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Karl Barth's doctrine of creation: church-bells beyond the stars

David Fergusson

Introduction

Abstract: Despite its apparent distance from our contemporary context, Barth's theology can be read as offering a distinctively Christian account of the world as God's good creation, while maintaining its distance from more philosophical and experiential approaches. Barth's iteration of the traditional doctrine reveals significant scriptural, personalist and christological features while insisting upon more than a mere account of origination. Though defending key features of his account, this article also suggests that at times his work displays an ingrained anthropocentrism, a pneumatological deficit and a systematic urge that threatens to constrict the theology of creation.

On reading Karl Barth's doctrine of creation, one is immediately struck by the altered theological context of the early 21st century. For Barth, the *Schöpfungslehre* was never really his first priority although he devoted to it considerable scholarly attention within the sequence of the *Church Dogmatics*. One quickly senses this from the preface. Writing in the immediate post-war context of October 1945, he expresses some dissatisfaction with his work in relation to its treatment of problems and his own preparedness to tackle the subject. Already there is an indication of unfinished business and a prescient sense of later work that others will feel obliged to undertake on the boundary between science and theology. Meanwhile, throughout *CD III/1*, there are repeated warnings against bad starting points, wrong turnings and deceptive tendencies which compromise the central theme of the theologian in the service of the church. In particular, the doctrine of creation has to be articulated in such a way as to avoid any regress to natural theology or philosophy as a source or norm for Christian dogmatics. This is attempted largely through the time-honoured practice of providing a theological commentary upon the opening chapters of the Bible.

Our own context is characterised by a rather different set of problems and a more collaborative mode of engagement. The most pressing of these is a cluster of environmental issues concerning the degradation of the natural world whether through depletion of resources, pollution, climate change and extinction of species. A theology that undergirds a positive appreciation of the natural world as valuable, apart from its human utility, is now required. Related to this is a belated sense that Christian theology has historically had too little to say about the status of non-human creatures. The result of this tendency is that an unconscious bias towards anthropocentrism can frequently be detected in earlier formulations of the doctrine of creation. At the same time, there has been a flurry of apologetic activity across the theological spectrum, much of it concentrated on the idea of divine creation, largely in response to secular attacks on religion, often in the name of science. Much of this seems remote from Barth's anxieties surrounding such theological manoeuvres. With its cultivation of cross-disciplinary conversation and multi-faith dialogue, the more conversational style of contemporary theology is quite different from the

combative approach of Barth. Insisting upon the integrity and distinctiveness of Christian theology, he seems uninterested in the kind of interactions that characterise modern academic theology.

A further cluster of intra-theological challenges besets any contemporary articulation of a traditional doctrine of creation. These are largely driven by the conviction that the God-world relationship was historically cast in dualist terms that tended to drive an ontological wedge between creator and creation. The relationship was hierarchical, detached and dialectical. By contrast, an account that is more immanent and holistic resonates with contemporary sensibilities surrounding the indwelling of God, the spiritual as an aspect of the material, and the world as our home rather than a mere staging post. In this context, the concept of Gaia and the phenomenon of 'deep green religion' have gained much greater traction in contemporary thought and practice. Given the steady rise of those who self-identify as 'spiritual but not religious', this is unlikely to diminish any time soon.¹

Within the wider history of Christian theology, we may now find ourselves in an entirely new position. The doctrine of creation was never the subject of a major doctrinal controversy or confessional division. Features of other controversies may have been related to the theology of creation, e.g. the Arian claim that the Word of God was a creature. But after the rapid acceptance of creation out of nothing in the late second century, there was a consensus amongst theologians concerning the shape and basic features of the doctrine. Varieties of expression can be detected, particularly around the use of emanationist language, but these did not result in serious doctrinal disruption. By contrast, the modern period has featured accounts of the God-world relationship that self-consciously depart in significant ways from this earlier consensus.

Amongst the more philosophical and durable of these revisionist positions has been that of process thought. Its reversion to the idea of creation out of chaos is an attempt to correct the tendency of *the ex nihilo* tradition to posit a sovereign God over against a malleable creation which is entirely of divine origin and constitution. The divine is characterised not so much by its creation of the material universe but by the operation of its creativity. For Whitehead, God has no meaning apart from the exercise of creativity and so requires as a necessary condition a world upon which to act. God 'is the aboriginal instance of creativity'². There are two principal benefits of this shift. In the first place, the problem of evil is refocussed on God's having to deal through a process of allurements with recalcitrant material. The attribution of everything that happens to God's will is clearly avoided. And, as a further gain, the model of creation out of chaos offers an account of divine indwelling that binds creator and creation together. We cannot think of one without the other, as if God might have lived in eternity without a creation. The traditional construction of transcendence is thus abandoned in favour of a panentheism which determines how related notions of divine action and presence are to be understood. Infused with the divine spirit,

¹ See Linda Mercadante, *Belief with Borders: inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

² A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York, Macmillan, 1929), 344.

the natural world has a mysterious potency which shapes the religious and ethical life of self-conscious agents.

