

A Study of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Accusation of "Positivism of Revelation" Against the Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology of Karl Barth

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Introduction

In his letter to Eberhard Bethge on 30 April 1944, Dietrich Bonhoeffer accused Karl Barth of arriving at a "positivism of revelation."¹ That an inconsistency of scholarly opinion concerning the meaning of *Offenbarungspostivismus* exists warrants further clarification and study of the accusation. This paper seeks to explore the theological commonalities and differences between Karl Barth, "a pastor who became a theologian,"² and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "a theologian who became a pastor,"³ and the interpretive theories for understanding Bonhoeffer's objection of *Offenbarungspostivismus* as they relate to an appropriate understanding of the accusation.

Until recently, scholars who wrote about the development of Karl Barth's theology affirmed a dialectic period marked by "a polarized account of God and created humanity"⁴ followed by an analogous period by which is meant a "God-created and God-sustained correspondence between God and humanity."⁵ McCormack challenges this school of thought and posits, "Barth's development was indeed the unfolding of a single material insight through several differing models of

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Eberhard Bethge, ed., [Letters and Papers from Prison](#) (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1967), 140.

² James W. Woelfel, [Bonhoeffer's Theology: Classical and Revolutionary](#) (New York: Abingdon Press, 1970), 94.

³ Ibid.

⁴ John Webster, [Barth](#) (London: Continuum, 2004), 22.

⁵ Ibid

explication.”⁶ For the purposes of this paper, McCormack’s interpretation will be presupposed and a critically realistic dialectical theology maintained.

Early Encounters Discovering Dialectical Theology

In the winter of 1924, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a young student of Adolf von Harnack in Berlin, discovered the first volume of Karl Barth’s essays, *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie*, and encountered a dialectical theology that, according to Eberhard Bethge, gave him “a more positive direction that took the place of his previous rather restless roving.”⁷ Against the backdrop of an anthropocentric Schleiermacher, a skeptical Feuerbach, and a critical Strauss, Barth had constructed a theology of God’s majesty that appealed to Bonhoeffer who, being rooted in philosophy and higher critical thought, never completely abandoned his liberal heritage but instead yielded to a “revelatory-theological, ecclesiological, and pneumatological perspective.”⁸

Together, Bonhoeffer and Barth shared a “rejection of philosophical Idealism”⁹ which Bonhoeffer manifested in his essay, “Can a Distinction be Drawn between

⁶ Bruce McCormack, Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 20. It is important to note that McCormack’s understanding of Barth’s theology is informed by a critically realistic look at Barth’s commentary on Romans I. While scholar’s label Romans I as “pre-dialectical,” McCormack argues that a meticulous interpretation of this work renders a continuity of dialectical thought that is evident throughout the entirety of his life. McCormack challenges the established presumption that is championed by Thomas F. Torrance, chiefly that “it would now be a misnomer to speak of his [Barth’s] theology as ‘dialectical’, for the emphasis is no longer upon *díastasis* but upon *analogy*—i.e. it is no longer a movement of thought setting men apart from God, but a movement referring man back to his source in the grace of God the Creator and Redeemer” (Thomas F. Torrance, Karl Barth: An Introduction to his Early Theology, 1910-1931 Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1962, 89). McCormack notes, “Whatever changes occurred in Barth’s method were simply a reflex of decisions made in the areas of eschatology, Christology, and the doctrine of election (23).”

⁷ Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage, trans. Eric Mosbacher, et al. (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 52.

⁸ Ralf K. Wüstenberg, A Theology of Life: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Religionless Christianity, trans. Doug Stott (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 34.

⁹ J. H. Burtness, Aks ib es Gott nicht gäbe *Internationales Bonhoeffer Forum* 6 (1983): 167-83, citation on 168, quotes in Ralf K. Wüstenberg, A Theology of Life: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Religionless Christianity, trans. Doug Stott (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 42.

a Historical and Pneumatological Interpretation of the Scriptures, and What is the Attitude to this of Dogmatic Theology?” in which he condemned the exaltation of textual criticism because the texts are more than mere historical sources, but they are “agents of revelation, not just specimens of writing, but sacred canon.”¹⁰ In criticizing the essay, his teacher, Reinhold Seeberg, described it as a “disturbing exercise in Barthianism;”¹¹ but regardless of the criticism, it depicts a Bonhoeffer developing a *Menschlichkeit* drawn from the *sola scriptura* of Martin Luther and reinforced by the theocentric momentum of Karl Barth’s philosophical, hermeneutical, and pastoral methodologies.

