Confessional Theology?

Confessional Theology?: A Critical Analysis of the Theology of Karl Barth and its Significance for the Belhar Confession

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To Precious Galaletsang for her love and support
in our life’s journey

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The preliminary impulse of this project came from the numerous conversations that I had with some of my peers while I was studying at the University of the Western Cape in 1997. South Africa had just had its first election by the people in 1994. Having followed the impact that theology had both in its sanctioning of apartheid as well as its bold attempts later to challenge the theological legitimacy of this ideology, I and most of my theological peers took it for granted that the church shall now have to retreat to that which it was called to; that which we thought was the proclamation of the Word of God and the administration of the sacraments. Clearly this view exhibited what we understood the task of theology was. These views have subsequently undergone vigorous revision as this project will reveal.

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—Rothney S Tshaka
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INTRODUCTION

Christian confessions are frequently seen as Christian documents that have nothing to do with the subject of politics. The result has been that both the concepts "confession" and "politics" have been interpreted in mutually exclusive ways. For this reason, some have argued that there is a distinction between confession and confessing, in the most cases opting for the latter which has to do with praxis.

Following Karl Barth's induction into academia and his responsibility to teach Reformed Theology at a predominantly Lutheran faculty, he discovered that Reformed confessions were more than mere statements of faith. This study endeavours to investigate the relationship between Christian confessions and politics, looking particularly at how the relationship between them has been construed in the theology of Karl Barth, the Barmen Declaration in Germany and the Belhar Confession in South Africa. It concludes that a relationship between confession and politics is unavoidable, yet this relationship is only best comprehended when one looks at it in a confessional manner.

This study then ventures to explain what is meant by "looking at Barth's theology in a confessional manner" by considering issues such as the primacy of the Word of God, the church as the subject of theology, the public witness of Christ to the world, the political context in which this theology takes place, as well as the ethical implications which emanates from this theology. The chronology of these characteristics is not haphazard, but serves the purpose of explaining why it is imperative that the supremacy of the Word of God determines the degree to which theology has to provide an answer to the political challenges facing the church.

The usage of the concept "confession" in this study is distinct from "confessionalism". The confessing act is always implied in the confession. The humanness with which a Christian confession is made reminds us of the fallibility of a confession; for this reason every confession must always be aware of its temporality, what Barth prefers to call the idea of "until further notice".

By confining itself not merely to his monumental work – the Church Dogmatics – but also to Barth's preceding and succeeding works, Chapter 1 establishes the confessional nature of his theology. This chapter traces

the most influential people and events that shaped the confessional nature of Barth's theology. These include Luther, Kant, the Blumhardts, as well as Calvin and the Reformed theology in particular.

Furthermore it is argued that it was primarily during his tenure as professor of Reformed Theology at Göttingen that Barth first began to really appreciate the essence of Reformed theology and Reformed confessions. An argument is made that it was his understanding of Reformed theology that influenced his politics. Barth's response to the question of the desirability of a universal Reformed confession has proven to be one of the early indicators of how he later came to see theology.

Chapter 2 investigates whether Barth was true to his 1925 understanding of what constituted a Reformed confession when he was confronted with the need to confess in 1934. The historicity of the Barmen Theological Declaration is explored to illustrate that Barth continued to view theology in a confessional manner.

Chapter 3 deals with Barth's Church Dogmatics, illustrating that Barth never wanted his work to be seen as a complete event, but preferred to see it as a process. In pursuing this argument, this study supports Hunsinger's claim that Barth's work takes the motive of "actualism" very seriously, and that this actualism has in general a tendency of explicating Barth's work in terms of events. It argues that contrary to the 1930s where Barth's theology insisted on the essence of confessional theology, the entire Church Dogmatics (especially the parts that proceeds the era indicated) should be read as confessional theology.

Chapter 4 deals with the Belhar Confession that was adopted in South African in 1986. Admitting that the Belhar Confession was influenced by the theology of Barth, the characteristics of confessional theology are also explored in this Confession. There are inevitable differences between Barth's views and the Belhar Confession, yet the similarities can hardly be ignored. It is argued that the new church order of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) ought to be equally emphasised to illustrate that the Belhar Confession has definite ethical implications. It is asserted that these ethical implications necessitate the embodiment of that which is confessed by those who subscribe to this Confession. This Confession does not merely deal with issues that affect humanity in abstraction. Many have failed to see the Belhar Confession's call for embodiment, because they have interpreted this Confession without regard for the new church order.

