

Theodulf of Orleans, Alcuin of Tours, Haimo of Auxerre, the Derash and Peshat Jewish traditions of interpretation, Isidore of Seville and Bede. Moreover, the author, who has already published a book on Andrew of St Victor, alerts us to the importance of the Abbey of St Victor in the story of medieval biblical scholarship. The book also has a refreshing lack of denominational bias, which is important in providing a scholarly, historical and theological adjustment to existing scholarship and received assumptions. Van Liere encourages us to acknowledge that the meaning of biblical text is always embedded in a tradition of interpretation, of which the medieval period is a vital part and must not be ignored.

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Thomas Xutong Qu, *Barth und Goethe: Die Goethe-Rezeption Karl Barths 1906–1921*. Foreword by Michael Welker (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Theologie, 2014), pp. 260. €24.99.

In January 1957, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth gave a lecture in Hanover about Protestant theology in the nineteenth century, at the invitation of the Goethe Society. He appeared dressed in an unusually formal way: tails, striped trousers and a starched standing collar. Why this attire? It is probably not wrong to assume that it was the name ‘Goethe’ which led him to opt for this respectful manner of dress. And this was so even though, along with Nietzsche and Bismarck, he mentioned Goethe only briefly, commenting that the theology of that period looked very meagre next to him.

Recently a remarkable book about the relationship between the young Karl Barth and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe has appeared. It is written by the Chinese theologian Qu Xutong (Thomas), assistant professor at the Institute of Foreign Philosophy and Culture at the Beijing Normal University. In the foreword to the book, his doctoral supervisor at Heidelberg, Professor Michael Welker, calls to mind Luther’s saying about the word of God as a travelling rainstorm which could have moved away from us in the West to some non-European place. The book does indeed document the existence of an apparently vital Christianity in contemporary China. It is significant for the relationship in general between Christian theology and a humanist way of thinking. It can certainly be assumed that what especially concerns the writer in his exposition is the testing of forms of engaging the intellectual situation in his homeland. His work, then, is certainly not some kind of intellectual game-playing.

The writer does not deal with his theme in generalities, but rather in a subtle investigation of texts by the Basel theologian in his early years. He develops his theme, which has not been addressed up until now, with a disciplined purposefulness. His research covers particularly the years 1906 to 1921, and he concentrates on his theme so intensively that he often ignores Barth's references to other poets and thinkers besides Goethe, not even examining the sense in which Barth also alludes to other figures. And there is certainly plenty to refer to. But the author looks upon his approach as justified because, as he sees it, there was no other person besides Goethe who in this period of time had such significance for Barth. Whereas in his youthful years Barth was enthusiastic about Friedrich Schiller, the thesis of this book is that it was Adolf von Harnack who decisively shaped the influence that Goethe had upon Barth. That certainly illumines the way in which Harnack's influence worked. According to Xutong Qu, Barth's preoccupation and engagement with Harnack defined his early years, whereas up until now Barth has been seen as primarily under the influence of Wilhelm Herrmann. In contrast with that view, the author closely analyses the sense in which the young theologian cites or alludes to the poet Goethe.

It may well be that, at the beginning, Barth drew on him to ornament his own thinking in order to appear to his readers as a man of educational refinement. The author dates that aspect to the sermons from 1906 to 1908. But then, there unfolds in the writings of the young Barth an intellectual dependence on and affirmation of Goethe, so that one must speak of an intellectual formation by him. There is certainly a substantive agreement with him, whose message audibly combines with the message of Jesus. On p. 80, Qu mentions Schleiermacher next to Goethe. I think that at that time Barth was chiefly shaped by Schleiermacher and that he read Goethe in his light. We read on p. 68, 'In Goethe Barth sees an exemplary possibility to become a "Christ-bearer" beyond the mission and evangelisation of Christians...' One must, of course ask, how that might happen since Barth must struggle with the fact that Goethe was quite explicitly not a Christian?

As we learn in the book, he had diverse responses at hand. It might be the case that true Christian being does not consist of external knowing but rather in 'the inner life' (p. 81) which is always present in an honest man, in every clear self-awareness. Or it might be that one explains that faith is not something specifically Christian but rather a general human phenomenon, the receptivity to God's working (pp. 86–8), an 'actualization of the real determination of the human life' (p. 84). It was obviously difficult for the young theologian to explain the relationship of such explanations to the Jesus Christ witnessed to in scripture. It cost him some effort to lay out the extent to which Jesus is in fact more than Goethe. Is he in perfection that

which can also be found in Goethe? – that's often asserted. Or does he only 'play the role of one giving and pointing to a model to emulate' (p. 91)? As he continues his work, Barth emphasises that Goethe is really no more than a worldly witness to Jesus Christ.

With regard to the relationship of these two great personalities, it is possible that the author of the book has underestimated the significance of the fact that after Barth's transition from Geneva to Safenwyl, his commitment to Goethe's wisdom began to disintegrate. It was undoubtedly his experience of the misery of the workers which provoked the question as to what kind of help Goethe might be able to provide in this situation. In a sermon for the third Sunday in Advent in 1911, the theme 'either he or Jesus' emerges: 'If what mattered most to me would be to lead a harmonious and cheerful inner life, to be full of profound insights of the most diverse kinds, to be as diverse, deep, and comprehensive as possible, then I would openly confess that I would not turn to Jesus but rather to Goethe who as a master of the art of living has perhaps the most to offer on earth.' But with Jesus something very different is at stake. Therefore, 'in all these instances the concern is that one choose, and that is what decides our position towards Jesus. There are two kinds of life goals: in one of them what matters to us is ourselves, whereas in the other what matters are the other people.' Accordingly, there emerges a reserve in Barth's earlier enthusiasm for Goethe. It did not wait until the time of Barth's second Romans commentary.

As an old man, Barth returned to Goethe and read his collected works. He did this in line with his statement that he found Goethe more interesting than 'modern' man, which was otherwise customary among contemporary theologians. What concerned him was the question as to how Goethe had managed to work his way (almost) around biblical Christianity. In fact, Barth was now planning to write a comparison of Goethe and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. He laid out in outline form what he wanted to cover in this treatise. The point would be to test whether he would have really and unreservedly affirmed the question with which Xutong Qu's book concludes: 'Could Barth describe Goethe's word, as he did Mozart's music, as a "parable of the kingdom revealed in the gospel of God's free grace"?' (p. 246).

This very interesting book invites a conversation with the author's thesis, and beyond that, a conversation between us Western Christians and the strong voice of the theologians which is now asserting itself from China. This book is the trailblazer for that conversation.

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