

Karl Barth – a brief introduction

Time and eternity

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It is only the heathen gods who envy man. The true God, who is unconditionally the Lord, allows him to be the thing for which He created him.

(-- Does not the divine wisdom have its true delight in the children of men? (--)

That the creature may continue to be in virtue of the divine preservation means finally that – itself actual and active within its limits – it may continue before Him eternally.

CD III/3, 87

That God chose human beings, that he created them in order to elect them as his partners, that they enjoy distinctive status in God's creation, is definitively revealed in Jesus Christ. Not in the sense that Jesus simply represented a divine, heavenly reality which was, so to speak, already established, independently of him and his story, but in the sense, rather, that from all eternity in a unique act, an election of divine simplicity and human mystery, Jesus was *integral* to God's own determination for himself and his creation. God's eternity is abroad in this person's life and work. Here time and eternity converge in a concrete existence. The nature of time and eternity is not something we can fathom for ourselves, says Barth. We grasp it only when, against the background of God's intervention in human time, we understand what time really is.

Barth's conception of time prior to 1932

In the first edition of *The Epistle to the Romans* (1919) Barth was still under the sway of the notion of an organic, historical unfolding of the Kingdom of God in accordance with the tendencies informing the cultural Protestantism he sought, in other respects, to invalidate. This conception of time and eternity might be termed *chronistic*. The chronistic understanding of time sees it as an independent, objective reality - for humans and (possibly) also for God. Time is an a priori given, conditioning all things. Eternity, accordingly, becomes time in its infinite extension – time quantified.

However, the emphasis on the paradox of revelation in the second edition of *The Epistle to the Romans* (1922) leads to a quite different, existential understanding of eternity. The end of time, the coming of God's Kingdom, *ta eschata* is, according to this second edition, not a future goal at the end of linear time or a total process within time but the eternal, existential challenge to human persons in time. It is God's intervention in the world at any given moment "*senkrecht von Oben*" ('vertically from above'). At this point, then, Barth polemicizes explicitly against a horizontal, chronistic understanding of time and so paves the way for the conception that Heidegger, Bultmann, Gogarten etc. were later to develop to considerable effect in the philosophy and theology of the twentieth century. This conception of time will here be referred to as the *existential* conception. In its more radical versions this view conceives of time as a aspect of human self-consciousness: the human subject's mode of existence is marked by embeddedness in the present and this temporality of the present time is fundamental to the distinctive mode of human existence in the world. Time is thus not an objective linear entity with a given past, present and future. The past is definitively over and the future has yet to be. Only the present has being in any real sense. From a theological perspective this means that God's word and revelation cannot be past or future and thus independent of human beings, but must impinge upon the present - existentially and qualitatively.

It must also be noted that Barth sought to distance himself from any *mythic* conception of time properly understood. By 'mythic' is meant a conception of time which views narratives about the relations and history of interactions between God and man as myths

in the sense of concrete representations that seek to mediate eternal, temporally independent truths. Barth denies that the Bible contains myths in this sense in that he insists that the biblical narratives always refer to particulars and so can never be reduced to general, abstract and temporally independent structures. Their fundamental referential nature – designating, as they do, actual events – separates them from myth and its timeless universality. Barth prefers to call e.g. the creation narratives (which are often called 'myths' in the literature) 'sagas' "in the sense of an intuitive and poetic [*divinatorisch-dichterisch entworfene*] picture of a pre-historical reality of history which is enacted once and for all within the confines of time and space."(CD III/1, 81)

The Conception of Time in Church Dogmatics (1932ff.)

The problem of time is frequently touched upon in *Church Dogmatics*. The most important loci are I/2 prolegomena § 14) concerning the time of revelation, II/I (the doctrine of God, §31) concerning God's time and III/2 (the anthropology, §47) concerning human beings who in their finitude are yet enveloped in God's eternity. At these points in the *Dogmatics* the understanding of time is marked, in part, by a self-critical revision of the earlier, radically existential understanding of time which was to be found in the second edition of the *The Epistle to the Romans* and, in part, by an attempt to develop a conception of time directly rooted in the Christ event. The principal nerve in the understanding of time which thus emerges may accordingly be said to represent an alternative to both the chronistic and the existential versions and is conjoined to the perhaps rather surprising thesis that *God himself has time*. Some interpreters detect a tendency in Barth in the later volumes of the *Church Dogmatics* to return to a conception reminiscent of the process thought of the first edition of the *The Epistle to the Romans*.