Finally, it is argued that the confessional nature of Belhar allows this Confession to contribute positively to the current democratic dispensation in South Africa. It is a Confession of its time and, knowing that it stands

within the tradition of Barth's confessional theology, it insists that it remains merely a commentary on the Word of God.

It is also argued that confessional theology can be a suitable theological alternative that can assist theological reflection on the role of the church in a context that is vexed with new challenges, such as the South African context. It is argued that confessional theology can provide a platform of discussing ways in which theology and politics, which remain intertwined, can both exist side by side, without the one dictating to the other.

CHAPTER ONE

THE SEEDS OF CONFESSIONAL THEOLOGY SOWN?

> [Calvin is] a waterfall, a primitive forest, a demonic power, something straight down from the Himalayas, absolutely Chinese, strange, mythological; I just don't have the organs, the suction cups, even to assimilate this phenomenon, let alone to describe it properly.
> —Karl Barth[1]

1.1 Introduction

Karl Barth has been hailed as one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century. As a Reformed theologian, Barth never forgot to give credit to his Reformed predecessors as well as other theologians who had influenced him. His reverence for the reformer Martin Luther has not gone unnoticed.[2] This chapter explores the most important individuals and events that made an impact on Barth, specifically Calvin and the Reformed tradition. Although the impact Luther made of Barth is well documented, this chapter shall attempt to give due credit to the impact of John Calvin

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[1] Karl Barth cited in: E Busch, *Karl Barth: his life from letters and autobiographical texts*. Philadelphia: SCM Press, 1976: 138.

[2] Hans Tiefel has done some exquisite work on the relationship between Martin Luther and Barth, particularly on the issue of Gospel and Law (cf. H Tiefel, *The ethics of Gospel and Law: Aspects of the Barth-Luther debate*. D. Phil dissertation. Yale University, 1967). Hunsinger has also noted the influence that Luther had on Barth. He refers to the index of Barth's Church Dogmatics and asserts that the longest entry in the index volume indicates that Luther was one of the individuals who made the greatest impact on Barth (cf. G Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000: 279-304 and 'Gesetz und Evangelium oder Evangelium und Gebot?' in: B Klappert, *Versöhnung und Befreiung: Versuche, Karl Barth zu verstehen*. Düsseldorf, Neukirchener Verlag, 1994: 166).

and therefore the Reformed tradition.[3] It will be argued that Barth saw in Calvin an individual who was approachable and with whom one could disagree, if necessary.

The initial parts of this chapter deal with the person of Barth and his preliminary encounters with Kant and other important figures at the time. It will explain why Barth thought it necessary to entertain Kant as a conversational partner in his theological reflection. This chapter will furthermore trace the centres in which Barth had studied and then continue to probe his growing awareness of the inadequacy of liberal theology. It will be illustrated that Barth only realised the loopholes inherent in liberal theology after he had stumbled on the truth in the Bible and the serious challenges that the Bible posed to this theology.

Karl Barth was interested in politics from the outset. Fundamentally, this chapter will assert that although the Bible opened a "strange new world" to him, Barth never thought that he had to abandon his interest in politics. This chapter shall attempt not to confine itself to a specific period in Barth's theological progress. In doing this it hopes to indicate the gradual maturity with which Barth handled politics. This claim is underpinned by the view that, although he later distanced himself from his initial identification of "'Jesus Christ with the movement for social change"[4], Barth never rejected his social tendencies.

The fact that he remained biased in favour of socialism does not suggest that he allowed himself to be confined by such an ideology. Barth's constant vigilance against the ills of "isms" placed him in a position where he could criticise the very views that he espoused. His initiation into the academic world and his responsibility to teach Reformed theology impelled him to invest more time and energy in his studies on Reformed confessions. This chapter will consider the importance of the Reformed confessions for Barth, as well as the role of confessional theology as a means of justifying the church's existence in the world while constantly reminding the church that it has not arrived at its desired destiny yet.

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[3] The impact that the Reformed tradition left on him can also not go unnoticed. The work of Matthias Freudenberg is of particular importance (cf. M Freudenberg, *Karl Barth und die Reformierte Theologie: Die Auseinandersetzung mit Calvin, Zwingli und den Reformierten Bekenntnisschriften während seiner Göttinger Lehrtätigkeit*. Germany: Neukirchener Verlag, 1997 and K Barth, *The theology of John Calvin*. Trans. G Bromiley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmands, 1995.)

