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Barth's First Commentary on Romans (1919): An Exercise in Apophatic Theology?

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Abstract: Barth's first commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans is paradigmatic of his use of apophatic language and theology in the development away from the liberal neo-Protestant theology of his teachers. This negation is for a purpose – the assertion of the truths of the human condition and God's solution in Christ that were posited by the apostle Paul. Methodologically this is a supplementary apophatic–cataphatic dialectic (within which is a further dialectic: *Diesseits–Jenseits*), comparable with the way eternity reaches into and transforms the fallen and broken human world. The evidence for negation in *Römerbrief*[1] is examined, showing how Barth seeks to refute the domestication of God in the self-satisfaction of our language, allowing for biblical-Christian truth to stand.

Often regarded in the English-speaking world as the poor cousin of the second edition of Barth's commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans, the first edition of *Der Römerbrief*[1] is probably marginalized in Britain and America because it has never been translated into English. But this is no reason to ignore the work. It stands in its own right; furthermore, it was on the strength of the first edition of *Der Römerbrief* that Barth was offered in the autumn of 1921 the post of Honorary Professor of Reformed Theology at the University of Göttingen, more or less at the same time as he was finishing writing the second edition. It is important to remember the comment by the Roman Catholic scholar Karl Adams that 'Barth's *Römerbrief* hit immediately in its first appearance – August 1919 – like a bomb on the playground of the theologians, comparably in its effects with the encyclical on antimodernisation of Pope Pius X'[2] was a reference to the impact

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1 Edition consulted/quoted: Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Erste Fassung 1919)*, Gesamtausgabe 2. Akademische Werke (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich), 1985.

2 Karl Adams, 'Die Theologie der Krisis', in *Hochland* 23 (1926), pp. 276f.

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of the first edition and not the second, which did not appear until late in 1922.

Written between the summer of 1916 and August 1918 – therefore written during the First World War – *Römerbrief*[1] was in many ways the foundation stone of *dialektische theologie* or *krisis theologie* and began the process of drawing young theological minds around Barth to form – according to other people, in particular Barth's opponents – something of a school. At the time of writing Barth was a parish pastor in Safenwil in the Aargau region of Switzerland. On holiday in the summer of 1916 he had been discussing with his friend and colleague Eduard Thurneysen about the way forward – theologically. Both had become disillusioned with their heritage in nineteenth-century liberal neo-Protestantism. Thurneysen argued that they needed a wholly new basis for theology. Barth even proposed returning to an in-depth study of Kant. However, at Thurneysen's behest they agreed that they needed to return to the Bible as the basis for redefining theology and thereby the basis of ministry and parish work. The rest as they say is history: on return Barth surrounded himself with biblical commentaries, a copy of Paul's Epistle to the Romans and a notebook. By Christmas he realized that his study was going to form a book. Later he redrafted the initial chapters, his thinking reforming and changing as he progressed through *Romans*. This struggle was recorded to a degree in his correspondence with Thurneysen.[3]

An apophatic–cataphatic dialectic

This article aims to look at one aspect of *Römerbrief*[1] – Barth's use of apophatic theology and language. Straight away let us establish one principle that both Barth and Thurneysen shared – negativity, apophatic language and theology was of value if it led to a greater affirmation. Nihilism, atheism, as well as apophatism could be used to cut a way through the cacophony of human culture and human centred religion to lead to a greater affirmation of the truth of the gospel – that is, orthodox Christian truths, not deism or general theism. This is an apophatic–cataphatic dialectic. For example, Thurneysen commenting on the characters and novels of the Russian novelist Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky wrote, 'It is for this that we love them, not for the radical nature of their negations but for their still greater affirmations, which arise from their denials.'[4] Therefore negation can be a mechanism for a greater biblical affirmation: the apophatic leads to the cataphatic – a paradoxical dialectic.

I intend to show in this article that this proposition applies to Barth's use of apophatic theology and language during the period generally of his theological

3 *Karl Barth–Eduard Thurneysen Briefwechsel Band I 1913–1921 Gesamtausgabe*, Bearbeitet und herausgegeben von Eduard Thurneysen (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1973).

4 Eduard Thurneysen, *Dostojewski* (Münich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1921), p. 10.

Retraktation as he called it, but specifically in *Römerbrief[1]*. Such an antinomy is also a scriptural principle, the astonishing negativity and nihilism of the crucifixion with the resultant atonement and life for humanity is of course an obvious example, but it also represents the Christian life. In 1 Corinthians 13 love is presented negatively – love is not. Furthermore Paul speaks of what it is if 'I do not have love'; he outlines that love is, in the positive, characterized by restraint: 'It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful'; he then lists what 'love is not'. The idea of the negative leading to a greater positive affirmation can be found also in 1 Corinthians 4:12 ('When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure'), 2 Corinthians 4:8–9 ('afflicted . . . crushed; perplexed, . . . so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies'), Hebrews 11:37f.; further, 2 Corinthians 1:6 ('If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation'), and so forth.

