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Theology in Purgatory: Karl Barth's Feuerbachian Critique of Modern Liberalism

Introduction

German theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) recognized the threat that modern Protestant liberalism posed to Christian theology and directed much of his theological work against it. This liberalism found its roots in the European Enlightenment—by which “man began to become conscious of his power for science, and of his power through science”¹—and was especially propelled into theological discourse through German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, known as “Father of Modern Liberal Theology.” Under Schleiermacher’s significant influence, 19th century theology reconceptualized God as a divine *concept* to be discovered from human consciousness, rather than a divine *being* to be discovered only through God’s self-revelation. This new theology was anthropocentric, rather than theocentric, and democratic rather than ecclesiastical—anyone could practice theology simply by interpreting inner religious experience.²

Barth argued that Schleiermacher’s theology “challenged the decisive premise of all Christian theology in a way which had not been known, perhaps, since the days of the ancient Gnostics.”³ This challenge was of no small significance, for Barth saw Schleiermacher’s influence upon Christian theology as total: “The first place in a history of the theology of the

¹ Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Brian Cozens and John Bowden (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 25.

² Lloyd Geering, “Theology Before and After Bishop Robinson’s *Honest to God* (1963),” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 31, no. 1 (2018): 230-232.

³ Barth, 459.

most recent times belongs and will always belong to Schleiermacher, and he has no rival. . . . Positively or negatively, we can draw lines from everywhere leading to Schleiermacher.”⁴ Given Barth’s alarm over the threat posed by Schleiermacher and his liberal heirs, one might expect Barth to mount a response from biblical texts, patristic and reformed theologians, or classical Christian doctrines. Instead, Barth turned to an unlikely ally: the German anti-theologian Ludwig Feuerbach. Throughout his theological career, Barth sustained an ongoing conversation with the writings of Feuerbach, arguing emphatically against Feuerbach’s conclusions while employing them in his polemic against modern theological liberalism.

This paper will explore the theological claims of Feuerbach as engaged and interpreted by Barth in his essay on Feuerbach in *Protestant Theology in the 19th Century*.⁵ How did Barth employ these claims against the rising tide of Protestant liberalism, and what is the significance for this debate today? This paper seeks to explore and respond to these questions.

Feuerbach’s Claims

Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) was such a giant of 19th century philosophy that Karl Marx once wrote: “There is no other way to truth and freedom than through the ‘river of fire.’ Feuerbach is the purgatory of the present time.”⁶ More recently, theologian Gerhard Forde echoed Marx’s appraisal: “With even a cursory glance at church and theology one can hardly be

⁴ Ibid., 411, 413.

⁵ This essay exists with slight variations in several other works by Barth: first, in his chapter on Feuerbach in *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings 1920-1928*, which claims its source as “lectures on the history of modern theology given at Münster in the summer of 1920”; and later in his introductory essay to the 1957 edition of Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity*. While Barth’s later *Church Dogmatics* engages Feuerbachian ideas in a much broader theological context, this paper will mainly focus on Barth’s explicit engagement with Feuerbach through the essay referenced here.

⁶ The name Feuerbach translates to “brook of fire.” Quoted in Bradley C. Jenson, “Christology through the Fires of Feuerbach,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (Fall 2020): 293.

blind to the fact that the spirit of Feuerbach hangs over us like a marsh gas.”⁷ Whether a noxious gas or a purifying fire, Feuerbach is inescapable. Many of his key ideas are now so deeply ingrained in modern thought that one can hardly imagine a pre-Feuerbachian world.

Feuerbach’s central theological (or, more aptly, anti-theological) idea was that what humans call “God” is not an external and objective divine *other*, but merely an internal and subjective human ideal which, in religion, is mistakenly projected outward:

Religion, at least the Christian, is the relation of man to himself, or more correctly to his own nature (i.e. his subjective nature), but a relation to it, viewed as a nature apart from his own. The divine being is nothing else than the human being, or rather, the human nature purified, freed from the limits of individual man, and made objective—i.e. contemplated and revered as another, a distinct being. All the attributes of the divine nature are, therefore, attributes of the human nature.⁸

In other words, religion is the process of man discovering his own essential nature in an externalized projection called “God,” such that “consciousness of God is human self-consciousness; knowledge of God is human self-knowledge.”⁹ To Feuerbach, this projection came at the tragic price of “disuniting man from himself”; by objectifying God, humans alienated themselves from their own essential nature and relegated themselves to a lesser, not-God status of only limited potential.¹⁰ Feuerbach developed these notions of theology and religion to their natural end in his seminal work *The Essence of Christianity*, ultimately concluding that “the secret of theology is . . . anthropology.”¹¹ Though *Essence*’s fame was soon

⁷ Jenson, 299.