The tripartition of time, Easter and election

Barth's comprehensive argument for his conception of time reposes on a small number of premises that may be sketched out as follows:

- a) Time – all time as humanly experienced – falls into three divisions. The past is the time that has now been. It is the time which *has being as bygone*, and is the now the object

of *recollection* and *forgetting*. The here and now, by contrast, *is* being in another mode: it is pure *present*, *immediacy* and *existence*. Finally, the future *is* neither as bygone nor as immediate but as *oncoming* and the object of *expectation*.

- b) The time of *Resurrection* and *Easter*, to which the New Testament through the several narratives of the appearances of the risen Christ to the disciples testifies, designates a temporally unique epoch. The forty days of which *Acts* recounts as spanning the Resurrection and the Ascension constitute the true time of revelation. That which during Jesus' life on earth remained hidden and paradoxical is, during those forty days, manifest, directly accessible.
- c) The course of Jesus' human life from birth to death bears a *dual representational aspect*. In part, God is represented in him and his life history, or, better: God himself is truly present to the world over the course of his temporal life. In part, man, humankind as such, is represented before God in this one individual. This duality gives expression to divine self-determination as indissolubly linked to the election of humankind, which formed the topic of the preceding chapter.

Human time – God's time

From the point of view of a theological understanding of time, Easter and the forty days mark a decisive occurrence. The Jesus whose life, like that of other people, was a life in time – i.e. a life delimited by birth and death – was present to his disciples, beyond death and the tomb. And he was present to them *as himself*, which is to say he was present in his own person with the *identity* which was his solely in virtue of *his truly lived and finite life history*. The Easter revelation does not, then, merely concern the continuation of a life that had been interrupted by violence and death but turns on its subject, rather - Jesus himself, who, after his story had ended, made himself present once more and in this fresh situation made himself the subject of renewed recollection. Jesus' life figures, then, as one and the same story stretching across two quite distinct sequences:

- a) It figured – and figures – as historically closed and belonging to the *past*.
- b) It figured – and figures in the Easter experiences of the church – as eternally valid *present*. Further his life remains (its historical closure notwithstanding) the subject of renewed expectation in relation to the *future*: He it is who is to come.

Jesus' life and Jesus' time constitute, in other words, a unique time which even though *past* is authentic and valid *present*. This means that the time of the risen Christ is unlike any other human time. Nor is that all: this (historical) past time is yet (in the Easter experiences and faith of the community of believers) the object of *expectation*. It is still regarded as a time that is to come. It represents the church's advent hope which attaches to none other than he who was and still is. In his second coming he will come – as the one he was!

How might we formulate the radical consequences that this has for common conceptions of time (the chronistic, the existential and the mythic)?

In Barth they are summed up in the simple proclamation which figures as a subheading in the important section § 47: *Jesus, der Herr der Zeit* – Jesus, the Lord of time. The resurrection signifies the revelation of a temporal dominion belonging only to God himself but which through grace envelops and liberates our human temporality. In a broader perspective we can say that the conception of history, human self-understanding and the import of human corporality is, for Barth, determined in and through this conception of time. Accordingly we also find here (especially in § 47) a series of critical remarks directed at docetist and historicist tendencies in the theology of the time.

Having arrived at this understanding, Barth is led to distinguish between two temporal dimensions – human time and divine time – and to give an account of the specific relation obtaining between them. Human time is that which is bound up with the chronological divisions of past, present and future. It is an aspect of God's creation of the world that it is so. Human beings have historico-corporeal reality only in the modality of time: he who gives of his time gives of himself. What can be said of the human person, of his life, his death, is perforce subject to the constraints of the irrevocability of this temporal sequence. The human person is one with his or her life history.

