

PAUL SILAS PETERSON

# The Early Karl Barth

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Paul Silas Peterson

# The Early Karl Barth

Historical Contexts and Intellectual Formation  
1905–1935

Mohr Siebeck

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This is the fate of our generation, that we are between the times.

We never belonged to the time that is coming to an end today.

Will we ever belong to the time that is coming?

Friedrich Gogarten, "Zwischen den Zeiten [Between the Times]" (1920)



## Foreword

This book is a revised version of my *Habilitationsschrift* which was accepted by the Protestant Faculty of Theology of the University of Tübingen (*Evangelisch-theologische Fakultät der Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen*). I am very thankful to Christoph Schwöbel and Elisabeth Gräb-Schmidt for their many helpful suggestions on an earlier draft of the manuscript. I would also like to thank Simone Langner of the *Bundesarchiv* (Berlin), Stefan Flesch of the *Archiv der Evangelischen Kirche im Rheinland* (Düsseldorf), Thomas Kemme of the *Deutsches Literaturarchiv* (Marbach) and Peter Zocher of the *Karl Barth-Archiv* (Basel). For their help with proofreading and manuscript preparation, I owe a special word of thanks to Jamin Swenson and to the excellent staff members at Mohr Siebeck: Klaus Hermannstädter, Jana Trispel and Kendra Mäschke. I am also very grateful that the distinguished publishing house Mohr Siebeck (Tübingen) has included this monograph in their prestigious series *Beiträge zur historischen Theologie* (*Contributions to Historical Theology*). For this great honor I would like to express my sincere thanks to Henning Ziebritzki (chief editor for theology) and Albrecht Beutel (series editor). I am also very thankful for the generous grant from the German Research Foundation (*Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*) which made the publication of this monograph possible. This book is dedicated to Lena, my compassionate wife who has patiently supported me with joyful companionship and enlightening conversation, and to our children.





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## Abbreviations

- BH *Barth Handbuch*, ed. Michael Beintker. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016.
- GA *Karl Barth-Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Hinrich Stoevesandt (1971–1998), Hans Anton Drewes (1999–2012) and Peter Zocher (2013–). Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1971–.
- HLS *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz*, 13 vols., ed. Marco Jorio, et. al. Basel: Schwabe, 2002–2014.
- LThK3 *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 11 vols., ed. Walter Kasper, et al., 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Freiburg: Herder, 2009.
- RGG3 *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 7 vols., ed. Kurt Galling, et al., 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1986.
- RGG4 *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 8 vols., ed. Hans D. Betz, et al., 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008.
- TRE *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, 36 vols., ed. Gerhard Müller, et al. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1976–2004.



## Introduction

Karl Barth (1886–1968) is presented here in his sociopolitical, cultural, ecclesial and theological contexts from 1905 to 1935. The time period begins in 1905, as he began to prepare for a speech on the “social question” (which he held in 1906). It ends in 1935, the year he returned to Switzerland from Germany. With many other important figures, such as Eduard Thurneysen (1888–1974), Emil Brunner (1889–1966), Friedrich Gogarten (1887–1967), Georg Merz (1892–1959) and Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), Barth was one of the younger theologians of the 1920s who contributed to a new impulse in theology. This new impulse is usually called “Dialectical Theology” or “Neo-Orthodoxy.” It was a retrieval of traditional theological concepts (like the doctrine of revelation and the doctrine of sin). This new theological movement emerged in a context of debate about the legacy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century traditions of modern liberal German Protestant theology. While some points of continuity with this older tradition of theology from the 19<sup>th</sup> century can be identified in the Neo-Orthodoxy of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it also sought to break fundamentally with this tradition of liberal modern thought. It asserted itself as the true voice of Christian theology over against the errors of an older generation – a generation that it mostly rejected.

This theological dispute was encouraged by other cultural and sociopolitical shifts in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, including World War I (WWI), the rise of communism and National Socialism. Later, in the 1930s, Barth became an important figure in the resistance to the German Christians in National Socialist Germany. This was not a resistance to National Socialism itself, but to a certain form of ideological Christianity that wanted to unify the faith with fascist political ideology. The National Socialists and many Protestant Christians initially supported the formation of a Protestant Reich-church with one Reich-bishop to oversee all the Protestant churches.<sup>1</sup> The new German Protestant Reich-church was then established in the summer of 1933. In the constitution of this new church, it called for a Reich-bishop. Later in 1933, the German Chris-

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<sup>1</sup> On the background of this period, see Carsten Nicolaisen, “Nationalsozialismus, 1. Historisch-politischer Rahmen, 2. Nationalsozialistische Religions- und Kirchenpolitik, 3. Kirchliche Grundentscheidungen, 4. Zwischen Anpassung und Protest,” in RGG4, 5.79–86; and Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, “Nationalsozialismus, 5. Theologiegeschichtlich,” in RGG4, 5.86–91.



tian Ludwig Müller (1883–1945) was elected to this office of the Reich-bishop. With the help of National Socialist officials, Müller then started to implement his agenda of ecclesial *Gleichschaltung* (phasing-in, consolidation, coordination, synchronization, enforced conformity) – a phasing-in of the smaller regional churches to the one Reich-church government. While many supported the idea of the new Protestant Reich-church as a representative body for all Protestants in Germany, there was so much resistance to Müller’s phasing-in agenda that it eventually fell apart in 1934. Some bishops refused to submit to him and an oppositional church movement emerged. This group claimed that they were the legitimate leaders of the Protestant church and the true heirs of the new church constitution from the summer of 1933. These oppositional bishops, church leaders and groups became known as the Confessing Church. In 1934 they eventually established their own ecclesial hierarchy as an alternative to the Reich-bishop’s hierarchy. Of course, many of them actually supported the National Socialist state, greeted its arrival in 1933 with joy, and did not want to resist it in any sense at all. Most of them just wanted to resist Müller’s phasing-in agenda. In fact, many of the oppositional church leaders were sympathetic to National Socialism even if many of them did not want to have the Aryan paragraph introduced into the church. With many others, such as Martin Niemöller (1892–1984), Barth was engaged in the initial resistance to Müller’s agenda of ecclesial phasing-in in 1933 and 1934. He also opposed the introduction of the Aryan paragraph into the church. Later, in 1935, Barth moved to Switzerland and became more critical of National Socialism. Before this, he was not publicly opposed to it. For over two years in National Socialist Germany, Barth never spoke out against it. These first two years – 1933 and 1934 – were the critical phase in the history of the Third Reich, the years in which everything was phased-in under Hitler’s power structure.