Der Römerbrief (1919)

Römerbrief[1] is a commentary, a biblical commentary, but it is also a theological treatise. It has been analysed and dissected as a piece of theology but Barth's primary aim was to show the validity of the world of the Bible – that the conclusion Paul came to about the human condition and God's answer to humanity's sinfulness were as valid in his day as they were in the first century. Barth focuses on God's relations with the world, and the solution God forges to humanity's condition, fallen as it is. This is seen dialectically: humanity is fallen yet 'Christian'; fallen yet of faith; living in the old world yet for the new world. Direct experience/knowledge of God is no longer possible yet we are moulded, changed by the Holy Spirit, so Barth claims. Dialectic points to a reality that is ultimate, concrete and universal; such dialectics include a dialectical criticism of religion. Von Balthasar[5] asserted that a dynamic eschatology seen as the irreversible movement from a fatally doomed world to a new living order filled with the life of God was the main thrust of *Römerbrief[1]*; this was the restoration (in the form of ἀποκατάστασις) of the original ideal creation in God. This condemned world cannot return to the original state through its own strength or will, though it still has some intimation of its true origin. Ἀποκατάστασις will be entirely achieved through the graciousness of Christ.

Römerbrief[1] owes much of its conceptual framework to Plato, as mediated by Barth's brother Heinrich. In addition, McCormack[6] has quite rightly shown that *Römerbrief[1]* was as expressionistic as *Römerbrief[2]* – Barth's rewriting of his commentary on *Romans* published in 1922 – the main difference being emphases.

5 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Karl Barth, Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie* (Köln: Verlag Jakob Hegner, 1951). ET *The Theology of Karl Barth – Exposition and Interpretation*, trans. John Drury (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971), pp. 64f.

6 Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909–1936* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) p. 139.

There is (as is the case with much of Barth's early work) a strong criticism of religion, but it is important to remember that this is a critique of religion in the service of the gospel. Barth was attacking, as McCormack correctly shows, liberal Pietism, idealistic epistemology and ethics, and the positive (i.e. cataphatic) elements in church and religion. Whilst refuting much nineteenth-century German theology and philosophy on the subject of history and eschatology, Barth does seek to show how the two realities of *welt* and *Gott* can come together – this is objective soteriology. Walker sees Barth's criticism focused on two idolatrous groups: idealism (Hegel) and romanticism (Schleiermacher).[7] Indeed much of Barth's use of apophatic theology and language is directed at criticizing and refuting the basis of nineteenth-century liberal neo-Protestantism as represented by his teacher Wilhelm Herrmann – who found no criticism or fault with the religion of his day. Barth therefore separates the gospel along with an orthodox interpretation of the *Deus dixit*, from the comfortable religiosity he encountered derived from Schleiermacher and rooted in Hegel.

A *Diesseits–Jenseits* dialectic

Barth and Thurneysen invoke dialectic in the contrast between this world and the *real* reality that permeates all of *Römerbrief[1]*. Barth, like Thurneysen, uses a *Diesseits–Jenseits* dialectic ('on this side of'–'on the other side of, beyond'). For example, Barth in *Römerbrief[1]*:

> We are no longer the same. We have been placed into the process which reaches from *Jenseits* into *Diesseits*.[8]

Why?

> With the breakthrough – Immanuel! God with us! which has taken place in the present time in the messianic present, in the decisive turn of the aeons in heaven.[9]

7 James Silas Walker, *The Development of Karl Barth's Theology from the first edition of Der Römerbrief through to the second edition of Der Römerbrief*, PhD thesis, Claremont Graduate School, 1963, University Microfilms Inc., Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1963, pp. 50f. (specifically, p. 51).

8 'Mit dem Durchbruch: Immanuel! Gott mit uns! (vgl. Mt. 1,23), der sich in der Jetztzeit, in der messianischen Gegenwart, in der entscheidenden Wende der Äonen im Himmel ereignet hat, ist ein Lebensprozeß eröffnet auch auf Erden, auf der seelisch-geschichtlichen Seite unseres Daseins. Wir sind nicht mehr die Gleichen. Wir sind in diesen vom Jenseits ins Diesseits übergreifenden Prozeß hineingestellt.' See Barth, *Römerbrief[1]*, pp. 167f.

9 Barth, *Römerbrief[1]*, p. 167.

Barth is saying that the possibility of the new world is with God only, for it is the reality that is *Jenseits* and inaccessible to us.[10] This is to a degree a Platonic use of *Diesseits–Jenseits* by Barth. Thurneysen:

> Only now is it clear that this world is this world (*Diesseits*), and the beyond is the beyond (*Jenseits*), that humanity is humanity and God is God.[11]

Seen from above, the world is still the world and God is still God – transcendent and other. This understanding is fundamental to Thurneysen's study *Dostojewski* (contemporaneous with *Der Römerbrief*), and to Barth's Platonism in *Römerbrief[1]*. By dialectically opening up this world from eternity, by emphasizing sin as the contagion (the agent of the separation, distance, between God and humanity), Barth and Thurneysen are, to a degree, invoking an apophatic void. Such apophatism negates or denies human religiosity (the world of nineteenth-century liberal neo-Protestantism that they were struggling to be free of). This realization, this diastasis, was of great importance to them at this juncture in their development. God was not to be seen as infused through history and human events (Hegelian-like); however, human events (*Diesseits*) were paradoxically, as we see in *Römerbrief[1]*, being pulled into towards eternity – *Jenseits*. The relationship may be dialectical but *Jenseits* dominates, eternity predominates and this reality (*Diesseits*) will be subsumed. This is an example of what Michael Beintker[12] identifies in Barth's early work as supplementary dialectics as compared to complementary dialectics where both elements stand unresolved over against each other: for example, in the second edition of *Der Römerbrief* these dialectics assume a more Kierkegaardian character – whereby the elements of such complementary antinomies stand over and against each other.

