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Bringing Barth's Critique of Religion to the Inter-faith Table*

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Although he criticized Barth under the enigmatic phrase “positivism of revelation,”¹ Bonhoeffer saw Barth's criticism of religion as “his really great merit.”² In the present age in which inter-faith dialogue has become more pressing than it has perhaps ever before been, theology can at times engage in two conversations that are not only separate but at worst self-contradictory: in its discussions with secular society, theology can engage in critical discussions about religion, drinking deeply from the well of criticism offered by the likes of Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Durkheim, and Marx;³ yet, in its discussions in inter-faith settings, the danger can arise that these critiques are thrown out altogether or at least lie in abeyance. If we are truly to realize the potential Bonhoeffer glimpsed in Barth's critique of religion, it is my contention that we must not leave this important piece of theology aside as we enter dialogue with members of other faith communities.⁴ Moreover, to engage in two sep-

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¹ See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (London: SCM Press, 1999), letters of April 30, 1944 (280), May 5, 1944 (286), and June 8, 1944 (329).

² *Ibid.*, May 5, 1944 (286). On the relationship between Barth and Bonhoeffer over the question of religion, see Andreas Pangritz, *Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, trans. Barbara Rumscheidt and Martin Rumscheidt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 71–114; Ralf K. Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Religionless Christianity*, trans. Doug Stott (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998). Wüstenberg argues correctly that Barth and Bonhoeffer are seeking to achieve different things: Barth offers a critique of religion but never religionless Christianity.

³ As these names indicate, this is clearly a very specifically modern European conceptual development, which cannot claim to be monolithically relevant for every religion in each part of the world.

⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. and trans. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, 14 vols. (Ed. © 2008 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved. 0022-4189/2008/8801-0004\$10.00

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arate conversations in almost completely different languages betrays the danger of becoming a two-faced monster and of failing to recognize our own particularity not simply as Christians but as Christians in the twenty-first century. Such an approach of separate conversations—while it may be the more simple to follow—fails to recognize that traditions (at least in the Western world) are simultaneously engaged in an interface with secular culture and an interface with other faiths as well.⁵ It holds the danger of creating a conversation with faith partners in which the real—albeit complex—dynamics of each faith are reduced to a unidirectional discussion that lacks the complexity of each individual faith's relations in and with the world.

To look to Karl Barth, and especially to his paragraph on religion, for help with this may at first seem neither a sensible nor apparent possible solution.⁶ Barth lived in an age in which his concerns as a

inburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–75), 1, pt. 2, §17: “The Revelation of God as the Abolition [*Aufhebung*] of Religion.” Henceforth *Church Dogmatics* will be cited as volume, part, and page (e.g., 1, pt. 2:3, etc.) and referred to as *CD*. References to further criticism Barth cites against religion can be found in Garrett Green, “Challenging the Religious Studies Canon: Karl Barth’s Theory of Religion,” *Journal of Religion* 75 (1995): 473–86. The present article does not address directly Barth’s discussion of the secular parables of the kingdom and the lights of creation, except to enhance conceptual clarity or in order not to misrepresent Barth. The reader is, however, directed to *CD*, 4, pt. 3, §69.2; George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 234–80; Geoff Thompson, “Religious Diversity, Christian Doctrine, and Karl Barth,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8, no. 1 (2006), esp. 10–18; and Glenn Chestnutt, “The Secular Parables of the Kingdom” (paper presented at the Society for the Study of Theology, Leeds, 2006).

⁵ There exists a vast wealth of material on the concepts of religion and the secular. At a broad level, “secular” (from the Latin *saeculum*) refers to an increased focus on this age or the world as opposed to a focus on the divine. This has had various effects and has developed in various forms, which one is ill-advised to see as a single movement or unified whole. On varieties of secularism and secularization, see David Martin, *The Religious and the Secular: Studies in Secularization* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), chaps. 1 and 4, and *Reflections on Sociology and Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), chap. 14. See also Timothy Jenkins and Ben Quash, “The Cambridge Inter-faith Programme: Academic Profile,” August 22, 2006, Cambridge University, http://www.divinity.cam.ac.uk/cip/uploads/academic_profile.pdf, 2–3, for their differentiation between secularism as “a set of minimal rules or dispositions that allow the working together of the various religious intensities in some sort of political unit for some sort of collective good” and as “a rival form, seeking to displace all these various forms of intensity (designated collectively as ‘religion’).” This latter view of secularism as a doctrine is also discussed in Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), chap. 1. Asad also remarks, however, that one should note that “because the secular is so much a part of our public life, it is not easy to grasp it directly” (16). For the purpose of this article, in addressing Barth’s own critique of religion, reference to the illusive concept of the “secular” will be understood in very general terms as taking a critical stance toward religion. Through examining Barth’s understanding of religion (itself influenced by other modern Western European secular critiques of religion), this article seeks to demonstrate what it is to internalize that critique within the Christian faith and how that may itself help to underscore the practice of inter-faith dialogue by warning the Christian of the dangers of idolatry.

⁶ Indeed, Thompson advocates that *CD*, §17, may be more problematic than helpful as a

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Christian were far more focused on the secular culture around him, and, for all of his criticism of "religion," he is prepared to conclude his paragraph by speaking of the church as the locus of "True Religion."⁷ With the exception of the particular question of the relationship of Christianity to Jewish people, Barth did not betray an interest in inter-faith issues.⁸ His approach to Islam was highly polemical, seeing it, for example, as a paganized form of Judaism.⁹ Sadly, this betrays the fact that Barth was very much a man of his times—struggling with the questions of his own age. While his generation's questions clearly concerned Christianity's relationship with the Jewish people, his primary concern was not people of other religions but those who had engaged in "the critical turn against religion."¹⁰ However, Barth's clear concern with the issues of his own day charges the present-day theologian with the task not simply to repeat Barth's own theology but to seek direction from the one whose tremendous theological acumen should critically be brought to bear on the pressing issues of today's generation. What from his thought can we extract to assist us in our present theological needs?

