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WHERE IS KARL BARTH IN MODERN EUROPEAN HISTORY?*

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Anglophone historians of modern Europe know Karl Barth primarily as the intellectual leader of the anti-Nazi Church Struggle and the principle author of the Barmen Declaration of 1934, which spoke a dramatic "No" to National Socialism's attack on the German churches. But Barth was also arguably the most important—and most prolific—theologian of the twentieth century. Aside from his unfinished magnum opus, the fourteen-volume *Church Dogmatics*, he published more than one hundred books and articles, and he quite literally wrote until the day he died in 1968.[1] Barth's output has elicited an equally impressive secondary literature, produced mostly by students of theology and amounting to around fourteen thousand titles in twenty-five languages.[2] As might be expected, theologians differ in their interpretations of Barth, seeing him as a formative voice in "neo-orthodox" Protestantism,[3] a left-wing socialist,[4] a fitting subject of deconstructionist philosophical theology,[5] a thinker who showed the way

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1 Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1975), 497–9.

2 Hans-Anton Drewes, "Theologie im Umbruch: Ein Heidelberger Symposium zu Karl Barth," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 11 Nov. 2005. Thanks to Ulrich Rosenhagen for making this source available to me.

3 Richard H. Roberts, "The Reception of Karl Barth in the Anglo-Saxon World: History, Typology and Prospect," in S. W. Sykes, ed., *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 140–41.

4 Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, *Theologie und Sozialismus: Das Beispiel Karl Barths* (Munich: Kaiser, 1972).

5 Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

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"past the modern,"[6] or a "critically realistic dialectical theologian."[7] In view of this record it may come as a surprise to find that until recently the Swiss was still "habitually honored but not much read," as theologian George Hunsinger wrote in 1991. Hunsinger was not the only observer to see that Barth's work was never fully integrated into the corpus of theological culture in Europe and the United States despite the scholarly interest in his thought. This situation may be changing, as a transatlantic "Barth renaissance" now gathers momentum, nearly forty years after the great theologian's death.[8]

The theological reception of Barth may be of only tangential interest to students of modern European intellectual history, but is this disinterest justified? It is significant to point out that Barth was as important in his field as Adorno, Freud, Wittgenstein, Weber, Heidegger, or Saussure were in theirs.[9] Whereas these thinkers have garnered much attention outside their specialties, the full compass of Barth's *oeuvre* remains relatively unknown to intellectual history. Barth was a theologian above all, but he was also a pastor, a moral philosopher, and a public intellectual. He was convinced that theological writing was always political writing. His position was that all human social endeavor, from economics to art, must be understood in relation to God's objectivity, and that any form of "God-talk," whether it took place in theological faculties or the public square, encompassed all human history. He cultivated this self-image through unceasing teaching and writing that resonated well beyond systematic theology. For Barth, theology was both a scientific discipline and a form of cultural knowledge, a template for understanding social endeavor, not only the expression of belief or the articulation of dogma; when he discussed "God and man" in the world, he meant world, just as he meant God and humankind. A distinguished historian of theology once argued that Barth's *Church Dogmatics* created a "counter-concept,"

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6 Michael Trowitzsch, *Über die Moderne hinaus. Theologie im Übergang* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999).

7 Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909–1936* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995).

8 George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 27; John Webster, *Barth*, 2nd edn (London: Continuum, 2004), 1; Karl Barth, *How I Changed My Mind* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1966), 43; Michael Beintker, Christian Link, and Michael Trowitzsch, eds., *Karl Barth in Deutschland (1921–1935): Aufbruch–Klärung–Widerstand* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2005); Bruce L. McCormack, "The Barth Renaissance in America: An Opinion," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 23/3 (2002), 337–40.

9 Webster, *Barth*, 1. I leave aside the more specialized subfield of the history of theology; see Bruce L. McCormack, "Die theologiegeschichtliche Ort Karl Barths," in Beintker, Link, and Trowitzsch, *Karl Barth in Deutschland*, 15–40.

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or even a "counter-world," to modern thought.[10] If that is the case, then surely Barth's writings merit more attention from historians outside theology or Church history than they have had until now.

The reasons for Barth's narrow foothold in the historical narrative require separate treatment, but two issues might be raised by way of introduction. First, scholarship's continued interest in the Holocaust is a central factor shaping Barth's reception among historians. Why indeed should Barth not emerge as a central figure at this historical moment in light of the dominant narratives of modern German history? Yet as we know, the history of twentieth-century Germany is always in danger of allowing this perspective to overwhelm research and to consider all lines of historical analysis primarily as they flow through the trauma of Nazi genocide. Scholarship on the Church Struggle has an analogous character. Recent works have cast a more critical eye at the German churches, charging them with sins of commission, not just omission, as much earlier research had.[11] Barth has not escaped this critical view as his theology in the 1930s is said to have been ambivalent toward Judaism and too late in recognizing Nazi anti-Semitic persecution. Nonetheless, as with scholarship on so many intellectual figures from the interwar era, presentist concentration on failure diminishes our understanding of the context in which he worked and the evolution of his thinking. It is arguable, for example, that "Barth's leftist politics" cannot be easily derived from his "Christocentric dogmatics," as Shelley Baranowski states for the 1930s. [12] If one avoids focusing too exclusively on the flawed Barmen Declaration, and instead takes a more developmental view of Barth's political theology, then the association between Barth's non-ideological leftism and his Christocentrism becomes more explicable.

A second reason for Barth's paradoxical hiddenness is that the insistent secularism of much historical research casts a shadow over Christian thinkers in twentieth-century Europe, especially in recent American historical writing. This is attributable in part to an ideological disinclination toward studying matters

[10] Trutz Rendtorff, "The Modern Age as a Chapter in the History of Christianity: Or, The Legacy of Historical Consciousness in Present Theology," *Journal of Religion* 65/4 (Oct. 1985), 478–99, 498.

[11] Robert P. Ericksen and Susannah Heschel, eds., *Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

[12] Shelley Baranowski, "The Confessing Church and Antisemitism: Protestant Identity, German Nationhood, and the Exclusion of the Jews," in Ericksen and Heschel, *Betrayal*, 103. Matthew D. Hockenos's *A Church Divided: German Protestants Confront the Nazi Past* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004) makes frequent mention of Barth in the post-World War II period, but of course its thematic focus connects directly to the history of the Church Struggle, and it is not as such a study of Barth.

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of faith, a disinclination that often moves Christian thought to the margins of historical inquiry. It may also be rooted in what Brad Gregory calls "secular confessionalism." Gregory argues that postmodernism, the linguistic or cultural turn, feminism, postcolonialism, and other trends are now so integrated into historical study that they are taken for granted as truths, all claims of opposition to "master narratives" notwithstanding, rather than recognized as the beliefs they are. And since in the secular-confessionalist mode these "truths" have a higher priority than beliefs based on allegedly nonrational criteria, there is an unacknowledged and often dogmatic "skepticism about all religious claims—that *no* religion is, indeed *cannot be*, what its believer–practitioners claim that it was."[13]

Regardless of what the causes are, such perspectives on the role of religion in late modern Europe are relevant to understanding historians' lack of interest in Barth. To remain with modern German history, there is a long tradition in synthetic treatments of the Weimar Republic simply to ignore the important theological debates of the early 1920s in which Karl Barth emerged as a seminal thinker.[14] Or to take another perspective, few students of modern Germany would regard the twentieth century as the "age of the Church." But in fact this era saw vigorous debates over doctrine and the Church's societal responsibilities.[15] In part because the intertwining of Church and state was much stronger and longer-lasting in Germany than in the US, Britain, or France, these debates had even greater impact in German-speaking political culture. Barth in turn did much to shape them because he was the foremost Protestant thinker in interwar Germany, where he taught in theological faculties from 1921 to 1935 before the National Socialist regime deported him to his native Switzerland. He retained that stature into the 1960s. Nonetheless, in a recent book on the "seduction of culture" in twentieth-century German history, the churches get one paragraph and several desultory references. Protestant thought is treated summarily as an example of the "eschatological interpretation of history" that allegedly distorted

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[13] Brad S. Gregory, "The Other Confessional History: On Secular Bias in the Study of Religion," *History and Theory*, Theme Issue, 45 (Dec. 2006), 132–49, 137; original emphasis.

[14] Consider Detlev J. K. Peukert's *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), still influential nearly two decades after its appearance in English, which is, however, silent on the theological ferment of the 1920s.

[15] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 5: *Christian Doctrine and Modern Culture since 1700* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 281.

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German political culture.[16] Barth, an "eschatological realist,"[17] appears nowhere in the text.

