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### **Karl Barth on Religious and Irreligious Idolatry**

David Clough

As far as Germany is concerned, the criticism of religion has been essentially completed, and the criticism of religion is the presupposition of all criticism ... The foundation of irreligious criticism is this: man makes religion, religion does not make man.  
(Karl Marx, 1844<sup>1</sup>)

Christianity reproached heathenism for idolatry, Protestantism reproached Catholicism, or early Christianity, for idolatry, and Rationalism now reproaches Protestantism, at least the older orthodox Protestantism, for idolatry, because it worships a man as God, and therefore an image of God—for that is what man is—in place of the original, in place of real being. But I go further and say: Rationalism itself, indeed every religion and every cult which sets up a God, i. e. an unreal being, a being different and separate from real nature ... and which makes it an object of worship, is the worship of images and consequently idolatry.  
(Ludwig Feuerbach, 1848<sup>2</sup>)

How are we to do theology after Feuerbach and Marx? For Karl Barth, the answer is simple. The proper response to these critiques of religion is to show that while all this is true, the theological critique of religion must be much more severe, with far wider consequences. The recognition of the scope and breadth of the idolatry of religion is a crucial ground-clearing exercise for a theology that seeks to be faithful to its subject,

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, 'Towards a Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction' in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 63.

<sup>2</sup> Feuerbach, *Das Wesen der Religion*, lecture 20, cited in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. T. H. L. Parker et al., vol. II/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), 292.

an exercise that also makes clear both the paths that are open to theological enquiry and the paths that are forbidden. For Barth, then, idolatry is not a subspecies of

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sin falling under the first commandment, nor is it worship in an undue mode, as characterized by Aquinas.<sup>3</sup> Rather, it is the universal and characteristic mode of human action seeking to evade the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

### **1. The idolatry of religion**

Barth identifies a religious impulse in human beings:

There seems always and everywhere to be an awareness of the reality and possibility of a dedication, or even a sanctification of the life of man, on the basis of an individual or social striving, which is almost always and everywhere referred to an event which comes from beyond. As a result, the representation of the object and aim of the striving, or the origin of the event, has always and everywhere been compressed into pictures of deities, with almost always and everywhere the picture of a supreme and only deity more or less clearly visible in the background.<sup>4</sup>

Human beings need truth above and certainty within themselves, both of which they think they can know, Barth claims. ‘Since the need is there, have not the starry heaven above and the moral law within long since brought this truth and certainty into the range and realm of [man’s] perception?’ The path to idolatry is then a short one: ‘To

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<sup>3</sup> ‘For the divine worship may be given either to whom it ought to be given, namely, to the true God, but “in an undue mode”, and this is the first species of superstition; or to whom it ought not to be given, namely, to any creature whatsoever, and this is another genus of superstition . . . For the end of divine worship is in the first place to give reverence to God, and in this respect the first species of this genus is “idolatry”, which unduly gives divine honour to a creature.’ (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947), 2–2, 92.2).

<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight, vol. I/2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 282.

satisfy this need, he steps out in a bold bid for truth, creating the Deity according to his own image—and in a confident act of self-assurance, undertaking to justify and sanctify himself in conformity with what he holds to be the law.<sup>5</sup> Thus far we might find a broad consensus on the religious development of humankind between Durkheim, Feuerbach, and Christian theologians of many stripes. Yet at this point Barth makes a decisive break with virtually all his predecessors and contemporaries, a break that is fundamental to his theological method. Feuerbach saw a progressive development in religion from lower forms to higher: pantheism gives way to polytheism, polytheism to monotheism, and monotheism becomes ever more rationalistic, before necessarily giving way

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to atheism.<sup>6</sup> Apart from the last step, many Christian theologians have seen merit in this account: it seems historically reasonable, and affects a certain charitable tolerance towards earlier beliefs, while making clear the superiority of the Christian religion—at least, so long as later religious movements are ignored or otherwise discounted. Emil Brunner, at one point a good friend of Barth's, is one example of a theologian who takes this progressivist line. Brunner makes the reasonable claim that human beings can know to some extent through creation without the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit. This natural knowledge is partial, dim and darkened by sin, resulting in a misrepresentation of God, and the worship of idols. Brunner affirms that it stands in need of revelation to correct it and point more clearly to the true God.

