

A RESPONSE TO RODNEY HOLDER ON BARTH ON NATURAL THEOLOGY¹

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Introduction

During a visit to the United States in 1961 Barth complained to Geoffrey Bromiley that certain of his questioners had superficially ignored his writings' details, because 'they are closed to anything else' than their orthodoxy, and 'they will cling to it at all costs'.² A failure to listen attentively characterises a number of critiques of Barth. No doubt fuel is provided by the fact that Barth's texts are so slippery, often taking away with one hand what he had appeared to present with the other. And, given that six million words are not easily digested, the manifold perspectives are not readily graspable.

Particularly among evangelical theological students the name of Karl Barth is greeted with cries of 'universalist', 'irrationalist', 'denier of biblical inspiration', and so on, as if one's whole work can be tied to the mast of a slogan or two and the terribly difficult task of seriously engaging with that corpus.

Whether Barth was guilty of whatever such slogans might mean, the absurdity of dismissing him lightly is obvious when the depth and complexity of his massive *oeuvre* is considered, and the fact that Barth, whatever his flaws – and he was himself not averse to believing that he had many – is a massively important theological intellect, a colossus of twentieth century theology. In the academic session 2000–1, the website of the Princeton Center for Barth Studies took pride in the fact that Barth, ranking fifth among such notable figures as evangelist Billy Graham, Mother Theresa, and civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr, was the only academic theologian to make the top ten in a recent poll in *Christian History* of the most influential Christians of the last century.³

¹ For the patient illuminating receptions of an earlier paper on similar matters my thanks go to Professors Nicholas Lash, David Ford, John Webster, and Drs. Mike Higon and David Moseley.

² Karl Barth (1 June 1961), *Karl Barth: Letters, 1961–1968*, ed. and trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981), 7f.

³ See www.ptsm.edu/grow/barth/index.htm

It was refreshing to read in Rodney Holder's recent article, while charging Barth with an ultimate 'irrationalism which deprives Christians of an important means of commending the faith in a pluralist society',

*It is ... only with the greatest respect and trepidation that I venture to engage with what Barth says about natural theology.*⁴

Holder argues for and defends a highly popular but, I would maintain, controversial interpretation of Barth's perspective on natural theology, a perspective given its most sophisticated expression by Richard Roberts. Two main problems are most readily perceivable: the approach to questions of rationality; and the lack of adequate distinction between Barth's understanding and critique of *natural theology* and what has occasionally been referred to by theologians as a *theology of nature*.

An Eschatological Rationality of the Divine Subject

In their essays on the so-called 'classical arguments for the existence of God' my first year students are expected to consider questions of rationality, what counts as rationality and how can it be recognised at all. They quickly learn through the accompanying lectures that they cannot merely use the arguments, and the equally 'classical' counter-arguments, without seeing what is going on 'under the surface', so to speak. How the arguments function, and how they are received, depends, of course, on how one understands the notion of what is reasonable. For example, the version of the ontological argument used by René Descartes has its place within a very different style of how we know things, and what is counted as rational, from that of, for example, Richard Swinburne's much more recent rehabilitation of the empirical arguments.

Holder suggests a way of understanding what is reasonable that would appear more in tune with the perspective of the latter's concerns, an empiricism so supposedly successfully foundational to many of the enterprises of the natural sciences.

While I do not have space here for a substantial critique of this strategy, it is at least worth pointing out that some serious reservations have been expressed by key thinkers over the presumptions that this style of empiricism holds dear⁵ – and these do not necessarily commit one to becoming an epistemological relativist, as Holder implies.⁶ The reason for making this point, apart from to

⁴ Rodney Holder, 'Karl Barth and the Legitimacy of Natural Theology', *Themelios* 26.3 (2001), 22–37 (22, 24).

⁵ For further reading, see, for example, John E. Thiel, *Nonfoundationalism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976); William Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1989).

⁶ Holder, 'Karl Barth', 36.

be fair to what is occurring in debates over the nature of rationality, is that Barth, among many things, refused to adhere to this strategy, at least for theology.⁷ He saw it as an attempt by modernity to impose its criteria of knowing (and one, one might add, that works only within a certain specialist field) on theology. However, theological knowing has its own distinctive way of reasoning.