It has often struck me that one can find an unusual parallel between Barth and the landscape gardener Capability Brown. Like Brown, Barth's theology forms a landscape that will take a century to realize its "capabilities." The task for students of Barth is neither to clear the land altogether, which will only bring us back to the starting point, nor to allow the garden to grow wildly without any pruning or care, which will leave no thing of beauty at all. Rather, it is to tend to this landscape, to nurture it, prune it, and allow it to grow, bringing in new features that are in keeping with it and ever improving the groundwork that was carried out with such foresight. It is the task of today's theologian to prepare the garden in different theological seasons, with the concerns and issues that the march of time brings about.

In order to keep to the above hermeneutical approach to Barth, this article will not offer a detailed exegesis of §17. This has been done

resource for contemporary discussions and that one should ground a theology of the religions elsewhere in Barth. Thompson, "Religious Diversity, Christian Doctrine, and Karl Barth," 3, 6–10.

⁷ *CD*, 1, pt. 2:325ff.

⁸ See Eberhard Busch, "Indissoluble Unity: Barth's Position on the Jews during the Hitler Era," in *For the Sake of the World: Karl Barth and the Future of Ecclesial Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2004), 53–79; Mark Lindsay, "Dialectics of Communion: Dialectical Method and Barth's Defense of Israel," in *Karl Barth: A Future for Post Modern Theology?* ed. Geoff Thompson and Christiaan Mostert (Adelaide: Openbook, 2000), 122–43.

⁹ *CD*, 3, pt. 3:28. For a more detailed and sensitive discussion of Barth's relationship with Islam, see Carys Moseley, "Karl Barth's Theology of Religion: Interpreting Religious Change Yesterday and Today" (paper presented at the Society for the Study of Theology, Leeds, 2006).

¹⁰ *CD*, 1, pt. 2:323.

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extremely well elsewhere and does not require addressing here.¹¹ Instead, it will seek to apply Barth's theology to an area where it may bear unexpected fruit—the inter-faith table—and to ask the question of what this theology looks like in an inter-faith setting.¹² While Barth does not address inter-faith issues, his paragraph on religion can highlight issues that arise in approaching and sitting at an inter-faith table, a table that must necessarily (given the concerns of the faiths) be one on which secular-religious concerns also lie. Barth's own approach to religion as a general category is influenced heavily by the modern European secular critique of religion, as found especially in Feuerbach.¹³ However, as will be seen, Barth's version of this critique is grounded in a Christian-specific form of that critique, which means that not only is religion itself sublated by revelation but so too is the very notion of religion.¹⁴ He gives a Christianized view of the critique of religion that offers an interpretation of the category of "religion" that is still in reference to thought that may be considered "secularist." Furthermore, it will be argued that in this endeavor Barth's paragraph provides tools with which to approach inter-faith dialogue while still retaining one's own particularity. The article will offer a vision of future inter-faith dialogue centered around the concerns of Barth's critique of religion and will seek to discover what such dialogue might aim to achieve.

¹¹ Green, "Challenging the Religious Studies Canon," 476–83, and *Barth on Religion: The Revelation of God as the Sublimation of Religion* (London: T&T Clark, 2007); and J. A. Di Noia, "Religion and the Religions," in *Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 243–57.

¹² To that end, this article has been circulated and discussed by Muslims, Jews, and Christians in Cambridge and London interested in inter-faith matters to seek to discover how such ideas are perceived by those actively engaged in this work and to attempt to gain a consideration of these thoughts from the perspective of the other gathered around the table. For their time and wisdom, I owe a debt of gratitude.

¹³ Although only a few references to Feuerbach exist in *CD*, 1, pt. 2, §17, one sees his influence on Barth in Barth's introductory essay to Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), x–xxxii. Barth states, for example, that "the attitude of the anti-theologian Feuerbach was more theological than that of many theologians" (x) and that "so long as the talk about 'God in man' is not cut out at the roots, we have no cause to criticize Feuerbach, but are with him 'the true children of his century'" (xxx). Therefore, while little direct discussion of the notion of the "secular" will take place in the body of this article, it is believed that Barth's own understanding of religion in §17 is underscored by such secular critiques of religion from the nineteenth century. For a consideration of Barth's engagement with Feuerbach, see John Glasse, "Barth on Feuerbach," *Harvard Theological Review* 57, no. 2 (1964): 69–96.

¹⁴ This point is made (albeit critically) by Thompson when he states: "The very argument about religion which Barth resisted had already internalized the 'religions' within Christian discourse on the basis of a putatively universal category of religion of which the religions were specific instances." However, Thompson goes on to state: "This is not to deny a priori the legitimacy of a Christian, theological interpretation of what have come to be designated 'the religions';" see Thompson, "Religious Diversity, Christian Doctrine, and Karl Barth," 8.

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This article offers a programmatic theory for inter-faith dialogue centered around this paragraph of Barth, rather than primarily a reflection on practice with all the human complexity that this involves. However, it is hoped that this theory may provide avenues for practice, particularly for those who construct their own theology in dialogue with the great Basel professor.¹⁵

I. SOME HONESTY ABOUT SOME DIFFICULT ISSUES

Barth's placing revelation in a position of primacy over religion, when taken out of context, can confront one with the dangerous creature of exclusivism.¹⁶ A deeper reading makes it quite clear that this cannot be maintained, and, instantaneously, one would have to agree with D'Costa that "Barth overturns these categories by being both an exclusivist, inclusivist and universalist!"¹⁷ However, the exclusivist tones of Barth's work cannot be ignored. The church is singled out as the "locus of true religion."¹⁸ While revelation denies that any religion is true in and of itself, the Christian religion becomes true from without in close analogy to the way in which the sinner is justified.¹⁹ Within this analogy,

¹⁵ *CD*, §17, marks only one point of entry into inter-faith dialogue for one utilizing the theology of Barth. If the critique of religion is seen to be too negative, perhaps more positive assessments can be found in the likes of Barth's doctrines of providence, witness, and the Holy Spirit.