Barth’s intellectual development was deeply connected to the sociopolitical shifts in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His earliest work actually shows his adoption of pan-Germanic Romantic nationalist ideas, including the “German-inwardness” theme, as well as the idea of a unique German destiny for all of humanity, and many disparaging racist views. Even for his time, Barth was propagating disturbing racist ideas. He taught young people in his confirmation courses that people with African backgrounds, the “Neger” (“niggers,” “negros” or “blackamoors”), are “little intelligent” and that they “live on a lower level” and are even “inferior to the Europeans.” The new nationalist and socialist themes of a strong and authoritarian state also emerge in Barth’s early writings. He also developed a new nationalist and socialist third way between the radical left and capitalism. Beyond this, in his early writings he also connected religion and the “fatherland.”

Like fundamentalist Christians in the United States at this time, Barth was very critical of historical relativism, liberalism and individualism, and the new

streams of intellectual thought around Ernst Troeltsch. Even before WWI, Barth was critical of Troeltsch. For a period of time, Barth became a radical socialist. In December of 1914 he went so far to claim that a true Christian must be a socialist. After the outbreak of WWI, he called for a radical socialism. At this time, the first proto-communists in the party were also calling for a radical socialism. This radical argument – that a true Christian must be a socialist – echoed through his early theological development. In a negated form, as an invalidated theory, it influenced his thinking well into the 1930s. Soon after he made this argument, he rejected it. He nevertheless wrestled with this issue for some time. It had to do with the relationship between the Kingdom of God and the Social Democratic cause. During WWI, Barth began to reject the direct alignment between the socialist political ideology and the Christian religion. As communism began to establish itself, Barth slowly took God out of the revolution. At the same time that he was taking God out of the revolution, however, he theologized the idea of radical opposition and the concept of “revolution.” Barth began to situate the revolution of God in a more abstract theological “crisis,” a crisis between God and man. This was somewhat similar to other intellectual and cultural movements from this period. It had a new cold, distanced and authoritarian tone. Barth liked to talk about God’s unconditional revelation “from above,” and, like his contemporaries, he embraced the language of “Volk,”<sup>2</sup> “obedience,” “order,” “orders of creation,” “authority,” “duty,” “calling,” “decision,” “yes or no,” a more general attitude of anti-liberalism and anti-Americanism (especially during and after WWI).

After becoming a professor in Germany in the early 1920s, Barth eventually became a German citizen in 1926. While he moved away from the radical alignment of Christianity with socialism, he maintained sympathies for an authoritarian political order. In the later 1920s, Barth even seems to endorse the idea of a state that essentially controls most all of human life, and, if necessary, entirely eliminates the private economy. As is shown here, Barth supported, in the summer of 1933 in Germany, after the rise of National Socialist Germany, the idea of an authoritarian state that organizes the entire economy. He saw this

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<sup>2</sup> The obvious translation of the German term “Volk” (English cognate: “folk”) is “people” (singular), such as “the German people.” This is the correct translation of this term in most post-1945 German language literature. In much of the pre-1945 context, however, and especially in the 1914–1945 period, the English term “people” does not cover the same semantic domain of the German term “Volk.” At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the term “Volk” was often used to refer to the idea of a singular ethnic and cultural identity. The concept was sometimes embedded in the broader discourse about the history and destiny of “the German nation,” which was rarely disassociated from ethnic categories. In many cases, “people” would probably be a suitable translation; in other cases, however, this English term “people” is too general. For this reason, *Volk* will usually be left untranslated in the following pages. On the problem of translating this term, see my *The Early Hans Urs von Balthasar: Historical Contexts and Intellectual Formation* (Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2015), 10.

as necessary in certain situations. Barth made a case for this using language of organic national solidarity that embraced the total cultural, social and political order. Barth endorsed the idea of an authoritarian state that controls and monitors everything with a “leader.”

As is clear from his work in the 1920s and early 1930s, Barth essentially avoided conflict with the rising National Socialists. In fact, he actually endorsed a radical interpretation of the church in 1933. He thought that it should stay out of politics. Nevertheless, he also claimed that it should be free to say what Joseph Goebbels (the National Socialist Propaganda Minister) says, or something completely different.

In the early 1930s, Barth did virtually nothing for the Jews – and this even after some Jews called on him to act. He went so far to claim that he would lose his professorship if he did do anything. Barth also put the Jews in a negative light on many occasions. Early in his career he criticized the “legalism of Judaism.” In the 1920s he described the Jews as “*uncannily/weirdly* moved”. Even in the 1930s he was still using pejorative language to refer to the Jews, such as “little-Jew.” In National Socialist Germany, Barth argued that the “Jew question” did not belong in the pulpit. In the later 1930s, Barth was still rejecting a “liberal solution” to the “Jew problem.”

