

# BARTH'S ETHICS OF RECONCILIATION

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## *Introduction*

In this book, I want to sketch a way of reading Barth's *Church Dogmatics* which takes at face value its claim to be an *ethical* dogmatics. Dogmatics, Barth proposes, 'has the problem of ethics in view from the very first'.<sup>1</sup> He has, however, rarely been taken at his word on the matter. The ethical sections of the *Church Dogmatics* have attracted far less attention than the more obviously dogmatic material; and even those who do give time to studying them frequently go away from the texts dissatisfied. It is as if the logic of Barth's thought, and especially the intensity of his adherence to certain understandings of the ontologically constitutive character of God's action in and as Jesus Christ, make serious consideration of human action superfluous, even, perhaps, a trespass on the sovereignty of grace.

Yet the fact remains that Barth devotes a great deal of space to ethics in the course of the *Church Dogmatics*. Moreover, the arguments which he there develops are no mere incidental excursions in a properly dogmatic treatise; they are intrinsic to the design of the whole. It is arguable that one of the most serious obstacles to the reception of Barth's *magnum opus* is an inadequate grasp of the fact that the *Church Dogmatics* is a work of moral theology as well as a systematics. More closely, Barth's *Dogmatics* is, amongst other things, a moral ontology – an extensive account of the situation in which human agents act. Barth's ethics has, therefore, a very particular character, both materially and

<sup>1</sup> III/4, p. 3.

formally. It is primarily devoted to the task of describing the 'space' which agents occupy, and gives only low priority to the description of their character and to the analysis of quandary situations in which they find themselves. Barth's ethics tends to assume that moral problems are resolvable by correct theological description of moral space. And such description involves much more than describing the moral consciousnesses of agents. A Christianly successful moral ontology must be a depiction of the world of human action as it is enclosed and governed by the creative, redemptive, and sanctifying work of God in Christ, present in the power of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, such an ontology is not centred on the human agent, and especially not on moral reflectivity. Yet Barth pushes *this* kind of focus on moral selfhood out of the way in order to introduce in its place what is to him a more theologically – and humanly – satisfying account of the moral life as genuine action in analogy to prior divine action. Failure to take this point seriously often lies behind critiques of Barth's theology – as driven by near-obsession with noetic issues, for example, or as abstract from, or even hostile to, the world of human history and action. I want to show in some detail how such readings are all too often abortive from the beginning, since they routinely disregard tracts of Barth's argument which he considered an inherent part of his dogmatic work.

In essence, what follows suggests that Barth's *Dogmatics* is best approached by bearing in mind three characteristics of his argument, all of which are inter-dependent, and no single one of which can stand on its own without twisting the design of the whole. The three characteristics are these: (1) The *Church Dogmatics* as a whole is one lengthy exposition of the statement which in a very particular way is 'at once the basis and the content of all the rest', the 'hardest and most comprehensive statement', that 'God is'.<sup>2</sup> One of the ways in which the *Dogmatics* can be construed is as a massively ramified reassertion of the aseity of God: as an intense

<sup>2</sup> II/1, pp. 257–9.

pursuit of the truth that neither in the realm of being nor in the realm of knowledge is God contingent or derivative, but rather axiomatically real, true, and free. God is 'the One who is free from all origination, conditioning or determination from without, by that which is not Himself'.<sup>3</sup>

(2) Because – and only because – it is an exposition of the statement 'God is', the *Church Dogmatics* is also all along the line an anthropology. For the form of God's aseity, the chosen path of the divine being, is specified in the history of Jesus Christ; God's freedom is freedom for fellowship. As God *a se*, 'God can allow this other which is so utterly distinct from Himself to live and move and have its being within Himself. He can grant and leave it its own special being distinct from His own, and yet even in this way, and therefore in this its creaturely freedom, sustain, uphold and govern it by His own divine being, thus being its beginning, centre and end'.<sup>4</sup> And so part of Barth's exploration of the logic of 'God is' is an exploration of how a Christian doctrine of God cannot be simply a doctrine of God. 'We should still not have learned to say "God" correctly (i.e., as understood in the Christian Church on the basis of Holy Scripture) if we thought it enough simply to say "God". However well-grounded or critical our utterance, if it has a logical exclusiveness, if it is only "God", it will not suffice . . . We must not be so exact, so clever, so literal, that our doctrine of God remains only a doctrine of God.'<sup>5</sup> God moves towards humanity by establishing covenant fellowship between himself and his creatures; God is true God 'only in this movement'.<sup>6</sup> Dogmatics thereby acquires a double theme. As Barth put it at the beginning of a lecture in the late 50s:

'Theology,' in the literal sense, means the science and doctrine of God. A very precise definition of the Christian endeavour in this respect would really require the more complex term 'The-anthropology'. For an abstract doctrine of God has no place

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 307.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 314.

<sup>5</sup> II/2, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

in the Christian realm, only a 'doctrine of God and of man', a doctrine of the commerce and communion between God and man.<sup>7</sup>

(3) Because the theme of the *Church Dogmatics* is *this* God in covenant with humanity, the *Dogmatics* is intrinsically an ethical dogmatics, and includes description of the human covenant partner as agent. For 'dogmatics asks concerning the covenant between the true God and true man established in Him from all eternity and fulfilled in Him in time. But true man is characterised by action, by good action, as the true God is also characterised by action, by good action. As dogmatics inquires concerning the action of God and its goodness, it must necessarily make thorough inquiry concerning active man and the goodness of his action. It has the problem of ethics in view from the very first, and it cannot legitimately lose sight of it.'<sup>8</sup>

In so far as it is a 'moral ontology', therefore, Barth's dogmatics can be construed as an extended inquiry into the moral field – into the space within which moral agents act, and into the shape of their action, a shape given above all by the fact that their acts take place in the history of encounter between God as prime agent and themselves as those called to act in correspondence to the grace of God. What Barth has to say about any topic in theology cannot adequately be grasped unless we bear in mind this larger scope of the argument of the *Church Dogmatics* as 'the-anthropology' and therefore as theological ethics. If 'in Jesus Christ the fact is once for all established that God does not exist without man',<sup>9</sup> then the task of Christian dogmatics includes ethics as a description of the human agent in relation to God.

So fundamental are these characteristics of Barth's theology that both his dogmatics and his ethics are seriously misunderstood if they are not kept in mind. Mistakes in interpreting Barth's thought often stem from deficiencies in

<sup>7</sup> K. Barth, 'Evangelical theology in the nineteenth century', in *The Humanity of God* (Collins, 1961), p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> III/4, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> K. Barth, 'The humanity of God', in *The Humanity of God*, p. 50.

attending either to the sequence or to the interrelation of the characteristics we have identified. If we are alert to them, on the other hand, then much hasty critique of Barth's treatment of such topics as trinity, revelation, election, or Holy Spirit can be corrected by close attention to the kinds of arguments which Barth develops in his ethics. Two of many examples are ready to hand.

(1) In *The Making of Modern German Christology* and elsewhere, Alistair McGrath restates a critical interpretation of Barth primarily associated with Gustav Wingren, namely that Barth construes God's relation to humanity in revelational or epistemological terms.<sup>10</sup> In restating the argument, McGrath claims that Barth's theology, despite its protestations to the contrary, is a mirror image of 'the Ritschl-Herrmann-Harnack tradition', in that

Barth . . . totally inverts the cognitive structure of the God-man relation, as expressed by the liberal school, insisting that man must be regarded as an *object* to whom the divine subject addresses his Word. By emphasising man's passivity and God's activity in the process of revelation, Barth believes it is possible to exclude *anthropological* considerations altogether from theology. Just as he believed the theologians of the nineteenth century to have been forced to reduce theology to anthropology by their insistence that man was subject and God object, so Barth believes that theology may maintain an intellectual autonomy if it is God who is treated as subject, and man as object, in the process of revelation . . . Barth thus effectively reduced the 'dialogue' between God and man to a 'monologue'.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, Barth lays heavy emphasis 'upon the making known, or revealing, to man of something which has already happened from all eternity'.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, McGrath argues,