It remains to be seen if modern German history's renewed sense that "religion lives in modern society" will overcome this inattention,[18] or if it will counterbalance other tendencies in scholarship that cannot be discussed fully here, such as the inclination to treat organized Christianity as at best a residuum in the march toward secularization, or the habit of seeing it as a fellow traveler of racial, gender, and political oppression. That Christendom has been all this is true, but so also is the fact that its diverse interactions with modern history cannot be reduced to a single interpretive category, or considered only as a shell for other social transformations. Nor should its staying power as an institution with broad public influence, even among nonbelievers, be underestimated at any time in the last century.[19]

Fortunately, intellectual historians have opened up a narrative space (without necessarily agreeing with or acknowledging the foregoing critique) wherein Barth may be considered more fully in terms of both the evolution of his thought and the interaction between his ideas and their context. Anson Rabinbach's work reminds us of the strong messianic component in German intellectual life in the first half of the twentieth century. Although it argues against received notions of the religious character of the Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig's thought, Peter Gordon's study of Rosenzweig and Martin Heidegger is attentive to the linkages between religious and philosophical debates in Weimar culture. Samuel Moyn's recent studies of the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas and the German philosopher Leo Strauss make a strong case for the influence of early Weimar dialectical theologians in general and Karl Barth in particular, although their focus necessarily leads away from a fuller discussion of Barth himself. And in one chapter of Mark Lilla's new synthetic study of the history of political theology, Rosenzweig and Barth are paired in a discussion of the nature and consequences of the post-World War I response to liberal theology.[20] These studies suggest that

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[16] Wolf Lepenies, *The Seduction of Culture in German History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 39.

[17] Ingolf U. Dalferth, "Karl Barth's Eschatological Realism," in Sykes, *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays*, 14–45.

[18] Michael Geyer and Lucian Hölscher, "Einleitung," in Michael Geyer and Lucian Hölscher, eds., *Die Gegenwart Gottes in der modernen Gesellschaft: Transzendenz und religiöse Vergemeinschaftung in Deutschland* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006), 9.

[19] Hugh McLeod, ed., *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 9: *World Christianities c.1914–c.2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[20] Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals between Apocalypse and Enlightenment* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997); Peter Eli Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger: Between Judaism and German Philosophy* (Berkeley

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the time is propitious finally to let Barth enter through the front door of the house built by the European history of ideas rather than leave him peering in through a window.

There is a need for a more expansive, developmental, and connective view of Barth as a major interlocutor of twentieth-century culture. But giving Barth his due and placing him in his proper context are no easy matters, not least because of the obvious complexity of the history through which he lived and the multifaceted nature of his thinking over five decades. The following remarks are therefore suggestive rather than comprehensive. They focus on Barth's understanding of history, his relation to culture, and his political theology. These were areas of great concern for Barth, and they have the added advantage that they tell us much about how his theology addressed extra-theological issues. The following gives shorter shrift to the shortcomings of his thought not only for reasons of space but also to remain consistent with the main goal, which is to widen the narrative platform on which to consider Barth. My remarks speak primarily to English-speaking scholarship and more specifically to North American history-writing about modern Germany and Europe.

HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Karl Barth's critique of liberal Protestantism (or *Kulturprotestantismus*) established his reputation as a dissenting theologian and public intellectual. But Barth began his professional career under the sway of those historicist perspectives on which liberal theology depended as it gained power in German theological faculties in the nineteenth century.[21] As a university student in Switzerland and Germany between 1904 and 1909, Barth identified with theologians who made Christianity a predicate of the historical evolution of European civilization in general, and of German nationhood in particular. Buttressed by historical critique of the Bible,[22] convinced of the need to adapt religious teaching to an ever

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and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003); Samuel Moyn, *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas between Revelation and Ethics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); *idem*, "From Experience to Law: Leo Strauß and the Weimar Crisis of the Philosophy of Religion," *History of European Ideas* 33/2 (June 2007), 174–94; Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York: Knopf, 2007). Thanks to Mark Lilla for generously sharing chapter drafts with me before the publication of his book.

21 Thomas Albert Howard, *Protestant Theology and the Making of the Modern German University* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, "Kulturprotestantismus: Zur Begriffsgeschichte einer theologiepolitischen Chiffre," *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 28 (1984), 214–68.

22 Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

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more dominant scientific world view, germanophone liberal Protestantism linked Church and world in an indissoluble identity. "German Protestant theologians of the Wilhelmine era were more concerned with the existing world as the venue of Almighty God's self-revelation than with the Bible as the source of revelation."[23] The theologian Ernst Troeltsch, an acute student of historicism and its intellectual consequences, was one of the most influential representatives of this perspective. It is no coincidence that he would become a target of the young Barth and his allies once their critique of liberal theology got under way.[24]

A seemingly optimistic liberal interweaving of Christianity and history in fact reflected a deeper ambivalence about the relevance of faith. The second half of the nineteenth century saw, especially in the intellectual classes, "a growing tendency . . . to do without religion, or to try to do without religion."[25] Historians have thought too teleologically about the so-called "secularization of the European mind," reading the twentieth century back into the nineteenth without considering countervailing forces. For example, European Christendom at the turn of the century held out great hope for the future of missionary activity (which in fact later exceeded all expectations in places such as Africa) and for the prospects of ecumenicism even as both Catholic and Protestant leaders recognized the institutional weakening of the churches.[26] Combined with hopefulness and anticipation, a sense of unease about the relevance of faith was nonetheless palpable. To search for the dehydrated "essence of Christianity," as the leading liberal Protestant theologian Adolf von Harnack did in a famous book of 1900,[27] was in effect to save what could be saved in a world where rationality, science, capitalism, and nationalism disengaged "sources of the self" from transcendent meaning. The reduction of Christianity to this-worldly essentials based on an

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[23] John A. Moses, "Bonhoeffer's Germany: The Political Context," in John W. de Gruchy, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 7–8.

[24] Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, ed., Ernst Troeltschs '*Historismus*' (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2000); Mark D. Chapman, *Ernst Troeltsch and Liberal Theology: Religion and Cultural Synthesis in Wilhelmine Germany* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Harry Liebersohn, *Fate and Utopia in German Sociology, 1870–1923* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988), 40–77; George G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middletown, CT: Weseleyan University Press, 1983), 177–95.

[25] Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 17.

[26] Brian Stanley, "The Outlook for Christianity in 1914," in Sheridan Gilley and Brian Stanley, eds., *Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 8: *World Christianities c.1815–c.1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 593–600.

[27] Adolf von Harnack, *What Is Christianity?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), based on lectures given 1899–1900.

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enduring ethical component was a kind of "spiritual lobotomy,"[28] albeit in the paradoxical form of passionately articulating belief's key premises. Such theological reduction was by no means confined to Christianity, but could be found as well among Jewish thinkers, most notably Leo Baeck, whose *Essence of Judaism* appeared five years after Harnack's book. Analogously to Harnack, Baeck saw Judaism in relation to more secular conceptions of reason, humanity, and morality. But it was Christianity's combination of arrogant affirmation and anxious self-definition by secular standards to which Barth reacted so strongly.

The situation was sharpened too by the Christian churches' increasing distance from the working classes. During a ten-year stint (1911–21) as a Reformed pastor in Safenwil, a small industrial town in Switzerland, Barth was drawn to religious socialism, a commitment which got him involved in local trade union conflicts—he earned the nickname "the red Pastor"—and led him to become a member of the Swiss Social Democratic party. His engagement with democratic socialism reinforced a sense that liberal Protestantism's close identification with "progress," which also meant its close identification with the bourgeoisie, blinded it to the social teachings of Christianity and weakened its ability to respond to economic distress.[29] But it also kept him in touch with the liberal Protestant tradition since it presupposed a relation between Church and world through transformative social action.

Barth shared in a broader dissatisfaction with the world of their fathers felt by the "generation of 1905," born in the 1880s, whose members were building careers in the decade before World War I.[30] Prewar expressionism, which gave powerful voice to such discomfort, had a strong impact on the young Barth, as discussed below. But it was the experience of the Great War that sharpened his break with his teachers and helped to transform dissatisfaction into a new theological agenda. In 1914, twelve of the ninety-three German intellectuals who signed a pro-war "Appeal to the World of Culture" were theologians. Whereas this did not mean that "pretty much all" of Barth's teachers had signed on, as Barth claimed, it is true that two of them, Harnack and Wilhelm Herrmann, were among his mentors.[31] World War I confirmed Barth's suspicion that historicist optimism and liberal-theological "progressivism" led to disaster. Barth held to this position consistently through the next decades even as his theology underwent slow change and his political attitudes evolved within the broader penumbra of liberal theory.