In the 1920s and 1930s, Barth offered an explicit defense of *völkisch*-thinking. This is a frame of thought that proceeds from the concept of a unique, unified ethnic identity that stands in contrast to other ethnic identities. He saw *Volk* as a living reality which was ethically relevant and an order of creation. Barth argued that Christians should be loyal to the nature of their *Volk* and their *Volk*’s way of thinking. In this sense, he claimed that “folkdom” (*Volkstum*) is a framework for action and a “criterion.” Barth even argued that people belong – by virtue of their “blood” – closer to some people and further from others.

In all this, as will be shown, Barth continued a full scale intellectual assault on liberalism. While in the middle of a controversial extramarital relationship with his younger assistant, Barth did everything he could to maintain his professorship in National Socialist Germany in order to avoid returning to Switzerland. He even endorsed the unconditional oath to Adolf Hitler (by eliminating his previously added conditional clause and by providing reference to an interpretation of the oath).

Barth’s first response to Hitler’s rise to power was to inform his mother that she should not worry about Hitler. He also reaffirmed the fact, in a letter to his friend Thurneysen, that the new state was ordained by God and that Christians should submit to it. When discussing the possibility of resistance, Barth argued that he did not have a right to sacrifice his professorship just because the National Socialist government did not like the Jews and communists. He did not want to return to Switzerland in the 1930s, although he tried to convince his wife Nelly to return to Switzerland with the two youngest children.

Barth fit into the Third Reich in the early stage so well that some National Socialist groups even wanted him to become a professor in Berlin. He even admitted, in a humorous and joking manner, that he helped with the phasing-in of the faculty of theology in Bonn. Barth did not want to have any problems with the National Socialist order so he essentially went along with everything to keep out of the “hailstorm,” as Karl Ludwig Schmidt suggested.<sup>3</sup> Schmidt was Barth’s colleague in Bonn. He was released from his duties by the National Socialist order on the 15<sup>th</sup> of September, 1933. If Barth had been a true threat to the regime at this time, the National Socialist government would have released him from his duties at the same time that they released Schmidt.

While it is true that Barth supported the Confessing Church’s resistance to the German Christians, this challenge to the German Christian ecclesial movement has been wrongly associated with a challenge to National Socialism. Barth – and the National Socialists who supported the Confessing Church – did not see their challenge to the German Christian theology or ecclesial movement as a challenge to National Socialism itself. Some contemporary secondary literature has projected Barth’s later conflict with National Socialism onto his early period. In doing this, Barth’s complicated development in the 1910s, 1920s and 1930s is overlooked.

Barth is often presented as a courageous fighter in the Confessing Church, one who tried to push it to challenge the injustices of National Socialist Germany. It is, of course, entirely true that Barth supported the Confessing Church in countless hours of meeting and theological work. At the same time, however, Barth rejected calls within the Confessing Church to speak out against National Socialism. Barth believed that the church did not have the right to cast judgement on the state. In October of 1934, as the Confessing Church was planning a response to the National Socialist takeover of the church, Barth used his rhetorical and intellectual powers to move the Confessing Church to reject Gerhard Jacobi’s call for a condemnation of the state’s actions. Barth claimed that the church should not be a judge over the state and that it should focus on the gospel.

Jacobi was a key leader of the Confessing Church. Everyone knew that he had a Jewish background in 1934. Jacobi was a pastor in Berlin at the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtnis-Kirche and he was one of the main figures in the early ecclesial resistance to the German Christians. The “Jacobi-group” (“Jacobi-Kreis”), which started to meet at his home in Berlin in 1932 with Eitel-Friedrich von Rabenau, Hermann Sasse, Walter Künneth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others, was the nucleus of the Young Reformation Movement. This movement

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<sup>3</sup> See Andreas Mühling, *Karl Ludwig Schmidt: ‘Und Wissenschaft ist Leben’* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), 134ff. On Schmidt’s remarks about Barth trying to escape the “hailstorm,” see below, Chapter Four.

emerged in May of 1933 as the first organized oppositional force against the German Christians.

After the Young Reformation Movement suffered a defeat in the church elections in the summer of 1933, a new force of resistance emerged, the Emergency Alliance of Pastors (*Pfarrernotbund*). The alliance grew out of the Young Reformation Movement. It also paved the way for the official establishment of the Confessing Church later in 1934.

At the “brown synod” in the Old Prussian Union on the 5<sup>th</sup> of September, 1933, the Aryan-Paragraph was introduced into the church, meaning that “non-Aryans” were to be excluded from the ministry. Following this, Bonhoeffer wrote to Barth and argued that it was time to break with the church and asked him what he thought they should do. Barth responded on the 11<sup>th</sup> of September by rejecting the idea of breaking off from the church. He said in his letter to Bonhoeffer that they should wait for the matter to move to a “more central issue” than the Aryan-Paragraph. Bonhoeffer and Franz Hildebrandt were disappointed with Barth, according to Bethge. Hildebrandt himself had a Jewish background. Indeed, as Bethge remarks, “What should be a ‘more central issue’ than the Aryan-Paragraph?”<sup>4</sup>

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of September, 1933, the alliance was started with Niemöller, Jacobi and others. It was established to call the church back to the Scriptures and the Protestant confessions. It supported pastors who were being persecuted by the German Christian agenda, and those who lost their pastoral positions because of their Jewish background. They rejected the Aryan-paragraph in the church. One-third of the German Protestant pastors joined the alliance. It collected dues from its members for the persecuted pastors. Jacobi was threatened multiple times. Five men came into his home on the 24<sup>th</sup> of January, 1934, and beat him with brass knuckles until he was bloody.<sup>5</sup>

As the new nationalist project to unify the German Protestant churches under one representative authority structure got going in 1933, Barth was critical of the talk of a new *Führer* (leader) bishop in the church. Nevertheless, he actually supported the establishment of the new German Protestant Church in 1933. He offered his support for the project before the German Christians took over. In the summer of 1933, he even offered to serve in the new “Ecclesiastical Ministry” of the new German Protestant Church. Barth was climbing the ecclesial-academic career ladder in National Socialist Germany.