<sup>10</sup> A. E. McGrath, *The Making of Modern German Christology. From the Enlightenment to Pannenberg* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 104-16; 'Karl Barth als Aufklärer? Der Zusammenhang seiner Lehre vom Werke Christi mit der Erählungslehre', *Kerygma und Dogma* 30 (1984), 273-83; 'Karl Barth and the articulus iustificationis. The significance of his critique of Ernst Wolf within the context of his theological method', *Theologische Zeitschrift* 39 (1983), 349-61. See further G. Wingren, *Theology in Conflict. Nygren, Barth, Bultmann* (Edinburgh, 1958), pp. 23-44.

<sup>11</sup> *The Making of Modern German Christology*, pp. 105f.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.



the *Dogmatics* becomes preoccupied with a single epistemological question: How do human beings *know* 'what has happened eternally'?<sup>13</sup> By locating all significant being and action in God's eternity, it appears, Barth has unwittingly made human consciousness into the centre of theological interest:

Although Barth inverts the nineteenth century subject-object relation in respect to God and man, his central interest remains the anthropologically conditioned question concerning man's knowledge of his situation . . . The 'eternalization' (*Äternisierung*) of revelation, necessary for Barth on the basis of his presupposition of the divine freedom and the exclusion of anthropological considerations from theology, inevitably means that the emphasis is actually shifted from that revelation itself to man's recognition and appropriation of that revelation – and hence from God's activity to man's insights and knowledge (or, more accurately, to man's epistemic capacities and incapacities).<sup>14</sup>

Such alarmingly unrestricted and under-illustrated claims about Barth would require a very detailed examination of the *Dogmatics* both for their defence and their rebuttal. In the present context, what is most striking is that the critique proceeds entirely without reference to Barth's consistent emphasis, steadily expounded throughout the *Dogmatics* but especially in its ethical sections, on the *moral* character of the relation of God to humanity. On McGrath's reading, Barth does not present God and humanity as agents in a differentiated fellowship as parties to the covenant of grace: rather, God is sole agent, and humanity the utterly passive recipient of divine disclosure. But – as I shall try to suggest – no view of Barth is adequate which construes his understanding of revelation as simply 'epistemological', in the sense of a deposit of knowledge of essentially a- or pre-temporal states of affairs or divine acts. And to reduce Barth's anthropology – indeed, his whole theology – to a single question: how do human beings know God? is a drastic oversimplification, achieved only by setting aside

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 110–12.

some very substantial tracts of Barth's writing in the *Dogmatics* and elsewhere. At the very least, I hope to show that we do well to take seriously Barth's claim that divine grace is not simply information, but action-eliciting divine activity:

When we see here [in Christ] the will of God being done, when, that is, we see His grace in action, the law is manifested to us. From what God here does for us, we learn what God wants with us and of us. His grace applies to us, affects us. Even in His grace, indeed just there, He shows that, while dealing for and with us, it is for and with us as His creatures . . . His action does not revolve within Himself, but is aimed at *our* action, at getting our action into conformity with His.<sup>15</sup>

(2) More briefly, a second – and much better informed – example is Sheila Greeve Daveney's comparison of Barth and Hartshorne in *Divine Power*.<sup>16</sup> Unlike McGrath, Daveney's handling of Barth's doctrine of God is alert to the fact that, in Barth, God's freedom 'points to the capacity and possibility of relationship which is grounded in God's own self-relatedness',<sup>17</sup> and hence she is aware that in the *Dogmatics* 'God's determining knowledge and will do not cancel worldly self-determination but rather establish it.'<sup>18</sup> Her account goes awry, however, when she concludes despite this that Barth 'never conceives God's relationship with the world as truly social in nature', since, according to Barth, 'God is always cause, creatures effect; God is always active while creatures are ever and only reactive.'<sup>19</sup>

Once again, a reading of the ethical material in the *Church Dogmatics* makes this critique rather problematic. Partly this is because Barth's central categories for talking about the relation of divine and human agency – 'covenant' and 'correspondence' – are most fully explored in those sections which

<sup>15</sup> K. Barth, 'Gospel and law', in *God, Grace and Gospel* (Edinburgh, 1959), pp. 8f.