This does relate to a commonly used category in Barth's work at this time – the concept of *Ursprung*, which he derived in part from his philosopher brother, Heinrich who wrote, 'Divinity and soul are in the *Ursprung*'.[13] The *Ursprung* for both Karl and Heinrich is a category of the primal source of all that is, ultimately connected with God and creation. Barth uses *Ursprung* to refer to the world from which humanity has fallen, and to which all will return, the present sinful world having lost contact with this *Ursprung* but it will be restored by the Christ, in the

10 Barth, *Römerbrief[1]*, p. 167; see also 3. Kapitel, *Die Gerechtigkeit Gottes*, Romans 3:21–25 'Die Offenbarung', p. 83; 7. Kapitel, *Die Freiheit*, Romans 7:1–6 'Das neue Wesen', p. 250.

11 'Nun erst ist klar, daß Diesseits Diesseits und Jenseits Jenseits, daß Mensch Mensch, und daß Gott Gott ist.' Thurneysen, *Dostojewski*, p. 67 / ET p. 62.

12 Michael Beintker, *Die Dialektik in der 'dialektischen Theologie' Karl Barths* (Münich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1987), pp. 38–9.

13 'Ursprung ist also die Gottheit und Ursprung ist die Seele', Heinrich Barth, *Das Problem des Ursprungs in der platonischen Philosophie* (Münich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1921), p. 19.

general resurrection.[14] The reality of God will prevail over all: a solution to the antinomy between salvation and damnation can only be in the *eschaton*; the *eschaton* closes the dialectic, not a Hegelian synthesis (but this closure is of a supplementary dialectic – this reality will be subsumed). To attempt to probe this diastasis will only conjure up an apophatic void. Some scholars consider that there is too great a tension in Barth's eschatological dialectics in *Römerbrief[1]*.[15] The problem is how to maintain the wholly otherness of God, whilst asserting the direct movement of the old fallen world towards this new world through an organic understanding of *Heilsgeschichte*.[16] Dialectic may allow for this juxtaposition but it also denies the movement – only in the *eschaton* can there be a closure of this antinomy.

That we can glimpse the first-fruits of this now is a paradox (closely related in conceptual terms to Barth's apophatic use of dialectic). If *Römerbrief[1]* was a harsh criticism of the world of humanity and human cultural aspiration, even more so by setting off this Tower of Babel against the reality of the supreme, transcendent other-worldly God, then this critique posited a real objective solution to the problem, this irreconcilable antinomy of 'God–humanity', in the form of faith in Jesus Christ universally open to all. But again, this appears to make redundant the organic movement of *Heilsgeschichte*. The implications of universalism in *Römerbrief[1]*, the question of how effective Barth's idea of organic salvation history (*Heilsgeschichte*) was, the tensions we have briefly alluded to were such that by the time of publication in the autumn of 1919 Barth was sufficiently dissatisfied to want to initiate a wholesale rewrite and revision – hence, *Römerbrief[2]*, much better known in the West because of Sir Edwyn Hoskyns' translation, initially published in the early 1930s.

Negation

Why does Barth use negative theology? and how does Barth use such negation in language and theological concept in *Römerbrief[1]*?

At the heart of Barth's theological *Retraktation* is an emergent, redefined doctrine of God. Broadly speaking we see Barth's doctrine of God developing away from the Schleiermachian immediacy and the Hegelian metaphysics, which tied God to religious experience and world history – the events of the First World War had exposed the fault lines in this doctrine. Here we have the genesis of Barth's concern for God's aseity – God's right, so to speak, to be God, independent from all that humanity would want to impose on God in theological definitions and religious

14 See Barth, *Römerbrief[1]*, 1. Kapitel, *Die Nacht* 1:18–21 'Der Abfall', pp. 24–31.

15 See Walker, *The Development of Karl Barth's Theology*, pp. 44f.

16 Walker, *The Development of Karl Barth's Theology*, pp. 75–6: 'God's history plus man's history equals Heilsgeschichte . . . It is the problem of maintaining the supra-cosmic reality of God and his new world while still retaining the direct movement of the old world into the new by way of organic Heilsgeschichte. The burden is greater than dialectic can carry.'

projections. A year into the war Barth commented in a lecture given in Basle, 'Kriegszeit und Gottesreich':[17] '[that] world remains world . . . But God is God'.[18] Herbert Anzinger wrote, encapsulating Barth's comments: 'To recognize that God is God, [in Barth's words] "To recognize God also, as well as he is in the life and words of Jesus", that he is "something other beyond reason, other as all".'[19] What we find here in 'Kriegszeit und Gottesreich' is Barth's early use of *negation* in relation to speaking about God; further, we find the use of *Ursprung* (derived from the influence, as we shall see later, of his brother, Heinrich Barth) as well as the emphasis on the wholly otherness of God:

> What concern to us is the God who was introduced to us once as the highest idea of the ethics? That 'Father in heaven', to whom He (Jesus) points us is no Ideality, which lives from its opposition (antithesis?) no formal, unreal magnitude, that finally belongs to this world, no idea of the justice or the precious (dear?) in the rivalry of the ideas of the ethics, but rather the reality, out of which our entire world has fallen. That God is our creator and origin in the other world is entirely new for us, this would be the only Positive thing that we can say. All our other speaking of God is a stammering, or it must if it should count seriously, exist in pure negation.[20]