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<sup>5</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 315.

<sup>6</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity: Milestones of Thought in the History of Ideas* (New York: Continuum, 1990).

‘*Nein!*’ is the one-word title of the tract Barth wrote in response to Brunner’s work, which ended their friendship.<sup>7</sup> Barth considered that the approach to natural theology Brunner had adopted threatened to lose all the ground they had established together against the prevailing trends of liberal German theology. The polemical tone of the work includes many rhetorical questions, one of which addresses the issue of idolatry directly: ‘Is it his opinion that idolatry is but a somewhat imperfect preparatory stage of the service of the true God?’<sup>8</sup> Barth’s negative answer to this question rests on his belief that the revelation of God in Christ means the abolition and re-establishment (*Aufhebung*) of religion, rather than the redirection Brunner seems to envisage.<sup>9</sup> The intensity with which Barth sees this arises from his engagement with Romans 1:18-32, the key New Testament text on idolatry. He calls this section of the 1922 edition of his explosive commentary, ‘The Night’, and on verse 23 comments:

They changed the glory of the incorruptible—for an image of the corruptible ... They had lost their knowledge of the crevasse, the polar zone, the desert barrier, which much be crossed if men are really to advance from corruption to incorruption ... Once the eye, which can perceive this distinction, has been blinded, there arises in the midst,

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<sup>7</sup> For an English translation both of Brunner’s essay ‘Nature and Grace’ and Barth’s response, see Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology*, trans. Peter Fraenkel (London: The Centenary Press, 1946). Barth’s essay is also available in Clifford J. Green, ed., *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Barth, ‘Nein!’ in Green, *Karl Barth*, 158.

<sup>9</sup> *Aufhebung* is a difficult word to translate. Garrett Green comments ‘Barth has borrowed a favourite term of Hegel’s and put it to his own use. He shares with Hegel the conviction that the truth can only be told by saying both no and yes; and he finds in the unique ambiguity of the verb *aufheben* a way of articulating their dialectical interrelationship’ (Garrett Green, ‘Challenging the Religious Studies Canon: Karl Barth’s Theory of Religion’, *Journal of Religion* vol. 75, no. 4 (1995), 473–486, 477).

between here and there, between us and the ‘Wholly Other’, a mist or concoction of religion in which, by a whole series of skilful assimilations and mixings more or less strongly flavoured with sexuality, sometimes the behaviour of men or of animals is exalted to be an experience of God, sometimes the Being and Existence of God is ‘enjoyed’ as a human or animal experience. In all this mist the prime factor is provided by the illusion that it is possible for men to hold communication with God or, at least, to enter into a covenant relationship with Him without miracle—vertical from above, without the dissolution of all things, and apart from THE truth which lies beyond birth and death.<sup>10</sup>

The message of Barth’s *Romans* is that God’s wrath is directed against all those who seek to deny or overcome the ‘infinite qualitative distinction’—Barth’s citation of Kierkegaard—between God and humanity. God is the ‘Wholly Other’ and all we can know of God comes from our wandering over the cratered battlefield where God has passed by. With this grenade, Barth sought to bring down the edifice of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century German theology that followed Schleiermacher in charting a way to God starting with religious experience. Barth witnessed to how this focus on the human leads to all manner of murky relationships between religion and nationhood, culture, race, and language. The experience he recounts as most formative was seeing virtually all his former theological teachers sign up to a public letter in support of Kaiser Wilhelm’s war policy in 1914.<sup>11</sup> To claim in this context that religion can be more than a witness to the void between the ‘Wholly Other’ and humankind ‘is a shameless and abortive anticipation of that which can proceed from the unknown God alone. In all this busy concern with concrete things there is always a revolt against God. For in it we assist at the birth of the “No-God”, at the making of idols.’<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 49–50.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Barth, ‘Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher’, in *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, ed. Dietrich Ritschl (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982), 264–65.