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28 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 520.

29 McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 78–125.

30 Douglas J. Cremer, "Protestant Theology in Early Weimar Germany: Barth, Tillich, and Bultmann," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56/2 (April 1995), 289–307, 289.

31 George Rupp, *Culture-Protestantism: German Liberal Theology at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977), 11.

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Barth's disillusionment was evident in wartime writing and speeches, but it reached a crescendo in his book on St Paul's Epistle to the Romans (*Römerbrief*), which appeared first in 1919, then in a 1922 revision.[32] The goal was to clear away layers of historicist scholarship so as to read the Bible with new eyes. The link between theology, history, and politics was unmistakable insofar as Barth aimed to free Scripture from historicist criticism and the nationalist–political uses to which it had been put. Expressionist influences were evident, as Barth tried to "get beneath" the text of Romans to discover that "aboriginal perspective" for which expressionist artists Franz Marc and Paul Klee also searched in their work.[33] Barth wrote that he "caught a breath from afar, from Asia Minor or Corinth, something primeval, from the ancient East, indefinably sunny, wild, and original, that somehow is hidden behind these sentences."[34] Theological scholarship has not addressed Barth's "popular Orientalism," which gained literary form in Hermann Hesse's novels *Demian* (1919) and *Siddhartha* (1923), and in the philosophical travel writing of Hermann Graf Keyserling.[35] Whereas secular Orientalism was antipathetic to orthodox Christianity, or at least syncretic in its mixing of Christian, pagan, and "Eastern" influences, Barth's *Romans* combined anti-bourgeois sentiment, counterliberal critique, and the recovery of a more radical (in the Latin sense) Christian perspective.

Barth's creative engagement with European culture at this moment may be found in part in his attitude toward history. Barth was the leader of a phalanx of Protestant (Lutheran and Reformed) critical theologians who attacked the primacy of historical learning, the so-called "crisis" or "dialectical" theologians, stressing instead the superiority of revelation as a source of knowledge of God. This critique was by no means confined to Protestants, but also included Jewish intellectuals, such as Franz Rosenzweig, whose thought on divine revelation emerged parallel to Barth's. Like Barth, who cooperated briefly with them in the Patmos group, along with other key religious thinkers such as the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, French Catholic Gabriel Marcel, and the Russian Orthodox Nikolai Berdyaev, they wanted to free themselves from

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[32] Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), the English translation of the revised German edition, cited below as *Romans II*. The first German edition is *Der Römerbrief* (Berne: G. A. Bäschlin, 1919).

[33] Irit Rogoff, "Modern German Art," in Eva Kolinsky and Wilfried van der Will, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Modern German Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 264.

[34] Cited in Busch, *Karl Barth*, 98; see also Barth to Eduard Thurneysen, 27 Sept. 1917, in *Karl Barth–Eduard Thurneysen: Ein Briefswechsel aus der Frühzeit der dialektischen Theologie* (Munich: Siebenstern, 1966), 47.

[35] Suzanne Marchand, "German Orientalism and the Decline of the West," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 145/4 (Dec. 2001), 465–73.

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nineteenth-century historicism and its interpretive apparatus.[36] To clear away this apparatus, which like a complicated maze prevented the believer from seeing what was on the other side, was the aim of many intellectuals who faced the spiritual and political upheaval of the postwar years.

Barth's reading of Scripture was both radically empathetic (in this he agreed with Troeltsch) and radically critical of historicist hermeneutics.[37] His approach was stated in the preface to the first edition of *Romans* when he wrote: "Paul, as a child of his age, addressed his contemporaries":

> It is, however, far more important that, as Prophet and Apostle of the Kingdom of God, he veritably speaks to all men of every age. The differences between then and now, there and here, no doubt require careful investigation and consideration. But the purpose of such investigation can only be to demonstrate that these differences are, in fact, purely trivial. The historical-critical method of Biblical investigation has its rightful place: it is concerned with the preparation of the intelligence—and this can never be superfluous. But, were I driven to choose between it and the venerable doctrine of Inspiration, I should without hesitation adopt the latter, which has a broader, deeper, and more important justification.[38]

The tradition of German historicist criticism of the Bible had placed an insurmountable gulf between contemporary life and the "primitive" Christianity of the New Testament. Even before Friedrich Nietzsche's acid attacks on Christianity, the theologian Franz Overbeck condemned modern Christianity as a pale reflection of its heroic, "primal" predecessor; for Overbeck, the distance between then and now was irretrievable, not least in liberal theology, which had "thrown away the shell of Christianity with the kernel."[39] Scholarly research on the life of Jesus had done much the same, leading in one direction to liberal Protestantism's emphasis on the purely ethical teachings of Christianity, and in another direction to pantheism, political radicalism, and atheism, reflected powerfully in the nineteenth century by the Young Hegelians and their successors, including Karl Marx.[40]

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36 Moyn, *Origins of the Other*, esp. chap. 4; David N. Myers, *Resisting History: Historicism and Its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

37 Thomas W. Ogletree, *Christian Faith and History: A Critical Comparison of Ernst Troeltsch and Karl Barth* (Louisville, KY and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 112–14.

38 Barth, "Preface to First Edition," *Romans II*, 1.

39 Franz Overbeck, *On the Christianity of Theology* (San Jose, CA: Pickwick Publications, 2002), 89.

40 Warren Breckman, *Marx, the Young Hegelians, and the Origins of Radical Social Theory: Dethroning the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964).

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Barth argued that these historical investigations were less compelling than many thought. They sharpened the intelligence and gave the reader a richer understanding, but their results were neither constitutive nor disturbing to the believer. Indeed, in contrast to their claims, they rendered insignificant the difference between then and now, between the moment of Christ's presence on earth and the benighted twentieth century. Barth proposed to move against and beyond both biblical criticism and misdirected contemporary attempts to capture the "essence" of Christianity by paring away its "backward" elements. His goal was to rediscover the unmediated urgency of St Paul's language by listening to the text as apostolic witnessing to the Word of God. In the nineteenth century the Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard demanded that people "forget the 1800 years" dividing the present from the moment of Jesus' life on earth, a perspective Barth increasingly adopted as his own. As Kierkegaard had once stated that Christianity should be seen not in its historical development, not "updated" for society's sake, but as something that was radically contemporary as eternal revelation, so Barth regarded the results of historical research on early Christianity as ultimately "trivial" when placed next to the Word of God in the Pauline text. The point was to avoid making a category error by equating human understandings of the Word with the Word of God itself in its full reality.

It is important to see that despite this sharp criticism, he did not reject historical research as such, but rather recognized its limits for biblical exegesis and Christian proclamation. When in the above-quoted statement he said that the historical-critical method "can never be superfluous," he meant it, and he followed through on this conviction throughout his career. No consideration of Barth's work that focuses on the maturation of his thought could remain satisfied with claiming him as an antihistoricist intellectual. One of his major later publications is a detailed study of nineteenth-century Protestant theology, based in part on lectures given in the 1930s, in which he insisted that although theological study must begin and end with theological concerns, historical analysis was still irreplaceable to understand how the Church's witnessing evolved over time. That he began with such theological concerns makes the study problematic for historical research, but that he insisted on placing historical methodology at the center also reveals his continued engagement with the past. To fail to see the value of historical research, Barth argued, was to close a door on potentially instructive theological voices from the Church's earlier history.[41] Indeed, in a later assessment of nineteenth-century theology, Barth conceded that his earlier criticisms had been too strong, and that the giants of liberal theology, such as Schleiermacher, deserved continued

[41] Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 1–15.

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reflection.[42] His "secret passion" for history was reflected in his personal reading, often divided evenly between secular and religious authors and including much historical literature and historical biography.[43] To classify him as "antihistoricist," as so many interpreters have (and as so many contemporaries did[44]) without such qualifications, is inaccurate with respect to both his understanding of theology and his general intellectual interests. But it is also to be misled by the overreaching rhetoric of his earlier work. Such evidence suggests in any event that the proper way of framing Barth's relation to the nineteenth century is one of critical dialogue rather than total discontinuity.