Negation, as Barth asserts, must characterize any speech of God from our perspective, from our human position: the *Deus dixit* must not be clouded by our strivings for God, our religiosity. Furthermore Barth sees this distance, this separation between the world and God in terms of *diastasis* – a relationship whereby two entities stand over against each other with no possibility of a synthesis (certainly

17 Karl Barth, 'Kriegszeit und Gottesreich' ('Wartime and the Kingdom Of God') lecture given in Basle, Switzerland, 15 November 1915, unpublished lecture in the Karl Barth archive in Basle. All but the first 12 of 31 pages survive. All quotations here are from Herbert Anzinger's presentation of large parts of the text in his work *Glaube und kommunikative Praxis* (Münich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1991), ch. 3. *DIE NÖTIGUNG ZUR GRUNDLAGENREVISION*, sub-section 3.2.2 *Die Problematik des ethischen Idealismus*, pp. 117f. (quotations from pp. 120–22). (My acknowledgement is to McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, for pointing to this lecture in Anzinger.)

18 Barth, 'Kriegszeit und Gottesreich': 'Welt bleidt Welt . . . Daß Gott Gott ist'.

19 Anzinger, *Glaube und kommunikative Praxis*, pp. 120–1: 'Daß Gott Gott ist, "Gott so wie er im Leben und Wort Jesu zu erkennen ist", daß er "etwas von Grund aus Anderes ist als Alles Andre".'

20 The full text by Barth, quoted in Anzinger, *Glaube und kommunikative Praxis*, pp. 121–2, is: 'Was soll uns der Gott, der uns einst als die höchste Idee der Ethik vorgestellt worden ist? Der "Vater im Himmel", auf den er [sc. Jesus] uns hinweist, ist keine Idealität, die von ihrem Gegensatz lebt, keine formale unreale Groß, die schließlich auch wieder in die Welt hineingehört, keine Idee der Gerechtigkeit oder der Liebe im Wetteifer der Ideen der Ethik, sondern die Wirklichkeit, aus der unsre ganze Welt herausgefallen ist. Daß Gott unser Schöpfer und Ursprung in der andern für uns ganz neuen Welt [ist, sei] das einzige Positive . . ., das wir sagen können. All unser sonstiges Reden von Gott ist ein Stammeln, oder es muß, wenn es ernst gelten soll, in lauter Negationen bestehen.'

not into a higher form of being in the Hegelian sense). Barth is making a conscious effort to distance himself from idealistic theology and religion. It has been noted,[21] that Barth is attempting to think from the standpoint of God himself, as evidenced from a phrase he borrows from Hermann Kutter used in *Römerbrief*[1], 'thinking from or out of God' (*ein Denken von Gott aus*).[22]

As Barth proceeded to untangle his theological thinking from the immediacy of nineteenth-century German Liberal neo-Protestantism he developed further this idea of God as 'Wholly Other'. This was emerging in 'Kriegszeit und Gottesreich' but also a year earlier in a paper entitled 'Der Glaube an den persönlichen Gott' (1914).[23] This concept also occurs in other lectures/articles during this period – for example, 'Die Gerechtigkeit Gottes' from 1916.[24] If we examine Barth's lectures, addresses and articles in this crucial period of 1914–18 – including *Römerbrief*[1] (Summer 1916 – August 1918) – we find several uses of negative theological language and concepts which are then carried through into *Römerbrief*[2] (written October 1920 – September 1921, but with a different dialectical character and emphasis to that in the first edition). This raises the question, 'Why does Barth use negative theological concepts?' Or more pertinently, 'How does Barth use such negation in language and theological concept?' There are several reasons/examples:

Negation in relation to theological epistemology and the doctrine of God

Initially we can see negation used in relation to the knowledge of God and the doctrine of God. It is used for ensuring the distinctness, the wholly otherness of God beyond all human knowledge and understanding, beyond human categorization as an object or thing. God is not a 'thing in itself' (*Ding in sich*)[25] not a metaphysical essence alongside other essences, not a second something, an-other, but the eternal, the transcendent, the pure *Ursprung* (origin) of everything that is. However to say that God is 'no thing' (i.e. no particular thing, as such) is not the same as saying God is 'nothing' (nothing at all) – though the subtlety of the English language here is not as clear in the German: *nein ding* (no thing) as compared to *nichts* (nothing), or *Nichts* (nothingness), *gar nichts* (nothing at all). Within this context, for example,

21 McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* and Terry L. Cross, *Dialectic in Karl Barth's Doctrine of God* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

22 Barth, *Römerbrief*[1], pp. 71f. See also McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, pp. 129–30.

23 'Der Glaube an den persönlichen Gott', in *Zeischrift für Theologie und Kirche* 24 (1914), pp. 21–32, 65–95.

24 'Die Gerechtigkeit Gottes', address delivered in the Town Church of Aarau on 16 January 1916. Published in *Neue Wege* 10 (1916); later reprinted in *Das Wort Gottes und die Theoligie* (Münich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1925), pp. 5–17. ET 'The Righteousness of God', in *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), pp. 9–27.

25 As used in *Römerbrief*[2], pp. 29–30 / ET, pp. 51–3.

Barth uses the term *diastasis* (long before he discovered it also in the work of Kierkegaard) to express this critical distinction between God and this world – *Welt bleibt Welt, das Gott Gott ist*.

