

THE STATE OF SCHLEIERMACHER SCHOLARSHIP TODAY
Selected Essays

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Schleiermacher and Barth:
Self-transcendence and Neo-liberalism¹

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Perhaps I have overlooked something up to now. Perhaps who and what are missing here are yet to come....

- Karl Barth, "Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher"

It may have been Mike Ryan from whom I first heard the name "Schleiermacher." It is certainly Mike Ryan, as much as Schleiermacher himself, whose image comes to mind whenever I hear how modern liberal theology grew from a "sense and taste for the infinite." How times have changed. During Mike's early teaching days at Drew, mainstream theology could comfortably cite "Schleiermacher as contemporary" to the debates of the day,² especially in the light of Richard R. Niebuhr's valiant efforts to rescue him from the barbs of Brunner and Barth.³ These days however—as in the heyday of neo-orthodoxy—theological debate often casts Schleiermacher's legacy into question,⁴ and I welcome this occasion to further the rehabilitative efforts now under way on behalf of Mike's theological hero.

The most famous challenge to Schleiermacher probably comes from Karl Barth, whose theology (like Schleiermacher's) emblemizes his own era. Something theologically pivotal was certainly happening at that time around the issues that provoked Barth, and he insisted years later that it was certainly not the

¹ I owe special thanks to Christopher Morpe and Terrence Tice, and I have benefited greatly from conversations with Trevor Eppheimer.

² *Schleiermacher as Contemporary*, edited by Robert W. Funk (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

³ Richard R. Niebuhr, *Schleiermacher on Christ and Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964).

⁴ Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Religion: A Contested Site in Theology and the Study of Religion," *Harvard Theological Review* 93, no. 1 (Jan 2000).

“pallid ‘Schleiermacher renaissance’” which had begun around 1910.⁵ Here we see a mark of Barth’s own rhetoric, which often suggests that his reader faces an urgent and unequivocal choice—Barth *or* Schleiermacher! To the end of his life, Barth remained (almost?) persuaded of this: “For the present I can see nothing here but a choice. And for me there can be no question as to how that choice is to be made.”⁶ For Barth and for many who have followed him, that choice has seemed to be one of being for or against Christian “liberalism.”

However, some of Barth’s right-wing critics have not been convinced of Barth’s self-avowed anti-liberal credentials.⁷ And it is indeed quite apparent from Barth’s actual discussion that he also felt a deep nostalgia for the father of liberal theology, and yearned at times for reconciliation.⁸ Despite his frequent virulence against those he took to be from Schleiermacher’s camp, in Barth’s mind “the door in fact is not latched”; he was “actually to the present day not finished” with his old master. This reflects the “profound ambivalence” toward Schleiermacher that Terrence Tice witnessed first-hand during Barth’s later years.⁹ Part of Barth *wanted very urgently* to be finished with Schleiermacher, and the fact that he just could not be done with him raises an interesting question. Why the waffling on Barth’s part? What’s the problem here? Could it be that Barth’s original judgment was so badly off the mark that even Barth himself began to see through it?¹⁰

Part of my aim here will be to address what becomes quickly obvious to Barth’s careful reader—that much of Barth’s discomfort with Schleiermacher was

⁵ Karl Barth, “Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher,” in *The Theology of Schleiermacher: Lectures at Göttingen, Winter Semester of 1923/24*, ed. Dietrich Ritschl (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 262.

⁶ Barth, “Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher,” 272.

⁷ Rousas John Rushdoony, *Systematic Theology* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1994), 36-37.

⁸ Barth, “Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher,” 274.

⁹ Terrence Tice, “Interviews with Karl Barth and Reflections on Schleiermacher in the Light of Barth’s Early Criticisms,” in *Barth and Schleiermacher: Beyond the Impasse?* ed. James O. Duke and Robert F. Streetman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 56.

¹⁰ When confronted with a convincingly positive reading of Schleiermacher as an alternative to his own, Barth confided as much privately to Terrence Tice, who tells it this way: “I think that [Barth] might have come to realize that if such discourse is to have much meaning one has to move in the direction of Schleiermacher. He told me, however, that he was ‘too old’ to attempt that now. I was in Basel when he was trying to form a doctrine of the Spirit, and I heard his lectures on the subject. He was extremely uneasy about what he was doing, i.e. whether he was doing anything productive in these lectures. Suddenly, he was losing confidence.” (Private correspondence, 1/01/2004.)

agenda driven polemic which Barth later felt obliged to retract. Barth in his later work developed his own views in remarkably subtle and provocative detail, and my purpose here is not address Barth’s mature program. That would involve tracing the transition through the first and second edition of *Romans* and then on into the *Dogmatics* (and the exact trajectory has been an increasingly contentious matter among Barth scholars¹¹). Rather, my purpose here is to draw on Barth’s early remarks especially, to indicate some basic points of contrast between his view and a plausible reconstruction of Schleiermacher’s project, and to suggest that Barth’s own view on Schleiermacher’s legacy may have been right in what it generally meant but often wrong in what it specifically said.

Let’s first consider Barth’s “target.” Schleiermacher’s *The Christian Faith* (or “*Glaubenslehre*”) stands even today as probably the most remarkable attempt since Calvin to provide a synoptic account of Christian doctrine, and though Barth objected to the direction of Schleiermacher’s program, he always marveled at Schleiermacher’s scholarly achievement.

“No one since can be compared to him, nor soon will be.”¹² This was not however apparent to many at the time of the work’s publication—a fact reflected in the trouble that many critics had over the expository two-part structure of the *Glaubenslehre*.¹³ The first part deals with religious self-consciousness in abstraction from its occurrence in the community, the second with self-consciousness as formed under the specifically Christian (i.e., Protestant) understanding of sin and grace. Because the “so-called metaphysical” discussion occurs first, many of Schleiermacher’s commentators had assumed that his project was mainly a philosophical one, intended to deduce Christianity on the model of speculative theology. In fact, however, Schleiermacher had intended this early discussion as no more than a “portal and entrance hall.”¹⁴

Yet what kind of “portal,” and for whom? Schleiermacher intends that the second part be “well known and familiar”¹⁵ to his audience—who are no longer,

¹¹ Gary Dorrien, *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 70.

¹² Karl Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, edited by Dietrich Ritschl (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 137.

¹³ James Duke and Francis Fiorenza, “Translator’s Introduction: The Significant of [Schleiermacher’s] *On the Glaubenslehre*,” in *On the Glaubenslehre: Two Letters to Dr. Lücke* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1981), 1-32.

¹⁴ Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, *On the Glaubenslehre: Two Letters to Dr. Lücke*, translated by James Duke and Francis Fiorenza (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1981), 56ff.