⁸ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 46.

⁹ Feuerbach, 14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 207.

eclipsed by the works of Feuerbach's most famous disciple-turned-critic, Karl Marx,¹² its anthropocentric conception of religion as human wish-projection, as human alienation, and as barrier to human progress are all now thoroughly entrenched in the modern world.

Barth's Response

If Feuerbach was the river of fire, then Barth suspected that nearly all modern theology had been badly scorched. Barth was concerned that 19th century theologians, epitomized by Schleiermacher, had “unwittingly surrendered to Feuerbach”¹³ without realizing the consequences. Despite this feared surrender, however, Barth is generous in his appraisal of Feuerbach, even contributing an introductory essay to the 1957 edition of *The Essence of Christianity*. His deep respect for Feuerbach—despite his ultimate disagreement—is evident; Barth wrote that Feuerbach practiced theology “so knowledgeably, and with such relevance to the theological situation of his age, throwing such clear light upon it, and in a way so interesting in itself, that we must allow him to speak together with the theologians.”¹⁴

And Barth does indeed “allow him to speak,” finding surprising common ground with Feuerbach. He agrees with Feuerbach's protest against the disembodied and immaterial spiritualism of Enlightenment philosophers in favor of “man's sensory existence.”¹⁵ Though Feuerbach wrongly locates God within human consciousness, to Barth, he rightly locates human consciousness within fleshly existence, and this emphasis places him on the side of the “radical

¹² Marx argued that Feuerbach had failed to see the socioeconomic forces contributing to human religious projection and therefore had insufficiently advocated human liberation through eradication of these forces. In other words, Feuerbach did not take his ideas far enough; one must not only explain religion, but eliminate the human needs from which it arises. Alistair McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader* (Maldon, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 495-6.

¹³ Jenson, 297.

¹⁴ Barth, 520.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 525.

Easter belief” of bodily resurrection.¹⁶ Such an emphasis on human physicality stands in contrast to the Enlightenment enthusiasm for consciousness as the highest human essence.

Barth’s agreement with Feuerbach deepens in his later works, and much of his *Church Dogmatics* reflects a sustained and serious engagement with Feuerbach’s influence in a broader theological context. Though this later, more extensive engagement is beyond the scope of this paper (indeed, it could fill a dissertation!), a brief summary of their major points of agreement and disagreement is in order.¹⁷ Like Feuerbach, Barth comes to regard religion as a human construct whose subject is not God, but man, and whose activity is merely man’s attempt to save himself, resulting in divine alienation. Barth writes that in religion, “we lock the door against God, we alienate ourselves from him, we come into direct opposition to him. God in his revelation will not allow man to try to come to terms with life, to justify and sanctify himself.”¹⁸ It is here at their point of strongest agreement, however, that Barth and Feuerbach finally and decisively part ways. H. Richard Niebuhr summarizes their departure in his foreword to *The Essence of Christianity*:

Barth and Feuerbach agree on this essential point—that to believe in religion is to believe in man, that to hope that religion will save man is to hope that man will save himself, that to have faith in Christianity itself is to put one’s trust in something human, personal, or

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ There is some debate as to whether Barth engaged Feuerbach on Feuerbach’s own terms, or merely as a straw man for Barth’s polemical purposes against modern liberalism. Articles on the Barth-Feuerbach confrontation by Manfred Vogel of Northwestern and John Glasse of Harvard represent the two sides of this debate, respectively. Both point out the different ways that Barth counters Feuerbach in the 1920s versus the 1950s, and both note Barth’s focus on Feuerbach’s early, explicitly theological works (epitomized by *The Essence of Christianity*) to the exclusion of his more broadly philosophical works, which evolve over time in ways that Barth leaves unaddressed. Glasse sees such discrepancies as undermining Barth’s arguments, while Vogel sees them as indicative of Barth’s laser-focus only on Feuerbach’s theology and not on his philosophy.