¹⁶ It is useful here to differentiate between types of exclusivism that may be confused by readers of Barth: (a) there is a christological exclusivism; (b) related to this, there is revelational exclusivism; (c) there is eschatological exclusivism, which denies salvation to the non-Christian. While there can be no doubt that a is a proper and appropriate form of exclusivism for Barth's theology, I have argued elsewhere that this does not lead to c but quite the opposite: see Tom Greggs, "Jesus Is Victor": Passing the Impasse of Barth on Universalism," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60, no. 2 (2007): 196–212. With regard to b, the situation is more complex. Certainly, it cannot be separated from the one event of a, which means that pluralism must necessarily be rejected as there can be no sources of revelation outside of Jesus Christ. There is, thus, an exclusivity that exists in scripture and (at least in the early volumes of *CD*) church proclamation as it attests to the one revelation of God in Jesus Christ (see *CD*, 1, pt. 1, §4, on the threefold nature of the word of God). However, this exists in the dialectical tension that comes with also realizing that the one Word of Jesus Christ relativizes all human words. This can be seen in Barth's later work on truth *extra muros ecclesiae* (*CD*, 4, pt. 3, §69). See Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 245ff. Hunsinger summarizes Barth's position nicely in the aphorism "exclusivism without triumphalism or inclusivism without compromise" (280). It may well be, therefore, that the form of christological exclusivism that Barth presents is the least dangerous form of exclusivism one can have while still retaining a proper level of internal coherence with basic expressions of belief for Christianity (as seen, e.g., in Nicaea and Chalcedon).

¹⁷ Gavin D'Costa, "Theology of Religions," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, ed. David F. Ford, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 630.

¹⁸ *CD*, 1, pt. 2:280, 298–99.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 325–26.

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Barth writes that “we have no hesitation in saying that the Christian religion is the true religion.”²⁰ In the Hegelian dialectical terminology Barth employs, religion is (to use Green’s language) “sublated” or (as he now prefers) “sublimated” by revelation.²¹ In singling Christian revelation out in this way, it is clear that Barth, in one sense at least, sees the Christian religion as unique from his insider perspective as a Christian. That this perspective belongs to Barth’s insider view as a Christian is underlined by his grounding this claim in terms of the Holy Spirit and the church. He writes that the true religion “is an event in the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit. To be even more precise, it is an event in the existence of the Church and the children of God. The existence of the Church of God and the children of God means that true religion exists even in the world of human religion.”²² This may seem a bold and arrogant claim. Moreover, Barth condemns theology that has lost its proper object and turned to religion rather than revelation “in all its uniqueness.”²³ He is, furthermore, concerned with mission, speaking of Christianity’s authority as a “missionary religion” with the authority “to confront the world of religions as the one true religion, with absolute self-confidence to invite and to challenge it to abandon its ways and to start on the Christian way.”²⁴ For Barth, the ultimate distinction between Christianity and the other religions lies emphatically in the name of Jesus Christ in whom the Christian religion is created,²⁵ elected,²⁶ justified,²⁷ and sanctified.²⁸ The ultimate and unshakable distinction between religions and the “true religion” can be seen “only in Him, in the name of Jesus Christ, i.e., in the revelation and reconciliation achieved in Jesus Christ. Nowhere else, but genuinely so in Him.”²⁹ For Barth, this revelation and reconciliation are inseparable: reconciliation is the content of revelation, and revelation is the only direct and overt means by which reconciliation may be known (albeit there may be incognito forms).³⁰ Both revelation and reconciliation

²⁰ Ibid., 326.

²¹ See Green, “Challenging the Religious Studies Canon,” 477ff. Green traced the development of his terminology in a recent paper. See Garrett Green, “Barth on Religion” (given at the annual conference of the Society for the Study of Theology, Leeds, 2006). It is the word “sublimated” that he now prefers for *Aufhebung* and uses in his new translation.

²² *CD*, 1, pt. 2:344.

²³ Ibid., 294.

²⁴ Ibid., 357.

²⁵ Ibid., 346ff.

²⁶ Ibid., 348ff.

²⁷ Ibid., 352ff.

²⁸ Ibid., 357ff.

²⁹ Ibid., 346.

³⁰ Discussed in *CD*, 4, pt. 3, §69.2.

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are identical with the person ("the name") of Jesus Christ. They are, thus, an event (a history) before they are a body of ideas. In this event, the Jesus Christ of history who lived and died for us in the first century CE in Palestine is present and effectual in the here and now.

Such an exposition of the paragraph leaves one wondering whether Barth's revelational model can provide any hope for inter-faith discussion at all. At worst, he may seem intolerant; at best, he stands so far within his tradition that it is difficult for him to see the other, let alone engage in dialogue with her. This type of interpretation, as it is hoped the following sections of this article will show, is in some ways at least to build a straw man in the place of Barth in order to knock him down. But it is worth acknowledging that clear difficulties exist in Barth's presentation of the critique of religion, and it is not difficult to see how some readers may take away the impression that Barth is a somewhat bigoted Christian who seeks apologetically to establish the uniqueness of Christianity over and against any other faith position. Crude as such a presentation is, it does, however, highlight certain issues that the Christian theologian engaging in inter-faith dialogue must confront.

For all of Barth's suggested exclusivism (at least on a christological and possibly revelational level, if not on a soteriological one), one is forced to ask the question in confrontation and dialogue with other religions: is he right? Does Christianity rest upon exclusivity, an element of which is no doubt found in all faiths? There is a very real danger that, in speaking to other faith communities about Christianity, what is brought to the table for discussion is not actually Christianity as known and practiced at all. Indeed, the same may well be true of the Muslim, the Jew, the Hindu, and others: desirous not to cause hurt or offense, many of us often leave the exclusivist elements of our faith at the door before entering into dialogue with those of other faiths. Barth is surely right to assert: "The Christian religion is the predicate to the subject of the name of Jesus Christ. Without Him it is not merely something different. It is nothing at all, a fact which cannot be hidden for long."³¹ Only Christianity knows this name in its significance, in spite of the critique of all religion Barth offers, for what it is. To sit at the inter-faith table without this fact, painful as it may be in face of the other, is to engage in a dishonest dialogue dishonestly. Our very need to sit together is grounded not only in what we share but—and herein lies the rub—in the differences we have. A number of very real dangers can arise from various quarters if this is ignored. There is, first, the danger that we sit down not as the other but as the same and

³¹ *CD*, 1, pt. 2:347.

