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Examining the Primary Influence on Karl Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*

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INTRODUCTION

When Karl Barth first introduced the second edition of his *Epistle to the Romans* in 1921, theologian Karl Adams said it was “the bomb that fell on the playground of the theologians.”¹ The bombing ground upon which Barth’s powerful, programmatic exposition fell was a theological landscape that had never emerged from the philosophical effects of Immanuel Kant’s pervasive epistemological dualism. The barriers that Kant’s epistemology erected to theological endeavor resulted in an abandonment of objective reality in general, and God in particular. As a result, theology had become the “predicate of what is essentially and universally human and hence even revelation could only be acknowledged and handled as a confirmation of man’s own latent possibilities or of his own analysis and self-understanding.”² In other words, “Christianity became, as a result of the humanistic and rationalistic presuppositions ... representative of nineteenth-century thought, ‘spiritualistic anthropomorphism.’”³

Such a subjective theological approach can be seen in the works of Schleiermacher, Hegel, Ritschl, Herrmann and others who would influence Barth’s early thought. It is against this theological backdrop of immanentism and relativism that the second edition of the *Epistle to the Romans* (hereafter, Romans II) assumes significance: namely, as an attack upon all human understanding after Kant.⁴ Nineteenth century

¹ Terry Cross, *Dialectic in Karl Barth’s Doctrine of God* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 82.

² T.F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology 1910-1931* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1962), 60.

³ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

theology's subjective turn was only somewhat modified by the objective, historical investigation into the "historical Jesus" undertaken by the Ritschlian school.

A tension characterizes Ritschl's thought. On the one hand, he must be credited with trying to avoid the "subjectivistic turn theology had taken in Schleiermacher as well as the speculative rationalism of Hegelianism."⁵ Yet he escapes neither the subjectivism of Schleiermacher nor the rationalism of Hegel. *Romans II* was written to expose the bankruptcy of any theology founded upon the vagaries of human experience while also taking aim at the nineteenth century's obsessions with the historical basis of Christianity and the belief that it could be established by positivistic methods. While *Romans II* still assumed a Kantian epistemological framework, it was one whereby man's knowledge of God is indeed limited to the phenomenal realm but without man necessarily turning inward to self, feelings, or the dictates of practical reason. Rather, he is given objective knowledge through the gracious revelation of God in Christ. Hence, Barth could agree with Kant's epistemological limitation of reason without adopting his strictures upon God's act of condescension whereby he confronts our reasoning.

In casting down all human effort at obtaining knowledge of God, *Romans II* employs themes that would reveal how dire man's situation really is. Kierkegaardian themes such as indirect communication, sin, dialectic, paradox, infinite qualitative distinction, *krisis*, and the divine incognito are used by Barth to cast doubt on the philosophical and theological attempts of man to ascertain that which can only be given by God.

Given the abuses of theological discourse that were committed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to advance a specific, cultural agenda and to undermine faith in the reliability of Scripture, Barth's critique of such discourse and his employment of

⁵ Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 50.

diastatic themes is understandable. While it goes without saying that Barth was well able to produce such a revolutionary work on his own, can we assume other influences behind the shift from the dynamic, eschatological focus of Romans I to the condemnation of all human possibilities and necessity of God's gracious disclosure in Christ of Romans II?

This question of influences becomes all the more interesting when we consider the reference Barth makes to the influences that helped inspire the changes made in Romans II. Clearly he brought to the table influences encountered in his early theological development: theologians such as Lüdemann, Harnack, Kaftan, Gunkel, Schlatter, Haering, Herrmann, Jülicher, Heitmüller, and the Marburg neo-Kantians Cohen and Natorp. But in the preface to Romans II, Barth specifically attributes his change in viewpoint to the continued study of Paul, and the influences of Overbeck, Plato and Kant (via Barth's brother, Heinrich), and Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky.⁶ Three years later in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, Barth cites Jeremiah, Paul, Luther, Calvin, and Kierkegaard as crucial figures in his theological ancestry.⁷

While much has been written regarding Barth's own influence upon theology, John Webster is surely justified, given the aforementioned breadth of influence upon the young Barth, when he says that "Barth's earliest theological writings remain relatively unexplored."⁸ Adding to the ambiguity is the fact that many scholars disagree regarding the main contributor to Barth's theological re-thinking. For example, Webster believes it was Franz Overbeck. T. F. Torrance states: "Theologically and philosophically it was undoubtedly Kierkegaard who had the greatest impact upon him, far greater than the actual mentioning of his name, in the Romans, for example, indicates."⁹ Ian R. Boyd

⁶ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 3-4.

⁷ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1934), 195-96.

⁸ John Webster, *Barth's Earlier Theology* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2005), 34.

⁹ T. F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology 1910-1931* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1962), 44.

believes the primary underlying influence on Barth's thought is to be found in German Expressionism as seen in Kafka. Hans Urs von Balthasar credits Hegelian and Kierkegaardian idealism as the significant influence.¹⁰ One thing is certain, and this is most encouraging: All scholars would agree that by the time of Romans II all these thinkers had influenced Barth in various ways. But given the varied opinion of scholars, which thinker was the most influential is a question that remains to be answered, if this is even possible.

In the past few years prominent Barth scholar Bruce L. McCormack has offered Barthian scholarship an enormous contribution by fleshing out Barth's theological development in his book (revision of a dissertation submitted to Princeton Theological Seminary) titled *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936*. Assessing at length the cultural events and philosophical and theological influences on Karl Barth leading to Romans II, McCormack concludes:

In the English-speaking world especially, the prevailing assumption has long been that Søren Kierkegaard was the dominant influence leading to the changes introduced into the second edition. European researches were divided on the question until fairly recently. A significant group of scholars working in the field of 'early Barth' research have concluded that Kierkegaard's contribution, while not insignificant, was of much more limited value than was once thought.¹¹

According to McCormack, Kierkegaard provided only the means of strengthening Barth's commitment to a specific form of neo-Kantianism inherited from Barth's brother Heinrich.¹² McCormack admits that "Kierkegaardian language and concepts play a significant role in Romans II."¹³ Yet, he wonders if such usage is really indicative of the extent of Kierkegaard's influence on Barth.¹⁴

The problem is that McCormack provides little evidence for his downplaying of

¹⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. John Drury (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 28.

¹¹ Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 216-217.

¹² *Ibid.*, 217.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 237.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 237.

Kierkegaard's contribution. Kierkegaard's contribution is said to be "significant" but not primary or major. Instead, McCormack argues that neo-Kantianism plays a much larger role. To support his thesis, McCormack depends on the work of Michael Beintker who concludes "that most of the conceptual building blocks needed to produce the characteristic shape of dialectic in Romans II were already in place before the encounter with Kierkegaard through Barth's reception of his brother Heinrich's *Ursprungsphilosophie*."¹⁵ McCormack's contention that "certain modes of thought" were in place that could account for the dramatic shift from Romans I to Romans II raises the question as to *which* ones. Assuming these "modes of thought" were rooted in neo-Kantianism, are we to believe that Kierkegaard only provided Barth with terminology that lacked any substantive relation to the theological system uniquely employed by Barth? It is strange that in the preface to Romans II Barth credits Kierkegaard as providing him with his very "system," one built on the Kierkegaardian concept of the "infinite qualitative distinction."¹⁶ Is neo-Kantianism truly the inspiration for a theological system that reflects *Kierkegaard's* thought – a "system" that, by Barth's own admission, he owes to Kierkegaard?

McCormack's examination of dominant influences on Romans II is problematic in other respects. He allows for too many influences, Overbeck's for example, without clarifying the nature of these influences. On face value alone Barth makes much more use of Luther and Kierkegaard than of Overbeck or Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp, the Marburg neo-Kantians. Of course McCormack's point is that neo-Kantianism provides the unspoken foundation for Romans II, and thus, face value would seem irrelevant. It is possible that McCormack may be right. However, the problem that his thesis presents for anyone who knows Kierkegaard well is the extent to which Barth employs not only

¹⁵ Ibid., 237.

¹⁶ Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 10.

Kierkegaardian language and concepts, but the intrinsic relation of such concepts to Barth's theological method and goal. All of this betrays strong Kierkegaardian influence. This is not to deny that neo-Kantianism had influenced Barth. One will readily admit that the "conceptual building blocks" already in place were influenced by neo-Kantianism. However, these same "building blocks" were also influenced by Herrmannian theology and the Ritschlian school, as well. The point is, *many* thinkers had influenced the theological and epistemological framework of Barth's thought by the time he wrote the *Römerbrief*. But those influences alone cannot account for the abrupt *change* in direction taken in Romans II. At issue is the *reformulation* of Barth's framework and the tools he employed in bringing about this theological re-thinking.

Given the obscurity which envelops the question of intellectual influences on Romans II, it is the purpose of this work to examine McCormack's thesis and to consider the themes and concepts of Romans II in order to ascertain whether Kierkegaard or neo-Kantianism constituted the primary influence. It must be mentioned that the objective of this thesis is not to quantify the relative influence of this or that philosopher on Barth's Romans II. Our only interest is in the legitimacy of McCormack's claim that the overriding influence was neo-Kantianism. However, in examining McCormack's position we will inevitably touch upon the influence that others had upon Barth, primarily Herrmann, Luther, Overbeck, Kant, and Schleiermacher. Our accounting of other influences will be limited to those thinkers which most scholars agree played a key role in providing the early foundation for Barth's thought, as well as those who contributed to the theological shift in Romans II.

To accomplish this objective we will examine the works of Kierkegaard, especially those from which we know for sure that Barth has read. We shall also examine what influence, if any, neo-Kantianism has had on Romans II, weighing it against that of Kierkegaard.

CHAPTER I
IN THE WAKE OF KANTIANISM: ESTABLISHING THE THEOLOGICAL
CONTEXT OF THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY THOUGHT WHEREIN ROMANS II
WAS INTRODUCED

First, it must be stated that the thinkers which follow are addressed not only because of their prominence within 19th and 20th century thought, but more importantly, because of the influence they exercised upon Barth's earliest theology. Our interest is to follow those lines of thought that permeated the Marburgian atmosphere wherein Barth was nurtured and influenced as a student. Among the intellectual currents of the time, it was the epistemological dualism of Immanuel Kant, as reflected in the theology of Schleiermacher and Herrmann, as well as in the neo-Kantianism of Cohen and Natorp, that shaped Barth's earliest thinking. Therefore, we shall briefly examine these influences in the hope of ascertaining what contribution, if any, they made to Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*, second edition. Expressed somewhat differently, the task is to account for Barth's earliest thought and to ascertain whether he does indeed remain faithful to it, or whether Romans II marks a departure from it due to Barth's encounter with Kierkegaard.

Barth and Kantianism

It would not be overstating the case to say that Kantian philosophy delivered a severe blow to theology – one from which it had still not recovered a century later. The

barriers that Kant's epistemology erected to the noumenal realm had called into question the epistemological presuppositions that theological discourse had for centuries taken for granted. The problem was no longer the Lutheran disparagement of fallen reason's ability to obtain knowledge of God, but rather the self-imposed restrictions of reason itself. God had effectively been relegated to the realm of ultimate transcendence as the utterly unknowable *Ding an sich*.

Kant's "Copernican revolution" was such not only because it redefined the way in which we know things, but also because it called into question what can be known. Taking direct aim at metaphysics, Kant denied that external reality is the sole source of the mind's ideas and therefore knowable by them. The situation is the reverse: it is the *mind* that creates reality – its *own* reality. While it knows *that* reality with absolute certainty, it is completely agnostic about the nature of extramental reality.

This was the denouncement of a development that had been for some time in the making. Throughout western philosophical history, metaphysics had been considered the "queen of all sciences."¹⁷ However, with the dawn of the Enlightenment, metaphysics began to lose its respectability as a legitimate intellectual endeavor. Thus, arguments for God's existence, which presupposed reason's ability to draw conclusions about the unseen world from observation of the physical world, were being rejected on the ground that God's reality transcends what is empirically knowable. Although scholastic natural theology might begin "with sensory experience of the visible, physical world,"¹⁸ it was too optimistic about man's ability to ascend to a knowledge of God by means of the empirical.

According to Kant, there exist within the understanding *a priori* forms and categories that synthesize the incoming intuitions deriving from our encounter with

¹⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. 2nd ed. 1789, trans, Norman Kemp Smith (London: MacMillian and Co. LTD, 1961), 41.

¹⁸ Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform 1250-1550* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), 49.

sensible objects. By imposing order (spatial, temporal, and logical) on these contents of sense experience, the categories supply the condition for the possibility of experiencing the world.¹⁹ Since sensory intuitions are *only* derived from empirical objects, Kant concludes that the forms and categories responsible for making sense of them are limited in their application to the world of sense. He says, "we are brought to the conclusion that we can never transcend the limits of possible experience though that is precisely what this science (metaphysics) is concerned, above all else, to achieve."²⁰

Though the mind imposes order on the contents of sense experience, thereby creating what Kant calls *phenomena*, it is unable to penetrate beyond the phenomenal reality that it has fashioned and apprehend the essences of things as they are. The realm inhabited by such essences (the "*Ding an sich*" or thing in itself) is utterly unknowable by pure reason. Kant's epistemological turn from extramental reality as supplying the conditions for possible experience to the mind as supplying them eliminated any ground for skepticism as to the nature of experienced, or phenomenal reality. Yet it simultaneously rendered the ultimate referents of phenomena (*noumena*) completely unknowable. The implications of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* for the knowledge of God are clear. Since God is not an empirical object, and since empirical objects are all that can be known by theoretical reason, God's existence is unknowable. Yet despite the impenetrable barrier that the *Critique of Pure Reason* erects to the theoretical knowledge of God, the *Critique of Practical Reason* allows for some, indirect knowledge of God (viz., his existence and moral nature) via an alternative route – that of the practical use of reason.

According to Kant, practical reason postulates God's existence as necessary if man is to attain to his *telos*, that moral perfection which makes him worthy of the

¹⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. 2nd ed. 1789, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: MacMillan and Co. LTD, 1961), 12.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

summum bonum, or supreme good. Furthermore, since man is finite, and the task of achieving moral perfection is an arduous endeavor owing to his natural inclination for evil, a further postulate is laid down by practical reason: the immortality of the soul. In all, practical reason necessitates three realities that proved elusive to theoretical reason: freedom, immortality, and God. These three postulates, which arise naturally from reason in its practical use, are absolutely requisite if morality is to be sustained as a possible endeavor. For further clarification as to the role that God plays in attaining to the *summum bonum*, a brief description of Kant's conception of morality is necessary.

In searching for the supreme principle of morality, Kant begins his inquiry into the nature of goodness. According to Kant, nothing is good in and of itself except the good will. It is reason's task to produce a will "which is not merely good as a means to some further end, but is good in itself."²¹ Thus the good will is that will which acts according to duty, which entails "the necessity of an action done out of respect for the law."²² It is reason that provides the will with an *a priori* principle whereby only those actions are to be legislated that can be willed of all rational beings. This principle, which Kant calls the categorical imperative, states: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become universal law."²³ Only that man who acts according to duty for duty's sake is considered by Kant to be moral, or virtuous.

It must be stated that although Kant recognized that man has a "propensity" towards evil, this evil does not rest within his reason or even in his natural inclinations. Rather, evil is manifested in the will's ability either to choose or reject the law. Kant sought to present a religion which was free from the heteronomy and mysticism that pervaded earlier conceptions of morality. Morality does not start with God or his law, but with man's reason, which legislates the categorical imperative and commands that he

²¹ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington. (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1993), 9.

²² *Ibid.*, 13.

²³ *Ibid.*, 30.

be obedient to it. Man, by nature, has the duty to be moral. However, because he has a propensity towards evil, Kant believes that something must be given to aid his endeavor towards morality, viz., the *summum bonum*. And because man is finite, Kant believed that the soul must be immortal if he is to ever reach that *summum bonum*.²⁴

Yet, as we have seen, the immortality of the soul is not the only postulate of practical reason. Kant believed that the existence of God is likewise necessary if man is to attain to his *summum bonum*, since the very possibility of the latter

must lead to the supposition of the existence of a cause adequate to this effect; in other words it must postulate the existence of God as the necessary condition of the possibility of the *summum bonum* (an object of the will which is necessarily connected with the moral legislation of pure reason).²⁵

If morality is to be sustained, then the "supersensible" postulates of practical reason (freedom, immortality, and God) are as significant for the conduct of life as are the theoretical limitations of pure reason. Kant was most certainly aware of the dangers of isolating knowledge to the empirical realm, for empirical knowledge provides no incentive for ethical behavior as defined by the categorical imperative. And while the one thing reason can be sure of is reason itself, its own potential and reliability had been restricted by Kant's limitation of theoretical reason solely to phenomena, and by practical reason's *a priori* legislation of only the bare form of morality, the categorical imperative. Given the restrictions imposed on reason, and therewith, upon any and every theological endeavor as a result of Kant's epistemology, it is interesting that Barth, as most theologians before him, had incorporated a fair amount of Kant's epistemology within his own theology.

First, it is important to note that much of Kant's influence on Barth did not result from Barth's direct interaction with Kant's work. Barth's Kantianism was a hybrid of various forms of Kantianism bequeathed him by his early teachers and influences. In

²⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Thomas Kingsmill Abbott (Chicago: William Benton, Encyclopedia Britannica Inc, 1952), 344.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 345.

light of this fact, our discussion of the relationship between Barth and Kant shall be more thoroughly examined later in the context of the neo-Kantianism Barth received from Wilhelm Herrmann and the Marburg neo-Kantians, Cohen and Natorp. It is the author's belief that however foundational Kant's influence on Barth may have been, it takes a new twist later on resulting from his encounter with Luther and Kierkegaard.

As a student at the University of Berlin from 1906 to 1907, Barth had read Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Yet Barth confesses that "the first book that really moved me as a student was Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*."²⁶ This should not be taken to imply that the impact of the *Critique of Pure Reason* was any less significant than that of *Practical Reason*. Each *Critique* had influenced Barth in different ways.