In his mid-1920 lectures at Göttingen, Barth began to express a version of theological rationality that has become particularly famous because of his Anselm-study. Without either defining this exposition from a general conception of 'science', or *a priori* ruling out the possibility of overlap between theological and other types of science (and this is important), Barth intends for theological rationality to take its rise from, and be wholly determined by, the nature of the object that is given to be known.⁸ Since God is not an 'object' in the sense that other objects are, Barth argues that God cannot be known in the same way as other objects, and therefore theological rationality remains relatively independent from these other forms of rationality.⁹

Barth does not, therefore, begin with and expound 'faith', even the content of 'faith', as would 'fideism' and 'subjectivism'.¹⁰ Theology becomes, if it is to be 'scientific' and rational, a faithful and obedient *Nachdenken* (literally, 'after thinking'). In other words, it has to be a thankful, realistic, and *a posteriori* reflection upon and explication of the divine object of faith's speaking, and that, of course for Barth, is in and through Christ.¹¹ This move Barth famously articulates through the Anselmian slogans, *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding) and *credo ut intelligam* (I believe to understand), later arguing, with respect to the former, that this is 'what distinguishes faith from blind assent'.¹² Such a process, for Barth, could never be irrational since it is rather the proper form of rationality.¹³ This is why Roger Trigg's accusation, cited by Holder, misses the mark:

⁷ Barth was not concerned with the more general questions of epistemology.

⁸ See, e.g. Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum. Anselm's Proof of the Existence of God in the Context of his Theological Scheme*, trans. of 2nd ed. 1958 by Ian W. Robertson (London: SCM Press, 1960), 18; CD, I.1, 3–11.

⁹ E.g., CD, I.1, 3, 5, 10f.

¹⁰ The first charge is levelled against Barth by, e.g., Robert Brecher, 'Karl Barth: Wittgensteinian Theologian Manqué', *Heythrop Journal* 24 (1983), 290–300 (299); James Richmond, *Theology and Metaphysics* (London: SCM, 1970), 13; the second by Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology I* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 42ff.

¹¹ Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion*, Volume 1, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 3, 8, 11.

¹² Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Grover Foley (London: Collins, 1963), 44.

¹³ Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G.T. Thomson (London: SCM Press, 1949), 22f.

Barth says we must rely only on revelation, and not on human reason, yet of course his own arguments are a product of human reasoning.¹⁴

Barth is not opposing all theo-anthropological procedures, as Pannenberg, for example, supposes in classifying Barth as the pre-eminent modern exponent of 'the christological procedure "from above to below"'.¹⁵ Later talk of a properly pneumatologically grounded anthropology, has been preceded by Barth's christologically determined anthropology.¹⁶ His objection is to a theology that attempts to stand anywhere but under the hearing of the *Deus dixit* (God's speaking). This, Barth believes, is precisely what Schleiermacher's theology of 'man's religious consciousness', and Cartesianism's *cogito* do (see CD, III.1, 314).¹⁷ Without challenging Feuerbach's materialist and atheistic humanism, Barth holds out Feuerbach's theological non-realism as a diagnosis of the fatal malaise affecting theology on the way of Schleiermacher (e.g. CD, I.2, 290). For example, the nineteenth century Ritschlians, Barth argues, constructed a ramp 'so that one may easily ('casually') climb to the top, that is, to revelation'.¹⁸ Feuerbach, however, indicated that the anthropocentrically conceived god of post-Cartesianism is the idolatrous positing of 'myself as the subject', 'a voice ... from this unredeemed world', a creation of a 'God for himself after his own image', and therefore a failure to hear the divine speech.¹⁹ Barth's 1922 treatment of religion as the expression of the sinful human mind, as a factory of idols, therefore emphatically endures into CD, I.2.

Barth identifies a similar procedure of control operating in the *analogia entis*' premature objectivisation of God, with its postulation of a common being shared by God and creation alike, and the subsequently possible human epistemic movement to the divine 'It'. Such moves fall under Barth's general condemnation of 'natural theology', by which he intends all forms of theology that do not begin exclusively from the known *Ratio* of God.²⁰ Natural theology, in both its epistemically Pelagian (human discovery of God) and Semi-Pelagian (human discovery of God aided by grace) forms, operates as a 'good and useful narthex or first stage on the way to the true

¹⁴ Holder, 'Karl Barth', 36, paraphrasing Roger Trigg, *Rationality and Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 177.