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thus do not sit down as religious people wishing to engage in dialogue at all. By this is meant that if we gather together around shared values (perhaps associated with one of many shades of social liberalism), we do not gather together primarily identifying as people of particular faiths but only secondarily so: we can run the danger of actually gathering together as people who are united by a (for all of the vagueness of this term) liberal agenda, through which we then see our own faith. Thus, for example, the Christian engaging in dialogue with the Muslim (who is thereby simultaneously engaging in dialogue with the Christian) finds it easier to see herself in the Muslim who will engage in such dialogue than the fundamentalist of her own faith who will not. The dynamics of identity are complex. Without facing up to the difficult and painful forms of exclusivity all faiths possess (whether in terms of the revelation of Jesus Christ or the Qur'an or the Abrahamic covenant), we run the danger of people meeting primarily not from the shared position of being members of different faiths or religions but from a shared secular world view of some neutral space in which to mediate conflict and in which faith is only expressed secondarily.

This leads to a second danger. This is that we do not engage in dialogue but in mutual agreement and "head nodding." Without confronting the painful reality of the exclusive ultimates that we have (however inclusive these may be),³² we run the risk of entering into the kind of universalizing in which modernity has engaged in its understanding of religion—seeing ourselves as all the same and not, therefore, presenting the at times problematic elements of the coexistence of our faiths in the religiously and socially heterogeneous communities of which we are a part. Underscoring this is the descriptive inadequacy of sameness, which can logically leave one wondering why one is a Christian rather than a Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jew, or Sikh.

³² Since, as has been stated, both revelation and reconciliation are identical with the person of Jesus Christ and are, therefore, an event before they are a proposition, Barth makes clear in a later stage of his dogmatics that the Jesus Christ who died for us in history is present and effectual here and now even *extra muros ecclesiae*: "As the reconciliation of the world to God, the justification and sanctification of man, is the reality, and indeed the living and present reality in Jesus Christ the true Witness of its truth, . . . not only *intra* but *extra muros ecclesiae* there are also lights in the darkness, clarities in confusion, constants in the oscillating dialectic of our existence, orders in disorder, certainties in the great sea of doubt, genuine speaking and hearing even in the labyrinth of human speech. They are all very wonderful and unexpected and unforeseen" (*CD*, 4, pt. 3:476). There is, therefore, a radical inclusivity to be found in Barth's radical and ultimate christological exclusivity. On the relationship between Barth's exclusivist christology and recognizing truth in non-Christian sources, see George Hunsinger, "Epilogue: Secular Parables of the Truth," in *How to Read Karl Barth*, 234–80. See also, expressing this in terms of ethics and natural theology, Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 197–204.

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Part of the difficulty and pain in coming to the inter-faith table is that we arrive as representatives (or better, members) of one religion and thereby not as representatives (or members) of another. But if we do not come as ourselves in all our rainbow-like differences, we can never engage in dialogue and certainly not inter-faith dialogue. Uncomfortable as Barth's theology of religion often is, it reminds us of how uncomfortable those seats at the inter-faith table not only are but—if we are to be internally coherent and to be present as members of our own faiths—have to be. This is not to engage in something unloving; quite the opposite, it is to bear that discomfort out of love for the other. Surely such sacrificial love is an even greater virtue than that of tolerance:³³ while tolerance pertains principally to ideas, love pertains to persons, and in sitting with those who believe different things than we do, we do not simply play with ideas but engage in love for the other.

II. ARRIVING AT THE TABLE PRIMARILY CRITIQUING ONESELF AND NOT THE OTHER

If elements of Barth's revelational exclusivism cause modern liberal sensibilities to feel uneasy at times, far more comforting for such sensibilities is Barth's recognition of the inclusive elements of the category of "religion." Barth's critique of religion is not aimed at other faiths. Indeed, his general lack of engagement in inter-faith dialogue should surely remind us of this. The Christian religion is one form of the subject "religion" of which there are other forms.³⁴ Christianity, also, therefore, stands under the critique of religion as *Unglaube* (faithlessness). What is more, the Christian religion stands under this judgment above all religions. Far from revelation raising the status of the Christian religion above all other religions to a position of superiority, it reveals to the Christian her religion as unbelief.³⁵ Indeed, Barth spends the first nineteen pages of his section on "True Religion" setting provisos for the way in which the Christian must never construe her religion as true. The Christian religion cannot engage in heightening its position through the judgment of revelation over and against religion; instead, "it is our business as Christians to apply this judgement first and most acutely to ourselves: and to others, the non-Christians, only in so far as we recognise ourselves in them."³⁶ Similarly, he writes: "the Christian religion . . . too, stands under the judgment that religion is

³³ Note, however, Barth's own theological defense of tolerance. See *CD*, 1, pt. 2:299.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 281.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 326.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 327.

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unbelief, and that it is not acquitted by any inward worthiness.”³⁷ For all that the category of religion is negative for Barth, Christianity is included in this category as the religion standing most firmly under the judgment of God. From the great polemicist, there is the clear assertion that both the criticism of religion and speech about Christianity as the “true religion” can never be engaged in “as preliminary polemic against the non-Christian.”³⁸ Even in achieving its goal, the religion of the Church of Christ is viewed negatively. Barth is able to speak of “knowledge and worship of God and a corresponding human activity” but goes on to describe this in the following terms: “We can only say of them that they are *corrupt*. They are an attempt born of *lying* and *wrong* and committed to *futile means*. And yet we have also to say of them that (*in their corruption*) they do reach their goals.”³⁹