Within a burgeoning literature, one can readily detect the ecological resonance of this theological shift. The *ex nihilo* tradition has been linked to patterns of exploitation, domination and colonialism as if the world was an artefact produced for consumption. As a web of intricately related living forms, however, the creation is better described, it is claimed, by a theology that offers more organic models of the God-world relationship. So immanence and indwelling tend to replace more traditional themes of transcendence and otherness, while resources from other faiths are readily deployed.³

In what follows, I shall assess Karl Barth's doctrine of creation with reference to these shifts in context, sensibility and style. Is he guilty as charged – he might cheerfully have accepted that verdict – or are there elements in his theology that speak to contemporary concerns and continue to make a forceful contribution to our conversations?

Creation out of nothing in Barth

On one reading, Barth's doctrine of creation appears to represent a rendition of the classical position. With his commitment to careful exegesis of Genesis 1–2 and his reaffirmation of the ontological distinction between the eternal God and the temporal creation, this impression can find obvious textual support. Apart from some passing references, exploration of the *ex nihilo* tradition is strangely absent from the discussion in *Church Dogmatics* III/1. Yet this is remedied by an excursus in *CD* III/2 in which Barth aligns himself with the key arguments for positing creation out of nothing.⁴ If not explicitly taught in Scripture, it makes sense of the trajectory of much Biblical thought, particularly two key New Testament passages – Romans 4:17 and Hebrews 11:3. Though neither text explicitly refers to the *nihilo* concept, each leans in that direction, according to Barth. The former passage links the sovereignty of God in creation to the promise of descendants to Abraham, while the Hebrews text attests in the context of the history of the covenant that 'what is seen was made from things that are not visible.' Both texts, aligned with much of the Hebraic tradition, assign responsibility for creation to the wisdom of God alone. This excludes other options which compromise or qualify the freedom and love of God. Divine grace, as it is narrated in Scripture, requires us to think in terms that do not permit an eternal matter that can rival God or a divine creation that is an aspect of God, internal to the divine being. For Barth, this is a 'fine and clear if negative witness.'⁵

Presented in this way, *creatio ex nihilo* denies the two other possibilities that we find in classical antiquity, viz. that creation is eternal (Aristotle) or that creation is out of God's being (Plotinus). The *ex nihilo* doctrine is thus primarily a negative article which prevents a slide into an eternal world or a process of divine emanation. As such, it maintains a

³ See for example Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller (eds.), *Ecospirit: Religions and Philosophies for the Earth* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), 152–157.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 155.

distinction between God and the world which is decisive for a fuller understanding of divine grace and the history of the covenant. So far, Barth's argument tracks the defence of the *ex nihilo* doctrine that we find in the early church, particularly in writers such as Theophilus of Antioch, Irenaeus and Tertullian. In three respects, however, his position subtly adapts the traditional teaching in ways that remain instructive.

First, for Barth, the *ex nihilo* concept is of relational significance. In generating a particular conceptual space between God and creatures, it becomes the necessary condition for the form of divine address to human beings. Instead of an expression of sheer divine power, the creation from out of nothing should be understood in the context of the ethical determination of human beings by God. Our creaturely status places us at once in a relationship that is characterised by personal terms such as responsibility, agency, freedom and love. The language of covenant is thus closely interlinked with the creation from out of nothing. Hence a relationality is intended and established by virtue of God's creating from nothing.

Second, although the creation is not divine, it is determined by its dependence upon the Word of God. This results in a characterisation of creation by reference to the identity of the Word. Creation is both *ex nihilo* and *per verbum*. For Barth, this entails a break with those modern philosophies (e.g. Sartre) which stress the accidental and autonomous nature of the human self. We are not created in a void or arbitrarily by divine fiat; it is not given to us to invent ourselves (*Deo gratias*). The *ex nihilo* (from nothing) must here be balanced by a proper stress on the *ex aliquo* (from something); we are determined by God's identity. As the internal basis of the creation, the covenant is already intimated in the story of Genesis 2. From the outset, the Word of God is addressed to human creatures and so determines their existence. The absence of any theological interval between creation and covenant prevents the world from being viewed apart from its relationship to the divine Word. This relationship is not merely one of origination but of continual interaction.

In Barth, the ontological size-gap between God and creatures establishes both a strong differentiation yet also a two-way relationship of dependence, summons and responsibility. As its necessary condition, this difference determines the nature of the bond between Creator and creation. And as a relationship which takes historical form, it requires to be narrated by Scripture. To describe the dealings of God with creatures a discourse of agency, intention, response, freedom and love is deployed. For this reason, the language of the personal, rather than the organic, tends to be preferred. At every turn, this has a capacity to counteract distorted notions of power and control. Responsibility before God checks and dismantles a false autonomy. Proprietorial control of creation is excluded by the divine-human encounter. There is much here that can correct previous distortions of the tradition without abandoning the early church commitment to a creation *ex nihilo*.