¹⁵ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (London: SCM, 1968), 33.

¹⁶ On the former, see Barth, in Barth, *The Humanity of God*, trans. John Newton Thomas (London: Collins, 1967), 23f.; on the latter, see CD, I.1, 148; IV.1, 135; Robert E. Cushman, *Faith Seeking Understanding: Essays Theological and Critical* (Durham, N. Carolina: Duke University Press, 1981), 118f.

¹⁷ For Barth, the test case is christology, and Christ fits badly into Schleiermacher's theology of the 'composite life'.

¹⁸ *Göttingen Dogmatics*, 61.

¹⁹ *Göttingen Dogmatics*, 48; 92; CD, I.2, 6.

²⁰ See CD, I.1, 36, 219. While Barth does utilise Kant's metaphysics-critique, he theologically rejects an *a priori* philosophical agnosticism as a negative natural theology (see CD, I.2, 29f.; 244f.; II.1, 183).

Christian revelation', gained quite apart from that revelation.²¹ All natural theologies

*begin their journey with their backs turned towards God and, with all brilliance and ingenuity, end at a deity who cannot be the God of Christian grace whom they seek.*²²

Barth creates a faith beyond religion by reversing the orientation of the subject-object schemes of post-Cartesian epistemology, albeit this is not a simple 'reversal' which denies a christological anthropology. Cushman is right to argue that Barth 'cannot fairly be charged with swallowing up man in the sovereignty of God'.²³ Combined with this reversal is a stress on God's freedom, which functions both in a similar manner to Barth's earlier stress on the divine transcendence over all human ethical, political and religious constructs, and, crucially, to identify the movement of grace. Consequently, the Subject for Barth becomes the *divine Subject* who freely and graciously gives himself to be known to the human *object* of revelation, in a movement that necessarily becomes the indexical point of all theological thinking.²⁴ This human knowing is thereby asymmetrically characterised as one in which the human subject does not master the known object, but is rather mastered by the divine Subject (e.g., CD, I.2, 866). Moreover, in an eschatologically significant statement, Barth argues that revelation is not a *datum* (given) but a *dandum* (to be given).²⁵

Given this, Barth proposes christology as the *sole* and regulative location of the objectivity of divine being and speaking. 'God is free for us at this point, and not elsewhere' (CD, I.2, 29). This is 'the narrow isolation' of the revelation-event, for it is in Christ *alone* that God reveals himself.²⁶

Barth, then, did not need to enter into detailed critiques of the classical arguments for the existence of God, showing up the assumptions of their proponents to an unrealistic portrayal of theological rationality. After all, Kant had demonstrated that 'pure

²¹ *Göttingen Dogmatics*, 91; cf. CD, I.1, 385; II.1, 86ff., 231.

²² Buckley and Wilson, 286.

²³ Cushman, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 120. This concern is particularly prominent after CD, I. Rowan Williams' claim, that humanity is utterly passive before and in the event of revelation, is therefore unwarranted in respect of these writings, and even in relation to CD, I.1, 148 ('Barth on the Triune God', in S.W. Sykes (ed.), *Karl Barth: Studies of His Theological Method* (Oxford, 1979), 147-93 (174)). Moreover, Gustaf Wingren's reading of Barth's project as a simple inversion of the liberal scheme, so that God's transcendence banishes his immanence, and God overwhelms humanity, is too simplistic and misleading (*Theology in Conflict: Nygren, Barth, Bultmann*, trans. Eric H. Wahlstrom (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1958), 25)].

²⁴ See *Göttingen Dogmatics*, 87.

²⁵ Barth, *The Holy Ghost and the Christian Life*, trans. R. Birch Hoyle (London: Frederick Muller Ltd., 1938), 16; cf. 23.