Such an approach to the Christian religion has a number of beneficial practices to bring to the inter-faith table. The first is the clear need for humility in approaching other faiths. Any sense of human superiority whatsoever is excluded by Barth in his description of how Christianity is the “true religion”: Christianity only becomes true through a complete act of grace on God’s behalf.⁴⁰ It is true only as the religion standing most firmly under the judgment that revelation offers to religion—faithlessness. This is not to say that Christianity is to lack confidence in God’s gracious act toward it but that it is dialectically to recognize the way in which it is “true religion” (grounded in the fact that God has elected to reveal himself in the religious form of Christianity) only as it stands within the thesis of “Religion as Unbelief.” Standing most sharply judged under this thesis, the Christian cannot come to the inter-faith table with any sense of a privileged position, nor even as an equal, but only as one who is the most guilty of idolatry and self-righteousness, even in the quest to purge herself of these things. The Christian’s solidarity with the other is never as *primus inter pares* but only as a member of the religion to whom God’s “No” is most sharply spoken in the search and quest for God. It is this sharpest “No” spoken to the Christian Church with which Barth is concerned—never an intolerant attitude toward other faiths or an unloving one

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ CD, 1, pt. 2:326.

³⁹ Ibid., 344; emphasis added.

⁴⁰ “The confession of Jesus Christ as the one Word of God, says Barth, has nothing to do with an arbitrary self-glorification of Christianity, the church, or the Christian. It is strictly ‘a christological statement.’ . . . As such it does not entail any exaltation of the Christian over the non-Christian, but rather an important bond between them. For the statement confronts Christian and non-Christian alike with ‘the one truth superior’ to them both” (Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 244).

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toward members of those faiths. Barth teaches the Christian engaging in inter-faith dialogue that judgment does indeed begin in Christianity's own house.

Second, Barth emphasizes that we cannot separate Christianity from other religions on the basis of a concept of "religion."⁴¹ This means that the Christian religion stands in solidarity with other religions. It is clearly part of a category to which other forms of religion belong. The connection between religions is evident in Barth, and it is only a short step from here to speak of the need to engage with the other forms of this phenomenon. However, for all that Barth sees solidarity between faiths, he is correct to realize that there is still difference and uniqueness: the flaw of naive pluralism is clear to Barth, and he stands firm in the belief that Christianity needs Jesus Christ. In solidarity with other religions, one must be truly concerned with *other* religions.

This need primarily to critique oneself brings with it the third implication of never confusing God or revelation with the human form of religion. Revelation stands over and against religion; it contradicts it rather than stemming from it or returning to it.⁴² Religion is not revelation. Nor is religion God. Religion seeks to be both of these things and fails because it is idolatrous. This distinction is helpful when one dares to assume at the inter-faith table the position of one's own God, whoever that unique God may be conceived to be for whichever faith. A solidarity that mediates our differences around this point helps one truly to engage in dialogue—not denying our different particularities but also able within our particularity not to have to close our ears to the words of the other. Gathering at the table as people of our own "religion" is not the same as sitting in judgment as if we were God. Turning the critique of religion back primarily on ourselves as Barth does helps to accentuate this point and prevents us from engaging in the blasphemy of playing God.⁴³

III. A CRITIQUE OF UNIVERSALS AND THE NEED FOR PARTICULARS

Early in the paragraph on religion, Barth very helpfully observes a relationship between universals and particulars: "The revelation of God

⁴¹ *CD*, 1, pt. 2:298. In this way, as in secular critiques of religion, Barth does not see the uniqueness of any one religion (even his own) qua religion.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 303.

⁴³ A recent broadsheet leader column, speaking about the Pope's comments on Islam and the reaction to them in September 2006, put it thus: "A modest acknowledgement that God is not to be second-guessed . . . allows Muslims, Jews and Christians to rub along together without taking constant offence at each other's blasphemies" (*Telegraph*, London, September 17, 2006).

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is actually the presence of God and therefore the hiddenness of God in the world of human religion. By God's revealing of Himself the divine particular is hidden in a human universal, the divine content in a human form, and therefore that which is divinely unique in something which is humanly only singular."⁴⁴ Leaving aside the question of the hidden-revealed dialectic found throughout Barth's works, within the universal of human "religion," Barth recognizes the divine particularity. That this particularity of the divine revelation is found within something that is humanly universal (i.e., religion) means that Christianity must be spoken of as something that is humanly only singular (or remarkable) and not unique. This suggests a complex dynamic between faiths. Not only is religion perceived to be a human universal (as had been the case in nascent studies and secular critiques of religion, such as Feuerbach's), but within that recognized universal, Barth suggests, Christianity must perceive its unique revelation of the particular hidden God within its specific human form. Given this relation of the particular to the universal, that which is "divinely unique" is present in something which is "humanly only singular." A sensitivity to this relationship between the universal and the particular is the way in which Barth can speak both of the relationship of Christianity to all other religions and of it as the "true religion."

Implicit in this speech about religions as singular, in comparison to the divine particularity found in "revelation" and the human universal found in "religion," comes a way of mediating dialogue with the other truly as the other while still recognizing the need to speak to each other in the first place at all grounded in the universal of "religion." In the movement away from universals and overarching theories of religion, this may seem rather outmoded, and certainly, for Barth, this

⁴⁴ *CD*, 1, pt. 2:282. This passage is a difficult one to translate. Green's new translation puts it thus: "God's revelation is in fact God's presence and thus God's hiddenness in the world of human religion. Because God reveals himself, the divine particular is hidden in a human universal, the divine content in a human form, and thus the divinely unique in something merely humanly remarkable" (Green, *Barth on Religion: The Revelation of God as the Sublimation of Religion*, 35). Clearly, "universals" and "particulars" have special connotations philosophically, especially to what might be broadly spoken of as postmodern thought, and one must be careful not directly to associate such usage with Barth for all of the connections one might draw between his thought and postmodernism. For more on Barth and postmodernism, see Thompson and Mostert, *Karl Barth*. The following reflections on this quotation seek—in keeping with the hermeneutical approach to Barth outlined in the introduction—to broaden out Barth's specific discussion here, applying his thought on the critique of Christianity's religion and its relation to the uniqueness of revelation to the broader question of Christianity's claim to uniqueness and its relation to other faiths. To do this, the inner logics of Barth's thought have been sought and expressed in a manner that perhaps at times is more philosophical than Barth himself may have intended.