¹⁵ Schleiermacher, *On the Glaubenslehre*, 59.

as in 1799, those "cultivated persons... removed from everything that would in the least way resemble religion."¹⁶ Schleiermacher is thinking instead of his students and his colleagues who are already part of the faith community; here Schleiermacher is fulfilling his calling to ministry, whose task is that of mirroring for others the "common inner experience" of the faithful: "we serve our brothers only by explaining more clearly to them what it is and so awaken in them the joy in it as well as concern for it."¹⁷ Both in structure and substance, Schleiermacher's work is an elaboration of a form of experience that not just every commentator consciously shares. This is what it means for Schleiermacher to say that theology is a "positive science": its elements "join into a cohesive whole only through their common relation to a particular mode of faith."¹⁸

So what the *Glaubenslehre* references is something one can only have from "inside," as it were, and this is so in two senses: (i) inside the first-person experiential viewpoint, and (ii) inside the community which molds that. Yet there is more to this. Schleiermacher's *magnum opus* is "dogmatic" in the honorific sense, emphatically not intended as an exercise in *dogmatism* ("an authoritarian mentality that prohibits free inquiry"¹⁹), and this can only be effectuated by expanding the available perspective. ("During the time our students pursue their theological education, the pure scientific content of theology should not be slighted. We, especially, are called upon to plant and nurture this seed whenever possible."²⁰)

Schleiermacher's project, in other words, makes simultaneous use of another viewpoint as well, one from "outside," from the objectivity of "science" (*Wissenschaft*). This is partly a matter of keeping the faith plausible for congregations who have imbibed enough empirical science to make miracles and "creation itself, as it is usually understood," no longer believable. Christianity should not be a barricade against the obvious.²¹ But it would be wrong to think of Schleiermacher, as some conservative Christians still tend to, as one whose agenda invites accommodation to the cultural winds of the moment. The ineluctable fact is that

¹⁶ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, edited and translated by Richard Crouter (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 3.

¹⁷ Schleiermacher, *On the Glaubenslehre*, 41.

¹⁸ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study*, edited and translated by Terrence Tice (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1990), §1.

¹⁹ Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit* (Valley Forge PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), 18.

²⁰ Schleiermacher, *On the Glaubenslehre*, 59ff.

²¹ Schleiermacher, *On the Glaubenslehre*, 59ff.

(Schleiermacher certainly believes) we *are* physically embodied creatures, and as Christians we are called to act in the real world, a world whose complexities are known mainly through science. This creates a dialectical requirement for anyone who aspires to an effective Christian vocation: we must balance the inside with the outside viewpoint. Schleiermacher's conviction is that doing so enriches rather than confounds our experience, and enhances our capacities to act faithfully from it.

So Schleiermacher's work was intended to reflect "an eternal covenant between the living Christian faith and completely free, independent scientific inquiry, so that faith does not hinder science and science does not exclude faith."²² Science and faith are not literally incompatible: this is not a compartmentalized "two-truths" doctrine, as if we were being prevented from surrendering either of two logically incompatible descriptions of the same object. For "as long as we do not need to draw boundaries between what is natural and what is absolutely supernatural in actual reality (and I see nothing that requires us to do so),"²³ fundamentalism and scientism are both excluded in favor of *naturalism*. And what naturalism presupposes is the efficacy of natural human intelligence to self-monitor and advance the aims of practical reason. (This is a crucial point, which Barth will take up with a vengeance.)

Schleiermacher is often contrasted with Kant, who famously began with a view of morality that dichotomizes human experience into separate realms (rational and empirical), but ended up with a view of religion that collapses that distinction.²⁴ Schleiermacher's early work *On Freedom*²⁵ was devoted to refuting Kant's "so-called doctrine of pure morals"²⁶ But the contrast between Kant and Schleiermacher should not be drawn too starkly on this point. Though Schleiermacher is a determinist when it comes to human behavior (including morality) and thus departs sharply from Kant on matters of moral psychology, religion is no less bound to ethical practice for him than it was for Kant. Theology, Schleiermacher says in the *Brief Outline*, is a "positive science" in that it seeks to

²² Schleiermacher, *On the Glaubenslehre*, 64.

²³ Schleiermacher, *On the Glaubenslehre*, 64-5.

²⁴ Theodore Greene, "The Historical Context and Religious Significance of Kant's *Religion*," in *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), lxii-lxiii.

²⁵ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Freedom*, translated by Albert L. Blackwell (Lewiston. Edwin Mellen, 1992).

²⁶ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Lectures on Philosophical Ethics*, 1812/13; 1816/17, translated by Louise Adey Huish, edited by Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

determine the cohesiveness of its elements not as a matter of pure speculation, but only in so far as they are directed towards "carrying out a practical task."²⁷ This is not primarily a matter of ecclesiastical governance; for Christianity in particular, Schleiermacher says in the *Glaubenslehre*, is a "teleological religion" in that "a predominating reference to the moral task constitutes the fundamental type of religious affections" (§9.1).

How that moral task is to be accomplished is the ultimate concern for Schleiermacher, and this has everything to do with the way the balance of outside and inside is maintained. Affect is inherently expressive, manifesting "in the most direct and spontaneous way, by means of facial features and movements of voice and gesture" (§15.1). But *religious* affections are rendered not just as "sensual gladness or sadness," but as the result of *self-consciousness*—that is, by the person becoming an object to herself. And this naturally rises to the level of expressive speech, in the form of "doctrine," though (once again) by this Schleiermacher does not mean simply rote catechism. Religious expression is as diverse as the occasions and individuals involved, even within a single communion, and this has an important implication. Just *because* doctrine naturally takes many discursive forms ("natural or figurative," signifying "directly or only by comparison and delimitation" (§15.1)), its overall coherence—an ideal that places Schleiermacher emphatically on the pre-postmodernist side of today's debate—requires a grounding in "logically ordered reflection" upon some common basis, which he identifies as "the immediate utterances of the religious self-consciousness." (§15.PS). That logically ordered reflection partakes of both the inside and outside view of human life, and the ability of culture to transmit the intellectual tools for accomplishing that very complicated dialectic is a relatively recent phenomenon which Schleiermacher was intent on utilizing.

Karl Barth on the other hand, especially in the 1920s and early 1930s, was fearful that we cannot effectively stand as Christian witnesses and at the same time position ourselves as contemporary intellectuals, because the Christian ought to be prepared to critique the cultural forces that threaten. Schleiermacher thought we could do both: speak from the outside, as it were, without losing the inside view, and even Barth liked to think that Schleiermacher's blend of the two would not have made him, politically, into a high German liberal.²⁸ But Barth's

²⁷ Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline*, §1.

²⁸ Barth, "Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher," 264.

appreciation was clouded. In hindsight, Barth's post-war attitude toward Schleiermacher looks like a cultural precipitate, reduced out of the conflagration in the trenches and towns across Europe—*Schmerzensschrei* from the generation whose world was collapsing. By 1916, the throngs that had cheered the guns of August two summers before were witnessing the lamp of European progress flicker towards extinction. After that, "crisis" theology began to emerge as a response to the "collapse of Protestantism," and one way of presenting the issue for public discourse was to frame it as a dispute over Schleiermacher-as-prophet-and-patron of high liberal modernism.