<sup>12</sup> Barth, *Romans*, 50.

By 1937 and the second volume of the *Church Dogmatics* Barth had ceased speaking of God as ‘Wholly Other’ and had confidence that the infinite qualitative distinction could be transgressed. But—as we have seen—he is adamant that this crossing can only be in one direction and at God’s initiative. The route taken by the kind of natural theology Brunner espouses, then, is completely cut off: there can be no sense of idolatrous heathen religion as a staging post towards authentic worship of the true God. For Barth, Israel’s handing over of its Messiah to the Gentiles, long after all idols had been set aside, is the starkest demonstration that there is no progress in

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religion. ‘In the face of the cross of Christ it is monstrous to describe the uniqueness of God as an object of ‘natural knowledge.’<sup>13</sup> Idolatry must be analyzed, then, not as an inadequate attempt to reach God who remains unknown, but as the rejection of God who is known.

There is an exegetical hurdle in making good the claim that God cannot be known in part through creation apart from revelation. From the Romans 1 passage, verse 20 suggests that all persons are without excuse because God’s invisible qualities are clearly visible in the world. Barth recognizes that this verse has been used as an opening to ‘every kind of natural theology’ but claims that this is to take the verse out of its context. The passage 1:18–3:20 stresses that Jews and Gentiles alike stand under the judgement and grace of God. But this is so only because of the revelation of God in Christ, a revelation that is presupposed by Paul throughout the passage. This is not therefore an abstract statement about the heathen; ‘Paul does not know either Jews or

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<sup>13</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. T. H. L. Parker et al., vol. II/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), 453.

Gentiles in themselves and as such, but only as they are placed by the cross of Christ under the promise, but also under the commandment of God'.<sup>14</sup> It is through Christ, not through the world in itself, that God's eternal power and nature are revealed.

Similar issues arise in Acts 14:15-17, where Paul tells the crowd in Lystra that God did not leave the nations without testimony to himself, and Acts 17:16-31, Paul's proclamation to the Athenians that he will make known the unknown god they have been worshipping through idols. Again, Barth argues that Paul is not referring to some independent knowledge of God derived from creation, but the situation all persons are placed in by the revelation of God in Christ.

The link between natural theology and idolatry is most clear in relation to the question of how directly God may be known by humankind. In *Romans*, Barth cites Kierkegaard in explication of 1:4a, 'and declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the Holy Spirit': 'Now, Spirit is the direct denial of immediacy. If Christ be very God, He must be unknown, for to be known directly is the characteristic mark of an idol.'<sup>15</sup> When, therefore, we make the mistake of supposing direct communication with God is possible

there emerge all those intermediary, collateral, lawless divinities and powers and authorities and principalities (viii. 38) that obscure and discolour the light of the true God. In the realm of romantic direct communion—in India, for example—these divinities are thrown up in the most extravagant numbers. Wherever the qualitative distinction between men and the final Omega is overlooked or misunderstood, that

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<sup>14</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight, vol. I/2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956). 306.

<sup>15</sup> Barth, *Romans*, 38–9.



fetishism is bound to appear in which God is experience in ‘birds and fourfooted things’ and finally, or rather primarily, in the ‘likeness of corruptible man—Personality, the Child, the Woman—and in the half-spiritual, half-material creations, exhibitions, and representations of His creative ability—Family, Nation, State, Church, Fatherland. And so the ‘No-God’ is set up, idols are erected, and God, who dwells beyond all this and that, is ‘given up’.<sup>16</sup>

In the *Church Dogmatics* II/1, Barth returns to this theme. The encounter of human beings with God is always mediated by a part of created reality, which does not become God, but represents God ‘in so far as it is determined, made and used by God as His clothing, temple, or sign’<sup>17</sup>. The recognition that no knowledge of God is immediate, Barth terms the *conditio sine qua non* for faith:

At bottom, knowledge of God in faith is always this indirect knowledge of God, knowledge of God in His works, and in these particular works—in the determining and using of certain creaturely realities to bear witness to the divine reality. What distinguishes faith from unbelief, erroneous faith and superstition is that it is content with this indirect knowledge of God.<sup>18</sup>