To elucidate the shape of the theology of creation at this juncture, it may be worth drawing upon a series of conceptual distinctions mapped by the philosopher John Macmurray. Distinguishing the different categories of the material, the organic and the personal, he argues that these shape matching forms of engagement. For Macmurray, the emergence of personal categories is practically situated. Through interaction with a primary care-giver, the

child learns how to respond, initiate and develop an awareness of intentionality, love, freedom and agency.⁶ This is clearly distinguished from material and inanimate objects which are used instrumentally by the care-giver. The temptation to develop a dualism of material and personal has to be avoided however in order to accommodate the organic world of plants and animals. This requires a further set of actions and forms of perception. Yet the personal remains practically distinct from the organic, principally because animals and plants do not act as our care-givers. Recent commentators have suggested that the boundary between the organic and the personal is more fuzzy than Macmurray appeared to concede.⁷ Some animals behave and relate to us in ways that include personal elements. The relationships we have with our bicycles, gardens and dogs are not devoid of all the elements that characterise interpersonal communion – the personal is embedded in an organic and material world. Nevertheless, the rich vocabulary of the personal is most fully employed with reference to other human beings and our complex interactions with them. In appropriating this language to describe the ways in which God encounters us, Karl Barth's theology expresses the God-world relationship in terms that are characterised by a personal scheme of intentionality, love, freedom and address.⁸ If Macmurray is right that this discourse is rooted in the relationship of affection and care between a mother and her child, then the charge that that this categorical scheme, when analogically applied, engenders a ruthless dominion of Creator over creature starts to diminish.

Nevertheless, Catherine Keller's insistence that Barth's schema posits a God of control leads her to reject the possibility of constructing this in terms of a dialogical personalism. In a striking *tour de force* of deconstruction, she inspects Barth's language of divine transcendence and otherness in his creation theology. Conceding that God is no longer remote but near at hand, she judges this to posit an even deeper threat to the human subject. The problem lurks within an 'intimacy of domination' that lacks reciprocity.

What "difference" does this discourse of dominance guarantee but that "complete subjection" for the subjects of the Lord above? If I may add an analogy "from below", indeed from "down there": it is domination up close, in the name of loving, jealous control, not domination at a distance, that drives women to the shelters.⁹

Without a stronger account of divine embodiment in the created order, this is judged by Keller as the inevitable upshot of the traditional scheme. I shall concede something in due course to this criticism, but for the moment it appears largely to by-pass Barth's Christological determination of the doctrine of God and his account of the Christian life as a free and joyful response in which we perform our own little works of righteousness. The Lord who is our servant is not a temporary theophany or a passing episode of divine self-abasement, but the fullest disclosure of God as one who is with us and for us. Its socio-

⁶ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), 44–85.

⁷ See Esther McIntosh, *John Macmurray's Religious Philosophy: What it Mean to be a Person* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 87–89.

⁸ Noting Barth's use of Buber's I-Thou categories, George Hunsinger explores 'personalism' as a central motif in Barth's theology. *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 40–42, 152–184.

⁹ Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003), 90.

political tendency is against the manipulative, exploitative and controlling aspects of our personal and social relations. While Barth's expression of this may unwittingly mask some objectionable aspects of patriarchal theology that require exposure – his bisexual treatment of the *imago Dei* is an obvious case in point – in itself his theology presents as an ethical protest against precisely those deformations that have blighted parts of the tradition. The long ethical sections of the *Church Dogmatics* militate against any notion that there is an absence of reciprocity. That divine and human action are asymmetric is undeniable, but there is a correspondence between these which pervades Barth's theology and sets it apart from more passive alternatives.¹⁰

Third, Barth ventures in this context to speak of a real pre-existence of the human creature in God. Here he borrows quasi-Platonic language by speaking of the Son of God as the 'uncreated prototype of the humanity which is to be linked with God (*das ungeschaffene Urbild der mit Gott zu verbündenden Menschheit*).' Echoing the language of election from CD II/2, he speaks of the way in which the divine Word is humanly disposed as 'the first born of all creation' (Colossians 1:15). Creation out of nothing is thus interpreted as the cosmic correlate of the incarnation. As such, it remains an article of faith, rather than a subject for speculative thought.

One important function of viewing the logos as the Word to be made incarnate is that there is no scope for thinking of creation *per verbum* apart from the identification of the Word with Jesus of Nazareth. This has attracted some criticism on account of its eternalising the history of redemption with a resultant loss of distinction between God and the contingent creation. At the same time, it coincides with anxieties around Barth's universalism which is viewed as an inevitable outcome of this pre-temporal location of creation and redemption within the divine being itself.¹¹ Still Barth's insistence upon the identity of Christ and the Word with respect to our understanding of the creation can be read primarily as a refusal to think of 'the Maker of heaven and earth' in other terms. The *logos asarkos* continues to point to the freedom of God and the contingency of creatures, but the restriction placed upon this notion prohibits any theologizing which would characterise the Word as the agent of creation without its self-determination as Jesus.¹² This retrojection of the decision to be made incarnate on to the eternal being of God yields gains and losses. At its best, it eschews any interval or gap between God *in se* and God *pro nobis*. Functioning as a regulative principle, it prevents the emergence of an inscrutable God behind or apart from Jesus coupled with a determination to frame the doctrine of God along Biblical lines. Everything

¹⁰ In a somewhat similar vein, Rowan Williams that the gratuitous nature of creation in the *ex nihilo* account points to the lack of any need in God for control or consumption of what is made. 'Authentic difference... that is grounded in the eternal being-with of God as trinity, is something which sets us free to be human.' *Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 78.

¹¹ This is the argument for example of G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (London: Paternoster, 1956).