It is not hard to see how this connection was made. Schleiermacher's mature work was conducted in an era of (apparently) great political promise, following the demise of Napoleon and the reconciliation of the Reformed and Lutheran communions in Germany. All this certainly looked like historical progress at this time, and his view of theology as a "positive science" reflected the status of scholarly activity he foresaw within a unified German state, made possible by a shared consciousness of a common cultural heritage.²⁹

But two generations later Barth saw this high liberal ideal badly eroding, so that "the pastor in his so-called edificatory activity is primarily the mouthpiece of the community itself and not the minister of the Word of God."³⁰ This was hardly Schleiermacher's intention: he had specifically warned against the Church's servitude to the state.³¹ But certainly by 1914, the *Gefühl* of many, in places both high and low, had become heavily draped in images of militant Christian triumphalism, with Harnack himself even writing the Kaiser's war address to the German nation. In that same month, ninety-three German intellectuals (including many of Barth's former teachers) had signed on to a proclamation that declared: "There is no spirit in the German army that is different from that of the German nation.... We believe that for European culture on the whole, salvation rests on the victory which German 'militarism', namely manly discipline, the faithfulness, the courage to sacrifice, of the united and free German nation will achieve."³² They had lost critical distance from their own culture, indulging in a "domestication of

²⁹ Jerry F. Dawson, *Friedrich Schleiermacher: Evolution of a Nationalist* (Austin and London: University of Austin Press, 1966), 149.

³⁰ Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, 170.

³¹ Schleiermacher, *Brief Outline*, §325.

³² H. Martin Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology: An Analysis of the Barth-Harnack Correspondence of 1923* (Cambridge University Press, 1972), 202-3, fn 54.

transcendence"³³ in which symbols are semiotically reapportioned and drained of their ability to shake us from our cultural slumbers. Barth, sadly and with great resignation, suspected that Schleiermacher himself, despite the best of intentions, ends up playing this kind of domesticating game. Certainly, Barth thought, Schleiermacher's natural successors were playing it in spades. And so the events to which Barth and Gogarten and Bultmann and Brunner were witnesses put liberalism, at least as they had known and embraced it up to then, very much on the defensive. Those who position themselves as spokesmen of an age must assume the burden of its fate. Yet, as a treatment of *Schleiermacher*, Barth's critical comments seem out of place, because of course Schleiermacher himself could not have been the spokesman for *Harnack's* age, two generations later. Is it not just a little puzzling that Barth so often treats him as if he were?

By 1924, Barth was placing the burden of Protestantism's "collapse" squarely on Schleiermacher: "All the official tendencies of the liberal Christian present emanate from him like rays," and we are "indeed forced to see in him the most brilliant representative not only of a theological past but also of the theological present."³⁴ This is an exceedingly odd passage. Barth here seems to be constructing a rather sweeping metanarrative, linking the ills of one cultural moment to "emanations" from another. Though I do not think that just any metanarrative is necessarily suspect, it is certainly suspect if it makes no provision for the particularities of context. Perhaps innovations suggested by Schleiermacher early in the century were badly reappropriated by others later on. But is this really Schleiermacher's problem, any more than the later abuse of Christianity rests on Jesus of Nazareth?

Barth at times wrote as if he were oblivious to these kinds of considerations, and I think there are two reasons for this.

(1) The first reason is one I have already mentioned, that Barth by the 1920s is urgently engaged in polemics. This can be the death of careful scholarship. Polemical discourse seeks out targets, specifically to drive home a point that may or may not have all that much to do with the target selected, and it often takes the intervention of others to set the intellectual record straight. (Origen, for example, had a view about the relation of the Logos to the Father which for later

³³ William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

³⁴ Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, xiv-xv.

generations, especially during the Arian controversy, became a convenient target for orthodox polemicists. And just as Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil of Caesarea assembled their *Philocalia* to rehabilitate poor Origen's reputation,³⁵ so too Terrence Tice, Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, and Richard R. Niebuhr, among others, have labored mightily on behalf of Schleiermacher.)

Years later, Barth recanted the "holy zeal" he had born against Schleiermacher, in the first edition of his *Romans*, and here Barth clearly knew he was off the mark, explicitly admitting that Schleiermacher had in fact given him ammunition against Ritschl and Troelsch.³⁶ But at the time and in the spirit of the most contentious of theological disputes, Barth was taking an extremely broad brush to Schleiermacher, as an indirect way of highlighting the true colors of others. As a strategy, this has at least one great advantage. The dispute was already personal enough, with Harnack and Jülicher and Naumann still very much on the scene, so the discussions must have been delicate. During the 1920s, hopeful that the crisis movement in theology would succeed, Barth chose to soften his criticisms of his potential allies (Brunner, Gogarten, Bultmann). So Barth very much needed Schleiermacher here—at least Schleiermacher was already dead!

But the obvious question persists: Given the inability of most individual *liberals* of the day to decipher the signs of the times, is this necessarily a mark against the *liberalism* that Schleiermacher had inaugurated? And granted that Schleiermacher's nationalistic sentiments could be amply summoned for darker, unanticipated political purposes, does the inability to foresee the future in one arena vitiate one's efforts in other respects? Could we not ask a similar question of Barth himself, regarding his views about, say, the status of women, which rested on a reed-like contrast between the "superiority" of the male (which Barth denied), and the "subordination" of women in God's order (which Barth affirmed)?³⁷ Would Barth's blindness on this matter (assuming that's what it is) impair the rest of the project Barth was promoting? It's hard to see how it would, any more than the existence of suicide terrorists invalidates the living core of a moderate Islam.

³⁵ I am grateful to John McGuckin for having suggested this point to me.

³⁶ Barth, "Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher," 262.

³⁷ Dorrien, *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology*, 165-7.

In retrospect, these observations seem almost too obvious to need restating. If "domestication" is the appropriation of a subject matter for one's own use, regardless of the inherent demands of the topic, then Barth himself clearly was heavily engaged in domesticating Schleiermacher! Yet, to the end of his life, he remained deeply ambivalent about what he had done. And at this point, a Freudian observation is nearly irresistible. During his lectures at the University of Vienna, 1915-1917, Freud had discussed "the traumatic neuroses," and especially "those arising from the terrors of war."³⁸ At the risk of wielding too broad a brush myself, I think it's worth considering whether something like this was not at work in Barth's own experience, though in an obviously more refined and healthier way than in the lives of most of the patients Freud, during this very same period, was treating. Though diagnostically unspecific, the parallels are quite striking, for clearly, despite his best efforts, Barth's later antipathy to his teachers (and, by association, to Schleiermacher) cannot be separated from his earlier devotion to them. In his early student days, "He was chained to Harnack ... in a kind of stupor so that even the Berlin Philharmonic could not lure him from his studies."³⁹ Barth later recalled how he had once regarded Schleiermacher's *Speeches* as "the most important and correct writings to appear since the closing of the New Testament canon."⁴⁰ What is so powerful, yet so potentially misleading, is the enchantment of such sweet discovery, which is very much like first love. It's very likely to happen only once in a lifetime, and if it turns sour, especially under traumatic circumstances, the effects of internal psychic conflict are likely to stick a very long time, and the inward conflict may never be resolved.