[4] Cf. K Barth, 'Jesus Christ and the movement for social change' in: G Hunsinger (ed.), *Karl Barth and Radical Politics*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976.

This chapter will ultimately make the claim that, for all intents and purposes, it was Barth's discovery of the relevance and importance of Reformed confessions that impelled him to justify the church's ability to engage in the affairs of the world. It will be pointed out that the church engaged the affairs of the world by means of a "confessional theology" which admitted that the church is charged to say something about God and yet, because of its humanness, cannot speak about this God as if it really knows Him. Attempts will also be made to indicate that confessional theology is not synonymous with confessionalism, hence reference is made to the effect that Barth remained constantly aware of the dangers of confessionalism.[5]

1.2 Berne (1904) to Geneva (1908): Early catalysts in the search for a contextual theology

Barth began his theological training in 1904 at the University of Berne under the direction of his father, Johann Friedrich "Fritz" Barth. At Berne, he had the unpalatable obligation to listen to some of the most tedious and conservative theologians of that era. His teachers at that time were tedious in his opinion primarily because he thought that they neither spoke to his condition nor commanded his attention.[6]

Despite this, it was also at Berne that he became interested in the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant, as well as Schleiermacher's theology of religious experience.[7] From Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, Barth realised that the gospel was in actual fact simple, and that

[5] When Barth visited the USA for the fist time he took some time to talk about his theology. He acknowledged that he knew too little about the USA to consider it his audience, nonetheless he reiterated some of the basic principles upon which he based his theology. Barth preferred to speak on the subject of Evangelical theology which in essence characterizes his theology. Evangelical theology insists radically on the Bible. His preference for the concept Evangelical is informed by his concern for the ills of denominational theology. This reveals Barth as someone that remained forever at loggerheads with confessionalism. Barth argued that Evangelical theology intended to apprehend, to understand and to speak of the gospel in the midst of the variety of all other theologies, and (without any value-judgment being implied) in distinction from them (cf. K. Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An introduction*. Trans. G Foley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963: 3-5). This is the same goal that confessional theology attempts to strive for.

[6] Cf. E Busch, 1976: 33.

[7] Cf. K Barth, *Karl Barth: How I changed my mind*. Edinburgh: St Andrews Press, 1966c: 18.

the divine truth was not a complicated, difficult construction with hundreds of different prepositions and hypotheses.[8]

When the time came for Karl Barth to continue his studies in Germany (as was customary among many of his peers in those days), a huge debate ensued between him and his father concerning where exactly he would further his theological studies. This difference of opinion was inevitable, since his father was considered to belong to a conservative school of theology. Fritz Barth's discomfort with liberal theology led him to conclude that his son would be safe at Halle or Greifswald, considered to be among the conservative centres of theology in Germany.[9]

In the end, Barth managed to obtain his father's approval to enrol in Berlin. Among the many theologians whom he encountered in Berlin, Barth was especially impressed by Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930). It was from this man's lips that Barth heard the argument that "the dogma of the early period was a self-expression of the Greek spirit in the sphere of the gospel".

Conceding that theology during Barth's formative years at Berne was dull, Barth nevertheless became enthusiastic about this subject after he had stumbled upon liberal theology and began to believe that those espousing a liberal voice in theology had something to say to him. In Berlin he became a devout pupil and disciple of Wilhelm Herrmann (1846-1922), a systematic theologian from Marburg.

Although Barth had come to enjoy liberal theology, his father was not impressed with this new venture and as a means of initiating him into sound positive theology; Fritz Barth resorted to sending his son off to Tübingen to hear Adolf Schlatter.[10] Barth finally left for Marburg in 1908. There his future dear friend and theological partner, Eduard Thurneysen, later introduced him to Hermann Kutter as well as Leonhard Ragaz, the leaders of the Swiss religious movement. He was particularly overwhelmed

[8] Cf. E Busch, 1976: 35.
[9] Cf. E Busch, 1976: 38ff; B McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: its genesis and development 1909-1936*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997: 37f.
[10] Cf. E Busch, 1976: 42.

by Ragaz with his theme "God was meeting humanity[11] today in socialism".[12]

By this time, Karl Barth was already a devoted follower of Immanuel Kant. With the help of his philosopher brother Peter Barth, Karl was convinced of the need to take Kant seriously as a conversation partner in his theological discourses. Therefore, although Barth insisted on the primacy of the Word of God in doing theology (as was especially the case with his mature theology), it cannot be denied that he equally paid attention to philosophy. McCormack has suggested that to the extent that Barth engages Kant in particular, Barth could be seen as a Kantian. He argued that since Barth operated with a philosophical epistemology, Barth was an idealist and at bests a Kantian.[13]