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human universal does not suggest that God's direct revelation is present in other religions.⁴⁵ However, this dynamic really does explain something of the desire to sit at an inter-faith table at all. It recognizes a relationship between religions in terms of the human existence of "religion" and yet the singularity of each religion from its own perspective of divine particularity: one does not have to surrender one's uniqueness in order to recognize one's relationship to other forms of religion. It is clear that in gathering around a table with Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, and so on, the Christian is doing something different than in gathering around a table with Marxists, economists, milkmen, and jugglers. Yet, in gathering with people of other religions, the Christian must also recognize that she is gathering with not only people of religion but people of other religions.

The desire to say that the other is really like me lacks any form of adequacy in description either of myself or of that other. And while without a certain level of dissimilarity dialogue would neither be necessary nor interesting, if the other is too dissimilar to me, the grounds for shared dialogue are extraordinarily difficult. Inter-faith dialogue falls between these two positions of seeing the other as the same as me or as so alien to me that I do not have any shared language or identity with which to dialogue with her at all. Inter-faith dialogue recognizes the other truly as *other* to itself but also truly as other *to itself*. While there may be little pressing need for Christianity as Christianity to sit at a table with a group of jugglers as jugglers, the otherness of other religions is an otherness in which the Christian can perceive her otherness to those other religions. Barth's lengthiest discussion of another religion (with the exception of Judaism) comes in terms of his engagement with two forms of Pure Land Buddhism.⁴⁶ While he recognizes in them certain traits of Protestantism as a religion of grace, Barth still recognizes the otherness of these forms of religion to Christianity and Christianity's otherness to them. Sitting at the table with someone one perceives as identical to oneself requires no tolerance, never mind the higher virtue of love: indeed, respect for the otherness of the other is essential to a hermeneutics of agape. To listen to another and only hear oneself is not to listen at all. Yes, there is a need

⁴⁵ Here, one again sees a connection between Barth and the secular critique of religion. The grouping together of all religions (regardless of their various particularities) under the title "religion" is very much related to the modern view of religion that underlies secular critiques of "religion" as a universal phenomenon. This has been sharply criticized. See, e.g., Martin, *Religious and the Secular*, 14–15.

⁴⁶ *CD*, 1, pt. 2:340–44.

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for a recognition of the universal of religion (or else we fail to see the particularity of religion as compared to those of no religion), but around the inter-faith table we gather in our singularities.

IV. THE NEED TO LISTEN AND THE NEED TO SPEAK

Part of Barth's sharpest critique of religion lies in its self-centeredness. Even in its attempt to overcome idolatry and self-righteousness in the forms of atheism and mysticism, it remains idolatrous and self-righteous, and Barth asserts: "Even in these two supposedly higher and apparently inimical forms, whether in good or evil, in failure or success, religion is still thoroughly self-centred."⁴⁷ The turn inward toward the self, in which the human claims faith in herself, is at the heart of Barth's criticism of what is wrong with religion.⁴⁸ It is perhaps a way of speaking of religions under the Lutheran epithet *cor incurvatum in se*. To be thoroughly self-centered seems to be the worst possible of sins, on a par even with idolatry and self-righteousness. Even for the Christian who believes hers is the "true religion," this danger is never far away. What is condemned by Barth is "our Christian conceptions of God and the things of God, our Christian theology, our Christian worship, our forms of Christian fellowship and order, our Christian morals, poetry and art, our attempts to give individual and social form to the Christian life, our strategy and tactics in the interest of our Christian cause, in short our Christianity, to the extent that it is *our* Christianity."⁴⁹ Inasmuch as Christianity is turned toward itself and the Christian toward herself, Christianity stands under God's judgment.

Such a criticism surely marks the need to recognize the other. For Barth, this other is clearly Jesus Christ. But this also provides the possibility for speaking to the other in dialogue. Barth characterized Christ both as the man for God and as the man for other humans.⁵⁰ For the Christian to be centered on Christ, rather than herself, means that she should be centered both on God and on other human beings. While religion might simply point one back to oneself, Christ orientates the Christian outward to God and to the world. The radical inclusivity of this is clearly evident within Barth's work: "If we see Him, we see with and around Him in ever-widening circles His disciples, His people, His enemies and the countless millions who have not yet heard His name. We see Him as theirs, determined by them and for them,

⁴⁷ Ibid., 314–15.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 314.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 327.

⁵⁰ *CD*, 3, pt. 2, §§44.1, 45.1.

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belonging to each and every one of them.”⁵¹ Part of this radical outwardness and orientation to others must surely include those of other faiths to whose humanity Christ belongs. The Christian Church must never be a merely inward-looking entity. If it is such, it ceases to be the *Christian Church* by Barth's description. The radical criticism of religion does not point the Christian away from the religions of others; it points toward them.

In this movement away from self-centeredness in religion, there is a need to listen to the other. Barth criticizes religion for seeking to “grasp at God.”⁵² Within the context of discussing revelation, Barth criticizes the need of man to speak in religion instead of listening.⁵³ For Barth, this is clearly the need to listen to revelation rather than to presume to speak for God. The inter-faith table is not what he is picturing in speaking about this. But, again, what does it look like when one brings this perspective on Christian faith to that table? Awareness of the dangers of speaking too quickly and presuming to speak for God is surely a useful trait to have in sitting with people from other religions. Moreover, with that clear danger of speaking must simultaneously come the need to listen. The opposite danger to failing to recognize the otherness of the other at the table is the danger of seeing the other as one to whom we must only speak, put right, and help to understand our religion. Such a failure leads us directly back to the problem of self-centeredness: in the dialogue we feel we need the first and the last word, or else we seek to set the agenda on our own terms. In short, we can fail to listen properly. Barth's critique of religion leads the person of faith to recognize the need to listen. For the person of faith at the inter-faith table, there are two positive aspects to this. First, she must listen to God's unique revelation to Christianity properly and carefully as it critiques her religion, rather than seeking to speak from her religion, recognizing that revelation is not her own but God's and only belongs to her as much as to any human “religion.” Second, as a result of this, she must be aware of the danger of speaking too quickly and of the need to listen to the other. For the Christian, these two cannot be separated. Jesus talked not only to but with people; he conversed. While (understandably) the gospel narratives focus on his speaking, they also remind us of his listening.⁵⁴

⁵¹ *CD*, 3, pt. 2:216.