¹² Bruce McCormack speaks of a *logos incarnandus* in Barth - the Word is always to be made incarnate. Within the parameters of the doctrine of creation this makes good sense. See 'Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology', in John Webster (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 199), 92–110. For further discussion of this point see Andrew K. Gabriel, *Barth's Doctrine of Creation*, 84–101.

affirmed by the Christian theologian must be consonant with his person and work. More problematically though, the claim that the divine being is oriented forever and only towards its determination as Jesus, the incarnate Son, not only borders a realm of speculation but also tends to suppress any prospect that creation may serve a multiplicity of ends.¹³ The over-determination of a legitimate Christological point of view can result in a restriction of possibilities which may over-step the limits of our knowledge, not least in view of the age and size of the cosmos that are now apparent.

Creation as an article of faith

By introducing a distinction between Scriptural and speculative groundings of the *ex nihilo* tradition, Barth distances himself from all attempts to buttress the traditional doctrine by appeal to any cosmological argument for God's existence. Throughout much of Christian history, we find a convergence of philosophical and dogmatic themes which unite speculative proof and Biblical testimony. In his five ways, Thomas Aquinas, at least on one interpretation, appears to assume that some version of the cosmological argument directs the meaning of the term God while also authorising belief in a creation out of nothing. (A similar strategy is adopted by Scotus.) Any pre-existent matter would itself have to be posited as a divine creation; hence the argument from world to God yields a philosophical argument for *creatio ex nihilo*. Yet Aquinas's doctrine of creation is much more than this. He offers a strong Trinitarian reading which stresses both the imprint of the Word upon all creatures and their being directed by the Spirit to their appointed end. As for Barth, creation is much more than a simple account of origination. And yet *pace* Aquinas, Barth remains instinctively uneasy with any alliance of philosophy and theology, of faith and speculation. This will draw the theologian into alien territory with a likely subversion of any claims that are uncomfortable or dissonant for a secular culture or compliant church. What are we to make of this?

John Webster has remarked that Barth's writing is less assured in *CD* III/1 than elsewhere.¹⁴ His over-schematised approach is taken to be an atypical sign of nervousness. To add to this, one might also note that the dominant signpost in this treatise tends to be 'No Entry'. Everywhere we are reminded that creation is derived neither from a philosophical argument for a First Cause nor a primordial experience of dependence. Belonging within the circle of faith, it is shaped by distinctive convictions surrounding divine grace, covenant, and Christ's work of reconciliation. Since a belief in creation is as much about Jesus as any other article, it cannot function as a forecourt to faith or a locus held in common with other religions and philosophies.

¹³ Oliver Crisp argues this with reference to the (medieval and Edwardsean) notion that creation is intended in all its diversity for the self-glorification of the Creator. See 'Karl Barth on Creation', in *Retrieving Doctrine: Explorations in Reformed Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2010), 26–44.

¹⁴ 'On occasion, the argument seems strained, especially in the exegetical sections, doggedly pressing a point beyond where it can usefully be taken and schematizing the material too tightly (usually a sign in Barth that he is ill-at-ease with the subject-matter and so trying to keep control of it.)' John Webster, *Karl Barth* (London: Continuum, 2000), 99.

Initially, this is outlined noetically in *CD III/1* under three headings. First, the reality of the world cannot be secured by philosophical means. Forms of scepticism continue to abound in the history of philosophy and these cannot be decisively repudiated. Second, the reality of God as Creator is also subject to doubt and counter-argument when one considers standard arguments to a First Cause or approaches that rest upon a common experience of contingency or dependence. These too fail to command widespread consensus and are in any case consistent with any number of alternative theistic hypotheses. And third, the identity of the Creator can only be known by reference to the history of Jesus. The creed teaches us to think of the Maker of heaven and earth as the Father of the Son. The Creator is to be named and narrated in distinctive ways. This is not the end point of an inductive or deductive argument, but is heard and known as we are summoned to faith. 'The necessary connexion between the first and other two articles of the creed, between the beginning and the continuation of the ways and works of the one God, must not be forgotten if in relation to dogma we are to maintain our birthright and not to sacrifice it for a mess of pottage.'¹⁵

This knowledge claim is grounded in an ontology of God's history – here the noetic reposes upon the ontic. In creating, divine agency has a historical character. Its meaning is known along the way of the fulfilment of this history. Hence the creative action of God cannot be specified apart from the history of Jesus, particularly his resurrection from the dead. Reiterated constantly, this conviction frames most of the discussion in *CD III/1*.

In an important respect, Barth's theology of creation can be read as a recovery of patristic, medieval and Reformation traditions which interpreted the creation of the world in the light of the Trinity and the incarnation. As such, his work has shaped much subsequent discussion in Protestant and Catholic theology. On the other hand, Barth breaks with the tradition in his endeavour to place a diastasis between a dogmatically inflected account of creation and more philosophical approaches that claim a consonance between reason and revelation. Undoubtedly, his earlier repudiation of the *analogia entis* and the excursions of natural theology are integral to this stance. In any attempt to rehabilitate an alliance of philosophy and theology on this front, he discerns a regression to patterns of thought that displace the central convictions of faith. This is not without ethical significance for Barth. A misguided search for intellectual alliances and mutual reinforcement of discourses is likely to blunt the prophetic witness of the church. The disruptive function of Christian theology will be lost in any apologetic enterprise that seeks to harmonise faith and science. This anxiety resurfaces later in *CD III/1* and also at the outset of *CD III/2*. There is a fundamental difference between the doctrine of creation and every conceivable world view.¹⁶ That creation is God's benefit has no philosophical equivalent; apart from Jesus, we cannot make sense of this claim. To this extent, the Christian doctrine of creation can neither entail, presuppose, guarantee nor be conflated with any philosophical *Weltanschauung*.