Barth's writings reflect not a rejection of history but a concern with the relation between God's reality and human being in time. Although he is often said to be the leading "dialectical theologian" of the age, Barth did not have a self-enclosed dialectical method, as Hegel did, so much as he had an entirely dialectical view of human history.[45] Precisely because Man sinned, because he was fallen, and because his distance from God was incalculable, history itself assumed shape from a diastatic relation between the human and the divine, between time and eternity. Theology, political discourse, culture—all analogized this movement in a reality defined by God, whose "No" to fallen humankind was at the same time a merciful "Yes" that allowed persons to exist in the first place. Synthesis was unattainable in history; only God brought dialectic movement to a standstill, only the Gospel, the "good news" of God's election of humankind through Christ, was undialectical.[46] Barth's "Christocentric concentration," as he termed it, became stronger with time, and the historical reality of humankind became explicable as a unity only through the metaphor of God's veiling and unveiling through the Incarnation as a whole. "The man Jesus lives in His time," wrote Barth, who argued also that, as God's mediator, Christ in history encompassed all human life and relations with God in all times. To say "that the being of man is history," as Barth put it, meant that God's incarnation was a real event in "primal history" from which all human history, the panoply of temporalities that constitute human lives, derived meaning.[47]

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42 Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960).

43 Busch, *Karl Barth*, 169.

44 Cornelis van der Kooi, "Karl Barths Zweither Römerbrief und seine Wirkungen," in Beintker, Link, and Trowitzsch, *Karl Barth in Deutschland*, 57–75, 64–5.

45 Timothy J. Gorringe, *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 108–11.

46 Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* II/2 (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag Zollikon, 1942), 11–12.

47 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2 (London: T. & T. Clark, 2004), 157, 439. On the metaphor of veiling and unveiling, see McCormack, *Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 366–7. The much-discussed question of the historicity of Christ cannot be addressed here. For a critical appraisal of Barth in German Christological thought see Alister E. McGrath,

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It is difficult to overlook the relevance of Barth's reading of history for Martin Heidegger's more famous (and atheistic) philosophy. Heidegger drew not only from Greek philosophy and the conservative revolutionaries of the early Weimar Republic but also from "crisis theologians" such as Barth, Emil Brunner, and Friedrich Gogarten. Revelation for Barth was an unprecedented interruption of the flow of human time; its nature was diametrically opposed to the uniform and progressive evolution of history characteristic of much nineteenth-century thought in general and liberal theology in particular. As he wrote in *Romans*, revelation was "KRISIS," which meant judgment or sentence, a bomb crater left behind in human culture. Here Barth moved beyond accepted historicist assumptions that "crisis" was a transitional stage leading to more advanced ages.[48] Instead it was a structural element the permanence of which placed human history within Christian eschatology, "the most practical thing that can be thought."[49] It had, to put the matter differently, the character of a permanent, real "encounter," between God and man and between man and man, rather than a "development."[50] Heidegger's notion of "interruptedness," which for him was an essential premise for the search for authenticity, derived in part from such theological critique, particularly as Heidegger went back to the Pauline–Lutheran texts in his reading of Barth and others.[51] At the heart of this "eschatological" moment of Weimar culture, we find Barth. Unlike Heidegger or other intellectuals who also incorporated eschatological perspectives, such as Walter Benjamin, and unlike many of his former theological allies, such as Friedrich Gogarten, Barth was never seduced by utopian or totalitarian politics.

Taking into account his more mature thinking, we are led to conclude that Barth's critique of historicism did not lead him to endorse a position that would be described neatly as unhistorical, antihistorical, or antihistoricist. His view of history—with respect both to its theological foundations and to the wider culture of the twentieth century—was too dynamic and mixed to fit easily such analytical labels. In fact, he accepted many of the findings of historicist thought, such as the relativism of all cultural values, with far less anxiety than did Troeltsch, who in his final years seemed unwilling to face fully the consequences of historicism's corrosive effects.[52]

The Making of Modern German Christology, 1750–1990, 2nd edn (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1994), 123–43.

48 Reinhart Koselleck, "Crisis," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67/2 (April, 2006), 357–400, 398–9.

49 Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper, 1959), 154.

50 Ogletree, *Christian Faith and History*, 185–91.

51 Benjamin D. Crowe, *Heidegger's Religious Origins: Destruction and Authenticity* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006).

52 Iggers, *German Conception of History*, 195.

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Barth's analysis of biblical language similarly revealed much about his evenhanded attitude toward history. This essay necessarily has little to say about that subject, but it may be useful to point out that Barth's perspective on biblical language was neither wholly historical-critical nor literalist. Neither symbolic language nor myth (as historicists might have put it), and not factual accounts of past events (as literalists insisted), were the primary features of biblical narrative. Rather, biblical narrative, its historical content, and the theological truth to which it pointed, depended on analogical reference and witnessing, modes of understanding appropriate to a subject matter ungraspable solely through ordinary analytical methods. As with his reading of the Pauline text, historical criticism was not without an important function, indeed it was necessitated by scriptural content itself, but it was framed by other, more revealing methods, rather more akin to the reading of "saga" than of legend, myth, or fact.[53] Here and elsewhere, Barth subscribed to a contained historicism, inapplicable as a general rule but still centrally part of his theological and methodological repertoire and his view of the wider society.[54] We see below that this approach meshed well with his overall perspective on culture and politics.

CULTURE

Throughout the war years and the two versions of *Romans*, Barth developed his dominant theme, namely that "God is God." Organized religion was only a very fallible symptom of man's understanding of a wholly other God, whose transcendence and simultaneous copresence were the grounds, not the results, of human experience. In one aspect of Barth's theology, religion was "unbelief" because it remained so thoroughly anthropocentric, especially in its nineteenth-century liberal variations. Properly understood, Christian faith was arguably not a religion at all, since its reality lay in God's revelation, not the human "idea of the holy,"[55] not the history of knowledge of God, and not the psychology of religious projection. God existed, as evidenced in revelation and Jesus' suffering, but man's ability to comprehend this unavoidable reality was limited. This was Barth's "critical realism," the roots of which still had strong links to the Kantian idealist tradition in which he gained intellectual maturity. It was Kant's critical epistemology that enabled Barth to conceive of God's self-revelation through

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53 Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 43–9.

54 By contrast, Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1996; first published 1966), 153–9, sees inconsistency in Barth's reading of "faith and fact."

55 Marburg theologian Rudolf Otto's still famous *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), first published in 1917, received a qualified but positive response in Barth to Thurneysen, 3 June 1919, in *Karl Barth–Eduard Thurneysen*, 50.

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dialectical veiling and unveiling in the first place. The continuities of Kantian thought in twentieth-century European culture remain a fitting subject for research on Barth's influences and impact.[56]

Barth would later further clarify what many took to be his radical vision of humankind's diastatic relationship with God, in which presumably world and God remained totally separate. Barth himself and later Hans Urs von Balthasar left the impression that Barth's book on Anselm of Canterbury of 1931, *Fides quaerens intellectum*, signaled a move away from the earlier dialectical position, but this argument is now in doubt.[57] No matter how questions of periodization are handled, the textured digressions of *Church Dogmatics* gave abundant evidence that Barth saw divine proclamation as proof of God's relation to man and culture, a position from which he never wavered even during the years of his radical break with liberal Protestantism. This relation was particular and direct, not abstract or "general," because it was grounded in a living human being, in a moment in history, a creaturely time and space. His relational theology, rooted in an evolving Christological specification, opened the door to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ideas of "Christ for us," which obligated the Christian to "being-for-others." The obvious communitarian implications of this Barth-inspired Christology have taken on great importance in global Christianity, from liberation theology to American evangelicalism. But Barth's relevance for secular theory is also not to be underestimated, as is clear with Emmanuel Levinas, the French Jewish philosopher who deployed Barth for his concepts of intersubjectivity and "the other."[58] Barth's elaboration of "God's humanity" as a central thesis of his theology also outlined a Christian ethics, a feature of Barth's thought that has gained minimal scholarly recognition or has been represented as ambivalent or unclearly stated. Whereas it is true that Barth resisted creating a system for rational reflection on ethical behavior, wanting to preserve the primacy of God's concrete command in the world, a purely voluntaristic reading of Barth's ethical writings is, as one commentator stated, "grossly simplistic."[59] In his discussion

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56 McCormack, *Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 464–7.

57 Ibid., 422; Michael Beintker, ". . . Alles andere als ein Parergon: Fides quaerens intellectum," in Beintker, Link, and Trowitzsch, *Karl Barth in Deutschland*, 99–120, where the author argues that the transition from Barth's early work to his *Church Dogmatics* cannot be located in a sudden turn represented by the Anselm study.