⁵² *CD*, 1, pt. 2:302.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ One may see this, for example, in the likes of John 4:1–42, in which Jesus engages in genuine dialogue with the Samaritan woman (notably, a woman of a different faith than orthodox Second Temple Judaism). Rather than simply lecture or preach at the woman, Jesus asks and answers questions and discusses a major religious divide of his age—worship at

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Is this to say that the Christian engaging in inter-faith dialogue should never speak? Clearly not, or else it would be no dialogue at all or a dialogue from which we are removed. To cease to engage, to be so fearful of speaking, and to abandon the desire to form a conception of God leads only to the worst of all dangers—to the path toward atheism or mysticism, which is itself a return to self-centeredness.⁵⁵ Instead, Christianity must engage in a dialogue held in the dialectical tension of speaking simultaneously of religion as unbelief and of a true religion. How, then, are we to speak and listen? It is to this that it is now necessary to turn.

V. WHAT DO WE SEEK TO GAIN FROM INTER-FAITH DIALOGUE?

GATHERING AROUND THE CRITIQUE OF RELIGION

Dialogue is not simply an academic exercise. To employ German terms, there is not only a sense in which dialogue involves *wissen*; there is a sense in which it also involves *kennen*. It is not a religious studies lecture or textbook in which we seek to learn empirical facts about the other—to know about festivals, rites of passage, community formation, holy books, and so on. Important as these may be, they are only a precursor to dialogue. To gather around the inter-faith table involves facing the other. In that way, it is not only educational but also formative. It is not simply bidirectional (I speak and you listen) but complexly multidirectional (I speak, you listen, we learn, you speak, I listen, I rethink, I speak again, etc.). It brings with it all the complexity of human relations and interaction, and the fact that we are shaped by those around us. Barth's critique of religion reminds us that, while we still retain the position of an insider to one singular faith, no religion is an island. In that way, it has something quite distinct to offer to the inter-faith setting. This distinct thing is its critical approach to the nature of religion in any form. In bringing this to the table, we must note how we are shaped by inter-religious dialogue, and we are engaged in the process of shaping: not simply writing books to the other, which are there in black and white with the final full stop in place, but engaging in ever-ongoing conversation.

Barth's critique of religion has an important shaping role for inter-faith dialogue. Speaking as a Christian about the Christian struggle with religion can help the Christian and possibly the other to identify also those elements of their own religion with which they struggle. For

Mount Gerezim. Other significant examples of Jesus listening or engaging in dialogue can be found in Mark 7:24–30 and Matt. 8:5–13.

⁵⁵ *CD*, 1, pt. 2:317–25.

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the Christian to identify how her own religion is unhelpfully at times “conditioned by nature and climate, by blood and soil, by the economic, cultural, political, in short, historical circumstances in which [s]he lives” enables her in inter-faith dialogue to recognize the historical penultimates of her own religion, which have been made the ultimates of practitioners.⁵⁶ It is to recognize that all religions are continually engaged in a choice between evolving in their historical form or preserving their present (or past) natures. It is to help and support the other in that and to recognize that God should not be confused with such penultimates.⁵⁷ To come humbly to the table recognizing these problems is to arrive at the table truly as we are—struggling not only with our place among the religions but our place in an ever-changing and developing world. It is to recognize the problems that come along with these changes—problems all too well known and variously and violently expressed in a host of fundamentalisms. Sometimes it is only in seeing the other that we truly see ourselves. If the Christian is truly to engage in dialogue, this critique (of her religion) is what she must bring to and (all the more importantly) take from the inter-faith table in the hope that it will enable us all to begin to realize the cultural determinants of our different religions, which so often (confused with revelation) we wrongly see as the different eternal decrees we each believe are uniquely given to our particular religions. Perhaps it is in this way that the Christian engaging in inter-faith dialogue is to understand the aforementioned passages in Barth about mission, which may seem to her most challenging in her inter-faith setting: the mission with which to attend the inter-faith table is a mission to recognize religion for what it is and to help to mediate against confusing it with God or revelation in all of their uniqueness—from each of our perspectives—to each of us.⁵⁸ This is in itself a particularist (or singular) agenda that revolves around a Christian-specific interpretation of the

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 316.

⁵⁷ It is here, again, where the secular critique of religion in its Barthian theological form proves helpful: in accepting their criticism of religion, the religious person is enabled to distinguish between the penultimate nature of her human religion (which is normally the critique offered to her) and the ultimacy of God (albeit, whom secular critics often confuse with religion).

⁵⁸ This is not an expression of some form of pluralism. It makes no suggestion that the “God”s whom different faiths speak of are the same one God expressed differently nor that their revelations are different expressions of the one reality. Instead, it recognizes the unique (and at times exclusive) truth claims of each faith, but also the way in which these are corrupted through each faith’s attempts at human expressions of this in their religion in a manner that allows room for both unity and uniqueness. It recognizes that each faith has its own struggle with religion and can learn from other faiths that have the same problems with the danger of confusing ultimate truth claims with religion. An example of this is given in the next paragraph.