(2) But all this needs to be placed within a much wider frame. First, we need to admit that prior interest is always at work in any scholarly enterprise, so perhaps we should not be too hard on Barth himself for having seen what he did through the eyes he had. But more importantly, polemical exaggeration born of inner psychic turmoil can hardly comprise the whole story here, or even the most important part of it. Barth's polemic is really directed at a substantive problem in ecclesiastical and cultural life, which he found emblemized in Schleiermacher's characterization of religion as "the solemn music which accompanies all human

³⁸ Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, translated by Joan Riviere (New York: Pocket Books, 1953), 390.

³⁹ Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology*, 4.

⁴⁰ Barth, "Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher," 262.

experience."⁴¹ Here was Schleiermacher in his most expansive, romantic mood, and it's not hard for us to detect, in Barth's warning against "the shaky scaffolding of religions self-expressions,"⁴² more recent warnings against "the banality of pseudo-self-awareness."⁴³

The dangers of theological domestication do not dissipate once Barth's sweeping rhetoric is peeled away (as the history of blindness and abuse by complacent "Christians" amply attests). The risk of *aesthetic* religion is its devolution into an *anesthetic* religion, into "the weak, pitifully weak tones"⁴⁴ of pre-war European culture, which had completely failed to grasp the situation into which it was plunging headlong. The best that historical scholarship had to offer failed in its task, and instead, "man [had] taken the divine into his possession" and "brought it under his management."⁴⁵ And yet Barth did not despair. There are, he declared, resources at our disposal. There are the documents of Scripture, which record the experience of those not unlike us, and there is the stance of faith, by which those experiential traces can have their impact upon us. (To be sure, Barth would not prefer to put it quite this way. This is the language that the now-banished Schleiermacher would have recognized, and Barth by this point was even avoiding references to moral conscience—since this had been a hallmark of much liberal theology.⁴⁶)

But what then is left for us, if not the culture of "religion"? Barth's answer is: God's Word, pure and simple. In hindsight, it is perhaps easy for us, as it was for Harnack himself, to marvel at the amazing simplicity, the almost plaintive naïveté of such a response, because it completely begs all the questions that liberal theology was at least asking. Given Barth's reaction to Schleiermacher—dubbed the father not only of modern theology but also of modern hermeneutics—and given the impact of Barth's spiritual awakening from the habits of interpretation then current, this is hardly surprising. It must indeed have seemed to Barth as if the Holy Scriptures do "interpret themselves," and do so not

⁴¹ Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, translated by Edwyn C. Hoskyns, 6th ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 258.

⁴² Karl Barth, "The Strange New World Within the Bible," 1916, translated by Douglas Horton, in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*. (Gloucester MA: Peter Smith, 1978), 44.

⁴³ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Warner Books, 1979), 135ff.

⁴⁴ Barth, "The Strange New World Within the Bible," 31.

⁴⁵ Karl Barth, "Biblical Questions, Insights, and Vistas," 1920, translated by Douglas Horton, in *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (Gloucester MA: Peter Smith, 1978), 68.

⁴⁶ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, edited by H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart, 2d ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), §83.

through our efforts to capture them conveniently in concepts that make us already comfortable.⁴⁷ Or, to put it another way: we find ourselves in a strange new world we hadn't planned on entering: "we are far from being equal to that knowledge," and yet nonetheless "we are not outside, as it were, but inside."⁴⁸

What does this give us? This is an absolutely critical point. It gives us *self-transcendence*. This is (at very least) a phenomenological observation: the perspective acquired reflects something wholly other than what we "know" ourselves to be. And how do we sense this? *We feel its power*: it has *power* to engage us in ways we know we could not orchestrate by our own conscious intentions. And the access to that power is not from outside, from the cool and detached objectivity of academic criticism. It is from within the practice of faith itself.

This call to self-transcendence has the ring of challenging urgency. But as we address this kind of question, we may well fail to find the implications for our discussion that Barth seems to have assumed. For the fact is, I think, that anyone who thoughtfully embraces the liberal tradition these days might find little in *these* Barthian comments to disagree with. Self-transcendence has lately become a theme even for non-Christians.⁴⁹ For us here, the real question is this: Does the danger that Barth rightly saw in the theological practices of one form of liberalism really require Barth's radical theological expedient? Or does the kind of program Schleiermacher inaugurated offer a promise that Barth's early criticisms miss? One's answer to this determines one's attitude toward Christian liberalism in general.

Barth's self-declared distance from Christian liberalism in his early writings is a response to the characterization he gives it—the aspiration to be both Christian and modern. For both Christian liberalism and modernity, he says, the "true agent" of history is "*man*, the individual."⁵⁰ What runs as a constant,

⁴⁷ Barth, "The Strange New World Within the Bible," 34.

⁴⁸ Barth, "Biblical Questions, Insights, and Vistas," 52.

⁴⁹ Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 74-77. Unfortunately, naturalism is not always salvaged in the process. For an example, see Victor Kestenbaum, *The Grace and the Severity of the Ideal: John Dewey and the Transcendent* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), and Casey Haskins' review in *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* XXXIX, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 513-19. See also my review of Kestenbaum in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* (Spring 2004).

⁵⁰ Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, 138.

disturbing undercurrent through "the time of Schleiermacher and his followers,"⁵¹ Barth thought, is the notion of the "absolute man," who "discovers his own power and ability, the potentiality dormant in his humanity." Such a person "looks upon it as the final, the real and absolute," as "something 'detached,' self-justifying, with its own authority and power, which he can therefore set in motion in all directions and without any restraint."⁵² But this, Barth insisted, is a spiritually bankrupt conception, and what we face is a radical choice: "A man can and must decide between Creator and creature where the Creator is God."⁵³

This apparently means what, at least until recently,⁵⁴ most commentators have taken even the mature Barth to mean that perfecting our natural capacities (*human autonomy*, in other words) is not going to solve our spiritual problems: for "the complexity of our lives, of our this-and-that culture, revolts against the simplicity of the knowledge of God: our *individualism* revolts..."⁵⁵ And the fact that high liberalism assumed otherwise is just why liberalism was to be rejected, along with the naturalism that Schleiermacher thought indispensable to Christian spiritual formation in the modern world. For Barth, "the categories of the science of religion cannot exhaustively describe the turning of man to God, much less contribute anything toward an understanding of it."⁵⁶ It is worth noticing that there are two issues here, which Barth (in his polemical exuberance) conveniently and rather carelessly conflated: (1) whether or not all that's involved in faith can be "exhaustively" accounted for by a "science" like history of religions (and here we can widen this to include social science in general), and then (2) whether or not the human sciences can "contribute anything" toward understanding faith. Regarding the latter, Barth here was adamant about the unity of the Bible and the dangers he saw in privileging the "other spirits" detected by historical-critical research, "Jewish or Popular Christian or Hellenistic or whatever else they may be." This kind of warning still cuts some heavy theological mustard in certain more conservative quarters, and the problem underlying it is, I think, a very real one—of literary and even theological *power*: Barth (along with his contemporary

⁵¹ Karl Barth, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1972), 18.

⁵² Barth, *Protestant Thought*, 36-7.

⁵³ Barth, *Protestant Thought*, 23.