58 Larry L. Rasmussen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005); Moyn, *Origins of the Other*; Stephen R. Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

59 Nigel Biggar, *The Hastening that Waits: Karl Barth's Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 45.

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of predestination, perhaps the central moment of his theology, Barth wrote that "there is no dogmatics that must not immediately become ethics."[60]

The "analogy of faith" (*analogia fidei*) served Barth well as an appropriate paradigm with which to assess humankind's relation to God, giving further evidence of the relational elements of his theology, even as his emphasis on God's transcendence remained. Barth offered the analogy of faith in response to both Catholicism's "analogy of being" (*analogia entis*) and Protestant natural theology's positing of knowledge of God from the perspective of human experience, history, or reason.[61] The analogy of faith meant that Christians filtered nature and reason through an evolving understanding of the Word of God. Nature and reason were not thereby rejected or displaced but always contextualized and made relative with respect to God's prior grace.[62] As God's command and action in the world were His reality, so the believer necessarily relied on self-reflection and listening for God's command in making decisions at each moment of creaturely existence.

Barth's supporters and critics in the early post-1918 period understood well that as the upstart theologian developed such themes, he was not only attacking an academic theology shaped in the nineteenth century by philosophy and history—and thereby drawn away from what Barth thought should be its real focus. They saw that Barth's position was not only an attack on organized religion, or on Christendom's close association with state and nation, an association that had become unsettled in the postwar context not least because the churches were forced to explore new relations with Germany's first democratic republic.[63] Barth's position encompassed all this and more as he was also making a comprehensive statement on twentieth-century culture. This theme has had a rather uneven track record in scholarship, even in theological debate, where the analysis of Barth's "theology of culture" is undernourished. It is a theme that has relevance in twentieth-century European intellectual history as well, evident for example in the "secularization" debate of the post-World War II period, in which Barth was often portrayed (inaccurately) as a "gnostic" who denigrated secular culture.[64]

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60 *Kirchliche Dogmatik* II/2, 11.

61 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth* (San Francisco: Communio Books, 1992), 47–55.

62 Biggar, *The Hastening that Waits*, 155.

63 Kurt Nowak, *Geschichte des Christentums in Deutschland: Religion, Politik und Gesellschaft vom Ende der Aufklärung bis zur Mitte des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1995), 205–42.

64 Robert J. Palma, *Karl Barth's Theology of Culture: The Freedom of Culture for the Praise of God* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 1983); Benjamin Lazier, "Overcoming Gnosticism: Hans Jonas, Hans Blumenberg, and the Legitimacy of the Natural World," *Journal of the History*

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The exchange between Adolf von Harnack and Barth in the journal *Die christliche Welt* (1923) illustrates what was at stake in the early Weimar *Kulturkampf*.[65] Harnack was the doyen of German Protestant theology, chair of the Prussian academy, a close personal friend of the former kaiser Wilhelm II, and a supporter of the war effort. He was a living symbol of modern German Lutheranism's integration into contemporary German national culture even when his theological work brought him into conflict with his orthodox confessional background. In Harnack's "fifteen questions," addressed to "the theologians who are contemptuous of the scientific theology"—Barth, Friedrich Gogarten, Emil Brunner, Eduard Thurneysen, and others—he probed these thinkers' view of biblical interpretation and religious experience. Was it possible, he queried, to understand the Bible only on the basis of the experiences of the individual without resort to historical reflection, as Barth's statement on Paul's contemporaneousness seemed to aver. If God and world were total contrasts, then what was the status of Christian morality, or of Christianity's attempted alliance with "the good, true, and beautiful" (a favorite phrase of Wilhelm II's) in contemporary culture through historical research? How was it possible to avoid atheism when God seemed so distant? Harnack's defense of "scientific theology" was also an attack on Barth's notion of culture. Harnack understood that for Barth (in contrast to a worldly liberal Protestantism) German culture, and the Christianity that played a central role in it, were finally inassimilable to God.

But if culture was inassimilable it was not inadmissible. Not withdrawal or asceticism but engagement was the only choice. Just as Barth argued through much of his career that the place to understand and, if need be, to critique religion's identification with worldly power was within the Church, so too he argued that one does not step outside contemporary culture but dissents against it while remaining committed to it. Scientific theology was not to be rejected but rather reminded that "its object had *previously* been its subject, and must become this again and again, something that has nothing *at all* to do with 'experience' and 'experiences'."[66] It was a matter of priority, and of directionality. Faith awakened by God, no matter how closely shaped by either piety or history, "would never be able fully to avoid the necessity of a more or less 'radical' protest against *this* world."[67] The contrast between God and world remained, only finally to be closed by the eternal God. "And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding,

of Ideas 64/4 (Oct. 2003), 619–37; John Stroup, "Political Theology and Secularization Theory in Germany, 1918–39," *Harvard Theological Review* 80/3 (July 1987), 321–68.

65 See James M. Robinson, ed., *The Beginnings of Dialectical Theology*, vol. 1 (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1968), 165–6.

66 Ibid., 167; original emphasis.

67 Ibid., 168; original emphasis.

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shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7) was a necessary reminder that the contrast was a true crisis, the solution to which really did surpass all knowledge because it came from God's mysterious action. History and scientific theology were not avenues to faith but indicators of man's distance from the divine. If theology had the courage to be "objective" about its mission of witnessing to revelation, if it did not let science dictate its methods but rather asserted itself vis-à-vis science, then the rest of the culture—"the jurors, physicians, and philosophers"[68] —might also listen. Their listening might reveal to them how far German culture had strayed from the God to which they gave misguided and, in Barth's eyes, ultimately sinful allegiance.

Barth's supporters understood the general cultural crisis that underlay these criticisms. Already in 1920 Friedrich Gogarten, a "dreadnought" for the new critical theology, wrote that "it is the destiny of our generation to stand between the times" and to occupy an "empty space" bounded by disillusionment with the previous generation and an uncertainty about the future due to the inability to "conceive of God."[69] This sense of irresolution was rife among secular thinkers as well. Siegfried Kracauer captured the moment in 1922 when he wrote of a "metaphysical suffering" felt by those who sensed the "lack of a higher meaning in the world, a suffering due to an existence in an empty space." "Those who wait" for such meaning were "companions in misfortune" even if they did not share similar political or religious (or irreligious) backgrounds.[70] Barth's fame rose in this period because the "companions in misfortune" who were "between the times" were prevalent in the educated classes. Barth never attained the general influence of Oswald Spengler, whose *Decline of the West* roiled cultural debate, nor did he share the conservative-revolutionary stance adopted by Spengler and his ilk. But Barth's work on Paul was nonetheless one of the publications that generated anticipation in the immediate postwar years. "These two works by Spengler and Barth," wrote Karl Löwith, a German university student in the early 1920s and later a major philosopher, "were the books that most excited us."[71]

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[68] Ibid., 170.

[69] Ibid., 277, 279. Gogarten's piece appeared as "Zwischen die Zeiten," *Die Christliche Welt* 34 (1920), 374–8. On Gogarten as "dreadnought" see Barth to Thurneysen, 27 Oct. 1920, in *Karl Barth–Eduard Thurneysen*, 56.

[70] Siegfried Kracauer, "Those Who Wait," in Thomas Y. Levin, ed., *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 129.

[71] Karl Löwith, *My Life in Germany before and after 1933* (Urbana, IL and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 26. Löwith was no exception; see Van der Kooi, "Karl Barths zweiter Römerbrief und seine Wirkungen."

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In the third volume of *Church Dogmatics*, Barth stated that "the doctrine of creation means anthropology."[72] One does not derive God from the anthropological understanding of religious experience, as Ludwig Feuerbach had, but only anthropology from God. Precisely this perspective underlay his sustained engagement with human culture. To read the *Church Dogmatics* over its decades-long gestation is also to follow Barth's response to philosophy, music, literature (nineteenth-century realism and detective novels were among Barth's favorites), politics, and of course theology. I am unaware of any anglophone scholar of modern European intellectual history who has explored this multivolume work for its use of such extra-theological sources. Barth wrote that Church history demonstrated how Christianity had always made "eclectic and non-committal use of current world views."[73] From the use in Genesis of the Babylonian creation myth to more modern attempts to reconcile faith and world, the churches and culture had come together in manifold ways. If, however, the proponents of faith gave themselves over too strongly to any particular world view, they stepped outside the dissenting sobriety with which Christians necessarily entered society. But even when Christians did commit to particular philosophies, their faith remained "disturbing, destructive, and threatening to the very foundation of these philosophies."[74]

Faith's noncommittal openness shaped Barth's response to cultural modernism. Scholars who uncritically depict Barth as a "neoorthodox" thinker create a misleading impression both with regard to the content of his theology and with regard to the implication this term had for his response to cultural trends. Barth's early work was rooted in German expressionism's anxious, antibourgeois hope for spiritual transformation.[75] The expressionist movement was centered in Germany but it had a strong following in Switzerland, where during and after World War I many German dissenters—Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Hugo Ball—found exile. Its longing for a new humanity, for an age of spiritual renewal beyond the liberal-positivist culture of the nineteenth century, marked the young Barth's work in profound ways, demonstrating again that his criticism of modern theological thought had strong prewar foundations. One of Barth's most prescient Catholic interlocutors, Hans Urs von Balthasar, described Barth's early methodology as "theological expressionism."[76] There is a strong stylistic correspondence between the turbulent force of expressionist language and the

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72 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2, 3.