<sup>4</sup> Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologe, Christ, Zeitgenosse*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (München: Kaiser, 1983), 363: “Was aber sollte eine noch ‘zentralere Stelle’ sein als der Arierparagraph?” On his relationship with Hildebrandt, see *ibid.*, 161.

<sup>5</sup> Regarding the attack on Jacobi, see Wilhelm Niemöller, *Hitler und die evangelischen Kirchenführer (zum 25. Januar 1934)* (Bielefeld: Bechtauf, 1959), 23. See also Carsten Nicolaisen, “Pfarrernotbund,” in RGG4, 6.1223–1224; Karl Kupisch, “Zur Genesis des Pfarrernotbundes,” in *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 91 (1966), 721–730.

While Barth is often presented as a heroic resistor of National Socialism, there is little evidence to support this claim from the early period leading up to 1935. On the contrary, as is shown here, Barth's radical anti-liberalism seems to have contributed to the toxic forces that were essential to the downfall of the liberal Weimar Republic. He argued that it was acceptable to be both a Christian and a National Socialist. Barth went so far to promise the National Socialist officials, in a statement of loyalty from the spring of 1933, that he had no plans to criticize the government. He argued that just as he had not supported the Weimar Republic he would also not criticize the new National Socialist order. Showing his goodwill at the end of 1933, Barth even donated money to a National Socialist folk-welfare organization. As his attempt to reach a *modus vivendi* with the new National Socialist order failed, however, he eventually turned against it. Through the early 1930s, Barth insisted that his challenge to the German Christians had nothing to do with politics. He even claimed that presenting his work as if it was a political issue did his theology harm.<sup>6</sup>

In the late spring and early summer of 1935, after Barth returned to Switzerland, a new critical posture towards the National Socialist political order begins to take shape. This was closely related to his own biographical situation. As is clear from the correspondences from the early 1930s, however, Barth actually wanted to stay in Germany; he never wanted to leave. His professorial status was very prestigious. Later in the 1930s (and especially after the start of World War II), as is well known, Barth began to resist National Socialism publicly in the safety of Switzerland.

Barth's biography from the 1910s, 1920s and 1930s reflects a relatively common path of development among many intellectuals on the socialist leftwing from his generation. During and after WWI, some socialists 1) maintained the course of older pre-1914 Social Democracy, while others 2) shifted to communism. Still others 3) moved to the right. Some of these who moved to the right 3a) moved to the radical rightwing (and, in some cases, joined new nationalist parties). Others who moved to the right, however, 3b) maintained sympathies for socialism but embraced some of the new nationalist rhetoric and neo-conservative and anti-liberal thinking patterns. As will be shown here, Barth's work up to 1935 is an example of the last group (3b).

In the foreground of this inquiry is Barth's relation to the features of his time, especially radical socialist ideology, WWI, an intellectual trend that would later be called the Conservative Revolution, the German Christians, the Young Reformation Movement and National Socialism. Barth's view of and interaction with the Jews is also analyzed along with other issues, such as radical think-

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<sup>6</sup> By contrast, in the spring of 1934 Bonhoeffer was explicitly calling for his opposition to the German Christians to be understood as a fundamental challenge to National Socialism. See Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 480. In the spring and summer of 1934, Bonhoeffer was hoping that the church would resist the state.

ing, anti-liberalism, alterity, anti- or trans-historicism, Expressionism and New Objectivity. Specific questions disputed in the secondary literature are also addressed, such as the place of WWI in Barth's intellectual development, his role in the Dehn Case, his reaction to the rise of fascism in Europe, his relationship to 19<sup>th</sup> century modern liberal Protestantism, his relationship to the Leonhard Ragaz-wing of the Religious Socialists and his relationship to the Weimar Republic. Critical analysis of Barth's theological development will be provided at key points in the following chapters. As will be argued, Barth's theological development and the basic concepts of Neo-Orthodoxy were deeply connected to the cultural and sociopolitical developments of the 1910s, 1920s and 1930s. Furthermore, as will be demonstrated, Dialectical Theology and National Socialism emerged from the same environment and they shared many similarities.

The following inquiry entails three major parts. The first part (Introduction) offers a general background to the major issues from this era that were important for Barth's development. In the second part (Chapters 1–4) the primary material of this investigation, including Barth's publications and correspondences, is organized in a chronological framework. The third part (Chapter 5, Conclusion) deals with specific issues (Barth, Dialectical Theology and National Socialism; Barth and the Jews; Expressionism, New Objectivity, anti-historicism, authoritarianism and alterity) and questions: Is Barth best understood through the theological lens alone? Was Barth in continuity or discontinuity with 19<sup>th</sup> century modern liberal theology? Was Barth apolitical in the Weimar Republic? And finally, did Barth contribute to the toxic forces that led to the downfall of the Weimar Republic?

A significant resource for this research has been provided by the *Karl Barth-Gesamtausgabe* edition of Barth's open letters, lectures and smaller works from his early period. The publication of Barth's socialist speeches and smaller works from 1914 to 1921 (published in 2012, including 42 unpublished texts), from 1930 to 1933 (published in 2013) and from 1934 to 1935 (published in 2017), have provided access to important unpublished material and extensive annotation. The editorial notes in the *Karl Barth-Gesamtausgabe* and in many other editions of Barth's works and letters have been an important resource for this monograph. The following presentation of Barth is also indebted to the many authors that have written books, essays and articles on Barth. There are too many to be named here, but they are cited in the footnotes and in the bibliography. When it comes to the first scholars who explicitly attempted to present Barth in his historical context, the following names should be mentioned: Adolf Jülicher (1857–1938), Hans Schlemmer (1885–1958), Gottfried Mehnert (\*1927), Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt (1928–2002), Klaus Scholder (1930–1985), Trutz Rendtorff (1931–2016), Eberhard Busch (\*1937), Falk Wagner (1939–1998) and Friedrich Wilhelm Graf (\*1948). This book would not have

been possible without the research and publication of these individuals and all the scholars behind the critical editions of Barth's works.

