *The Humanity of God*, trans. John Newton Thomas and Thomas Wieser (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1960), 21. See also Thomas W. Ogletree, *Christian Faith and History: A Critical Comparison of Ernst Troeltsch and Karl Barth* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1965), 40.

<sup>29</sup> Ogletree, *CFH*, 40.

<sup>30</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, ‘Die Selbständigkeit der Religion,’ *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 6, 1 (1896): 82.

human communes on the basis of the exercise of the religious *a priori* could be identified with God, since Barth held that the true God could not be encountered on the basis of any kind of *a priori* or point of contact within the human being. Troeltsch's religion, too, was thus idolatry. And Troeltsch, too, according to Barth, afforded religion roles within theology (e.g., that of source and object) which belonged properly only to God's revelation. 'Then E. Troeltsch taught us that the main task of the theologian is to exercise himself in 'entering hypothetically' into the phenomena of general religious history, so that by a comparative assessment of the various worlds of religion he may then see that Christianity is relatively the best religion.'<sup>31</sup> Again, in Troeltsch, according to Barth, 'Theology turned into philosophy of the history of religion in general, and of the Christian religion in particular.'<sup>32</sup> It was, in particular, the historical manifestation of religion, religion as an historical phenomenon, that was taken to be theology's object, and thus could Troeltsch's theological method could be described as a 'history of religions' approach.<sup>33</sup> Only revelation, for Barth, ought to be theology's object, and it, therefore, had to be, as such, determinative for theological method. Not only did Troeltsch's 'religion' have to be judged as idolatrous, for Barth, so too did his use of the concept of religion within theology, and his selection of a theological method which either revealed or determined that he held religion as an historical phenomenon to be theology's object.

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<sup>31</sup> Barth, *CDI*/2, 290.

<sup>32</sup> Barth, 'ET,' 13. See also pp. 23, 28.

<sup>33</sup> Barth, 'ET,' 14, 22.

#### 4.1.5 Barth on religion in Harnack<sup>34</sup>

The ‘religion’ of Harnack (1851-1930) was, for Barth, once again, ‘nothing other than the realization of a human possibility,’<sup>35</sup> the attempt to reckon with and live out the ‘simple Gospel,’ ‘the message of God the Father, the infinite worth of the human soul and the love of the brethren.’<sup>36</sup> Barth knew well that Harnack was right that faith can always be understood as religion in this sense or one similar to it,<sup>37</sup> but he also believed that the state of the *homo religiosus* as such was one of a ‘natural-titanic presumptuousness,’<sup>38</sup> in which the human being idolatrously substituted his or her own conception of God for God’s revelation.

Harnack’s theological method was borne out of a deep concern, furthermore, that theology be scientific,<sup>39</sup> which meant, for him, among other things, heavy reliance upon the historico-critical method within theology. This meant for Barth, however, as in the case of Troeltsch, the abandonment of revelation as both the object of theology

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<sup>34</sup> The most complete and direct of Barth’s engagements with Adolf von Harnack may be found in the correspondence between these two men which was published in *Die Christliche Welt* in 1923. An English translation of this correspondence, from which the quotations presented here are drawn, may be found in H. Martin Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology: An Analysis of the Barth – Harnack Correspondence of 1923* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 29-53. This correspondence is composed of five documents, two written by Barth and three by Harnack. The first (29-31) is a list of fifteen questions, formulated by Harnack, and addressed to the ‘despisers of scientific theology.’ The second document (31-35) is Barth’s reply to each of these fifteen questions, the third (35-39) an open letter from Harnack to Barth, the fourth (40-52) Barth’s response to that open letter, and the fifth (52-53) a ‘postscript’ to the discussion written by Harnack. This correspondence will here be cited as ‘Barth-Harnack’ when the reference is to one of the documents which Barth wrote to Harnack, and as ‘Harnack-Barth’ when the reference is to one of the documents written by Harnack.

<sup>35</sup> ‘Barth-Harnack,’ 44-45.

<sup>36</sup> Karl Barth, ‘Herder,’ trans. Brian Cozens, in *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 502.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Barth-Harnack,’ 48.

<sup>38</sup> ‘Barth-Harnack,’ 49.

<sup>39</sup> ‘Harnack-Barth,’ 31. Rumscheidt (*Revelation and Theology*, 23) notes that, ‘For Harnack, science was a sphere of methodical, unprejudiced, stately and well-thought-through approach to the cognition of an object or truth.’

(since it was not uncoverable by means of the historico-critical method)<sup>40</sup> and as the determinant of theological method, and its idolatrous replacement with religion.<sup>41</sup> Barth surely knew that in Harnack's *What is Christianity?* he had, once again in accord with the Protestant liberalism which came before him, stated programmatically that it was, 'with the Christian *religion* alone that we have to do.'<sup>42</sup> In his substitution of religion for revelation, Barth understood Harnack to be a true heir of the liberal tradition which began with Schleiermacher: 'Harnack was obviously speaking for neo-Protestantism, whose proper object of faith is not God in His revelation, but man himself believing in the divine.'<sup>43</sup> And Barth could not have failed to note, further, that Harnack, again following his liberal forefathers, considered 'religion' to be the generative principle of all particular religions, and the standard by which they had to be measured.<sup>44</sup>

#### 4.1.6 Barth on religion in Herrmann

Barth noted that, for Herrmann, religion was 'the ability – based in itself and experienced only as a miraculous event – to see the working of God in the events of

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<sup>40</sup> 'Barth-Harnack,' 31-32, 43-46; see also *CD I/2*, 367.

<sup>41</sup> Karl-Josef Kuschel rightly argues (*Born before All Time? The Dispute over Christ's Origin*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1992), 65-66) that one of the main differences between Barth's understanding of theology and that of Harnack is their divergence on the question of whether theology must be undertaken according to a more general, and purportedly presuppositionless, scientific method (Harnack) or whether it means simply that theology must faithfully afford precedence to its object, and formulate its methods according to it (Barth). Barth clearly believed that Harnack, by taking the former route, allowed something other than revelation to determine its method – and this could only mean idolatry.

<sup>42</sup> Adolf von Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, trans. Thomas Bailer Saunders (London: Ernst Benn, 1958), 17. Emphasis added.

<sup>43</sup> Barth, *CD I/2*, 367.

<sup>44</sup> Harnack, *WIC*, 17.

life,'<sup>45</sup> in light of 'the experience of pure dependence in free surrender.'<sup>46</sup> Indeed, what Herrmann called 'religion' would be identical to 'revelation' according to certain definitions of the latter (though certainly not according to that of the mature Barth).<sup>47</sup> And his conception of religion could have only been seen by Barth as an outwardly closer approximation to what he would understand as 'true religion' in the *Church Dogmatics* §17 than any of the other conceptions found amongst liberal Protestants, for Herrmann's religion did ostensibly depend for its possibility and actuality on a gracious act of God; it was 'based in itself and experienced only as a miraculous event.'<sup>48</sup> It did not, therefore, have its possibility in human beings as such; it was not, e.g., based in an inherently human capacity as in Schleiermacher or in a human *a priori* as in Troeltsch.<sup>49</sup> Since Herrmann meant by the term 'religion' to refer to a reality closely bound up with true encounter with God, which was the answer to the human ethical dilemma, it is unsurprising that, unlike Barth, '[Herrmann] nearly always spoke of religion in positive terms.'<sup>50</sup>

Barth could allow that at least some of what Herrmann called 'religion' was evoked by an actual encounter with God, i.e., revelation. But according to Barth religion

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<sup>45</sup> Karl Barth, 'The Principles of Dogmatics According to Wilhelm Herrmann,' in *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings 1920-1928*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith (London: SCM Press, 1962), 243.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 239. Quoting Herrmann's 'Christliche-protestant Dogmatik,' in Hinneberg's *Die Kultur der Gegenwart: Ihre Entwicklung und ihre Ziele* I: IV, 2, ed. Paul Hinnenberg (Berlin: B.G. Teubner, 1909), 624.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Morgan, 'Troeltsch and Christian Theology,' in *Writings on Theology and Religion*, by Ernst Troeltsch (London: Duckworth, 1977), 227.

<sup>48</sup> Barth, 'PD,' 243.

<sup>49</sup> Barth, 'PD,' 244.

<sup>50</sup> Gary Dorrien, *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology: Theology Without Weapons* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 180.

in Herrmann's sense *became* a human 'ability',<sup>51</sup> a certain modification of 'consciousness',<sup>52</sup> a 'particular, vital possession of individual men';<sup>53</sup> though its origin was not in human beings, its ongoing reality was. For Barth, any reality possessed by human beings, including religion, and including even that religion evoked by revelation, not only not could not be identical to revelation, it could actually only *oppose* revelation. The 'god' of the religion that was a human ability and possession could only ever be an idol, since the true God could not be the object of human cognition and perception in any static sense.<sup>54</sup> Herrmann, further, afforded to his idea of 'religion' the role of source of the knowledge of God, and of the source and object of theology – as seen in his description of dogmatic formulations as *Glaubensgedanken*.<sup>55</sup> Barth wrote that, 'According to Herrmann [dogmatics] is the search for clarity concerning the origin and validity of our own religion.'<sup>56</sup> The affording of the roles of source and norm in theology to religion could only, once more, represent for Barth the affording to religion a role properly belonging only to revelation – the idolisation of religion.

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<sup>51</sup> Barth, 'PD,' 243.

<sup>52</sup> Barth, 'PD,' 243.

<sup>53</sup> Barth, 'PD,' 241.

<sup>54</sup> The fact that Herrmann's 'religion' (according to Barth) was the answer to a universally perceptible ethical dilemma (Barth, 'PD,' 261; Albert A. Jagnow, 'Karl Barth and Wilhelm Herrmann: Pupil and Teacher,' *The Journal of Religion* 16, 3 (1936): 302; Daniel Lee Deegan, 'Wilhelm Herrmann: A Reassessment,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 19 (1966): 193) and the end of the universally valid 'way to religion' (Barth, 'PD,' 256) are also reasons why Barth had to judge it negatively.

<sup>55</sup> Barth, 'PD,' 240; *GD*, 25.

<sup>56</sup> Barth, *GD*, 8.

#### 4.1.7 Summary of Barth on religion in German Protestant Theological Liberalism

Notwithstanding important differences, a number of commonalities existed across many or all liberal Protestant thinkers (in Barth's interpretation) when it came to the definition, evaluation, and theological usage of 'religion.'<sup>57</sup> In the first place, religion was understood as an anthropological reality – an ongoing modification or possession of human feeling, values, outlook on life, experience, etc. – in which the human being in some way knows or communes with God. The reality of religion (strictly defined) was the core, generative principle, and standard of particular world religions. With the exception of the fact that he came to deny that it is the true God who is communed with on the basis of religion, Barth affirmed this general understanding of religion held in various specific ways by liberal theologians, throughout his career without (at least from the time of *Romans*) binding himself to the more specific understanding of any one of the latter. Second, religion was viewed in Protestant liberalism as truly having to do with God (with a partial exception in the case of Feuerbach) and thus as a human good. As will be seen, Barth, because he came to believe in his mature period that religion was idolatrous, denied that it was good. Third, in liberal theology religion was afforded roles which the mature Barth believed ought to be afforded only to revelation: the roles of source of the knowledge of God, source, norm and object of theology, etc. In this way, liberal Protestant theology was 'religionistic,' i.e., it made an idol of

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<sup>57</sup> Though Barth was clearly aware of differences between these thinkers on the topic of 'religion,' it may nevertheless be true that he was guilty of totalising the liberal view and use of religion in such a manner that he failed to do justice to each of the individual thinkers described above. This is a criticism is, for example, suggested by McCormack's statement that: 'Barth's critique was, in a good many of its main lines, not valid for Schleiermacher. But it was valid for Troeltsch. Barth's problem was that he never succeeded in distinguishing Schleiermacher from Troeltsch.' (Bruce McCormack, 'What Has Basel to Do with Berlin? Continuities in the Theologies of Barth and Schleiermacher,' in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 80) Whether or not this critique of McCormack's is valid, the important point for present purposes is that Barth *believed* that there were enough underlying similarities between liberal understandings and uses of religion that he could rightly think and speak of a generically liberal understanding and use of it.

religion. Even if Barth did not explicitly critique the ‘religionism’ of liberal theology as idolatry, it is clear that he understood it to be what he elsewhere did explicitly call idolatry: ‘That [modern liberal Protestant theology] really lost revelation is shown by the very fact that it was possible for it to *exchange revelation*, and thereby its own birthright, *for the concept of religion*.’<sup>58</sup> In sum, Protestant liberalism, according to the mature Barth, in general rightly defined religion, but wrongly evaluated it, and wrongly, i.e., idolatrously, afforded to religion roles which properly belonged only to revelation.

#### **4.2 Religion and Idolatry in Barth**

To the above synchronic description of Barth’s mature interpretation of the liberal understanding, evaluation and utilisation of ‘religion,’ and the interspersed comments concerning Barth’s own reaction to and appropriation of the same, must now be added a more complete, analytical and diachronic account of the relationship between religion and idolatry in Barth. In this way it will be seen more clearly what the relationship between idolatry and religion was in Barth’s mature thought, and how and why he arrived at that mature position. First, what was perhaps implicit above must now be made explicit: the question of how idolatry related to religion in Barth’s thinking must be asked in two ways: (1) How did Barth think of idolatry relating to the theological *use* of the concept of religion? (2) How did Barth think of idolatry relating to the *essence* of religion? Three stages in the way in which Barth answered these questions over the course of his career may be discerned. Undergirding Barth’s thinking at each of these stages, and the transitions between them, was his ever-stable formal definition of

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<sup>58</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 49. Emphasis added.

idolatry as the replacement or substitution of God in God's revelation with that which is created.

#### 4.2.1 Barth's liberal period

The first stage which may be discerned is Barth's liberal period, i.e., that period from approximately 1908 when he became a student of Herrmann until 1915 when he broke from liberalism. During this period Barth's understanding of religion was characteristically liberal, and largely Herrmannian. For Barth, as for Herrmann, religion was the experience of God as the answer to the individual's moral struggle. Thus Barth in 1909:

Individuell bedingt ist das Erwachen der Religion, wie wir sie verstehen. Wo ein Mensch zur Erkenntnis gekommen ist, daß es ihm faktisch unmöglich ist, das als gut erkannte Sittengebot bei sich durchzusetzen, da kann er es erleben, daß ihm in der Überlieferung der christlichen Kirche oder in ihrem gegenwärtigen Leben eine Macht begegnet, der er sich in Gehorsam und Vertrauen gänzlich unterwerfen muß.<sup>59</sup>

Religion was, for him, a general reality of communion with God which had particular manifestations in the various world religions. Also in 1909, Barth wrote that, 'Die altisr. Religion eine unter vielen, nicht einmal der erste Israels. Überall wo Menschen Rel. haben, ist Gott beteiligt...'<sup>60</sup> Since all world religions were manifestations of this basic reality, the Christian religion could have only a relative advantage over other world religions: 'Der Christ erkennt in den andern Religionen unvollständige Stufen der höchsten Wahrheit.'<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Barth, 'Moderne Theologie,' 342.

<sup>60</sup> Barth, *Konfirmandenunterricht 1909-1921*, 3.

<sup>61</sup> Barth, *Konfirmandenunterricht 1909-1921*, 62.