<sup>16</sup> S. G. Daveney, *Divine Power. A Study of Karl Barth and Charles Hartshorne* (Philadelphia, 1986). Daveney's findings are repeated in A. Case-Winters, *God's Power. Traditional Understandings and Contemporary Challenges* (Louisville, 1990), pp. 97–126.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 230f.

Daveney does not examine. Partly it is because Barth's ethics offers the kinds of specifications of notions such as 'cause', 'effect', and 'action' which show that the critique is off target, because it misconstrues Barth's usage. For careful study of the ethical materials in the *Church Dogmatics* shows that concepts such as 'divine sovereignty' or 'omnipotence' are misunderstood and misapplied if their logic is thought to exclude the responsible life of the creatures of God. Moreover, one of the major reasons for Barth's inclusion of the ethical material in the *Church Dogmatics* is his conviction that the narration of God's mighty deeds cannot proceed without the narration of the corresponding deeds of God's fellow-workers, for grace evokes correspondences.

Critiques such as those of McGrath and Daveney miss the mark to the extent that they fail to take cognisance of the three structuring features of Barth's argument which we outlined above. McGrath simply ignores both the second feature – the principle of 'the-anthropology' – and the third feature – the *ethical* character of the *Church Dogmatics*. As a result, he seriously misunderstands the first feature – the sovereignty of God – by interpreting the statement 'God is' as logically exclusive. Daveney's analysis is more open to recognition of the second feature, but she continues to look for the wrong thing in the area of the third feature. Looking to Barth to provide an account of human agency as self-initiated or contra-causal to God rather than merely 'reactive', she is inevitably disappointed and has to interpret Barth's refusal as a return to an oppressive notion of divine power. Hence she can see no coherence between what he wants to affirm about divine action on the one hand, and what he says of human action on the other. Both critics, therefore, leave Barth feeling that any affirmation about human action and its significance which he might make runs counter to the logic of his fundamental – 'Christomonist' – axioms.

By way of contrast, I want to offer a reading of Barth which seeks to show that what he has to say about the

freedom of divine action is fully coherent with, and inseparable from, what he says of the active life of humanity in correspondence to God. As a test case for such a reading, I take the unfinished ethics of reconciliation with which the fourth locus of the *Church Dogmatics* would have closed.

The material is found in two volumes: the so-called 'baptism fragment' of *Church Dogmatics* IV/4, and the posthumous material translated as *The Christian Life*.<sup>20</sup> These two volumes contain the last parts of the *Church Dogmatics* which Barth taught to his students in Basle. The baptism fragment contains paragraph 75, on 'baptism as the foundation of the Christian life', which stems from lectures in the summer semester of 1960. *The Christian Life* contains the material which immediately precedes and follows the treatment of baptism: paragraph 74, a general introduction to the ethics of reconciliation (lectures from the winter semester, 1959–60), and paragraphs 76–8, an unfinished exposition of the opening invocation and first two petitions of the Lord's Prayer (lectures from the summer semester, 1961). A planned section on the eucharist was never written. Paragraph 74 is a heavily revised version of the lecture texts, produced by Barth in the summer of 1960, in which the notion of 'invocation of God' replaces 'faithfulness' as the leading rubric for the Christian life.<sup>21</sup> Paragraphs 76–8 follow the lecture texts more closely.

Barth had intended to follow his usual custom of revising the lecture texts for publication as a further section of the *Church Dogmatics*. A number of considerations led him to abandon this intention in the case of all the material except paragraph 75. First, he was no longer teaching the material published as the *Dogmatics*. Though he taught in the winter

<sup>20</sup> *Die kirchliche Dogmatik, IV. Die Lehre von der Versöhnung, 4* (Zürich, 1967), translated as CD IV/4; *Das christliche Leben. Die kirchliche Dogmatik IV,4. Fragmente aus dem Nachlass. Vorlesungen 1959–61*, eds. E. Jüngel, and H.-A. Drewes (Zürich, 1976), translated as *The Christian Life. Church Dogmatics IV/4. Lecture Fragments* (Edinburgh, 1981).