73 Ibid., 10.

74 Ibid., 11.

75 McCormack, 31–5.

76 Balthasar, *Theology of Karl Barth*, 83.

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Romans commentary, the prose of which has an urgent, corrosive ambience.[77] But just as expressionist longing gave way to the more dispassionate tones of new objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*), so too did Barth's work move away from the earlier emotions. When Barth insisted ever more frequently on God's "objectivity," he acted as an agent of the new sobriety, even when his understanding of "the real" was quite different from that of secular thinkers.[78]

Barth's cultural provenance also reflects his status as a European intellectual conversant with the important thinkers of the time. The luminaries of high bourgeois culture appear scattered across Barth's writings, especially in the *Church Dogmatics*, where perhaps many readers expect not to find them because of this publication's "churchly" character. Such eclecticism is fitting for one whose work "orders all the paths of human wisdom, philosophical and religious, around the central core of a purely theological point of view."[79] In the *Church Dogmatics* we find commentaries of varied length on Mozart (Barth's favorite composer), Shakespeare, Spinoza, Rousseau, Goethe, Hegel, Kant, Schopenhauer, Marx, Darwin, Richard Wagner, John Stuart Mill, Max Weber, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Jung, Jaspers, and many others interwoven with often labyrinthine theological and biblical references and historical analysis of Church doctrine. Barth's stance of engagement within distance remains evident throughout this massive referential system, which (seeing that Barth often listened to Mozart as he worked) had the character of a symphonic score rather than a theological treatise.

Let us take one example among many of the tone and direction of Barth's cultural analysis. Barth appreciated the existentialist thinkers of his time, both Christian and secular, but his acceptance was tempered. In his response to Karl Jaspers's work, Barth concentrated on the concept of the "limit experience," or "frontier situation" (*Grenzfall*), as a point of critique. The limit experience renders "human experience . . . unavoidable and inexplicable and totally questionable," reminding man of his "historicity . . . and his relatedness to another."[80] Insofar as this relatedness could lead the person through the self in a moment of crisis and disruption to a transcendent other, Barth found that the concept of personhood to which it pointed was closer to the truth than that of naturalism and idealism. Nonetheless, how could one be certain that such moments did what Jaspers said they did? Did not the world wars suggest that people in fact learned nothing from frontier situations? "According to the present trend," wrote Barth,

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77 Stephen H. Webb, *Re-figuring Theology: The Rhetoric of Karl Barth* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991).

78 Gorringe, *Against Hegemony*, 73–84.

79 Von Balthasar, *Theology of Karl Barth*, 36.

80 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2, 112, 113.

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> We may suppose that even on the morning after the Day of Judgment—if such a thing were possible—every cabaret, every night club, every newspaper firm eager for new advertisements and subscribers, every nest of political fanatics, every pagan discussion group, indeed, every Christian tea-party and Church synod would resume business . . . with a new sense of opportunity, completely unmoved, and in no serious sense different from what it was before.[81]

The limit experience brought any number of responses, including surrender and faith, defiance (the atheist position), or resignation. And because existentialist philosophy retained a sense of human existence as self-contained entity, because it presupposed that man alone attained transcendence and the "unconditional attitude," its openness to God's free grace, and to "anything that might be identified with the God who is distinct from man and the world, and superior to both," was thwarted.[82]

Cultural engagement within distance could also result in harsh criticism of those thought to be close to Barth. Here it should be remembered that Barth's critical eye focused on the Church or on other believers as much as it did on secular thinkers. There is the notoriously contentious exchange between Barth and his friend Emil Brunner over natural theology, which Barth rejects with a devastating "No," in the 1930s.[83] Another example is Barth's response in 1948 to a famous statement by the German theologian Rudolf Bultmann that "it is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of demons and spirits." Barth asks, "who can read this without a shudder? But what if the modern world-view is not so final as all that?"[84] Coming as it did after the Holocaust, Barth's shudder responded not solely to the idea that the modern world was a "disenchanted" unity. He also wanted to point out that its victory was accompanied by, indeed presupposed, violence and mass death.[85] It may also be noted that Barth countered Bultmann's historicist argument with his own historicist rejoinder insofar as "the modern world-view" he critiqued was necessarily provisional.

Few scholars who have celebrated Walter Benjamin's characterization of civilization as a "document of barbarism" note that, years before, Barth wrote that "religion is not the sure ground upon which human culture safely rests; it is the place where civilization and its partner, barbarism, are rendered fundamentally

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[81] Ibid., 115.

[82] Ibid., 119.

[83] The debate is reprinted as Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002).

[84] *Church Dogmatics* III/2, 447.

[85] Gorringe, *Against Hegemony*, 174.

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questionable."[86] For Barth, World War I was evidence of contemporary society's complicity with barbarism, a complicity that did not exclude Christendom itself. The Holocaust, for all its unique and inexplicable features, merely continued modernity's intimate relation with mass slaughter. At the same time, revelation's corrosive character, its bomb-like quality in the cultural landscape, offered a clear alternative for those who too enthusiastically embraced modernist culture or its political analogues. Barth's reticence to engage fully in any modern philosophical movement, to remain actively and hopefully within the interstices rather than on the ramparts of society, bore striking similarities to postmodernist suspicion of "master narratives." But Barth's skepticism was grounded in a deep religious faith offering precisely the kind of transcendent meaning that postmodernist theory allegedly does without. This faith also meant that the Christian entered political life with greater confidence than the wary postmodernist could.

POLITICAL THEOLOGY

Political theology concerns the changing relation between "power" and "salvation." As such, political theology manifests both "descriptive" and "polemical" dimensions, in the argument of Jan Assmann. In the descriptive (*beschriebene*) mode, scholars analyze how religious concepts are deployed to uphold or critique power relations. In the polemical or operational (*betriebene*) mode, thinkers develop ideological and analytical-critical projects grounded in "the theological."[87]

Historians of modern Germany regard Carl Schmitt as the modern founder of political theology. Schmitt was famous, or notorious, for arguing that all twentieth-century political concepts derived from the secularization of theological paradigms.[88] But in fact political theology has a long history well

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86 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (written in 1940), in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 256; Barth, *Romans II*, 258. Benjamin was unaware of Barth's work; see Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 316.

87 Jan Assmann, *Politische Theologie zwischen Ägypten und Israel*, 3rd edn (Munich: Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung, 2006), 23–35.

88 Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005); *idem*, *Roman Catholicism and Political Form* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996). For recent scholarship on Schmitt see Heinrich Meier, *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt: Four Chapters on the Distinction between Political Theology and Political Philosophy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998); *idem*, *Carl Schmitt and Leo Strauss: The Hidden Dialogue* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995); John P. McCormick, "Political Theory and Political Theology: The Second Wave of Carl Schmitt in English, *Political Theory* 26/6 (Dec. 1998), 830–54.

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preceding twentieth-century developments. Moreover, Barth's contributions were as important as Schmitt's, if not more so, a fact recognized by contemporary theologians but rarely by historians, at least in North America. Indeed, Schmitt's thinking in the 1920s evolved with Barth's Romans commentary always in sight.[89] The state of contemporary historical study of Barth's political thought (as opposed to his role in the Church Struggle) gains more definition if we compare it to the scholarship of earlier periods, for example the 1950s, when the political scientist Dante Germino critically analyzed Barth as the formative influence on "fideist" political thought, one of the two main currents in Christian political theory at that time (alongside the Catholic "rationalist" tradition).[90] How and why Barth's contributions to political thought sunk into relative oblivion later on in the century is a fitting subject for intellectual history.