²⁶ Barth, 'The First Commandment as an Axiom of Theology', in H. Martin Rumscheidt (ed.), *The Way of Theology in Karl Barth: Essays and Comments* (Allison Park, Pennsylvania: Pickwick Publications, 1986), 63-78 (77).

reasoning' (and in his early period Barth was keen on Kant's 'negative natural theology', but later came to see it as presuming that which could only be known in the event of knowing God) is phenomenally limited. In one famous critique, Paul Tillich, for example, rejects the classical arguments because they deny divine transcendence. To say that 'God exists' is to place God on the same level as creatures. God thereby becomes a 'being' like all other existing 'beings' rather than the 'ground of being'.²⁷ Subsequent thinkers (and Hume before Kant also) have demonstrated not only the ambiguity of the universe, and therefore the varying ways that its story can be told depending on the network of beliefs formative of and available to the storyteller's imagination. John Wisdom's parable of the 'invisible gardener', used to anti-theist effect by Anthony Flew, could be an interesting observation on this. Even Barth recognises this ambiguity when he declares that the means through which God reveals himself

can also not serve it [viz. revelation]; it can even hinder and prevent it. The very thing can fail to happen which, because this form is given, ought to happen. The direct opposite can even happen ... God himself can be rejected in the grace of his condescension to the creature [CD, II.1, 55f.].

Of course, probabilistic claims are made by Richard Swinburne, for example. However, his case is far from assumed to be secure by philosophers of religion. Commenting earlier on a similar model, Alisdair MacIntyre argues that

a fallacious argument points nowhere (except to the lack of logical acumen on the part of those who accept it). And three fallacious arguments are no better than one. What those who make such remarks may be really getting at is the quite different point that the proofs, though fallacious, may embody insights which have nothing to do with the logical value of the proofs.²⁸

Moreover, it can even be a double-edged sword with probabilistic claims being made by anti-theists. Something else is going on in the process of believing in God's existence that – a 'believing that' has its context only within a 'believing in'.

Ludwig Wittgenstein famously remarked that meaning depends on use.

the words you utter or what you think as you utter them are not what matters, so much as the difference they make at various points in your life. How do I know that two people mean the same when each says he believes in God? ... Practice gives the words their sense.²⁹

²⁷ See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 235–38.

²⁸ Alisdair C. MacIntyre, *Difficulties in Christian Belief* (London: SCM Press, 1959), 63, 65.

²⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, eds. G.H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, trans. Peter Winch (Chicago University Press, 1980), 85.

According to Barth, the context for God-talk is very much within the environments of those witnessing to God's Self-giving in Christ. (What that does to the non-Christian religions for Barth I will not speculate. His critique of 'religion' has its place within his critique of God-talk not properly listening or attentive to God's own having spoken/speaking/coming to speak. Hence, he has his sights set primarily on 'Christian' forms of God-talk.)

Holder misses this, as is clear from his discussion of language of 'creation'. In the context of his criticism of Barth's supposed claim that God is Creator is an article of faith,³⁰ there is a problem in his arguing that:

*Arguably it is easier to believe in the reality of the world than in the incarnation!*³¹

However, the confusion here is that to speak of 'reality' in Holder's sense (the *existence* of the world) is not simply, and without further serious qualification, to speak of *creation*. Creaturehood is not something that atheists could legitimately speak of, since for them there can be no Creator. Existence is 'creation' only for the Christian in Christ, in the sense that only in him do we know God as the triune God (CD I), our gracious Elector (CD II), Creator (CD III), Reconciler (CD IV), and Redeemer (the proposed, but never composed, CD V). Hence Wisniewski's attempt to revive 'natural theology' through Barth's theology, when presented as 'knowledge of nature *without* God', should be viewed as being careless.³² There simply cannot be any form of nature *without* God for the Christian. To speak of God as Creator without speaking of him as Saviour and Lord is not to speak of the God of Jesus Christ; to speak of humans as 'creatures' without speaking of them as reconciled and called to mission is not to speak of human beings elected in Christ.³³

Barth's critique of natural theology indicates what happens when our claims to knowing God are not made within the participation in the grace of the trinitarian God. Barth had come to this realisation through his traumas with the *Kriegstheologie* (War-theology) of Germany in 1914. He saw, then, in Feuerbach's anthropocentric turn a warning of reifying our ideas of, and desires for God. 'One cannot speak of God', he claimed in reference to Schleiermacher, 'by speaking of man in a loud voice'.³⁴ In his worry over idolatry, Barth is not alone. After all, Calvin spoke of the human mind as a factory of idols, and his implying the doctrine of total depravity creates problems for any easy association of him with a kind of Thomistic

³⁰ Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 50.