Faith stands or falls with this appreciation of the ‘clothed objectivity of God’,<sup>19</sup> which Barth acknowledges as an insight of Luther’s.<sup>20</sup>

The exegetical hurdle here seems higher than the previous one. Barth claims it is a mistake to interpret the recurrent formula ‘And God said’ as proof that the Bible allows revelation of God without the veil of God’s works. Barth discusses Exodus 33:11–23 in this context, where we are told that God spoke to Moses face to face, as a man to his friend. This cannot mean direct encounter, Barth argues, because the passage goes on to affirm that no one can see God and live. Even in this most rare of encounters, Moses is permitted only the sight of God from the back. Similarly, when

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<sup>16</sup> Barth, *Romans*, 50.

<sup>17</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 17.

<sup>18</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 17.

<sup>19</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 18.

<sup>20</sup> For an intriguing comparison of Barth’s critique of natural theology with that of Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard, see George Connell, ‘Against Idolatry: Heidegger and Natural Theology’ in *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought*, ed. Merold Westphal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 144–68.

the prophets report God's speech, Barth argues, they are testifying to what they have seen of God's activity in the world. God really stands before them, really speaks to them and they really hear God, 'But all this takes place, not in a direct, but in an indirect encounter. What directly confront them are the

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historical events, forms and relationships which are His work.'<sup>21</sup> Even the New Testament witnesses to God incarnate in Jesus Christ do not encounter God directly: they see 'the sign of all signs' through God's humanity, 'They, too, stand before a veil, a sign, a work of God.'<sup>22</sup>

While Barth closes off the possibility of knowledge of God through creation, apart from revelation, therefore, he does not do so in the name of some more direct communication from God to humankind. Natural theology is not idolatrous because it looks for God in an indirect way in creation when it ought to be attending to the direct source of revelation: it is idolatrous because it claims that creation gives direct and immediate knowledge of God. Faith is content with an indirect knowledge of God, and therefore looks for and finds God's revelation in the work of God in the world. Natural theology looks to the world with the idolatrous aim of seeing God directly apart from God's revelation; faith looks to the world with the aim of receiving God's word as it is mediated through created reality.

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<sup>21</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 19.

<sup>22</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 20. For a reflection on the veiledness of Christ in Barth's theology, see Trevor Hart, 'The Word, the Words and the Witness: Proclamation as Divine and Human Reality' in *Regarding Karl Barth: Essays toward a Reading of His Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999), 28–47.

There can be no progressive development of religion, therefore, as Feuerbach and Brunner envisage. This does not mean, however, that Barth considers that the Christian religion should be placed in a category separate and distinct from all others. Here he cites Strauss on the foolishness of Christian theologians who fail to acknowledge the historical background to the development of their religion: ‘Because the fruit is now before us, separated as ripe fruits usually are, from the twig and stalk which bore them, it is supposed not to have grown on a tree, but to have fallen direct from heaven. What a childish idea!’<sup>23</sup> Barth avoids Strauss’s criticism in recognizing that “Christianity” or the “Christian Religion” is one predicate for a subject which may have other predicates. It is a species within a genus in which there may be other species.<sup>24</sup> The Christian religion, then, is one among the many religions contradicted by the revelation of God. From the standpoint of revelation it too can be clearly seen ‘to be a human attempt to anticipate what God in His revelation wills to do and does do. It is the attempted replacement of the divine work by a human manufacture’.<sup>25</sup> Apart from revelation, Christians have the duty to apply God’s judgement on religion firstly and most acutely to themselves.<sup>26</sup> I have already referred to Barth’s view of the disastrous turn of German Protestant theology in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. When he turns to Roman Catholic

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theology his critique is no less severe, claiming that the problem is not just in relation to natural theology, but errors in the doctrine of God:

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<sup>23</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 283.

<sup>24</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 281.

<sup>25</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 302.

<sup>26</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 326.