Barth's political thought is perhaps best seen as a "theological politics," which is to say that he did not interpret theology politically but rather viewed politics from a theological perspective.[91] Like his contemporaries Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich, Barth believed that Germany's tribulations were linked to the crisis of faith. In a November 1918 letter to Eduard Thurneysen, he wrote of the "organic relationship" between the worlds depicted in the New Testament and the newspaper.[92] But this did not mean the worlds were of the same order. In fact, Barth's political thinking was shaped most fundamentally by the First Commandment—"Thou shalt have no other gods before Me"—and his insistence that the interpenetration of the divine and the profane realms was regulated by the prohibition on idolatry. From this perspective, liberal Protestantism had domesticated the Christian message to the point that the sheer otherness of God's revelation was obfuscated. Nationalism and socialism offered little in the

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[89] On recent uses of Barthian political theology see Gorringe, *Against Hegemony*; Haddon Willmer, "Karl Barth," in Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 123–35; on Schmitt's awareness of Barth see Dietrich Braun, "Carl Schmitt and Friedrich Gogarten," in Bernd Wacker, ed., *Die eigentlich katholischer Verschärfung . . . Konfession, Theologie und Politik im Werk Carl Schmitts* (Munich: Fink, 1994), 203–27, 223, 225.

[90] Dante L. Germino, "Two Types of Recent Christian Political Thought," *Journal of Politics* 21/3 (Aug. 1959), 455–86; Charles C. West, *Communism and the Theologians: Study of an Encounter* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1958). But see now Matthew Hockenos, "The German Protestant Debate on Politics and Theology after the Second World War," in Dianne Kirby, ed., *Religion and the Cold War* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

[91] David Haddorff, "Karl Barth's Theological Politics," introduction to Karl Barth, *Community, State, and Church: Three Essays* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 3.

[92] Cremer, "Protestant Theology," 290; Barth to Thurneysen, 11 Nov. 1918, in *Karl Barth–Eduard Thurneysen*, 48–9.

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way of alternatives:

We know that the domain of grace has no existence or non-existence that may be observed; that it is not the property of this or that man; that it does not belong to Children or to Socialists or to the Russian Nation or to the German people.[93]

Yet unlike so many of the thinkers of the early 1920s who attacked prevailing political conditions, Barth's view of the political-historical moment was optimistic, not pessimistic, and it would remain so throughout his life. He advocated neither revolution of right or left, nor defense of the old order, nor political utopia, but hopeful "witnessing" to God's actions in the world as they appeared in particular political situations. Starting with his theological presupposition of God's being as "act" and "decision," for which revelation was the fulcrum, Barth's politics always focused not on ideological programs but on concentrated moments and problems, and how the Church could respond to them. This could entail support for positions that appeared inconsistent to someone expecting linearity within a preconceived ideological framework. But such linearity was foreign to Barth's theological politics, which operated analogously to the dialectical form Barth saw in human history.

Cremer argues that Barth's "conservatism" and quietism were evident in the 1920s, but this misses the mark.[94] In fact, Barth argued that "men must not be permitted to remain spectators, otherwise they will be unable to apprehend the con-version which God effects."[95] In an influential 1919 lecture in Tambach, Thuringia, he insisted that "analogies of the divine" and "parables of the kingdom of God" on earth were still possible even as he stated that God's "revolution" preceded and subverted all political revolutions.[96] This remained a consistent theme of his thought in succeeding decades. It also inoculated him from that totalitarian politics to which many other contemporary critics were drawn in the interwar era.

This message of active witnessing outside ideological expectation was analogous to his cultural engagement within distance. As with his ethics, his politics presupposed "permanent revolution without revolutionary self-consciousness."[97] This put him at odds with Marxist theorists of the time such as Ernst Bloch, whose concept of utopia had religious dimensions but remained secular in orientation, or György Lukács, who advocated intentional and self-conscious "permanent revolution." It put him at odds with liberal theology, which accepted German nationalism and allowed its investment in imperial German

93 Barth, *Romans II*, 220.

94 See Cremer, "Protestant Theology," 290.

95 Barth, *Romans II*, 220.

96 Busch, *Karl Barth*, 111.

97 Dietrich Korsch, *Dialektische Theologie nach Karl Barth* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1996), 36.

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political culture to lead it into a disastrous war. Indeed, liberal theology had been a political theology when it stepped into the public arena, not theological politics, because it allowed its theology to be defined by political interest. Barth also contradicted Paul Tillich's attempts to engage socialism for theology. He was drawn to religious socialism early in his career, and as pastor in Safenwil he joined the Swiss Social Democratic party. But such involvement was based not on ideology but on the need to express solidarity with the victims of injustice.

The late date of his entry into the German Social Democratic Party (May 1931) could be taken as evidence of prior political disinterest. On the other hand, a condition of his appointment at the University of Göttingen in 1921 was that he not be involved politically as he had been in Switzerland. He wrote often of his reluctance to take strong political stands in public conflicts due to his foreigner status in a German university, where colleagues' strong nationalism (of, for example, the nationalist theologian Emmanuel Hirsch, later a Nazi supporter) made him feel like an outsider. But hopeful witnessing was not necessarily quietist in this context. This was a time when many educated Germans were at best "Republicans of the head" (*Vernunftrepublikaner*) rather than of the heart, a position that crippled the new republic and robbed it of its emotional legitimacy. Barth's position—a witnessing that precluded political advocacy only if it was irresponsible to God's revelation in Christ—might have extended parliamentary democracy's "loan period" by allowing for political activity without the pressure of transforming it into the "friend–enemy" binary that, for example, Carl Schmitt argued was the essence of the political.[98] Permanent revolution without revolutionary self-consciousness put all political actors on notice that their word could not be the last word. When we consider the fact that Barth lived at a moment when democracy was a contested option, not a matter of consensus, then the position he took may have redounded to the advantage of a weak republic that needed time before many Germans made the definitive and irreparable choices they made for either communism or Nazism.[99] After all, working democracies function on the basis of a deferral of ultimate answers and on continued extension in the penultimate.

Such a position did not prevent Barth from entering political debate, as when he publicly defended the appointment to the theology faculty in Halle of Günther Dehn, who had made critical remarks about World War I, against the protests of nationalist students. Nor did it keep him from discussing politics with his students, for whom he held a weekly evening discussion group at which contemporary issues and the biographies of political figures such as Liebknecht, Ludendorff, Tirpitz, the kaiser, and Scheidemann were considered. In 1931 his

98 Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1976).

99 Willmer, "Barth," 124.

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open discussion evenings were devoted to analysis of the German political parties and their ideologies.[100] In a short autobiographical statement he wrote for the *Christian Century*, he asserted that political questions had always been of central interest to him, not only in 1933. The record bears him out if we are to understand his political engagement not only in party-political terms. Barth was not immune to the criticism he encountered for his political positions. Later in his life he conceded he could have shown more political decisiveness in the 1920s.[101] But it is an open question whether Barth's remark was an accurate assessment of the political reality of the time or an overly self-critical stand influenced by later events and Barth's humility.

Such issues are especially relevant when we turn to the Church Struggle. Historians often point to Barth's controversial *Theological Existence Today*, published in June 1933 at a key moment in the Nazi attempt to take over the German churches. In this short booklet, which circulated widely before being banned, Barth stated that his inclination was to remain "untimely" (*unaktuell*) and "to do theology and only theology."[102] Barth made this point in reaction to many who had asked him to remark on the political situation. In fact, already in 1931 had Barth criticized "hyphenated Christianity," which linked Christ with nationalist goals, and which read the Bible through German-nationalist lenses.[103] Hyphenated Christianity defined the "German-Christian" movement, which now threatened to bring the Nazi party directly into Church life. It was this movement that supported a policy of "ethnic cleansing" of the Gospel by denying Jesus' Jewishness, questioning the legitimacy of the Old Testament, and claiming that knowledge of God was grounded in ethnic–national identity.[104] Barth's opposition to such absurdities had been clear from the beginning, and thus to advocate "theology and only theology" was not only to continue his previous political critique, but also to strike at the idolatrous heart of Nazi theo-politics.

A related topic is the question of Barth's recognition of Nazi racial persecution. It was noted above that recent scholarship criticizes Barth for ambivalence or tardiness in defending Jews against the regime.[105] Even so, it remains an open question as to whether Barth's position was flawed because among other things it

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[100] Gorringe, *Against Hegemony*, 77; Busch, *Karl Barth*, 209, 218.

[101] Willmer, "Barth," 124.

[102] Karl Barth, *Theologische Existenz heute!* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1933), 3.

[103] John S. Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches, 1933–1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 10–11.