This epistemology is particularly evident in Barth's Romans II which, in the view of McCormack, stood in the shadow of Kant. McCormack holds that Barth took for granted the validity of Kant's epistemology as set forth in the First Critique as well as the success of his attack on metaphysics.[14] Barth's comprehension of Kant and the contribution that Kant made to the rational world needs to be weighed against two realms that Kant radically delimited: the one that of "pure reason", the domain of time and space and causality; the other that of practical reason or faith, the domain in which are to be found (eternally beyond the inquiry or criticism of science) God, freedom and immortality.

By validating scientific inquiry in terms of the *a priori* nature of knowing, Kant saved science and the whole Newtonian world of time, space and causation from the destructive scalpel of Hume's scepticism. On the other hand, he saved the realm of religion and morals from the disintegrations of empirical discovery and scientific relativism in ethics and belief.[15]

As he dealt more seriously with Kant, Barth felt at ease to have him as a conversation partner in his theological discourses. According to Kant,

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[11] The German word (Mensch) has the connotation of human being. With the translation of Barth's work into English this word was rendered 'men'. The author will take the liberty to correct this false impression and refer to human or humanity instead of being contend with the word 'men' as it is used in the English translation.

[12] Cf. E Busch, 1976: 44.

[13] Cf. B McCormack, 1997: 466.

[14] Cf. B McCormack, 1997: 245.

[15] I. Kant, 'Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals' in: I Edman and H Schneider (eds.) *Landmarks for Beginners in Philosophy*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc., 1960: 570.

knowledge begins with experience, but yet it does not follow that all arises from experience. Even our empirical knowledge may consist of what we perceive through our senses.[16]

As soon as this is realised, Kant asserts that it then follows that we must admit and assume that behind the visible there is something else that is invisible, namely, the essence of the object in question. Although we must admit that these objects can never be known to us except as they affect us, we can come closer to them, but can never tangibly grasp the essence.[17] With this Kant admits that the possibility exists where knowledge can exist independent of experience. This he calls *a priori* knowledge, which differs from empirical knowledge which has its sources *a posteriori*.

It has already been pointed out that Barth heard for the first time the name Immanuel Kant while still a student at Berne. It was during that time that he developed a great interest in Kant's writings and would repeatedly read especially Kant's critique of pure reason. In fact, Barth was entertaining the possibility of engaging Kant more thoroughly when Barth decided instead to deal with the epistle of Paul to the Romans. When Kant's critique of pure reason saw the light in the 18th century, it changed people's thinking. Barth maintains that it was in Kant and the work in question that the 18th century saw, understood and affirmed itself and its own limitations. However, in saying this, continues Barth, it has to be conceded that Kant, like Rosseau and Lessing, stood at the turning point of his age.[18]

Suffice it to say that Karl Barth worked and lived in the shadow of the Enlightenment where faith in God had become a highly challenged phenomenon. It is for this reason that Van der Kooi stresses the significance of Barth's theological context as well as his interest in Kant.[19] Van der Kooi continues to maintain that Barth, unlike Calvin whom he portrays as a pre-modern thinker, stood fully within the complexities of modernity.[20]

Even though Barth gave credit to some of Kant's contemporaries, especially Rousseau and Lessing and later Herder, Schleiermacher and Hegel for the contribution that each brought to the Enlightenment debates, Barth was convinced that it was fundamentally impossible to conduct a

[16] I Kant in: I Edman & H Schneider (eds.), 1960: 632.
[17] I Kant in: I Edman & H Schneider (eds.), 1960: 633.
[18] K Barth, *From Rousseau to Ritschl*. London: SCM Press, 1959: 150.
[19] C van der Kooi, *Als in een Spiegel: God kennen volgens Calvijn en Barth*. Kampen : Kok, 2002: 12.
[20] C van der Kooi, 2002: 13.

conversation with them from the point of view of the critique of pure reason – which brought (at least for him) a new theological possibility, for they simply did not recognise it as a distinct opposite of their own possibility.[21]

Barth had come to understand the concept "Metaphysics" as referring to the classical attempt to provide an account for the order which human subjects observe in the world about them. Deducing from experience, the human being speculates the existence of the First Cause. McCormack has rightly observed that it was the rejection of this order of knowing which has earned Barth the title of being anti-metaphysical.[22]

At Marburg Barth was exposed to the Neo-Kantism of Herman Cohen (1842-1918) and Paul Natorp (1854-1924), which had also influenced Hermann, although he was very critical of it. Through him, Barth was influenced as well. The Neo-Kantism of Cohen insisted that the stuff of sensed experience cannot be considered a source of the content of knowledge. This found its most pointed expression in his understanding of the concept "origin" (*Ursprung*).