In their Easter experiences to which the account of the forty days in particular testifies, the first community of believers encounter something other than human time. They encounter

God's time. For Jesus, who at that point *had been* (and whose identity was inextricably bound up with this past chronology), made himself, *as such*, sovereignly present again, which meant that purely human chronology was subjected to what was, in a sense, suspension. In his resurrection Jesus showed himself apparently capable – *whilst still retaining the identity given him in his historically unique personhood* – of disrupting the inexorability of human chronology. The tripartite time, which for the human person situated in the world confers identity and yet also means transience, disappearance and death, Jesus, in his resurrection, was able to *command concurrently*. The past figured in the present - as present. It figured too in the present as anticipated future. But its "historical" limitations given through its beginning, its receiving of content and its ending were recovered as in a new, surprising and eternal contemporaneity in the time of Resurrection, which may accordingly be called God's time. The historically bounded story of Jesus is at once both unbounded and simultaneously present in the risen Lord, who is indeed called *Kyrios*. Here, in other words, past, present and future are crystallized in a way not known to ordinary human life.

As noted above, in human life temporality leads to identity-conferring historicity, but also to the transitoriness of existence. Nothing human beings are able to do can alter this. And every attempt to evade the temporality of existence and with that its transitoriness by postulating an atemporal core, say, in the form of an infinite soul, leads with inexorable logic to a dilution of historically given identity. In the time of Resurrection – in God's own time – things are different. Precisely there, in divine eternity's drawing near in the risen Christ, lies eternal time, says Barth. God takes to himself time, human time, created time, through Jesus and his time. It is indeed real time with the triadic division into 'no-more', 'here-and-now' and 'not-yet'. But in the risen Christ this division does not signify the transitoriness that belongs to human life inasmuch as in his Lordship over time he is present in terms of what he was (the past), of what was previously hoped for (the prophetic 'past perfect') and as he who will come again (the future). God, then, has time. But God's temporalities distinguish themselves from human time since they are simultaneously present in one eternal and primordial now, an eternal present, encompassing that which is, that which was, and that which is to come. "I am the Alpha and the Omega, saith the Lord God, which is and which was and which is to come, the Almighty." (*Revelation 1,8*)

(Revised Version)) This verse is important for Barth's argumentation for the conception of the real unity of times in God's eternal time without its entailing the effacement of temporal modalities.

The accounts of the Virgin Birth and of physical Resurrection are considered as the New Testament's witness to that interfacing with the time of the created world given in and through the temporal duality of the person of Jesus. They give expression to the encounter of God's uncreated time with man's created time.

Talk about 'God's time' involves the application of human categories to God, which Barth accepts as the expression of a legitimate 'privileged anthropomorphism' (I/2, 56) – a term borrowed from J.G.Hamann.

Critical reflections

It cannot be denied that in tracing this career of thought we have been brought to the bounds of what can meaningfully be thought and said about time. Indeed we may already have overstepped it. So let us briefly rehearse the criticism that has been levelled at Barth's conceptions of time and history. The problem may be formulated as follows: Does the sharply accentuated *simultaneity* (the contemporaneity of past, present and future in the risen Christ and thereby in God himself) mean that human temporality and, by the same token, history get taken "up" into God's eternity (God's "eternal time")? That the idea of God's time nullifies the import of authentically human time? And is the future foreordained by eternal divine decree so that the openness of human time is ruled out? The oft-repeated and seemingly unrelenting critique of Barth's (putative) ahistoricalness makes immediate sense against the background of these questions.