<sup>21</sup> For an earlier stage of the manuscript, see *ChrL*, pp. 275–90, and the comments of the editors, p. xi.

semester 1961–2 (due to the failure to appoint his successor), he lectured on that occasion on the material eventually published as *Evangelical Theology*;<sup>22</sup> thereafter, he gave only occasional seminars and colloquia, and with the cessation of regular lecturing, Barth noted, ‘there ended . . . an essential part of the impulse which lay behind my work thus far’.<sup>23</sup> Second, Barth’s ‘faithful assistant’ Charlotte von Kirschbaum, who had become indispensable to Barth in the production of the *Church Dogmatics*, fell permanently ill.<sup>24</sup> Third, Barth himself suffered prolonged bouts of illness during 1962–5, which left him exhausted and often depressed, and rendered serious writing largely impossible. For these reasons, all that Barth was able to prepare for publication before his death in 1968 was paragraph 75, leaving the rest to find their way into print as one of the early volumes of the Swiss *Gesamtausgabe*.

The ethics of reconciliation, then, consists of a single finished section, and a substantial body of material which Barth did not oversee for publication. Certainly the unfinished material should not be overvalued; of the material which he had prepared for the final part of the doctrine of reconciliation, Barth chose to publish only the *Tauffragment* and those texts which he himself oversaw for publication must remain primary in interpreting his work. Nevertheless, as Barth’s last assistant points out, Barth did not destroy the other materials, but preserved them;<sup>25</sup> they remain, therefore, a very significant, if secondary, source for an account of his thought.

Why choose this particular material to exemplify a reading of Barth? Two main reasons can be adduced. First, these closing sections of Barth’s *magnum opus* have yet to receive a full-scale commentary. Though the baptism fragment generated a very considerable literature in the late 1960s and

<sup>22</sup> London, 1963.

<sup>23</sup> iv/4, p. viii.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> E. Busch, ‘Introduction’, in H.-M. Rumscheidt, ed., *Karl Barth in Re-View. Posthumous Works Reviewed and Assessed* (Pittsburgh, 1981), pp. xixf.

early 1970s, most reaction focussed on its radical suggestions in the area of sacramental theology and practice, and very few paid attention to its place within the larger structure of the *Church Dogmatics* and the doctrine of reconciliation, where it is clearly a treatment of Christian *ethics*. In his preface to the baptism fragment, Barth stressed that ‘the positive teaching which I have tried to give in this fragment . . . is for me infinitely more important than this objection to the baptismal practice which is still predominant. Except on this positive basis the objection would make little sense, just as my criticism of the sacramentalist theory of baptism is intelligible only on the same positive basis’.<sup>26</sup> And he went on:

I foresee that this book, which by human judgment will be my last major publication, will leave me in the theological and ecclesiastical isolation which has been my lot for almost fifty years. I am thus about to make a poor exit with it. So be it!<sup>27</sup>

His hunch proved largely correct, with respect not only to the baptism fragment, but also to the other material on the Christian life, which has gone largely unnoticed and has had negligible impact on interpretations of Barth’s thought. A full-scale assessment of the texts is thus long overdue.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> iv/4, p. xi.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. xii.

<sup>28</sup> Three recent works devote some space to the ethics of reconciliation, though none offers a full-length interpretation. J. Macken, *The Autonomy Theme in the ‘Church Dogmatics’: Karl Barth and His Critics* (Cambridge, 1990) contains a critique of Barth’s handling of human agency in the baptism fragment as part of a larger account of the critique of Barth stemming from Rendtorff’s work. P. D. Matheny’s study *Dogmatics and Ethics. The Theological Realism and Ethics of Karl Barth’s ‘Church Dogmatics’* (Frankfurt/M, 1990) offers some very astute characterisations of the ontological dimensions of Barth’s moral theology, though from a broader perspective. N. Biggar’s recent and excellent study *The Hastening that Waits. Karl Barth’s Ethics* (Oxford, 1993) devotes some space to the ethics of reconciliation (pp. 62–81), though it treats the baptism fragment only in passing and, like Matheny, takes a more synoptic view of the issues than the present study.