Kant's influence on Barth's early epistemology is quite apparent.²⁷ In fact, given the context of the time, it would seem unusual had it been otherwise. In keeping with Kant's critique of metaphysics, Barth believed that a chasm existed between faith and knowledge. Knowledge is limited to the empirical world, and there is no knowledge of transcendent realities, such as God.²⁸ Like Kant, Barth believed an epistemological dualism was necessary if faith were to be preserved. Thus, metaphysical knowledge did not result from the faculty of reason, but was rather derived from an inner, subjective, experience of faith granted by God. As we shall soon discover, the benefits that Kant's dualism had for faith would be further developed by Barth in his reading of Wilhelm Herrmann.

Although Barth believed that knowledge of God did not satisfy the ordinary criteria for knowledge, he held that it was knowledge nonetheless. Faith allowed him and his predecessors to espouse knowledge of God notwithstanding Kant's epistemological restrictions. Furthermore, it was Kant's epistemology that contributed to Barth's

²⁶ *Karl Barth/Rudolph Bultmann: Letters 1922-1966*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Company, 1981), 152.

²⁷ Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 130.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.

conception of the “real.”

Just as Kant believed that there exists a reality behind and beyond empirical phenomena, Barth’s conception of the “real” reflects the same belief that there exists a reality which is responsible for all phenomenal reality. The “real” is not that which is known within the empirical world, but refers to that wholly otherness of the realm of God of which the empirical world is a mere reflection.²⁹ Barth held that reality is not that which is perceived by the senses. Rather, it is verified in the experience of faith. Although both Kant and Barth agreed on the inability of our senses to apprehend noumenal reality, Barth did not agree with Kant’s conclusion that religion results from a practical extension of reason which necessitates the postulates God, immortality, and freedom.

Barth’s insistence that *faith* affords knowledge of the “real” avoids the Kantian principle that religion is nothing more than the practical extension of reason. It also avoids the importation of Kantian formalism into religion, for while Kant had been able to derive religion’s fundamental postulates from practical reason, they are nothing more than abstract concepts devoid of objectivity.³⁰ For his part, Barth goes even further than Kant in delimiting reason so that faith is totally divorced from it. However, this in no way diminishes the influence of Kant’s autonomous morality on Barth’s own conception. For both thinkers, morality arises “from an internal truth and authority present in the inner experiential core of each individual.”³¹ Barth’s affirmation “of autonomy as ... a transcendental principle ... of the moral law”³² is indeed highly Kantian, so much so that somewhat later as a pastor in Geneva (1909), Barth would once again employ Kant’s categorical imperative as a means of prompting others to redress the ills of society.³³

²⁹ Ibid., 130.

³⁰ Simon Fisher, *Revelatory Positivism? Barth’s Earliest Theology and the Marburg School* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 219.

³¹ Ibid., 175.

³² Ibid., 178.

³³ Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 55.

In summary, Barth's earliest theology reflects the employment of Kant's dualistic epistemology for the purpose of maintaining the validity of knowledge of God. Our brief explication of Kant's epistemology, and the nature of the influence it had on Barth, will provide the basis for our later examination of Barth's *Romans* as an attack on all theological endeavors since Kant. The fact that Barth's earliest theology was "anthropocentric" should be of no surprise. Much of his theological heritage resulted from the futile attempts of his predecessors to bypass Kant. It is in this context that we come to our discussion of Schleiermacher, whose anthropomorphic solution to Kant's epistemological dualism provided the pattern for nineteenth century theology. It must be noted that our interest in Schleiermacher is meant in no way to detract from the significance of philosophical idealism's response to Kant. Our interest in Schleiermacher stems from those "central" tenets of thought to which Barth's *Romans II* reacted, tenets that Barth traces back to Schleiermacher. Actually, Barth's own assessment is that Hegel's philosophy represented a unity of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries like no other.³⁴ However, due to Schleiermacher's enormous influence on the early Barth, especially as mediated by Herrmann, it serves our interest to give him primacy.

Barth and Schleiermacherianism

In the wake of Kant's demonstration of the impossibility of metaphysics, Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768-1834) sought to restore theology to its proper place among the sciences. Conceding that Kant had foreclosed the possibility of knowing God by the faculty of reason, Schleiermacher sought an alternative route via feeling" (*Gefühl*). Although there can be no theoretical cognition of God, Schleiermacher contended that humanity can nevertheless know him in the feeling of absolute dependence.

The proposed faculty of feeling seems a very questionable and indeed ambiguous

³⁴ Karl Barth, *Protestant Thought: From Rousseau to Ritschl*, trans. Brian Cozens (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), 269.

mode of cognition. One is not sure whether Schleiermacher was advocating some form of subjective experience absent any objective content. It is the conclusion of the late professor of Christian Dogmatics at the University of Edinburgh, Hugh Ross Mackintosh, that Schleiermacher's "feeling of absolute dependence" is to be understood as providing a "mode of objective apprehension, a species of emotional perception or awareness of spiritual things, and God is viewed as confronting the soul in His real and infinite causality."³⁵ Therefore, the one who is conscious of feeling unconditional or absolute dependence is one who finds himself in relation to God.³⁶ However, given this subjective and individualistic conception of relational knowledge of God, one cannot but wonder what role specifically Christian doctrines have for Schleiermacher, especially those pertaining to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

First, it would seem that, since "feeling" is a universal category, there is no absolute religion, not even Christianity, with which it is associated. Hence, although for Schleiermacher "Christianity is best ... no historical religion can exhaust all possible religious feelings."³⁷ The implications of this particularistic conception of religious feeling for the person and work of Jesus Christ are as follows.

If Christianity is only one among many religions sharing the common bond of the "feeling of absolute dependence," then it follows that Christ is not the only mediator between God and man. To be sure, Schleiermacher does place a unique significance on the person of Christ. As the founder of Christianity, Jesus represents the Archetype of one who had complete God-consciousness. He exemplifies the possibility of being able to form a perfect unity between that which is historical and that which is ideal.³⁸ Schleiermacher even ascribes sinlessness to him. However, since *all* humanity possesses the natural capacity for "God-consciousness," one cannot but wonder what unique role

³⁵ Hugh Ross Mackintosh, *Types of Modern Theology: Schleiermacher to Barth* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), 48.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

Christ plays in redemption.

In what seems reminiscent of Kant's notion of radical evil, Schleiermacher believed that although humanity has the ability to realize the good, our natural inclination is for the flesh. It is in Christ, the embodiment of one who has perfectly attained to God-consciousness, that we find the power, or more specifically the encouragement, to realize our own potential. Thus for Schleiermacher, redemption is nothing but the sloughing off of our fleshly desires as we become more aware of God's presence in our life.

From the time Barth first read Schleiermacher's *Speeches* as a student at Berlin, to the time that he became a pastor at Safenwil in 1911, he was still "very much under the influence of Schleiermacher."³⁹ Even at Marburg in 1908, where he sat under the tutelage of the Schleiermacherian/Ritschlian theologian Wilhelm Herrmann, Barth was acquiring "a sound theological foundation by an intensive study of Schleiermacher and Kant."⁴⁰

In an article written by Barth in 1912 entitled "*Der christliche Glaube und die Geschichte*" we discover that his philosophy of religion reflects nothing less than the essence of Schleiermacher's thought. Barth says: "Piety ... considered purely in itself is neither a knowing nor a doing, but a determination of feeling of immediate self-consciousness."⁴¹ With these words Barth reveals the depth of Schleiermacher's influence: Knowledge of God is obtained in the subjective experience of self-awareness. Although Barth finds religious experience reaffirmed in Herrmann as the primary organ for knowing God, it was Schleiermacher who first provided him with this way around the limits set by Kant. Of course, Schleiermacher's isolation of the knowledge of God to the human category of experience resulted in an indifference to the historical person of Jesus

³⁹ Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 62.

⁴⁰ *Karl Barth/Rudolph Bultmann: Letters 1922-1966*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Company, 1981), 153.

⁴¹ Simon Fisher, *Revelatory Positivism? Barth's Earliest Theology and the Marburg School* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 222.

with which Barth never agreed. Barth therefore found himself more in line with Ritschl and Herrmann in espousing the objective revelation of God in Christ, though he would later find himself differing from their conception of Christ as well.

In the end, Schleiermacher's, as well as the early Barth's, assessment of Christ is not that which is given in scripture, viz., the objective self-disclosure of God in human flesh. Rather, Schleiermacher's view of Christ as the ideal human exemplar of "god-consciousness" is quite similar to Kant's in its net effect, as with all Christology thereafter whereby Christ is seen as the incentive for ethical living. We must not be surprised at Schleiermacher's conclusions. He earnestly sought a way around the confines of the Kantian epistemology that would deliver knowledge of God while, at the same time, trying to stay faithful to Kant. Even scripture, which seeks to convey the supernatural confrontation with the natural, must be reinterpreted as the subjective experiences of those who have experienced God-consciousness. It would not be long until the subjective theology of Schleiermacher would find its counterpoise in the historical criticism of Ritschlianism. And with this school of thought we draw nearer to the theological situation of Germany in Barth's day.

Barth and Ritschlianism

In view of the limitations Kant imposed on theology, it is no surprise that by the end of the nineteenth century we find the theological circles of Germany dominated by the historicism of the Ritschlian School. Though Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889), like his predecessors, assumed Kant's limitation of pure reason and its qualitative distinction from practical reason,⁴² he nonetheless sought to retrieve theology from the subjective mire of Schleiermacher. The significance of the Ritschlian school lay in its commitment to a

⁴²Gary Dorrien, *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 18.

theology centered in the historical person of Jesus Christ.⁴³ By interpreting Kant as an anti-metaphysical moralist,⁴⁴ Ritschl took to task the presumptuous metaphysical claims of speculative rationalism. On his interpretation, morality needed no metaphysical foundation. Indeed, metaphysics was an impossibility because all putative knowledge claims must, in principle, be verified by historical/empirical investigation. Lacking such warrants, they must be considered bogus and ethically useless. The sum of the matter is that since knowledge can only be obtained empirically, the only basis for any knowledge of God and His will is to be found in the historical person of Jesus Christ, as one who fully represents God by exemplifying the ideal, ethical human being. Similarly, Ritschl rejects the subjectivism of Schleiermacher's knowledge of God as residing in "God-consciousness." Ritschl's theology begins with the gospel as historically given in Jesus Christ.⁴⁵ That gospel does not convey metaphysical knowledge, but is rather the practical guideline for ethical conduct.

Like Kant, Ritschl believed scripture to be a historical text which lends empirical knowledge rather than an account of the divine entering human history. Religion must not transcend historically concrete facts lest it escape into mysticism. Whether Christ was the God-man is for Ritschl superfluous, as well as epistemologically unverifiable. Christ is not one in essence with God the Father. Since all knowledge is confined to the phenomenal realm, Ritschl insisted that we come to understand Christ, not as the God who entered human history, but rather as the ideal ethical being, "the archetype of moral personality."⁴⁶ Only as one who exemplifies supreme awareness of God's will (i.e., moral conduct) is Christ to be considered divine.

According to Ritschl, Christ, the founder of Christianity, has infused human

⁴³Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 39.

⁴⁴Karl Barth, *Protestant Thought: From Rousseau to Ritschl*, trans. Brian Cozens (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), 391.

⁴⁵ Hugh Ross Mackintosh, *Types of Modern Theology: Schleiermacher to Barth* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), 148.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 162.

history with the divine task of incorporating the Kingdom of God here on earth. Naturally, Ritschl's understanding of the "Kingdom of God" is removed from its supernatural, eschatological context, and equated instead with the "moral unification of the human race."⁴⁷ Participation in this moral task is only possible for those who have been reconciled to God.

Reconciliation is for Ritschl the act whereby God encounters the believer as Father, justifying him in his feeling of trust, which results in a spiritual dominion over the world. Thereafter reconciled man is incorporated into the ethical task of building God's kingdom. Reconciliation is not the renewing of a right relationship between God and man as understood by orthodoxy. Because the sinner lacks the experience of reconciliation gained by the aforementioned encounter, he opposes the moral task of establishing God's Kingdom.⁴⁸ This opposition is diminished when one experiences a feeling of utter trust in God, as revealed in Christ, as the possibility for human morality. It is obvious that although Ritschl sought to steer clear of Schleiermacher's subjectivism, his own understanding of justification as "feeling" is quite similar. But given the inconsistency of human feelings and ethical behavior alike, the question arises as to the nature of Ritschl's understanding of justification. Is it an isolated event, or something which is continual? Ritschl's answer is most definitely the latter. Faith in Christ is not isolated to a particular event whereby one is justified. Instead, it is a continually reaffirmed trust, materialized in the ethical task of establishing the Kingdom of God. As we here consider Ritschl's influence on Barth, we must not permit ourselves to say too much, lest we detract from the significance of Herrmann's variant of Ritschlianism on Barth.

By Barth's own admission, it was Ritschl who gave theology a surer foundation

⁴⁷ Ibid., 151.

⁴⁸ Karl Barth, *Protestant Thought: From Rousseau to Ritschl*, trans. Brian Cozens (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), 395.

than Schleiermacher. He says:

It was Ritschl's great merit that with his reaction he showed that it was possible to abandon the Schleiermacher-Hegel approach and he thus for a moment clearly illuminated the point of departure for the complete development, the perfected Enlightenment.⁴⁹

The "reaction" of which Barth speaks is Ritschl's historical approach which provided theology with an objective starting point in contrast to that of Schleiermacher, which was grounded in human emotion. And yet, as we have mentioned in our discussion of Ritschl, his historical critical approach did, as Barth says, show the way toward a "perfected" enlightenment theology that reduced religion to ethics.

By contending that religion is to be understood as an intimate personal experience of God, Barth follows Schleiermacher. And by acknowledging that religious experience manifests itself as an active force in culture and history, he follows Ritschl. Especially important for Barth is Ritschl's claim that God has revealed Himself in the person of Jesus, in whom our experiences of God are grounded. Barth took refuge in Ritschl's objective/historical grounding of theology in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, which afforded it a sure basis that stood in sharp contrast to the uncertainty of Schleiermacher's objectively void "inner" experience. However, Ritschl's contentment with limiting the significance of the historical revelation of God in Christ to its moral externalization in the Kingdom of God was tantamount to discrediting the truly divine element of our experience of God. In sum, Barth could not go along with Schleiermacher's lack of an objective ground for the experience of God-consciousness, but he was also unwilling to content himself with Ritschl's negation of the supernatural element in its historical basis, Jesus of Nazareth. Being unsatisfied with Ritschl and Schleiermacher, he found a middle way in the theology of Wilhelm Herrmann wherein the two were united.

⁴⁹ Karl Barth, *Protestant Thought: From Rousseau to Ritschl*, trans. Brian Cozens (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), 392.

Barth and Herrmannianism

According to Bruce McCormack, “since it was Albrecht Ritschl who provided the first important stimulus”⁵⁰ for Herrmann’s development, “to describe Herrmann’s theology as Ritschlian is correct.”⁵¹ Ritschl’s insistence that religion be independent of the natural sciences and philosophy attracted Herrmann, for he yearned to separate faith from knowledge and provide a truly Lutheran conception of faith.⁵² By the same token, given the element of religious experience in Herrmann’s theology, he seems to have been dependent on Schleiermacher as well.⁵³

Following Ritschl, Herrmann agreed that knowledge of God comes to us in the historical person of Jesus Christ. But, as we have seen, although the Ritschlian School had sought to make knowledge of God attainable within the context of historical inquiry, it was at the mercy of historical critical investigation. In contrast to Ritschl, Herrmann believed that while one must begin *with* history to understand Christianity, its truths cannot be understood *from* history. True knowledge of God is to be had only within the element of personal experience, which is grounded in the historical person of Christ.

Personal experience as the means of attaining knowledge of God was employed by Herrmann as a way to get around Ritschl’s own inadequate approach via historical criticism. Herrmann believed that Ritschl’s subjection of religion to historical investigation resulted from the false assumption that religious knowledge is ascertained by methods of scientific investigation. But for Herrmann, religious knowledge differed from scientific knowledge in that the “science of religion deals with a reality grasped by certain people and not a claim of universal acknowledgement like the natural sciences.”⁵⁴ So, unlike Ritschl, “history” is not to be equated with the normal conception whereby an

⁵⁰Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 49.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 51.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁵⁴ Wilhelm Herrmann, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Nathaniel Micklem and Kenneth A. Saunders (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1927), 58.

event falls within the realm of historical investigation. Rather, as “supra-history,” distinct from world history, “history” refers to that spiritual source which is responsible for the existence of all world history, which, as “source,” is transcendent and hidden from scientific investigation. But it was not only the transcendent nature of history that Herrmann sought to protect. Because Ritschl’s conception of history was thoroughly empirical, it was probabilistic and therefore subject to revision. This also concerned Herrmann.

The science of historical study is one which by its very nature lends itself to change as new information is accumulated. If we are to base our faith on the vagaries of historical narratives which are apt to change, then our faith is nothing more than a historical probability.⁵⁵ Of course Herrmann did agree that “the historian may succeed ... in removing doubt as to the historical reality of some person long since dead; but if he seeks to base his faith in God upon this, his argument collapses immediately.”⁵⁶ It does so because history only affords probabilities. Still, one may ask, does not Scripture as God’s Word, provide the certainty needed to ground faith? The answer for Herrmann is a definite no!

Consistent with his Ritschlian training, Herrmann regards Scripture as strictly historical and therefore providing only minimal knowledge of the historical facts. Of course minimal knowledge is better than no knowledge, for at least it serves to destroy “certain false props of faith and that is a great gain,”⁵⁷ but more than that it cannot do. For example, one may well believe on the basis of Scripture that the historical person Jesus existed. But given the ability of history to provide only approximations, as well as the epistemological barrier between the “phenomenon” of Scripture and its noumenal referent, Scripture is not the Word of God. Those who believe it to be “God’s Word” are,

⁵⁵ Wilhelm Herrmann, *The Communion of the Christian with God*, ed. Robert T. Voelkel (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1906), 70.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

according to Herrmann, “unchristian.” To equate a historical narrative with God’s own word would be to “set a book above God’s own revelation.”⁵⁸ The scriptures are, for Herrmann, historical narratives written by men. And can we expect someone to base his very existence entirely on what was given him by other men?⁵⁹ Obviously not. But if the scriptures are not God’s Word, and history itself is unreliable as a grounding for the Christian faith, where and how has God communicated with men?