We reject this because it is a construct which obviously derives from an attempt to unite Yahweh with Baal, the triune God of the Holy Scripture with the concept of being of Aristotelian and Stoic philosophy. The assertion that reason can know God from created things applies to the second and heathenish component of this concept of God, so that when we view the construct on this side we do not recognise God in it at all, nor can we accept it as a Christian concept of God.<sup>27</sup>

Barth therefore follows Luther and Calvin in applying the condemnation of idolatry to the Christian religion. ‘What we have here is in its own way—a different way from that of other religions, but no less seriously—unbelief, i. e., opposition to the divine revelation, and therefore active idolatry and self-righteousness.’<sup>28</sup> He recognizes, however, that the problem of religion cannot be avoided. We act as receivers of images of God, and as creators of counter images.<sup>29</sup> This activity is inevitable and necessary, and there is no special virtue in iconoclasm:

Of course it is inevitable and not without meaning that in times of strong Christian feeling heathen temples should be levelled to the earth, idols and pictures of saints destroyed, stained glass smashed, organs removed: to the great distress of aesthetes everywhere. But irony usually had it that Christian churches were built on the very sites of these temples and with materials taken from their pillars and furnishings ... This goes to show that while the devaluation and negation of what is human may occasionally have a practical and symbolical significance in detail, it can never have any basic or general significance.<sup>30</sup>

Christians are, then, inevitably engaged in the human religious activity of religion, with its very real dangers of idolatry. How can they be sure their religion is true? This question seems crucial given Barth’s blistering critique of all forms of religion alongside his recognition that religion is human activity in response to God’s revelation. How is the religion Barth endorses to escape the charge of idolatry that all others face? Barth recognizes the force of this question, and frequently comments on how dependence on

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<sup>27</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 84

<sup>28</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 327.

<sup>29</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 182.

<sup>30</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 300.

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revelation can become idolatrous: when the Trinitarian revelation of God deals with the appearance of God rather than God's true being;<sup>31</sup> when revelation is presented as objective with no account is given of how revelation is received by human beings;<sup>32</sup> when religion exists in a safe sphere apart from the plight of the neighbour;<sup>33</sup> when the church assembles around revelation as a lifeless idol and despairs of itself;<sup>34</sup> when the authority of Scripture in relation to the church is presented as the lifeless calm of icy mountain peaks;<sup>35</sup> or when the church hears God's word without acting on it, making the Word of God into a lifeless idol.<sup>36</sup> Alongside these alerts to how revelation can go wrong, Barth offers a series of criteria for how the church can avoid idolatry: that it is the name of Christ that functions as the final test,<sup>37</sup> that the key question is whether the adherents and representatives are really God's church,<sup>38</sup> and that the issue is whether Christians have found grace before God.<sup>39</sup>

Barth does not, therefore, mean to deny that religion can be true: indeed, he asserts that 'Christianity is the true religion'. But for a religion to become true is possible only on the same basis that sinners can be justified: it is a possibility that is dependent on the grace and revelation of God.<sup>40</sup> Therefore these alerts and tests, either

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<sup>31</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley, vol. I/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 353.

<sup>32</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 237.

<sup>33</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 434.

<sup>34</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 545.

<sup>35</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 673.

<sup>36</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 846.

<sup>37</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 343.

<sup>38</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 356.

<sup>39</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 357.

<sup>40</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 325–6.

individually or collectively, will not be able to function as an objectively clear measure by which Christians could establish their righteousness or unrighteousness. To provide such a measure would have been a contradiction of Barth's position, since the very search for such an unassailable judgement shows the character of our religion to be self-righteousness and idolatry. There is no refuge from the question of whether our worship is true, or whether it is subject to the prophetic judgement Isaiah or Amos pronounced on their contemporaries. Barth's alerts and tests aim to keep us aware of the constant pitfalls into which we may fall in our religious life, not to provide support for our endemic preoccupation with self-justification.