Negation as a refutation of the validity of natural theology

Second, we can see the use of negation as a refutation of the validity of natural theology, that is, the efforts made by men and women to define God, even invent gods, and attribute divine characteristics, without recourse to divine revelation. However, it is important to remember that during the period around and following the publication of *Römerbrief*[1] Barth is still developing his scepticism of natural theology and it takes the form of a simple denial. This refutation does not have the theological explication that was to characterize his mature work, forged in part through the discussions he held with Roman Catholic philosophers of religion and theologians in the late 1920s and his public exchange with Brunner in the early 1930s.

Negation as a criticism of religion

Third, there is the critical assumption that the churches and historical Christianity, human religiosity and piety (at best this is an organized religious response to the historical event of the incarnation and resurrection, at worst this is no more than religious projection, narcissistic mythologies) will always be subject to criticism and assessment – from the perspective of the gospel. Such a critique is negative because it looks critically, pessimistically and destructively on the religious efforts of humanity. All may not have served the gospel as they should have. Underlying this criticism is a belief in the aseity, sovereignty and independence of God from humanity and human history. God in Christ is the final arbiter of whether human religion is acceptable or not, and on what terms, if any.

Paradox: negation as atheism – atheism as a negation

Fourth, we can see the emergence in the early lectures and addresses of a respect, under certain circumstances, for 'negation as atheism – atheism as a negation', a paradox. This is seen as the clearing away of all human conceptions and preconceptions, and especially projections. For example, Barth knew only too well that atheists might often have a better grasp of the truth of God than Christians immersed in religious culture. And of course Barth and Thurneysen saw varying degrees and forms of atheism/atheists with varying degrees and characteristics of negation, dialectic and paradox. The most explicit use of this qualified respect for atheism in Barth's early work occurs in 'Die Gerechtigkeit Gottes' (1916).

Negation in relation to the Christian life

Fifth and finally, Barth, like the apostle Paul, also uses negation as a characteristic of the Christian life, for example, to deny oneself and take up Christ's cross is a negation. We saw something of this, the value of this apophatic–cataphatic dialectic in scripture earlier.

Negation – concepts

How does Barth present this in his early addresses and lectures and in *Römerbrief[1]*? In two ways – the language used and the theological concepts that emerge from the language. In terms of the language the primary terms are *N/negativ* (negative), *Negation* (negation). The secondary terms are *P/paradox* (paradox/paradoxical), *Paradoxon* (paradox – philosophical and rhetorical), *Paradoxie* (paradoxicalness), *Dialektik* (dialectic), *dialektisch* (dialectical) *P/positiv* (positive), *unwissentlich* (unknowingly, unknowability), *Rätsel* (mystery, enigma). The terms *V/verneinungen* (denials) *Verneinungenswort* (negative word) *Verneinungsfall* (answer in the negative) are also used, but primarily by Thurneysen (and Barth) in the context of their work on Dostoevsky. In terms of concepts many of these ideas are in origin from 1914/15 and are presented in the lectures/addresses simply as ideas, then used more explicitly in both editions of *Der Römerbrief*, and are only spelt out in Barth's mature work. For example: Visibility–Invisibility; Knowability–Unknowability; Negative–Positive; Veiling–Unveiling; Revelation–Hiddenness; Paradoxicalness–Logicality; Yes–No (Barth proposition of God's 'Yes' to our 'No', and 'No' to our 'Yes').[26] As we have seen from 'Der Glaube an den persönlichen Gott' (1914) and 'Kriegszeit und Gottesreich' (1914), there is already a dialectical disjunction between pairs of antinomies, characterized by diastasis. This method continues into Barth's writing and rewriting of *Der Römerbrief* and into his mature work – in particular the use of Visibility–Invisibility, Knowability–Unknowability, Veiling–Unveiling in the *Church Dogmatics*.[27] However, it is in *Römerbrief[1]* that he makes the most explicit use of negation: there are twenty-two explicit key references to or uses of *N/negation* in the first edition,[28] but also much of the work is infused with such dialectical negation.

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26 See *Church Dogmatics* II/1 The Doctrine of God.

27 *CD* II/1, specifically ch. V, *The Knowledge of God*, §§25, 26 and 27. The root of many German and English terms in this field will be found in intertestamental Greek (also Pseudo Dionysius), for example, ἀποφασις, εως (*a denial, negation* – Liddell and Scott); also ἀγνωσος, ον (*unknown* – used by Paul in his Areopagus speech, Acts 17:23a & 23b), also ἀγνωσια, ας (*ignorance, no knowledge, lack of spiritual perception*) and ἀγνοια, ας (*ignorance, unawareness*), also μυστηριον, ου (*secret, mystery – of something formerly unknown but now revealed*). Barth's use of *unwissentlich* is similar to ἀκαταληψια/ἀκαταληπτος (*incomprehensibility*) – and he uses this Greek explicitly in *CD II/1* The Doctrine of God §27 'The Limits to the Knowledge of God'.