On iv/4, perhaps the best starting point is E. Jüngel, ‘Karl Barths Lehre von der Taufe’ and ‘Thesen zu Karl Barths Lehre von der Taufe’, in his *Barth-Studien* (Gütersloh, 1982), pp. 246–94; Jüngel is particularly alert to the larger context of iv/4. A selection of some of the better studies (most of which nevertheless focus on the controversial questions of baptismal candidacy) would include R. Schlüter.

Second, these texts from Barth's unfinished ethics of reconciliation are an extraordinarily instructive source for the reading of Barth which I am seeking to commend. More, perhaps, than any other part of the *Church Dogmatics*, they demonstrate how questions concerning human action were by no means peripheral to Barth's dogmatic thought, but very close to its heart. Moreover, they contain Barth's most fully developed ideas on questions in which human agency is at the forefront – questions of the voluntary nature of our allegiance to, and confession of, Christ, questions of the

*Karl Barths Tauflehre* (Paderborn, 1973), especially pp. 56–107; the essays in F. Viering, *Zu Karl Barths Lehre von der Taufe* (Gütersloh, 1971); and, among others, the following: K. Aland, *Taufe und Kindertaufe* (Gütersloh, 1971); A. C. Cochrane, review of iv/4, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 5 (1968) 745–57; and 'Markus Barth – an unBarthian Barthian. The place of the doctrine of baptism in the CD', in D. Y. Hadidian, ed., *Intergerini Parietis Septum* (Pittsburgh, 1981), pp. 39–50; A. Demura, 'Zwingli in the writings of Karl Barth – with special emphasis on the doctrine of the sacraments', in E. A. McKee, and B. G. Armstrong, eds., *Probing the Reformed Tradition* (Louisville, 1989), pp. 197–219; H. Hartwell, review of iv/4, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 22 (1969), 10–29; H. Hübert, *Der Streit um die Kindertaufe* (Frankfurt/M, 1972); H. Mottu, 'Les sacrements selon Karl Barth et Eberhard Jüngel', *Foi et Vie* 88 (1989), 33–55; A. Quadt, 'Die Taufe als Antwort des Glaubens' *Theologische Revue* 6 (1968), 468–74; T. Rendtorff, 'Der ethische Sinn der Dogmatik', in *Die Realisierung der Freiheit* (Gütersloh, 1975), pp. 119–34; E. Schlink, *Die Lehre von der Taufe* (Kassel, 1969); H. Stirnimann, 'Karl Barths Tauffragment', *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 15 (1968), 3–28; T. F. Torrance, 'The one baptism common to Christ and his church', in *Theology in Reconciliation* (London, 1975), pp. 82–105; R. Weth, 'Taufe in den Tod Jesu Christi als Anfang eines Neuen Lebens', in H. Deuser et al., eds., *Gottes Zukunft – Zukunft der Welt. Festschrift für Jürgen Moltmann zum 60. Geburtstag* (Munich, 1986), pp. 147–58. G. Wainwright, 'Développements baptismaux depuis 1967', *Etudes Théologiques et Religieuses* 49 (1974), 67–93, gives a useful survey of the wider territory.

On *ChrL*, once again Jüngel gives a very good introduction in 'Invocation of God as the ethical ground of Christian action', in *Theological Essays* (Edinburgh, 1989), pp. 154–72. Further studies of the posthumous material include K. Blaser, 'L'Éthique en tant qu' "Invocation de Dieu". A propos des derniers cours de Karl Barth', in *Karl Barth 1886–1968. Combats – Idées – Reprises* (Bern, 1987), pp. 171–81; J.-L. Blondel, 'Prayer and struggle: Karl Barth's *The Christian Life*', *St. Luke's Journal of Theology* 23 (1980), 105–15; C. C. Dickinson, 'Church Dogmatics iv/4', in H.-M. Rumscheidt, ed., *Karl Barth in Re-View* (Pittsburgh, 1981), pp. 43–54; T. Vogel, ' "Unterweisung in der Kunst des richtigen Fragens nach Gottes Willen und des offenen Hörens auf sein Gebot": Ansatz der Ethik und des ethischen Argumentation bei Karl Barth', in H. Köckert and W. Krötke, eds., *Theologie als Christologie* (Berlin, 1988), 121–35; J. B. Webster, 'The Christian in revolt: some reflections on *The Christian Life*', in N. Biggar, ed., *Reckoning with Barth* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 119–44.