A proper discussion of these matters can naturally not be attempted here, but two points may be offered for consideration: *First*, the dual aspect of this conception of time represents an attempt to reflect the original testimony of the Resurrection as encountered in the New Testament and not (as critics have often alleged) an arbitrary, Platonizing temporal-eternal dualism. *Second*, Barth maintains an indissoluble and non-systematizable duality which could be said to qualify as the assertion of a reasoned

theological complementarity: 1) Time is real as a divine, eternal reality. 2) Time is real as a chronological dimension in the world of creation and covenant. But these two are one in God's supreme dominion over time! The claim is, then, in other words, that the mere fact that something assumes a *chronological form in one context* does not preclude its figuring in the context of divine reality as *contemporaneously and simultaneously present* in all its constituent parts. In the reality of the triune God, which we know only as "in a mirror", the two coincide in a divinely consummated unity, in an *eternal now*. The Lord God is Lord too over the god of time, Kronos (KD I/2, 49). This is presupposed by theology in and through its reference to the early Christian proclamation that Jesus is Lord. But according to Barth it is never granted theology or human thought to capture this final unity of God's time and the world's time in any perspicuous theological or metaphysical synthesis. That would require that we conducted theology in heaven and not on earth. The unity, the continuity between God and the world is something we can at best only speak about, or testify to, incompletely and analogously in time, as expressed in such movements of thought or in the practices of the community of believers.

The unity of divine time and human time in the risen Christ is the bearer of both the belief of the community of believers in the coming of the present, risen Christ and also the future-orientated advent hope – directed at the coming of none other than he who once was. Past, present and future thus offer themselves as *modalities in the Son's one unique revelation*.

As to the question concerning the possibility of determinism, the reader is referred to the reflections in chapter 3 on how God's gracious election of human beings is experienced as subjective freedom.

The mystery of time

What is human temporality?

Barth offers a double-barrelled answer which may be seen as serving both as a comment on the thought of other theologians, philosophers and poets moved by the problematic of time (Bultmann, Cullmann, Kümmel, Heidegger, Hölderlin) and at the same time as an

original and fully elaborated conception of time. The anthropological volume of the *Dogmatics* contains a phenomenological analysis of human existence in time (III/2,616ff.). Barth does not use the term "phenomenology" but speaks of "*Erscheinung*", appearance, which may be assumed to mean the same thing. Phenomenology is not an approach Barth avails himself of under normal circumstances and closer scrutiny reveals that nor does he here. It figures, rather, as one strand in a more complex structure which aims i.a. at showing that a purely phenomenological analysis ends in a theological aporia, i.e. an irresolvable knot. The implication, in other words, is that a theologically acceptable approach to the problem of time needs to be informed by a component quite distinct from the phenomenon of time itself.

As already noted, human time trifurcates into past, present and future. But, in contradistinction to Jesus' time in the Resurrection the human past is – from the phenomenological point of view – truly bygone, concluded time. We relate to the *past* in recollection or forgetfulness – including the particular form of forgetting known as repression. Whenever an age or even an individual begins primarily to live off what has been it is a symptom of decline. It is a symptom of the understandable but often slightly desperate attempt to disguise the gulf between the past and the present.

The *future* as a realm of human existence is the object of expectation and hope. But for that very reason it is also uncertain. We do not know whether, in the future, we shall still *exist*. Nor do we know whether, if we do, the future will contain what we had hoped for or what we had feared.

The safest time for confidence about our own existence seems to be the here and now, the *present*. But what is the present? It is transition – an extensionless point between what no longer is and what is not yet. It is "*the flight and chase from darkness to darkness*". It is the act of existence itself, the act in which actually existent human life is wrested from the past without its yet being in possession of the future. Strictly speaking the present has no extension, it is a moment "betweentimes" – time on the turn, without its own time.

The conclusion of a phenomenological analysis of time is an acknowledgement of the ineradicable mystery of human reality: humans only exist in time, and *will* it – but are themselves without their "own" time. They are held, powerless, between the interfaces of the depredation of the present by the past and the future's potential and (at some point) definitive annihilation of what is momentarily existent.