When, during this period, it came to question (1), the question of the relationship between idolatry and the theological *use* of ‘religion,’ Barth’s position ran thus: any theology which does *not* afford ‘religion’ the role of source, norm and object is idolatrous. Even at this time, Barth believed that only revelation ought to hold these roles. How then could religion holding them not only *not be* idolatrous, but also be the only scenario which was not idolatrous? Simply because Barth, at this time, in line with his liberal teachers, associated very closely, and even in a certain sense, identified, religion with revelation.<sup>62</sup> This has already been suggested above, and Barth made this identification even more explicit when he wrote in 1909 that, ‘...was wir von menschl. Seite *Religion* nennen [,] ist von Seiten Gottes *Offenbarung*.’<sup>63</sup>

With the near identification of religion and revelation made, it became the case that to afford the roles of source, norm and object in theology to religion *was* to afford it to revelation. Alternatively, to *refuse* to afford the roles of source, norm and object in theology to *religion* was to afford them to something *other than* revelation, and, thus to commit idolatry. This line of thinking is most easily perceptible in Barth’s previously cited 1911 essay ‘La Réapparition de la Métaphysique dans la Théologie,’ the argumentative thrust of which is that the substitution of metaphysics for ‘la religion [and its God], qui est l’objet de la théologie’<sup>64</sup> is an illicit act, which can be characterised as idolatry. ‘Lui [‘Le Dieu de la conclusion métaphysique,’ (p. 349)]

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<sup>62</sup> See McCormack, *KBCRDT*, 67, n. 70 and Frei, ‘The Doctrine of Revelation in the Thought of Karl Barth,’ 27, 33, 140, 361. While this identification was in line with much of Protestant liberalism, it should also be noted briefly here that liberalism could also sometimes use the term ‘revelation’ differently, i.e., such that it was not synonymous with religion, but rather such that it referred to the specific creaturely media of revelation, i.e., of the creation of the internal reality of religion. See, e.g., Schleiermacher, *TCF*, 50. Such ‘revelation’ was of secondary importance to inward reality of religion (and revelation), and to be understood in terms of it. This point will become important below.

<sup>63</sup> Barth, *Konfirmandenunterricht 1909-1921*, 15. Emphasis original.

<sup>64</sup> Barth, ‘La Réapparition,’ 336.

attribuer une importance religieuse, c'est ériger un idole («einen Götzen aufriechen und anbeten»)...<sup>65</sup>

When, during this same period, it came to question (2), the question of the relationship between idolatry and the *essence* of religion, Barth held – again, keeping in line with Herrmannian liberalism – that the essence of religion was altogether good, and that it was not idolatrous. The belief that religion was truly communion with God necessitated this. Religion could not be the replacement of revelation, since religion, in an important sense, *was* revelation. Idolatry would have necessarily meant *irreligion*. In Barth's 1910/11 'Lebensbilder aus der Geschichte der christlichen Religion,' for example, he closely linked religion and revelation, and irreligion and speculation (the latter, as the previous chapter has shown, was for him a form of idolatry): 'Irenäus hat in richtiger Weise die Einheit Gottes u. d[er] Offenbarung gegenüber der unrel. Spekulation der Gnost[iker vertreten]. Er spekuliert aber selbst unreligiös...'<sup>66</sup>

#### 4.2.2 Barth's Romans II period

The second stage which may be discerned in Barth's thinking on these issues is best represented by his discussion of religion in his 1922 *Romans II*, and in the seventh chapter in particular, which is devoted to the discussion of that topic. 'Freedom' is the title of the chapter, but its three sections are entitled 'The Frontier of Religion,'<sup>67</sup> 'The Meaning of Religion,'<sup>68</sup> and 'The Reality of Religion,'<sup>69</sup> respectively. As the title of the

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<sup>65</sup> Barth, 'La Réapparition,' 350.

<sup>66</sup> Barth, 'Lebensbilder,' 100.

<sup>67</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 229-240.

<sup>68</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 240-257.

<sup>69</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 257-270.

chapter suggests, even the negative judgments which Barth levelled against religion under these sub-headings were part of his attempt to elucidate the freedom of God *vis-à-vis* all of that which is created.

Chapter 7 treats of the seventh chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Romans, using the term 'religion' in place of Paul's 'law.' It may here be briefly noted that, as may be expected given that by 'religion' Barth meant to describe what Paul meant to describe by the term 'law,' Barth's concept of religion in *Romans II* seems to have included not only a certain modification of consciousness or of human experience, but also a certain set of empirical human actions: '...we hear, we believe, we obey, we confess, we express ourselves with some passion, in speech or in print.'<sup>70</sup> This did not represent a rejection of the liberal understanding of religion, however – Schleiermacher was still clearly in view, for example, in the negative statements which Barth made about religion<sup>71</sup> – but simply an expansion of the strict form of its definition of it. As has been noted, Schleiermacher's tradition realised that, though religion was primarily a matter of subjectivity, it also had objective manifestations. And, to be sure, religion was for Barth in *Romans II*, as it had been in liberalism, the actualisation of an innately, and indeed essentially, human possibility and reality, and the highest one at that. 'We have to show that religion is a human possibility, and, consequently, a limited possibility...'<sup>72</sup> 'As men living in the world, and being what we are, we cannot hope to escape the possibility of religion.'<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 230. It was also, as Matthew Myer Boulton rightly states, conceived of as a certain 'moral and legal ordering' of such actions. (*God Against Religion: Rethinking Christian Theology Through Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 26).

<sup>71</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 258, 260.

<sup>72</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 229-230.

<sup>73</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 230.

Barth apparently believed that the ‘religion’ of liberalism was at least roughly the same reality as that which Paul sought to describe with the term ‘law,’ and his decision to gloss Paul’s ‘law’ in Romans 7 as ‘religion’ was materially determinative for what he said about the latter. It should not be thought either that Barth’s choice to equate religion and Paul’s ‘law’ was arbitrary, or that, having made that equation, his discussion of ‘religion’ was unconcerned with what Paul said about the law, as if he was willing to jettison Paul’s actual meaning for the sake of the exposition of his own theology. According to Barth’s own statements, he was not engaged in ‘free theologizing,’ nor did he set out in *Romans* ‘to compose a free fantasia on the theme of religion.’<sup>74</sup> Barth was engaged in *Romans II* in the writing of biblical commentary. It must be assumed, therefore, that he believed that ‘religion,’ understood in a characteristically liberal manner, was at least roughly equivalent to what Paul meant by ‘law’ and life under it in Romans 7, however this equation of Barth’s is to be evaluated. It should also be assumed, for this reason that Barth’s material statements concerning religion were driven by what Paul had to say about the law.

When it came, during this time period, to question (1), that of the relationship between idolatry and the theological use of religion, Barth’s held the exact opposite position of that which he held during his liberal period. Whereas then the refusal of the roles of source of the knowledge of God, and source, object and norm in theology<sup>75</sup> to religion was idolatry (since religion and revelation were nearly identified), by the time of *Romans II* the *affording* of these roles to religion was, for him, an act of idolatry. This change came about because, as has been recounted previously within the present

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<sup>74</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, ix.

<sup>75</sup> ‘Theology’ here refers not simply to a formal academic discipline, but to all attempts to think and speak of God and creation in relation to God.

work,<sup>76</sup> Barth's break from liberalism involved the disentangling of revelation from all that is human, including religion and religious experience (and, indeed, the opposing of one to the other). By the time of *Romans II*, religion was no longer revelation or grace, but, rather, the law. Once religion and revelation could no longer be in any sense identified, to afford to religion a role which properly belonged to revelation (e.g., that of source and object in theology) was to *replace* revelation with that which was not revelation, i.e., it was to commit idolatry: in this case, the idolatry of legalism. This kind of idolatry is what occurs when 'men cling to religion with a bourgeois tenacity, supposing it to be that final thing of soul and sense which is deathless and unshattered.'<sup>77</sup> Barth believed that liberal theology was guilty of this precisely this kind of idolatry, when it held that religion itself was the means of being 'in tune with the infinite,'<sup>78</sup> the 'apprehension of the absolute,' a 'feeling and taste for eternity.'<sup>79</sup>

When it came, during this time period, to question (2), Barth's thinking was much more complex than is often realised. So, too, was his overall evaluation of religion, which is nowhere near as negative as is often assumed. Those who, like von Balthasar, see *Romans II* as being 'deeply anti-religious'<sup>80</sup> misunderstand it. Because

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<sup>76</sup> See 2.1.2.1 of the present work.

<sup>77</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 238.

<sup>78</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 253.

<sup>79</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 260.

<sup>80</sup> Von Balthasar, *TKB*, 53. Greggs, in his important treatment of religion in Barth also seems to see Barth's evaluation of religion in *Romans II* as predominantly negative. He realises that it is 'never fully negative' (*TAR*, 18), but implies that it is *primarily* negative; and this, as will be seen, is not the case. Further, while Greggs perceives the positive element in Barth's discussion of religion, he interprets Barth's claims that religion is death, an enemy of human beings, etc. as an attempt on Barth's part to guard against an overly-positive assessment. (*TAR*, 19) In fact, just the opposite is the case. Religion, in *Romans 7*, is a positive reality precisely when and because it is death, an enemy, etc. It is, as will be seen, an enemy to human beings as they stand apart from God, in their sin and idolatry; in other words, it is precisely the enemy that human beings need in order to be shaken from their self-assurance and self-contentment, and therefore to be placed in a position in which they can only wait upon God. Religion is

Barth truly set out to interpret Paul, he could have no more been anti-religious than he could have been, as an interpreter of Paul, an anti-nomian. Indeed, for Barth, religion, like the law for Paul, was, ‘holy, just and good.’<sup>81</sup> Religion, like the law, possessed for Barth the power to disclose sin and idolatry as such to human beings and, therefore, to prepare the human being for God’s grace. Many commentators such as Vallée, Busch, Krauss and van der Kooi have perceived a striking note of positivity in Barth’s evaluation of religion, and this is the reason why.<sup>82</sup> Yet, on the other hand, Barth did ostensibly render many negative judgments against religion, and did, criticise it for its association with idolatry. Indeed, in certain places, he spoke very disparagingly about it, agreeing with Marx, for example, that religion was a kind of opiate.<sup>83</sup> How can Barth’s negative statements about religion, and his charge of idolatry against it, be reconciled with what van der Kooi rightly describes as Barth’s, at times ‘liebvoll, sympathisch’<sup>84</sup> tone as he speaks about religion?

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negative only when it does not act as an enemy to human beings apart from God, but rather reassures them in their actually godless pursuits, goals, and ideals. Further examples of those who overestimate the negativity of Barth’s evaluation of religion in *Romans* include Benkt-Erik Benktson (*Christus und die Religion: Der Religionsbegriff bei Barth, Bonhoeffer und Tillich* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1967), 59) and Sung Ryul Kim (*Gott in und über den Religionen: Auseinandersetzung mit der «pluralistischen Religionstheologie» und das Problem des Synkretismus* (Zurich: TVZ, 2010), 30-31).

<sup>81</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 254.

<sup>82</sup> Gérard Vallée, ‘Foi et Religion dans le Commentaire de l’Épître aux Romains de Karl Barth,’ *Science et Esprit* 32, 3 (1980): 338; Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth & the Pietists: The Young Karl Barth’s Critique of Pietism and Its Response*, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2004), 85; Kraus, *TR*, 8; Cornelis van der Kooi, ‘Religion als Unglaube. Bemerkung zu einer Kampfpapare,’ in *Karl Barth im europäischen Zeitgeschehen (1935-1950): Widerstand – Bewahrung – Orientierung*, ed. Michael Beintker, Christian Link and Michael Trowitzsch (Zurich: TVZ, 2010), 449. See also Choan-Seng Song (‘The Relation of Divine Revelation and Man’s Religion in the Theologies of Karl Barth and Paul Tillich’ (ThD diss., Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, 1965), 10-28), who rightly understands that Barth sought, in *Romans II*, only to critique a certain, deviant kind of religion.

<sup>83</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 238.

<sup>84</sup> Van der Kooi, ‘Religion als Unglaube,’ 449.

They can be reconciled by the realisation that Barth, in *Romans II*, distinguished between two possibilities for the *practice* or *use* of religion. There was as little possibility of Barth speaking negatively of religion *per se* as there was of him speaking negatively of the law *per se*; but just as the law can be viewed and utilised both properly and improperly, so can religion be practised both properly and improperly, i.e., in conformity or non-conformity with its genuine nature and purpose.

The concrete practice of religion, whether proper or improper, was always idolatrous because the religious person always remains, even in his or her religion, a sinner and an idolater, separated from God by the ‘infinite qualitative distinction.’<sup>85</sup> Since the concrete religious human being, like all human beings, can never come to possess revelation, his or her conception of God can only be an idolatrous one, one not founded upon revelation: he or she can only conceive of God as ‘one factor in a contrast,’<sup>86</sup> and thus only as a ‘god of this world.’<sup>87</sup> The god that the religious person can grasp is not God, but an idol, the ‘No-God.’<sup>88</sup> The religious person, therefore, never possessed a positive relationship with God by virtue of his or her religion, but, rather, always remained in his or her religion as he or she was apart from it: a sinner and an idolater.

When religion was understood and practised properly, however, the religious person could receive this very self-negating and self-condemning fact – that of one’s own sin, idolatry, and godlessness – as a disclosure of religion. Properly practised,

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<sup>85</sup> That idolatry was for Barth a universally human act has been argued in 2.1.1.2 of the present work.

<sup>86</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 231.

<sup>87</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 231.

<sup>88</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 231.

religion, for the Barth of *Romans II* is ‘the point at which sin becomes an observable fact of experience...’<sup>89</sup> Those who understand and practise religion along these lines, ‘penetrate the valley of the shadow of death.’<sup>90</sup> They are compelled by religion itself to recognise that ‘God is not to be found in religion,’<sup>91</sup> and because religion is the highest human possibility, *all* human action can be seen under that same sign.<sup>92</sup> They recognise themselves ‘to be conditioned invisibly by – sin.’<sup>93</sup> In this type of religion, one encounters and perceives the limit to and judgment of all human possibilities, and religion is thus ‘fraught with disturbance...non-aesthetic...non-rhetorical...non-pious.’<sup>94</sup> The essence of religion so practised is self-negation, humility, recognition of one’s own sin and idolatry, and dependence upon grace. Thus, it is unsurprising that concerning this form of religion, Barth was almost unequivocally positive in *Romans II*. Indeed, he exhorted his contemporaries to take up the practice of religion: ‘Let us be convincedly nothing but religious men....’<sup>95</sup> Conceptually, the reason that Barth could affirm this positive possibility for religion is that – as has been argued previously in this work – at the time of *Romans II*, although Barth did not believe that experience, feeling, etc., could disclose any positive knowledge of God, and self and world in relation to God, he did believe that existential experience could provide *negative* knowledge of those

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<sup>89</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 242.

<sup>90</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 255.

<sup>91</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 242.

<sup>92</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 231.

<sup>93</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 244.

<sup>94</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 258.