⁵⁴ John Macken, *The Autonomy Theme in the Church Dogmatics: Karl Barth and His Critics* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁵⁵ Barth, "Biblical Questions, Insights, and Vistas," 53-4, my emphasis.

⁵⁶ Barth, "Biblical Questions, Insights, and Vistas," 66.

sympathizers) feared that the commentator will succumb to these other spirits, "be bewildered by the voices of those other spirits, which so often render inaudible the dominant tones of the Spirit of Christ."⁵⁷

Now anyone who has sat in on a history of religions seminar in a good liberal seminary may have noticed just what Barth was troubled by, and how so many seminarians depart from such a class with little sense for how to apply what they have learned to preaching and liturgy (or to their own faith struggle). I think there are two causes for this. There is, first, the sheer complexity of the data, which requires a technical command that only the most dedicated students acquire; and then there is the (related but separate) difficulty of organizing and assessing the material, so that something genuinely meaningful comes from having assembled it in the first place. Since Barth, especially during this early period, had little confidence in human powers of philosophical reflection for understanding theological matters, he was distrustful of the historical approach that requires philosophy's sensitive and well-practiced use.

Schleiermacher, on the other hand, sees theology and science (and philosophy itself) working very much in tandem in just this way—which is to say that he has confidence in the discerning application of natural human intelligence in the study of matters of faith, not just to analyze faith in accordance with the latest canons of research, but to apply some of those to strengthen it. He might point out that Barth at times (though, again, not consistently) would edge rather close to the "natural heresy" of Manicheanism—of supposing that our natural capacities for redemption (the "human possibilities") so under-match our need for it, that our natural intelligence becomes an irrelevancy if not a detriment. Schleiermacher seeks a balance on this, characterizing human nature as both "in need of redemption and capable of receiving it." The "natural heresies" are formulations of belief that fail to reflect the balance which compound statements like these imply. Barth sometimes spoke as if Schleiermacher's legacy was really a crude Pelagianism, pronouncing humankind so capable of redemption that grace had become inessential. But for Schleiermacher, no doubt, the real problem would be that Barth's polemical concerns have a "foreshortening" effect: the nearer a

commentator stands to the Manichean line herself, the more easily she will believe that the middle, balanced view is really Pelagian.⁵⁸

The point for Schleiermacher would not be that Barth's warnings against "religion" were actually wrong—Pelagianism *is* a heresy—but rather that what Barth specifically said overlooks important implications about the structure of human consciousness. Here is where philosophy serves a very useful function in theology. Philosophically speaking, "autonomy"—at least in its honorific spiritual sense—is not best construed as a human condition that aspires to independence from God, but as a condition whereby God works through "a complex psychological structure, especially the rational or deliberative components together with the interests and desires that are already a part of that structure."⁵⁹ This does not of course mean that the structure itself is left unaltered by that process: in fact, this is just how human transformation occurs—through some features of our embodiedness having effects on others. If this were not a human possibility for physical creatures such as us, then we would be left with only the blind hope of a Manichean supernaturalism.

Barth regarded this "liberal" way of speaking as a dangerous accommodation: Bultmann and his collaborators ("all of you") were "trying to understand faith as a human possibility," and as a result were "once again surrendering theology to philosophy."⁶⁰ This distrust in philosophy had its cost. Barth was obviously right in associating liberalism not only with confidence in the application of scientific research, but also with the value of human autonomy. Unfortunately, it is not always clear what people mean when they use the term "autonomy," and certainly in Barth's case, the subtle incisiveness he would be employing with great effect in matters of church dogmatics was not consistently reflected in his handling of strictly philosophical ones. In the case of autonomy, Barth in his early formative period—when his critical attitude toward Schleiermacher became more or less firm—simply missed the complex contours of the discussion.

⁵⁸ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, §22.2,3.

⁵⁹ Bernard Berofsky, "Autonomy," in *How Many Questions? Essays in Honor of Sidney Morgenbesser*, ed. Leigh S. Cauman, et al. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), 315.

⁶⁰ *Karl Barth Rudolf Bultmann Letters 1922-1966*, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, edited by Bernd Jaspert (Grand Rapids MI: Wm B Eerdmans, 1981), 49.

⁵⁷ Karl Barth, "Preface to the Third Edition," 1922, translated by Edwyn C. Hoskyns, in *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 16-17.

This is not a deficiency of Barth's alone: the issue remains a complex and unsettled one, and continues to be addressed, from both a secular⁶¹ and a Christian⁶² perspective. Theologians—Neil Biggar,⁶³ for example—have often framed the discussion around assumptions about “freedom” that fail to reflect the more plausible forms of compatibilism⁶⁴ that have emerged in recent philosophy.⁶⁵ Barth's own understanding of this matter, early on, was not entirely clear. First, Barth declared that the fact that we hear God's Word, and are taken up in it, “cannot be due to the natural strength of our religious emotion, for the religious emotion may turn men aside from God as well as toward him.”⁶⁶ Here Barth seemed to think that our natural capabilities are typically arrayed against rather than for God (this reflects Barth's rediscovery of Calvin during the gestation of his *Romans*). For Barth, as he put it in these early sermons, the explanation is in “the fact of *election*.” But then, interestingly, he immediately added that the explanation's “really vital core” is “our response [sic] to the fact of election,” and that the entire doctrine is “well adapted to the requirements of individual *freedom*.”⁶⁷ Now, this touches on a notorious controversy which I will do no more than mention here: if freedom involves our own action (and not just God's), and if we had *no* capabilities of responding to God's grace, then faithful response to God's call would depend upon the *absence* of human freedom. Religious liberals have typically tended to reject this move, and have maintained the general aim of elaborating “faithfulness” in terms of human possibility.

Interestingly, it is not clear that Schleiermacher always takes exactly this “liberal” line himself: in fact he overtly takes the rather shocking view that we should “regard God as the author of sin,”⁶⁸ a matter that I shall not attempt to assess here. Similarly, Barth himself might have declared that “no natural constitution of man, nothing that takes shape in him independently of the whole

⁶¹ Bernard Berofsky, *Liberation from Self: A Theory of Personal Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁶² See my forthcoming *Spiritual Autonomy after Foucault: Philosophy and Christian Neo-liberalism*.

⁶³ Nigel Biggar, *The Hastening That Waits: Karl Barth's Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 5.

⁶⁴ “Compatibilism” is the view that freedom is compatible with (causal) determinism, and is thus not necessarily excluded from a naturalistic human world.

⁶⁵ Harry G. Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

⁶⁶ Barth, “Biblical Questions, Insights, and Vistas,” 54.

⁶⁷ Barth, “Biblical Questions, Insights, and Vistas,” 58.

⁶⁸ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, §79.

serious of gracious workings mediated by Christ, alters this relation to God...”⁶⁹ Schleiermacher is self-consciously speaking “from within” an early nineteenth-century Reformed Christian discourse, and it is not apparent just what we should make of these kinds of pronouncements once the limitations of historical context are factored out. But all that is another discussion. What interests me here is the general line that Barth drew from Schleiermacher and the implications he thought it had. So let us now consider whether, as Barth apparently supposed, self-transcendence really *cannot* be regarded as a “human possibility,” in a manner that Schleiermacher might generally accept.