As is clear from the introductory remarks above, in this research some problematic issues in Barth's early work were uncovered. Barth was partly influenced by very problematic ideologies and prejudices. He adopted some of these and made them his own. The contemporary theological reception of Barth's work, which views his work as an important resource for theological insights, is, for the most part, not drawing upon Barth's early period. Most of the reception of Barth's work today among theologians focuses on his later work, from the later 1930s to the later 1960s, including, most importantly, his *Church Dogmatics*. However, the first volume of the *Church Dogmatics* from 1932 does include some of the problematic issues that are addressed here.

This historical-critical analysis is intended to be a contribution to the research that is concerned with understanding Barth, his thought, the emergence of his ideas and his relationship to the broader cultural, religious, social and political developments of his time. Every intellectual figure has a contextual framework situated in specific discourses and in particular cultural and ideological milieus. The aim of this study is to show how Barth related to these contexts, how he drew upon ideas to contribute to the debates of his time, and how he positioned himself in the controversy and conflict in this period of European history, in the 1910s, 1920s and 1930s. In this, it is necessary to show how he took specific paths through these conflicts, and how he avoided other paths – paths that others took, and that others wanted him to take.

## 1. The historization of Barth and biographical overview

### *The historization of Barth*

The historical analysis of Barth has been a part of the German academic scene at least since Adolf Jülicher's 1920 review of Barth's *Romans 1919*. Jülicher claimed that Barth's theology was an example of the new cultural moods.<sup>7</sup> Shortly after Hitler's rise to power, Hans Schlemmer published a critical study analyzing the relationship of Barth and his theology to the German Christians (*Von Karl Barth zu den Deutschen Christen*, 1934). In the wake of the totalitarian horror of the Third Reich, the post-1945 German historians of the 1950s started to locate Barth in problematic streams of thought during the Weimar Period. In 1959 Gottfried Mehnert drew attention to Barth's political relevance for Weimar in his study of the Protestant Church and politics in Germany from

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<sup>7</sup> Adolf Jülicher, "Ein moderner Paulusausleger" (review of Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, Bern: Bäschlin, 1919), in *Die Christliche Welt* 34 (1920), 453–457; 466–469; in *Anfänge der dialektischen Theologie*, vol. 1, ed. Jürgen Moltmann (München: Kaiser, 1962), 87–99.



1917 to 1919 (*Evangelische Kirche und Politik*). He claimed that Barth's support of the radical ideas of social-anarchism and contribution to the ideological opposition to the political order, in his inability to find a way of endorsing the democracy, aided in delivering the Weimar state over to its fate. He explicitly argued that Barth's way of thinking, as expressed in the Tambach Address ("The Christian in society," 1919), was very influential among the younger generation. This view of Barth gained influence in the historical analysis of the period. The argument was developed further by Klaus Scholder. Referring to the theological situation in Germany during the Weimar Period, in 1963 Scholder held that Barth's theology was influenced by a fascination with the crisis of the period that provoked a radicality of questioning.<sup>8</sup> He situated Barth in his historical context and presented Barth's theology as not necessarily a matter of resistance to the Third Reich. Barth's radicalism and its consequences for Weimar have been an issue in the secondary literature since these critical publications. Following these studies, and Kurt Sontheimer's study of anti-democratic thought, by the mid- and later 1960s, with Manfred Jacobs for example, it had become common to present Neo-Orthodoxy within the cultural context of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in connection to radical thinking and anti-liberalism.<sup>9</sup>

The academic discourse about this matter shifted to the public square with a 1978 article in the popular German magazine, *Der Spiegel*, on Barth and the Third Reich. This article promoted Scholder's claim that Barth was not interested in outright conflict with the Third Reich but merely the freedom of theological doctrine and the church. It also argued that in exchange for this freedom, Barth offered the regime a theology and a church that was politically abstinent.<sup>10</sup> Another line of interpretation, one which emerged in the later

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<sup>8</sup> Klaus Scholder, "Neuere deutsche Geschichte und protestantische Theologie. Aspekte und Fragen" (1963), in idem, *Die Kirchen zwischen Republik und Gewaltherrschaft: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, ed. Karl Otmar Freiherr von Aretin and Gerhard Besier (Berlin: Siedler, 1988), 75–97, here: 86: "Man wird den Verdacht nicht los, als ob auch bei der Verlagerung des Schwerpunktes auf das im engeren Sinne Kirchlich-Theologische, die die Arbeit Barths in diesen Jahren charakterisiert, die Faszination der Krise eine Rolle gespielt hat dergestalt, daß sie die Radikalität des Fragens provozierte, ohne ihrerseits in ihrer Fragwürdigkeit deutlich zu werden."

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Manfred Jacobs, *Vom Liberalismus zur Dialektischen Theologie*, 2 vols. [paginated as one volume] (Habilitationsschrift, Univ. Hamburg, 1966); Kurt Sontheimer, *Antidemokratisches Denken in der Weimarer Republik: Die politischen Ideen des deutschen Nationalismus zwischen 1918 und 1933* (München: Nymphenburger Verlagshandlung, 1962).