<sup>95</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 254.

realities. Religion was, for him, properly practised, the highest form of negatively revelatory existential experience.<sup>96</sup>

There was for Barth, however, in *Romans II*, a second, degenerate possibility for the practice of religion, in which one fails to perceive the true meaning of religion, i.e., religion's disclosing of the human predicament of sin, idolatry and separation from God, and believes that, by virtue of one's religion, one knows and stands in positive relationship to God. The essence of religion, so practised, was not self-negation, humility, and recognition of one's own sin and idolatry and therefore need for grace but, rather, pride, self-satisfaction, blindness to one's own sin and idolatry, and confidence in the reality of one's 'god.' It was in discussing religion in *this form* that Barth agreed with Marx that religion acts 'upon [people] like a drug which has been extremely skillfully administered. Instead of counteracting human illusions, it does no more than introduce an alternative condition of pleasurable emotion.'<sup>97</sup> Clearly, by the time of *Romans II*, Barth believed that neo-Protestant religion was religion in this form; it had understood and practised religion as if it were not a completely self-negating, sin- and idolatry-revealing, reality, but, rather, as if it were 'that human capacity by which 'all human occurrences are thought of as divine actions,'<sup>98</sup> or as 'the solemn music which accompanies all human experience' (Schleiermacher).'<sup>99</sup> In this 'religion' one was

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<sup>96</sup> The influence of existentialism, particularly of the Kierkegaardian variety, on *Romans II*, has been widely recognised. See McCormack, *KBCRDT*, chapter 2. While McCormack sees Kierkegaard's influence as less determinative than others have, even he must acknowledge that, 'it is beyond question that Kierkegaardian language and concepts play a significant role in *Romans II*' (237). Barth himself was quite open about Kierkegaard's influence: '...if I have a system, it is limited to a recognition of what Kierkegaard called 'the infinite qualitative distinction' between time and eternity, and to my regarding this as possessing negative as well as positive significance...' (*Romans*, 10)

<sup>97</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 236.

<sup>98</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 257-258.

<sup>99</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 258.

convinced that one's 'god' was truly God, and was, therefore, not merely an idolater – as all people, and all religionists, are – but an *unconscious*, self-satisfied, idolater.

In Barth's most negative comments about religion in *Romans II*, the fault that he seeks to point out is not to be found with religion *per se* but rather with this particular, degenerate, form of its practice and use. The person who practises religion along these lines is like the person who strives to obey the law and, being satisfied with his or her own obedience, never recognises that he or she falls short of its standard, and, therefore, never allows him or herself to be brought under conviction or to a realisation of the need for grace. In such a case, the problem is not with the law but rather with the person who fails to understand the law and perceive its judgment.

In *Romans II*, Barth demonstrated little interest in criticising religion *per se* as being essentially idolatrous. Rather, given that all human beings were idolaters, and religion, like the law, revealed sin and idolatry as such, he desired to hold forth the first possibility for the practice of religion – the one in which one perceives one's own idolatry and sin as a disclosure of religion – and to argue for the avoidance of the second form of religion which leaves its practitioners undisturbed and self-satisfied in their idolatry. This explains the divergent remarks that Barth made in *Romans II* on the topic of religion. All religion involved idolatry. But the religion he disparaged was religion in the second form, and the religion about which he spoke lovingly and sympathetically, and enjoined upon others, was religion in the first form. 'Religion is neither a thing to be enjoyed nor a thing to be celebrated: it must be borne as a yoke

which cannot be removed.’<sup>100</sup> ‘Religion is not at all to be ‘in tune with the infinite’ or to be ‘at peace with oneself’...religion is an abyss: it is terror.’<sup>101</sup> Again:

Should we remove ourselves consciously or unconsciously from the dangerous ambiguity of religion, either we must take refuge in some other less exalted human possibility...or we must side-step into some ancient or modern variety of religion; and, if we are not fully aware of the ambiguity of all religion, to do so will mean inevitably that the alternative variety which we have selected will be a bad one.<sup>102</sup>

The two forms of approach to and experience of religion under discussion were both human possibilities, such that Barth could exhort his contemporaries to choose one instead of the other. The essence of religion properly understood and practised was this: it was the location of the experience of sin and idolatry which reveals sin and idolatry as such.

#### 4.2.3 Barth’s Church Dogmatics period – as represented by the CD §17<sup>103</sup>

The final stage to be mentioned in Barth’s thinking on the issues of religion and idolatry is that of his *Church Dogmatics* period, as represented by his treatment of religion in the CD I/2, §17.<sup>104</sup> Within §17 Barth, in what Green calls his ‘formal *theological* definition

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<sup>100</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 258.

<sup>101</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 253.

<sup>102</sup> Barth, *Romans II*, 254.

<sup>103</sup> Quotations and citations of §17 are from Garrett Green’s recent translation of that paragraph (*On Religion*). Green’s translation is to be preferred to the original English translation for a number of reasons, perhaps most importantly because of its sensitivity to the two-fold meaning of the German *Aufhebung*, a term which plays a central role in Barth’s argument. Green translates *Aufhebung* as ‘sublimation’ in an attempt to capture the positive aspect of the German term, which was obscured in the original translation of *Aufhebung* as ‘abolition.’ For a summary of the ways in which Green’s translation differs from, and is an improvement over, the original translation, see Green, ‘Translator’s Preface,’ pages vii-xi in *On Religion*, by Karl Barth (London: T&T Clark, 2006).

<sup>104</sup> Barth took up the issue of religion between *Romans II* and the CD §17 in a sustained way in §18 of his 1927 *Chr.D.*, which was entitled ‘Die Gnade und die Religion.’ In this paragraph, Barth’s discussion of religion was, in general, very similar to that found with the CD §17, and it was, in particular, similar to the latter in the way in which it linked religion and idolatry. Barth wrote therein, for example, that:

of religion,'<sup>105</sup> wrote that religion is, 'the realm of attempts by man to justify and sanctify himself before a wilfully and arbitrarily devised image of God.'<sup>106</sup> While this (highly evaluative<sup>107</sup>) definition of religion was intentionally broad and inclusive, and allowed Barth to consider a number of different realities which might be termed 'religion,' his primary target remained religion as described by liberal Protestantism; not because he held that liberal Protestantism errantly defined religion, but rather, precisely because he accepted their definition of it.<sup>108</sup>

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Im Ereignis der Religion als solchem ist der Mensch der Schöpfer Gottes, ist Gott in bedenklichster Weise des Menschen Gott, Prädikat seines, des Menschen Wesens und Lebens...in der Religion als solcher macht sich der Mensch selbst seinen Gott, verehrt und verherrlicht er also auf einem kleinen Unweg letztlich sich selber. Beruht Religion auf der letzten, tiefsten Möglichkeit der menschlichen Seele, so ist sie als dieses Ereignis, in sich betrachtet, gewiß auch der letzt und tiefste Akt des Widerspruchs gegen Gott, in dem der Mensch existiert, die offen ausbrechende Empörung, *die Sünde* gegen das erste Gebot, neben der alle anderen nur abgeleitete Bedeutung haben können. (415-416)

Barth's discussion of religion in §17 is, however, more detailed and comprehensive, and so it is to it that attention is directed here.

<sup>105</sup> Garrett Green, 'Challenging the Religious Studies Canon: Karl Barth's Theory of Religion,' *The Journal of Religion* 75, 4 (1995): 476-477.

<sup>106</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 33.

<sup>107</sup> Indeed, Strenski has critiqued this definition of religion as being not a *definition* at all, but rather an *evaluation*. (Ivan Strenski, 'On 'Religion' and its Despisers,' in *What is Religion?: Origins, Definitions, & Explanations*, ed. Thomas A. Idinopulos and Brian C. Wilson (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 114) While Strenski perhaps has a point, what he seems to desire is value-neutral and completely philosophically- or empirically-derived definition of religion. This is precisely what Barth believes that he cannot offer if he is to define and discuss religion theologically, from the perspective of revelation. According to Barth, '...what we learn from God's revelation about the essence of religion does not allow us to make any but the most incidental use of an immanent definition of the essence of religion derived from elsewhere.' (Barth, *On Religion*, 53)

<sup>108</sup> It is clear, for example, that in §17, religion is a universally human reality, and that the various particular world religions are objective instantiations of religion in general, and can be considered and measured as such. The Christian religion, according to Barth, 'stands in a series along with other human faces...seen from this angle it is surely remarkable but not unique. (*On Religion*, 34) Greggs rightly acknowledges this: 'Barth seems to concede to Schleiermacher the universal nature of religion, and Christianity's belonging to that genus.' (Greggs, *TAR*, 26) Further, Barth implicitly affirmed the viewpoint of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* among others, by stating in §17 that religion is a 'human, historically and psychologically comprehensible phenomenon, into whose nature, structure and value one may enquire as in the case of other human phenomena...' (*On Religion*, 34) Others who rightly note that the liberal Protestant concept of religion was in view in §17 include Loy ('Relation of Christianity,' 95), Aagaard ('Revelation and Religion,' 158: 'religion is constantly understood in a liberal manner'), and Kraus (*TR*, 23: 'Die Rechtfertigungslehre ist es, die in eine tödliche Kollision mit dem neuprotestantischen Verständnis von der »christlicher Religion« gerät. In dieser Kollision wird Religionskritik erweckt.')

When, during this period, it came to question (1), Barth's position remained the same as it had been at the time of *Romans II*; if anything, it was presented more explicitly. Revelation and religion could in no sense be identified and, thus, the affording of roles to religion which properly belong to revelation alone, e.g., the roles of source, object and norm in theology, constituted the idolatrous replacement of revelation with religion. This kind of 'religionism,' according to Barth in §17, had a history within the theological tradition stretching back to at least Walaeus and the 1624 Leiden Synopsis,<sup>109</sup> and was carried on in more recent times within liberal Protestantism.<sup>110</sup> It is perhaps clearer in §17 than anywhere else that Barth believed that Protestant liberalism was guilty of this kind of idolisation of religion within theology, and that it was because of the kind of 'religionism' that it represented that the topic of religion had to be treated within theology.<sup>111</sup>

Barth's solution to the problem of idolatry resident within 'religionism,' long in place in practice, but clearly articulated in §17 as such, was the methodological affording of the roles of source, norm and object in theology to revelation, and thus, by implication, the displacement of 'religion' from those roles. Liberal theologians had spoken of and evaluated everything, including particular religions and their particular 'revelations' (among which they believed Jesus Christ ought to be ranged), from the perspective of religion. The way beyond this idolatry was, for Barth, for theology to speak of human religion (and, indeed, all else) from the perspective of revelation, i.e.,

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<sup>109</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 38-39.

<sup>110</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 46.

<sup>111</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 37-46.

Jesus Christ, and Holy Scripture<sup>112</sup> understood in its testimony to him: ‘It is basically a matter of re-establishing the order of the concepts revelation and religion in such a way that the relationship between them becomes comprehensible again as identical with that event between God and man in which God is *God...*’<sup>113</sup>

It is important to note that Barth spoke of re-establishing the order of the *concepts* of revelation and religion as the way beyond religionistic idolatry. As has been suggested previously in this work (especially in chapter 3), the logic of Barth’s thought was such that theologian could not possess revelation itself as he or she would need to do were he or she to be able to, in the strict sense, afford it the roles which it ought to hold within theology. Thus, in the strict sense, something other than revelation always held the roles that revelation should hold within human theology, and human theology was always, therefore, intrinsically idolatrous. The best that the theologian could do was to select his or her concepts, including those which would hold the roles of source, object and norm, in correspondence to revelation – in the way proper to and possible for the creature – and therefore have reason to hope that, by God’s grace, revelation would be given as theology’s object.

Barth could not have said that the theologian must overcome religionism by displacing the concept of religion with revelation as the holder of the roles of the source, object and norm in theology in the strict sense. He could only urge the replacement of

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<sup>112</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 51, 33. It is thus potentially misleading even to say with Green that Barth ‘secures [his argument] biblically’ (Green, ‘Introduction,’ 17) in his exegetical excursions in §17. Barth does not use Scripture simply to *secure* what he had already wanted to say about religion, but rather seeks to *derive* everything that he says about religion from Scripture.

<sup>113</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 52. Emphasis original. Similarly, Barth wrote in 1938 (*How I Changed my Mind*, ed. John Godsey (Edinburgh: Saint Andrews Press, 1969), 37, emphasis original): ‘Shall I say something about the change in my thinking about religion in the last ten years? Then let me say first of all that my thinking in any event remains at one point the same as ever. It is unchanged in this, that *not* so-called ‘religion’ is its object, its source, and its criterion, but rather, as far as it can be my intention, *the Word of God.*’

the concept of religion with a human *concept* of revelation, shaped by actual revelation. But since the human concept of revelation is infinitely different than revelation itself, just as is the concept of religion, those who heed Barth's admonitions find themselves no less complicit in the act of idolatry than the religionistic theologians. They, too, afford to that which is created a role which belongs properly only to revelation. The reason that Barth argued against religionism, and for a theology which utilises a concept of revelation in the places in which religionism utilises the concept of religion, was not that the former was intrinsically idolatrous and the latter was not. It was, rather, that, both of them being intrinsically idolatrous, the latter, unlike the former, *corresponded to* revelation itself, and, therefore, there was reason to expect that God in God's grace would give revelation to be its object, and that its idolatry would be overcome. When it is stated that Barth believed that theology must speak of religion (and, indeed, all else) from the perspective of revelation rather than *vice versa* if idolatry is to be avoided, it must be understood in this way: religion (and all else) must be spoken of from the perspective of revelation in the way in which it is possible for the creature to speak from the perspective of revelation: in creaturely correspondence to it, which in turn means from the perspective of a human concept of revelation shaped by actual revelation, such that one might have reason to hope in God for the overcoming of idolatry.

The fact that Barth sought to speak of religion only from the perspective of revelation in this sense, i.e., to offer a properly *theological* account of religion, in the *CD* §17, was determinative for his discussion of it, both formally and materially. Formally, it was because Barth sought to speak of religion from the perspective of revelation that his approach to it was not firstly phenomenological or philosophical. Barth even denied that his *definition* of religion was substantially influenced by

empirical data; he wrote that: ‘What we learn from God’s revelation about the essence of religion does not allow us to make any but the most incidental use of an immanent definition of the essence of religion derived from elsewhere.’<sup>114</sup> While the possibility of deriving any definition of religion (including the one Barth offers in §17) directly from revelation without reference to phenomena may seem doubtful, the major point remains: Barth was not interested, in his discussion of religion, in entering into a phenomenological study of the varieties of religious consciousness, belief and practice; his understanding of religion was determined *a priori* by what he believed he heard in revelation.<sup>115</sup>

Barth’s material judgments concerning the essence of religion in §17 must also be understood as attempts to speak of religion from the perspective of revelation: to bear witness to revelation in the way possible for human beings, and to interpret Holy Scripture. As will be seen Barth, in §17, levelled some very strong judgments against religion. He did not understand these as merely human judgments, but rather as human attempts to bear witness to the divine judgment heard in revelation.<sup>116</sup> According to him, what is said in theology about religion ‘can have nothing to do with a negative [or, indeed, a positive] value judgment. It contains no judgment based on religious studies or philosophy of religion...’<sup>117</sup> Rather, ‘we must allow [revelation’s verdict on religion] to

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<sup>114</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 53.

<sup>115</sup> D.T. Niles recounts that he once asked Barth how he knew that Hinduism was ‘unbelief’ (a term with which Barth labelled all religion in §17, as will be seen) given that Barth had never met a Hindu. Barth’s simple response was, ‘*A priori*.’ (Daniel Thambyrajah Niles, ‘Karl Barth: A Personal Memory,’ *South East Asia Journal of Theology* 11 (1969): 10-11. Cited in Pan-chui Lai, ‘Barth’s Theology of Religion and the Asian Context of Religious Pluralism,’ *Asia Journal of Theology* 15, 2 (2001): 247).