28 For example, *Römerbrief[1]*, pp. 38–9 (on Rom. 1:28–31, 32); pp. 71–2 (on Rom. 3:5–8); pp. 80–1 (on Rom. 3:20a); p. 92 (on Rom. 3:22b–24); pp. 144–5 (on Rom. 4:23–25);

Negation in *Römerbrief*[1]

But what exactly does Barth say in *Römerbrief*[1]? What use does he make of this apophatic theology and language? Barth's apophatic theology in this period can be seen as an assertion of the inadequacy of human understanding in matters Divine, and therefore a corrective within theology (a necessary corrective to the affirmative, the reliance upon human language, human constructs for God, or gods). Therefore whatever attempt at speaking of or about God, God remains unsayable and much of our religion remains a human invention. For example, on the consequences of the rebellion against God, Barth wrote:

> In their idols too people do indeed seek God, and in the Unreal they think they have the Real, they consider what is nothing to be something and the turn to false norms still betrays a consciousness of the norm. And this too can be denied and given up. The folly (*Narrenweisheit*) now becomes unrestrained subjectivism, false religiosity into irreligiosity, the disorientation of conscience into a complete loss of conscience. (pp. 38–9, on Romans 1:28–31)

Continuing on Romans 1:32, Barth then asserts that 'the whole paradox and the whole sickness of the situation lies in humanity itself, in its self-contradiction, into which it has come'. In negating human religiosity Barth commented that according to human ideas this dialectic unfolds repetitively, for 'whoever talks of "God", without thinking of God can easily be more right than God is. But he can only be in the right against "God"!' (pp. 38–9, on Romans 1:32), for humanity will be called to account for its unrighteousness 'that under a dialectical appearance, "according to human concepts", a game is played with God's revealed good will' (pp. 71–2, on *Romans* 3:5–8). For this is 'the whole paradox of God's relationship to so-called history' (pp. 80–1, on *Romans*, 3:20a). The human condition is negative because of its fallenness, sin fractures and leads to negation, the logic of the matter is, as Barth asserts, that we are now overwhelmed by God's anger (remembering that he was writing during the First World War), but we are not abandoned, the paradox is that God is still faithful (see Barth on Romans 3:22b–24, p. 92). Law as a result is paradoxical (p. 144), but God wants to make something of us, we are called to inherit the new world to be a new humanity that God has called to life. Dare we venture to go where God will preserve us? where God can be our strength? Barth:

> And this step, which has little to do with mysticism and ethics alike, should be acknowledged to be righteousness, as the redeeming self-revealing act of God. Like Abraham we stand not just once but hour by hour, before the God

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pp. 214–15 (on Rom. 6:1–14); pp. 296–7 (on Rom. 8:1–11); pp. 300–1 (on Rom. 8:1–11); pp. 313–14 (on Rom. 8:12–27); pp. 328–9 (on Rom. 8:12–27); pp. 349–50 (on Rom. 8:32); pp. 352–3 (on Rom. 8:35–37); pp. 358–9 (on Rom. 9:1–5); pp. 363–4 (on Rom. 9:6–13); pp. 384–5 (on Rom. 9:14–29); p. 395 (on Rom. 10:1–3); pp. 438–9 (on Rom. 11:1–11); pp. 488–9 (on Rom. 12:14–16b); pp. 522–3 (on Rom. 13:8b–10); pp. 535–6 (on Rom. 14:1–2); pp. 611–12 (*Zu Kapitel* 2/3).

> who makes the dead alive and calls non-being into being (4.17). (pp. 144–5, on Romans 4:23–25)

Barth is repudiating mysticism where it rejects revelation and chooses to ground itself in religiosity (even if such mysticism is dressed in the trappings of philosophical apophatism): we must continually, hour by hour as Barth puts it, stand before the unknowable God who knows us intimately and whose righteousness convicts us yet wills our life, our re-creation. This tension is dialectical and if we try to make something positive out of it (even the positive apophatism of the mystical tradition) then we do not close the antinomy but merely deny it and in consequence deny the self-revealing God. Negation (the apophatic) is only acceptable if it leads to a greater affirmation (the cataphatic) on God's part:

> And now the decisive point: with the negation of sin into which we have been grafted by Christ we have achieved a new position. (p. 214, on Romans 6:1–14)

And we are born into a new life, we must walk in this new life, this new relationship with the unknowable God,

> that separates us sharply and decisively from our former being as dead, that forcefully forbids us to go back on our positive transition into a new better existence and form of life, not into a mystical vacuum and not into a Buddhist nirvana. (p. 215, on Romans 6:1–14)

To do so would simply be a human attempt to close the dialectical negation, a human attempt to solve the question of God and life on human terms by creating yet more religion. Why? because:

> By baptism we are placed under positive conditions, which as such negate[29] and exclude all dependency on anything else. (p. 215, on Romans 6:1–14)

This has its own superior life and 'is not mere negation, opposition and critique' (p. 215). In consequence negation leads to a greater affirmation, despite the bewilderment that characterizes the apophatic (our ignorance in human terms of God and *his* purposes), the result is a greater affirmation (hence the apophatic–cataphatic dialectic).