To Cohen, the understanding and usage of this concept is not a complicated matter. He is also convinced that thought cannot have its origin in anything outside of itself. To elucidate the complexity surrounding the subject, McCormack makes reference to Fisher who delineates three meanings of the word *Ursprung* in Cohen's thought:

Firstly, Origin refers to a point of commencement, the beginning of cognition in thought itself. Secondly, Cohen's usage of the term does not envision a spatial or temporal origin; it is purely a question of logical origin. Lastly, he refers to the potency of the thought to produce its content autonomously.

Ursprung according to Cohen therefore means "originary" or "originative".[23] McCormack asserts that the net effect of Cohen's doctrine of *Ursprung* is that the ideal epistemological subject is credited with a kind of knowledge which was traditionally attributed to God alone.[24] With this, Cohen wanted to exhibit the unitary character of all human knowledge. As a result he could convincingly reach the conclusion that there were only three validly recognised patterns of cognition viz. logic, ethics and aesthetics.

Taken together, these three modes of consciousness were thought to exhaust that which can be known scientifically. Thus logic concerned

[21] K Barth, 1959: 151.
[22] Cf. B McCormack, 1997: 246.
[23] Cf. B McCormack, 1997: 45.
[24] Cf. B McCormack, 1997: 46.

itself with being or that which is true, ethics concerned itself with that which ought to be or the good, and aesthetics concerned itself with beauty.[25] It is worth noting that Cohen regarded logic to be superior to the rest, for it was within this sphere that he developed the model of generation which was asserted to be valid for all scientific knowledge. Cohen's administration of these three concepts gave him reason to speak of the "objective consciousnesses".

Because everything that was perceived had its origin or was formulated by one of the external modes detected by Cohen, and because everything had to be logically ascertained, Cohen was confronted with yet another crucial problem. Since scientific approaches cannot ascertain the existence and the way in which God conducts His business, what is to happen to God? It became quite clear that both Cohen as well as Natorp made or had no place for God in their schemes, even though both were religious humanists. McCormack reminds us that both these philosophers were convinced that the idea of religion was a fundamental force in the formation of culture. Because of this conviction, they had to find ways of incorporating this aspect into their scheme.

In McCormack's view, Natorp's solution was much more complex *and in turn would open itself for much misunderstanding* (italics added). In an attempt to remedy the situation, Natorp modified Schleiermacher's understanding of religion as "feeling" (*Gefuhl*). He then concluded that feeling is of extreme importance to the inwardness or self-consciousness which accompanies and vivifies all cognitive striving of whatever kind (scientific, ethical, *et al*). The problem which arises is this: given the fact that religion itself is non-cognitive in that it is incapable of generating an object, it is therefore without an object. The result is that, for Natorp, there is no God.

Cohen on the other hand, who is noted by McCormack as being a pious albeit liberal Jew, is to a certain extent careful in this regard. For him, the place to accommodate religion within the Marburg system was under the heading of ethics. How does he do this? First he argues that the self (like the objects known to/by sciences) is not so much a given to the extent that it is an ongoing task. The self is realised through a lifetime of fidelity to moral law, meaning that it is only those choices that are made in complete freedom (and this includes freedom from coercion or even gracious assistance from God) that are moral. It is evident that Cohen believes that humanity is capable of good. This leads him to the conclusion that the

[25] This insight is taken from Fisher's *Revelatory Positivism?* Cited in: B McCormack, 1997: 46.

collective realisation of the good by society is an indication of the moral progress of the human race.

The great emphasis on the freedom of the human being inhibits Cohen to bring God in at the beginning of his scheme, although it makes place for God at the end. Cohen can do this because he in assured that the unfolding of ideals comes to an end and the process of unfolding ideals will not be perfectly realised in history. Thus God for Cohen becomes merely a guarantee that there will always be a world in which moral goals are progressively attained. It was for this reason that when he wanted to speak about the God/World relation, he used the term *Ursprung*, indicating thus that the God-World relation was a purely logical one, and not a personal one.