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critique of religion as espoused from certain secular criticisms of religion. While the Christian cannot assume that other religionists will accept this critique (although sometimes they might), the necessity of attendance at the inter-faith table is for the good of the Christian herself, who, in dialogue with the other, may be enabled to engage more easily in this self-critique, which might also be modeled for others.⁵⁹

The Christian should not simply believe she is engaged in shaping; in dialogue she is simultaneously being shaped. The other can also help her to identify more sharply the confusions she has between religion and revelation, or religion and God. Gathering around this critique of or struggle with religion with the other can highlight this more than a gathering with those who are like us. I was struck by this at the 2006 Society for the Study of Theology conference in Leeds, England. In an extremely moving and (in a rarely appropriate use of the word) holy paper, Aref Nayed placed “God” on the conference agenda in a way in which Christian (and indeed Jewish) scholars—perhaps for being too similar to the others in this predominantly Christian conference—had been unable or unwilling to do.⁶⁰ In a conference that had addressed “Theology and the Religions,” God seemed at times to be quietly absent from the discourse. This is no comment on the other excellent and stimulating papers, but it is to say that in the Muslim other’s entirely Muslim and in many ways confessional paper, the conference was not reminded but, rather, moved to remember God in its dialogues and discussions. In a presentation singularly regarding his own faith, the implications of Nayed’s interpretation of Muslim thought to Islam made clear to the ears of the Christian and Jewish participants the need to reform Christian and Jewish theology in a way similar to the manner in which Nayed had seemed to articulate Muslim theology, not in a way that would make these theologies more “Muslim” or “pluralist” but in a way necessary to make these theologies more Christian and Jewish, respectively, reminding Christians and Jews of the need to have the nature of God (however uniquely God may be conceived to a faith) as central to any discussion of the theology of religions and salvation. The other in speaking about herself can convict us to recognize the need to reform ourselves. As the other, she can have a shaping effect upon us. In Barth’s terms, she can help us rec-

⁵⁹ MacIntyre states that shared problems do not provide traditions with “a neutral standard in terms of which their respective achievements can be measured. Some problems are indeed shared. But what importance each particular problem has varies from tradition to tradition, and so do the effects of failing to arrive at a solution” (Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* [London: Duckworth, 1988], 348).

⁶⁰ Aref Nayed, “Al-Rahman: God the Compassionate” (paper given at the annual conference of the Society for the Study of Theology, Leeds, 2006).

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ognize our own *Un Glaube* in our own religion and remind us to turn the critique of religion back primarily onto ourselves. The other can help us approach the revelation offered to us in fresh and dynamic ways and with critical eyes turned toward ourselves insofar as we make it our revelation and confuse it with our religion. The other can help us to recognize in the penultimate in which we all dwell the ultimacy of God.

VI. CONCLUSION

It is hoped that this short attempted application of Barth's critique of religion to the pressing question of inter-faith dialogue has pointed to the creative fruit Barth's work might bear on this topic. Taken from the perspective of Christian faith, it is hoped that it helps us to understand the way in which we can gather together holding to the veracity of our own faith (as others will to theirs) and, therefore, truly as members of our faith community, simultaneously recognizing our solidarity with the other under the term "religion." Indeed, it is perhaps under this title that we recognize most clearly the need to speak to each other. Against the simple universalizing tendencies of modernity, it is necessary to recognize the connected singularities of each religion and the complexity with which we engage in speaking to the other. The dangers of modernity in seeing us all as the "same" must be countered along with the reactionary elements of our own traditions that see the other religion as insurmountably alien and—at worst—the enemy.

In recognizing this need to remember the critique of religion as a religious person (or, more specifically, as a Christian), one sees the great value of meeting around Barth. To end where we began, it stops us from having two separate, dissimilar, and (ultimately) internally incoherent conversations that ignore each other. We are forced to remember the complex dynamics of inter-faith and secular-faith conversations and to bring to each an awareness of the other.⁶¹ This is the true mediation in which the practitioners of inter-faith dialogue are engaged: in the secular-faith setting, reminding the secular powers of the particularities of faith communities and ourselves of the critique

⁶¹ Ford states that "the world is not simply religious and not simply secular but is complexly both religious and secular, with all sorts of constantly shifting interactions and balances"; David F. Ford, "Gospel in Context: Among Many Faiths" (paper presented at the Fulcrum Conference, Islington, April 28, 2006). See also David F. Ford, "Abrahamic Dialogue: Towards Respect and Understanding in Our Life Together" (paper presented at the inauguration of the Society for Dialogue and Action, Cambridge, 2006).

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of “religion,” and in the inter-faith setting, reminding ourselves and the other of the way in which secular modernity has shaped (often by reaction) forms of our own faiths and reforming ourselves accordingly.⁶² So often, our mediation is between faith and nonfaith in both settings. These are matters that are best done together and over which it is easier to come to clarity in dialogue with the other. Gathering around a critique of religion can help us offer something formative; it stops inter-faith dialogue being merely something proper and fitting in which we engage and helps it to become essential for the good of our own existence. To gather in this way begins to give a proper place to the complex dynamic and dynamic complexity of gathering around a table together as simultaneously members of different faith communities and members of late-modern society.⁶³

⁶² To quote Ford once more: “The pathologies of the religions are of course made worse by their mirror opposites in the secular sphere, as the extremes reinforce each other. Unwise, fundamentalist religious dogmatisms feed off unwise, fundamentalist secular ideologies, and vice versa” (David F. Ford, “God and Our Public Life: A Scriptural Wisdom,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 1 [2007]: 78).

⁶³ As was the case with Barth’s ecumenical involvement, no doubt Barth’s own approach to inter-faith dialogue would have been more ad hoc than this article may suggest: his approach would have at once been more decided and also more open (and hence dialectical) than my own. The article’s purpose throughout has been to think from Barth rather than toward him, to push at Barth rather than to repeat his findings. It has proceeded, therefore, in the belief that the present political climate of the West demands sustained and ongoing commitment to inter-faith dialogue in order that conversations between faiths can be kept going. An element of this was perhaps recognized by Barth in his acceptance of Marquardt’s critique and his admittance that he had attended more to biblical Israel than contemporary Judaism: see letter 260 to Dr. Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, September 5, 1967, in *Karl Barth Letters, 1961–1968*, ed. Jürgen Fangmeier, Hinrich Stoevesandt, and Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), 261–63. Also of note on this point is Katherine Sonderegger, “Response to Eberhard Busch,” in Hunsinger, *For the Sake of the World*, 80–94.