As we have said earlier, the only historical fact that we can be sure of is the life of Jesus. It is in the historical person of Jesus that we find God’s revelation to man. However, given the historical uncertainty of scripture, what can be known of that revelation? On what is our faith grounded? For Herrmann, “the historical fact upon which faith is grounded is the ‘inner life’ of Jesus.”⁶⁰ Thus Herrmann says:

The person of Jesus becomes to us a real Power rooted in history, not through historical proofs, but through the experience produced in us by the picture of his spiritual life which we can find for ourselves in the pages of the New Testament.⁶¹

Herein lies the significance of scripture: Though itself only a historical narrative of Jesus’ life, it presents us with a token of his “inner life.” It is only the inner life of Jesus that gives us knowledge of God, provided that we too experience this “inner life” personally. Thus scripture serves as the medium for conveying the inner life of Christ which is only experienced in faith.

Faith, for Herrmann, is not “the arbitrary acceptance of ideas”⁶² given in scripture, but submission to the power and will of God which calls us to His kingdom of moral activity. The power and will of God is fully realized in the inner life of Christ,

⁵⁸ Wilhelm Herrmann, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Nathaniel Micklem and Kenneth A. Saunders (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1927), 58.

⁵⁹ Wilhelm Herrmann, *The Communion of the Christian with God*, ed. Robert T. Voelkel (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1906), 69.

⁶⁰ Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 52.

⁶¹ Wilhelm Herrmann, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Nathaniel Micklem and Kenneth A. Saunders (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1927), 51.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 69.

which we experience in faith, and by which we are made aware of the moral law's demand on us. It is in Christ's inner life that we experience the sure and objective revelation of God. While "revelation" is any experience whereby "man acquires the power of real life or becomes religious,"⁶³ it is the person of Christ that affords its objective referent. Christ's historical person is central for Herrmann because it provides us with an example of one whose inner person represents full obedience to God's will. As we look to Christ's moral excellence, we are provided encouragement and strength to be moral as well.

The centrality of experience in Herrmann's theology is reminiscent of what has been discussed of Schleiermacher. As we said earlier, Herrmann employed only the younger Schleiermacher, who understood religion as a historical phenomenon existent only in certain individuals, and not "a constituent part of every human consciousness."⁶⁴ While Schleiermacher understood religion "as a real and active factor in history,"⁶⁵ he reduced it to subjective, personal experience. With this Herrmann disagreed. Experience is indeed an important element. Yet it is not the sum total of religion, which has as its goal participation in the kingdom of God. This kingdom of God is validated by our experience of the inner life of Jesus, which, because of its subjective nature, is beyond the investigative powers of historical criticism and is veridical only for the individual who possesses it. Yet, it is indirectly attested in the objective moral order. Not surprisingly, much of what Herrmann says of Christ is of the same order.

Historically, the *person* of Jesus is an objective fact, whereas his deity lies beyond the powers of historical investigation. In view of the fact that Luther's doctrine informs much of Herrmann's work, it would seem that he has in mind Luther's concept of the God who is hidden in Christ. Yet there are significant differences. True, Herrmann

⁶³ Ibid., 34.

⁶⁴ Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 57.

⁶⁵ Wilhelm Herrmann, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Nathaniel Micklem and Kenneth A. Saunders (New York: The Macmillian Company, 1927), 31.

seems to suggest that Christ is divine, being one in substance with God the Father. This is beyond empirical/historical investigation, and is therefore, a fact for faith alone. Yet, Herrmann's insistence that we first must come to know the man Jesus before coming to know his deity seems problematic. One might wonder what exactly we are to know about the man Jesus. Are we to see that he was another moral teacher like Socrates? Or does his humanity so closely approach deity that our assent to the latter is only a short step? More problematic still is Herrmann's belief that one need not confess Christ's deity in order to be a Christian. This flies in the face of two thousand years of Christian teaching, and clearly owes more to nineteenth century liberalism than to Luther.

In line with Luther, Herrmann sounds orthodox when he insists that "we cannot grasp the true meaning of the confession of the deity of Christ at all unless we let that work take place upon us which effects through Jesus in the soul of every man who comes to himself."⁶⁶ Since the self-revelation of God is hidden in Christ, Herrmann believed that we must first be given, by God's grace, the ability to see the hidden God. It is indeed possible for reason to speculate on the idea of God. But to speculate that God is in Christ is something altogether beyond reason's grasp.⁶⁷ It is worth mentioning that whereas Luther believed that reason's inability to see the hidden God in Christ was a result of sin, Herrmann construes it as the result of the limits imposed on reason by Kantian epistemology. Whatever the similarities between the Christologies of Herrmann and Luther, the question still remains whether Herrmann did in fact believe Christ to be God incarnate.

The "dogma" of Nicaea, which adamantly declares that Christ, in his very being, is one in essence with God the Father, thus "God of very God," is for Herrmann not only sheer speculation, but detracts from the central issue of Christianity, viz., that of

⁶⁶ Wilhelm Herrmann, *The Communion of the Christian with God*, ed. Robert T. Voelkel (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1906), 144.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 165.

experiencing the inner life of Jesus. The “dogma” formulated at Nicaea undertook the impossible task of seeking to understand something that evades our ability. We are not to speculate on the idea that an empirical reality could afford knowledge beyond itself.

Thus, concerning Christ’s deity, Herrmann says:

If we understand by the Essence of God anything else than the inner life of Jesus, then we get away from Jesus altogether in our moments of religious exaltation... But the confession of the Deity of Christ which the dogma demands presupposes precisely this: that the Essence of God is something quite other than the inner life.⁶⁸

Affirmation of the deity of Christ is not, for Herrmann, the confession that Jesus is one in essence with God. Rather, in the will of the historical man Jesus, we find the “mind and will of the everlasting God.”⁶⁹ In this sense, as the ethical archetype, is Christ divine – “the first person who makes clear and gives a definite character and content to those moral ideals by which we judge ourselves and others.”⁷⁰ Jesus is for Herrmann no more than a mere man who, as the ethical archetype, reveals a life fully dedicated to the will of God. His example provides redemption for those who experience his life and thus find the strength and encouragement to live morally.⁷¹

When examining the thought of the early Barth, most scholars agree that no figure has been more influential on Barth than Wilhelm Herrmann. Before Barth’s break with liberalism, it can be said that his earliest theology is almost an exact replication of Herrmann’s. It was Herrmann who provided Barth with a way of escaping Kant’s epistemological restrictions on the knowledge of God by means of the self-authenticating principle of human experience which is, contra Schleiermacher, historically grounded.

Of course, one cannot attribute exclusive influence to Herrmann when, as we have seen, much of his thought is itself a synthesis of Kantianism, Schleiermacherianism, and Ritschlianism. All of these influences comprised the theological and philosophical

⁶⁸ Ibid., 171.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 178.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 121.

⁷¹ Ibid., 122.

heritage that, as modified by Herrmann, produced the early Barth. Similarly, when we later come to discuss Barth's relation to neo-Kantianism, we shall discover that it was Herrmann, who mediated this influence as well. Employing his own form of neo-Kantianism, because he could not come to terms with much of the neo-Kantian philosophy, Herrmann provided Barth with a theological "filter" that allowed only a minimal influence of neo-Kantianism on his thought.

Our goal now is to discuss the general points of agreement between Barth and Herrmann. Only later in our consideration of the direct correlation between neo-Kantianism and Barth's Romans II will we examine Herrmann's critique of neo-Kantianism with a view to ascertaining the extent that Barth's Romans II can be considered neo-Kantian.

Although it was not until Marburg that Barth, as a student, became personally acquainted with Herrmann, he had read Herrmann's *Ethics* while a student in Berlin. From the first reading of the *Ethics*, Barth became a devoted follower of Herrmann's theology which was to a large extent Kantian as well as Schleiermacherian.⁷² Now that Barth was at Marburg, sitting under Herrmann, he was absorbing him "through every pore."⁷³ As Barth says, Herrmann truly was the "theological teacher of my student years."⁷⁴

Following Herrmann's Kantian epistemology, Barth held that direct, empirical knowledge of God was beyond reason's ability. Following Herrmann further, Barth affirmed that God had "indirectly" revealed himself in the historical person of Jesus Christ. The centrality of the historical Jesus for providing knowledge of God was something Barth had acquired from the Ritschlian/Herrmannian theology. However,

⁷² Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 41.

⁷³ *Karl Barth/Rudolph Bultmann: Letters 1922-1966*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Company, 1981), 153.

⁷⁴ Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 44.

Barth did not follow Ritschl in employing the method of historical criticism whereby Christ is given only as ethical archetype. Rather, Barth takes up Herrmann's understanding that God meets us in a supernatural communion, and is revealed in the inward experience of the inner life of the historical Jesus.

In an early essay on the person of Jesus, we find that Barth's words reflect nothing less than Herrmann's theology when he says that "the ground of faith is the personal inner life of Jesus."⁷⁵ Not only does Barth espouse Herrmann's viewpoint when he says that the "human portrait" of Jesus "presents itself to us as complete obedience to God,"⁷⁶ but he also affirms Herrmann's evasion of Ritschl's historical criticism when he claims that our faith "becomes neither weaker nor stronger through whatever scholars have to say pro or con about the certainty of Jesus' external life."⁷⁷

With Herrmann, the early Barth believed that knowledge of God could not come from historical/scientific investigation. Rather, it results from our human experience of the inner life of Jesus. This experience, being the realization of faith, assures us that God has indeed communicated with us, for it is an experience that is self-authenticating. Since faith is an experiential awareness of God's grace "hidden in the depths of individual experience,"⁷⁸ it avoids the scrutiny of historical criticism. Conversely, it follows that faith cannot be generated by an assent to mere historical facts. However, historical facts are not in and of themselves superfluous for Barth.

Consistent with Herrmann's modified Ritschlianism, historical investigation provides a certain amount of objectivity, though it is minimal. The problem of relating history and faith is the same for Barth and Herrmann. Inasmuch as historical knowledge is, by nature, at the mercy of historical/scientific investigation, it is prone to change with the accumulation of new information. Like Herrmann, Barth believed that a faith

⁷⁵ Simon Fisher, *Revelatory Positivism? Barth's Earliest Theology and the Marburg School* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 181.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 181.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

grounded in history is a faith grounded in historical probability. The implications for Barth's understanding of Scripture are thus the same as we saw in the case of Herrmann.

According to the early Barth, Scripture is not to be understood as divine, propositional truths given in a historical context, but rather, as a testimony of inner experience.⁷⁹ It seems that Barth did, however, give more weight to Scripture in comparison to other historical writings in that it provided testimonies of divine experience.⁸⁰ Nonetheless, Scripture cannot be the "divine" Word of God lest we subject religion to historical inquiry by equating God's word with fallible historical documents. Simon Fisher writes that "Barth was attempting to preserve the objectivity of efficacious revelation without recourse to a propositional understanding of revelation."⁸¹ Only in Christ is objective knowledge of God given. But this knowledge is only given in the subjective pole of an individual experience of faith. Since it is only in Christ that God's self-revelation is given, we are faced with the question, as we were with Herrmann, of Barth's understanding of Christ's deity.

Although Barth's early thought reflects an orthodox understanding of Christ's deity, we must assume that since he parallels Herrmann's theology so closely, his understanding of Christ as the "ethical archetype," the ideal human example of one who was in full obedience to the moral demand and will of God, is Herrmannian as well. As further research is given to Barth's earliest writings, which have yet to be explored, a Christology different from Herrmann's could yet emerge. But for now, we are content to conclude that Barth's theology seems to reflect his teacher in every respect. It is no wonder that with Barth's break with liberalism, and the publication of Romans II, the theological world was turned upside down.

Thus far, by examining the various schools of thought by which Barth was

⁷⁹ Ibid. 176.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid. 178.

influenced, we have sought to account for his earliest thought. However, we would fail to address the objective of this paper if we did not examine the significance of the neo-Kantians, Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp, on Barth's earliest thought. Our examination of neo-Kantianism will necessarily be brief so as to allow greater consideration of McCormack's assertion that it was neo-Kantianism that influenced Barth's production of Romans II, not Kierkegaard.

Barth and Neo-Kantianism

When Barth first heard the lectures of the leading figures of the neo-Kantian movement, Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp, he was a student at the University of Marburg. The neo-Kantian movement was unique in that it represented not only a return to Kantianism, but a revision of it as well. The specific epistemological influence of Cohen and Natorp had so permeated the atmosphere at Marburg that no one could escape its demand for consideration. This is evident from Wilhelm Herrmann's own theology, which combines the ethical idealism of this school of thought with his own historically based transcendent theology of experience.

The resurrection of Kant's philosophy during the closing decades of the nineteenth century and its diverse reinterpretation by numerous proponents was a response to the impressive rise of the sciences, and the failure of speculative idealism and naturalism (whether evolutionary or mechanistic) to account for the possibility of science. Because Kant *had*, more than any other, seriously grappled with this problem and charted the way forward with his transcendental method, the neo-Kantians harked back to the "method and spirit" of Kant.⁸² The then-dominant interpretation of Kant's epistemology held that phenomena were a subjective creation. This left philosophers like Cohen

⁸² *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Neo-Kantianism," 5:468.

dissatisfied.⁸³ The unique form that the Marburg school of neo-Kantianism took, therefore, represented both agreement and divergence from Kant's thought.

First, Marburg neo-Kantianism differed specifically from Kantianism in its refusal to accept Kant's split between the noumenal and phenomenal. According to Cohen, if the *Ding an sich* is unknowable in and of itself, "then the possibility of such things-in-themselves is unjustifiable."⁸⁴ A hallmark of neo-Kantianism was therefore its insistence that the noumenal realm was nonexistent. Rather, the *Ding an sich* is reinterpreted by the neo-Kantians to represent unknown "ideas" left as a task for further research.⁸⁵

Second, by a reinterpretation of Kant's innate categories of the mind such that they were *entirely* responsible for reason's ability to obtain knowledge, neo-Kantianism minimized the necessity of empirical intuition as a source for knowledge.⁸⁶ Whereas Kant contended that knowledge of the empirical world resulted from the mind's ordering of intuitions that were given in sense experience, Cohen believed that the sensible world itself results from the *conceptual* architecture of reason.⁸⁷

The *a priori* categories do not function in the normal Kantian manner as "making sense" of reality. Rather, they serve as the "originators" of reality. According to Cohen, Kant failed to recognize "that there is nothing given to thought which is not itself the creation of thought."⁸⁸ In other words, all knowledge of the empirical world results from thought itself, rather than from an interaction between the *a priori* categories of the mind and an empirical object.⁸⁹ Not only are the *a priori* categories themselves reinterpreted

⁸³ Andrea Poma, *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*, trans. John Denton (New York: State University Press, 1996), 9.

⁸⁴ Ian Boyd, *Dogmatics Among the Ruins: German Expressionism and the Enlightenment as Contexts for Karl Barth's Theological Developments* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 39.

⁸⁵ Simon Fisher, *Revelatory Positivism? Barth's Earliest Theology and the Marburg School* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 38.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 9.

⁸⁷ William Kluback, *Studies in Judaism: The Idea of Humanity: Hermann Cohen's Legacy to Philosophy and Theology* (New York: University Press of America, 1987), 243.

⁸⁸ Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 44.

⁸⁹ Andrea Poma, *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*, trans. John Denton (New York: State University Press, 1996), 49.

as “the synthetic unity of apperception,”⁹⁰ intuition is reinterpreted as information derived from a sensuous object, that is itself attributable to the act of thought. Thus, thought is not responsible for the *reproduction* of reality – it is rather the *foundation* of reality.⁹¹

The neo-Kantian interpretation of Kant’s epistemology contends that true reality exists only as thought or Idea – hence the contention of Cohen’s student, Ernst Cassirer, that he was “one of the most resolute Platonists that has ever appeared in the history of philosophy.”⁹² Notwithstanding this assertion of the ultimately ideal nature of reality, Cohen’s transcendental idealism is not to be understood as a denial of material reality. Neo-Kantian epistemology, in advocating idealism, does not deny material substance “but grounds substance itself as a concept in thought.”⁹³

Third, Cohen follows Kant in the latter’s conviction that all knowledge exists within space-time. Yet thought qua *Ursprung* (Origin) is itself the foundation and generator of reality, not merely responsible for the reproduction of reality, as in Kant. In short, knowledge results not from mind’s ascertainment of an object, but from its constituting it.⁹⁴

One point at which Kantianism and neo-Kantianism were closely related was in their mutual disqualification of any theoretical knowledge of God. Although Cohen and Natorp differed slightly in their understanding of religion, both affirmed that the concept of religion results from reason in its practical manifestation. What concerned Cohen most about religion was its relation to ethics. For Cohen, religion is nothing more than ethics. On his panlogistic view of reality, everything has its origin in logic, and ethics is no exception, with the caveat that logic, or thought, pertains to what actually is, whereas

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁹¹ Simon Fisher, *Revelatory Positivism? Barth’s Earliest Theology and the Marburg School* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 39.

⁹² *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “Neo-Kantianism,” 5:471.

⁹³ Andrea Poma, *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*, trans. John Denton (New York: State University Press, 1996), 58.

⁹⁴ Thomas Willey, *Back to Kant: The Revival of Kantianism in German Social and Historical Thought 1860-1914* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978), 37.

ethics is concerned with what ought to be.

According to Cohen, the world exists in actuality, distinct and cut off from the ideal. As what “should be,” the ideal presents itself as an ethical task for humanity to achieve. However, a discontinuity exists between the task and its attainment, which Cohen calls sin.⁹⁵ Although sin can be understood as a universal condition, since it exists in all individuals, Cohen insists that the experience of sin is only useful as it pertains to individual experience.⁹⁶ How so? Individual experience of the aforementioned discontinuity provides the incentive needed for society to seek actualization of the ethical ideal. Obviously, the neo-Kantian conception of sin is far removed from the orthodox conception since sin is not a universal ontological condition separating God and man, but a logical “contaminant” to be removed by logical striving; the need for God’s redemption is removed by neo-Kantianism. Redemption, according to Cohen, is a task belonging entirely to man as he seeks to actualize the ethical ideal within society.⁹⁷ Thus salvation is not an eschatological event, but a continual process of self-sanctification. What role, then, does God play within this epistemological construct?