At first glance, this claim of Barth appears to be amongst the least promising in his entire theological oeuvre. The assertion that we cannot know God as Creator until first we know Jesus as the eternal Son sits uneasily with Scripture, tradition and the experience of

¹⁵ *Church Dogmatics III/1*, 13.

¹⁶ *Church Dogmatics III/1*, 343.

Christian people. Is there is not a rudimentary awareness of creation in the Hebrew Scriptures, especially the Wisdom literature with its relative detachment from accounts of salvation history? Do the apostles not already assume this sense of God in their appeal to a pagan audience in Acts 14: 15–17? Are not the Fathers, the Schoolmen and the Reformers united in their assumption that there is a general revelation to those outside the church and that this is largely directed towards a sense of God as Creator? These questions have always beset Barth's theology, and not always from those hostile to his endeavour. It is for this reason that so much anxiety has surrounded his vehement rejection of natural theology and the related criticism of the *analogia entis* as foundational to Roman Catholicism. While this latter category is absent from the polemics of CD III/1, Barth vigorously maintains the view that the knowledge of creation is christologically determined. There is no other way of approaching the subject that will not imperil the distinctive content of the Christian confession of 'the maker of heaven and earth.'

In assessing Barth's doctrine of creation, W.A. Whitehouse raises the question of its present cultural significance, asking whether it may be 'no more than an ideological tour-de-force for some few within the cultural ghetto of the Europeanized Christian Church who enjoy that sort of thing.'¹⁷ This seems a startling challenge, given that Whitehouse was one of the more perceptive of the early exponents of Barth's theology in the English-speaking world. Does the context of CD III/1 explain something here? Eberhard Busch alludes to Barth's historical pessimism during the war years and his dissatisfaction with earlier theologies which had used arguments for creation as a bridgehead between modern philosophy and Christian theology. Noting the extent to which his doctrine of creation is preoccupied with the treatment of *Das Nichtige*, Busch stresses Barth's determination to maintain the narrow pathway along which the Christian theologian must tread. In the ocean of suffering and killing, how are we to rediscover the goodness of the Creator?¹⁸

And yet as Whitehouse seemed to sense already in 1986, our theological context has shifted since the war years. The dominance of European Christendom is now reaching an end. The ecological crisis *inter alia* has generated a strong sense of the value of the natural world, of the variety of species, and of the embodiedness of human life. Much modern spirituality is focussed on the natural world and celebrates its sacredness, in ways that are often remote from the institutional life of the churches – their Scriptures, creeds and ritual actions. The eclecticism of contemporary religious life, particularly with our growing awareness of the claims of other faiths, is farther removed from the dominant social position exercised by the churches until the 1960s. The Barthian claim that the only route to a knowledge of God the Creator is through the Bible and its witness to Jesus seems increasingly distant from this altered cultural situation. Even more salient perhaps is the partial disconnect for many Christians of creation and redemption. The awareness of God through the beauty and constancy of the natural world does not seem to be immediately derived from Scripture or tradition in the *consensus fidelium*, as if there is a unbroken epistemological line from a

¹⁷ W. A. Whitehouse, 'A Reading of *Church Dogmatics*, III/1' in Nigel Biggar (ed.), *Reckoning with Barth: Essays in Commemoration of the Centenary of Karl Barth's Birth* (London: Mowbray, 1988), 43–57.

¹⁸ Eberhard Busch, *The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth's Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 177.

Sunday morning service to an informed afternoon walk in the public park. These be may consistent and related to one another, but to claim that one is foundational for the other runs the risk of imposing a systematic rigidity upon the practices and intellectual habits of the church which distorts what is actually going on. There is a fluidity, adaptation and capacity to live at times with tension and incoherence; this may serve the practice of faith quite well. For this reason, Kelsey's recent preference for an 'unsystematic systematic theology' is timely, especially as this is accompanied by a stronger sense of the different plot lines that are interwoven in Christian theology in its stories of creation, redemption and eschatological fulfilment.¹⁹

How might Barth's theology be appropriated in this altered setting? There are at least three responses which can be proffered. One is to maintain that alternative approaches to creation are simply mistaken, and that the only reliable source of knowledge is Scriptural revelation. A second is to insist that in the even greater cultural confusion and diversity of our age, a theology that is confident of its central theme is needed more than ever. A third would be to look for resources in Barth which qualify this claim and so find ways of appropriating insights and experience from outside the church. The first type of response I find implausible. The insights that can be derived from art, science and other faiths in contemplating the created world are manifold. These are often recognized and celebrated in Scripture and throughout the history of the church. To pull up the drawbridge and to eschew all such connections seems a futile exercise, rather akin to the defence of creation science. And there is plenty in Barth's writings that counsels against such a procedure.

The second strategy takes us closer to the intention of Barth and it has some force within the current context. To affirm creation is to do much more than make a claim for the transcendent origin of the world. It is to characterise both God and the world in particular ways. Affirmations of divine goodness and commitment to the world, the liturgical praise of the Creator, and the lament of evil, within a wider sense of the world as providentially ordered by God – all these belong within the circle of faith. Here we are dealing with a 'web of belief' in which the different strands are related to one another in ways that reflect various core convictions. These assume a commitment to Jesus as a constant point of reference. While the expression of such convictions can be revised and adapted under different pressures (of which more later), the sense of the world as created is freighted with particular claims that shape our understanding. Here Barth's interlacing of creation and covenant makes good sense. Each informs the description of the other and neither can be treated adequately apart from its counterpart. The summons to faith is thus of some relevance as we seek to describe the theological significance of distant galaxies or prehistorical animals.