³¹ Holder, 'Karl Barth', 26.

³² Ned Wisniewski, *Our Natural Knowledge of God: A Prospect for Natural Theology After Kant and Barth* (Peter Lang, 1990), 2, my emphasis.

³³ That Barth does not utilise insights from the natural sciences to aid in his description of creation is worth noting, but not because Barth felt that they were unimportant, merely because they could not dictate what Christians mean when they speak of creation.

³⁴ Karl Barth, *Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1928), 196.

(and this is not the Thomism appropriate to Aquinas, according to the likes of Ernst Best, Fergus Kerr, and Nicholas Lash, among others) knowing of God as Creator prior to God's Self-giving. Moreover, immediately after claiming creation's expression of God's 'invisible qualities', Paul, who could say this on the basis of his Hebraic faith in the creative God of Israel, asserts the exchanging of 'the truth of God for a lie', the lie of idolatry, a sinfulness and ignorance of the true God that appears to deepen in intensity to the Pauline mind as the letter continues (Rom. 1:20, 24). Hence, for Barth, the event of the cross, so powerful an image in the second edition of the *Romans* commentary (1922), stands as an iconoclastic exposure of human being as existing in a state of sinful rebellion from God. At Golgotha, Barth declares starkly, 'Man unveils himself here as really and finally guilty ... by killing God' (CD, I.2, 92). Hence, 'it is monstrous to describe the uniqueness of God as an object of "natural knowledge"'.³⁵

Barthian 'Irrationalism'?

Does this entail that Barth is a 'fideist'? He does not begin as such with the human act of faith, as he felt Schleiermacher was prone to do.

The question needs, then, to be reformulated: is Barth an 'irrationalist'? Barth, of course, and here he is far from being alone among theologians, philosophers, and philosophers of science, for example, in denying the appropriateness of empiricist accounts of theological rationality, or accounts of rationality derived from 'alien' disciplines.

Rephrasing the question again, lest it be felt that Barth is being allowed to escape too easily: does Barth make theological rationality incommensurable with accounts of rationality in other disciplines, and therefore prevent any possibility for serious conversation (even if that is not understood as operating according to others' criteria and strategies), argument and engagement with these other disciplines, a denial of theology's 'public' language? It is this that Richard Roberts fears in Barth – that Barth ghettoises theology, isolating it from the 'public' domain and thereby encourages a profound 'totalitarianism', something akin to Bonhoeffer's suspicion of a Barthian 'positivism of revelation'. Roberts admits that Barth's stress on the incarnation could be one way freeing Barth from this bind, since it is claimed to be God's act for the world in space and time. Should Barth be able to do this, he would then, in theory at least, be free to engage in the kind of apologetics (perhaps a negative apologetics since he would not be able to follow an empiricist strategy) that focuses on the historical Jesus. Roberts 'discovers' that Barth is actually incapacitated from doing this because of the nature of the temporality of the incarnation.

³⁵ Inaccurately cited by Jung Young Lee as CD, IV.1, 453 ('Karl Barth's Use of Analogy in his Church Dogmatics', *SJT* 22 (1969), 129–51 (134)).

This is a complex study and critique, and I have attempted to critically engage with it elsewhere.³⁶ Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that Barth does not engage in this type of strategy. One could claim that Barth's work was not as a religious philosopher but as a constructive ecclesial theologian, and therefore to do this would to have been 'preaching to the converted', so to speak. But there is more to it than that.

'As Open to the World as Any Theologian Could Be'³⁷

When Holder announces that

*there is a limited knowledge of God available to us in creation, but ... this knowledge is God-given (it is God revealing himself), just as is our knowledge of God in Christ. To make this clear it might have been helpful ... to replace the term 'natural theology' by 'general revelation', and to call God's revelation of himself in Christ and Scripture 'special revelation'*³⁸

he advertises an important, but common, misreading of Barth's theology of revelation. This is further evident in his claim that Barth denies

*all knowledge of God apart from God's own gracious revelation of himself ... in Christ ... known to us through Scripture.*³⁹

Or again, 'God's self-revelation in Scripture is all that matters'.⁴⁰

The problem, then, seems to lie in Barth's christocentrism, which John Baillie describes as a denial 'that except in his incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth God has ever spoken to man at all', since this alone is revelation.⁴¹ Critics particularly lament the implication that Barth expensively denies creation's place as revelation; and a similar concern underlies some evangelical complaints over Barth's denial of Scripture as revelation.⁴²

Without attempting to expose their own problematic presuppositions, these critics pre-eminently misrepresent Barth as rejecting revelation's mediateness, particularly through Scripture, and preaching (and creation?).