There is something monstrous about human situatedness in time, according to Barth. The contours of an alienation, a distortion, the destruction of any authentic human existence in time emerge in such an analysis of it. Thus it is that the second part of Barth's analysis aims to show that God's time manifests itself as a divine *objection to*, and *contradiction of*, this (in itself 'monstrous') phenomenologically given human time. This occurs through Jesus and his life in which God as their Creator and Lord is manifest as the defender of his human creatures threatened by time. The analysis of time in the phenomenological mode gives expression, then, not to authentic time as created, as that which from the hand of the Creator was designed for human beings, but to time, rather, as it appears to fallen man. It is the time of nothingness which points to the fact that man stands accused and faces judgement. By contrast, Jesus' time is not unnatural, artificial but is the only real time. It is the time that unmask our sinful, distorted approach to temporality inasmuch as it discloses and (and bestows) real time.

But the existence of the man Jesus means that God became man, the Creator a creature, eternity time. It means therefore, that God takes and has time for us; that He Himself is temporal among us as we are. Yet He does this in a manner appropriate to Himself. He is temporal in unity and correspondence [*Entsprechung*] with His eternity. But what can this mean but that He is temporal in a way which also corresponds [*entspricht*] to man as His creature, in the original and natural form of the being of man in time before it was perverted and corrupted? That Jesus is the Lord of time, He who was and is and is to come [*der da ist, war und kommt*], is of course unique to Himself. In this respect He is incomparable. It is the divine determination of his human being alone. But this unique determination includes a being in time which is

true and genuine in contrast to the plunge into falsehood. For Jesus, to live in the present does not mean the flight and chase from darkness to darkness, but being which is independently filled and therefore selfresting and lasting.

CD III/2, 519

This line of thought is pursued in what follows and leads to the claim that the *past*, which is *co-existent present*, and the *future*, which is *coexistent present* in the life of Jesus, *in its triadic entirety* discloses true human time – time lived in relation to eternity in God. Only here is there an opening up for a new, truly human access to time – time as gift. Through him, and him alone - he who represents man before God - is there once again opened up for authentic being in time for *all*. Revelation bestows on man time in qualitative terms.

The above quotation, from 1948, shows too how the early Barth's understanding of time and eternity is modified in the later works in the direction of a far more complex conception of time, embracing both the differential, and the unity, obtaining between God's (Jesus') time and human time.

That God himself assumed temporality certainly vouches for its reality – as *against* the analytical interpretation in which time is incomprehensibly and obscurely juxtaposed with annihilation and in which it receives its unmistakably transitory character. But God himself stepped into time and yet he is eternal. So eternity does not mean timelessness but fulfilled time – time liberated from transitoriness and annihilation. Eternal God's relation to man in time means, then, *that man in time is not delivered up to annihilation*. The human past, too, which now appears simply as that which has once been, is a time lived as a time given and willed by God himself. It is a time lived in relation to God by virtue of God's decision to elect human beings in time as his partners. But the past *qua* given by, and lived for, God cannot simply evaporate. The past as such – phenomenology's stark perspective notwithstanding – has not disappeared; it has only disappeared *qua our human present*. The past, by contrast, *is truly existent* as authentic reality hidden in God. This is guaranteed by Eternal God himself, making it manifest through his self-disclosure in Jesus as the Lord of time. And since the past still *is*, it means that that substance, depth and duration also accrue to the human present. The future too is concurrently

present. In virtue of God's eternity human life in time gains in continuity, substance and import. Precisely the temporal experience of the rich and transparent instant in whose momentary clarity everything seems to come together in unfathomable, mysterious unity and depth – an experience which can only with difficulty, if at all, be accommodated by a one-dimensional, chronistic conception of time - calls for the kind of reconfiguration in terms of a theology of revelation which Barth here seeks to provide.

It is moreover important at this point to observe that Barth does not simply maintain that some subjective postulate about God or about divine eternity equips one to meet the objection posed by the radical insight into the annihilation of human existence in time. One cannot by means of a postulate cancel out a reality. It should instead be said that, with reference to the temporal experience of the presence of Christ to which the community of believers throughout the ages attests, he seeks to unfold a universal alternating conception of time: one that will open up for other dimensions of time and, as Barth sees it, such as are much more fundamental than the apparently voracious movement from nothingness towards a new nothingness.

