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Karl Barth on Creation

It is no secret that Karl Barth's theological star has waned in recent decades. But even currently invisible stars may, in principle, still have much light to shed on ancient, intractable problems. Science can no doubt be a useful dialogue partner for some areas of theology, but when it comes to the crunch of theodicy, Barth's intuitions about the meaning of 'creation' may perhaps still be more realistic than any amount of speculation about the 'big bang'.

Karl Barth's thought is closely associated with the complete rejection of natural theology, and hence with any purely rational approach to the doctrine of creation. Rather than lamenting the shortcomings – from a Catholic point of view – of such an uncompromising approach to matters theological, it might be more helpful, initially at least, to consider Barth's positive understanding of creation. A useful summary of the latter can be found in chapters eight and nine of his *Dogmatics in Outline*,¹ the text of a series of lectures delivered in Bonn in the summer of 1946.

Barth rejects the idea that the doctrine of creation could be somehow easier to understand or more accessible to us than any other aspect of the creed. In his view it is false to imagine that we do not need to rely as much on revelation in dealing with creation as we do in dealing with other articles of faith. It is not, in other words, as if Christians needed revelation to discover, for example, the doctrine of the Trinity, but could work out by human reasoning alone that the world is God's creation. '[I]t is not', he writes, 'the existence of the world in its manifoldness, from which we are to read off the fact that God is its Creator. The world with its sorrow and its happiness will always be a dark mirror to us, about which we may have optimistic or pessimistic thoughts; but it gives us no information about God as the Creator. But

¹ K. Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, tr. G. T. Thomson (London: SCM, 1949).

always, when man has tried to read the truth from sun, moon and stars or from himself, the result has been an idol.’²

For Barth the great mystery of creation lies not, as we might automatically be inclined to think, in providing a religious solution to man’s search for meaning in the universe. Creation, for him, is not the church’s answer to human uncertainty about the ultimate origins and destiny of the universe, i.e. the church’s answer to the question: ‘Is there a God who is responsible for bringing the world into existence and sustaining it?’ Rather, the fundamental mystery of creation lies not in affirming that God the creator exists, but rather it lies in affirming that *we*, his creatures, exist. ‘How’, Barth asks, ‘can there be something alongside God, of which He has no need? This is the riddle of creation.’³ The answer to the riddle, according to Barth, is that creation is grace.⁴ God allows heaven and earth and us to exist not by necessity but by grace. ‘God’, writes Barth, ‘does not grudge the existence of the reality distinct from Himself; He does not grudge it its own reality, nature and freedom. The existence of the creature alongside God is the great puzzle and miracle, the great question to which we must and may give an answer, the answer given us through God’s Word; it is the genuine question about existence, which is essentially and fundamentally distinguished from the question which rests upon error, “Is there a God?” That there is a world is the most unheard-of thing, the miracle of the grace of God.’⁵

Barth distinguishes creation as grace from all types of gnosis, ancient and modern, which hold ‘that what the Bible calls the Son is fundamentally the created world or that the world is by nature God’s child’.⁶ In Barth’s theology, therefore, it is consistent for him to say that reason cannot bring us to the point of concluding that the world is God’s creation, since creation for Barth is grace, and grace is beyond reason.

² *Dogmatics in Outline*, 52.

³ Op. cit. 54.

⁴ Citing Luther, Barth affirms ‘that God, who does not need us, created heaven and earth and myself, [out] of “sheer fatherly kindness and compassion, apart from any merit or worthiness of mine”’ (op. cit. 54).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Op. cit. 54f.