Schleiermacher's project famously declares that the “immediate” religious self-consciousness is one of “absolute dependence” upon God⁷⁰ and this raises at least two serious objections. The first, given extensive treatment by Wayne Proudfoot,⁷¹ is that Schleiermacher is inconsistent in attempting to specify an “object” of “immediate” consciousness, because consciousness is intentional (i.e., structured as to its content), and therefore linguistically framed and *not* immediate. It is not clear to me however that the crucial aspects of Schleiermacher's project rest on the question of “immediacy.”⁷² The second object is of more direct concern. One has to wonder how this characterization of “absolute dependence” leaves any space for privileging human autonomy. And of course it does not, if “autonomy” and “dependence” are binary opposites. But are they? Despite their frequent conflation, especially in political and economic discussions,⁷³ it is useful to keep these two distinct.⁷⁴ Theologically speaking, the ideal of *autarky*—of total self-sufficiency—is the real danger of Pelagianism. As long as we resist the most depraved doctrine of original sin and cosmic fallenness (and the *ad hoc* supernaturalism that accompanies such a desperate view), “autonomy” can mean something quite different from autarky, having to do not with how the human being avoids determinative contextuality, but with how the human being is functionally integrated into her context. Integration is impossible unless the world's actual features are sufficiently reflected in the rational and affective

⁶⁹ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, §109.4.

⁷⁰ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, §4.

⁷¹ Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 31ff.

⁷² This needs to be discussed more fully, but not in the present context.

⁷³ “...full autonomy, understood as self-sufficiency or autarky, cannot be practiced...” Julio de Santa Ana, “The rights to development and economic justice,” *Reformed World*, 48 (3), <http://www.warc.ch/dcw/rw983/03.html>

⁷⁴ Macken, *The Autonomy Theme in the Church Dogmatics: Karl Barth and His Critics*, 1-21.

structure of the person to enable her to make her way in the shared world, and the ways she thinks of herself must be no less framed in just such a vocabulary. Only within such a broad framework does it make much sense to speak about revelation: revelation is always to someone particular, in some specific context or other.

Thus the Word addresses us only within a social practice that is not, as Schleiermacher would say, "given externally or invented specially by each investigator." For "the Christian self-consciousness must be already developed in the community before really dogmatic elements come to be formed..."⁷⁵ And just what is this "Christian self-consciousness"? For the Evangelical (liberal or conservative), it is a form of self-representation. It is not the assent to abstract moral or theological principles. It is a peculiar way in which self-identity has been formed by a process of self-ascription. We know who God is only in the way God interacts with us and through us, and (since we are natural creatures) only in the way God interacts in the natural world. And this is the only way we know who *we* truly are as well.

Once self-conscious naturalism has taken the linguistic turn, the full-blown result is what we might call *the discursive turn*—by which power comes to be understood in much the way Michel Foucault (however haltingly at first⁷⁶) was trying to understand things toward the end of his own career.⁷⁷ If "reality" is in any sense a "social construction" (and it seems likely that the flexibility of our linguistic web of belief insures that in *some* sense it has to be), then the phenomenology of religious experience must be implicated in the ways that the Word works upon us, and herein lies the power of the discursive word. "Only for those who believe is it the power of God unto salvation,"⁷⁸ and only those who *represent themselves* as needful, does "salvation" have any power.

"Self-transcendence" in this context would be a functional concept, involving the resolution of the inner conflict between this-worldly habits and the *imago dei in nobis*. The mark of this resolution is (as Barth declared) God's *power*. For if

⁷⁵ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, §20.1.

⁷⁶ Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures," translated by Colin Gordon, et al., in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 78-108.

⁷⁷ Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," translated by P. Aranov and D. McGrawth, in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 281-301

⁷⁸ Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 38.

the central theme of Romans is indeed the passage about "the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth,"⁷⁹ then we have to account for, and even begin with, what we know most intimately and directly. This is *the experience of power itself*. This is not a chronological beginning: we don't notice "God's power" like some rumble in the stomach and then wonder where on earth *that* came from. Nonetheless, we are brought into the experience of God's power through earthly means, through the stories about the faith of others (in scripture and elsewhere) and through encounters with contemporary witnesses. These are of course natural events. God is always mediated naturalistically, by human thought,⁸⁰ for "man does not live abstractly but concretely, i.e., in experiences, in determinations of his existence by objects, by things outside him and distinct from him."⁸¹ So "revelation" is not a prepositional, purely cognitive affair, as it had been for the Protestant scholastics (and still is), and here in fact Barth was on the same side of the discussion as Schleiermacher had been. The Word of God, Barth would soon announce, is "three-fold," and revelation, scripture, and witness *interpenetrate each other*. These form the basis for our "experience" of God. And here, suddenly in 1936, Barth was even admitting that Schleiermacher's notion of the religious affections "is obviously very similar" to what he wants now to say!⁸²

So once again we see Barth's ever-shifting ambivalence toward Schleiermacher, and our suspicion grows that one side of Barth really wanted to update rather than reject Schleiermacher's project. Schleiermacher is, like Barth, a Reformed evangelical—he describes himself in fact as "a theologian who comes from the reformed tradition and who does not believe that this tradition should be put aside."⁸³

Though Schleiermacher would certainly not have put things quite as we would today, it's worth imagining how such an updated project might proceed around the notion of "self-transcendence." Let's note two important aspects of this.

⁷⁹ Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 35.

⁸⁰ Karl Barth, "Fate and Idea in Theology," 1929, translated by George Hunsinger, in *The Way of Theology in Karl Barth: Essays and Comments*, ed. H. Martin Runsccheidt (Allison Park PA: Pickwick Publications, 1986).

⁸¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. and trans. G. W. Bromiley et al. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975ff), I/i, 198.

⁸² Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/i, 198-9.

⁸³ Schleiermacher, *On the Glaubenslehre*, 55.

(a) To reiterate: Self-transcendence requires, first, self-consciousness, and self-consciousness is a discursive event—i.e., *self-representation*. As a point of moral psychology, it would seem, one cannot transcend what one has not at least implicitly described to oneself, “for it is only through our consciousness of [our own] sin that we come to the idea of the divine justice.”⁸⁴ Otherwise, the resulting change of self no more involves the free human person than an involuntary twitch of one’s arm involves intentional human action.⁸⁵ This does not of course mean that one “does” the transcending as a matter of intentional effort: the fact that self-transcendence cannot be “accomplished” is of course the part of Pauline doctrine that struck Luther with such force (and Schleiermacher regards himself as no less an anti-Pelagian⁸⁶). The point rather is that self-transcendence does not occur unless the person has “become in his various mental states... an object to himself.”⁸⁷ For someone comfortable with Reformed discourse, this self-representation involves, first, an awareness of one’s own sinfulness, and then the felt power of “God,” a power from we know not where (and certainly not a power we are used to generating on our own), and through which “the consciousness of sin will become the consciousness of forgiveness of sin.”⁸⁸

(b) As a characterization of faithful Christian response, “self-transcendence” is not just any arbitrary transformation: it is a transformation in accordance with a certain way of relating to self and to others. Our self-awareness as saved people stays with us and informs our actions towards others. Regarding others, this involves a relation that here, without further explication, I will simply term “agapic”; regarding oneself, it involves what Calvin called the “assurances of the heart” in the hope for unseen things.⁸⁹ These are, for Schleiermacher, inseparable except in reflection: “our ordinary vocational activity” is tied to our consciousness of “blessedness.”⁹⁰ The latter frees us up for the former: it transforms our self-regarding preoccupations and calls us to faithful disbelief, for in faith we cannot believe “that any situation is hopeless—any situation.”⁹¹ And it directs our

⁸⁴ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, § 84.2.