nature of human moral maturity, questions of rebellion and resistance. A close reading of these texts will give the attentive reader a quite different version of Barth from that promoted by some interpreters, a reading in which the description of humanity's deeds as God's covenant partner is neither a concession to, nor a compromise of, Barth's point, but the outworking of some of his most deeply held theological convictions.

For these reasons, then, Barth's ethics of reconciliation offer a good entrée into a neglected feature of his work. However, they cannot be isolated from the whole argument of the *Church Dogmatics*, since the *Dogmatics* is, for all its detours, reconsiderations, and occasional retractions, a massively consistent argument, each part of which builds upon and helps interpret the other parts. Accordingly, the first two chapters of this book set the context of Barth's late ethical writings by tracing the theme of human agency as it emerges in the earlier parts of the argument of the *Dogmatics*, where Barth considers revelation, trinity, election, creation, and Christology, among other topics. These two chapters show extensively what is then shown intensively by reference to the final sections of the *Church Dogmatics* – namely, that Barth can make good his claim to have kept a firm eye on human persons as agents right from the beginning of his dogmatic argument.<sup>29</sup>

This book is, however, more than an exposition and interpretation of Barth. It also tries to identify some of the resources which his work offers for constructing a Christian theological account of human agency. Forty years ago, Donald MacKinnon remarked that 'it is simply not the

<sup>29</sup> Macken's proposal that what is found in the ethics of reconciliation is a late shift in Barth's development which emerges 'out of decades of struggle in which the affirmation of human and creaturely reality gradually won ground without contradicting the absolute claim of the divine subject' (*The Autonomy Theme*, p. 85) is not quite correct. Matheny (*Dogmatics and Ethics*, p. 5) is more on target when he suggests that '[v]ery early on in his career, Barth was convinced that a proper construal of the scriptural understanding of divine-human relationality could be used as a parable or model to provide a criterion and a point of reference that would set limits and furnish guidelines for human ethical agency'.



case that our theological understanding of human action is adequate to the perplexities of the present',<sup>30</sup> and his remark still holds true today. One – perhaps *the* most – persistent problem for Christian moral theology in modernity is that of developing an account of human persons as agents, active historical subjects rather than simply patients or recipients of the actions of others or Another. How can we talk of human action in such a way that we affirm both the reality of divine grace and the reality of action as a human moral project? Is it possible to affirm that human persons are subjects and agents in their own histories, and also to affirm that their subjectivity and agency are ultimately what they are by the gift of God? What range of languages about divine grace and human action do we need to attend to and develop in order to retain a sense of divine prevenience and yet of the substance of the human realm? And in what ways can our language beguile us into implicitly or explicitly undermining either the reality of our acts or the reality of their ultimate source in God? Elsewhere, MacKinnon phrased the issue thus:

A man's freedom is inalienable and imprescriptible; and we have to ask what becomes of his action if he takes the law of that action from outside himself to the extent not only of acknowledging that he receives *ab extra* its principle, but that he must regard its very accomplishment as something which he has received. True, he may point, as Paul does, to the range of his endurance; but is it his own? Is it tolerable for a serious morality to speak of 'our sufficiency as being of God'?<sup>31</sup>

MacKinnon's way of putting the question echoes a set of convictions about human subjectivity and liberty whose widespread acceptance and virtually axiomatic authority for Western understandings of morality are amongst the chief cultural fruits of the modern era from the seventeenth century onwards. These convictions have, in short, made any language about divine grace extremely difficult to sustain.

<sup>30</sup> D. M. MacKinnon, 'Christian and Marxist dialectic', in MacKinnon ed., *Christian Faith and Communist Faith* (London, 1953), p. 240.