God for Cohen is like the mathematical concept zero: a very important placeholder in the system, yet completely without content; featureless and colourless. As much as he was aware of how convincing the arguments set forward by this Neo-Kantism were, Barth had to constantly remind himself that he was a theologian and not a philosopher. This philosophical vision and language which Cohen and Natorp wanted to introduce into the field of biblical revelation would pose a great threat to the independence of theology from science and ethics. It is more than fair to predict that, should such a philosophical approach be ordained, revelation would be subordinate to philosophy. It is for this reason that, when we look at Barth's rejection of such an approach, the question raised by Balthasar as to whether Barth should in this regard be understood prophetically or systematically becomes relevant.[26]

In his search for a contextual theology, Barth had no alternative but to seek a new objectivity in theology. Therefore, in contrast to the philosophers, for him God was not a "supreme being" whose objective relation to the world was basically mechanical. In addition, faith was not a kind of passive cognition of divine data in revelation and nature, nor was theology a series of formal propositions from scripture and conditioned by general truths.

When Barth was confronted with the critical structures of Kant and Neo-Kantism regarding the limits of human cognition, the genius of liberal theology consisted of overcoming this mechanical externality in the relationship between God and human beings. It was this genius, says Hunsinger which depended largely on three factors as identified by Hans Frei, namely that Barth had inherited from liberal theology the dialectical

[26] Cf. H Balthasar, *The theology of Karl Barth*. San Francisco: Communion Books, Ignatius Press. 1992: 72.

form of theological thought, the primacy of God in revelation, and the centrality of Jesus Christ as the content of theological knowledge.[27] Each of these inherited factors was instrumental as Barth set out to desert a theology that he had once felt content with. Barth also owed a great deal to Hermann who assisted him in the process of inculcating the mentioned issues in his theological reflection.

It was without a doubt Hermann who encouraged Barth to assert the independence of theology from science and ethics. Hermann was instrumental in stimulating Barth in this regard. From his first readings of the Ethics, he knew himself to be a devoted disciple of Herrmann.[28]

In Romans II Barth continues to draw upon the term employed in Kant's epistemology when Barth says the *unintuitable* must become *intuitable*; yet in such a way that the *unintuitable* won't changed.[29] This then means that, in order for God to remain distinct from the medium of revelation, God veils himself in the medium.

When referring to Barth's progress in Marburg, McCormack characterises the Barth's active period in Marburg as "the making of an outsider".[30] There are a number of reasons why this is a necessary and relevant characteristic. Firstly, although Barth was not a native of Germany, his activities in Marburg would certainly put his name on the theological map of Germany. More importantly, it was at Marburg that Barth came into close contact with the Neo-Kantism of Natorp and Cohen.

It was also in Marburg that he met some of his most important theological counterparts in the likes of Rudolf Bultmann and others. Here Barth also made the acquaintance of Martin Rade who, in addition to being professor of theology, was also the chief editor of *Die Christliche Welt*, a journal of which Barth would later become assistant editor.[31] From a very early period in Barth's theological development, one can detect that he was constantly engaged in processes which seemed to defy all odds. As a young man with a Marburg education showing such a great interest in the ideology of the Swiss Religious Movement was considered as odd.

The competence which he illustrated in his engagement with diverse realities manifests a view that Barth was always on the lookout for that which was good in a particular teaching. He had come to understand from Hermann Kutter's language about God, to say that great word God earnestly, responsibly and momentously. Kutter had taken the familiar

[27] Cf. G Hunsinger, 2000: 283.
[28] Cf. B McCormack, 1997: 37.
[29] Cf. B McCormack, 1997: 249.
[30] Cf. B McCormack, 1997: Prologue.
[31] Cf. E Busch, 1976: 46.

anti-ecclesiastical resentment of liberal theology and put it to a positive use: "The realm of God's power is greater than the realm of the Church'; God may well confront Christendom right in the midst of the persons and events of the profane world process".[32]

After leaving Marburg during the middle of August 1909 Barth became *Hilfsprediger* (assistant pastor) in Geneva. It was there that he became more aware of the intricacies of the ministry. Standing in the very same place where John Calvin had lectured, he began to take the complexities of the ministry seriously. The fact that he grappled with these issues culminated in his ministry when he was pastor of a small parish at Safenwil from 1911-1921. Barth's approach to politics in Safenwil had taken a new form contrary to the one that he had while still an assistant pastor in Geneva. There can be no doubt that his stay in Geneva impelled him to take the political situation in which he found himself seriously.