<sup>116</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 55, 56, 72.

<sup>117</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 55.

stand and be valid as *divine* judgment...'<sup>118</sup> 'It is by God's *revelation* in Jesus Christ and it *alone* by which this characterization of religion...can really be carried out.'<sup>119</sup>

Clearly, Barth's theology provides no license for the levelling of independent, human judgments against religion (whether from the perspective of mysticism or atheism, or some other), and has very little in common with them. Such critiques can never be finally effective in any case, for all human judgments originate from points within 'the magic circle of religion.'<sup>120</sup> In other words, all human beings – including the atheist and the mystic – are, for Barth, religious,<sup>121</sup> and so all human attacks upon religion come themselves from the perspective of religion in some form. Thus, human criticisms of religion, or even attempts to eradicate it, can never be successful because they always, ultimately, whether implicitly or explicitly, presuppose and recommend religion in another form. Truly penetrating and effective critique of religion can only come from 'outside the magic circle of religion,'<sup>122</sup> that is, not from human beings, but from revelation. It is revelation alone which 'signifies a real and dangerous assault upon [religion]...in comparison to which the books of mysticism and atheism can only be described as utterly harmless.'<sup>123</sup>

At the same time, Barth clearly did not believe that the fact of the exclusive efficacy of revelation's critique of religion ought to silence the theologian on the topic; on the contrary, since theology had to testify to revelation, it *demand*ed that the

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<sup>118</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 56.

<sup>119</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 72.

<sup>120</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 83.

<sup>121</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 83.

<sup>122</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 83.

<sup>123</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 72.

theologian (and, indeed, the Christian) testify to it, repeat it, explain it, and expound it.<sup>124</sup> While the judgment upon religion must be allowed to ‘stand and be valid as *divine* judgment’ on all religion, it must also ‘be made visible from time to time in the shape of specific devaluations and negations’<sup>125</sup> – as Barth himself made it in §17. Thus di Noia is perhaps misleading when he writes that, in Barth, ‘the judgment [on religion] is emphatically not one that is pronounced upon the world of non-Christian religions by Christianity and its representatives.’<sup>126</sup> This statement is accurate in that this judgment’s origin does not lie with Christianity and its representatives, and that any judgment upon religion cannot only be directed against non-Christian religions, for (as will be seen) the Christian religion is in solidarity with the rest, such that whatever is said about the rest must apply to it also. But having heard revelation’s judgment upon religion, and having first applied it to the Christian religion, Barth believed that Christians could and must re-pronounce it also over the world of non-Christian religions. More recently, Ensminger has made a similar claim to that of di Noia, to the effect that for Barth the critique of religion is a ‘*divine* judgment through revelation *without* a corresponding human judgment.’<sup>127</sup> Barth’s own statements that religion is ‘unbelief,’ ‘idolatry,’ and ‘works-righteousness’ are not *independent* human judgments, but what are they if not human judgments upon religion which seek to *correspond* to the divine judgment upon it?

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<sup>124</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 55.

<sup>125</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 58.

<sup>126</sup> Di Noia, ‘Religion and the Religions,’ 250.

<sup>127</sup> Sven Ensminger, *Karl Barth’s Theology as a Resource for a Christian Theology of Religions* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 69. Emphasis original. See also, similarly, Busch, *The Great Passion*, 141 and Kornelis H. Miskotte, *When the Gods are Silent*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 66-67.

While ultimately aiming to speak of the possibility and reality of ‘true religion’ in the CD §17, Barth’s evaluation of religion’s intrinsic essence (which was meant to be a repetition of that of revelation) was unequivocally negative; much more negative than it had been in *Romans II*. For while in *Romans II* Barth believed that religion was the experience of sin, idolatry and godlessness which revealed (like the law) sin, idolatry and godlessness as such, by the time of the CD §17 he had abandoned this idea. This shift was due to deeper changes in his understanding of revelation and its exclusivity which caused him to deny that even *negative* knowledge of God could be gained apart from revelation, and which have been described elsewhere in the present work.<sup>128</sup> No longer being able to understand religion as having the salutary effect of revealing sin and idolatry as such, he came to see the judgment of revelation upon the intrinsic essence of religion of even the most self-negating kind as being that it is merely a form of sin and idolatry. Barth’s answer to question (2), at this time was simply that religion *is* at its essence idolatry. Many commentators have failed to perceive the true nature of the shift in Barth’s evaluation of the essence of religion from positive (in *Romans II*) to sharply negative (in the CD §17) in general, and from seeing it as revelatory of idolatry and in that way salutary (in *Romans II*) to itself merely idolatry and therefore a necessary evil (in the CD §17), in particular.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> See 2.2.3.3. In §17 in particular, see Barth, *On Religion*, 60 for a description of Barth’s understanding of revelation as revealing its own exclusivity as the source of the knowledge of God. It is clear that by this time Barth understood revelation to be the sole source of both positive *and* negative knowledge of God – on the basis, he would no doubt argue, of revelation itself. Thus, (religious) existential experience could no longer provide even negative knowledge of God.

<sup>129</sup> Some have, for example, failed to perceive any shift between the evaluation of religion in *Romans II* and that in the CD §17, or have seen any shift as being superficial. Within this group are Friedrich Heiler, McCormack, Green, Braaten, and Kim. Heiler writes that, ‘Ein leidenschaftliches Anathem gegen Religion wurde von der Barthschen Theologie ausgesprochen,’ and cites *Romans II* as evidence. (*Erscheinungsformen und Wesen der Religion* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1961), 5) This is, however, to read Barth’s mature position back into *Romans II*. McCormack overstates the negativity of Barth’s evaluation of religion in *Romans II*, which is logical given the fact that he wrongly denies that Barth believed, at this time, that (properly religious) existential experience could offer true,

Revelation, for Barth, encountered human beings within the field of religion, and particularly the Christian religion. It is in that encounter, in which there occurs a ‘sublimation’<sup>130</sup> of religion by revelation, that revelation’s judgment upon religion may be perceived. The German term for sublimation (*Aufhebung*) as is now widely recognised, is poorly translated in the original English translation of the *CD* as ‘abolition,’ such that the title of the *CD* §17 is made to read, ‘The Revelation of God as

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negative knowledge of God and self and world in relation to God. (*KBCRDT*, 282-283; 260-261) Green, on the other hand, points precisely to the change in Barth’s thinking which undergirded the transition in his thinking on religion and its relationship to idolatry between the time of *Romans II* and the time of the *CD* §17: the shift from an existentialist anthropology, and a belief in the human existential experience of religion as capable of granting knowledge to the human being of his or her predicament before God, to a more thorough christocentrism, which would not allow that even this knowledge could be gained from any other place than in revelation. (Green, ‘Introduction,’ 9) He downplays the effect of this shift, however, when he states that ‘Nothing that [Barth] says about religion [in *Romans 7*] is incompatible with his later views,’ (Green, ‘Introduction,’ 9) and he repeats this judgment elsewhere: ‘It would be difficult to find an assertion in [*Romans 7*] that Barth would repudiate later.’ (Green, ‘Challenging the Canon,’ 476) In actuality, Barth’s rejection of the possibility of (religious) existential experience affording negative knowledge of God and self in relation to God had an enormous effect upon his evaluation of the essence of religion, and there are a number of statements which Barth made in *Romans 7* about religion that he would have to later repudiate, even if only implicitly, as a result of it. For example: ‘Religion compels us to the perception that God is not to be found in religion.’ (*Romans II*, 246) Carl Braaten also downplays the change in Barth’s evaluation of religion between the time of *Romans II* and that of the *CD* §17. He notes that, ‘A distinction between Barth’s earlier and later periods in speaking of the world religions can be observed,’ but then equivocates: ‘I am not prepared to argue that he changed his mind or contradicted himself, nor can I claim he repeated himself.’ (*No Other Gospel! Christianity among the World’s Religions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 53-54) In actual fact, as argued, there was a very significant change in Barth’s thinking between these two works. Kim, too, sees Barth’s view of religion as very negative in *Romans II* (see footnote 79 above) but downplays the negativity of it in §17. (*Über Religion*, 52-55) Some have understood the shift in Barth’s evaluation of the essence of religion from *Romans II* to the *CD* §17 the wrong way round, seeing it as a transition from a completely negative to a less negative evaluation of religion’s essence. An exemplar of this view is Zachhuber (‘Religion vs. Revelation,’ 312). It is van der Kooi who seems to most clearly understand the shift between *Romans II* and the *CD* §17 on this matter: he writes that while ‘Im zweiten Römerbrief ist der Ton noch beinahe liebevoll, sympathisch,’ ‘Wenn ich es richtig sehe, hat sich 1938 etwas verschoben. Die Religion ist jetzt zu einer *Gefährdung der Humanität* geworden.’ (‘Religion als Unglaube,’ 449) Others who seem to properly understand this shift between *Romans 7* and §17 include Osgood Darby Cannon III (‘The Concept of Religion in the Theology of Karl Barth’ (PhD Dissertation, Drew University, 1975), esp. pp. 110, 132) and Paul Knitter (‘Christomonism in Karl Barth’s Evaluation of the Non-Christian Religions,’ *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 13 (1971): 99-121, 106). Knitter sees Nürnberger’s (‘Glaube und Religion bei Karl Barth: Analyse und Kritik der Verhältnisbestimmung zwischen dem Christlichen Glauben und den Anderen Religionen in §17 der ‘Kirchlichen Dogmatik’ Karl Barths’ (Doktors der Theologie Dissertation, Philipps-Universität Marburg/Lahn, 1967) argument as correctly seeing the shift between *Romans 7* and §17 as owing itself to a shift from philosophical categories to more complete Christocentrism, but he critiques Nürnberger by stating that the latter failed to perceive the material difference that this made in Barth’s evaluation of religion. Knitter himself rightly sees that this shift led to a more negative evaluation of religion in §17 compared to that found in *Romans*.

<sup>130</sup> ‘Sublimation’ is the term used by Green to translate the German *Aufhebung* in his 2006 translation of §17, entitled *On Religion: The Revelation of God as the Sublimation of Religion*.

the Abolition of Religion.’ This translation wrongly gives the impression that Barth believed that the entrance of revelation into the realm of human religion meant only the destruction of religion by revelation.<sup>131</sup> In actual fact, while the idea of revelation’s *Aufhebung*/sublimation of religion does contain this negative aspect, it also contains a positive aspect though the latter has been frequently neglected.<sup>132</sup> As Green notes, while the term *Aufhebung* and its cognates indeed include the ideas of ‘abolish,’ ‘annul,’ or ‘suspend,’ they also include the meanings ‘to lift up,’ ‘to preserve,’ or ‘to save.’<sup>133</sup> Perhaps the best that can be done in English in order to communicate what Barth meant by referring to revelation’s two-sided sublimation/*Aufhebung* of religion is to speak of revelation’s *mortification and vivification* of religion.<sup>134</sup>

When revelation *mortifies* religion, according to Barth, it exposes it as being, at its very essence, idolatrous. Barth treated of this mortifying moment of revelation’s encounter with religion under the heading ‘Religion as Faithlessness [*Unglaube*].’<sup>135</sup> Indeed, it is Barth’s preferred manner of speaking to describe the mortifying of religion as being its exposure as essentially *Unglaube*. Yet this section could just as well have been entitled ‘Religion as Idolatry,’ because, as has been previously argued, unbelief and idolatry were, for Barth, two ways of describing the same reality, since unbelief in

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<sup>131</sup> As Christian Link (‘Der Religionsbegriff Karl Barths: Einleitung in KD I/2, §17,’ *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 19, 1 (2003): 10) rightly says: ‘Barth zielt in §17 keineswegs auf ein *Abschaffung* [abolition] oder auch nur Tabuisierung der Religion. Das thematische Stichwort der ‘*Aufhebung*’ meint etwas durchaus anderes.’ See also Wolf Krötke, *Der Mensch und die Religion nach Karl Barth* (Zurich: TVZ, 1981), 13.

<sup>132</sup> In, for example, Hendrik Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith* (London: Lutterworth, 1956), esp. pp. 185-196.

<sup>133</sup> Garrett Green, ‘Religion,’ in *The Westminster Handbook to Karl Barth*, ed. Richard Burnett (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 180.

<sup>134</sup> It is important, however, that one not read too much into these terms at this stage but, rather, let their meanings be filled out in the exposition below.

<sup>135</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 53-84.

revelation never takes the form of pure negation, but always takes the form, rather, of the substitution of that which is created for revelation: ‘...in religion man resists and closes himself off to revelation *by creating a substitute for it*,’<sup>136</sup> ‘putting a human contraption in place of the divine handiwork.’<sup>137</sup>

Barth argued that as revelation encounters religion it contradicts it ‘just as religion had previously contradicted revelation...’<sup>138</sup> If faith [*Glaube*] is the human action which corresponds to revelation, the fact that revelation contradicts human action within the realm of religion reveals that the latter, at least in the absolute sense, does not correspond to revelation, and is, therefore, *Unglaube*. Viewed differently, as revelation displaces that which religion had, in its *Unglaube* in revelation substituted for revelation, it reveals them to have been substitutes, and, therefore, religion to be idolatrous. Barth considered God’s revelation under two aspects: the cognitive, in which God offers Godself to human beings to be known,<sup>139</sup> and the reconciliatory, in which God reconciles human beings to Godself.<sup>140</sup> The *Unglaube* that is religion is the complete human failure to properly correspond to either aspect.<sup>141</sup> And, once more, this

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<sup>136</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 59. Emphasis added.

<sup>137</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 57.

<sup>138</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 59.

<sup>139</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 57ff.

<sup>140</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 64ff. Hartmut Ruddies correctly writes that, for Barth: ‘Offenbarung ist nicht nur in einem technischen Sinn die Voraussetzung von Gotteserkenntnis, sondern sie ist immer auch in einer substantiellen Weise Offenbarung des göttlichen Für-uns-Seins, Offenbarung der Versöhnung Gottes mit dem Menschen.’ (‘Christologie und Versöhnungslehre bei Karl Barth,’ *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 18, 2 (2002): 175)

<sup>141</sup> Avery Dulles (*Revelation Theology: A History* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 95), for one, understates matters when he writes that, for Barth, ‘...religion, even in a Christian context, is to some extent a perversion of revelation.’

*Unglaube* takes the form of the replacement of revelation in each of these aspects with that which is created, such that the essence of religion is, for Barth, two-fold idolatry.

Firstly, the *Unglaube* of religion that corresponds (or fails to correspond) to the cognitive aspect of revelation involves the refusal of the knowledge of God offered in Jesus Christ in the form of the establishing of a ‘wilfully and arbitrarily devised image of God’<sup>142</sup> in the place of Jesus Christ. Barth notes that, ‘Here ‘willfully and arbitrarily’ just means for the moment ‘out of [one’s] own means, [one’s] own insight, will-power and energy.’’<sup>143</sup> The particular ‘image’ of God that religion substitutes for the knowledge of God given in Jesus Christ may have merely conceptual existence, or also extra-conceptual existence; it is ‘that reality, seen or thought, in which man assumes and asserts something Real, Ultimate, Decisive beyond or even within his own existence, by which he in turn takes himself to be posited or at least determined or conditioned.’<sup>144</sup> It is as revelation encounters religion, and Jesus Christ is known to be the only image of God, that images of God universally erected in the practice of religion are seen to be false images of God, merely created substitutes for the revelation of God, and, thus, idols.<sup>145</sup> Throughout §17, Barth explicitly refers to this form of the *Unglaube* which is religion’s essence, the substituting of created images of God for God’s revelation, as idolatry [*Götzendienst*].