Barth equates revelation with God's *Self-giving* as the 'Word'. Herein, revelation is presented as an event of *personal*, I-Thou, encounter of

³⁶ John C. McDowell, *Hope in Barth's Eschatology: Interrogations and Transformations Beyond Tragedy* (Ashgate, 2000).

³⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. John Drury (New York: Anchor, 1972), 157.

³⁸ Holder, 'Karl Barth', 23.

³⁹ Holder, 'Karl Barth', 24.

⁴⁰ Holder, 'Karl Barth', 34.

⁴¹ John Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God* (Oxford, 1939), 17f.

⁴² On the former, see e.g. Barr, 124. On the latter, see Klaas Runia, *Karl Barth and the Word of God* (RTSF, 1980), 25; Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 'The Authority of Scripture in Karl Barth', in D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (eds.), *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon* (Leicester: IVP, 1986), 275-94 (290f.).

God in Christ with human beings, rather than as, for example, divinely authoritative propositions (e.g., CD, IV.3.1, 183). An uncompromisable distinction between God's *being* as revelation and all creaturely elements is consequently devised.⁴³ Baillie in particular, and Holder too as earlier cited, confuses Barth's primary emphasis here on 'revelation' as the *content* of the encounter (God's *Self* in Christ) with the *means* (Scripture, etc.) by which that revelation becomes present.⁴⁴ To suggest that content and means are identical, therefore, would be tantamount to declaring the latter's divinisation, which can either be a docetic embarrassment of revelation's use of the fragile and contingent, or an attempt to undermine eschatological provisionality in the quest for certainty. Perhaps Barth lacks a doctrine of creation.⁴⁵

However, given Barth's stress on the divine selection of, and self-chosen identification with, the instrument by which he will be revealed – particularly and wholly in that of the incarnation – it is just not true that the event of revelation is external to the means as Rowan Williams believes is the case for Barth (see CD, II.1, 54f.). That is so only to the extent that Barth places the elements in the divine *choice*, so that they have no *intrinsic* value of their own by which to determine the nature of God's eternal choosing (this issue divided Barth from Brunner).

Nevertheless, although distinct from it, the identified sacramental *means* of revelation (Scripture and proclamation) function *indispensably* as what Torrance calls the 'earthen vessels' and 'corporeality' of revelation in order to mediate revelation's contemporary presentness.⁴⁶ They function *appropriately* as divinely chosen sacramental means through which God freely makes himself present. Thereby, Barth refers to the divine presence as a 'contingent contemporaneousness'.⁴⁷ Indeed, Barth even claims that

*The power of Jesus Christ is not operative, however, save through these instruments, these secondary and therefore conditioned means of revelation.*⁴⁸

Accordingly, they are invaluable witnesses to; tokens of; and, to adopt David Kelsey's description of Scripture, 'identity-descriptions' of God in the event of revelation, even though they are not that

⁴³ See, e.g. CD, II.1, 55. On Scripture's *distinction from* revelation, see *Göttingen Dogmatics*, 202, 212, 216; CD, I.1, 127; I.2, 457, 463ff., 506, 513, 744. Barth differentiates 'revelation' even from Christ's humanity, although it takes place through this 'primary token', or medium.

⁴⁴ Similarly, John Macken, *The Autonomy Theme in the Church Dogmatics: Karl Barth and his Critics* (Cambridge, 1990), 171. On this distinction, see Ronald F. Thiemann, 'Response to George Lindbeck', *Theology Today* 43 (1986), 377–82 (378).

⁴⁵ Williams, 192.

⁴⁶ T.F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 105.

⁴⁷ CD, I.1, 164; cf. 192.