¹⁸ McGrath, 497. Quote taken from Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, I/2*, ed. and trans. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 297-300.

social. The great disagreement is that *Feuerbach can so believe in man and Barth cannot*.¹⁹

Barth cannot. Ultimately, he must—as must all theologians faithful to Christian orthodoxy—base his theology in the grace of divine revelation, not in the capacity of human consciousness.

That Feuerbach “can so believe in man” becomes the basis for Barth’s use of Feuerbach to critique modern liberal theology. Feuerbach’s theology “lets the cat out of the bag for us to see,”²⁰ bringing the anthropocentric premises of modern theological liberalism to their necessary conclusion with startling clarity. Barth wields Feuerbach as a cautionary tale, a signpost marking the way not to go. Niebuhr writes:

Barth recommends Feuerbach to students of theology in order that they may see what the outcome is bound to be of every theology that begins with man’s subjective states The theological statements resulting from such an inquiry are bound to be anthropological statements.²¹

Barth’s engagement with Feuerbach has more at stake, then, than simply refuting Feuerbach’s claims on their own terms. Barth aims to critique the entire project of modern theological liberalism with a vision of its inescapable conclusion in Feuerbachian atheist anthropology. Barth asks, “Had not the theologians themselves tended to work in this same direction before him [Feuerbach]?” Might Feuerbach “represent the point of intersection where all these lines [of 19th century theology] converge, little as this may have been the intention of their originators?”²² He briefly references the doctrines of Schleiermacher, Wilhelm DeWette, and August Tholuck which

¹⁹ Niebuhr, viii. Emphasis mine.

²⁰ Vogel, 29.

²¹ Niebuhr, viii.

²² Barth, 523.

center divinity within human experience as evidence that modern theology has followed the anthropocentric path of Feuerbach, and must therefore reckon with its atheist final destination.²³

No matter how deep his regard for Feuerbach, Barth cannot ultimately follow his path. He critiques Feuerbach on two points, one theological and one anthropological. Because Barth sees Feuerbach as the apotheosis of modern theological liberalism, his critiques of Feuerbach also serve as critiques of the entire project of modern theology. Barth's first critique is theological: a confused Lutheran Christology which mistakenly conferred divine attributes upon all men through the humanity of Christ and had barricaded itself "perhaps too rigidly" against doctrinal correctives offered by Calvin.²⁴ Barth develops his Christological response to Feuerbach far more extensively in *Church Dogmatics*; in his essay in *Protestant Theology*, he devotes only a few speculative paragraphs which he suggests ought to "give Protestant theologians special food for thought."²⁵ Barth's second critique is anthropological: Feuerbach failed to see "man as he is in reality,"²⁶ at least in part because he had not yet witnessed the atrocities of the early 20th century. Feuerbach and his theological contemporaries "were not so fully aware of the individual, or of wickedness or death"; having been spared Barth's acute awareness of "man's inhumanity to man,"²⁷ they could more readily exalt and idealize human consciousness without the stain of sin and death.²⁸

Modern Application

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 524.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 525.

²⁷ Niebuhr, viii.

²⁸ Ibid., 526.

Barth's use of Feuerbach to confront the theological liberalism of Schleiermacher and others may seem like an esoteric conversation among dead German theologians of little relevance today. Yet the legacy of this confrontation lives on, and Feuerbachian theology, with its high anthropology and low Christology, persists as a sort of purgatory through which Christian theology must be purified. Evidence of Feuerbach's influence is everywhere, perhaps most explicitly in the historical Jesus movement as exemplified by theologians such as Charles A. Wilson.²⁹ This movement locates its Christology in the historical record rather than revelation; Wilson goes a step further to locate it in one's own projected longings: "Suddenly we have our values confirmed to us. We have them valorized to us. We are staring into the water and seeing ourselves, and we name it Jesus."³⁰

But Feuerbach's legacy persists in less obvious places as well. Wherever human consciousness supplants divine revelation as the basis for theological knowledge, Christians are treading on Feuerbachian ground. Barth saw modern theologians treading this same ground, however unintentionally, and sounded the alarm that its soil was poor and unstable, unable to support any theological enterprise built upon it. A similar alarm is necessary today, perhaps most necessarily where theologians are unaware of their own precariousness.

The world of social media theology is one such place of unknowing precarity, where Christian thought leaders tweet and 'gram in a sort of digital Wild West, untethered from the authority and accountability of an enfolded, localized community of faith. One thinks of both the leftist "woke" theologies and right-wing nationalist theologies so prevalent across social media. Both theologies shallowly reimagine God's role as tethered to human identity politics:

²⁹ Jenson, 295-7.