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<sup>142</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 33.

<sup>143</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 58. The connection between the religious concept of God and the speculative concept of God, and, therefore, also the concept of God of natural theology, is a close one. Jenson rightly states that, ‘By ‘natural theology’ Barth means the reflecting about God which occurs in the course of our *religious* quest.’ (*God After God*, 70. Emphasis added.) See also Christoph Kock, *Natürliche Theologie: Ein evangelischer Streitbegriff* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2001), 50.

<sup>144</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 58.

<sup>145</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 59.

Secondly, the *Unglaube* of religion that corresponds (or fails to correspond) to the reconciliatory aspect of God's revelation involves the replacement of that reconciliation with one's own moral striving, undertaken in service of the idol which one has fashioned. 'Religion is the realm of attempts by man to *justify and sanctify himself* before a wilfully and arbitrarily devised image of God.'<sup>146</sup> These efforts, according to Barth, most often take the form of, sacrifice, prayer, asceticism [and] morality.'<sup>147</sup> This replacement of the reconciliation with God offered in Jesus Christ is an ethical or practical form of idolatry, and Barth's analysis of it bears resemblance to Luther's critique of works-righteousness (which he cited at some length).<sup>148</sup> Barth did not specifically designate this phenomenon as idolatry in §17, and, at times, distinguished between it and the first aspect of religion's *Unglaube* by referring to the latter as idolatry and the former as 'works-righteousness.'<sup>149</sup> But there is no doubt that works-righteousness is also idolatry according to Barth's own definition,<sup>150</sup> and this in two ways. First, it ascribes to one's own works a role that properly belongs only to Jesus Christ: that of justifier and sanctifier. Second, the works themselves, in being acts of service to 'wilfully and arbitrarily devised images' as if they were God, ascribe to those images the role of God. It is again as revelation encounters human beings in the realm of religion, and God in God's revelation is seen to be the sole justifier and sanctifier (and the only one worthy of divine service) that the negative implications of

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<sup>146</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 33. Emphasis added.

<sup>147</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 66.

<sup>148</sup> Boulton, *GAR*, 164.

<sup>149</sup> See, for example, Barth, *On Religion*, 75.

<sup>150</sup> It is clear, also, etymologically, that this practical, lived ascription of that which belongs to God alone to some other aspect of created reality, and not simply the conceptual or physical formation of images, is in view in the NT biblical term εἰδωλολατρία.

this are also brought into view: that one's own efforts of works-righteousness were only creaturely substitutions for the true justifier and sanctifier, and that they were thus idols, and that the 'god' worshiped in one's efforts of works-righteousness was only a created substitute for the true God (and thus an idol).<sup>151</sup>

Barth did not specify the exact nature of the relationship between cognitive idolatry and the practical idolatry of works-righteousness. He confessed his ignorance as to which came first and generated the other, and also suggested that the question was relatively unimportant: 'Might sacrifice, prayer, asceticism, and morality and religion be more primitive than God and the gods? Who is to say? In face of these two possibilities we surely find ourselves in a circle that can be looked at and understood one way or the other with the same result.'<sup>152</sup> But even if chronological priority cannot be definitively assigned to either of these two forms of idolatry, it is clear that, for Barth, they stand in the closest of relationships to one another. They always exist together, and together constitute the essence of religion. The devising of an idolatrous image of God, if that image is truly regarded as God, implies service or worship of that image in some form; and because such images are unable to dispense grace to their devotees, dependent as they are upon those devotees for their own existence, the service and worship of them can only be a form of works-righteousness. Viewed from the other angle, works-righteousness requires its practitioners to posit an idolatrous image of God before whom they seek to justify and sanctify themselves, and to whom their efforts and strivings are directed, since any God who requires and accepts human attempts at self-justification can only be an idol. Since religion was, at its essence, idolatry in this two-fold way, and

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<sup>151</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 72.

<sup>152</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 66.

since all human beings participated, for Barth, in religion, all human beings were also, for him, religious *idolaters* – again, in this two-fold way: ‘Precisely this capacity to be in the world and to be human is, as man’s own capacity, identical with the capacity to devise and fashion gods and to justify and sanctify himself.’<sup>153</sup>

The Christian religion and its practitioners, far from being exempted from revelation’s critical, mortifying judgment upon all religions and religionists, are indicted by it first of all: ‘...it is incumbent upon us precisely as Christians to allow this judgment to apply first and most acutely to ourselves.’<sup>154</sup> The judgment of revelation, and therefore of the theologian, upon religion is ‘aimed not only at various others with their religion, but rather first of all at ourselves as members of the Christian religion.’<sup>155</sup> This is because it is the Christian religion in which revelation is received, and which is, therefore, most directly contradicted and revealed to be idolatrous by it. Since Christianity is, essentially and intrinsically, a religion like all others, the revelation that the Christian religion is essentially idolatry is indirectly, by extension, a revelation that the same is true for all religions. Since this is the pattern of revelation’s idolatry-critique of religion, it must also be the pattern of the idolatry-critique of religion of the theologian who seeks to bear witness to revelation: he or she must criticise the Christian religion as idolatry first and foremost, but must also, secondarily, level the same critique against all religion and religions. Christians are to understand the judgment of revelation on religion as applicable to other religions ‘only to the extent that we recognize

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<sup>153</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 83.

<sup>154</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 86.

<sup>155</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 55.

ourselves in them – i.e., to the extent that we recognize that the truth of this judgment of revelation applies to us and encounters us.’<sup>156</sup>

This being the case, two opposing interpretations of Barth on religion are both shown to be inaccurate. In the first place, there are some interpreters of Barth, such as Richardson and Parrinder, who claim that he did not think of Christianity as a religion at all, and that his critique of religion was not meant to affect Christianity, but was, rather, meant to be levelled only against other world religions.<sup>157</sup> Barth explicitly denied the idea that Christianity was not a religion:

These reflections could not, therefore, be understood as a polemic against the non-Christian religions that might have served as preparation for the proposition that the Christian religion is the true religion, so that our only further task would be to show that the Christian religion, in contrast to the non-Christian ones, is not guilty of idolatry and works-righteousness, hence is not faithlessness but faith, and hence the true religion—or to show (which comes to the same thing in the end) that the Christian religion is not a religion at all...<sup>158</sup>

Far from Barth seeking to protect Christianity from the critique that theology had to level against all religion in obedience to revelation, Barth held that Christianity was, properly, its primary object.

On the other hand, there are others who wrongly suggest that Barth’s critique of religion as idolatry was not meant to be levelled against particular world religions at all, but, rather, only against human *religiosity* as understood by liberalism. Forms of this

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<sup>156</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 86.

<sup>157</sup> See Alan Richardson, *Religion in Contemporary Debate* (London: SCM Press, 1966), 18; Geoffrey Parrinder, *Comparative Religion* (London: Sheldon Press, 1976), 48. See also Hans Strauss, ‘Krisis der Religion oder Kritik der Religionen?!?’, in *IIAPPHEIA: Karl Barth zum Achtzigsten Geburtstag* (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1966), especially p. 306.

<sup>158</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 86. Barth, later in life, would write, in apparent contradiction, ‘Das Christentum ist *keine* Religion.’ (‘Christentum,’ 182. Emphasis original.) Yet even this does not necessarily indicate a reversal of Barth’s position; rather, in this context, it seems that he was seeking to differentiate Christianity from other world religions in the same way that he did in §17: without denying that, considered according to its intrinsic features, it remained ultimately in solidarity with them.

misinterpretation of Barth have been propagated by Loy, Lai, Harrison, Aagaard and, to a lesser extent, Chestnutt.<sup>159</sup> As suggested above, Barth sought to criticise religion as described by liberal Protestantism. But he believed, still in keeping with liberalism itself, that the liberal (and especially Feuerbachian) conception of religion as the actualisation of a human capacity rightly identified the generative principle and core of all particular, empirical world religions, such that the latter also could, and, indeed, had to be, subjected to the critique of idolatry. That this was the case can be surmised from the way in which Barth moved easily, and without explanation, from discussing 'religion' to discussing particular world religions such as Christianity<sup>160</sup> and Pure Land Buddhism.<sup>161</sup>

Revelation mortifies all religiosity and all of its objective manifestations, revealing their intrinsic essence to be idolatry in this two-fold way. Yet revelation also *vivifies* the religion in the realm of which it is granted. Barth considered the religion

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<sup>159</sup> See Loy, 'Relation of Christianity,' 269; Lai, 'Theology of Religion,' 250; Peter Harrison, 'Karl Barth and the Non-Christian Religions,' *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 23, 2 (1986): 215; Aagaard, 'Revelation and Religion,' 158; and Glenn A. Chestnutt, *Challenging the Stereotype: The Theology of Karl Barth as a Resource for Inter-religious Encounter in a European Context* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 40.

<sup>160</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 34.

<sup>161</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 101-106. Knitter is thus right to say that, 'All that Barth says [in §17] about religion in general can apply to every religion.' ('Christomonism,' 106, n. 20) And DiNoia is right in saying that even though, in §17, 'At the centre of attention is *religion* –or, perhaps more accurately, religiosity – as a structure or element in human personal existence,' it is also the case that, 'More to the periphery, but certainly present, are actually existing human *religions* as social forms, comprising developed organizations and recognizable institutions (dogmas, rituals, and so on).' ('Religion and the Religions,' 246) Barth, during an interview late in his career (1964), made a comment that might be understood to suggest that his earlier criticism of religion was not addressed to particular world religions; when questioned concerning his statement that 'Religion ist Unglaube' he responded: 'Aber wenn ich von Religion rede, dann denke ich doch vor allem an Schleiermacher und an seine Folgen. *Vom Hinduismus und Buddhismus weiß ich doch nichts oder nur wenig.*' ('Interview von H.A. Fischer,' 145. Emphasis added.) If by this Barth intended to suggest that his critique of religion as idolatry did not apply to Hinduism and Buddhism (and it is not completely clear that this was his intention), then this is a revisionist understanding of §17 that does not fit with the textual evidence of §17 itself. That Barth, in conformity with Protestant liberalism, consistently understood 'religion' as a genus to which particular world religions belonged has been recognised and often, more recently, made the target of critique. See for example Geoff Thompson, 'Christianity and World Religions: The Judgment of Karl Barth,' *Pacifica: Australian Theological Studies* 7 (1994): 200-203.

which is vivified by revelation under the heading ‘True Religion.’ Though this second, positive aspect of revelation’s *Aufhebung* of religion has often been neglected,<sup>162</sup> it was, in Barth’s thinking, *for the sake of* the vivification of religion that God in God’s revelation mortifies religion, and, thus, it was for Barth with a view to the discussion of true, vivified religion that he had to discuss religion’s mortification. The flow of §17’s argument is towards the discussion of ‘true religion,’ and the negative assertions which Barth makes about religion should be understood as an attempt to specify negatively in what sense Christianity might be said to be the true religion. Further, §17 as a whole is situated within a broader section within the *CD*, the final paragraph of which is §18, ‘The Life of the Children of God.’ Within the latter, Barth wrote, ‘Since this section [which included §17] as a whole is concerned with revelation in its manward aspect, it is obvious that the object of this final discussion can only be man himself as the recipient of revelation, i.e., believing and perceiving man.’<sup>163</sup> The main goal of both §17 and the section in which it was situated was the exposition of the reality of true religion – religion which truly had to do with God. Barth’s critique of religion as idolatry must be understood in that light, and, therefore, as motivated even in its most negative moments by a fundamentally positive intention.

The possibility of true, vivified, religion is always only a possibility for God, actualised by the giving of revelation – unlike in *Romans II*, in which true and false religion were both human possibilities. At all times, all human religion remains, intrinsically and essentially, idolatry. When Ensminger states that ‘Barth never sees a

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<sup>162</sup> See Kraemer, *The Christian Faith*, 195-196.

<sup>163</sup> Barth, *CD I/2*, 362.

world without religion as attainable or even desirable'<sup>164</sup> he is correct in suggesting that religion, for the Barth of the *CD* §17, cannot be avoided, but wrong to suggest that, on Barth's terms, there is nothing desirable about the prospect of the abolition (in the sense of eradication) of religion: the essence of religion, after all, is unbelief and idolatry. But just as revelation justifies some intrinsically idolatrous doctrines of God, causing them to be more than merely idolatrous, so, too does God's gracious self-giving in revelation justify a certain form of religion, causing it to truly have God as the object of its thought and worship. Barth did not hesitate to specify that the form of religion for which God does this is the Christian religion: '*...the Christian religion is the true religion.*'<sup>165</sup> The Christian religion, for Barth, was not the true religion due to anything belonging to its intrinsic essence; not *contra* liberal Protestantism due to the fact that among the world religions it most fully instantiated and expressed religion in general: 'Not even the distinction of the church as the site of *true* religion, which is indeed given with revelation, is to be understood in such a way as to imply that the Christian religion as such were the fulfilled essence of human religion, or that the Christian religion was for that reason the true religion and fundamentally superior to the other religions.'<sup>166</sup> Nor was it the true religion even because it was a religion of grace (in the sense that it gives a human idea of grace a place of theological priority).<sup>167</sup> For Barth, Christianity was the true religion due to God's gracious election of it to be justified and the recipient of God's revelation. Its being the true religion depends wholly upon 'something that

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<sup>164</sup> Ensminger, *Resource for a Christian Theology of Religions*, 58.

<sup>165</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 85. Emphasis original.

<sup>166</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 53.

<sup>167</sup> For other religions can claim to be religions of grace in this sense. Most striking in this regard, Barth notes, are Yodo-Shin and Yodo-Shin-Shu Buddhism. (*On Religion*, 101ff)

happens to it quite apart from any aptitude or merit.’<sup>168</sup> For the very same reason that the theologian must criticise Christianity as idolatry first and foremost, he or she must also, in Barth’s thinking, affirm that Christianity is the true religion: because it is to the Christian religion that revelation is granted.

It is important to understand that, for Barth, revelation was never granted to the Christian religion in the sense that it became in any way its possession. Rather, it had, at each moment, to be granted afresh. ‘That there is a true religion is an *event* of God’s grace in Jesus Christ.’<sup>169</sup> Thus, there was no alteration to the intrinsic essence of Christian religion, such that it became capable of revelation, and intrinsically, even in part, non-idolatrous. The Christian religion was the true religion, in the same way that sinners are justified. As the justified sinner is always *simul justus et peccator*, so too was the justified religion always sinful and idolatrous, its righteousness forensic, alien, and imputed. Weinrich explains: ‘Wenn in theologischen Sinne etwas gerechtfertigt wird, bekommt es gerade nicht Recht, sondern ihm wird Recht zugesprochen...So wie der Sünder in seiner Rechtfertigung nicht Recht bekommt, so auch nicht die Religion.’<sup>170</sup> While the analogy of justified sinner was his most prominent as a way of explaining Christianity’s relationship to revelation, Barth also used a number of others, all of which communicated roughly the same point: Christianity, according to Barth, is the true religion due to the *creatio*<sup>171</sup> and *electio*<sup>172</sup> *continua* of God, and in analogy to

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<sup>168</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 85.