⁴⁸ Barth, 'Revelation', in *Revelation*, ed. John Baillie (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1937), 41–81 (64), my emphasis.

revelation themselves.⁴⁹ Moreover, and here is the important point to put to Holder and others, even specifically extra-ecclesial elements can become witnesses, and are perceivable as such in the light of a christological hermeneutic.⁵⁰ On this Marshall correctly argues that Barth's christocentrism does not stipulate about the details of the process of revelation's subjective appropriation, since, as Thiemann indicates, Barth means by the term 'revelation' primarily the *content* of our knowing of God.⁵¹ In a statement not unrelated, Barth himself affirmed,

*No one can say how this is done, not even the most devout and learned theologians of all times have been able to hear the Christmas message.*⁵²

Consequently Barth eclectically comes to make positive, albeit critical, use of extra-ecclesial anthropologies (CD, III.2); Mozart's music (CD, III.3, 297ff.); and various philosophical elements.⁵³ For example, the last's perceivable role in the processes of Barth's theological ruminations and articulations is too complex to be reduced to any single systematic scheme of an opposition of relations. Barth uses philosophy eclectically in the service of theology, while intending to take care not to allow it to undermine or overwhelm the particularity of theology's witness to God in Christ. Thiemann describes this as 'the temporary borrowing of a tool to help us better understand the complex meaning of the Christian Gospel'.⁵⁴ A statement of Barth's renders the flavour of what he intends here. He admits that

The central affirmations of the Bible are not self-evident ... Every possible means must be used ... not the least, the enlistment of every device of the conjectural imagination

in order to interpret it.⁵⁵ In this thematic context he famously declares

God may speak to us through Russian communism, through a flute concerto, through a blossoming shrub or through a dead

⁴⁹ David H. Kelsey *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (London: SCM, 1975), 45. On the biblical writers as 'witnesses', see CD, I.1, 125ff., 169, 301; I.2, 64, 457. The Spirit makes the Scriptures authoritative for us (e.g., CD, I.1, 113), but only because he *had inspired* their authors to witness to Christ (see *Göttingen Dogmatics*, 219; CD, I.2, 505, 514ff.). Scripture is an 'authentic copy of revelation' (CD, I.2, 544) through which God will speak in each present (*Göttingen Dogmatics*, 201, 206; CD, I.2, 457).

⁵⁰ See *Göttingen Dogmatics*, 92; CD, I.1, 176.

⁵¹ Bruce Marshall, *Christology in Conflict: The Identity of a Saviour in Rahner and Barth* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 148f.; Ronald F. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville, Westminster: John Knox Press, 1991), 84.

⁵² Barth, *Christmas*, trans. Bernhard Citron (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1959), 25.

⁵³ Barth, 'The First Commandment in Theology', 63-78.

⁵⁴ Ronald F. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture* (Louisville: Westminster, John Knox Press, 1991), 82.

⁵⁵ See Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 37f.

dog. We shall do well to listen to him if he really does so ... God may speak to us through a pagan or an atheist, and in that way give us to understand that the boundary between the Church and the profane world still and repeatedly takes a course quite different from that which we hitherto thought we saw.⁵⁶

Anderson is mistaken, therefore, when arguing that the later Barth has *changed direction* on the issue of 'natural theology' (although the use of that term is questionable in relation to Barth in any case), albeit it does appear that Barth has *extended* the 'witness' concept to include creation in CD, IV.3.1.⁵⁷

However, God does not identify himself through these with the specificity that he does in the incarnation and Scripture, but remains free in his choice of which extra-ecclesial elements to utilise, albeit a freedom which it becomes clear, as the CD progresses, is not arbitrary or occasionalistic as such.

Conclusion: Barth Contra Brunner

It is worth assessing Holder's perspective on the Barth-Brunner debate in conjunction with that of Trevor Hart's very interesting piece on that controversy.⁵⁸ This article contains a helpful description of the Barth-Brunner debate of the 1930s, and rightly refuses to dismiss Barth's anti-Brunnerianism as purely a product of the times, an extreme reaction to circumstances, as some critics are wont to do (such as James Barr).⁵⁹ Barth, Hart emphasises, first voiced suspicions about Brunner in 1929 and not 1934, although it is also true, it needs to be added to Hart's account, that even prior to 1929 Barth had consistently rejected any notion of Creature-Creator continuity, but had come from 1929 onwards to focus the attack on the *analogia entis* (analogy of being).⁶⁰

However, Hart problematically concludes that Barth's theology necessitates the application of Brunner's 'formal capacity', or rather a *passive* capacity in contrast to an aptitude or predisposition in favour of revelation, in that God reveals to human beings and not

⁵⁶ CD, I.1, 60f.