The eternal redemption of temporal man

It has often been remarked that *Church Dogmatics* ended before it was finished. The final volume was the fragment IV/4 – at which point the work already ran to more than 9000 large pages – and a fifth volume devoted to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and eternal life was thus never written. However, Barth's doctrine of the resurrection from the dead is intimately related to his conception of time which furnishes the backdrop to the doctrine's further development although, within the framework of the *Dogmatics*, the subject never in fact received a single paragraph to itself.

At least one classic interpretation of human redemption and the resurrection to eternal life falls out of the picture as far as Barth is concerned: it is the idea of the soul's immortality in the form of infinite (timeless) incorporeal existence. Although Barth certainly has a theory

of the human soul, it is, more than anything, an interpretation of human subjectivity and not a doctrine of an incorporeal, immortal, infinitely existent soul.

Barth's claim is, as we have seen, that human existence is an existence situated in time. And, owing to eternal God's revelation in time, human life in time has bestowed upon it continuity, substance and unity through faith in the Lord of time, Jesus Christ. He draws together past, present and future – without suspending chronology – and in such a way that time's surrender to nothingness is overcome 'in him'. God's inward Trinitarian movement involving the Son's love of the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit finds an echo or reduplication in the unity of temporal modalities: eternity as the unification and consummation of past, present and future but without the suspension of chronology.

When human life no longer contains the subjective present, which is to say when human life has become sheer pastness and has reached its boundary in death, it remains authentic and present in divine eternity. It is existent in the guise of what has been. It has not been nullified despite having reached its end point in 'the flight of lost time from darkness to darkness'. It is wholly crucial, then, whether time be considered analytically *qua* phenomenon or whether it be viewed in the perspective of divine eternity. According to Barth, the analytical–phenomenological perspective proves inadequate in the face of the temporal experiences of duration and substance noted above. By contrast, the theological perspective, as set out above, is able to accommodate temporal experiences – and, by the same token, authentic human insights, aspirations and realism.

Two attitudes to death

Let us turn briefly to what this means for our attitude to death. Human beings are created with a determinate beginning in time. But are they also created – as it were, prior to the Fall – with the limitation of a determinate temporal boundary? Or are humans created – having once seen the light of day – to live forever? Is the ending of human life in time a condition inherent in its creation as such or is its ending in death a circumstance that first entered in as a consequence of the Fall?

In the history of theology both answers have been returned. Generally, it might be said, the notion of human persons' being created for an eternity prevailed almost unchallenged in theology and church until c. 200 years' ago. Indeed, the view may still be encountered today in the hymnal tradition. However, developments in philosophy, theology and other disciplines led to a change, ushered in not least by Friedrich Schleiermacher, one of the first proponents of the idea that humankind had been created for a bounded and finite existence (Moltmann, 105 f.) On this interpretation, human finitude should not be regarded as the result of human sin for human beings are simply not created to live forever in time. But what, then, it might be asked, does the saying: "the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6,23) mean? It means that it is sin that turns life's created finitude into a harsh and painful limitation. Barth espoused this view from his earliest work right through to his final writings, indeed even accentuating it through his emphasis on temporality, as we have noted. The resolution of this issue has important implications for the eschatological questions themselves, i.e. those turning on the end of time, the coming of the Kingdom, and the resurrection of the dead, as they have traditionally been called.

Death as a boundary

For human beings, death represents the final boundary of their lives. It is not the only boundary. Birth too is a boundary, interfacing with non-being.

Then why is death feared? Why is death so shrouded in dread that denials, disguises, lies and self-deception typify our relation to it despite every attempt to bring it out into the open and elucidate it? Why such anxiety at the thought of death? If it were simply that death constitutes a boundary, a natural delimitation of life, one would expect birth in equal measure to be the focus of dread and suppression. Or that both boundaries might be contemplated 'naturally' without fear. But this is clearly not the case. It is not that birth does not also present a problematic in relation to human finitude: Barth considers it disquieting too to consider that before I was – I was non-existent! But the difficulties involved in confronting the fact that I shall at some point again be non-existent are plainly greater. There will come a moment in which I shall encounter my own annihilation, my life

in time will be over and done with – and even now I draw inescapably closer to that boundary.