⁸⁵ Arthur C. Danto, “Basic Actions and Basic Concepts,” 1979, in *The Body/Body Problem* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 45-62.

⁸⁶ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, §61.5.

⁸⁷ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, §16.1.

⁸⁸ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 109.2.

⁸⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, edited by John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), III, ii, 36, 41.

⁹⁰ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, §87.2.

⁹¹ Morse, *Not Every Spirit*, 250.

energies to where they may better be used “in the Lord’s work,” not by leaving self-awareness behind, but by remembering our own spiritual journey and identifying with those who are in a similar process, as we act from the felt assurance that they may still find elusive. So “good works are a natural effect of faith.”⁹²

Now if all this is indeed so, why would this not be rightly characterized as a “human possibility”? Religious *piety*⁹³ is a human possibility, but (Barth liked to say) “faith” is “never identical with ‘piety,’ however pure and delicate.”⁹⁴ One has the sense here that Barth at times regarded human thought rather as Plato regarded artistic production, as the creation of images without metaphysical substance. However, to say that self-transcendence is a phenomenological category need not be to say that its occurrence has *no* metaphysical presuppositions, or that those who accept such a view “relativize all truth and deny the very reality of a transcendent order.”⁹⁵ Does this need to involve such a radical metaphysical transformation, at the human level, that it effects an *entire* alteration in the believer’s being, imprinting upon us capacities and sensibilities and God knows exactly what, where before we had absolutely none of these? “No!” To be sure, self-transcendence is (very broadly speaking) a human “action,” but this does not mean that it is accomplished by human “effort,” nor that it inevitably expresses a domesticating of transcendence.

What it does mean is that, given the requirement of self-consciousness, any feature the activity of self-representation involves is *ipso facto* a trait of hearing and responding to the Word, and Barth early on was attentive to the inevitable paradox here, expressed in our characterization of God as the paradoxical object of our belief. What we can or cannot directly say about that Object is addressed but not settled by Schleiermacher’s observation that the divine attributes are to be taken “as denoting not something special in God,” but as denoting the way we see God interacting with us:⁹⁶ for this still leaves open the question as to whether there is a positive analogy between our experience of this interaction and the actual being of God. What is not always noticed is the possibility that the paradox

⁹² Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, §112.1

⁹³ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, §2.

⁹⁴ Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 40.

⁹⁵ Donald B. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology, Volume Two: Life, Ministry, and Hope* (New York: HarperCollins, 1978), 289.

⁹⁶ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, §50.

of faith arises even before these questions are addressed and is deeply implicated in the activity of self-representation at the purely human level, which is after all a natural event. Logically speaking, self-reference has inherently paradoxical features,⁹⁷ and yet of course, as natural creatures, we seem to perform that activity all the time. No metaphysical transcendence seems required before we deal with paradox, and it is an open and intriguing question as to how this impacts the human side of faithfulness, especially as this involves our "double vision" when it comes to our own self-consciousness, as both "outside" and "inside" ourselves.⁹⁸

I have concentrated my discussion here on Barth's early theological development, but we are obviously well beyond the "dialectical" stage of Barth's formative years, when his most fervent attitudes toward Schleiermacher were formed. Where does all this leave us *since* then? Part of the answer has to do with how Barth's own theology has fared up to the present moment.

After witnessing Barth's famous address at the Aarau student conference in 1920, Barth's old teacher Harnack admitted to being scandalized by the fact that Barth was actually a *pastor*, one who is "charged with the cure of souls." For "what [Barth] gave with one hand he took away with the other."⁹⁹ Barth declared that as Christians we speak and listen "inside and not outside" the knowledge of God; and yet, even so, we suffer a "dark, enigmatical, inexplicable sense of being outside and of lacking a premise."¹⁰⁰ How could such a confusing, paradoxical message have any impact on the real world of parishioners, who need answers rather than riddles? For just this reason, Harnack thought of Barth's theology as the sort of religion "incapable of being translated into real life, so that it must soar above life as a meteor rushing toward its disintegration."¹⁰¹

No doubt Harnack would have been shocked at the standing that Barth's career has actually achieved—it has not only soared; it has virtually hovered over twentieth-century theology like a shimmering, filigreed aurora, but Harnack was perhaps correct in one respect. For the most part, Barth's synoptic view of theology has proven nearly incapable of being translated, at least *in tact*, into real academic life. Generally speaking, Barth did not attract allies who accepted his entire project, taken as a whole; instead, his combination of views "drove one

⁹⁷ Susan Haack, *Philosophy of Logics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 135ff.

⁹⁸ Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, 86ff.

⁹⁹ Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology*, 15-16.

¹⁰⁰ Barth, "Biblical Questions, Insights, and Vistas," 53.

¹⁰¹ Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology*, 15.

major theologian after another to consign him to the backwaters."¹⁰² It is not hard to imagine why. Barth adhered to two theological themes that make a perplexing couplet, and this puts him closer to Schleiermacher than he was very often eager to admit. He would not budge on either. He proclaimed the objectivity of the Word, but he also proclaimed the insuperable limitations of our cultural and particular moorings when attempting to comprehend it; and those who draw most from Barth's work tend to hang on one or the other of these two doctrinal points. Barth's objectivist side can be lauded as incipient neoorthodoxy,¹⁰³ or else dismissed as revelational positivism;¹⁰⁴ his particularist side can be hailed for its anticipations of postliberalism,¹⁰⁵ or else disparaged as a species of "neo-liberalism."¹⁰⁶

But those who would rather not have to choose between objectivity and diversity are naturally drawn back to Schleiermacher's synthesis, and find themselves battling, as Barth himself did, on two fronts at once. This is none too easy a task, but one that committed liberals these days need to engage, and this has been complicated by the fact that there is much in Schleiermacher that many may find problematic. His aversion to preaching on the Old Testament in his later years was based on his notion that an incomparable historical event occurred with Christ, and that the events before that, which we find characterized in the Hebrew scripture, no longer have vivid pertinence to us.¹⁰⁷ This is a view that seems ill-suited to the efforts of many nowadays on behalf of interfaith dialogue.¹⁰⁸ As Barth noticed,¹⁰⁹ it raises qualms over the doctrinal fit between Schleiermacher's claims about Christian uniqueness¹¹⁰ and his generally historicist view of human culture. ("By what right, one might ask [of Schleiermacher], may Christianity as a

¹⁰² Dorrien, *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology*, 131.

¹⁰³ Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990).