³⁰ "Professor's new book examines images of Jesus," *St Olaf College News*, 14 June 2018, <https://wp.stolaf.edu/news/professors-new-book-examines-images-of-jesus>

God is supreme leader, master political strategist, and emancipator in chief who liberates his people not from sin and death, but from worldly oppression of the most banal variety: slights of political incorrectness, manipulations of news media. Barth was keenly aware of the reality of oppression; not only had he lived in through two world wars, but he had scathingly critiqued his theological predecessors for exalting human consciousness while simultaneously exploiting human beings through the slave trade and colonial imperialism.³¹ Barth saw clearly that anthropocentric theology is not the way of liberation, but of ultimate human oppression: the bondage of atheism. “Thinking about God as only a concept is not enlightening; it is darkening. Indeed, it is darkness to think that no divine being exists.”³² While social media theologians do not espouse atheism, they tread the same unsteady ground as modern liberal theologians before them, and Barth reveals that it will ultimately give way.

Another contemporary iteration of unsteady ground is in the ubiquitous phrase “love is love,” by which is usually meant something along the lines of “all forms of sexual attraction and sexual/gender identity are equally and interchangeably valid forms of human love.” This phrase is most often employed in support of marriage rights, non-discrimination, and dignity for LGBTQ+ people; those in opposition, by default, find themselves on the opposite side of love. The phrase has more recently been appropriated by progressive Christians as a sort of theological shorthand for the belief that a God of love does not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation. However true this interpretation may be, and wherever one stands on LGBTQ+ issues, the Christian appropriation of the phrase “love is love” presents a problematically anthropological redefinition of the word “love,” one rooted in idealized human concept rather than divine revelation. This “love” may be love, but it is certainly not Love—the divine

³¹ Barth, 24.

³² Jenson, 293.

perfection which finds its supreme expression in the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ on behalf of sinful humanity. Those outside the Christian faith may claim “love is love” within the vague and sexual conception of love set forth in popular culture. Those inside the Christian faith, however, cannot parrot the same slogan without theological consequence; “love” is reduced in the Christian lexicon from divine self-revelation to humanized abstraction.

The focus of this paper is not (thankfully) contemporary sexual or identity politics, but both are offered as examples of an anthropologizing tendency that is alive and well in Christian theology, particularly in the online world of social media which may escape the attention of serious theologians. Its theology, though shallow, is absorbed by masses of Christians who more readily turn to digital pastors than to their home churches for theological guidance, a trend which may only increase as Christian worship has been digitized during the 2020 pandemic. A Barthian-Feuerbachian warning is necessary to reveal the shakiness of the ground upon which such theology is built, and to warn that atheistic anthropology is its logical culmination. However, such a warning is likely to fall flat in the social media realm of pithy sentiments, short attention spans, and ignorance of historical theology. Bradley Jenson’s assessment of Barth points to a helpful corrective, observing that Barth’s method:

is helpful, but only to a point. Why? Because . . . dogmatic proposition is an abstraction, not an actuality. . . . Abstract thought, no matter how well it is formulated, cannot overcome the spirit of Feuerbach. To be sure, dogmatics as abstract thought is important and necessary. But dogmatics must lead to doing the kerygmatic deed in the living present.³³

Jenson suggests embodied proclamation as an alternate application of Barth’s critique. Christian theologians must *live* the revelation of God in word and deed, not just argue its supremacy in abstract dogmatic arguments. This lived revelation holds particular promise in a

³³ Jenson, 299.

social media age which prizes authentic lifestyle and has little attention span to sustain abstract theological debate. Barth's Feuerbachian critique is certainly necessary to sound the alarm in modern theology. But perhaps this critique would find its most resonant expression today in formation for a distinctly Christian way of life. Perhaps a lifestyle modeled on Christian revelation of Love—communal, creative, self-giving, sacrificial, dying—is the most effective counter to the anthropological claim that “love is love,” providing not only an abstract rejoinder but also an enfleshed counterexample. As the modern church persists in “the purgatory of Feuerbach,” a revival of formation and catechesis may allow it to emerge from the fires unburned, an embodied and relational living demonstration of a theology rooted in the grace of divine revelation. Whether lived or abstracted, however, Barth's critique is as relevant and necessary as when it was first penned, showing Feuerbach's atheism as the true culmination of a theology based in human consciousness.

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