Why is death *qua* boundary so much harder to deal with than birth? It is so precisely because between these two bounds my tenure of life in time – be it long or short – has played itself out. And human persons meet death burdened with the guilt they have incurred in the course of living their lives. They arrive at the portals of death compromised – and have compromised themselves! – in a manner and with a burden they can no longer sustain any illusion of escaping. The integration in death of personal guilt excludes all self-deception. In death guilt bares its face. It brings the human agent close to that annihilation, that extinction which he or she, in sinning, has flirted with throughout life. It is, accordingly, not without reason that people have a troubled relation to this final boundary.

But there is far more to say about death. For what does it mean in relation to God?

Offhand one might expect Barth to reply – in line with standard theological thinking down the ages – that in death we meet God's judgement. But in Barth's reply there is a characteristic twist: in death the human person encounters *a sign of divine judgement*.

But why 'a sign of' and not 'the thing itself'? For the simple reason that the power of chaos, the power of nothingness that the human person confronts at life's ultimate boundary, is simply too overwhelming for any individual as such. The power of extinction and judgement to which the human person in death *draws near* is not merely some sort of 'neutral' nothingness. It is not a matter of annihilation, a resolution into nothing. *No, it is that nothingness, rather, that God in his eternal and gracious election eliminated!* It is *that* possibility which God himself, in his divine mercy, rejected, and which his entire creative and redemptive work controverts. All the same, it is that to which, in sinning, human beings submit.

Not even in death does the guilt-laden agent directly meet judgement and annihilation even though it is here it comes closest. Its power is too terrible, too all-encompassing for the individual to be delivered up to a confrontation with it. This is already reckoned with,

on Barth's perspective, in God's primordial election, predestination, which is here conjoined to actual human experience of fear of death and love of life. Since God interposes himself between his human creature and the power of nothingness the death of the individual sinner is primarily to be regarded as *a sign* of this divinely sovereign 'interposition' in and through the death of Jesus. There is no longer any purely personal relation to extinction, death and devil.

Monism or dualism?

Clearly, a fresh problem arises at this point which consists of the elucidation of the relation between God himself and "nothingness", the possibility rejected. Has God, in Barth's thinking, an indirect responsibility and causal role in respect of what he rejects since it may, in a sense, be said to be maintained and sustained precisely in virtue of this divine choice? If so we must conclude that Barth's theology comes close to monism in what concerns being-nothingness, life-death, guilt-reconciliation – a line of thought according to which everything is traced back to a single cause in God.

Alternatively, we might hold Barth to the duality resident in the fact that while yet accentuating God's definitive and unequivocal triumph over the powers of destruction he at the same time concedes these powers a certain independence. Again, he repudiates any notion of parity in order to avoid what would amount to a genuine *dualism* (i.e. an equipoise between being and nothingness, life-death etc.) but takes the power of evil seriously as a reality in the world. The decisive point for Barth is that evil and nothingness, even in their immediate graphic horror, must always be viewed in the light of God's contestation against them. Granted, God's primordial choice is the first and last word, but this does not rule out a series of penultimate challenges from what has been excluded. But this relation between divine choice and the power of nothingness is both once and for all decided in Jesus Christ and, *at the same time*, unfolds as, and in, a story in the human world. The question of monism or dualism does not admit of resolution through the bare positing of static models set up as a polarity. What we have, rather, is an eschatological story whose culmination, as it were, has already been realized in Christ's Resurrection. It is via this insight that man's relation to death and evil must seek its proper place.

In conclusion it might be said that in his interpretation of death Barth deposits the conditions for getting to grips with it in the most comprehensive and inaccessible repository, i.e. in what was from eternity ordained by God and fulfilled in Jesus' death and Resurrection. It might be said, then, (to use an expression from another context) that death, guilt and extinction in Barth's theological universe pass from being abrupt, non-neutralized negative phenomena to being integrated in a larger pattern. Inasmuch as they are considered *signs*, they lose their (inscrutable and threatening) local meaning and enjoy a conferred meaning deriving from a comprehensive context. Their erratic, chaotic and hideous role in working disintegration is nullified through their being drawn into a new context, there to occupy only the space allocated them. Through the proclamation of this order human persons are offered the chance to live their lives in the knowledge of guilt and death, and to live, not in fear, but in the gratitude which figures as the expression of the deepest and truest reality.