The seriousness with which he took his ministry in Safenwil led him to be labelled the "Red Pastor" of Safenwil. It was also while being in Safenwil that he abandoned the view he had held earlier that social misery was a necessity which serviced to elicit genuine faith. Barth could now attempt to make a connection between the gospel and the law. Two things helped him to do so: Calvin's idea of a city of God on earth, and his discovery and careful study of Werner Sombart's *Sozialismus und Soziale Bewegung*.[33]

It is worth noting that Barth only developed his socialist convictions after he had come into direct contact with members of his parish in Geneva and Safenwil. That a genuine interest in the social conditions of those he ministered to was only manifested later impels us to ponder how he would have related with his teachers who were political conservatives.

McCormack asserts that Hermann's concern for the working class extended only as far as a desire to see the worst abuses of modern industrialisation ameliorated. He continues to declare that Hermann's analysis of social problems focused upon individual relations; he made no effort to investigate structural and institutional forms of evil. He certainly had no interest in a radical change in the prevailing capitalist system that governed economic and social relationships.[34]

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[32] H Kutter cited in: E Jüngel, *Karl Barth a theological legacy.* Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986: 30.
[33] B McCormack, 1997: 80.
[34] B McCormack, 1997: 87.

1.3 Experiencing loopholes in liberal theology: A requiem

It would be completely false to assume that Barth had reached his apex as a contextual theologian when he occupied the position of pastor in the industrial area of Safenwil. Note should however be taken of the way in which he executed his ecclesiastical duties in light of the many challenges that the socio-economic and political environment in Safenwil presented.[35]

In affirming this, it should also be stated that his points of interaction with these facets differ from period to period in his theological development. By this it is meant that the essence of context in theological deliberation has always been with Barth, although the different contexts in which he found himself necessitated different ways of engaging with his context. For this reason it is argued that his involvement with the student society Zofingia[36] in 1906 already revealed him as someone who took his context seriously. Barth delivered a paper on "Zofingia and the Social question", drawing on the teachings of Ragaz.[37]

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[35] Barth's activities in the small industrial area of Safenwil are usually seen as indicators that he took his context seriously. His involvement with the creation of a few trade unions as well as his writings concerning the treatment of the workers is seldom not cited as illustrations of his awareness of the importance of context for theology. Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt has been the chief exponent to insist on the significance of these activities for a better understanding of Barth's theology (cf. Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, *Theologie und Sozialismus: Das Beispiel Karl Barths*. Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1972.) It is the view of this thesis that the Safenwil activities should not be seen as isolated incidents in Barth's theology. It is true that they signal Barth's tangible involvement in his context, but they are not the only pointers that portray Barth as a contextual theologian. Another reason why his activities in Safenwil are seen as important for understanding him as a contextual theologian is because it is seldom argued that Barth started writing prior to his Safenwil pastorate. During the time prior to his ministry in Safenwil, Barth was already engaging the relationship between theory and praxis. Hunsinger refers to some essays written by Barth in which he showed intense struggling with theory and praxis. These essays are: *Modern Theology and the Work for the Kingdom of God* written during his student days in 1909, followed by The Christian Faith and History, written from the pastorate in 1910 but not published until 1912, and Faith in a Personal God, written in the spring of 1914. With the last essay one can detect a last attempt to give a last chance to liberal theology (cf. G Hunsinger, 'Towards a radical Barth' in G Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 193-194).

[36] Zofingia was the student association to which Barth also belonged while in his first semester at Berne (cf. E Busch, 1976: 35)

[37] Cf. E Busch, 1976: 37.

It has already been pointed out that it was in Safenwil that Barth came to engage the socio-economic and political factors in a more proactive fashion. In Safenwil we see him involved in the establishment of four trade unions as well as his acquisition of membership to the Social Democratic Party (SDP), which afforded him the title of the "Red Pastor" of Safenwil. It was this very tendency of practising theology and relating it to politics that led Marquardt to the conclusion that Barth's socialism was a *socialist praxis*.[38]

In the periods leading to the World War I, Barth registered his commitment to Religious Socialism. According to McCormack, Barth's sermons of 1913 demonstrate the fervour with which he engaged the world in which he lived.[39] Inevitable, some of the themes that Barth dealt with in his sermons in this year offended those who did not share the same convictions with regard to the stance that the church ought to be taking in the world. The result was the resignation of five of the six members of the church session (*Kirchenpflege*).[40]

With these sermons, Barth preached that self-seeking, greed, pride and hatred were the powers dictating the laws that govern our business, our political life, as well as our social life. At the same time, Barth emphasised that the person who is apathetic about such a state of affairs and cares instead only for his or her own spiritual salvation "does not know God".[41] McCormack is correct when he asserts that some of these sermons

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[38] F Marquardt, 'Socialism in the theology of Karl Barth' in: G Hunsinger (ed.), 1976: 47-76.