Qua “Being,” God is totality distinct from the world of actuality. He provides the ground, or precondition, for the world and man, although he is not the cause of the world or man.⁹⁸ Whether God actually exists as distinct from man is ambiguous in Cohen’s ethical idealism since God exists as only “Idea.” Due to the discontinuity between the ideal and actual, reason postulates God as that idea which guarantees the possibility of conciliation between the realm of nature and that of ends.⁹⁹ As Idea, God is the archetype of morality, providing humanity with a pattern to emulate in the actualization of ethical society.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ Andrea Poma, *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*, trans. John Denton (New York: State University Press, 1996), 215.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 210.

God's relation to the world as the ideal of human morality is a correlate to Kant's own conception of God as that postulate whereby the moral law can be realized in the world.¹⁰¹ Hence neo-Kantianism, in both Cohen and Natorp's conception, embodies a historical optimism whereby the objective consciousness procures its own salvation in the attainable activity of morality.¹⁰² One of Cohen's and Natorp's chief differences has to do with the question of whether, for Cohen, God actually exists as the true source of morality or as only a mere idea which reason postulates as the moral archetype.

Hermann Cohen's ambiguous conception of God leaves us wondering. However, in Natorp's view, it does seem clear that God is nothing but a pure postulate. In contrast to reason, Natorp holds that religion exists wholly in the realm of feeling. Reason is justified in its knowledge claims only to the extent that they can account for objective reality. Religion, however, asserts knowledge claims without objective warrant and, as such, is a non-cognitive endeavor. Nonetheless, in Natorp's view, however far religion may be removed from science, it is useful for humanity since, qua feeling, it is the awareness of our need for morality, the highest human aspiration.¹⁰³ It is not the manifestation of a supernatural reality but is rather a human phenomenon. Thus, in Natorp's view, God, as the highest ideal a society can entertain is nothing but an anthropocentric construct postulated so as to provide society with an ethical ideal to emulate.¹⁰⁴

Religion, then, is understood by neo-Kantianism as pertaining to the realm of history wherein man seeks to exchange the empirical reality of his present situation for the ethical ideal which is to be realized in the autonomous self-sanctifying moral action

¹⁰¹ William Kluback, *Hermann Cohen: The Challenge of a Religion of Reason* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1984), 6.

¹⁰² Thomas Willey, *Back to Kant: The Revival of Kantianism in German Social and Historical Thought 1860-1914* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978), 111.

¹⁰³ Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 48.

¹⁰⁴ Judy Deane Saltzman, *Paul Natorp's Philosophy of Religion within the Marburg Neo-Kantian Tradition* (New York: Georg Olms Verlag Hildesheim, 1981), 157.

of man's reason. The practical postulate "God" serves as the supreme idea which grounds man's ethical endeavor as he strives for moral perfection, or "god-likeness."

The incorporation of Kant, Schleiermacher, and Ritschl's theological ethics is quite apparent in the Marburg neo-Kantian system. However, the confinement of religion to the human phenomenon of ethics was a point which Wilhelm Herrmann consistently disputed with his neo-Kantian colleagues. The relegating of God to an ethical ideal failed to provide a foundation on which to ground morality. It is this same grievance that Barth himself raised against the epistemologies of his neo-Kantian teachers. And yet, Barth still owed a certain debt to the neo-Kantian movement.

When examining Barth's relation to Marburg neo-Kantianism, one finds that his adherence to this school seems limited to merely the use of neo-Kantian tools and concepts whereby he constructed his own epistemology. As a theologian, Barth had no interest in bringing his thought into line with the whole of neo-Kantian philosophy. Not even in his earliest phase could he endorse the neo-Kantian conception of God or ethics, though on the whole, the early Barth's epistemology is in agreement with the general tenets of Cohen's epistemology, the net effect of which was to "place knowledge of God outside the realm of cognitive activity."¹⁰⁵ Barth agreed with Cohen's reformulation of the Kantian *a priori* as being not dependent upon the "psycho-physical constitution of the human organism," but assigning it "*sui generis* transcendental" status.¹⁰⁶ In agreement with Cohen, only scientific apprehension is considered knowledge since it results from laws which govern human thought.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, the early Barth found the "operationalism" of neo-Kantianism to his liking in its presentation of reality, not as static, but as the result of human cognitive creativity.¹⁰⁸ As we shall see, even though

¹⁰⁵ Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 75.

¹⁰⁶ Simon Fisher, *Revelatory Positivism? Barth's Earliest Theology and the Marburg School* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 188.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

Barth agreed with the important role human cognition contributes in knowing reality, he would diverge from neo-Kantianism primacy of human cognition, espousing instead the primacy of divine revelation in grounding human knowledge.

As neo-Kantian philosophy became the predominant thought form at Marburg, many theologians found themselves faced with the task of reconciling it with their own theology. Although many tenets of neo-Kantian thought were accepted within Marburg theology, there were several problems which the Marburg theologians thought severe.

As we saw earlier, for neo-Kantianism, the Origin (*Ursprung*) of knowledge and reality is given in thought itself. This reduction of *all* knowledge and reality to the architectonic of thought was tantamount to a logical monism with which Barth could not agree. Thus when, à la Kant, he is seen advocating the significance of human thought as constitutive of empirical reality, he is not claiming that there *only* exists empirical knowledge. According to Barth, metaphysical pursuits which follow purely rational/scientific methods fail to see that man is encountered by a knowledge that transcends this empirical world and its observational methods. This knowledge, given only in religious experience, does not have its origin in human thought, but is *given* to thought and therefore has its origin in God. Thus the early Barth's epistemology regards the Absolute as given by revelatory experience, discovering "what experience has already encountered."¹⁰⁹ However, this is to say that Barth credited religious knowledge with the same sort of cognitive power as empirical knowledge.

For Barth, even though knowledge is given in thought's relatedness to empirical objects, both thought and object are grounded in God. As *Ursprung*, God is the source of all reality and knowledge, both natural and supernatural. Therefore, Barth's conception of God as Origin is in total contrast to the neo-Kantian conception of God as a product of human thought. To accept the neo-Kantian conception would be to make God a creation

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 198.

of reason instead of its source. Faith given in the revelatory experience of Christ's inner life differs from the neo-Kantian epistemology in that knowledge does not merely result from thought but is also given to thought. Thus Barth rejected neo-Kantianism's logical monism for a religious monism.¹¹⁰

The "non-cognitive" nature of faith issued in the neo-Kantians' neglect of both the reality of religious experience and the grounding of morality in the experience of Christ's inner life. The inability of faith to provide the objective certainty that neo-Kantian epistemology demanded was irrelevant to Barth since religious experience, as self-authenticating, was its own proof.¹¹¹ According to Barth, the basic error of neo-Kantianism was its assumption that religious knowledge must somehow result from Kantian epistemological categories.

Barth developed his philosophy of religion (*Religionsphilosophie*) in response to neo-Kantianism's failure to provide an account by which a thinking subject, as well as an ethical subject, could be grounded.¹¹² Neo-Kantianism's neglect of the individual and his moral activity led the early Barth to postulate the concept of "personality," which denotes a reality beyond scientific investigation and provides the ground Barth needed for constructing his religious individualism.¹¹³ Barth's individualism was *not* conceived along the lines of neo-Kantianism, according to which the individual, qua manifestation of thought, is the sufficient ground of religious (i.e., moral) knowledge. Hence, even though Barth (and Herrmann) agreed with Natorp's basic conception of religion as feeling, he dissented with the latter's identification of religious feeling as the product of human thought.¹¹⁴

The extent to which neo-Kantian ethics influenced the early Barth is again best understood in Barth's conception of *Ursprung*. In line with Cohen and Natorp, Barth

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 193.

¹¹¹ Ibid. 198.

¹¹² Ibid., 192.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 146.

understood the necessity of a religious knowledge for promoting a personal and social morality. The neo-Kantian/Kantian conception that the good is something which is generated autonomously by the will is fully advocated by the early Barth. But again, it is the origin of the will's awareness of the good that distinguishes Barth from his neo-Kantian teachers.

As we saw earlier in the ethics of Cohen and Natorp, the ethical *Kulturbewußtsein* is nothing more than the result of thought providing humanity with an incentive for morality. Central to ethical knowledge is thought's grounding of morality in the idea of God. But nonetheless, God and ethics find their *Ursprung* in man. Whereas neo-Kantianism sought to ground ethics in thought, Barth sought to establish God as the origin of human morality.

God is not for Barth mere idea, nor being. Rather, God is the Idea of ideas, the Being of all beings.¹¹⁵ To stress this point, Barth goes to the extent of using the concept of *Idea* rather than *Ursprung* to refer to God. This switch in terminology was employed by Barth with deliberate reference to the Platonic conception of Ideas as universal and transcendent, outside of thought itself. By this means Barth seeks to transcend the neo-Kantian *Kulturbewußtsein*, which ultimately does not have its origin in thought, but in divine energy which accounts for its teleological efficacy.¹¹⁶ It is not in thought that ethics originates, but in God. From him “descends the supernatural power of revelation which actualizes possibilities for culture and individuates personal life.”¹¹⁷ The role which neo-Kantianism assigns to logic as the *Ursprung* of God and morality, has no place in Barth's early thought, even if thought still performs an active function in knowing God. God, as the transcendent reality beyond man's reason and yet immanent within the confines of revelatory experience, is alone the cause of man's awareness of

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 274.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 261.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 291.

Himself.

In conclusion, religion is not to be equated with the ethical demand actualized in culture à la Cohen. Nor is it identical with feeling that incites humanity to be moral, à la Natorp. Instead, for Barth, religion is a personal experience of God in which a subject finds himself in personal communion, which is then externalized as an active force in culture and history.¹¹⁸

Reactionary Theology: The Relationship of Barth's *Römerbrief* to His Early Theology

1. Breaking with Liberalism: Immanentism and Social Ethics

The turning point in Barth's early thought from a subjective theology to a more objective starting point is interesting in that it did not result, initially, from the inadequacies or inconsistencies in his theology. Rather, Barth's break with Liberalism resulted from the inconsistencies exposed in the misuse of theology to advocate the war policy of Kaiser Wilhelm II leading to WWI.

In August 1914, ninety-three German intellectuals, among them many of Barth's former teachers, gave their support to the war effort on the grounds that it would advance the kingdom of God on earth. This day is recorded by Barth as "a black day" on which he witnessed the abuse of theology to support a human agenda. He says:

It was like the twilight of the gods when I saw the reaction of Harnack, Herrmann, Rade, Eucken and company to the new situation, and discovered how religion and scholarship could be changed completely into intellectual 42 cm cannons.... To me they seemed to have been hopelessly compromised by what I regarded as their failure in the face of ideology of war. Thus, a whole world of exegesis, ethics, dogmatics, and preaching, which I had hitherto held to be essentially trustworthy, was shaken to the foundation, and with it, all the other writings of the German theologians.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 205.

¹¹⁹ Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 81.

During this time, Barth had been a pastor in Safenwil where he employed Cohen's ethics in preaching a social morality. But with the Religious Socialists backing of the war, Barth began seriously to question the category of religious experience, which was the basis for the war movement. The problem was this: if religious experience affords conclusions that contradict religion itself, then maybe religious experience is not as trustworthy as once thought.

Furthering Barth's break with liberalism were questions as to what extent we can act and speak of God given the inconsistencies between God's actual revelation and our understanding of that revelation. This problem plagued Barth to such an extent that in questioning our ability to preach, he asked, "Can I, may I, speak of God at all?"¹²⁰ Interestingly, religious socialism began as a call for the churches to repent, and turn away from the superfluous "God" of the bourgeois classes.¹²¹ However, as time progressed, it split in two as seen in the distinctive agendas of Leonard Ragaz and Hermann Kutter.

Advocating political action as the means for bringing about change were the ethical socialists such as Leonard Ragaz. On the other side stood Hermann Kutter, whose understanding of the New Testament convinced him that the gospel advocated the actualization of a new world at all costs. By 1915, Barth had decided to join Ragaz in supporting the instantiation of a religious society. This should not be seen as an apparent contradiction in Barth's thought. Barth's reason for becoming a party member was to bring about concomitant change or reform within Christianity and Socialism. For Barth, "a real socialist must be a Christian if he is in earnest about the reformation of Socialism."¹²² In time, Barth saw that religious socialism was nothing more than political socialism disguised in theological garb. As a result, Barth's questioning of Kantian ethics, which lay at the heart of this theological abuse, would strengthen. He could not

¹²⁰ Ibid. 90.

¹²¹ Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 84.

¹²² Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 83.

advocate the consensus of his former teachers that man is ultimately good. On the contrary, “man in his questioning understands he is not good.”¹²³ In Barth’s eyes, all of modern Protestantism had become utterly questionable, and along with it, the Christianity it advocated. As a result, not long after Barth joined the Swiss Social Democratic Party, he began to sense a problem with Ragaz’s ideas. It seemed to Barth that Ragaz’s ethical striving was similar to the works of the law. Both existed in the realm of human possibility which was in itself an impossibility.¹²⁴

At the center of religious socialism lay the neglect of an important principle Barth had learned from Herrmann. Religious Socialism sought to bring about God’s kingdom by means of political action. But in Barth’s mind, only God is able to bring about his kingdom. Since Barth was not in favor of armed insurrection, the only feasible and biblical option left was ethical striving. But, as mentioned, even this option was losing its legitimacy as a result of “war theology.” “Human attainments – even those of the socialists – ought never to be identified with the Kingdom.”¹²⁵

In the context of Barth’s growing frustration with theological/political endeavors of 1915, Barth came upon the writings of the two Blumhardts and found refuge in their theology of Christian hope. The hope for a Christian rests not in the progressive immanentism of political-theological reform, but rather in a dynamic encounter with God by which true Christian ethics permeates the world in the here and now. The question arises however, as to how theology ended up going so far astray as to become nothing but a tool used to support the war effort which, as far as Barth was concerned, had its roots in human sinfulness.

According to Barth, the reason why theology had drifted so far off course lay in

¹²³T. F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology 1910-1931* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1962), 64.

¹²⁴ Ian Boyd, *Dogmatics Among the Ruins: German Expressionism and the Enlightenment as Contexts for Karl Barth’s Theological Developments* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 64.

¹²⁵ Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 101.

the theological anthropomorphism inherited from Schleiermacher. In response to Kant's epistemological dualism, Schleiermacher had fashioned a theology in which God is nothing more than a reflection of the human consciousness. The religious/social movement of the early twentieth century whereby humanity claimed to bring about the Kingdom of God by its own moral endeavors cannot be of much surprise given the nature of theology during this time. The obscuring of the distinction between God and man inevitably results from the neglect of God's agenda in favor of man's. The experience of seeing theology go awry enabled Barth to question the reliability of revelation grounded in human subjectivity.

The year 1916 would show itself to be the most crucial year in Barth's theological development. Not only had he been reading the Blumhardts, he had also begun a fresh reading of the Apostle Paul's epistle to the Romans. He says:

On a certain day in 1916, Thurneysen and I very naively agreed to go back to academic theology to clarify the situation (being the problem of theological liberalism and religious socialism). The following morning, surrounded by a stack of commentaries, I found myself before the Romans of the apostle Paul with what seemed to me to be the newly put question of what was really in it.¹²⁶

As Barth continued in his quest for theological clarity, it became apparent to both he and Thurneysen that they "could no longer share the fruit of Schleiermacher."¹²⁷ This declaration eventually led Barth, with Thurneysen, to try and learn their "theological ABC all over again, beginning by reading and interpreting the writing of the Old and New Testament, more thoughtfully than before."¹²⁸ Due to Barth's intense reading of Paul, the Blumhardts, and his discovery of J. T. Beck in June of 1915, by November of 1916 Barth had finally turned away from Schleiermacher, Herrmann, Ragaz, and Religious Socialism¹²⁹ for good.

¹²⁶ *Karl Barth/Rudolph Bultmann: Letters 1922-1966*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Company, 1981), 155.

¹²⁷ Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 97.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* 97.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* 101.

Against the immanentism of nineteenth and early twentieth century theology, according to which God is the result of human cognition and experience, be it in Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Herrmann, or neo-Kantianism, Barth began to advocate a God who was fully transcendent, unknowable by any means of human endeavor or ability.¹³⁰ It was official; Barth had broken away from the liberal theology of his student days, and of the time.

2. Dropping the Bomb: The Publication of Romans I

From the notes Barth had made from his study in Romans would emerge his well-known controversial book, *Der Römerbrief*, published in 1919.¹³¹ The central motif of this groundbreaking book, the “bomb” that fell on the theologians “playground,” is dynamic eschatology conceived of as a “movement from a doomed temporal order to a new living order ruled by God.”¹³²

The task of Romans I, like Romans II, was to present the righteousness of God which condemns man and the human endeavor of religion.¹³³ It is clear that the message of condemnation against all human endeavor was meant to address the misuse of theology in promoting WWI. Barth’s Romans I was a declaration to humanity that all its ethical striving to establish the kingdom was useless. Humanity could do nothing which could instantiate God’s realm within our realm. It is this distinction, realm of God versus realm of humanity, that provides the basis for the two types of dialectic used in Romans I.

The first type of dialectic Barth employs is a complementary dialectic. Here, “two members stand over against each other in a relation of open contradiction or

¹³⁰ Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 129.

¹³¹ *Karl Barth/Rudolph Bultmann: Letters 1922-1966*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Company, 1981), 155.

¹³² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. John Drury (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 25.

¹³³ G.C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Harry R. Bower (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Company, 1956), 27.

antithesis.”¹³⁴ No reconciliation between the two members is ever accomplished. The second type of dialectic is the supplementary dialectic. Here “one member of a pair predominates in value and potency over the other.”¹³⁵ As a result of this disproportion, the stronger member will take up the weaker into itself, whereby the weaker is either negated or elevated to a higher synthesis within the stronger.¹³⁶ The supplementary dialectic was used by Barth within his dialectic of history and so-called history, as well as within the dialectic of real and unreal humanity.