This Christian reading of creation might be interpreted *in optimam partem* by a comparison with Gerard Manley Hopkins' notion of 'inscape', Julian of Norwich's homily of the hazelnut and the imagery of George Hebert's 'Prayer'. Each illustrates, though in different ways, how the Christian imagination has perceived the cosmos in Christ-shaped ways. Characterised by reflection upon the natural world, Hopkins' poetry is deeply suffused with strong

¹⁹ David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence* Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

convictions about the resurrection of Christ. This shapes his perception of matter. Inscapere refers to what each thing is in its own particularity. For Hopkins, following Scotus, this includes its identity as created and intended by God. Writing in his diary on 18 May, 1870, he states, 'I do not think that I have ever seen anything more beautiful than the bluebell I have been looking at. I know the beauty of our Lord by it. Its inscape is mixed of strength and grace, like an ash-tree.'²⁰

In more conceptual form, Julian of Norwich reflects on the contingency of the hazelnut in her first 'shewing' in the *Revelations of Divine Love*. Created, loved and kept by God, the hazelnut (an emblem of 'all that is') is a source both of metaphysical wonder and praise. Her meditation is shaped not so much by philosophical deliberation upon contingency – though it may include that – as by the particularity of her vision which enables her to perceive the hazelnut within a narrative of creation and redemption. Her reflection is suffused with key elements of the Christian story, especially providence, which evokes this sense of contingency and warrants a set of practical responses.²¹ There is here a Christological inflection of the hazelnut's createdness which resonates, at least in part, with Barth's conjunction of creation and covenant.

George Herbert's celebrated poem on 'Prayer' juxtaposes the images of church-bells and stars in a way that further illustrates this blended understanding of cosmos and Christ. The simplest prayer, such as the Our Father, reaches to the transcendent maker of heaven and earth. What is decisive, following the cosmic Christology of the New Testament, is a refusal to think of creation as unrelated to Christ or as placed on a trajectory that leads us away from his person and work. Its meaning cannot circumvent Jesus. Barth's theology insists upon this in the most robust way possible.

At the same time, his account of the covenant as the internal basis of creation seems to make a stronger (instrumental) claim about the world as willed in order to accomplish God's self-determination in the person of Jesus. This Christological concentration generates another difficulty that is less easily resolved, as we shall see in the following section.

The Lights of Creation

While Barth's theology regularly posts 'no entry' signs by closing off routes that were travelled in the past, other paths are identified that establish links between the wider wisdom of the world and the particular insights that determine the life of the church. These do not figure prominently in *CD III/1*, although even here there are hints of conversations

²⁰ H. House (ed.), *Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 199.

²¹ 'What is noticeable is that Julian's understanding is brought not by some poet's route, as Gerard Manley Hopkins might be led, from the individuation of some particular "lifelike thing" to God, but, like Thomas, by the metaphysician's route, which extends from the sheer contingency of "all that is made," which is but a "haselnot" teetering on the edge of nothingness, to the love that alone holds it all in existence over against the "nought" into which it "might suddenly have fallen". Denys Turner, *Thomas Aquinas: A Portrait* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 140. My only (Barthian) caveat to this valuable comparison would be to add that Julian's 'metaphysical route' is surely determined by her visions of the crucified Saviour.

and points of contact that require to be more fully explored.²² These must be understood by reference to the analogy of being that is established in the person of Jesus and which is the key to understanding its analogical links to the entire created universe.²³ All things are created in order 'to co-inhere' in Christ, and so in their own distinctive ways they can attest and enrich the church's witness. Much of this becomes evident as Barth's discussion moves into the realm of anthropology with its stress on our relational co-humanity and in his later discussion of the 'little lights of creation' in *CD IV/3*, often ignored by those who castigate his earlier rejection of natural theology. Commenting elsewhere on his 'Nein' to Brunner, he could remark that later he brought natural theology back through Christology.²⁴ What appears on one reading to be excluded in *CD III/1* is now reintroduced in Christological medium in *CD IV/3*.

The lights of creation are not to be confused with the 'sorry hypothesis of a so-called natural theology' which establishes an abstract concept of God apart from faith.²⁵ These created lights or parables of the kingdom have to be understood by reference to the (necessary but not exclusive) Scriptural witness to Jesus. Their identity is determined christologically, but known in part and attested outside the church. In relation to creation, Barth provides several examples of the creaturely lights. These are not to be understood as revelation nor as bearing direct witness. As creaturely realities, their testimony is indirect but it is adapted and incorporated within the life of faith. Barth illustrates this with reference to the fact of our existence in time, the constant patterns of renewal in the natural world, the contrast of light and shade in the rhythms of existence, the laws discerned by natural and social science, the responsibility for the task of 'humanising the world', and the unfathomable mystery of a cosmos which cannot be fully comprehended but which always generates fresh questions.²⁶

At this juncture, Barth's theology appears more open to assessing the connection between our knowledge of the Creator and the ways in which we know the creation. These may be different, as he insists, yet to maintain a rigid distinction between Christian theology and a *Weltanschauung* seems to overlook the extent to which theologies inevitably commit to positions which incorporate philosophical, historical and scientific assumptions. In each generation, these links require to be negotiated and sometimes adjusted. An obvious example would be our reading of the Fall story in light of historical and scientific judgements about the emergence of hominids. A theology which is hermetically sealed from all the elements of a contemporary world view is simply not possible. In this context, T. F. Torrance argued for a theological science that entered into constructive conversation with the

²² In addition to the comments in the Preface, Barth writes of the 'mysterious background' to each worldview and the questions it raises though cannot answer. *CD III/1*, 341.