[39] Karl Barth remained very interested in preaching. This is clear since he always thought of theology as critical reflection on the Word of God. H Genest has demonstrated the impact that preaching had on Barth. In a chronological manner he traces most of the sermons that shaped Barth and also illustrates the different impacts that the different contexts had on his preaching (cf. H Genest, *Karl Barth und die Predigt: Darstellung und Deutung von Predigtwerk und Predigtlehre Karl Barths*. Deutschland Neukirchener, 1995). Some of the important collections of Karl Barth's sermons are; *Suchet Gott, so werdet ihr leben!* (Karl Barth/Eduard Thurneysen) Bern 1917; *Komm Schöpfer Geist!* (Karl Barth/Eduard Thurneysen) München 1924, 1926, 1932; *Die große Barmherzigkeit* (Karl Barth/Eduard Thurneysen), München 1935; *Fürchte dich nicht!* (Predigten aus Jahren 1934-1948) München 1949; *Den Gefangenen Befreiung* (Predigten aus dem Jahren 1954-1959) Zollikon 1959, Zürich 1963; *Rufe mich an! Neue Predigten aus der Strafanstalt Basel*, Zürich 1965.

[40] B McCormack, 1976: 92

[41] M Lindsay, *Covenanted Solidarity: The theological basis of Karl Barth's opposition to Nazi Antisemitism and the Holocaust*. New York: Peter Lang Publishers, 2001: 92.

illustrate the seeds of some of Barth's most profound views which later became evident in the development of his dialectical theology. Already in Safenwil, Barth had come to realise that his liberal approach to theology was not adequate. World War I would later merely endorse his growing suspicion about the integrity of liberal theology.

It is impossible to conclude that the sermons of this period were more important than his later sermons. In one of his later sermons Barth spoke of the poor Lazarus. He calls God the God of the poor and bases this not on the grounds of Lazarus' piety, but Lazarus' being the friend of God because he is marginalised and persecuted due to his poverty.[42]

In the midst of the theological confusion in which he found himself, Barth made the acquaintance of the message of the Blumhardts through Thurneysen who had encouraged him to take the work of these eschatological revivalist seriously. Christoph Blumhardt (1842-1919) was the son of Johann Christoph Blumhardt (1805-1880).[43] This encounter was important for Barth for a number of reasons. Firstly, Barth came to appreciate the message of the two Blumhardts who insisted on Christian hope. The younger Blumhardt consolidated the idea of engaging politics in Barth. This is probably due to the fact that the younger Blumhardt was elected to serve as a deputy at the 1900 Württemberg assembly after having joined the SDP in 1899, and yet could still manage to practice his

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[42] Barth's sermon on the poor Lazarus cited in: M E Brinkman, *De Theologie van Karl Barth: Dynamiet of dynamo voor christelijk handelen*. Baarn: Ten Have, 1983: 44-45.

[43] The Blumhardts left an indelible mark on the theological thinking of Barth. He never parted ways with them and his credit for their contribution cannot be ignored. Barth maintained that at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century there was a reaction to the integrity of liberal theology. This reaction was manifested in the advocacy of eschatology. He furthermore believed that one focus in this movement of discovery was the message of the younger Blumhardt. Barth also held that the younger Blumhardt, H Kutter as well as L Ragaz challenged the positively church-centered Christianity when they linked their fight for the kingdom of God with eschatology and hope with the Socialist labour movement (cf. K Barth, *Church Dogmatics* Vol. II/1, 1936: 633 and J Cort, *Christian Socialism*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988: 199-201). In Barth's works that were published posthumously, an appreciation of the Blumhardts still remains evident. Barth reminds us that their main message was to prepare humanity for the world to come. He (Blumhardt senior) writes "very naively, but with axiomatic certainty, they were thinking of the reality of the risen and living Jesus Christ himself, acting and speaking as a distinctive factor no less actual today than yesterday" (cf. K Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics* Vol. IV, Part 4. Lecture Fragments. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981a: 259).