¹⁰⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, translated by Reginald Fuller, edited by Eberhard Bethge, Revised (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 171.

¹⁰⁵ George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 135.

¹⁰⁶ Bernard Ramm, *Handbook of Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1966), 88-89.

¹⁰⁷ Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, 16.

¹⁰⁸ Mary C. Boyce, *Has God Only One Blessing? Judaism as a Source of Christian Self-Understanding* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000).

¹⁰⁹ Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, 147.

¹¹⁰ Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, §13.1.

whole apply the term *error* to other modes of belief?"¹¹¹) Likewise, feminists might feel less sympathy than Barth undoubtedly did with the "old-fashioned Christian rigorism"¹¹² in Schleiermacher's picture of married bliss and his traditionalist take on passages like Col 3:18.¹¹³ And political progressives may find disconcerting the nationalistic sentiments he shared with others in Germany, following the upheavals of the Napoleonic era.

But of course. We would expect the cultural landscape to have shifted radically two centuries after Schleiermacher. What is perhaps surprising is how well Schleiermacher might still recognize much in our temporary situation. For cultured despisers of religion¹¹⁴ are still very much at work. Today these are the textualist "romantics" of contemporary neo-pragmatism, who (as Richard Rorty puts it) are content with a "fuzzy overlap of faith, hope and love" for humanity, and reject "the conviction that a power not ourselves will do unimaginably vast good" rather than hoping simply that "we ourselves will do such good."¹¹⁵ This is an entirely secularized, aestheticized faith, rather similar, in quite a number of ways, to the liberalism of some of Barth's teachers. It shares liberal themes in other respects as well, especially in its preoccupation with overcoming all forms of "abasement," and this means not only freedom from any ties to religious Otherness, but also detachment from the world as it "really is."¹¹⁶ For Rorty, there simply is nothing out there, or in here, or anywhere else "with which we ought to be in touch,"¹¹⁷ and that, Rorty thinks, is a good thing: "A post-metaphysical culture seems to me no more impossible than a post-religious one, and equally desirable."¹¹⁸

This amounts to the notion that there is no such thing as "objectivity," if by that we mean a relation between language and language-independent reality. Any

¹¹¹ Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, 151.

¹¹² Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, 115.

¹¹³ "Wives be subject to your husbands!"

¹¹⁴ Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*.

¹¹⁵ Richard Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility, and Romance," in *Pragmatism, Neo-Pragmatism, and Religion: Conversations with Richard Rorty*, ed. Charley D. Hardwick and Donald A. Crosby (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 14.

¹¹⁶ John McDowell, "Towards Rehabilitating Objectivity," in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert B. Brandom (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2000), 109-10.

¹¹⁷ Richard Rorty, "Response to McDowell," in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert B. Brandom (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2000), 123.

¹¹⁸ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xvi.

Christian will recognize this as "overcoming the tradition"¹¹⁹ in perhaps the most totalizing way possible, and people who have never even heard of Richard Rorty but who identify themselves as "liberal" nowadays, are likely to have imbibed the popular atmosphere that Rorty, as much as any other single individual, has helped to create.

Sometimes, and much more often than some theologians like to think, general positions in philosophy or theology really *are* (as Rorty says) nothing but handy terms for yoking together some favored particularist rhetoric around very localized concerns. This is the kind of observation Wittgenstein had in mind when he tied meaning to use. (Origen's Logos theology comes to mind, as way of mediating the contentious disputes with pagan Neo-platonists.) However, on pain of falling into totalizing hegemonism, should we simply assume there is *no* core to such discussions? It may still be that there are generic traits of human existence (as Dewey would have said) which get reflected (badly or well, as the case may be) in various philosophical and theological formulations. What evangelical Christianity assumes, in either its liberal or conservative form, is that the world is God's creation and remains the province for God's providence. For them, this fact itself is the generic trait of our physical embodiedness, recorded in our original nature as creatures—in the "sense of deity inscribed in the heart."¹²⁰

This is not however a serious possibility for secularists like Rorty. By most accounts Richard Rorty himself is not the most commanding figure on the theological scene, but his influence has been pervasive in many areas of American academic life, including religious studies. Whereas Barth had insisted, against the Harnacks of his day, that theology must speak from "inside and not outside" the knowledge of God,¹²¹ Barth's "postliberal" successors, who have embraced the "linguistic turn" that Rorty helped inaugurate¹²² and Barth resisted,¹²³ generally take "inside" as a purely textual positioning, whereby we can understand the meaning of Scripture only by occupying a space within the linguistically-defined social practices of its intended audience. "Meaning," then, is immanent to the language of those practices. This is not immanence as it has been naturalistically

¹¹⁹ Richard Rorty, "Overcoming the Tradition: Heidegger to Dewey," in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 37-59.

¹²⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, I, iii, 1.

¹²¹ Barth, "Biblical Questions, Insights, and Vistas," 53.

¹²² Richard Rorty ed., *The Linguistic Turn* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1967).

¹²³ Barth, "Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher," 266.

construed (typically by liberals), as referring to God's presence within the metaphysical fabric of the real world. Post-liberal meaning is typically confined to words themselves, rather than lying "outside the text or semiotic system either in the objective realities to which it refers or in the experiences it symbolizes."¹²⁴ The connection with Rorty is obvious—he very specifically advocates "a general turn against theory and toward narrative"¹²⁵—and this has been cited by post-liberals themselves.¹²⁶

Barth also knew, as others have lately said, that the events of the twentieth century, both political and philosophical, do not permit a return to "the liberal theological program as we have known it."¹²⁷ But the fact that we cannot return to the lost world of progressive innocence—of paleo-liberalism, if you will—does not mean that we are left only with the saga of post-liberalism. Here may be another set of binary opposites that deserve to be contested, for as Francis Schüssler Fiorenza has indicated, there is more than one way of making a linguistic turn.¹²⁸ Maybe objectivity and pluralism are not necessarily at odds with one another, and maybe what irritated orthodox critics of Barth, enough for them to invent the term "neoliberal," is just what we should embrace—the sense that faithfulness is a way of contacting objectivity, from a power "inside," which in turn gives a more powerful witness to social justice than Rorty's "liberal ironist"¹²⁹ can possibly manage. Rorty announces that there is no plausible alternative to his form of what he unabashedly calls "ethnocentrism,"¹³⁰ and just because objectivity (or deep interpretation) is no longer an operative category, "we must, in practice, privilege our own group."¹³¹ In that case, maybe our neoliberal stands like Barth to Rorty's Harnack.

¹²⁴ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 114.

¹²⁵ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xvi.

¹²⁶ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 137, fn 20.

¹²⁷ Joseph C. Hough, "The Loss of Optimism as a Problem for Liberal Christian Faith," in *Liberal Protestantism*, ed. Robert S. Michaelson and Wade Clark Roof (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1986), 166.

¹²⁸ Fiorenza, "Religion: A Contested Site."

¹²⁹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, xv.

¹³⁰ Richard Rorty, "On Ethnocentrism: A Reply to Clifford Geertz," in *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 203-10.

¹³¹ Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" in *Philosophical Papers*, vol. I, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 29.