Due to Adam’s desire to be independent of God, a discontinuity within history resulted. A fracture between the ideal and the actual now existed without reconciliation. Human history (phenomenal or unreal history) was forever separated from real, or ideal history. However, since God does interact with the world of humanity, real history is capable of being experienced within world history, although it exists beyond world history and is not dependent on it. Barth’s dialectic of history served as a theological tool whereby he “put the movement and action of God in history beyond the reach of historical investigation.”¹³⁷ By saying that real history, which is not confined to space and time, has occurred in world history, Barth locates its source outside the confines of the space-time continuum.¹³⁸

Such a move had the effect of negating the human endeavor of establishing the Kingdom (via ethics) by placing the realm of God existent beyond human possibility. Furthermore, this discontinuity between God’s realm and man’s realm had consequences for the very existence of humanity. As individuals within history, we find ourselves separated from ideal humanity, real humanity. As unreal, we stand under the crisis of divine judgment that condemns our efforts, leaving us in uncertainty as to our election or

¹³⁴ Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 163.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* 163.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.* 146.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

damnation. Even those endeavors which seek to establish morality by means of religious Socialism, or religion itself, are of no avail.

In condemning all human striving for its hubristic attempt to establish equality with God, Barth clearly directed his attack at the theological ethics of his former teachers. Thus neither the ethics of Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Harnack, Herrmann, nor neo-Kantianism could escape the divine judgment which says “no” to our human efforts. Barth believed that true ethics, founded in God, was a reality which was to exist in the human present, not something we can hope to achieve in the future by ethical striving. More importantly, this actualization of the divine in human time was initiated by God, not man. The kingdom of God is not something which comes about by a “rebellion within the old aeon,”¹³⁹ but is only established by the dawning of the new aeon.

The supplementary dialectic was used by Barth to describe how redemption is possible for history and humanity. The negative member of the dialectic is of course humanity. Thus, since humanity exists in a state of alienation from God, only God, as the positive member of the dialectic, is able to take us up into himself and negate the negative aspect of the “unreal.” Barth’s completion of this functional dialectic is found in his newly established understanding of grace.

In the awareness that we stand under God’s judgment, we have thus heard the “no” of God against our very existence. But those who are aware of the “no” against all their endeavors, and yield to it, then hear the divine “yes” of God’s mercy and grace as he offers redemption and new being.

In conclusion, the publication of Romans I was a theological statement against the inflated attempts of human reason to attain to knowledge of God, as well as a condemnation of human ethics which, by obscuring the difference between God and man, relegated God to an idea, or archetype, that incites us to moral activity. For Barth, God

¹³⁹ Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 110.

stands alone, above, and beyond reason's grasp. His realm can be neither emulated nor reproduced by human methods, whether ethical or religious.

By identifying the influences on Barth's early theology and tracing the contours of the diastatic theology found in Romans I, it has been our intent to establish the complete disassociation of Barth's early, subjective approach from the more objective tack taken in Romans I. However, if the category of transcendence is already quite apparent in Romans I, Barth's reformulation of the text as Romans II would sharpen this distinction to its fullest. This clearer break from the Barth's theological liberalism was in large measure due to influences that he encountered after Romans I had been published. Thus, next, we shall briefly observe those influences, as well as establishing the theme of Romans II.

CHAPTER II
EXAMINING THE REFORMULATION OF ROMANS I AND THE PUBLICATION
OF ROMANS II

Although it is not the objective of this thesis to account for the numerous influences on Barth's Romans II or the extent to which some of these influences may be considered primary, it serves our interest at least to address the issue briefly. Furthermore, we shall examine the reasons Barth gives as to why the reformulation of the first Romans commentary was necessary. In doing so we shall discuss his objective as well as the concepts employed by Barth in Romans II with the purpose of understanding the significance of this text for its time.

The Need for Reformulation and the Tools Employed

In a book titled *Revolutionary Theology in the Making: Barth-Thurneysen Correspondence 1914-1925*, Thurneysen discusses the significance of Barth's re-writing of the Romans commentary which led to the more famous second edition. He says:

In this work the last remnants of a kind of thinking that concerned itself with the evolution of inner life were finally stripped away. Karl Barth had done with all idealistic, neo-Kantian concepts.... This way from above to below is the only way of access for man to God and to eternal life.¹⁴⁰

In September 1919, Barth had agreed to speak at a Religious Socialist conference in

¹⁴⁰ *Revolutionary Theology in the Making: Barth—Thurneysen Correspondence, 1914-1925*, trans. James D. Smart (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1964), 17.

Tambach. There, Barth had met several people who were uneasy with the solution the first edition presented. In greeting these people, Barth became aware of their hunger for a true religious reality. As a result of this encounter, Barth “put afresh the question of the biblical meaning of the Kingdom of God.”¹⁴¹ In searching for new answers Barth came upon the writings of several thinkers who further stimulated his questioning. He says:

This new questioning was stimulated by the posthumous publications of Overbeck, by Kant, whom with the help of my younger brother I had come to see differently in the light of Plato, by Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky, whom as yet I knew only selectively, and by a better knowledge of Paul himself through a series of sermons I preached on Ephesians and II Corinthians.¹⁴²

In a discussion with Gogarten on October 27, 1920, it came to Barth’s attention that the first edition of Romans had still been dependent on his theological forebears.¹⁴³ As a result, Barth received the enlightenment that the first edition could not be reprinted, but “rather it must be reformed root and branch.”¹⁴⁴

In the preface to the second edition of Romans, Barth gives an account of those thinkers who “led to an advance and to a change of front”¹⁴⁵ resulting in the publication of Romans II. First, and foremost, through a continued study of the apostle Paul, Barth received a greater understanding of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans than before. Secondly, in 1920 Barth had discovered the posthumous writings of the Basel theologian Franz Overbeck (1837-1905). According to Thurneysen, it was Overbeck who provided Barth with the conception of *Urgeschichte*, a central motif used in the second edition.¹⁴⁶ Barth would employ this concept to account for those events of divine history which take place

¹⁴¹ *Karl Barth/Rudolph Bultmann: Letters 1922-1966*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Company, 1981), 155.

¹⁴² *Ibid.* 155.

¹⁴³ *Karl Barth Letters: 1961-1968*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Company, 1981), 45.

¹⁴⁴ *Revolutionary Theology in the Making: Barth—Thurneysen Correspondence, 1914-1925*, trans. James D. Smart (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1964), 53.

¹⁴⁵ Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 3.

¹⁴⁶ *Revolutionary Theology in the Making: Barth—Thurneysen Correspondence, 1914-1925*, trans. James D. Smart (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1964), 21.

within world history. Furthermore, Barth's reading of Overbeck's *Christianity and Culture* would provide him with clarity as to the devastating anti-Christian elements present within Christendom.¹⁴⁷ Thirdly, Barth had acquired a better understanding of Plato and Kant from his brother Heinrich's writings as well as their discussions. Fourthly, Barth "paid more attention to what may be culled from the writings of Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky" which was "important for the interpretation of the New Testament."¹⁴⁸ Though not much has been said by other scholars concerning the extent that Dostoevsky influenced Barth's writing of Romans II, Barth himself does credit Dostoevsky with having provided him with not only the steam used in a whole section, but with a quote as well.¹⁴⁹ However, more controversial is the extent to which Kierkegaard had influenced Barth's Romans II.

Although Barth had first discovered Kierkegaard in 1909, he says that Kierkegaard had "only entered my thinking seriously and more extensively, in 1919, at the critical turning-point between the first and second editions of my Romans."¹⁵⁰ Barth's use of the word "extensively" to describe his familiarity with Kierkegaard comes as no surprise inasmuch as he says, in discussing the underlying foundation of Romans II:

If I have a system, it is limited to a recognition of what Kierkegaard called the 'infinite qualitative distinction' between time and eternity, and to my regarding this as possessing negative as well as positive significance: 'God is in heaven, and

¹⁴⁷ It is the opinion of some scholars that Franz Overbeck's attack upon Christendom was central to Barth's own critique. However others, specifically T. F. Torrance, believe that Barth's attack was not due to the influence of Overbeck alone, but Kierkegaard as well. In view of Barth's familiarity with Kierkegaard's writings – specifically *Practice in Christianity* and *Attack upon Christendom* – and given Barth's self-avowed debt to Kierkegaard, it would be naïve to credit Overbeck with sole responsibility for Barth's critique of the state of Protestant Christianity in his day. In a planned sequel to this thesis, the author hopes to provide ample evidence not only that Barth was influenced directly by Kierkegaard, but that Overbeck was, as well.

¹⁴⁸ Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 4.

¹⁴⁹ *Revolutionary Theology in the Making: Barth—Thurneysen Correspondence, 1914-1925*, trans. James D. Smart (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1964), 59.

¹⁵⁰ Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 252.

thou art on earth.’¹⁵¹

Of course, as we have mentioned in the introduction, some scholars, such as McCormack, believe that Kierkegaard’s influence is less significant than that of the neo-Kantianism Barth had inherited from his brother Heinrich.¹⁵² Nonetheless, most scholars agree, including McCormack, that Kierkegaard’s contribution to Romans II is obviously significant given the not inconsiderable terminology Barth borrowed from Kierkegaard. However, against McCormack, Barth’s use of Kierkegaardian language goes way beyond the borrowing of his terminology alone. Barth consistently employs the Kierkegaardian concepts of paradox, incognito, leap of faith, indirect communication, and God as the “Wholly Other” with their full significance, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Fifthly, although not mentioned initially in the preface to the second edition, Barth relies heavily on the thought of Martin Luther.¹⁵³ As utterly transcendent, God is the *Deus nudus*, the majestic, naked deity, and as such, the unknown God. Only in Christ is this transcendent God made known, while being simultaneously concealed under the opposite form, “the God hidden in sufferings.” Finally, new in Barth’s Romans II is the motif of eschatology which he received from Blumhardt. Against the predominant eschatology of Barth’s time is Barth’s firm belief that the Kingdom of God is not a reality that ethical society is in the process of establishing. Such an unattainable, futuristic, and humanistic perception neglects, according to Barth, the new reality imposed upon society from above for implementing the Kingdom of God in the here and now.

¹⁵¹ Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 10.

¹⁵² Current Barth scholarship assumes that it is either neo-Kantianism or Overbeck that is the primary influence on Romans II. But these conclusions rest upon a neglect of the significance that Kierkegaard’s “infinite qualitative distinction” holds for the “system” underlying Romans II.

¹⁵³ Themes drawn from Kierkegaard are reinforced by Barth’s reading of Luther. Craig Hinkson has shown that the young Kierkegaard was in all likelihood indirectly influenced by Luther through reading Hamann, the preeminent Luther scholar of the 18th century. Luther’s *Deus nudus* and *Deus absconditus in passionibus* have parallels in Kierkegaard’s concepts of “the Unknown” God and the “God Incognito.” Thus Barth, in using Luther, reiterates Kierkegaard in his use of Luther. See Craig Hinkson, “Luther and Kierkegaard: Theologians of the Cross,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3, no. 1 (2001):25-45, and “Kierkegaard’s Theology: Cross and Grace. The Lutheran and Idealist Traditions in His Thought,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1993), chaps. 1-3.

The influence of these thinkers provided Barth with a new clarity previously unknown to him. In the past Barth had wrestled with the problem that if “in revelation we are concerned with the being and act of God himself in space and time, then we cannot know it directly as if we could read it off by historical and critical reflection.”¹⁵⁴ Barth’s use of these several thinkers helped him answer this problem.

The Theme of Romans II

The central theme of Romans II, upon which Barth advanced his dismantling of the anthropomorphic theology of his time, is the “infinite qualitative distinction” that separates God and man, and time and eternity. This concept was used to draw a sharp demarcation between God’s thoughts and man’s thoughts, between genuine Christianity and cultural Christianity. Inasmuch as the distinction is infinite, God and man inhabit two worlds, one known and the other unknown. The known world is the world or history of man, which is the world of sin and flesh. The unknown world is the world and history of God, which is the source of man’s world and history. Having his abode above and beyond man’s reach, God is unattainable by any human endeavor, be it neo-Kantian ethics, epistemology, or theology itself. “From beginning to the end of the book twentieth century man is planted face to face with Almighty God in his infinite Majesty and Holiness and incredible, inscrutable Grace.”¹⁵⁵

When man is faced with the ultimate transcendence of God, he is made aware that his ethical and religious endeavors are but an illusion and that his present situation is one of *krisis*, or divine judgment upon all such endeavors.¹⁵⁶ The theme of *krisis* is central for Barth in that it is an expression of the infinite separation between God and man. Man is incapable of obtaining righteousness by his own efforts; righteousness belongs to God

¹⁵⁴ T.F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology 1910-1931* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1962), 81.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 50.

¹⁵⁶ Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 38.

alone. As separated from God, our relation to Him is one of unrighteousness.¹⁵⁷ Such a relationship between God and man reveals the impossibility of pleasing or satisfying His righteousness.

Barth's adamant condemnation of human efforts, especially religion, was intended to awaken his contemporaries to the political and theological crisis of his time. As human ignorance continued its advance toward what is God's alone, namely righteousness, Barth sought to place his fellow theologians in a situation of theological *krisis* in which they could hear God's "no" to their human efforts. Barth was strongly convinced that when we, as mere sinful men, try to grasp God, we instead exalt ourselves and "obscure the distance between God and man."¹⁵⁸ Indeed, as Barth says, "when we set God upon the throne of the world, we mean by God ourselves. In 'believing' on Him, we justify, enjoy, and adorn ourselves."¹⁵⁹ Such is the situation of man; such was the situation of German theology.

Barth's emphasis on the human *krisis* before God has been understood by many as the central theme of Romans II, so much so that Romans II has been called a "theology of crisis."

But according to Bruce McCormack, the idea that Romans II is a theology of crisis "rests upon a superficial reading of the book."¹⁶⁰ As already stated, Barth's use of *krisis* theology was a ramification of the infinite qualitative distinction between God and man. "*Krisis*" was a term Barth used to convey the unreliability of theology in the tradition of Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Herrmann, and Cohen. Barth's point was to show that these theological systems wherein God was a product of man's reason or emotion, resulted not from man's ability to know God, but from his *inability* to know Him. If man is unable to know God, he must conjure up a basis for such knowledge in himself. If theology had for

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. 44.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 210.

so long created God in its own image, co-opting God for its own purposes, then the realization that God is beyond reason's ken would indeed present an epistemological and ethical crisis. However, is the declaration that the human situation is one of *krisis* the last word of Romans II?

When we, as mere humans, realize that we are qualitatively different from God, when we see that it is not we who have created God but He who has created us, when we admit that our conceptions of Him, our efforts at obtaining Him, are but empty projections of our need of Him, it is then that we find God's grace, His divine "yes" upon our very being. "Those who take upon them the divine 'No' shall themselves be borne by the greater divine 'Yes.'"¹⁶¹ But where does this grace come from by which we hear the divine "yes" of God?

In the midst of the separation between time and eternity, man and God, is the person of Jesus Christ who offers reconciliation. Only in Christ do the "two worlds meet and go apart, two planes intersect, the one known and the other unknown."¹⁶² For Barth, the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth is where God has made Himself known in human history. It is in Christ that the world of God "intersected" ours. However, while God's realm has encountered ours in Jesus, it yet remains distinct from our world. This dialectical interaction was used by Barth to allow for God's revelation in history, while remaining distinct from our history. The idea of God did not originate within human history. Rather, human history has its origin in God. This point was to be blatantly clear for Barth's readers. Only in Christ is knowledge of the unknown God given. However, as we continue our examination of the central motifs of Romans II, we shall see that the knowledge of God in Christ is something which, while given directly in the historical person of Jesus, is also given indirectly under the opposite form so as to make room for

¹⁶¹ Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 41.

¹⁶² *Ibid.* 234.

faith.

In conclusion, whereas Romans I contained remnants of Barth's earliest theology, Romans II eradicated them. As a result of Barth's employment of the concept of the "infinite qualitative distinction," the theology of his forbearers (Schleiermacher, Ritschl, Herrmann, and the neo-Kantians, Cohen and Natorp) had been utterly removed from Barth's thinking, being replaced by the theology of Luther, Overbeck, Kierkegaard, and Calvin. Given God's transcendent nature and existence, the methods of historical criticism, as well as the anthropomorphic criteria of religious experience and ethics, were rendered useless. As we consider to what extent neo-Kantian epistemology served Barth in the formation of Romans II, the line of demarcation between Barth's earliest thought and that of Romans II will show itself to be quite drastic. For in contrast to Barth's earliest theology, the purpose of Romans II was to make room once again for the holy and transcendent God of the Bible who is unable to be grasped by man's reason and ethical endeavors.

CHAPTER THREE

KIERKEGAARD OR NEO-KANTIANISM: CORRELATING THE THEMES AND INFLUENCES IN ROMANS II

The Kierkegaard Reception in Late 19th and Early 20th Century Germany

In 1865, Bishop Peter Christian Kierkegaard offered Hans Peter Barfod the task of arranging his deceased brother's papers for publication. This earliest edition of Kierkegaard's journals was published in installments. The first came in 1869, entitled *Af Søren Kierkegaards efterladte papirer, 1833-43* [From Søren Kierkegaard's Posthumous Papers, 1833-43].¹⁶³ Volume two (comprising the years 1844-46) appeared in 1872, volume three (1847) in 1877, volumes four (1848), five (1849), and six (1850) in 1880, and the last two volumes – seven (1851-53) and eight (1854-55) – appeared in 1881.¹⁶⁴ Even before Kierkegaard's journals appeared in Danish, however, his published works were being translated into German. The earliest, full-length translation appeared in 1861, titled "A Work." It consisted of the first nine *Øjeblikket* articles. A second edition appeared in 1864, unchanged except for the title: *Christentum und Kirche*. "Die

¹⁶³ Habib C. Malik, *Receiving Søren Kierkegaard: The Early Impact and Transmission of His Thought* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 216.