²³ For an important discussion of how this can be construed see Bruce L. McCormack, 'Karl Barth's Version of an "Analogy of Being": A Dialectical No and Yes to Roman Catholicism', in Thomas Joseph White OP (ed.), *Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 88–144.

²⁴ 'Später holte ich dann die theologia naturalis via Christologie wieder herein.' 'Ein Gespräch in der Brüdergemeinde', *Civitas Praesens*, 13 (1961), 7. Quoted by Wilfried Härle, *Sein und Gnade* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1975), 42.

²⁵ *Church Dogmatics IV/3*, First Half, 117.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 143–150.

methodology and findings of post-Einsteinian physics. His project seeks an integration of natural theology within the parameters set by revelation, this being interpreted in the spirit of Barth.²⁷

Nevertheless in describing the relationship of these creaturely lights to the light of Christ and in seeking a greater measure of integration than is ventured in *CD III/1*, Barth avoids strategies of independence and complementarity. These lights are not to be read as different manifestations of a single reality, since there is a relationship of subordination and dependence which needs to be mapped. Instead they must be viewed as integrated into the scope of the great light so that they shape the ways in which the Word of God is uttered within 'the lights, words and truths of creation.'²⁸ Creaturely lights are thus relativized in relation to Jesus Christ, the one great light, but in this act of relativization they are incorporated and given their place. There is an institution (*Instauration*) and integration which takes place here. As in a symphony, their voices are blended into the praise of God. This process of 'coinherence' provides a Yes in Barth's theology which complements and qualifies his 'No' to natural theologies and philosophies of religion which attempt to locate a separate and complementary knowledge of God.²⁹

The image here is redolent of the concentric circles that Barth employed in his writings on church and state. In attesting the kingdom of God, the state and civil society can form the outer circle inside which is the circle of the church in its witness to Christ.³⁰ This coinherence of church and world is ordered by the one Word of God. A pattern is set in which all created reality is established by virtue of its relation to Christ. A theological tour de force, this provides a compelling vision of the cosmos as Christ-centred. But again the question should be asked whether it is a scheme that over-systematises the various components of a theology by pressing these into one model. In fact, this may be a consequence already of the supralapsarian doctrine of election in *CD II/2* with its claim that the election of Christ as God and human being is foundational to every divine action *ad extra*.³¹ This claim is much ontologically stronger than the previous assertion that everything in creation must be thought in ways that are shaped by the way of Christ. Yet when over-codified in this way does this threaten the polyphony of voices in Scripture, church and world by forcing these into a single schema and seeking too readily to identify their positive or negative relation to Christ? And does it tend to foreclose new theological conversations, in particular those that will increasingly take place with representatives of other faiths? Much of this may be a matter of emphasis and of avoiding a lack of rigidity in dogmatic claims, but the

²⁷ T. F. Torrance, 'Natural Theology in the Thought of Karl Barth', *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 136–159.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 157.

²⁹ See George Hunsinger, 'The Yes Hidden in Barth's No to Brunner: The First Commandment as a Theological Axiom', in *Evangelical, Reformed and Catholic: Doctrinal Essays on Barth and Related Themes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 85–105. 'What Barth took away from nature with one hand, he gave back with the other by grace.' (105)

³⁰ *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-War Writings* (London: SCM, 1954), 32–33.

³¹ For a seminal discussion of the centrality of election in the development of Barth's theology see Bruce L. McCormack. 'Grace and being: the role of God's gracious election in Karl Barth's theological ontology', in John Webster (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 92–110.

Christological centre may be overworked to the extent that it constricts scope for the exploration of new questions and the breaking out in fresh directions under altered cultural pressures. Again we have to ask whether the theologian must subscribe systematically to the notion that 'everything is created for Jesus Christ'³² even when this is read inclusively so as to counter charges of Christomonism?

The image of the circle is a closed and unifying one. Notwithstanding its elegance, if deployed in a regular and pervasive manner, it can risk imposing a single unity upon the subject matter of theology which distorts the different strands and themes that comprise Christian faith. These do not readily come together into a single enclosure of ideas that rotate monotonously around a common centre to which everything else is made peripheral. New questions and tasks emerge which require different strategies of revision, departure and return. The exercise of relating these to one another and to distinctive claims for the finality of Jesus remains a valid and necessary one; yet the fact that God has created many things and not only one kind of entity requires an openness and provisionality in our enquiries. These are never fully in view nor comprehended by our human intellects in a single comprehensive gaze. Despite eschewing the goal of a systematic theology, Barth's own work runs the risk, in some places at least, of imposing a constrictive framework upon subsequent investigation and revision of earlier solutions. Karen Kilby makes a similar criticism of Hans Urs von Balthasar in claiming that his work generates a 'performative contradiction'. While insisting upon a plurality of perspectives, Balthasar appears to adopt a vantage point that suppresses this insistence. The frequently-cited image of the radiating circle with its mysterious centre is not only a way of coping with pluralism but of overcoming it in ways that move too rapidly towards a premature closure of all questions.³³