<sup>169</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 106. Emphasis added.

<sup>170</sup> Michael Weinrich, ‘Von der Humanität der Religion: Karl Barths Religionsverständnis und der Interreligiöse Dialog,’ *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 19, 1 (2003): 42. See also George Pfeleiderer, ‘Karl Barth: Theologie des Wortes Gottes als Kritik der Religion,’ in *Theologen des 20. Jahrhunderts: Ein Einführung*, ed. Peter Neuner and Gunther Wenz (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2002), 136.

<sup>171</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 108-109.

the reality of the *assumptio carnis*<sup>173</sup> and to the way in which the sun shines on a specific part of the earth, illuminating but not essentially altering it, while leaving the rest of the world in darkness.<sup>174</sup>

### **4.3 Critique and Conclusions**

A number of scholars including K. Ward and I. Strenski have criticised Barth's critique of religion as idolatry as expressed in §17 and as discussed above on the grounds that it is prideful, triumphalistic and/or imperialistic. Ward writes that Barth's theology of religion is 'a particularly clear example of human pride and self-interest,' which, 'enables one to dismiss others as of no account and so bask in the superiority of one's own possession of truth.'<sup>175</sup> Strenski claims that in Barth's §17 and in particular his discussion of Christianity as the 'true religion' he has 'imperialistic intentions'<sup>176</sup> and that Barth's analysis of religion is 'not only embarrassing, it is offensive to the dignity of the spiritual and religious lives of literally billions of fellow human beings.'<sup>177</sup>

These criticisms of Barth are, however, without ground, especially in light of the fact that Barth criticises *all* human religion, including the Christian religion, as being intrinsically idolatrous. That Christianity is the true religion emphatically does not mean, in Barth's thinking, that truth is its possession: '...our *Christianity*, just to the extent that it is *our* Christianity, a human work undertaken by us and applied to various

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<sup>172</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 111.

<sup>173</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 52.

<sup>174</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 117.

<sup>175</sup> Ward, *Religion and Revelation*, 17.

<sup>176</sup> Strenski, 'Religion and its Despisers,' 115.

<sup>177</sup> Strenski, 'Religion and its Despisers,' 116.

short and long-term goals...appears on the same level with the human works of other religions.<sup>178</sup> In the same reception of revelation which makes Christianity the true religion, Christianity learns that it is, intrinsically, on the same level as all other religions: like them, it is idolatrous. Thus, that which is the ‘possession’ of the Christian religion and its adherents is not truth, and there is, therefore no room, on the part of the Christian, for pride or a feeling of superiority *vis-à-vis* persons of other religions, but, rather, only for humility and gratitude for grace. Barth’s critique of religion is ‘offensive’ because it seeks to repeat the offense of the cross, which involves a revelation of the radical sinfulness of *all that is human* and the folly and idolatry of all human attempts to reach God apart from grace. Barth, in fact, places Christianity in solidarity with all other religions as much as is possible to do without denying the reformed tradition, and, indeed, the biblical witness to the fact that God’s grace is a discriminating, electing grace which selects particular recipients – namely, Israel and the Church.

A critique which must be levelled against Barth’s understanding of religion as idolatrous comes from a very different, and even opposing, angle. It is highly problematic that Barth spoke so strongly of the ongoing justification of true religion (in the sense of the imputation of righteousness), but not of its sanctification (in the sense of the impartation or infusion of righteousness and revelation), concepts which should always be considered together. Barth did speak of some form of the sanctification of religion. For him, the sanctification of religion means that it is ‘differentiated and singled out, stamped and characterised’<sup>179</sup> by the name of Jesus Christ. It is shaped by

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<sup>178</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 87. And Greggs is right to say that, for Barth, ‘In receiving revelation, revelation should not be thought of as becoming ‘Christian’ or ‘ours.’ (TAR, 30)

<sup>179</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 122.

revelation into creaturely correspondence to Jesus Christ, and this means for him that it is made to ‘serve the name Jesus Christ,’<sup>180</sup> and to be always concerned to ‘awaken and keep alive the remembrance and expectation of’<sup>181</sup> Jesus Christ. But none of this meant, for Barth, sanctification in the sense of the infusion or impartation of righteousness to religion, for this would, in turn, mean the complete or at least partial cessation of intrinsic idolatry within religion – something which Barth, who held that religion was always idolatry at its very essence, would not allow. The sanctification of religion meant, rather, for him, that while religion continued to be, at its essence, idolatry, its idolatry was ‘placed under the order of revelation.’<sup>182</sup>

If religion can be justified, then it can also be sanctified. And sanctification means more than sin and idolatry being placed under a different ‘order.’ It was Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonians, for example, that, ‘the God of peace, *sanctify* you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept *blameless* (ἀμείπτως) at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.’<sup>183</sup> This suggests that sanctification effectuates a change in one’s actual life, in that which one does and in that which one leaves undone, and that this change involves one’s actions being no longer worthy of blame. Surely this speaks of more than the possibility of being a sinner and idolater under a specific ‘order’; namely, it speaks of the power of God by which one can be delivered from sin

<sup>180</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 122.

<sup>181</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 122.

<sup>182</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 125. It was not the case for Barth, ‘...daß das alles nicht mehr *sein muß*, diese Selbstbehauptung und Selbstrechtfertigung in der Religion, weil Gott uns in sich selbst alles gegeben hat.’ (Adrianus van Egmond, ‘Triumph der Wahrheit und Triumph der Gnade. René Girard und Karl Barth über Offenbarung, Religion, Kreuz und Gott,’ *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 6, 2 (1990): 195). Revelation and righteousness were, for Barth, not *given*, but always *to be given*; thus, religion did always remain, intrinsically, idolatry, self-assertion, and self-justification.

<sup>183</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5.23, NIV. Emphasis added.

and idolatry. And there is at least a significant strand of the NT that presents a stark contrast between the essential character of a life prior to receiving God's grace in Jesus Christ and the essential character of that life after having received that grace. Paul wrote:

Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters [note that 'idolaters' are specifically included here, as one descriptor of what some of Paul's audience *used to be*] nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.<sup>184</sup>

Here sanctification is not presented simply as sinners and idolaters in particular being 'placed under the order of revelation'<sup>185</sup> but as the actual removal and casting off of sin and idolatry.

Righteousness is not only imputed to the one who receives Jesus Christ, but it is also imparted to him or her in sanctification, such that one is enabled at least to some extent to no longer be an idolater, an adulterer, etc. Once again, sanctification means the (at least partial) deliverance *from* sin and idolatry, such that the sanctified person or religion, which was once idolatrous and sinful is no longer so to same degree, or with the same level of consistency. The sanctification of religion means that the concepts of God and the practices of the religion in the realm of which revelation is given are not only imputed with righteousness, they are also imparted with righteousness, such that they become, even intrinsically, true concepts and true worship of the true God – and thus no longer, or at least no longer to the same extent, idolatrous.

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<sup>184</sup> 1 Corinthians 6.9-11, NIV.

<sup>185</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 125.

The fact that, as has been discussed, Barth's theology more broadly tended to reject the reality of infused righteousness, and the fact that Barth clearly desired to maintain that, intrinsically, Christianity was in complete solidarity with all other world religions, made it such that he could not accept this understanding of revelation's affect upon true religion. Barth's emphasis upon the solidarity of the Christian religion with other religions need not be completely jettisoned for the sake of the affirmation of the infusion of grace in sanctification; Christianity would still depend utterly on grace for what truth it did possess; and it would still undoubtedly also be, to some degree, sinful and idolatrous. Yet in failing to affirm the infusion of grace, both in the realm of religion and more broadly, Barth failed to fully bear witness to the efficacy of God's grace and revelation, which, as the NT also testifies, does not only impute righteousness, but also imparts it.

Barth's critique of religion as idolatry is of great importance for the question of the interaction between Christianity and other world religions. Its clearest implication is the same whether one upholds Barth's thought as he presented it, or whether one, against Barth, affirms not only the justification of the Christian religion but also its sanctification in the most complete and biblical sense. It is an oversimplification when Ensminger writes that, Barth in the *CD* §17 'did not have the relationship between Christianity and other religions in mind, but reacted against revelation being interpreted in the light of *religion* (singular) and not vice versa.'<sup>186</sup> That Barth did the latter is

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<sup>186</sup> Ensminger, *Resource for a Christian Theology of Religions*, 217. Emphasis original. In recent years it has been suggested (see Geoff Thompson, 'Religious Diversity, Christian Doctrine and Karl Barth,' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8, 1 (2006): 23-24) that Barth's statements in the *CD* §69.2 merit more attention than those in §17 when it comes to the question of the interaction between Christians and persons of non-Christian religions. It is unnecessary to attempt disprove this assertion here. It may merely be stated that (1) while §69.2 does indeed contain material which is relevant to the question of that interaction, there is no reason why the contributions of §17 to that discussion ought not also be considered in their own right, and that (2) that which is relevant in §69.2 does not contradict the contributions of §17 to that discussion, but rather, at most, further nuances them, as has been shown (see,

beyond dispute. But it has also already been argued that Barth understood his critique of religion as idolatry to apply to particular world *religions*, and the fact that Barth believed that this critique had implications for the interaction between Christianity and the world religions is made clear by the fact that, as will be seen below, Barth explicitly described what the foremost of those implications were: the necessity and urgency of Christian missions and evangelism to the adherents of non-Christian religions.

Recent emphasis on the possibilities for using Barth's theology of religion as a resource for inter-religious dialogue, however, may have obscured this most direct implication of Barth's critique of religion as idolatry for Christian interaction with persons of other world religions, and the one which he himself drew. Several scholars, in recent years, have sought to find in Barth's theology of religion a resource for inter-religious dialogue. Important works in this vein include Greggs' article 'Bringing Barth's Critique of Religion to the Inter-Religious Table,'<sup>187</sup> Chestnutt's book *Challenging the Stereotype: The Theology of Karl Barth as a Resource for Inter-religious Encounter in a European Context*,<sup>188</sup> and Krötke's article 'A New Impetus to the Theology of Religions from Karl Barth's Thought.'<sup>189</sup> Barth's theology of religion, as presented in §17 does indeed provide a resource for inter-religious conversation and dialogue. It reminds the Christian of his or her solidarity with persons of other religions (albeit solidarity in sin and idolatry), and ought, therefore, to engender attitudes of

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for example, Christoph Dahling-Sander and George Plasger, *Hören und Bezeugen: Karl Barths Religionskritik als Hilfestellung im Gespräch mit den Religionen* (Waltrop: Hartmut Spenner, 1997), 33-35).

<sup>187</sup> Tom Greggs, 'Bringing Barth's Critique of Religion to the Inter-faith Table,' *The Journal of Religion* 88, 1 (2008): 75-94.

<sup>188</sup> Chestnutt, *Challenging the Stereotype*.

<sup>189</sup> Krötke, 'A New Impetus.'

humility and openness towards them. At the same time, it does not ask the Christian to compromise his or her convictions merely for the sake of conciliation. It is precisely humility which does not involve this kind of compromise of one's convictions that is needed for genuine inter-religious dialogue and conversation.<sup>190</sup> Chung, if he has something more than a merely historical or factual point in mind, is thus incorrect to state that Barth's theology, 'does not inspire inter-religious dialogue,'<sup>191</sup> as is Kraemer when he states that Barth's theology, '...keeps religion and religions in their place, but it establishes no contact and no real encounters.'<sup>192</sup>

Yet Barth's theology of religion and, in particular, his idolatry-critique of religion, as he himself made clear, called, most directly and above all, for Christian *missions and evangelism* to persons of other world religions. It is remarkable that discussion of the implications of Barth's theology for Christian engagement with other religions has almost completely neglected to mention this; Krötke's recent article cited above, for example, though it contains a section entitled, 'Christian Faith's Encounter with Religions,' makes no mention of the need for Christian missions or evangelism. Chung goes so far as to state that, 'Barth is sceptical of any attempt of evangelising any ideologies, cultures and other religions...'<sup>193</sup> Not only was Barth not sceptical of

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<sup>190</sup> Francis Schüssler Fiorenza seems critical of Barth's theology of religion because, from its perspective, 'religions [will always] be viewed in one's own terms.' ('Religion: A Contested Site in Theology and the Study of Religion,' *Harvard Theological Review* 93, 1 (2000): 32) It is difficult to see how genuine dialogue with others can unfold unless one understands and describes reality from one's own perspective, in one's own terms.

<sup>191</sup> Paul Chung, 'Karl Barth and Inter-Religious Dialogue: An Attempt to Bring Karl Barth to Dialogue with Religious Pluralism,' *Asia Journal of Theology* 15, 2 (2001): 241.

<sup>192</sup> Kraemer, *The Christian Faith*, 193.

<sup>193</sup> Chung, 'Inter-Religious Dialogue,' 241.

missions and evangelism to persons of other religions, his theology of religion, and his idolatry-critique as levelled against religion, positively demanded them:

And just as [Christianity] has not taken this light and glory [i.e., the fact that it is the true religion] for itself, so also no one can take it away, and it and only it has the task and authority for *mission*, that is, to confront the world of all religions as the one true religion, to invite and call upon them with complete self-confidence to turn back from their ways, to turn to the Christian way.<sup>194</sup>

Other religions, for Barth, have been exposed by God's revelation as idolatry. He was willing to say elsewhere that 'If the ground of divine immanence is sought and supposedly found apart from Jesus Christ [and all non-Christian religions are in view here] it can signify only our enslavement to a false god.'<sup>195</sup> The Christian religion is thus compelled to mission, in the hope that those who are adherents of other religions might 'turn to the Christian way' and overcome idolatry. Of course, by inviting the non-Christian to 'turn to the Christian way,' the Christian is, for Barth, inviting him or her to leave behind one form of idolatry for another, for the Christian religion is also a religion, and therefore also has idolatry as its essence. The difference, for Barth, is that, within the Christian religion, one may expect to encounter God's revelation, and therefore to really know and serve the true and living God.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 120.

<sup>195</sup> Barth, *CD II/1*, 319.

<sup>196</sup> Barth's theology of religion cannot be easily fitted into the categories of 'exclusivist,' 'inclusivist' or 'pluralist,' where 'exclusivist' is understood to denote the position that truth and salvation are the possessions of the Christian religion alone, where 'inclusivist' is understood to denote the position that Jesus Christ is, and can be expected to be, present in non-Christian world religions, leading their adherents into truth and salvation (*à la* Rahner), and where 'pluralist' is understood to denote the position that all or most world religions are more or less equally valid paths to the attainment of truth and salvation (*à la* Hick). Harrison writes, in an over-simplified summary of the relevant secondary literature, which is nevertheless not without some foundation in fact, that 'Virtually all would agree with Alan Race, that Barth represents 'the most extreme form of the exclusivist theory.'" (Harrison, 'Non-Christian Religions,' 209; Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 11) Livingston and Fiorenza certainly agree: 'In Protestantism the position [of exclusivism] is expressed with particular force in the writings of the Dialectical theologians, especially by Karl Barth.' (James C. Livingston and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Theology of Religions: Christian Responses to Other Faiths,' in *Modern Christian Thought: The Twentieth Century*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition

One who takes Barth's theology of religion as a point of departure may infer a qualified affirmation of, and perhaps even summons to, inter-religious dialogue and conversation. But one must also say what Barth himself said explicitly in §17: and emphatic 'yes' to Christian mission and evangelism to other religions, in which human beings are held captive to idols.