<sup>10</sup> (Anonymous) "Gott oder Führer: Über das Verhältnis Karl Barths, des theologischen Vaters der 'Bekennenden Kirche,' zum NS-Staat sind jetzt neue Dokumente veröffentlicht worden" (16 January, 1978), in *Der Spiegel* 32 (1978), nr. 3, 154–157. Scholder on Barth in Bonn: "Über dieses Amt [sc. des Theologen] und diesen Auftrag entschied allein das Wort Gottes. Und solange der Staat dies zuließ, nämlich die freie theologische Lehre und die freie kirchliche Verkündigung, gab es keinen Grund, um einer praktischen Entscheidung willen dies aufs Spiel zu setzen." Klaus Scholder, *Die Kirchen und das Dritte Reich, vol. 1: Vorgeschichte und Zeit der Illusionen 1918–1934* (Frankfurt: Ullstein, 1986), 551.

1960s in Germany, was a positive analysis of Barth as a radical socialist. This is found with Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt's *Theology and Socialism: The example of Karl Barth (Theologie und Sozialismus: Das Beispiel Karl Barths)* from 1972.<sup>11</sup> In Falk Wagner's 1975 article on Barth's "theological phasing-in" ("Theologische Gleichschaltung"), he calls Marquardt's *Theology and Socialism* the critical beginning of the integration of Barth's thinking into the intellectual and socio-political context of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup> This process had already begun before this, however. Nevertheless, Marquardt's book was very controversial in Germany when it appeared. It pushed Barth's historical context into the foreground among Protestant theologians.

The Marquardt controversy ("Fall Marquardt") became a public *cause célèbre* in the 1970s.<sup>13</sup> On the 7<sup>th</sup> of July, 1971, the collegium of the Ecclesial College of Berlin (*Kirchliche Hochschule Berlin*) rejected Marquardt's submitted habilitation, "Theologie und Sozialismus: Das Beispiel Karl Barths." In it, Marquardt held that Barth was always a socialist. He claimed that Barth's theology was socialist from the early period to the late period. He also claimed that Barth's theology was representative of socialism and interwoven with socialist ideas in its fundamental structures. George Hunsinger wanted to promote this new reading of Barth. He translated one of Marquardt's essays and additional remarks from Marquardt for the American edition of his essay, dated on the 14<sup>th</sup> of November, 1974. In these remarks Marquardt states: "It is of both scholarly and political interest to rescue Karl Barth from the clutches of conservative or liberal social forces which misuse his theology as an apolitical legitimation for existing rela-

<sup>11</sup> Falk Wagner, "Theologische Gleichschaltung. Zur Christologie bei Karl Barth," in *Die Realisierung der Freiheit: Beiträge zur Kritik der Theologie Karl Barths*, ed. Trutz Rendtorff (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1975), 10–43, here: 10. Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, *Theologie und Sozialismus: Das Beispiel Karl Barths* (München: Kaiser, 1972).

<sup>12</sup> Wagner, "Theologische Gleichschaltung," 10. Marquardt, *Theologie und Sozialismus*.

<sup>13</sup> Lessing, *Das Problem der Gesellschaft in der Theologie Karl Barths* (1972); Helmut Gollwitzer, *Reich Gottes und Sozialismus bei Karl Barth* (München: Kaiser, 1972); Felix Flückiger, "Theologie und Sozialismus bei Karl Barth: eine kritische Stellungnahme," in *Theologische Beiträge* 4 (1973), 101–119; Ingrid Jacobsen, ed., *War Barth Sozialist?: Ein Streitgespräch um Theologie und Sozialismus bei Karl Barth (Radikale Mitte 13)*; Berlin: Verlag Die Spur, 1975); Ulrich Dannemann, "Karl Barth und der religiöse Sozialismus," in *Evangelische Theologie* 37 (1977), 127–148; Dannemann, *Theologie und Politik im Denken Karl Barths* (1977); William Reginald Ward, "The socialist commitment in Karl Barth," in *Studies in Church History* 15 (1978), 453–465; Peter Winzeler, "Der Sozialismus Karl Barths in der neuesten Kritik," in *Evangelische Theologie* 48 (1988), 262–272; Michael Murrmann-Kahl, "Ein Prophet des wahren Sozialismus?" in *Journal for the History of Modern Theology/Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte* 1 (1994), 139–166; Marc van Wijnkoop Lüthi, "Aufrecht zwischen allen Stühlen: Karl Barth und der Sozialismus," in *Konfluenzen* 1 (2001), 56–73; Martin Leiner, "Protestantisme et 'situation prolétarienne' chez Paul Tillich et Karl Barth," in *Etudes théologiques et religieuses* 80 (2005), 81–94; Hartmut Ruddies, "Paul Tillich, Karl Barth und der religiöse Sozialismus," in *Internationales Jahrbuch für die Tillich-Forschung* 4 (2008), 53–65; Hartmut Ruddies, "Bürgerromantiker und Sozialist," in *Zeitschrift für Dialektische Theologie* 25 (2009), 10–23.

tionships or for the glossing over of real political conflicts through a cheap reconciliation.”<sup>14</sup> In the wake of the cultural shifts of the 1960s, Marquardt held that the “*Church Dogmatics* subjects the dogmatic tradition of Christianity to the canon of a socially reflected concept of God. Those who think that it establishes a theological ontology of transcendence are wrong. Those who see that it is essentially political even in its theological details are correct.”<sup>15</sup> In a statement issued on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July, 1971, by the rector of the Ecclesial College of Berlin, in defense of the decision of the collegium, the rector stated that the collegium decided against acceptance of the *Habilitationschrift* with a large majority and not for political reasons but for academic reasons. According to the statement, the collegium requested that Marquardt join the collegium for a conversation at its next meeting and requested that he make changes to the book. Because both requests were not fulfilled, according to the rector’s statement, the work was officially rejected. Upon hearing the decision of the collegium, Helmut Gollwitzer, Marquardt’s *Doktorvater* and a professor at the Free University of Berlin with additional commitments at the Ecclesial College of Berlin, resigned from the college. Gollwitzer informed the press of his decision before the rector of the Ecclesial College of Berlin became aware of Gollwitzer’s resignation. In the wake of the controversy, a major press campaign was then led against the Ecclesial College of Berlin which drew in, among others, the former mayor of Berlin, Heinrich Albertz, in support of Marquardt.<sup>16</sup>