[104] Doris L. Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

[105] But there is also a recent affirmative scholarship: Mark R. Lindsay, *Covenanted Solidarity: The Theological Basis of Karl Barth's Opposition to Nazi Antisemitism and the Holocaust* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

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failed to draw out the full implications of his theological politics.[106] In the Barmen Declaration, Point VI quoted 2 Timothy 2:9, "God's Word is not fettered." This meant that "the Church's commission, which is the foundation of its freedom, consists in this: in Christ's stead, and so in the service of his own Word and work, to deliver all people, through preaching and sacrament, the message of the free grace of God." For many in the resistant church movement (Confessing Church), "all people" meant only those baptized Jews within the Christian churches. But the implication was much broader, as was the message of the Gospel as a whole. Dietrich Bonhoeffer saw this, and perhaps much more insistently than Barth did, but his stance was exceptional, and in any case few could have predicted at this moment that Nazi anti-Semitism would result in mass-extermination policies. Barth in any case opposed the ominous implications of a conservative Lutheran "supersessionism," based on the idea that Christianity had rendered Judaism irrelevant, insisting instead on the continued structural relatedness of Jews and Christians.[107]

Barth's politics presupposed that all political movements deserved only conditional approval at best. To have recognized that minimal guideline would have been an important step forward, especially at a time when Hitler's power was not yet secure. To hesitate and not go forward, at that historical moment, was a powerfully critical message, and one that was consistent with Barth's theology of God's particular action in the world. Presentist political concerns should not obscure the tremendous potential for political resistance to be found in Barth's stance, which rested on the idea of avoiding all political abstractions on the right or left. Barth bracketed all political action, which is not to say that he thought unpolitically, but that he located ultimate authority in divine action, not nation, class, race, or ideology.

Many contemporaries in post-World War II Europe and elsewhere, the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr among them, castigated Barth for his politics in the Cold War, when he refused to issue the same resounding "No" to communist regimes that he had given to National Socialism. The critics argued that his stance was inconsistent with the strong antitotalitarianism of the earlier period. But there was in fact a deep continuity in Barth's political thinking, as there was in his theology. As he told an audience in Hungary in 1948, "the Church may have to speak very conservatively today and very progressively or even revolutionarily tomorrow—or vice versa."[108] Barth explained his position

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106 Hockenos, *A Church Divided*, 173.

107 See *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, II/2, the entirety of chap. 7, over five hundred pages long, where this point is made repeatedly.

108 West, *Communism and the Theologians*, 312–18; Karl Barth, *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-war Writings, 1946–52* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954), 92.

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succinctly when he said that communism had never been guilty of the outright sacrilege of National Socialism, the displacement of the real Christ with a national Jesus, or of anti-Semitism.[109] The accuracy of this observation may be questioned, just as it may be asked whether Barth's self-positioning "between" East and West was itself a function of the guarantees provided by liberal democracy. But the point is that Barth's unwillingness to make a full condemnation of communism was an instance of Christian particularism, which was seen in relation to God's specific and concrete action toward humankind. Not abstract principles, or party "lines," but concrete decisions, offered in the spirit of contingency, was the only possible Christian position for Barth, even in the increasingly tense international atmosphere of postwar Europe. Communism was not guilty of idolatry, and by this specific criterion it was to be judged differently from Nazism.

Barth's theological politics assimilated neither to the "end-of-ideology" syndrome that affected many intellectuals in war-ravaged Europe, nor to a Lutheran "two-kingdoms" approach, which unduly separated Church and state and thereby freed the state for manifestly evil actions. Nor did Barth adhere to a liberal pluralist theory that reduced the Church to a special interest among others, each roughly equidistant from the state. Barth in fact placed the Church, in a famous metaphor, at the center of a system of concentric circles, the outer rim of which was the state.[110] Whether it knew it or not, the state operated in an environment in which the Christian proclamation was formative, but it was not to be a "Christian state," nor was there to be a "state" within the "Church." This was at the same time not an antiliberal position, because as Barth argued, Christendom would on balance always choose liberal democratic polities since they alone ensured the proper degree of freedom for the Church to proclaim the Word and for people to hear it. Barth's ideas have recently been the direct or indirect focus of a renewed political-theological discussion that gives the Church a more powerful political profile than it had in the Weberian secularization model, which so many assumed had grasped the internal dynamic of Western political culture.[111]

CONCLUSION

This essay's goal was to broaden the space occupied by Karl Barth in historical narratives of modern European thought, a space that should neither be confined

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109 Nowak, *Geschichte des Christentums*, 315.

110 See, above all, Karl Barth, "The Christian Community and the Civil Community," in *idem*, *Community, State, and Church*, 149–89.

111 See Daniel M. Bell, Jr., "State and Civil Society," in Scott and Cavanaugh, *Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, 423–38.

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to the figure of the radical, dialectical theologian of the 1920s, nor to that of the Church dogmatician narrowly tending a disciplinary garden over the course of a century in which theological discourse became irrelevant to politics and culture. It must necessarily remain a rather sketchy argument because of the voluminous nature of Barth's work and the paradoxical fact that we have a large scholarly literature on Barth, overwhelming in scope and content, generated above all by theologians. But this is the core of the predicament, namely that whereas theology values Barth as an epoch-making figure casting his shadow over past and present, intellectual historians have for the most part been satisfied to leave him standing in his own shadow. My modus operandi has been to isolate three themes, namely history, culture, and politics, which the historian might use to trace the way in which Barth worked as a central interlocutor of European culture.

With regard to historical consciousness, Barth's *oeuvre* suggests that he not only did not disengage conclusively from the historicist and idealist influences of the nineteenth century, but that he also remained in dialogue with those liberal historicist thinkers whom he is said to have rejected. Only a preoccupation with the early Barth, the firebrand who wrote the electric critique of liberal theology in the two Romans commentaries, would allow one to classify him without significant qualification as an antihistoricist thinker. If the theological origins of historicism are now the subject of fuller scholarly attention,[112] then Barth's work, usually taken to be a decisive break with historicist perspectives, may in fact be a stronger source of continuity than has been assumed. By the same token, the continuities of Barth's thinking, both formal and historical, lead to larger questions about the relation between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, or more specifically about how the *fin de siècle*'s "resonances with the longer time-span of the twentieth century" are to be explored.[113]

A second point is that Barth never regarded theology as a fortress against secular influences, but rather presupposed that human knowledge of the Word of God operated in a relation of distance within engagement to nontheological knowledge. This too raises the question of how Christianity in particular, and religious thought in general, worked within twentieth-century culture. At the very least, it lends further evidence to the growing scholarly

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112 Thomas Albert Howard, *Religion and the Rise of Historicism: W. M. L. Wetter, Jacob Burckhardt, and the Theological Origins of Nineteenth-Century Historical Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Samuel Moyn, "Amos Funkenstein on the Theological Origins of Historicism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64/4 (Oct. 2003), 639–57.

113 Suzanne Marchand and David Lindenfeld, "Germany at the Fin-de-Siècle: An Introduction," in Suzanne Marchand and David Lindenfeld, eds., *Germany at the Fin-de-Siècle: Culture, Politics, and Ideas* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 30.

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dissatisfaction with historical narratives of religion's inalterable decline in the age of high secularization. But the argument may also lead to a more ambitious interpretation, namely that "even as religion seems to vanish from politics and public culture, it never ceases to define the project of modernity."[114] Barth's attempt to formulate a counter-world to modern thought represents a fruitful line of inquiry in the examination of such issues.

Finally, Barth's political thought was inassimilable to any particular ideology. As such, his theological politics offered a strong challenge to the "isms" of the past century, which if anything became stronger than they had been in the nineteenth century, supposedly the "age of isms" par excellence. Barth's prohibitions on idolatry made up an important part of a developing repertoire of antitotalitarian politics, which tragically remained buried or malformed in much of European political culture in the first half of the last century, but which deserves continued study both for its origins in Christianity and Judaism and for its relevance to the rethinking of the intellectual history of European political thought now taking place.[115] Presumably such politics, in its "operational" mode, might be applied in the contemporary period not only to the classical political ideologies, as they form and re-form in the new millennium, but also to the more general phenomenon of the "sacralization of politics,"[116] or even to recent "identitarian" movements, which have acted so corrosively in so many different ways. But regardless of whether there is a "Barthian" response to twenty-first-century politics,[117] the foregoing suggests the need for Barth's stronger presence in the history of modern European thought, the theological constituents of which, after a muted recent career, are now again increasingly important and provocative subjects of study.

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[114] Sheehan, *Enlightenment Bible*, ix.

[115] Two examples: Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals and Politics* (New York: New York Review Books, 2001); Richard Wolin, *The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism from Nietzsche to Postmodernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[116] Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

[117] For a recent attempt to relate Barth to Habermas see Timothy Stanley, "From Habermas to Barth and back again," *Journal of Church and State* 48/1 (Winter 2006), 101–26.

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