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## **2. The idolatry of nations**

Idolatry is therefore a religious problem: it is a turning from the God who reveals Godself in Jesus Christ, the attempt to grasp at revelation, to anticipate it, to talk about God instead of listening to God.<sup>41</sup> Yet Barth was always alert to how the consequences of idolatry went far beyond the religious sphere. In 1922, in his *Romans* commentary, Barth showed how the dead idols human beings fashion attain an ironic life of their own in their power over us:

The images and likenesses, whose meaning we have failed to perceive, become themselves purpose and content and end. And now men have really become slaves and puppets of things, of 'Nature' and of 'Civilization', whose dissolution and establishing by God they have overlooked.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 302-3.

<sup>42</sup> Barth, *Romans*, 51.

If this was clear in 1922, it became clearer in the years that followed. Timothy Gorringer, in his valuable study placing Barth's theology in its social context, traces the idolatrous tendencies of German National Socialism. In 1928 Goebbels said of Hitler that 'many are called but few are chosen': he was the only man capable by 'fate-given perception and the power of the word' to be a 'pathbreaker of the future' through 'the active grace of destiny'. In 1933, Heidegger in his inaugural lecture 'hailed Hitler as a leader called by destiny, sanctioned by all the primal forces of the German soul that made the Leader and the led one flesh'. Hitler claimed that providence had spoken to him and brought him success. Even more chilling is Alfred Rosenberg's 1930 account of Nazi religion, in which he called for 'a new faith, the myth of blood' in which Aryan blood would be the new sacrament of the German people. Alongside the extremism of this blasphemy Gorringer notes the increased stridency of the political theology of Hirsch and others, weaving the *Volk*, state, war and God ever more closely together. Hirsch claimed in 1933 that 'Not one people in the world has a statesman who takes Christianity so seriously. When Adolf Hitler ended his great speech on 1 May with a prayer, the whole world felt the wonderful sincerity of it'.<sup>43</sup>

To respond to these developments, Barth considered it crucial to understand them for what they were: not mere rhetoric, not mere politics, not some inexplicable aberration, but the consequences of an idolatrous reversal of revelation and religion. The 'German Christians' were the Protestants who accommodated themselves to National Socialism after Hitler's seizure of power in 1933, and were prepared to swear allegiance to Hitler and place *Mein Kampf* on the altar beside the Bible. Barth saw this development as 'the last, fullest and worst monstrosity of neo-

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<sup>43</sup> Timothy Gorringer, *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 129–30.

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Protestantism', but believed that simply to address this consequence in isolation would be to no avail. The first requirement must be to do theology rightly:

we cannot be afraid of the consequences and repudiate them unless it is perfectly clear that we are not co-operating in that reversal of revelation and religion. To put it concretely, we are defenceless against the "German Christians" of our own time, unless we know how to guard against the development which took place in van Til and Buddeus, and even earlier.<sup>44</sup>

For this reason, the 1934 Barmen Declaration of the Confessing Church, which Barth drafted, was not primarily a denouncing of opponents, but a creedal affirmation of authentic faith. Its first article puts Barth's insistence on the priority of revelation, and his rejection of alternative sources of knowledge of God, in context:

"I am the Way and the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through me" ...

Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God whom we have to hear, and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death.

We reject the false doctrine that the church could and should recognize as the source of its proclamation, beyond and besides this one Word of God, yet other events, powers, historic figures, and truths as God's revelation.<sup>45</sup>

The intimate connection Barth saw between theology and politics is further made clear in his discussion of the divine perfections, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, composed in 1938-9. Under the heading 'The Unity and Omnipresence of God', Barth observes:

every genuine proclamation of the Christian faith is a force disturbing to, even destructive of, the advance of religion, its life and richness and peace ... No sentence is more dangerous or revolutionary than that God is One and there is no other like Him ... It was on the truth of the sentence that God is One that

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<sup>44</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 292.