¹⁶⁴ Jens Himmelstrup, *Søren Kierkegaard. International Bibliografi* (Copenhagen: Nyt Nordisk Forlag, Arnold Busck, 1962), 15.

Gegenwart”. *Ein ernstes Wort an unsere Zeit, insbesondere an die evangelische Geistlichkeit* [Christianity and Church. “The Present.” An Ernest Word to Our Time, Especially to the Evangelical Clergy].¹⁶⁵ At about the same time, in 1862, Christian Hansen published a translation of Kierkegaard’s *For Self Examination. Recommended to the Present Age* under the German title, *Zur Selbstprüfung, der Gegenwart empfohlen*. Most interesting for our purposes is the fact that these earliest translations were eagerly received by the Tübingen theologian and professor, Johann Tobias Beck (1804-1878).

Beck’s theology was so influenced by Kierkegaard that he employed Kierkegaard’s attack upon Christendom in his own confrontation with various church officials of his time.¹⁶⁶ Frederick C. Petersen, a professor of theology at the University of Christiania, once said of Beck, that he was the only theologian of his time “who wishes to adhere to the faith as Kierkegaard knows it.”¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, Beck’s love for Kierkegaard was so contagious that it led to the translation and publication of selections from *Practice in Christianity* by one of his students, Albert Barthold in 1872.¹⁶⁸

It is disturbing that scholarship ignores the possibility that Barth received a Kierkegaardian influence through Beck. Barth’s first mention of Beck came on July 27, 1916, when he wrote to Thurneysen declaring, “Discovery of a goldmine: J. T. Beck!! ... I came on the track of him through my work on Romans and will make use of him there.”¹⁶⁹ And make use of him he did. “More than I myself realized, it was strongly influenced by the ideals of Bengel, Otinger, Beck, and (by way of Kutter) Schelling,”¹⁷⁰ Barth says. Of course the date 1916 reveals that Barth is discussing the first edition of *Romans*, published in 1919. However, Beck’s presence continues to be felt in the second

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁶⁶ Habib C. Malik, *Receiving Søren Kierkegaard: The Early Impact and Transmission of His Thought* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 220.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 261.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 220.

¹⁶⁹ *Revolutionary Theology in the Making: Barth—Thurneysen Correspondence, 1914-1925*, trans. James D. Smart (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1964), 38.

¹⁷⁰ *Karl Barth/Rudolph Bultmann: Letters 1922-1966*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 155.

edition where Barth commends Beck's desire to execute a "genuine understanding and interpretation" of Paul's Epistle, aligning him with the likes of Luther and Calvin.¹⁷¹

The previously mentioned works of Kierkegaard that were first translated into German were only the beginning. Thereafter a flood of works came to press. *The Point of View* and *An Open Letter* both appeared in 1873, followed by selections from *Fear and Trembling* (1874), *Judge For Yourself* (1876), some of the *Discourses* (1876), all of *Practice in Christianity* (1878), *The Sickness Unto Death* (1881), a full translation of *Fear and Trembling* (1882), both volumes of *Either/Or* (1885), *The Lilies of the Field* (also 1885), and *Stages on Life's Way* (1886). All were translated and published by Albert Barthold. In 1890 yet another student of Beck's, Christoph Schrempf (1860-1944), provided his first translation of the *Concept of Anxiety* and *Philosophical Fragments*, together titled *Zur Psychologie der Sunde, der Bekehrung und des Glaubens* [*On the Psychology of Sin, Conversion, and Faith*].¹⁷² *Works of Love*, translated by Albert Dorner, appeared that same year. In 1896 he and Schrempf collaborated on *Søren Kierkegaards agitatorische Schriften und Aufsätze. 1851-1855*, also published under the title, *Søren Kierkegaards Angriff an die Christenheit*.¹⁷³ These early efforts led to the first critical edition of the collected works, the Jena edition, edited by Schrempf and Hermann Gottschied (also a student of Beck), which appeared between 1909 and 1922.

The sheer volume of Kierkegaard's works being made available during this time, the publication of selections from his journals, and several biographies written on Kierkegaard's life, all suggest an extreme occupation in the late nineteenth century with Kierkegaard. One wonders to what extent Barth himself was familiar with Kierkegaard's writings. A number of his contemporaries certainly were. Karl Holl (1866-1926), a

¹⁷¹ Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 7.

¹⁷² Habib C. Malik, *Receiving Søren Kierkegaard: The Early Impact and Transmission of His Thought* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 313.

¹⁷³ Jens Himmelstrup, *Søren Kierkegaard. International Bibliografi* (Copenhagen: Nyt Nordisk Forlag, Arnold Busck, 1962), 27.

student of Harnack and inaugurator of the twentieth century Luther renaissance, expressly avowed his debt to Kierkegaard. And his student, Emanuel Hirsch (1888-1972) – an exact contemporary of Barth’s – became one of the leading Kierkegaard scholars of the twentieth century. But as to the matter of Barth’s acquaintance with Kierkegaard, Bruce McCormack’s thesis is that all we can know for certain is that Barth was familiar with Kierkegaard’s *Moment, Practice in Christianity*, and an abridged edition of the *Journals*.¹⁷⁴ McCormack contends that we have no reason to assume that Barth was acquainted with *Philosophical Fragments*, *The Sickness unto Death*, or *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*,¹⁷⁵ basing this contention upon “allusions made by Barth to Kierkegaard in his letters and early lectures.”¹⁷⁶ However, his conclusion is highly questionable.

Barth’s familiarity with Kierkegaard is universally recognized on the basis of his repeated citations of Kierkegaard by name, as well as his use of Kierkegaardian terminology in Romans II such as paradox, Wholly Other, indirect/direct communication, moment, divine incognito, scandal, and leap of faith. Are we to assume that Barth’s employment of such terms is limited to those works alone wherein they occur?

Throughout Romans II, Barth not only uses specific terminology that can be traced directly to Kierkegaard, but Kierkegaardian concepts – a fact that some scholars seem to ignore. According to T. F. Torrance, Barth’s understanding of sin, as developed in chapters five and eight of Romans II, is so evidently reflective of Kierkegaard that he is convinced that Barth had read *The Sickness unto Death*, *The Concept of Dread*, and *Fear and Trembling*.¹⁷⁷ Further, is Barth’s repeated use of the phrase “either/or” in chapter eight, *The Spirit/The Decision*, to be understood as mere coincidence? Also

¹⁷⁴ Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 235.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. 336.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. 235.

¹⁷⁷ T. F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology 1910-1931* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1962), 63.

reminiscent of Kierkegaard is Barth's discussion of love in chapter eight. Of course, such conclusions could be considered to be mere speculation. But, if so, then McCormack must also be guilty of speculation. In general, whereas speculation might be attributed to one who makes referential connections to a possible source, the same might be imputed to those who draw conclusions from the lack thereof. Furthermore, McCormack's thesis, which identifies neo-Kantianism as the primary influence on Romans II, is at face value ambiguous and with scant textual support.

Only once, in contrast to the numerous times that Kierkegaard is mentioned, is a proponent of neo-Kantianism mentioned, namely Cohen. It is true that McCormack's case does not rest upon source citation of any given author. His argument follows from what he believes to be obvious usage of neo-Kantian concepts in Romans II. Leaving all mention of Kierkegaard's name aside, the claim of Kierkegaardian influence that is here advanced rests upon the same critical analysis of concepts that McCormack employs. Thus, we shall now put McCormack's own thesis to the test, with the hope of either finding agreement or disagreement with it.

The Infinite Qualitative Distinction

The prominence of the Kierkegaardian concept of the "infinite qualitative distinction" in Romans II has been overlooked for too long. Granted, most scholars agree on the importance this concept had for Barth's attack on the liberal theology of his day. However, it is then quickly left behind in search of some more formative concept deemed more central to Romans II. As we stated earlier, Barth, when questioned about the system of Romans II, credited Kierkegaard as providing him with such a system. Accordingly, this concept can be said to be not only a "thematic" concept for Barth, but the foundational one.

Upon this concept, that God and man are infinitely, qualitatively distinct, rest the various dialectics Barth uses in drawing out the significance of God's otherness from

man. This distinction serves Barth well, with the time and eternity dialectic providing an instance of just such qualitative otherness. As we have seen, from it results Barth's conclusion that the world of man exists in sharp contrast to the world of God. By using this Kierkegaardian concept, Barth sought not only to separate the history of man from the history of God, but to tear asunder the existence of man himself. If man is to exist in relation to God and His realm, he must do so dialectically; he must exist as something other than self. Given the relationship of the time/eternity and history of man/history of God dialectics to the more foundational infinite, qualitative distinction, our curiosity is greatly aroused by the suggestion of current scholarship that Kierkegaard's influence on Barth was isolated to this concept alone.

As stated in the introduction, many today prefer to see Overbeck or, as McCormack argues, neo-Kantianism as Barth's principal influence. Specifically, McCormack appeals to the work of Michael Beintker, who argues that the list of influences given by Barth in the preface to Romans II was not accidental. Repeating Beintker's argument, McCormack says, "The ordering was intended to attribute a priority of importance to the influence of Plato and Kant (as mediated through Heinrich Barth) over that of Kierkegaard."¹⁷⁸ Although we shall address this claim later, even more disconcerting is McCormack's suggestion that Kierkegaard's influence only served to reinforce Barth's already adopted *Ursprung* philosophy of neo-Kantianism. As McCormack would have it, it was the concept of *Ursprung*, not that of the "infinite qualitative distinction," upon which Barth built the theology of Romans II.

But Barth's employment of Kierkegaard's concept of the infinite, qualitative distinction extends far beyond what we have hitherto maintained, for on its basis Barth sought to present not only a barrier between two realms, but also a barrier to human thought as regards its potential for obtaining knowledge of God. It is here that Barth

¹⁷⁸ Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 217.

takes his cue from Kierkegaard once again inasmuch as he presents human thought with an object that is inscrutable to human reason, namely the Incarnation. Here Kierkegaard lends Barth the understanding of how exactly God communicates with man given the latter's limitations – viz., by means of indirect communication and paradox. The use of Kierkegaard's (and Luther's) dialectical theology of paradox is central to the whole of Romans II in that neither human reason, nor any other faculty, is able to access God. Given that this is so, what, more exactly, is this Kierkegaardian concept of the infinite, qualitative distinction, and why is it central to Romans II?

1. Dialectic of Time and Eternity

As we are already aware, theology in Barth's day blurred the distinction between God and man. Aware that this state of affairs had obtained in Protestant theology since Schleiermacher, Barth regarded it as a betrayal of the very heart of the Gospel of Christ.¹⁷⁹ Instead, Barth speaks of

God, who is distinguished qualitatively from men and from everything human, and must never be identified with anything which we name, or experience, or conceive, or worship, as God; God, who confronts all human disturbance with an unconditional command, 'halt.'¹⁸⁰

At face value, Barth is mounting a Kierkegaardian attack on the theological methods of all his past teaching. This is obvious in view of the radical disjunction he posits between God and religious experience, thereby disqualifying the subjectivistic epistemologies of Schleiermacher, Herrmann and Natorp. In like manner, Barth rejects the ethico-religious epistemology of Cohen as a mere human conception. Inasmuch as Barth condemns all human endeavors, one can only wonder how some can possibly maintain that Barth's Romans II is influenced by neo-Kantianism, or any of the theological approaches in which he was trained, for that matter.

¹⁷⁹ Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwin C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 225.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 331.

The most immediate consequence of Barth's use of the infinite qualitative distinction was to isolate and bar off God's realm of eternity from that of time. Thus there exist two worlds: the "world of the Father, of Primal Creation"¹⁸¹ and the world of man. The qualitative distinction between them is so extreme that Barth used the word "infinite" to describe it, thus employing Kierkegaard's meaning to the fullest extent. Within the realm of man's time and history there has never existed a means by which the "eternal meaning of the created world"¹⁸² could be ascertained. Against Schleiermacher's and Herrmann's adherence to religious experience Barth says, "The Gospel is ... not an event, nor an experience, nor an emotion."¹⁸³ And against any epistemology which establishes God as the moral incentive created by reason he says, "The Gospel proclaims a God utterly distinct from men ... because they are, as men, incapable of knowing Him."¹⁸⁴ The very fact that man is "unable to reckon with anything except feelings and experiences and events"¹⁸⁵ is evidence enough for Barth that God is objectively beyond human cognition.

The conception of God as transcending human thought and experience is, of course, present not only in Kierkegaard, but also in Luther. In solidarity with both men, Romans II affirms a concept of God who is unknowable in his extreme transcendence. Of course, the concept of the infinite qualitative distinction between God and man *might* reflect a Kantian epistemology, as well. However, is there really sufficient reason to credit either Kant or Cohen with it?

As we recall, Kant believed that God was objectively unknowable because of the limits of theoretical reason. But what theoretical reason could not accomplish, practical reason could. By its means the "knowledge" of God (his existence and moral nature) was vouchsafed. The limitation of theoretical reason to the empirical world mattered little,

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 29.

¹⁸² Ibid., 87.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 28.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 53.

for it was *reason*, in any case, that generated God's existence as the necessary grounding of morals. Thus did Kant's ethics present the knowledge of God as the product of *human* thought processes. Neo-Kantianism was no different. Recall that, for Cohen, God was placed outside the realm of human cognition. By way of compensation, however, God was located within the realm of ethics qua *Idea*, the ideal archetype of morality that is generated by human thought.

Given what we see here, it is quite clear that the qualitative distinction between God and man is not an adaptation of the noumenal/phenomenal split that characterizes Kantian epistemology. Moreover, inasmuch as neo-Kantianism disregards the noumenal realm altogether, from its standpoint God cannot possibly exist apart from phenomenal reality and the phenomenal activity productive of it, viz., human cognition. Lest anyone suppose that the slightest similarity obtains between Barth's own viewpoint and that of Kantianism/neo-Kantianism, Barth condemns the latter's conception of God:

We make of the eternal and ultimate presupposition of the Creator a 'thing in itself' above and in the midst of other things, of that which is living and abstracted from all concreteness a concrete thing – no doubt the highest – in the midst of other concrete things, of the Spirit a spirit, of what is inaccessible and therefore so nigh at hand an endlessly uncertain object of our experiences.¹⁸⁶

Barth is adamant that since God is not a "thing in a series of things,"¹⁸⁷ human logic, in relation to God, is inapplicable.¹⁸⁸ Pointedly *against* the neo-Kantian conception of God as a product of human logic, Barth says:

The true God, Himself removed from all concretion, is the Origin of the *Krisis* of every concrete thing, the Judge, the negation of this world in which is included also the god of human logic.

For Barth, the infinite qualitative distinction set a limit beyond which historical/scientific investigation could not pass; indeed, it constituted an insuperable barrier to any form of

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 47.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 82.

reasoning that presumed to go beyond the phenomenal by identifying supernatural reality with an artifact of human reason. God's distinctiveness from the world is not to be equated with Kantian epistemological dualism nor is knowledge of Him ascertainable by ethics. God is the unknown God whose power "can be detected neither in the world of nature nor in the souls of men."¹⁸⁹ Thus did Barth attempt (by way of Kierkegaard) to rid theology, not only of the pernicious influence of Schleiermacher and Herrmann, but that of Natorp and Cohen. The fault of liberal theology in Barth's day was its optimism in believing that historical/scientific methods could penetrate beyond the restrictions of time and history.

2. *Urgeschichte* and Christianity

As qualitatively distinct from God, human history is cut off from the primal history of God. Nevertheless, the reality of God's realm is evident from the efforts of man to establish ethical society and religious institutions. "History bears inevitable witness to its non-historical beginning and its non-historical end."¹⁹⁰

Critical to grasping the significance of Barth's "infinite qualitative distinction" is the disjunction that the related "time/eternity dialectic" creates for our understanding of history – viz., that of secular history (*Geschichte*) vs. primal history (*Urgeschichte*). For Barth this understanding rests in our

apprehension that the world and human history are moving in a secular and relative context, which is in itself ultimately meaningless; but it involves also the apprehension that they have meaning as a parable of a wholly other world; that they bear witness to a wholly other history; that they are reminiscent of a wholly other mankind; that they are, in fact, a parable, a witness, and a reminiscence, of

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 37.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 147.

God.¹⁹¹

Although this statement is pregnant with meaning, Barth's primary intention is to affirm, behind world history, a primal history responsible for its existence. Qua original history, it exists as an unknown plane that intersects the known plane of human history. This unknown plane is "the world of the Father, of the Primal Creation, and of the final Redemption."¹⁹² This world of God that originated human history Barth calls *Urgeschichte*.

In short, the term *Urgeschichte* designates the ahistorical, unknown origin of the world and humanity.¹⁹³ Inasmuch as they now exist separate from their origin, world historical institutions have drifted away from, and stand in total contrast to, their true essence. Hence, it is easy to understand why Barth had much to say against the Christianity of his day.

As an historical phenomenon, Christianity exists in contradiction to what it was originally meant to be. This being the case, Romans II must be understood as an attack on Christendom. Specifically, the concept of the infinite qualitative distinction is used to reveal that the unknown plane of God's world is inaccessible to human reason and the methods it employs.

According to Barth, all that "we can know and apprehend and see belongs to this world."¹⁹⁴ But inasmuch as historical knowledge belongs to the past and is without relation to a primal history that is undefined, many of his contemporaries, as well as

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 107.

¹⁹² Ibid., 29.

¹⁹³ Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 230.

¹⁹⁴ Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 163.

modern scholarship, have labeled Barth an irrationalist. However, given Barth's own admission in Romans II that historical criticism, as a science, "is both necessary and justified,"¹⁹⁵ some other basis for his critique of historical investigation must be found.

It bears repeating that Barth's critique is aimed at those methods by which historical criticism relegates God and the supernatural to the confines of the human intellect, hence, stripped of all that is supernatural. Historicism was nothing more for Barth than man's attempt to lay hold of God by reducing Him to a creation of human thought, whether deriving from religious experience or ethics. It is important to note, however, that Barth's misgivings about historical criticism differed greatly from the qualms he had about it in his earlier theology.