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(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 471) But Barth is not an exclusivist without qualification; in the first place, salvation and truth are not at all the *possession* of the Christian religion, and Barth is, at least at certain points (see esp. the *CD* §69), open to at least the possibility of persons receiving the truth and salvation that is Jesus Christ outwith the Christian religion. At the same time, Barth is not simply an inclusivist. It is the *Christian religion* and it alone in which one may expect to encounter Jesus Christ consistently and normatively. It may be said with confidence that Barth is not a pluralist in Hick's sense. For a consideration of the reasons why Barth's theology is resistant to pluralism, see Keith E. Johnson, 'Divine Transcendence, Religious Pluralism and Barth's Doctrine of God,' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5, 2 (2003), esp. pp. 210-213. At the same time, the logic of Barth's thought tends toward universalism, i.e., the view that all are or will be saved. This has led D'Costa to claim, with justification, that, 'Barth overturns these categories by being an exclusivist, inclusivist, and universalist all at once.' (Gavin D'Costa, 'Theology of Religions,' in *Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918, Third Edition*, ed. David F. Ford with Rachel Muers (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 630) Barth may be characterised not as a *Christian* exclusivist, but as a *christological* exclusivist, who holds that knowledge of Christ is to be expected in an ongoing way in the *Christian* religion, and not in other religions. See also on this question, Trevor Hart's chapter 'Truth, the Trinity, and Pluralism,' in his *Regarding Karl Barth: Toward a Reading of his Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 1999), 117-138.

## Chapter 5: Conclusions

### 5.1 Summary of Idolatry-Critique, Idolatry, and the Idol in Barth's Theology

The theological critique of idolatry was an integral part of Karl Barth's attempt to bear witness to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as testified to by Holy Scripture. The only truly effective critique of idolatry was, for Barth, the critique of Jesus Christ himself who, in giving himself to human beings, displaces those aspects of created reality which human beings had previously held in roles which properly belong to him alone. Yet since Jesus Christ does, in giving himself to human beings, in this way reveal idols as such, Barth believed that theology, which must concern itself with testifying to and interpreting Jesus Christ's self-giving, must also contain a critique of idolatry. Not only Barth's idolatry-critique, but also his definition of idolatry (as the human act of substituting that which is created for God in God's revelation) and his understanding of the idol (as the created reality so substituted) were, he believed, derived from revelation and its authoritative witness, Holy Scripture.

It has been seen, furthermore, that Barth's understanding of the nature of the idol and (formally speaking) of the human act of idolatry underwent clarification and expansion, but little to no discernible, essential change, throughout his career. The unpublished §42, for example, was not excluded from the *CD* because Barth came to no longer understand the nature of the idol in the way in which he had described it there, as suggested, for example, by Wüthrich<sup>1</sup> and van Wyk.<sup>2</sup> The description of the nature of the idol offered in the unpublished §42 is, rather, perfectly reconcilable with Barth's description of the nature of the idol elsewhere, and the real reason why the unpublished

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<sup>1</sup> Wüthrich, *Das Nichtige*, 224.

<sup>2</sup> Van Wyk, 'Gatg,' 1595.

§42 was ultimately excluded from the *CD* remains an open question.<sup>3</sup> And it was because Barth's underlying, formal definition of idolatry remained constant that changes in his understanding of the material content of revelation elicited changes in his idolatry-critique. This has been demonstrated, for example, in the discussion in 2.2.3 of the way in which changes in Barth's material understanding of revelation elicited changes in his idolatry-critique as it related to natural theology.

Barth's critique of and aversion to idolatry played important roles in his discussion of a variety of topics, including his discussion of the knowledge of God, the doctrine of God, and religion. Within his discussion of the knowledge of God, for example, he rejected all natural theology on the grounds that it was idolatrous. Within the doctrine of God, it was a desire to correspond to revelation, and thereby avoid idolatry, which drove some of Barth's most innovative decisions *vis-à-vis* the theological tradition, and it was often through a critique of idolatry in traditional approaches to the doctrine of God that Barth argued negatively for the necessity of those decisions. When it came to Barth's discussion of religion, two of his major goals were to expose as idolatrous both the essence of religion and certain forms of its theological usage. Since 'religion' was, in his thinking, the generative principle and essential core of particular religions, Barth's critique of religion as idolatry was also meant to apply to particular religions, and to be understood as having implications for the interaction of the Christian with the adherents of non-Christian religions, the most direct of which was

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<sup>3</sup> The still unresolved discussion of and debate on the question of why Barth ultimately chose to exclude the unpublished §42 from the *CD*, which cannot be entered into here, has been carried out in the German secondary literature, and in particular in the following works: Stoevesandt, 'GG,'; Hailer, *Gott und die Götzen*; Plonz, *Die herrenlosen Gewalten*, 317-318; Wüthrich, 'Das fremde Geheimnis'; Wüthrich, *Das Nichtige*; Krötke, 'A New Impetus.'

the urgency of Christian missions and of enjoining the adherents of non-Christian religions to ‘turn to the Christian way.’<sup>4</sup>

## **5.2 The Relevance of Barth’s Idolatry-Critique for Contemporary Theology**

At a number of points throughout the present work it has become evident that Barth’s idolatry-critique raises, and suggests certain ways of answering, questions of great relevance to contemporary theology. Three of these questions will be raised once again here for further consideration.

### 5.2.1 The question of the propriety of natural theology

Barth’s critique of idolatry calls into question whether, and to what extent, contemporary Christian theology ought to offer its endorsement to natural theology. Barth’s idolatry-critique as levelled against natural theology suggests that Christian theology ought to deny the propriety of natural theology, and insist that the ‘god’ with which natural theology is concerned is not God. Many attempts to overcome the obstacle that Barth’s critique of natural theology as idolatry presents for the theological endorsement of natural theology have been based upon the idea that Barth’s critique was the product of extra-theological considerations – the socio-historical circumstances of 1930s and 1940s Germany<sup>5</sup> or unacknowledged (and now unacceptable) philosophical presuppositions,<sup>6</sup> for example. The true, theological foundations of Barth’s critique of natural theology as idolatry have not been sufficiently reckoned with,

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<sup>4</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 120.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Marquardt, *TuS*, 263; Webb, *RFT*, 168; Grant, ‘Unnatural,’ 99; Barr, *BFNT*, 116.

<sup>6</sup> E.g., Grant, ‘Unnatural,’ 96-98; Matthew Rose, ‘Karl Barth’s Failure,’ *First Things* (June 2014), <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/06/karl-barths-failure>.

and, in part for this reason, it continues to offer a formidable challenge to theological proponents of natural theology.

As has been seen in chapter 2, Barth's judgment that natural theology is necessarily idolatry emerged from deeply-rooted theological convictions – and especially from within his doctrines of sin and salvation. If Barth's doctrines of sin and salvation are accepted, natural theology is, in fact, necessarily idolatry. Barth's rejection of natural theology as idolatry will continue to stand as a significant obstacle to the Christian endorsement of natural theology until it is successfully challenged at its foundations within these doctrines. The present work has sought to demonstrate one problem among them, the correction of which makes allowance for a specific form of non-idolatrous natural theology, namely, that which is undertaken by the Christian who *has been* a recipient of special revelation.<sup>7</sup> If Christian theology is to give an even broader endorsement to natural theology, it will be necessary to go further in critiquing and correcting the foundations of Barth's critique of natural theology as idolatry in his doctrines of sin and salvation.

### 5.2.2 The question of the doctrine of divine incorporeality

Barth's critique of idolatry, further, should cause contemporary theology to question the traditional doctrine of divine incorporeality and the associated systematic spiritualisation of biblical anthropomorphisms. It has been recounted that, according to Barth, avoiding idolatry within the doctrine of God requires serious and sustained consideration of the anthropomorphisms and anthropoieticisms which are found within the biblical description of God and the rejection of that principle of spiritualisation. If it

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<sup>7</sup> See 2.3 of the present work.

is accepted that the avoidance of idolatry requires this, this would mean that the task for theologians working within the doctrine of God when it comes to the matter of biblical anthropomorphisms would not be to seek to understand and articulate their supposedly more real, spiritual significance, such that they themselves might then be discarded. It would be, rather, (1) to uphold and interpret them as genuine objects of inquiry and reflection in their own right, and, (2) to articulate in what sense God is corporeal, possessing an arm, a face, etc., on the one hand, and in what sense God is ‘Spirit’ (John 4.24), on the other, such that ‘corporeal’ and ‘spiritual,’ predicates of God, are not understood to be mutually exclusive. The idea that they need not be is not unknown to the theological tradition. Tertullian, for one, took it for granted that they were not: ‘For who will deny that God is body, even though ‘God is spirit’? For spirit is a particular kind of body in its own image.’<sup>8</sup> Articles by Paulsen<sup>9</sup> and Stroumsa<sup>10</sup> have further documented the presence of a strand of early Christian theology which affirmed the corporeality of God.

Departure from the traditional doctrine of divine incorporeality need not be understood to entail the acceptance of the kind of corporeal understanding of God which

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<sup>8</sup> Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, trans. Alexander Souter (London: SPCK, 1920), 42. Undoubtedly, it was a conception of ‘spirit’ influenced by Stoicism which Tertullian held, and which allowed him to understand ‘spirit’ as not being exclusive of corporeality.

<sup>9</sup> David L. Paulsen, ‘Early Christian Belief in a Corporeal Deity: Origen and Augustine as Reluctant Witnesses,’ *Harvard Theological Review* 83, 2 (1990): 105-116. Paulsen’s thesis runs as follows: ‘The view that God is incorporeal, without body or parts, has been the hallmark of Christian orthodoxy, but in the beginning it was not so...I show that ordinary Christians for at least the first three centuries of the current era commonly (and perhaps generally) believed God to be corporeal. The belief was abandoned (and then only gradually) as Neoplatonism became more and more entrenched as the dominant world view of Christian thinkers.’ (105) He further argues for an understanding of God as corporeal in the thought of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Melito of Sardis. (111-113)

<sup>10</sup> Guy G. Stroumsa, ‘Form(s) of God: Some Notes on Metatron and Christ,’ *Harvard Theological Review* 76, 3 (1983): 269-288. Stroumsa focusses upon rabbinic thought concerning corporeal anthropomorphisms, but also discusses the segment of the early Christian tradition which accepted corporeal anthropomorphisms within the doctrine of God without the principled attempt to spiritualise them.

applies the predicates of body, finger, hand, etc., to God univocally, such that it is thought that one, by the mere examination of, e.g., a human hand, can understand what it means that God has a hand. This is the type of affirmation of divine corporeality which existed in the popular religion of antiquity (and, indeed, in a widespread manner in early Christianity, if Paulsen is to be believed<sup>11</sup>), and which was rightly made the target of the early philosophical critique of religion and of the critique of early spiritualising Christian theologians.<sup>12</sup> On the contrary, the kind of affirmation of divine corporeality Barth's idolatry-critique calls theologians to consider has as a basic underlying assumption the idea that no concept derived from the created world can be univocally applied to God; nor, indeed, can any concept be applied to God even analogically apart from the instruction of revelation. Instead, the human being must be taught by revelation and Holy Scripture both which concepts to predicate of God, and how those predicates must be understood when applied to God. What it means that God has a hand can by no means be grasped by mere observation of a human hand. This point may be clarified by the assertion that the fact, according to Scripture, God has a hand, a face, a finger, etc., does not mean that God has 'flesh and bones,' just as (to answer a question of Wittgenstein's) the fact that God has an eye (2 Chron. 16.9; 1

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<sup>11</sup> Paulsen, 'Early Christian Belief in a Corporeal Deity.'

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata or Miscellanies*, trans. William Wilson (Savage, MN: Lighthouse, 2015). Clement, himself an incorporealist, wrote: 'Now, as the Greeks represent the gods as possessing human forms, so also do they as possessing human passions. And as each of them depict their forms similar to themselves...' and goes on to cite the critique of Xenophanes to the same effect. (517) Elsewhere, he gives an appreciative overview of the philosophical critique of ancient popular religion on the ground that it understood God to exist in the same form as human beings. (369ff) The kind of corporeal understanding of God that Xenophanes and Clement were concerned to contest should not be accepted. In the present day, this seems to be the understanding of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (the tradition from out of which Paulsen writes), whose *Doctrine and Covenants* (130.22) states that: 'The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man's; the Son also...'

Peter 3.12) does not mean that one ought to speak of God's eyebrows.<sup>13</sup> In both cases, Scripture asserts the former, but not the latter. To assert the latter on the basis of the former is to assume that God has a hand, a face, a finger, an eye, etc., in the same way in which human beings have them, and this is not warranted. If the traditional doctrine of incorporeality is left behind, the proper distance between Creator and creature should be maintained by the affirmation that the way in which a predicate applies to God – whether that predicate be spiritual or corporeal – is *analogous* to the way in which it applies to created being.

Further, if it is accepted that the avoidance of idolatry requires that the traditional doctrine of divine incorporeality and the systematic spiritualisation of corporeal images of God be left behind, this also would not necessarily imply that corporeal images should have a role within the doctrine of God which is equal to that of the non-corporeal, spiritual divine attributes – though it is also not clear *a priori* that they should not, or, indeed, that they should not have an even greater role than them. To settle the question of whether corporeal or spiritual predicates should predominate in the description of God, or whether they ought to be equally balanced, *a priori*, is to allow a non-revealed principle to usurp the proper place of revelation, and, therefore, to commit idolatry. If idolatry is to be avoided, Barth would urge, revelation and Holy Scripture must settle this question.

### 5.2.3 The question of metaphysics in theology

Barth's critique of idolatry, further, raises, and suggests a way of answering, the question of metaphysics within theology. In recent years there has emerged, from within

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<sup>13</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1966), 71: 'Are eyebrows going to be talked of, in connection with the Eye of God?'

certain quarters, a call to rid theology in general, and the doctrine of God in particular, of metaphysics, at least partially on the grounds that metaphysical images of God are idols. Exemplary of this call is Kevin Hector's 2011 book *Theology without Metaphysics*,<sup>14</sup> throughout the course of which Hector links metaphysical doctrines of God with idolatry. Barth's evaluation of metaphysics and their relationship to idolatry gives contemporary theologians reason to be circumspect regarding such calls.

While Barth believed that the use of metaphysics in theology and the doctrine of God in particular was, strictly speaking, always idolatrous, he also believed that the same was inevitable. The most important question, for Barth, was whether a particular doctrine of God was metaphysical in the right way – i.e., was a venture in metaphysics which corresponded to revelation – and it might, therefore, be hoped that God would give Godself to be the object of its description and its victory over idolatry. Barth's theology raises the question of whether calls to dispense with metaphysics are not misleading in suggesting that metaphysics can be avoided, and whether such calls are not always, necessarily, ultimately calls only for the leaving behind of a specific form of metaphysics, and (even if only implicitly) for the acceptance of another.

In the case of Hector, early on in his book he admits that he is not really attempting to argue for a theology free from metaphysics in the broadest sense of that term (the sense which Barth usually assumed), but rather only a certain type of metaphysics,<sup>15</sup> namely, what he calls 'essentialist-correspondentist metaphysics.'<sup>16</sup> While Hector affirms that his proposals may be understood as a revised form of

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<sup>14</sup> Kevin Hector, *Theology without Metaphysics: God, Language and the Spirit of Recognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Hector, *Theology without Metaphysics*, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Hector, *Theology without Metaphysics*, 9.