<sup>45</sup> Translation by Douglas S. Bax from Green, *Karl Barth*, 149. Note Green's identification of the final four allusions to Hitler's seizure of power in 1933, the exalting of 'blood and soil', Hitler himself, and the ideology of the *Volk*.



the “Third Reich” of Adolf Hitler made shipwreck. Let this sentence be uttered in such a way that it is heard and grasped, and at one 450 prophets of Baal are always in fear of their

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lives. Beside God there are only His creatures or false gods, and beside faith in Him there are religions only as religions of superstition, error and finally irreligion.’<sup>46</sup>

Gorringer comments that this text shows Barth’s profound conviction ‘that God constitutes our reality, and cannot therefore be ultimately contradicted’.<sup>47</sup>

It would be absurd, I believe, and the greatest contrast with the politically engaged theology of Barth, for theologians to meditate soberly on the relationship between theology and politics in 1930s Germany, without also pausing to reflect on the possibility of an idolatrous politics in our day. For today, as then, world events are dominated by those who take religion seriously, by the Al Quaida terrorists engaged in a campaign of mass murder in the name of Islam, and by the heads of state of the US and the UK, who led the campaign against them in Afghanistan, and who used it as a springboard to beginning a new conflict with the old adversary of Iraq. There is obviously no moral equivalence between current US and UK foreign policy and the policies of the Nazi Germany, but this does not mean that there is no comparison to be made between the use of religious language in the two cases. Should we not marvel at the way Christian language is invoked in US presidential addresses, just as we have in the speeches of German politicians before World War II? In the State of the Union address preceding the Iraq war that began in 2003, George Bush stated that the United States of America has ‘been called to a unique role in human events’. Faced by

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<sup>46</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 444.

<sup>47</sup> Gorringer, *Karl Barth*, 145.

enemies who ‘embrace tyranny and death as a creed’, America stands for a different choice, ‘freedom and the dignity of every life’. It will ‘overcome evil with greater good’, ‘lead the world towards the values that will bring lasting peace’, and it has discovered again that ‘God is near’.<sup>48</sup> In more muted tones these themes were echoed by the British Prime Minister, who also believes in a battle of good versus evil embodied in the conflicts between nation states.<sup>49</sup> If we are to learn from Barth’s vision of the relationship between theology and politics, we should not rush to repudiate particular sentiments, or offer our political judgement on particular policies, or particular UN resolutions. Our first tasks as theologians are to reflect on the theological meaning of the words used in such debates, to ask about the nature of the theology that gives rise to them, and to question whether the churches to which we belong are engaged in a faithful, or idolatrous witness.

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### **3. Idolatry and atheism**

I began with the critiques of religion offered by Marx and Feuerbach, and we now have an overview of Barth’s critique, which has much in common with them. Barth acknowledges this common ground. In the 1922 *Romans* commentary, he portrays the ‘No-God’ worshipped by those too cowardly to be atheists:

What men on this side of resurrection name ‘God’ is most characteristically not God. Their ‘God’ does not redeem his creation, but allows free course to the unrighteousness of men; does not declare himself to be God, but is the complete affirmation of the course of the world and of men as it is. This is

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<sup>48</sup> George Bush, State of the Union Address, Washington D. C., 29<sup>th</sup> January, 2003.

<sup>49</sup> For example, in a speech to British Ambassadors before the war, Tony Blair referred to the US as a ‘force for good’ (Tony Blair, Speech at Foreign Office Conference 7<sup>th</sup> January 2003, URL: <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page1765.asp>).

intolerable, for, in spite of the highest honours we offer him for his adornment, he is, in fact, 'No-God.' The cry of revolt against such a god is nearer the truth than is the sophistry with which men attempt to justify him. Only because they have nothing better, only because they lack the courage of despair, do the generality of men on this side of resurrection avoid falling into blatant atheism.<sup>50</sup>

Barth frequently engages with Feuerbach in the *Church Dogmatics*, often to challenge complacent theology. He is perplexed, for example, how the defenders of the modern doctrine of God, 'that the being of God is the predicate of the human subject' could 'expose themselves so openly to this objection of Feuerbach'.<sup>51</sup> In an ironic reference to Nietzsche, Barth argues that the New Testament account of knowledge of the triune God as contrasted with the world of religions in the first centuries 'signified and signifies the most radical "twilight of the gods"', in Schiller's words the 'de-divinisation of the lovely world'. The charge of atheism against the Early Church was not fabrication, Barth argues, 'and it would have been wiser for its apologists not to have defended themselves so keenly against this charge'.<sup>52</sup>

Christian faith shares this critical view of religion with atheism, therefore, and journeys along the same road. Where it parts company, for Barth, is where the critique broadens to encompass atheism. For atheism and religion have much in common:

In their general view of the world scientists and historians are in far closer agreement with philosophers and theologians than is normally recognized. It is not merely that the world exists side by side with God: it has taken His place, and has itself become God, and demands 'the

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<sup>50</sup> Barth, *Romans*, 40.