Another controversial publication that contributed to the historization of Barth in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was Wilfried Härle’s 1975 article on Barth’s break with liberalism. Härle claimed that Barth’s break with the modern liberal theology actually emerged before the outbreak of WWI and the alignment of the 93 intellectuals with the German Reich and its war cause.<sup>17</sup> This complicated the thesis that Barth’s break with liberal theology reflected his rejection of the German war effort. The historical analysis of Barth was also supported by Hans Prologingheuer’s 1977 chronicle of Barth’s last years in Germany, which collected a variety of sources, including those from newspapers.<sup>18</sup>

At this time others sought to locate Barth’s thought in the streams of modern liberal theology from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This approach connected the develop-

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<sup>14</sup> Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, “Socialism in the Theology of Karl Barth,” in *Karl Barth and radical politics*, ed. George Hunsinger (Philadelphia, Penn.: Westminster Press, 1976), 47–76, here: 75.

<sup>15</sup> Marquardt, “Socialism in the Theology of Karl Barth,” 68.

<sup>16</sup> For a presentation of the events, with statements, cf. (anonymous) “Zur Einführung,” in Jacobsen, ed., *War Barth Sozialist?* 7–10. Issue 13 of the *Radikale Mitte (War Barth Sozialist?)* contains over 100 pages of reviews and responses to Marquardt’s book from various authors.

<sup>17</sup> Wilfried Härle, “Der Aufruf der 93 Intellektuellen und Karl Barths Bruch mit der liberalen Theologie,” in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 72 (1975), 207–224.

<sup>18</sup> Hans Prologingheuer, *Der Fall Karl Barth: 1934–1935; Chronographie einer Vertreibung* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1977).

ment of Barth's theology to Wilhelm Herrmann (1846–1922) and the modern liberal tradition which stems from Schleiermacher. This was a point of dispute already in the 1920s. In the 1960s, however, it became a matter of systematic inquiry.<sup>19</sup> Later, in the 1980s, after Barth was connected to the radical cultural developments in the Weimar Period, after the radical socialist reading became popular in the 1970s and after the critique of Barth's thought as structurally totalitarian came to press, the establishment of this continuity with the liberal tradition took on an entirely new meaning.<sup>20</sup>

In his 1972 publication, *Theory of Christianity*, Trutz Rendtorff, professor for systematic theology at the Protestant Faculty of Theology in Munich from 1968 to 1999, provided a critical impulse for a new interpretation of Barth in the 1970s and in the years to follow. In the wake of the Marquardt controversy, and with continuing discussions about Barth's theology and its intellectual origins, Rendtorff presented Barth's theology in continuity with the theme of the self-constituting realization of freedom and autonomy from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Barth's theology this theme is expressed in the self-determining being and action of a free and radically autonomous God. The autonomous subject of 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy is thus reconstituted in the "radical autonomy" ("radikale Autonomie") of the divine being.<sup>21</sup> In the wake of Rendtorff's thesis, a new interpretive school was formed in the middle of the 1970s. In 1975 a collection of essays on Barth's theology, edited by Rendtorff, was published with the title *The realization of freedom: Contributions to the critique of Karl Barth's theology*.<sup>22</sup> The volume contained critical engagements with Barth's theology from Falk Wagner, Walter Sparr, Friedrich Wilhelm Graf and Rendtorff. This group, with many other authors, is sometimes called the Munich School. It promoted the autonomy thesis but developed new avenues of interpretation. Wagner's contribution to this volume was particularly controversial. He pointed to Barth's lack of genuine alterity and presented Barth's theology as related to fascist thought

<sup>19</sup> Jacobs, *Vom Liberalismus zur Dialektischen Theologie*, 345–376; cf. Eckhard Lessing, *Das Problem der Gesellschaft in der Theologie Karl Barths und Friedrich Gogartens* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1972).

<sup>20</sup> Hartmut Ruddies, "Karl Barth im Kulturprotestantismus: Eine theologische Problem-anzeige," in *Wahrheit und Versöhnung: Theologische und philosophische Beiträge zur Gotteslehre*, ed. Dietrich Korsch and Hartmut Ruddies (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1989), 193–231; idem, *Karl Barth und die Liberale Theologie: Fallstudien zu einem theologischen Epochenwechsel* (Dissertation, Univ. Göttingen, 1994).

<sup>21</sup> Trutz Rendtorff, *Theorie des Christentums: Historisch-theologische Studien zu seiner neuzeitlichen Verfassung* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1972), 161–181. Rendtorff submitted the document originally to the *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, it was however rejected by Gerhard Ebeling because it was too controversial. Cf. Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, *Der heilige Zeitgeist: Studien zur Ideengeschichte der protestantischen Theologie in der Weimarer Republik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 96.