This is a form of *Christian* apophatism (though it can be considered that the use of dialectic distances, to a degree, Barth's use of negation from much of the Christian, so-called, mystical tradition): 'But we no longer stand under this judgement. We are in Christ.' Barth may negate religion when it is human self-seeking, worse still the domestication of God, but this negation allows for the positive affirmation from God: 'Instead of it thundering against us in judgement and negation, it now stands behind us as a given, as the one that leads and stirs us . . . For as sin has ravaged not only the soul but also nature, so also the end of God's

29 Barth uses *ausschließen*, to bar, debar, to foreclose, to exclude (from), thereby to negate (Oxford-Duden): 'Wir sind durch die Taufe unter positive Bedingungen gestellt, die als solche alle andern Abhängigkeiten aufheben und ausschließen.'

ways is the corporeality of the new creation' (pp. 296–7, on Romans 8:1–11). From an individual (that is, human) perspective the fulfilment of the divine will is insoluble:

> It hurls the most well meaning and sharp of entrepreneurs back into the nothingness of fleshly being, to which they belong. It demands no more and no less that a new act of God's power, in analogy, in continuation of the first creation from nothing. For the world and humanity, which now are, have in fact fallen back into chaos, into nothing, and have become subject to the dominion of death. A new world must break in, if God's truth and goodness are to be honoured, and not just misleadingly and apparently so. (p. 300, on Romans 8:1–11)

Invoking negative language, Barth comments that it is the paradoxical and irrational (surd like) entry of sin that is the cause for the entry of the power of God in Christ. Therefore this entry, and this incarnation/resurrection is likewise paradoxical and apparently irrational, not a rational necessity (p. 301). Because the 'Spirit of Life (*Geist des Lebens*)' (p. 313, alluding to Romans 8:2) indwells in us our present situation is determined in two respects:

> **Negatively**: we live, and so we can no longer live after the manner of the flesh; for this 'life' would in fact be death. Through the course/process of Christ's life, in which we are grafted, the possibilities for the existence of the fleshly nature have been cut off, indeed still more: we ourselves disable the functions and influences which from the old world affect us, fill us and poison us, and so help us to break all their force (8:12–13). **Positively**: we are now in and out of ourselves organs or agents of God's power. The absolute necessity of our triumphant defensive and offensive against the powers of the old world is based on the fact that God is no longer a stranger to us, no idea, to which we would have to bow down and serve conscious of our inadequacy; but in Christ God's matter has become our matter, in which as children of the house we share without a backward glance at our worthiness, simply with the thought of the greatness and goodness of the Father (8:14–16). (p. 313, Barth's emphases)

The fullness of this remains undeveloped, as Barth terms it. We are children and heirs (Paul's terms) but there is a paradoxical opposition between these present sufferings that still afflict us and our new nature – but 'we still stand in the coming of God's glory' (pp. 313–14, on Romans 8:17–18). Hence the negation in the Christian life we noted earlier: like Christ we are 'hidden, veiled' but we are also 'under manifold confusion, degeneration and paradox' (p. 328). Barth sees this dialectically, paradoxically, at odds with this world, in many ways incomprehensible to this world and its powers:

> The divine wisdom made a mockery, the divine glory trampled in the dust, the divine power given to death, the divine love subjected to the misery and shame of our human world. This was how God came after us. This was how he shone his light in the darkness (2 Co 4.6). (p. 350, on Romans 8:32)

This is, of course, illustrated further by Barth when he deals with Romans 8:35–37 when Paul comments 'Who will separate us from the love of Christ?' and proceeds to outline the hardships and fears, persecutions and danger. Those in the churches of his day who opt for a different future than the future of God (p. 352) are criticized by Barth for they 'so cleverly bypass the paradox of the Cross' (pp. 352–3, on Romans 8:35–37) with, as Barth saw it, pious relativism. This use of paradoxical negation is developed further when Barth deals with Romans 9:1–5 when he comments on the paradoxical gaze of the one who truly seeks after truth (pp. 358–9).

Negation is separation – separation is negation: again Barth invokes a dialectical antinomy and, when commenting on Romans 9:6–13, uses this to discuss the plight of the Jews. Barth:

> Looked on from the outside Israel's plight is something of an insoluble paradox . . . separation comes from God Himself, from the God who judges humanity. The same word that once called them, now excludes them. (pp. 363–4)

Barth continues saying that so it is with God and man. The situation is paradoxical and he attempts to deal with the issue of double predestination and the organic movement of *Heilsgeschichte*, which is in many ways appears the least successful concept in *Römerbrief*[1]:

> Preliminary questions find preliminary, half-right and downright false answers. They may not be approved of, but they are 'tolerated', that is by further corrective and more precise questions they are brought into the progress to that goal that stands over all our action. They must also serve negatively to illumine and open the way. They are corrected by true answers that do not lack anything, and are given over to oblivion. (pp. 384–5, on Romans 9:14–29)

Thus we find human epistemic limitation in terms of God's knowability, but also in relation not simply to transcendence but also immanence – God's dealings with humanity. Such questioning and paradoxes 'must at least illustrate the progress in a negative way' (p. 385).