<sup>31</sup> D. M. MacKinnon, *A Study in Ethical Theory* (London, 1957), p. 270.

Language about grace and language about human morality seem to pull in quite contrary directions, for to appeal to divine grace is to appeal for the action of an agent other than ourselves, and so to confess the inadequacy, even the uselessness, of our own moral endeavours. Consider, for example, a few remarks from Kant's *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. He writes thus of the idea of grace:

The concept of a supernatural accession to our moral, though deficient, capacity and even to our not wholly purified and certainly weak disposition to perform our entire duty, is a transcendent concept, it is a bare idea, of whose reality no experience can assure us. Even when accepted as an idea in nothing but a practical context it is very hazardous, and hard to reconcile with reason, since that which is to be accredited to us as morally good conduct must take place not through foreign influence but solely through the best possible use of our own powers.<sup>32</sup>

Kant goes on to say that the idea of grace 'is wholly transcendent', so that it is 'salutary to hold it, as a sacred thing, at a respectful distance, lest, under the illusion of performing miracles ourselves or observing miracles within us, we render ourselves unfit for all use of reason or allow ourselves to fall into the indolence of awaiting from above, in passive leisure, what we should seek within'.<sup>33</sup> Kant's point is that grace is a morally subversive concept; reliance upon an external agency easily corrodes morality by transferring to another those tasks which it is our duty to perform. 'Grace dreamed of in slothful trust'<sup>34</sup> removes us from the real world of responsible action into a world of happy dependence upon 'foreign influence' where it matters little what we do.<sup>35</sup>

Does Barth offer us any help here? Most would answer in the negative, finding in him a restatement of the problem

<sup>32</sup> I. Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (New York, 1960), p. 179.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>35</sup> That Kant nevertheless retains a (minimal and not fully coherent) notion of divine grace, generated chiefly under pressure from his notion of radical evil, is shown by G. E. Michalson, 'Moral regeneration and divine aid in Kant', *Religious Studies* 25 (1989), 259-70.

rather than an attempt at its solution. It appears as if the logic both of Barth's doctrine of God and of his anthropology not only prevent him from making any substantial affirmations about human action, but also segregate the internally coherent world of his theology from the public realities of human history and action:

The later work of Barth, notably that of the *Church Dogmatics*, possesses a pathos . . . strength and power were bought at the price of progressive isolation. This is a tendency chartable not only biographically through Barth's successive rejections of those with whom he came to disagree, but also within the inner logic of a theological system that struggles to regain reality through a strident theological rhetoric of the 'real'.<sup>36</sup>

Or again, this time in connection with Ernst Bloch:

The triumphalist pursuit of hegemony in either Bloch's 'Kingdom' or Barth's 'God' risks an intellectual absurdity most apparent where the systematic and ontological self-consistency of both is most complete. Thus the concluding passages of Bloch's *The Principle of Hope* and the third volume of Barth's *Church Dogmatics* risk *reductio ad absurdum* as on re-encountering contingency after their ontological adventures both writers face the charge that they represent merely the seamless rhetoric of transformation rather than an actual analysis of the possibility of translation of theory into social reality and practice. Their intellectual excursions into the grandiose inner logic of narratives extending, as it were into the future (Bloch) and the past (Barth), risk reduction to banal identity. Both have, in reality, reactivated quasi-idealist strategies that license massive literary self-advertisement but change little in any direct sense.<sup>37</sup>

In response to this most serious challenge to Barth, I want to suggest that his manner of theology remains a compelling option. However, its resourcefulness can only be seen if we are prepared to bear with Barth as he calls into question some of the most cherished and respected principles of modern Christian theology. One such principle is a commit-

<sup>36</sup> R. H. Roberts, 'Barth and the eschatology of Weimar', in *A Theology on Its Way? Essays on Karl Barth* (Edinburgh, 1991), p. 196.

<sup>37</sup> R. H. Roberts, *Hope and Its Hieroglyph. A Critical Decipherment of Ernst Bloch's "Principle of Hope"* (Atlanta, 1990), p. 222.