<sup>22</sup> Rendtorff, ed., *Die Realisierung der Freiheit: Beiträge zur Kritik der Theologie Karl Barths* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1975).

structures. Graf is another influential figure in the historical interpretation of Barth. He drew upon Scholder and published many articles and essays in the 1980s and 1990s on Protestant theology in the Weimar Period. His work has been developed further in his long introduction to a republication of older articles (*Der heilige Zeitgeist*, 2011). The Munich School, and the many publications that followed in the 1970s and 1980s, entailed a variety of approaches, some more philosophically oriented, others more sociopolitical, cultural and historical.<sup>23</sup>

The Munich School was, however, not the only group of Barth interpreters in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While the Berlin School was reading Barth from the left, the Tübingen School, with Eberhard Jüngel and Jürgen Moltmann, represented a stronghold of neo-Barthian theology in the 1980s and 1990s. Jüngel's 1980 article on Barth in a theological encyclopedia (*Die Theologische Realenzyklopädie*) begins with a sentence which reflects the new insecurity caused by the critical interpretations of Barth: "Karl Barth is the most important Protestant theologian since Schleiermacher."<sup>24</sup> At a time when Barth's theology was coming under significant criticism in German faculties, an alternative approach emerged that brought versions of Barth's theology into dialog with contemporary philosophy of religion and theology. This approach was less concerned with understanding the historical emergence of these ideas than with their contemporary relevance for the philosophy of religion and theology. Later in the article, in reference to Marquardt and Rendtorff, Jüngel claims that a "violence" ("Gewaltsamkeit") is not necessary in the critical discussion about Barth which "perverts the intention of the interpreted work into its opposite."<sup>25</sup> In the German context, after the development of the critical historical interpretation of Barth's theology, as exemplified in Scholder's work and in *The realization of freedom*, Barth's theology never regained the popularity it once had. According to Georg Pfeiderer, the influence of Barth's theology went into decline after his death in 1968.<sup>26</sup> This was not the case in the 20<sup>th</sup> century English language reception of Barth. While in Germany the academic conversation about Barth and his intellectual context in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century has been underway for many decades, this has had only a limited echo in the English language literature on Barth.

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<sup>23</sup> Graf names the following authors: Rendtorff, Wagner, Manfred Baumotte, Wilfried Groll, Horst Renz, Klaus Tanner, Friedemann Voigt and Georg Pfeiderer; Graf, *Der heilige Zeitgeist*, 99.

<sup>24</sup> Eberhard Jüngel, "Karl Barth," in TRE, vol. 5 (1980), 251–268, here: 251: "Karl Barth ist der bedeutendste evangelische Theologe seit Schleiermacher."

<sup>25</sup> Jüngel, "Karl Barth," 267: "die Intention des interpretierten Werkes in ihr Gegenteil verkehrt."

<sup>26</sup> Georg Pfeiderer, "Karl Barth und die Folgen," in *Reformatio* 48 (1999), 209–218, here: 210.

The critical readings of Barth, which emerged in Germany in the 1970s and 1980s, are largely absent in the majority of the English language Barth reception. The one major exception is Hunsinger's translation of some of the earliest essays on the subject in his *Barth and Radical Politics* (1976). With this publication, however, Hunsinger wanted to promote Barth's radicalism. The book only engaged, furthermore, the reading of Marquardt.<sup>27</sup> The later discourse with Rendtorff, Wagner, Graf and others took place simultaneously and after the publication of Hunsinger's book. This discourse would not really reach its climax until the later 1980s, following Barth's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. Since then, new literature has been published, primarily in German.<sup>28</sup> Whether one visits the webpage of the Center for Barth Studies at Princeton Theological Seminary, or reads some of the contemporary literature on Barth, a recurring theme seems undeniable in the Anglo-American conception of Barth at least since the later 1980s and 1990s.<sup>29</sup> For example, John B. Webster, who seems to follow Jüngel's analysis, writes in the *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (2000): "Barth is the most important Protestant theologian since Schleiermacher, and the extraordinary descriptive depth of his depiction of the Christian faith puts him in the company of a handful of thinkers in the classical Christian tradition."<sup>30</sup> This view of Barth is often linked with his political engagement. Later, Webster continues: "More, perhaps, than any other Protestant leader in Germany at the time, Barth was free of the desire to retain the social and cultural prestige of the church at any price, and could bring to bear on the events of the Nazi takeover

<sup>27</sup> For a summary and analysis of Marquardt's account of Barth as a socialist, cf. William Reginald Ward, *Theology, Sociology and Politics: The German Protestant Social Conscience 1890–1933* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1979), 170f. Cf. Shelly Baranowski, "The primacy of theology: Karl Barth and socialism," in *Studies in Religion* 10 (1981), 451–461; James Bentley, "Karl Barth as a Christian Socialist," in *Theology* 76 (1973), 349–356; Dieter Schellong, "A Theological Critique of the 'Bourgeois' World-View," in *Christianity and the Bourgeoisie*, ed. Johann Baptist Metz (New York, N.Y.: Seabury, 1979), 74–82; John Howard Yoder, "Review of Karl Barth and Radical Politics," in *Journal of Church and State* 10 (1978), 338–339.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Hermann E.J. Kalinna, *War Karl Barth "politisch einzigartig wach"? über Versagen politischer Urteilskraft* (Berlin: Lit, 2009); Michael Beintker, Christian Link, Michael Trowitzsch, ed. *Karl Barth im europäischen Zeitgeschehen (1935–1950): Widerstand – Bewährung – Orientierung* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2010). See also Stefan Holtmann, "Karl Barth als Theologe der Neuzeit," in *Karl Barths Theologie als europäisches Ereignis*, ed. Martin Leiner and Michael Trowitzsch (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2008), 331–347, here: 331. See also Ernstpeter Maurer, "Barth-Rezeption bei lutherischen Theologen in Deutschland," in Leiner, et al., ed., *Karl Barths Theologie als europäisches Ereignis*, 367–386.

<sup>29</sup> From the webpage of the Center for Barth Studies: "Karl Barth (1886–1968), the Swiss-German professor and pastor, is regarded by many as a modern day 'Church Father.' Barth's great contribution to theology, church, politics, and culture will take generations to appropriate and assess. As the principal author of 'The Barmen Declaration,' he was the intellectual leader of the German Confessing Church, the Protestant group that resisted the Third Reich." [www.ptsem.edu/library/barth/](http://www.ptsem.edu/library/barth/) (accessed January 2014).

<sup>30</sup> John B. Webster, "Introducing Barth," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. idem (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1–16, here: 1.