A dialectic that is commonly used in the second edition of *Der Römerbrief* can also be found here in *Römerbrief*[1], that is the Yes–No antinomy (Barth's proposition that God says 'Yes' to our 'No', and 'No' to our 'Yes'). This may be seen in such pairings as offender–offended, critic–criticized, attacker–attacked (p. 395), but it finds its fullest expression where Barth quotes Luther:

> Don't you know, have you not heard: 'The true word of God, when it comes, *always* comes *against* our wish and intention. It does not cease its opposition to our intention, even in what is most holy, but destroys and uproots and explodes everything' (Luther). (Barth's emphases p. 395, on Romans 10:1–3)

Barth likens the situation of the Jews, seemingly abandoned as the people of God, with the church of his day (remembering he was writing during the First World War):

> Can you not imagine that what is completely radical can be completely positive, that precisely because I seems to decide 'against' you, I have decided 'for' you? It appears to be a hard word: the church is now abandoned by God! but can one seriously speak of God and have in mind only a harsh negation? (p. 395, on Romans 10:1–3)

Hence we find yet again an irreconcilable antinomy between the apophatic and the cataphatic; the antinomy appears as such because of the purposes of God – the immanent Trinity, though at this early stage Barth does not explicate in so explicit a manner (see also p. 438, on Romans 11:1–11). The movement of salvation history can under certain circumstances appears to have been negated by the incarnation–resurrection (the latter being given a much greater emphasis in the second edition of *Der Römerbrief* at the expense of *Heilsgeschichte*): 'we have to let the plan work with its own dialectic (12.19–20)' (p. 489).

The closure/resolution of these dialectics is with the *eschaton* – this is a consistent theme in Barth's dialectical theology even in the early addresses and essays we mentioned earlier. God is love. Love moves to reconcile the antinomy because love builds the new world – 'for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law' (Romans 13:8b). Such positive behaviour announces the divine word:

> All rebellion and all negation towards the dominant powers is ambivalent (others can do that!), love is an unambivalent word, that humanity can understand. All struggle against evil on its own foundation can finally not succeed, love is the power of resurrection, by which it comes to new creation . . . Love will establish peace, which seems to you almost impossible, love convinces men who can now only be considered enemies, love overcomes the state, whose ungodliness is a stark offence to you. (pp. 522–3, on Romans 13:8b–10)

Therefore, for Barth, powerful negations of this world will allow for us to perceive, even enter paradise (p. 535), but only love transcends and closes the dialectics, removes the negations, these dialectical antinomies. Religion may serve, but also may hinder; therefore we find Barth's negative criticism of religion/church.

Conclusion

What Barth is attempting to undermine in his invocation of apophatic theological language is the domestication of God. Therefore we can only speak of God by denying self-satisfaction in our speech,[30] thus the apparently annoying dialectical antinomies we looked at earlier – God's 'Yes' to our 'No' and vice versa. This

30 See Rico Sneller, 'Crisis in our Speaking about God: Derrida and Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*', in Isle N. Bulhof and Kate Laurensten, *Flight of the Gods – Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).

methodology continues in the wholesale rewriting between 1920 and 1921 of his commentary to be published as the second edition of *Der Römerbrief*. Von Balthasar commented on *Römerbrief*[2] that,

> In the fire of Overbeck, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard (and the Reformers . . .), the gunpowder has been ignited . . . The second edition is like 'dynamite' (p. 238) coming dangerously close to Nietzsche; it 'revolutionizes religion' (p. 237), it is the 'cry and the silence' (p. 238). We have now truly fallen into the 'hell of religion' (pp. 239f.). We must smell 'the stench of death to the point of death that is wafted from the summits of religion' (p. 259).[31]

This apophatic methodology continues not only in this criticism of religion as John Webster has shown with regard to *Römerbrief*[2][32] but was at the heart of Barth's theological epistemology. As such it was used to 'present God as the abolition of all human possibilities . . . of securing some vantage point from which God might be rendered manageable'.[33] Webster's article 'On the Frontiers of what is Observable' on Barth's apophatic language in *Römerbrief*[2] makes an excellent complementary reading to this essay.[34] Although it is important to remember that Barth's apophatism in the second edition is much more acerbic and dismissive in the sense that in terms of methodology it is 'complementary dialectics' he used rather than the 'supplementary dialectics' that we have seen in *Römerbrief*[1], Webster does note that much later Barth in his mature work did realize that God could not be contained or domesticated by such negative language – both transcendence and immanence had to be acknowledged, but on God's terms and God's terms only. Therefore the unsayable God could be spoken of, with *his* permission (*analogia fidei*). God even in coming to us in his Son is still God.

Primarily at this period Barth and Thurneysen use apophatic theology and language to refute the domestication of God into the German idealism that characterized their, as they saw it, liberal theological heritage, Barth asserted the independence, the distinction of God from all human matters including knowledge and cognition. But this is a technique used to lead to a greater affirmation: God can only be known in and through himself, hence the focus on the *Deus dixit* in his mature work, the incarnation, the christocentric emphasis. At this time Barth used apophatic language and theology to help define the cataphatic, as we have seen, as a method in redefining the meaning and content of theology. Ironically

31 von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth – Exposition and Interpretation*, p. 68.
32 J.B. Webster, '"On the Frontiers of what is Observable": Barth's Römerbrief and Negative Theology' *Downside Review* 105 (July 1987), pp.169–80.
33 Webster, 'On the Frontiers', p. 175.
34 Within the context of Barth's use of apophatic language and concepts it is worth mentioning Mary Ann Stenger, 'Ultimacy in Relation to Affirmation and Negation: Buddhist and Christian Perspectives', *Dialogue and Alliance* 5 (Spring 1991), pp. 55–67.

Barth would have seen one of the severest criticisms of Christian apophatism by the French philosopher Derrida – that it always and inevitably leads to affirmation – as a compliment. *Der Römerbrief* is, all importantly, first and foremost a biblical commentary in which Barth asserted biblical-Christian truth – from his perspective.[35]

35 See Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, eds., with a conclusion by Jacques Derrida, *Derrida and Negative Theology* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992).