Earlier, as a student of Herrmann, Barth found fault with historical criticism's rejection of religious experience as a legitimate source of knowledge (since subjective experience supposedly had no place in an objective, scientific endeavor). However, the Barth of Romans II places religious feeling in the same camp as historical criticism inasmuch as *all* such methods whereby knowledge of God is claimed have their origin not in God, but in man, and must therefore be denied. Inevitably, the question arises as to how we can account for the shift in Barth's critique of historical criticism between his earlier theology and Romans II.

As we have said, in modern Barth scholarship there is a tendency to esteem the influence of neo-Kantianism and Franz Overbeck more highly than that of Kierkegaard. It is specifically the presence of the concept of *Urgeschichte* in Romans II that leads some to favor Overbeck's influence over Kierkegaard's. However, the notion that Overbeck's contribution of one concept, *Urgeschichte*, somehow outweighs the breadth

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 6.

of Kierkegaard's influence is illogical. Yes, Barth does mention Overbeck from time to time in Romans II. But he is referenced much less than Kierkegaard. As we mentioned earlier, Thurneysen does credit Overbeck with being the one who provided Barth with the term and conception of *Urgeschichte*. However, even Thurneysen understood this concept not as "the" central motif of Romans II, but as "a" central motif among many.

The writings of Overbeck were serviceable to Barth inasmuch as they attacked the presumption of historical investigation that it could penetrate the "primal history" that lies behind the artifacts of world history.¹⁹⁶ For Overbeck, historical knowledge presents human understanding with only an approximation of what really happened and what is really happening. In the preface of Romans II, Barth shares Overbeck's skepticism about the limits of historical investigation when, in addressing his own reliance on the historical text of the Paul's Epistle to the Romans, he says, "That the assumptions are certainly justified is at the end only a relative certainty. They cannot be proven."¹⁹⁷ And as regards the obsession of modern theology with the merely historical, Barth says:

If it were possible for a man to penetrate with his understanding the non-historical in which every great episode in history had its origin, he might, by raising himself beyond the sphere of history, attain to that knowledge which would absolve him from the necessity of taking serious account of the actual facts of history.¹⁹⁸

That there lies beyond history something *non*-historical, in the light of which history is to be understood, is a certainty for Barth. For, as the continuation of the above passage reveals, the historical cannot be properly interpreted unless it is illuminated by "the Logos of all history ... the non-historical, or rather the Primal History, which conditions

¹⁹⁶ Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 228.

¹⁹⁷ Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 10.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 140.

all history.”

Not only does Barth call attention to the inability of historical methods to yield any true understanding of history, he deplores their underlying assumption that revelation and faith have no role to play in religious knowledge. In this regard, Barth’s critique of historical criticism seems so reflective of Kierkegaard’s own critique that it has caused some scholars, for example Gary Dorrien, to believe that Barth’s understanding of Overbeck was conditioned by what he knew of Kierkegaard.¹⁹⁹ Barth’s dislike for historical criticism is, in fact, so Kierkegaardian that he even employs the concept of the “Moment” in presenting the significance of Christianity as the eternal truth that invades time with the specific purpose of relating to the individual in the moment.²⁰⁰ But are there still other indicators that Barth’s understanding of history and its relation to Christianity is inspired by Kierkegaard, not Overbeck?

At the beginning of *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard asks: “Can a historical point of departure be given for an eternal consciousness; how can such a point of departure be of more than historical interest; can an eternal happiness be built on historical knowledge?”²⁰¹ It is within the confines of *Philosophical Fragments* and the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, hereafter CUP, that Kierkegaard addresses these questions.

Concerning the historicity of Christianity, Kierkegaard says, “Objectively viewed, Christianity is a given fact.”²⁰² That is to say, it “is a historical truth; it appears at a

¹⁹⁹ Gary Dorrien, *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 63.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁰¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 3.

²⁰² Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 21.

certain time and certain place and consequently it is relevant to a certain time and place.”²⁰³ As far as Kierkegaard is concerned, the historical character of Christianity “constitutes both a necessary aspect and an embarrassing destruction to Christian faith. On the one hand, he recognizes the necessity of the Incarnation as the basis for the Christian: God entered history as a human being.”²⁰⁴ On the other hand, he considered preoccupation with Christianity’s facts to be highly detrimental, leading to an impersonal, disinterested acceptance of Christianity’s claims that is the very antithesis of faith.

Such was the state of Christianity in Kierkegaard’s day. Faith had become provisional acceptance of historical facts, combined with continued research and/or speculation so as to ascertain the historical truth more securely by way of evidence and demonstration. Kierkegaard notes that this preoccupation with the “objective” had caused nineteenth century Lutheranism to resemble its earlier, Catholic counterpart. Johannes Climacus describes Catholicism at the time of Luther as being characterized by a surfeit of objectivity: “Did not the papacy have objectivity and objective definitions and the objective, more of the objective, the objective in superabundance? What did it lack? Appropriation, inwardness.”²⁰⁵ And that is precisely how he describes Lutheran Christianity in his own day:

The objective view... continues from generation to generation precisely because the individuals (the observers) become more and more objective, less and less infinitely passionately interested. On the assumption that one would in this way continue to demonstrate and seek a demonstration of the truth of Christianity, something remarkable would finally emerge, that just as one was finished with the demonstration of its truth, it would cease to exist as something present: it would

²⁰³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers* 7 vols., ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Assisted by Gregor Malantschuk (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), v. 4, 232.

²⁰⁴ Louis P. Pojman, *The Logic of Subjectivity: Kierkegaard’s Philosophy of Religion* (Alabama: University Press, 1984), 38.

²⁰⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 366.

have become something historical to such a degree that it would be something past, whose truth, that is, whose historical truth, had now been brought to the point of reliability.²⁰⁶

Kierkegaard's chief concern is that fixation on Christianity's facts robs faith of its vitality, in the end, doing away with it altogether. This complaint that he raises about the biblical-historical approach to Christianity is paralleled by an identical one as regards the speculative approach, the only difference being that whereas biblical scholarship of Kierkegaard's day sought to remove the facts of Christianity from all doubt, the very possibility of doubt had been eliminated by Hegelian speculation. The net result was, of course, the same. In place of uncertainty, risk, and the passion of subjective decision, Hegel and his Danish followers had bequeathed to theology an objective "relationship of observation" that was no longer "infinitely interested in deciding the question."²⁰⁷

However much the objective historian might seek certainty by amassing ever more data, objectivity's promised certainty is nonetheless pure illusion, and the quest for it, futile:

For with regard to historical issues it is of course impossible to reach an objective decision of such a nature that no doubt would be able to insinuate itself. This also indicates that the issue is to be formulated subjectively, and that it is indeed a misunderstanding to want to assure oneself objectively and thereby avoid the risk in which passion chooses and in which passion continues upholding its choice.²⁰⁸

No amount of demonstration or evidence is able to provide objective certainty since, as Kierkegaard is wont to stress, "with regard to the historical the greatest certainty is only an approximation."²⁰⁹ But where one's eternal fate is concerned, an approximation is not good enough. Hence, those who seek to be fully assured of the truth of Christianity by

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 32.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 21.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 42.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 23.

means of historical evidence will be greatly disappointed. It cannot be otherwise, for history has to do with the past. Those who live in the present can never know for sure the actual events of the past. Add to this Christianity's claim that *the eternal came into existence* at a past moment in time, and the situation becomes utterly untenable. However much the researcher may try to ascertain the facts of Christianity, the *fact* stubbornly remains that Christianity teaches an impossibility that is, and ever will be, a scandal to reason, whatever the historical evidence may testify.

But yet another difficulty follows from the fact that Christianity deals with a past reality that is not fully accessible to the present. Because of the provisional nature of history's conclusions, they can always be rewritten as more evidence is uncovered. As such, history poses an acute problem for the believer:

Consider the believer who is at the mercy of historical evidence (supposing it possible), who bases his confidence in Christianity on certain sources which today seem more or less established. So he decides to believe the Gospel; but tomorrow the evidence takes on a new dimension and he is forced to withdraw his confidence in that evidence has changed his commitment, suspending his faith. Can one really subject faith and commitment to the changing shifts of evidence in this way?²¹⁰

To live in suspense of what the next biblical critic will say about the historical basis of Christianity, whether *pro* or *contra*, is to live in a constant state of doubt and fear that is anathema to true faith.

One further, very important point needs to be made. The historical approach to demonstrating the truth of Christianity contains a deep misunderstanding, for when it comes to Christianity's cardinal doctrine, the Incarnation, not only is historical evidence unable conclusively to prove that God became man, it is in principle, impossible that it

²¹⁰ Louis P. Pojman, *The Logic of Subjectivity: Kierkegaard's Philosophy of Religion* (Alabama: University Press, 1984), 42.

ever *could*. Though there is conclusive evidence that Jesus of Nazareth existed and that his disciples believed that they witnessed his miracles and resurrection, one cannot offer *any* sort of evidence to justify the conclusion that he was *God*. Such an “inference” is tantamount to an illicit *μετάβασις εις άλλο γένος* [transition to another concept sphere].²¹¹

It is no wonder that objectivity concerned Kierkegaard. He believed that because historical proofs are inconclusive and historical certainty is unattainable – particularly as touching the Incarnation – it must be believed as a result of a subjective decision.

Scholarship can never, by means of historical evidence, demonstrate such an event as the Incarnation. Thus, Kierkegaard sees those who participate in the futile quest for certainty by means of historical research as “continually moving in the sphere of approximation knowledge,”²¹² ever involving themselves in a “parenthesis” that forestalls the decision of faith.

Because of Kierkegaard’s unwillingness to consider historical investigation as the “end of all things,” some have interpreted him as being critical of apologetics. It is true that he did not look favorably upon apologetics, but this too must be understood in the context of his time. He says, concerning scholarship:

Thus everything is assumed to be in order with regard to the Holy Scripture, what then? Has the person who did not believe come a single step closer to faith? No, not a single step. Faith does not result from straightforward scholarly deliberation, nor does it come directly; on the contrary, in this objectivity one loses that infinite personal, impassioned interestedness, which is the condition of faith.”²¹³

What Kierkegaard wants us to consider is that even if all the facts were available, it would not be enough to yield the subjective certainty of faith. “Historical research never

²¹¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 98.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 81.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 29.

provides absolute knowledge or absolute certainty, therefore approximate knowledge, however likely, cannot give the absolute conviction that is necessary for faith.”²¹⁴ Faith is not the result of historical inquiry, but of divine intervention. Apologists and scholars who “labor with restless zeal” in the service of “science and scholarship” will always remain objective observers ensnared in a fruitless search for absolute certainty.²¹⁵

Kierkegaard seems justified in contending that knowledge based on historical data “can never provide that degree of certainty that removes doubt.”²¹⁶ In fact, history confirms the opposite effect of inhibiting a subjective decision for faith.

It is incontestable that Kierkegaard believed that scholarly deliberation would cultivate, not faith, but mere adherence to doctrines in which the scholar or speculative philosopher would rest content.²¹⁷ It is imperative, then, to realize that his attack is not directed against the doctrines of Christianity, but rather, at the mistaken view that faith results from objective adherence to those doctrines.²¹⁸ Therefore, it follows that “objective inquiry is only relatively less important to religious faith than is ordinarily supposed, not that it is utterly irrelevant to faith.”²¹⁹

Although it might seem to some that Kierkegaard’s presentation undermines the historical basis of Christianity, the result is only a limitation in the certainty that history can confer upon faith. It should be noted that Kierkegaard’s perception of the dangers

²¹⁴ Louis P. Pojman, *The Logic of Subjectivity: Kierkegaard’s Philosophy of Religion* (Alabama: University Press, 1984), 41.

²¹⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 21.

²¹⁶ David E. Mercer, *Kierkegaard’s Living Room; The Relation between Faith and History in Philosophical Fragments* (London: McGill-Queens University Press, 2001), 136.

²¹⁷ Paul F. Sands, *The Justification of Religious Faith in Søren Kierkegaard, John Henry Newman, and William James* (New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2003), 39.

²¹⁸ Steven M. Emmanuel, *Kierkegaard and the Concept of Revelation* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 108.

²¹⁹ Paul F. Sands, *The Justification of Religious Faith in Søren Kierkegaard, John Henry Newman, and William James* (New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2003), 43.

that historical certainty held for faith closely reflects Barth's own concerns. Barth shared Kierkegaard's skepticism concerning the surety of historical knowledge, especially as it relates to that which exists beyond the investigation of historical methods, namely, the realm of God and His self-revelation in Christ. Kierkegaard's belief that faith alone affords the certainty that is needed if one is to embrace Christ's deity has as its correlate the belief that historical knowledge is *unable* to provide such certainty. Thus, if Barth shares Kierkegaard's conception of the incarnation as Paradox, it is highly unlikely that he would have done so without also entertaining Kierkegaard's view of historical knowledge as an approximation, and therefore uncertain. Against McCormack's claim that Barth had not read *Fragments* or *Postscript* that Barth could have somehow been acquainted *only* with Kierkegaard's conception of Paradox without *also* having been familiar with his critique of historical/scientific investigation seems highly improbable. However, the evidence that is needed to put an end to all doubt about Barth's use of Kierkegaard is found in chapter eleven of Romans II where Barth appeals to Kierkegaard's warnings to Christendom.

In issuing his own warning to Christendom in chapter eleven of Romans II, Barth makes frank appeal to Kierkegaard. He says, "We have heard what Kierkegaard said about it all, and we agree with him."²²⁰ A page later he says, "When a Kierkegaard or a Kutter, measuring the Church by an absolute standard, proceeds to utter his complaint against it, we are bound to uphold his criticism, indeed we must underline it and endorse it."²²¹ It was *Kierkegaard's* criticism of a counterfeit Christianity that provided Barth with the inspiration to address the church of *his* day. Barth even quotes Kierkegaard's

²²⁰ Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 392.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 395.

very words saying, “The moment I make of my words an existential thing – that is to say, when I make of Christianity a thing in this world – at that moment I explode existence and have perpetuated the scandal.”²²²

Thus we have good reason to believe that Kierkegaard’s critique of “historicized” Christianity played just as important a role in Barth’s own critique as did Overbeck’s. Moreover, given the extensive nature of the borrowing that seems to have occurred, it is most dismissive of current scholarship to assume that Barth somehow missed the thrust of Kierkegaard’s authorship, which was to define true Christianity over against its counterfeit state in Denmark. As we have shown, obsession with historical evidence was endemic to the Christianity of Kierkegaard’s day, which was only beginning to come to terms with Strauss’ *Das Leben Jesu* (1835-36). Accordingly, the reduction of Christianity to objective, historical facts played no small role in the counterfeit Christianity that was practiced. Barth too was faced with the same situation, and therefore found a welcome ally in Kierkegaard for accomplishing his own prophetic task.

Another important implication of the infinite qualitative distinction is Barth’s development and use of the Adam and Christ dialectic. Barth’s discussion of this particular dialectic is central to the message of Romans II in that it presents a clear break with the neo-Kantian concept of man and neo-Kantian ethics. It is to this dialectic that we now turn. Here, too, we shall see Kierkegaard’s decisive influence.

3. The Dialectic of Christ and Adam

According to Barth, Adam as the “old man,” the “old subject,” represents the sinful state of mankind. As such, humanity is under the wrath and judgment of God.

²²² Ibid., 438-39.

This then is our past – Adam and all of us, Adam in his relationship to us, we in our relationship to Adam. This is the history of man and of humanity outside Christ: the sin and death of a single man, of Adam, the man who in his own person is and represents the whole of humanity, the man in whose decision and destiny the decisions and destinies, the sins and the death of all the other men who come after him, are anticipated.²²³

Over against the old man stands the new man, represented by Christ, “the ‘new’ subject, the Ego of the coming world.”²²⁴ As cut off from God’s world, the old man is under the *Krisis* of God. As fallen, his efforts are useless. Thus he is left to himself without any means whereby he may know God or gain His favor. Even religion, which seeks to make manifest the realm of God within human history, is rendered utterly sinful, according to Barth.

If sin conditions all human action, as Barth believed, the only truly good action belongs to God alone. When man comes to grips with his inability to act ethically, he performs a “secondary act of human ethics” which has its origin in God and not in himself. This reconstituting of man whereby he can, for the first time, act ethically is grounded in the aforementioned act of repentance. The grace of God is the precondition for repentance by which we come to understand that our ethics, established religions, and conceptions, are utterly useless in attaining God’s favor. Thus, when men of this world and time come to understand their situation, “there breaks out a sickness unto death.”²²⁵ Against the claims of McCormack and others, it seems highly problematic to maintain that Barth was not familiar with Kierkegaard’s work, *The Sickness unto Death*. Barth’s use of this terminology affords evidence that he was indeed familiar with this particular work, or at least with Kierkegaard’s use of the term to describe man’s fallen condition.

²²³ Karl Barth, *Christ and Adam*, 29.

²²⁴ Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 181.

²²⁵ *Ibid.* 244.

However, whenever man has understood his condition to be such, he can be sure that this awareness was given by God's grace. Barth's whole deconstruction of human ethics has but one purpose: to show forth God as the originator and possibility of truly ethical action. This is, of course, contrary to the whole of neo-Kantian ethics and epistemology.

Neo-Kantianism, it will be recalled, regards ethics as a human endeavor that has its origin in logic. God is the supreme idea that grounds all ethical possibilities, and man is fully capable of bringing them to fruition. Where Barth maintains that man is innately sinful, Cohen contends that man has a natural disposition to goodness. According to Cohen, the very fact that man is aware of his own sinfulness is evidence of his intrinsic goodness.²²⁶ Not that sin was ever a reality which concerned neo-Kantianism. As one will recall, for Cohen, sin was nothing more than a logical contaminant to be overcome by thought. One can only wonder how the neo-Kantians could persist in such a view given the radical evil brought to light by World War I. Nonetheless, this much is clear: What Barth has to say in Romans II stands in total contrast to the neo-Kantian conception of man and ethics.