<sup>51</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 293.

<sup>52</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 444.

same devotion which the old-fashioned believer offered to His God' (D. F. Strauss). Contradictions within the deified world—Nature and Civilization, Materialism and Idealism, Capitalism and Socialism, Secularism and Ecclesiasticism, Imperialism and Democracy—are not so serious as they give themselves out to be. Such contradictions are contradictions within the world, and there is for them no paradox, no negation, no eternity.<sup>53</sup>

Where mysticism internalizes and spiritualizes religion, concealing the 'No' it must finally speak to religion, atheism childishly shouts it out to the world. Its whole interest is in the denial of religion as such: it lives in and by its negation. But its negation does not go far enough: it 'does not deny the reality of nature, history, and civilization, of man's animal and rational existence, of this or that ethic or the lack of it. On the contrary, these are the authorities and powers to which the atheist usually subscribes with the happiest and most naive credulity'. Its denials give rise to idolatry and self-righteousness, opening the door again to every kind of religious glorification. This means 'It is really opposed to religion only as the spring is to the river, as the root to the tree, as the unborn child to the adult'.<sup>54</sup> If the human power to devise and form gods is to be challenged, something more radical is required:

A real crisis of religion is needed to affect this power ... It will not have to be content with easy successes against the theologies and ideologies and mythologies of external religion, extending only to temple buildings and ceremonies and observances. It will have to rush into that inner chamber shouting: 'Here is the *fabrica idolorum*! Here we lie and murder and steal and commit adultery! Here the cry must be: *Ecrasez l'infame*! ... The real crisis of religion can only break in from outside the magic circle of religion and its place of origin, i. e. from outside man ... This is what happens in the revelation of God.<sup>55</sup>

Barth's account of idolatry is significant in identifying three unlikely and unsuspecting groups of idolators. The primary target of his critique is the church. The problem of religion, which is the problem of idolatry, is *the* problem of theology,

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<sup>53</sup> Barth, *Romans*, 52

<sup>54</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 322–324.

<sup>55</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 324–5.

according to Barth,<sup>56</sup> and he is merciless in identifying the idolatrous possibilities of all religion—including Christianity. Christians must recognize that idolatry is firstly a problem for the church, not for others: it is the test of whether its religion is dependent on the revelation

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and grace of God, or has become merely a self-serving human activity. Having appreciated the peril of their position, Christians should be alert to the dangers of lapsing into the belief that their religious practices have merit of themselves, apart from the grace of God. They will continue these practices—there is no alternative to religion—but will do so in recognition that the truth and worth of their religion lies in God's hands, not in their own.

The second target of Barth's critique may find itself even more surprised than the church to be accused of idolatry. Politicians attempting to draw on religious justifications for their policies may be guilty of idolatry, or blasphemy, or both. Barth witnessed the prostitution of German Christianity to the idols of Nazism in his day, and his alertness to the dangers of allegiances between politics and religion, I have suggested, remains crucial in the politics of the twenty-first century.

The third group to face the charge of idolatry are those who thought they had left all such religious practice behind. Atheists are in danger of substituting idols such as nature, civilization, human reason, relativism or freedom for the God they deny. Ceasing to worship God is not an escape from idolatry: it can frequently result in the erection of idols to fill the space formerly occupied. Theology has the potential to

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<sup>56</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 284.

offer a more radical critique than atheism, affirming with Marx that humankind makes religion, but continuing to recognize that atheism too is of human manufacture. The critique of idolatry, therefore, should also give pause to those who have forsaken religion. Barth concurs with Marx that the critique of religion is the beginning of all criticism; he differs from Marx concerning where this criticism, the unmasking of idolatry in all its forms, should end.