The double aspect of death

Death undeniably marks a boundary, and one which, against the background of guilt and sin, human beings inevitably fear. There is, then, nothing mitigatory or conciliatory about death; there is always something inherently shocking about it and it ought never to be trivialized. What theology can add is this: although death limits life, God limits death. By interposing himself between human beings and nothingness God sets a bound to the awfulness of death and he invests himself in the assertion of this limit. Since this limitation on death is deposited in Jesus Christ, human beings now, in time, have *death put behind them by virtue of their union with the Lord of time, Jesus Christ* (Gal. 2,20; Rom. 6,3). The boundary human beings are constantly approaching is one they have already crossed - in virtue of the fact that Jesus Christ commands it and they are joined to him in baptism through faith. This is the Christian's life in the world: to believe and to testify to this and to live it out in thankfulness. Put differently, it spells the opening up of a new and different approach to death as a boundary, in virtue of Jesus Christ - where death is something other than the sign of guilt and judgement. On this approach death has its original import

restored to it, as the God-given and divinely ordained boundary to authentic human life in time.

Death is thus marked by a double aspect for human beings. It is manifestly marked by its proximity to guilt, judgement and chaos. Barth sees this dimension as prominent in the New Testament. But there coexists a 'finer strain' according to which death – *qua* liberated – may be regarded as the natural limit to human life.

But what, then, does this mean for the notion of eternal life and resurrection?

On Barth's view the life to come should not be conceived as an extension into infinity of human life in time. Transcendence [*das Jenseits*, KD III/2, 770] for human beings is – God and only God. Since God is he who sets limits to the limits marked by birth and death it means that in death the human person meets God. In death God is encountered as he who from eternity has accompanied man in time and for whom limited, finite human life now completed will be forever preserved and enveloped in mercy. God alone is transcendence for human beings. The words of St Paul in his First Epistle to the Corinthians 15.50ff. to the effect that the mortal shall put on immortality and the corruptible shall put on incorruption are construed by Barth as the revelation, the disclosure of this (KD III/2, 760). The New Testament hope has as its object exactly this: the 'eternalizing' [*Verewigung*] of – yes, precisely! – delimited life. And accordingly the transfiguration, purgation and liberation of lived life *as such*. The metamorphosis and transformation of lived life – the only life the individual has! – into a consummated life, one of freedom and fullness in eternal God is what 'resurrection from the dead' means. God's eternal affirmation of a given individual in time contains within itself this same individual's glorification in eternity, while still sustaining temporally given limitations and identity. At the same time this affirmation overcomes the vulnerability and the threat of guilt and nothingness concomitant on the sinful temporality of human life in this world.

This interpretation involves commitments to particular positions regarding a range of traditional complexes of problems in eschatology. One question that immediately suggests itself is whether Barth conceived of a temporal, future eschatological event or

whether any such is ruled out by and through the conception of time according to which the future is understood as already contained in the Christological 'once and for all'. In his later writings (esp. IV/3), however, Barth seems ever more clearly to operate with what amounts to a future eschatology, a recreation of the world, which is to say, a new event: a recreation which will mean the ultimate victory over the powers of nothingness in all its manifestations – the resurrection of the dead, the coming of the kingdom as well as the rectification of all injustice.

The idea of eternalization (by some interpreters called 'vitalization') of lived life in the temporal modus of eternity raises a number of questions: What about the person who only had a few years of life, perhaps merely minutes, in this world? And what about the individual who has to conclude that his or her entire life has been a failure, misdirected from start to finish – is this person to be eternally bound to that life now lived out? To this the answer must be that 'resurrection' – even in its future form – is, in essence, the discovery of a totally different quality: it is 'eternal time' in God and must accordingly be thought of as depriving any quantifying approach of its justification.

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