Breaking with Barth

To call Bonhoeffer “Barthian” is accurate if one is referring to the direction in which Bonhoeffer’s theology tended. In his first exchange of letters with Barth, Bonhoeffer wrote, “I feel with you, it is hard to say why, in a strange way quite certain that the way in which you see things is somehow right.”¹² Karl Barth’s reaction to the milieu of biblical liberalism of the day was indeed attractive to the young theologian, but to regard Bonhoeffer as “Barthian” in the sense of a cloned theological specimen is not only misleading, but it also overlooks the independence and other-worldliness Bonhoeffer demonstrated in his books, particularly *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

In *Jugend und Studium*, H. Pfeifer wrote Bonhoeffer “cannot simply be classified with a specific school. K. Holl, R. Seeberg, and K. Barth all influenced him; from all three he appropriated fulcral elements, and over against all three he preserved his independence in theological questioning and searching.”¹³ Like Barth, Bonhoeffer was a revolutionary thinker; though the two shared bitter differences, Bonhoeffer remained grateful for his mentor’s work and “criticized [him] as an ally,”¹⁴ realizing that he walked in the counter-cultural trail that Barth’s theology had blazed.

The first criticism against Barth occurs in the margins of Bonhoeffer’s copy of *Die Theologie Karl Barths*, written by Max Strauch to introduce and defend the theology of Karl Barth. In this book, Strauch describes the existence of an eschatological dualism, an “infinite qualitative difference, between this world and the next.”¹⁵ While Strauch’s dialectical defense of Barth’s theology captivated

¹⁰ Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage, 56.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Woelfel, Bonhoeffer’s Theology: Classical and Revolutionary, 90.

¹³ H. Pfeifer in Wüstenberg, A Theology of Life: Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Religionless Christianity, 39.

¹⁴ Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage, 53.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Bonhoeffer's attention, Bonhoeffer suspects that Barth's treatment of the distance and free majesty of God endangered the emphasis on the earthly dilemmas of man.¹⁶ In Strauch's book, Bonhoeffer read, ". . . in contrast to all the visible is the invisible; in contrast to this world the incommensurable next world; in contrast . . . to all reality and transience is the world of the origin and the goal,"¹⁷ and after underlining origin and goal, he wrote, "Not the faith which is now simply received!"¹⁸

While Bonhoeffer was suspicious of Barth's treatment of the transcendence of God to the exclusion of his immanence, Bonhoeffer's penetrating criticism as it relates to *Offenbarungspositivismus* occurs in a comment captured by Benkt-Erik Benktson in 1944. Benktson noted that Bonhoeffer described Barth as one who "started along this line of thought"¹⁹ but had not yet carried it to "completion."²⁰ The *fontes* of this criticism occur in the lecture "Biblical Questions, Insights and Prospects" delivered by Barth in 1920, later to be read by Bonhoeffer in *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie* published in 1924, in which Bonhoeffer criticized Barth "for making revelation and not the Church his point of departure."²¹ He also asked whether Barth's sequence, his coming to the Church only by way of revelation, did not make salvation too secondary a factor.²² Bonhoeffer sought to carry Barth's theology to completion, and perhaps he did so successfully by fully incarnating Barth's theology in *communitas* and Christian ethics. According to Woelfel, Bonhoeffer is indebted to Barth because he acquired Barth's theological methodology, even though he developed it in his own way.²³ Nevertheless, Bonhoeffer's criticisms concerning God's transcendence and revelation to humanity are significant to understanding the revelatory positivistic accusation Bonhoeffer would later make against his former teacher.

Toward A Definition of *Offenbarungspositivismus* Interpretive Theories

In his book *A Theology of Life*, Wüstenberg noted there are several interpretive theories which can lend themselves to a better understanding of Bonhoeffer's

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Max Strauch in Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage, 53.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ B. E. Benktson in Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage, 54.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage, 55.

²² Ibid.