⁵⁷ Ray S. Anderson, 'Barth and a New Direction for Natural Theology', in John Thompson (ed.), *Theology Beyond Christendom: Essays on the Centenary of the Birth of Karl Barth* (Allison Park, Pennsylvania: Pickwick Publications, 1986), 241-66 (244f.); cf. CD, IV.3.1, 117f., 139.

⁵⁸ Trevor A. Hart, 'A Capacity for Ambiguity? The Barth-Brunner Debate Revisited', *Tyndale Bulletin* 44 (1993), 289-305; reprinted in *Regarding Karl Barth: Essays Toward a Reading of his Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999). My review of this book is forthcoming in *Evangelical Quarterly*.

⁵⁹ See James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology: The Gifford Lectures for 1991 Delivered in the University of Edinburgh* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

⁶⁰ See, for example, Karl Barth, 'Fate and Idea in Theology', in Rumscheidt (ed.), 25-62 (39f.); Stephen Andrews, 'The Ambiguity of Capacity: A Rejoinder to Trevor Hart', *Tyndale Bulletin* 45 (1994), 169-79.

inanimate objects or beasts.⁶¹ Barth nevertheless continues to suspect Brunner of 'smuggling in' some sense of this predisposition. What Brunner in the debate misses, and Hart and Holder are guilty here also, is the underlying issue of election. Even a 'formal capacity' would set the terms of God's action in the world and thereby threaten God's freedom, whereas Barth was more careful than Brunner in affirming that the eventful trinitarian God elects and creates human beings in Christ to respond to his Self-revelation. The 'capacity' or 'point of contact' is, therefore, a christological and eschatological concept, problematic if divorced from this since it can imply a sense of meritotiness.⁶²

Just what is occurring, then, in complaints over Barth's 'irrationalism' is precisely a failure to be sufficiently attentive to the complex nuances of the nature of rationality in Barth's theology. It must be recognised that what he is doing when he rejects 'natural theology' is not denying the created order as a means of God's speaking; or rejecting the necessity of engaging both critically and responsibly with extra-ecclesial thinkers. But in that conversation, in which the church may learn new and surprising ways of reading its own Scriptures, Barth does not advocate either a totalitarian shouting of the gospel, or a forgetting of the Christian grammar. Whether, however, Barth was too hasty in practice to dismiss various 'apologetic' strategies or arguments is another matter. For him, the best apologetics is good dogmatics.

Holder, while not dealing with a wealth of secondary literature on the subject that indicate that this is a manifestly much more complex issue than often imagined,⁶³ is to be thanked for refusing to ignore a very important issue which indicates the magnitude of the task of comprehending and engaging with Barth.

⁶¹ See Holder, 'Karl Barth', 34f.

⁶² See Joan E. Donovan, 'Man in the Image of God: The Disagreement between Barth and Brunner Reconsidered', *SJT* 39 (1986), 433-59 (442, 445).

⁶³ Richard Roberts, *A Theology on its Way? Essays on Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991). Particularly worth noting are Ingolf U. Dalferth, 'Karl Barth's Eschatological Realism', in S.W. Sykes (ed.), *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 14-45; Steven G. Smith, 'Karl Barth and Fideism: A Reconsideration', *Anglican Theological Review* 66 (1984), 64-78; James J. Buckley and William McF. Wilson, 'A Dialogue with Barth and Farrer on Theological Method', *Heythrop Journal* 26 (1985), 274-93; Fergus Kerr, 'Cartesianism According to Karl Barth', *New Blackfriars* 77 (1996), 358-68; Gunton, 1988; Paul Molnar, 'Some Problems with Pannenberg's Solution to Barth's 'Faith Subjectivism'', *SJT* 48 (1995), 315-39.