While there is demonstrably nothing neo-Kantian in Barth's understanding of ethics, Barth does however use Kant's epistemological dualism to reinforce his separation of man's ethical endeavors from true ethics, which reside in God. Barth says, "Pure ethics require – and here we are in complete agreement with Kant – that there should be no mixing of heaven and earth in the sphere of morals."²²⁷ This appeal to Kant is not meant as an endorsement of Kant's view that man has within himself the possibility of ethical

²²⁶ Andrea Poma, *The Critical Philosophy of Hermann Cohen*, trans. John Denton (New York: State University Press, 1996), 218.

²²⁷ Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, trans. by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 432.

behavior. Rather, it is meant to reinforce the distinction between God and man, and to rebuke the presumption that man is able to lay hold of what belongs to God, and can only be given by God, viz., ethics. Much of Barth's borrowing from Kant and Plato in Romans II is partial, with Barth appropriating only those elements that he found useful. Any moral triumphalism, such as one finds in Ritschl, the neo-Kantians, or Kant himself, is utterly foreign to Barth. Neither is Christ the ideal moral archetype given as a purely human possibility. Remember, any attempt to divinize the ethical task of man was for neo-Kantianism sheer superstition and as such must be done away with. Man need not look beyond himself for what he already possesses.

Clearly, Barth's view of man and his relation to ethics in no way coincides with the neo-Kantian conception. Instead, Barth views such matters from the standpoint of Kierkegaard's infinite qualitative distinction between God and man, between time and eternity. Man's condition "without God in the world" testifies to a breach that no amount of ethical striving, no quality of religion, no employment of rational faculties, can remedy. Barth had no intention of entertaining the neo-Kantian conception of religion as the *Kulturbewußtsein* that arises from the natural employment of the human spirit.²²⁸ While it is certain that McCormack would agree with much of what has been said, it is equally true that he is nevertheless convinced of the primacy of neo-Kantian influence on Romans II. The central argument he uses to establish this is Barth's use of the neo-Kantian concept of *Ursprung*. McCormack believes it was not only Barth's direct encounter with neo-Kantianism that was significant for his theological development in Romans II, but his brother Heinrich's mediating influence. Given what has been said

²²⁸ Simon Fisher, *Revelatory Positivism? Barth's Earliest Theology and the Marburg School* (Oxford University Press, 1988), 252.

thus far concerning the relationship between Barth's theology and neo-Kantian epistemology, it is hard to imagine that any substantial correlation between the two could be established. Nonetheless, we shall examine more thoroughly the role played by the *Ursprung* in Romans II.

Knowledge of God

1. Idea or Reality: Barth and the Neo-Kantian Conception of *Ursprung*

As we discussed in the introduction to this thesis, Bruce McCormack argued that current Barth scholarship has recently reevaluated Kierkegaard's role in Romans II and concluded that Kierkegaard's influence is not as great as once thought. Rather, as McCormack states:

Søren Kierkegaard's role was limited to strengthening Barth's commitment to certain modes of thought whose real origin lay in the influence of the distinctive form of neo-Kantianism elaborated by Barth's philosopher brother Heinrich.²²⁹

The neo-Kantian epistemology of Heinrich Barth can be understood as faithfully trying to adhere to the neo-Kantian concept of *Ursprung*. It will be recalled that neo-Kantianism attributed the generation of reality to thought, which establishes the rational structures that lie at its basis. Thus, "human cognition was not understood to represent external reality; rather, reality is itself the product of the knowing process."²³⁰ Heinrich Barth employed this concept to stress the non-givenness of reality which establishes knowledge.²³¹ It is true, as McCormack points out, that Barth adhered to the neo-Kantian tenet that human knowing generates its contents resulting from "laws inherent in the

²²⁹ Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 217.

²³⁰ *Ibid.* 218.

²³¹ *Ibid.* 220.

categories of human understanding.”²³² Furthermore, he accepted neo-Kantianism’s view that the knowledge of God lies outside the realm of ordinary human cognition. However, on the basis of these points of convergence should we then assume that Barth was a proponent of the whole of neo-Kantian epistemology? Obviously not.

From our earlier discussion of neo-Kantianism, it became clear that it viewed God an ethical incentive that has its own *Ursprung* in the generative powers of thought. For Barth, the situation is precisely the reverse: it is not thought which originates God, but God who is the “eternal pure Origin [Ger. *Ursprung*] of all things.”²³³ For neo-Kantianism, thought was responsible for the origin of all reality, even the existence of God (although it can be hardly said that God actually exists, since he is a product of thought). It is reason which is prior to all else, creating all things to be known. Thus, according to neo-Kantianism, it can be said that man is the creator of God. Is this the message of Barth’s Romans II? Though clearly it is not, McCormack believes that Romans II affords evidence of Barth’s commitment to the concept of *Ursprung*. He finds support for this in Barth’s denial that God is a “*Ding an sich*” or just another metaphysical essence. He is rather the eternal, pure origin of everything that is.²³⁴ If, by McCormack’s own admission, Barth’s God is not the product of human thought, but is rather the origin of all things, even thought itself, in what sense then does Barth faithfully present the neo-Kantian conception of *Ursprung*? Barth seems to be merely borrowing the term, but then redefining it to identify God, not thought, as the origin of reality. Only thus can one make sense of Barth’s repeated declamations against the pretensions of

²³² Ibid. 222.

²³³ Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 78.

²³⁴ Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 224.

human reason thinking that it can know God. If Barth were truly to uphold the neo-Kantian definition of *Ursprung*, then Romans II would not make much sense.

Offering more proof for the primacy of neo-Kantian influence in Romans II, McCormack cites a letter Barth wrote to Thurneysen. In it Barth says, “Heinrich’s lecture has become for me an impetus to keep much more powerfully in view the *totaliter aliter* of the Kingdom of God.”²³⁵ Given what has been said about Barth’s earlier thought, the neo-Kantian conception of *Ursprung* cannot possibly be meant here. Actually, since Barth seems to be suggesting that Heinrich’s lecture provided him with further clarity as to the necessity of separating the kingdom of God from anything pertaining to this world, it follows that not even Heinrich’s understanding adhered to the neo-Kantian position. Furthermore, the point Barth seems to be making is that Heinrich only provided him with a further incentive to hold to that which he already accepted.

Against Barth’s own declaration that it was Kierkegaard who provided him with his “system” in Romans II, McCormack says: “But when it is kept in mind precisely who this philosopher was who spoke of the *Ursprung* as the crisis of human knowing, then we will be warned against concluding too much from this passage.”²³⁶ However, McCormack seems to involve himself in a contradiction inasmuch as “crisis of human knowing” would seem to include *neo-Kantian* knowledge. Things become still more confusing when McCormack says: “The God of Romans II may well perform all of the critical functions of Heinrich Barth’s *Ursprung*, but the *Ursprung* is not God. It was the

²³⁵ Ibid. 223.

²³⁶ Ibid. 224.

negative, critical potential which Karl was happy to exploit in this philosophical category.”²³⁷

Here McCormack confesses that Heinrich’s neo-Kantian conception of *Ursprung* as thought is different from Barth’s own understanding of it as God. This difference is indeed crucial. Therefore all that can be said of Barth’s adherence to neo-Kantianism is, first, that human knowing is governed by transcendent laws. But these laws are not found in thought but in God who is the origin of all things visible and invisible. Second, Barth’s use of the neo-Kantian concept of *Ursprung* is limited to the term itself which is redefined so as to put God in the place of man.

Barth further diverges from the neo-Kantian use of *Ursprung* when he identifies a kind of knowledge that exists outside the creativity of the human consciousness – viz., the knowledge whereby God makes Himself intuitable to the knowing subject. Such thought that transcends human thought has no place in neo-Kantianism. Hence, the question as to why it should be considered the primary influence on Romans II is indeed bewildering. Nonetheless, referencing Beintker, McCormack says: “The conceptual building blocks needed to produce the characteristic shape of dialectic in Romans II were already in place before the encounter with Kierkegaard”²³⁸ through Heinrich’s *Ursprungsphilosophie*. Are we to believe that *it* is to be credited with Barth’s formation of dialectical theology, which tears asunder any coexistence between God and man?

As we saw earlier, it was Kierkegaard’s concept of the “infinite qualitative distinction” that seems to be directly responsible for Barth’s development of dialectical theology. Because Barth states that his “system” amounts to neither more nor less than

²³⁷ Ibid. 225.

²³⁸ Ibid., 237.

this one distinction, it is clear that he only borrows the term, *Ursprung*, and then freely redefines it in light of his knowledge of Kierkegaard, Luther and others. We simply cannot credit primacy to this *one* neo-Kantian concept in the face of the weight Barth lays on the absolutely foundational concept of the qualitative difference between God and man, as well as the other, numerous Kierkegaardian concepts that Barth employs.

The question arises, then, as to where and how does God communicate to man, given the impossibility of initiating any direct form of communion? Barth's answer is both simple and yet, once again, problematic for the natural capacity of man. It is in the person of Jesus Christ that God has revealed Himself, while at the same time hiding Himself in the guise of human flesh. In Barth's discussion of the revelation of God in Christ we encounter yet again the infinite, qualitative distinction between God and man, and its overcoming by means of the Absolute Paradox and faith.

2. Paradox: The Dialectic of Veiling and Unveiling

Throughout Romans II Kierkegaard's name and thought are consistently used to describe how God's revelation in Christ relates to the human subject. Barth follows Kierkegaard in identifying the "absolute unlikeness" that obtains between God and man as sin. Furthermore, it is because of man's sinful condition that he is unable to penetrate the incognito that God assumes in Christ. Quoting Kierkegaard, Barth says that Jesus "can be comprehended only as Paradox."²³⁹ The paradox is that despite – and yet, precisely because of – God's self-revelation in Christ, He remains in concealment.

²³⁹ Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Roman*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 29.

It is evident that the Kierkegaardian concept of “paradox” is used to convey the fact that God cannot be known directly, whether by human reason or historical/scientific investigation. God’s revelation is for Barth, indeed, knowledge. However, it is knowledge which is communicated indirectly. Thus for both Barth and Kierkegaard the paradox is “that the Son of God became man”²⁴⁰ and entered human history. If fallen man had difficulty enough relating to the unknown, transcendent God (Luther’s *Deus nudus*) who reveals Himself in creation, how much greater is his difficulty when he encounters God clothed in human flesh. This form of self-revelation is a scandal to reason since it contradicts its preconceived idea as to the nature of God. When reason reflects on God, it thinks of an omnipotent ruler clothed in honor and majesty. That this majestic God of creation should reveal himself in the form of a lowly servant is utterly preposterous:

He was a lowly human being, a lowly man who did not set himself off from the human throng either by soft raiment or by any other earthly advantage and was not distinguishable to other human beings, not even to the countless legions of angels he left behind when he humbled himself.²⁴¹

Fallen reason beholds this lowly servant and is offended that he claims to be God. It is simply unable to grasp this form of revelation, for it would never occur to it that God in all his majesty should reveal himself thus. In Christ there is “nothing to be seen except a lowly human being who by signs and wonders and by claiming to be God continually constituted the possibility of offense.”²⁴² The possibility of offense is the unavoidable result of God’s self-manifestation in so paradoxical a fashion. It should be noted that the

²⁴⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, 7 vols., ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Assisted by Gregor Malantschuk (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), vol.4:412.

²⁴¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985), 56.

²⁴² Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1991), 65.

offense cannot be ameliorated by appeal to historical evidence, even though the incarnation is itself an historical event.

For Kierkegaard, Christ is “God incognito,” God revealed by an act of indirect communication. Faith, not reason, is man’s means of relating to God’s self-revelation in Christ, for “to deny direct communication is to require faith.”²⁴³ With Kierkegaard, Barth believes that only faith can penetrate what is directly visible, the lowly servant form, and behold God veiled in human flesh. The “Absolute Paradox” requires faith, and faith is intensified by, and thrives upon, the Absolute Paradox. Thus, Barth indeed echoes both Kierkegaard as well as Luther in affirming that:

In Jesus revelation is a paradox, however objective and universal it may be. That the promises of the faithfulness of God have been fulfilled in Jesus the Christ is not, and never will be, a self-evident truth, since in Him it appears in its final hiddenness and its most profound secrecy.²⁴⁴

Like Kierkegaard, Barth held that paradoxical revelation of God in Christ is necessary if Christendom is to be shown the inadequacy of human methods for knowing God, or for satisfying His righteous demands. But in fact this is what the theological and philosophical schools in Kierkegaard’s and Barth’s day tried to do. Should historical and scientific investigation insist on proceeding in this manner, Barth believed that Christianity would lose its very essence which is its “*otherness*.” “Remove from the Christian religion, as Christendom has done, its ability to shock, and Christianity, by becoming a direct communication, is altogether destroyed,” wrote Barth.²⁴⁵ Kierkegaard could not have said this better, himself.

²⁴³ Ibid., 141.

²⁴⁴ Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 98.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 99.

According to Kierkegaard, Christianity exists not for the masses, but for the individual. Just as importantly, Christianity is for the individual who does not waste away in philosophical speculation, hoping and waiting for the culmination of truth. No, Christianity is the result of decision which speculation and deliberation defer in their search for absolute certainty. “Mass Christianity” and “Objective Christianity” are the very antithesis of true Christianity.

Christianity is the examination of existence which asks whether you will be a disciple or at least be in a true relation to it. This is begun afresh with each generation – all that about the history of Christianity is nonsense and trickery. First, it is nonsense to change the question about relating yourself absolutely to the absolute into a matter of striving from generation to generation in a continual approximation.²⁴⁶

The situation in Kierkegaard’s day was that “Hegelian philosophy had sought to replace the Christian virtue of faith with the philosophical ideal of objective knowledge.”²⁴⁷

Faith was no longer a matter of simple faith and decision, but of world-historical knowledge and the results of the biblical scholarship. Therefore, Kierkegaard sought to reform the current state of the church, bringing it back to the biblical perspective, not the philosophical. It was to this end, “to make clear what is involved in being a Christian, to present the picture of a Christian in all its ideal, that is, true form,”²⁴⁸ that Kierkegaard devotes his entire authorship.

Given the similarities of Kierkegaard’s day to Barth’s, it was appropriate, indeed providential, that Barth found in Kierkegaard the very ammunition he needed for the task set before him – viz., directing criticism at an intellectualized Christianity that was not

²⁴⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals: Last Years (1853-1855)*, ed. and trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1965), 33.

²⁴⁷ Steven Emmanuel, *Kierkegaard and the Concept of Revelation* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 95.

²⁴⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Armed Neutrality*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 21.

significantly different from what Kierkegaard himself had encountered, and an acculturated Christianity that was moribund, if not already dead. In short, the whole point for Barth was to once again, like Kierkegaard, make room for the transcendent God who is revealed in Christ, and known only by faith.

3. Faith and Offense

Against the objectifying certainty of Christendom, which reduces the startling revelation of God in Christ to a mere historical fact, or ethics, or some other product of human thought, Barth emphasizes the radical discontinuity of faith and reason. Faith does not result from rational deliberation on the divine origin of the universe or the historical evidence that can be marshaled in favor of the Resurrection. True faith is a gift from God that counters unregenerate reason's offense at God's revelation in Christ.

Faith believes against the understanding. Instead of attempting to explain and render "probable" the paradox, faith exists in tension with reason, and is therefore subject to spiritual trial. It believes that which is absurd, the God-man, and ventures to follow him. Since historical knowledge is at best an approximation, and evidence is unable to "prove" the deity of Jesus, deliberation must be brought to an end, and a leap of faith must take place. Barth affirms Kierkegaard's own understanding of faith when he himself writes:

For all faith is both simple and difficult; for all alike it is a scandal, a hazard, a 'Nevertheless'; to all it presents the same embarrassment and the same promise; for all it is a leap into the void.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁹ Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 99. And again: Faith "is always a leap into the darkness of the unknown" (p. 98)

For Kierkegaard and Barth alike, inwardness, subjectivity, and appropriation are concepts central to what it means to be a Christian. Historical investigation can never afford the sense of certainty that is needed to respond to Christ's command, "Believe and follow me." Indeed, however much the historical evidence may corroborate scripture, this only serves to underscore the fact that God's revelation in Christ *conflicts* with reason and "consequently is the object of faith."²⁵⁰ It cannot disclose the hidden presence of God in Christ. "He is the paradox, the object of faith, exists only for faith."²⁵¹ Therefore, "the possibility of offense is not to be avoided."²⁵²

Summary and Conclusions

Whereas the whole of theology in Barth's time understood "God's revelation to come through an experience of 'God consciousness' characterized as numinous, holy, ultimate concern, an experience reflected in all religions,"²⁵³ Barth's message in Romans II stands as an attack on such theology. Inasmuch as neo-Kantianism, particularly as espoused by liberal theologians such as Herrmann, was nothing more than the then-dominant variant of theological anthropomorphism that had ruled theology at least since the time of the Enlightenment, it seems impossible to allow for the primacy of this school's influence on Barth's Romans II. Thus, against McCormack's thesis, it must be maintained that it was *Kierkegaard* who provided Barth with the resources he needed to combat the consignment of God to the human realms of reason and morality. By calling

²⁵⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1991), 26.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 97.

²⁵³ John Douglas Morrison, *Has God Said? Scripture, the Word of God, and the Crisis of Theological Authority* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2006), 131.

attention to the ill-suitedness of the concept *Ursprung* for the key role that McCormack assigns it, and by demonstrating the absolutely foundational nature of the “infinite qualitative distinction,” we have provided ample support for our thesis that it was Kierkegaard – not Cohen, Natorp, or Heinrich Barth – that gave birth to dialectical theology. Kierkegaard’s inestimable influence is also evident in Barth’s employment of a host of related concepts such as paradox, divine incognito, indirect communication, scandal, possibility of offense, and the conception of faith as a “leap.” Furthermore, we have traced Kierkegaard’s conception of historical research as a never ending approximation process that cannot, in any case, demonstrate the factual nature of the Incarnation, and shown its relevance to Barth’s dismantling of historical criticism’s negation of the supernatural. Seen thus, Barth’s *Romans II* serves as a strong indictment of the inflated attempts of reason to usurp the divine prerogative, and a stern warning that all human endeavors stand under the judgment of the transcendent God. This message is not a neo-Kantian one, but a Kierkegaardian one.

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