In part, this imbalance in Barth may reside in the under-development in key places of his account of the work of the Holy Spirit. (It may also result in an insufficiently capacious eschatology though that may be another story.) Most of the textual material under review has focussed on the second rather than the third article. As a consequence, the continuous, new and eschatologically-directed role of the Spirit (the second of the two hands of God) is generally neglected in the extensive treatment of the Word of God as the one great light. The indwelling and circumambient presence of the Spirit bestows upon the world a dimension and richness that may be lacking in logocentric approaches that are too focussed upon the divine-human encounter construed in personalist terms. These perspectives should not be presented as exclusive in any fully Trinitarian account of divine action.

This recurrent criticism also connects with a further perceived weakness in Barth's theology of creation with respect to the temporal dynamism of the natural world.³⁴ According to a substantial body of criticism, creation is not a stage established for its external relation to

³² CD III/1, 376.

³³ Karen Kilby, *Balthasar: a (very) critical introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 82–83. On the other hand, Kilby is inclined to exempt Barth from this criticism on the ground of his greater tolerance of unresolved difficulties.

³⁴ For example, T. F. Torrance laments the lack of a fully blown Trinitarianism in Barth while also criticising the narrow focus on the human being in his doctrine of creation. *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian*, op. cit., 132.

the drama of salvation.³⁵ In itself, the created world has a long history that has witnessed the rise and fall of different species, most of which are only remotely connected to human beings. But for Barth, creation tends to be viewed in static or rhythmic terms; these characterise the physical setting of a historical drama upon which its existence and value tend to repose.³⁶

The tendency to concentrate upon the election of the human results in a double location of our humanity both in the life of God and in the created world. Yet the realm of nature has only a single reality by virtue of its function as the external basis of the covenant.³⁷ This generates an anthropocentrism which causes anxieties today even amongst his most sympathetic readers. If the natural world is assigned an instrumental function only in the human-focussed drama of the covenant history, then it would be of little surprise if its ethical significance were diminished. This leaves too far out of view those vast tracts of the material world and animal life which are not directly related to the life of *homo sapiens*. There are strands in Barth, particularly in his Scriptural exegesis, which pull in other directions. Some of these are quite striking in their force and reveal Barth's frequent capacity to qualify and correct himself.

A good hunter, honourable butcher and conscientious vivisectionist... are summoned to an intensified, sharpened and deepened diffidence, reserve and carefulness. In this matter they act on the extreme limits where respect for life and callous disregard constantly jostle and may easily pass into one another. On these frontiers, if anywhere, animal protection, care and friendship are quite indispensable. ³⁸

Such remarks notwithstanding, Barth's theological ontology suffers much of the time from an inherent anthropocentric leaning with an attendant ecological deficit. The stock response to this problem is to argue that his theology requires a stronger sense of all created life as participating in the covenant. Orthodox theology, particularly in the work of Maximus, has become an important resource for this task.³⁹ Nevertheless, notions of participation and indwelling require a much stronger pneumatological rendering of creation than we find in Barth and doubtless some adjustments to his doctrine of election in *CD II/2* which precedes and shapes the anthropocentrism that we encounter in *CD III/1*. An account of the Spirit as

³⁵ See Andrew Gabriel, *Barth's Doctrine of Creation*, 50.

³⁶ 'Constancy, persistence and rotation were the characteristics that struck Barth about nature. But this is a one-sided impression. If all systems of life have a temporal structure, then they are all – each in its own way – open to the future.' Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* (London: SCM, 1985), 63.

³⁷ This criticism is made for example by Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985), 152. See also Adrian Langdon, 'Jesus Christ, election and nature: revising Barth during the ecological crisis', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68.4 (2015), 453–470.'

³⁸ *CD III/4*, 355.

³⁹ See Ian McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 73–83.

organically as well as personally related to creatures and creation is required at this juncture.

Much of this criticism can of course be too easy. Barth should not be expected to have anticipated the problems and preoccupations of a later generation – clairvoyance is not one of the functions of theology. His preoccupation with other issues, particularly the problem of evil and the need to read creation as a Christian theme, leans in other directions. Our successors will no doubt identify the blind-spots in our own diffusions. Yet his *Schöpfungslehre* remains a powerful ecumenical force which demands a careful reading and considered engagement in its appropriation of classical themes. There are ways of developing his central claims in ways that fulfil his aim of viewing the doctrine of creation as an *articulus fidei*. Taking us far beyond an account of origination, he established its links with the broad vision of a world that is willed, made, loved and steadfastly partnered by God. Even if we cannot follow him at every turn – and this may impose a burden not of light revision, but of a more robust re-thinking of key elements – his recasting of the traditional doctrine cannot be evaded or dismissed by any contemporary account of creation. As Hans Frei remarked in a famous essay, '[O]ne may not want to agree with Barth's governing vision, or with his particular exercise of imagination or of rationality or both together. But can really strong theology be any less?'⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 162.