²³ Woelfel, 94.

accusation of *Offenbarungspositivismus*.²⁴ One such theory concerns Barth's doctrine of revelation. Barth suggested that the hiddenness of God has been bridged by the self-revelation of God through the mediated work and person of Jesus Christ, thus negating the paradox of both revelational and soteriological objectivism. Concerning the nature of God's revealed, written Word, though, Barth wrote that the Scriptures *become* the Word of God when we encounter them.²⁵

Another interpretive theory aiding in an understanding of *Offenbarungspositivismus* is Bonhoeffer's attack of Barth's Calvinism. Barth's theology, particularly his views on predestination and reprobation, was informed by his encounter with the writings of the Protestant Reformers when he was considered for admission to the university faculty in Göttingen, Germany. "He threw himself with remarkable fervour into the material on which he was required to instruct his students (at that point, mostly Reformed ordinands), zealously studying the texts and controversies of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed tradition."²⁶ He plunged into the writings of the Reformers, particularly John Calvin, and was clearly fascinated by the material he was reading.²⁷

Though Barth differed with Calvin in constructing a more Christologically driven interpretation of divine predestination,²⁸ he believed the fundamentals of the doctrine, mainly that God's sovereignty mandates that he has the divine right to choose and not choose certain individuals to receive everlasting punishment or reward.

A final interpretive theory concerns the dialectical method Barth utilized in his theology. When he began his studies at Berne in 1904, Barth was influenced by professors who were established in German liberal theology. Professors such as Rudolf Steck, Karl Marti, and the systematic theologian Hermann Lüdemann

²⁴ Wüstenberg, 60.

²⁵ Otto Weber, Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics: An Introductory Report on Volumes 1:1 to III:4, trans. Arthur C. Cochrane (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1950), 26.

²⁶ John Webster, Barth's Earlier Theology: Four Studies London: T&T Clark, 2005), 42.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁸ According to Bruce McCormack, Barth engaged the doctrine of predestination in Göttingen, but the doctrine did not achieve full maturity until later in his life. "Predestination, for Barth, is not a decision by means of which God determined all of His actions towards particular men and women before time began. It is not a completed act. Barth was quite happy to speak of predestination with the tradition as eternal, unconditional, and double. But 'eternal' for him was not synonymous with pre-temporality" (Bruce McCormack, Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 372.

gave Barth “a thorough foundation in the earlier form of the ‘historical-critical school.’”²⁹ Lüdemann was a former student of F. C. Baur,³⁰ and had constructed a theological system based on the works of Immanuel Kant and on what one might call positivism.³¹ After breaking with his former liberal teachers, Barth created his own theological methodology influenced by the writings of Overbeck, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, and Kierkegaard, although the techniques he learned from his liberal teachers played an important role in the dialectical direction his theology would eventually take.

Barth’s dialectical methodology reflected his philosophical training. As van Til posited, “Perhaps Barth only intended to use his method of dialecticism as a means by which to give new and fresh expression to the gospel. Perhaps he used philosophy as a servant of revelation after all.”³² While von Balthasar argued that an analogous theology replaced the former dialectical theology in Barth’s second edition of *Romans*, thus becoming a theology in “philosophical garb,”³³ perhaps Bonhoeffer regarded the continuity of Barth’s dialecticalism, particularly in the second edition of *Romans*, as having “logical and not real character, and thus running the risk of neglecting the historicity of Jesus.”³⁴ Could one of these interpretive theories be the point of departure that merited criticism from Bonhoeffer?

Findings

While it is difficult to determine the exhaustive meaning of Bonhoeffer’s accusation against Karl Barth concerning *Offenbarungspositivismus*, one must note that even Barth confessed to have “behaved and expressed [himself] positivistically.”³⁵ Pangritz suggested two specific instances in which Barth might be guilty of positivism. First, in his second edition of *Romans*, Barth’s critical approach to religion is systematized in a way that relies too heavily on Kierkegaard’s “infinite qualitative difference” concerning time and eternity.³⁶ Second, in Barth’s Tambach address, “The Christian’s Place in Society,” his

²⁹ Eberhard Busch, Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 34.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Cornelius van Til, Christianity and Barthianism (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1962), 329.

³³ Hans Urs von Balthasar in Van Til, Christianity and Barthianism, 331.

³⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Andreas Pangritz, Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 23.

³⁵ Karl Barth in Pangritz, Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 82.