*metaphysics*,<sup>17</sup> he clearly believes that they lead to the *avoidance* of idolatry,<sup>18</sup> and he critiques as idolatrous, throughout his book, only the specific type of metaphysics that he has in mind in using that term. If it be granted, as in the case of Hector, that the call to dispense with metaphysics within theology can ultimately only be a call to dispense with a certain kind or certain kinds of metaphysics (namely, those which are idolatrous), Barth's critique of idolatry poses the further question of whether the problem of idolatry might be a problem not with a certain kind of metaphysics, but, rather, with metaphysics themselves, such that the *a priori* dispensing with a certain form of metaphysics cannot aid in the task of overcoming idolatry.<sup>19</sup> A serious reckoning with Barth's idolatry-critique in relation to metaphysics causes one to ask seriously whether it might be salutary for theology to give up on the attempt to overcome metaphysical idolatry by seeking to jettison either metaphysics in general or particular forms of it which are purportedly (particularly) idolatrous, and to, rather, embrace the fact that theology is unavoidably an exercise in metaphysics, dependent upon divine grace for the overcoming of the idolatry typically resident therein.

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<sup>17</sup> Hector, *Theology without Metaphysics*, 3.

<sup>18</sup> Hector, *Theology without Metaphysics*, 211.

<sup>19</sup> Barth would claim that all metaphysics are, as such, intrinsically idolatrous, but that metaphysics can be undertaken in correspondence to revelation and thereby have hope that God will give Godself to be their object and their victory over idolatry, and thus that the question of which forms metaphysics are to be used in theology cannot be determined *a priori*. The present work, though it suggests something slightly stronger, namely, that metaphysical efforts, when they are undertaken in service of revelation, can be intrinsically non-idolatrous, nevertheless ultimately suggests the same thing: that which forms of metaphysics should and should not be used in theology and the doctrine of God should not be based on an *a priori* determination that a certain form of metaphysics is idolatrous (since *a priori*, not taken up and transformed as part of the attempt to testify to revelation, all metaphysics are idolatrous), but, rather, that the use or non-use of a certain form of metaphysics can only be determined by whether or not the ongoing attempt to bear obedient witness to revelation requires one to take it up.

### **5.3 The Example of Barth's Idolatry-Critique**

Barth's idolatry-critique should be considered not only with an eye to the questions it raises and helps answer, but also with an eye to the example that it offers, for contemporary theology. Barth's understanding of idolatry and his idolatry-critique are marked, above all, by the fact that they are derived from concrete, historical, special revelation – Jesus Christ as testified to by Holy Scripture – and that his idolatry-critique has as its goal bearing witness to the uniqueness of that same revelation. Idolatry, for him, must be defined and critiqued as the replacement of *God's self-giving in Jesus Christ*.

In this, Barth's idolatry-critique and his understanding of idolatry differ rather widely from those of thinkers like Paul Tillich, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and, more recently, Mark Johnston. Idolatry, in these thinkers is, de-particularised (from the perspective of Barth), and understood not as the replacement of Jesus Christ with a substitute, but rather as the replacement of, or, more generally, as a sin against, a more abstract conception of deity or true religion. Thus Tillich's criticism of idolatry, which is born of an attempt to bear witness not to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, but, rather, to the transcendence of 'the Holy': 'All idolatry is nothing else than the absolutizing of symbols of the Holy, and making them identical with the Holy itself.'<sup>20</sup> For Tillich, the Holy is not Jesus Christ; instead, Jesus Christ is one such symbol of the Holy, the identification of which with the Holy is idolatry.<sup>21</sup> Thus also Cantwell Smith's 1987 argument that idolatry in the sense of false worship does not exist, since all human worship is worship of 'the Transcendent,' the only true idolatry being the absolutisation

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<sup>20</sup> Paul Tillich, 'Religious Symbols and our Knowledge of God,' *The Christian Scholar* 38, 3 (1955): 193.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Tillich, *The New Being* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 133.

of one religion or theology over and against the others.<sup>22</sup> And thus, more recently Mark Johnston's claim in his 2009 book *Saving God: Religion after Idolatry*, that idolatry is, among other things, 'the attempt to evade or ignore the demanding core of true religion: radical self-abandonment to the Divine as manifested in the turn toward others and toward objective reality.'<sup>23</sup>

Less particular definitions of idolatry like these (and their corresponding forms of the critique of idolatry) undoubtedly carry certain advantages with them. Most notably they seem, at least on the surface, to not only not detract from, but in fact to help promote, inter-religious and inter-disciplinary dialogue and cooperation. The theological critique of idolatry thus understood, far from necessarily implicating the forms of worship and conceptions of deity of other world religions and therefore being a potential impediment to inter-religious dialogue can, in fact, become a grounds of inter-religious agreement, as long as one's definition of 'the Holy,' 'the Transcendent,' or true religion, is broad enough to include the deity and the religion of persons of other religions – as is indeed the case in Tillich, Cantwell Smith, and Johnston. And according to such a conception of idolatry, far from, for example, philosophical conceptions of deity having to be judged as idolatrous from the perspective of theology, philosophical and theological forms of idolatry-critique can be allies.

While it is not difficult to understand why this state of affairs might be desirable, Barth's particularistic definition and critique of idolatry calls on theologians to consider whether fidelity to Jesus Christ as testified to by Holy Scripture as the source and object

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<sup>22</sup> See Wilfred Cantwell Smith, 'Idolatry: In Comparative Perspective,' in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Understanding of Religions*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 53-68.

<sup>23</sup> Mark Johnston, *Saving God: Religion after Idolatry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 24. A particularly notable recent analysis of idolatry which does not de-particularise the critique of idolatry is Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit's book *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

of theology might call for defining idolatry in a manner more akin to his own definition. Not only does Barth exemplify a particularistic understanding and critique of idolatry which contrasts with these de-particularised versions, his version of the critique of idolatry would also implicate these de-particularised ones in itself. Since Jesus Christ is the proper source and object of all theology according to Barth, he would have understood theological idolatry-critiques which are driven by reflection upon and the desire to bear witness to more abstract conceptions of deity or true religion to have an idolatrous substitution already undergirding them. It was, for Barth, only through idolatry-critique derived more strictly from Jesus Christ and Scripture that one could hope for the true overcoming of idolatry.

Adopting a particularistic theological critique of idolatry *à la* Barth could complicate (though it would not eliminate) the prospects for inter-disciplinary and inter-religious dialogue. It would likely mean, as it did in Barth's own thinking, that the critique of idolatry would have to be levelled against the world of non-Christian religions, and against conceptions of deity derived otherwise than from Jesus Christ and Holy Scripture (as, for example, philosophical conceptions of God, by definition, are).<sup>24</sup> It would likely mean, further, that missions to persons of other religions would come to take priority over inter-religious dialogue. Yet, in the question of how the theological critique of idolatry should be understood, the desire to not problematise the prospects for extra-theological conversation should surely not be more pressing than the desire to remain faithful to theology's object. The important question implicitly raised by Barth,

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<sup>24</sup> Barth himself clearly understood this. It has been seen particularly in chapter 3 that Barth evaluated philosophical conceptions of deity as idolatrous, and, further, it has been seen in chapter 4 that Barth believed that his critique of idolatry had to be levelled not just against 'religion' but also against particular world religions (*contra* Loy, 'Relation of Christianity,' 269; Lai, 'Theology of Religion,' 250; Harrison, 'Non-Christian Religions,' 215; and Aagaard, 'Revelation and Religion,' 158).

once more, is whether or not such faithfulness might require adopting a particularistic critique of idolatry like his own.

#### **5.4 A Problem with Barth's Idolatry-Critique**

Even if Barth's particularistic understanding and critique of idolatry is accepted in general, it need not necessarily be accepted in all its details. A problematic aspect of his understanding of idolatry is that it seems that, according to it, all human activity is, intrinsically, wholly idolatrous. In chapter 2 it was argued that Barth was mistaken in believing that the critique of idolatry had to be levelled against all natural theology – including natural theology undertaken by the person who has been a recipient of special revelation. In chapter 3 it was argued that Barth was mistaken in holding that all human doctrines of God are, without exception, wholly idolatrous intrinsically. And in chapter 4 it was argued that Barth was mistaken in claiming that no religion – including the 'true religion' – could ever be intrinsically true, but that all religions are, rather, always wholly idolatrous intrinsically. For the same reason that Barth held natural theology, human doctrines of God, and all religion to be intrinsically idolatrous, he also held all human activity in general to be intrinsically idolatrous: namely because, due to effects of the fall, God cannot be the intrinsic object of any human worship (and all human activity is worship) and, therefore, some substitute must be.

Idolatry, for Barth, could be overcome in the event of the divine act, but it was not abrogated or destroyed (either in whole or in part) within actual human life, i.e., within the realm of concrete human action. That idolatry is *never abrogated or destroyed* within actual human life, or, phrased positively, that all human action is intrinsically idolatrous, means that human thought, speech, and action, always,

considered according to their intrinsic nature, afford to that which is not God in God's revelation roles which belong only to God in God's revelation. That idolatry can nevertheless be *overcome* means that God, in the event of revelation, comes to possess those roles *in spite of this fact*. In other words, revelation causes human worship to have God in God's revelation as its object not by intrinsically altering it, at least not in a way that perdures outwith the event of revelation, such that God becomes its intrinsic object and the ability to truly worship God becomes a human possession (destroying or eliminating idolatry). Rather, in the event of revelation it is granted to human worship to have God as its object, in spite of the fact that its intrinsic object is not God (overcoming idolatry).

The fact that, on Barth's account, all human activity is, intrinsically, wholly idolatrous is the product of a deficiency in his hamartiology and soteriology: namely, his unwillingness to understand sanctification as involving infused or imparted grace or righteousness, the human reception of which affects not just the momentary overcoming of idolatry, but also its elimination by way of the perduring alteration it makes to the intrinsic features of human life and worship. To be sure, Barth could speak of sanctification, and even of a resultant human righteousness.<sup>25</sup> Grace did, for him, bring about a perduring alteration in the intrinsic character of human action, speech and thought, causing them to 'correspond' to itself.<sup>26</sup> This human correspondence, or human righteousness brought about by sanctification, is, however, held by Barth to exist in 'unconquerable distinction' from divine righteousness.<sup>27</sup> In fact, in light of the

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<sup>25</sup> See especially Barth, *TCL*, §78, which is entitled, 'The Struggle for Human Righteousness.'

<sup>26</sup> Once more see Barth, *TCL*, §78 for an example of Barth's use of the language of human 'correspondence' to revelation or grace to describe the reality created in the human moral life by grace.

<sup>27</sup> Barth, *TCL*, 264-265. See also pp. 244-245.

foregoing argument of the present work, the human righteousness or correspondence to grace which is the result of sanctification should be understood to be, in Barth, ultimately a particular form of unrighteousness, sin and idolatry – unrighteousness, sin and idolatry ‘placed under the order of revelation’<sup>28</sup> – and not, to any degree, their elimination.

This denial of the impartation of righteousness on Barth’s part has wide-ranging implications for his theology as a whole, since his soteriology provides the basic pattern for much of what he says concerning the encounter of God in God’s revelation and the world – and, therefore, what he believes the theologian must say about the world. Much of Barth’s discussion of the encounter between God in God’s revelation and the created world (whether in the realm of theology, the realm of religion, or some other) may be understood as the strict application of the reformed doctrine of justification without (and, at times, even with an explicit repudiation of the propriety of) a corresponding application of the doctrine of sanctification as infused or imparted righteousness. Thus Barth’s misstep in denying sanctification as infused righteousness very likely had consequences not only for his idolatry-critique as deployed within the realms of the doctrine of the knowledge of God, the doctrine of God, and the discussion of religion, but also for what he said on a number of other topics (e.g., ecclesiology). Barth’s soteriology, and his doctrine of sanctification in particular, have been the subject of a good deal of secondary literature,<sup>29</sup> but the apparent absence of a conception of

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<sup>28</sup> Barth, *On Religion*, 125. Even in *TCL*, §78, where Barth appears at his most positive concerning the possibility of human righteousness, he makes sure to clarify that, ‘The only point is that in spite of their situation [that of those who practise human righteousness] of shared guilt and oppression they have been required and empowered to pray for the coming of the kingdom. This is what differentiates them from all other people.’ (267)

<sup>29</sup> Works of secondary literature which address the topic of Barth’s soteriology, and specifically his doctrine of sanctification, include, among others, Fred H. Klooster, ‘Aspects of the Soteriology of Karl Barth,’ *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 2 (1959): 6-14; John Webster, *Barth’s Ethics*

sanctification as infused righteousness in Barth is still in need of critique and correction: not only because of its implications for what would traditionally be discussed under the heading of soteriology, but also because of its implications for Barth's theology more broadly.<sup>30</sup>

For the present, it must suffice to say that Barth's problematic doctrine of sanctification caused him to arrive at problematic conclusions within his discussion of idolatry: especially his assertion of its utter inescapability. Whether or not one accepts Barth's particularistic understanding and critique of idolatry, Barth's doctrine of sanctification, which denies imparted righteousness should not be accepted, nor should his associated claim that idolatry can never be abrogated or eliminated in the actual life of the human being, to any degree. Rather, even if one accepts Barth's very strong doctrine of the depravity of humanity *post-lapsum*,<sup>31</sup> one should also affirm that sanctification reverses the effects of the fall, and that, as a result of encountering grace and revelation, human beings may become *no longer* depraved, sinful or idolatrous, or at least no longer so to the same degree or with the same level of consistency. By the

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*of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995; John Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998); Nigel Biggar, *The Hastening that Waits: Karl Barth's Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Adam Neder, *Participation in Christ: An Entry into Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009); Sonderegger, 'Sanctification as Impartation in the Doctrine of Karl Barth'; Daniel L. Migliore, 'Participatio Christi: The Central Theme of Barth's Doctrine of Sanctification,' *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 18,3 (2002): 286-307; George Hunsinger, 'A Tale of Two Simultaneities: Justification and Sanctification in Calvin and Barth,' *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 18, 3 (2002): 316-338; Clifford Blake Anderson, 'The Problem of Psychologism in Karl Barth's Doctrine of Sanctification,' *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 18, 3 (2002): 339-352; Nimmo, *Being in Action*; Ethan A. Worthington, *The Claim of God: Karl Barth's Doctrine of Sanctification in His Earlier Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015).

<sup>30</sup> Perhaps, too, some might want to take issue with Barth's even more fundamental decision to make soteriology (narrowly defined as the doctrines of justification and sanctification) the pattern for what theology must say about the encounter of God in God's revelation with the world in general.

<sup>31</sup> This, of course, is not beyond questioning, and some may find it necessary to follow in the steps of Alan M. Fairweather (*The Word as Truth: A Critical Examination of the Christian Doctrine of Revelation in the Writings of Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth* (London: Lutterworth, 1944), 54ff) by also critiquing it.

impartation or infusion of grace and revelation, human knowledge of God can truly and intrinsically be knowledge of *God*, and not knowledge of an idol; human doctrines of God, truly and intrinsically doctrines of *God*, and not of an idol; human religious attempts to conceptualise God truly conceptualisations of *God*; and human religious-moral strivings truly and intrinsically acts of worship of and bearing witness to *God*. And Christian theology, since revelation is truly imparted to it, can displace idols, not with another idol, but with revelation.

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