³⁶ Pangritz, 83.

interpretation of the Divine as something that cannot be accommodated, divided, or utilized paints God as the wholly Other who is unrelated to his created world.³⁷

“Positivism of revelation” did not find its origin with Bonhoeffer. Church historian E. Seeberg suggests that revelatory positivism dates back to Martin Luther, who believed faith to be “the power of the invisible”³⁸ that “discerns true but hidden reality.”³⁹ On the basis of this Lutheran “positivism” as it relates to the church, Bonhoeffer, who, according to Pangritz, understands “positivism of revelation” to mean “the ‘irrational’ assertion of divine revelations as the ‘positively’ given reality against all reason, in opposition to the possibility of natural knowledge of God,”⁴⁰ accuses Barth of having insufficiently arrived at this thought “insomuch as the positivity of revelation evaporates dialectically in him.”⁴¹ Pangritz posits that in the prison letters, Bonhoeffer’s “positivism of revelation,” though in a Lutheran sense is commendable, suddenly becomes a reproach against Barth, who should have planted the notion of “positivism of revelation” in the confessing church⁴² while being an instructor at the faculty of Berlin.

There is a divergence of opinion concerning the context to which Bonhoeffer was speaking when he criticized Barth, but it becomes plausible, when reading Bonhoeffer’s letter to Eberhard Busch, to conclude that he was reacting to the continuity of Barth’s dialectical handling of religion. Pangritz theorizes, “In his charge of ‘positivism of revelation’, Bonhoeffer wanted above all to warn against the danger of saying too much in dogmatics and of becoming ‘loquacious.’”⁴³ Wüstenberg adds that “Bonhoeffer, who had no intention of developing a concept of religion himself, and certainly no theory of religion, uses the expression ‘revelatory positivism’ to criticize Barth’s attempt in “Church Dogmatics 1/2” to engage in such conceptual development.”⁴⁴ Perhaps by speaking too conceptually about the imminence and transcendence of God, Barth neglected a development of ethics and committed the offense of revelatory positivism by presenting truth “as postulates, without being capable of making clear their relationship to the life of man in the world come of age.”⁴⁵

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 74.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 75.

⁴¹ Ibid., 76.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Pangritz, 114.

⁴⁴ Wüstenberg, 68.

⁴⁵ John A. Phillips, Christ For Us in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1963), 158.

Conclusion

The meaning of *Offenbarungspositivismus* may never be recovered; nevertheless, this paper concludes that while the three theories of interpretation aid in understanding the milieu of Bonhoeffer's accusation, and perhaps even contributed to the reprimand, Bonhoeffer accused Barth of developing a "revelatory positivism" because Barth spoke to the issue of religion with a dialecticalism that too strongly affirmed religion as an "anthropocentric phenomenon"⁴⁶ rather than an "intellectual-historical phenomenon."⁴⁷ Positivism, as Bonhoeffer used the phrase, connoted the "blatant disregard of the relationship of God to the world as Creator to creation which robs God of his Lordship and the world of its maturity."⁴⁸

That Bonhoeffer, who began his life "with an intense interest in the church and ended with a radical concern for the world,"⁴⁹ developed his theology at a different stage than Barth, who "began as the prophet of judgment on religion and became preoccupied with the church,"⁵⁰ is also central to this accusation. Barth's critically realistic dialectical theology too harshly polarized the transcendent God from the worldly man, and when Bonhoeffer makes this accusation in prison, he was concerning himself with the reconciliation between the created order and its Creator, as evident in the development of his ethics. At that stage of his life, Bonhoeffer concluded that Barth, who maintained a dialectical theology throughout his work, is guilty of *Offenbarungspositivismus*. It must be concluded that Barth would not have sought satisfaction in this accusation, though at times he confessed to having committed it.⁵¹

Nevertheless, even until his death on 9 April 1945, Bonhoeffer remained the champion of the teachings of his mentor, Barth, and, as Woelfel added, "neither did any of Barth's actual students develop his theological insights more creatively than Bonhoeffer."⁵²

⁴⁶ Wüstenberg, 68.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Phillips, 159.

⁴⁹ Woelfel, 94-5.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Karl Barth in Pangritz, Karl Barth in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 82.

⁵² Woelfel, 94-95.

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