Another motive Barth has for excluding any philosophical approach to creation is that he sees creation and covenant as completely interrelated, as implying one another. Indeed, for Barth, creation takes place for the sake of the covenant. The covenant expresses the primordial truth in the God-man relationship:

[W]e would not have said the last decisive word about creation, if we did not add that the covenant between God and man is the meaning and the glory, the ground and the goal of heaven and earth and so of the whole creation . . . [I]t is not the case that the covenant between God and man is so to speak a second fact, something additional, but the covenant is as old as creation itself. When the existence of creation begins, God's dealing with man also begins . . . The covenant is not only quite as old as creation; it is older than it. Before the world was, before heaven and earth were, the resolve or decree of God exists in view of this event in which God willed to hold communion with man, as it became inconceivably true and real in Jesus Christ. And when we ask about the meaning of existence and creation, about their ground and goal, we have to think of this covenant between God and man.⁷

Barth's theological system, in particular his rejection of natural theology, is nowadays, as is well known, in eclipse, or at the very least one can say that it is not nearly as influential or as highly respected as it once was. His comprehensive reliance on revelation as the only true source of knowledge about God and about God's works tends now to be dismissed as an arbitrary, uncritical and thus indefensible form of biblical or ecclesiastical positivism. Because of his unwillingness to recognize any natural path leading from the world to God, he is even considered to have unwittingly helped prepare the way for the destruction of Christian faith by critical reason. However, before rejecting Barth as a fideist, it might be helpful to recall the objections to Christianity that he was trying to outflank in his own theology. It might also be apposite in this context to recall the order in which Christian truth would appear to be attained or accepted both in human experience and in the biblical witness itself.

Firstly, what were the difficulties Barth was attempting to counter? These can be summed up under two headings: the projection theory of religion (Feuerbach) and

⁷ Op. cit. 63f.

the problem of evil. By setting his face firmly against any attempt to extrapolate from human experience of the world to God, and by locating the mystery of creation not in God primarily, but rather in the reality of the world, which exists for no reason reason can fathom, Barth aims at undercutting the whole force of Feuerbach's objection to Christianity. To this end he agrees with Feuerbach that any humanly projected God is indeed an idol, arguing that God is not the goal of man's dreams but man the result of God's grace. As for the problem of evil, this problem will always be a stumbling-block on pure reason's path to God. Hence, Barth starts with faith and revelation, abandoning any pretence of being able to argue rationally from the world to the existence of God the creator. Furthermore, he links creation inextricably with the covenant (God's salvific will for humanity revealed fully in Christ). In this way, Barth is able to avoid any obviously crushing blow to his theology from the side of the problem of evil, whereas this problem would appear to be insuperable for any purely rational theodicy.

A further strength of Barth's theology of creation lies in how it dovetails with the way Christianity seems to be discerned or attained in human experience and in the record of the Bible itself. For it is a conviction or an intuition about redemption or salvation that is surely of primary importance for religious believers. From such a conviction they may, if they wish to, go on to speak about creation as implied in any belief about redemption. People, however, rarely retain or lose their faith in God, depending on the answers they may receive to abstract questions about the origins of things. Rather, they find first of all, or fail to find, life good or endurable or valuable or lovable or meaningful or worth living, and only subsequently may they come to accept that the God who has made life worthwhile must also have created it. In other words, the ultimate source of the goodness of life must also be the ultimate source of its existence.

Why, however, it might be asked, not just say that the world needs no explanation beyond itself, or that an 'internal solution' to the riddle of the world ought to be perfectly adequate? This very position has, of course, often been maintained, indeed even exuberantly and defiantly so. Thus, in Proust we read: 'It has even been said that the highest praise of God consists in the denial of him by the

atheist who finds creation so perfect that he can dispense with a creator.’⁸ To this exquisite paradox one can perhaps only respond somewhat helplessly by referring to the murkiness, cruelty and unfinished nature of life which seem to preclude any straightforward acceptance of its intrinsic wholeness or self-sufficiency, now or at any other point along the path of history. For even a possibly glowing future for humanity and the world could never of itself be reason enough to justify or redeem the horrors of the past. It must be conceded, however, that the permanent human refusal to justify such horrors is an expression of faith; it is not based on any appeal to a self-evident situation of fact or to a self-grounding set of ‘values’. And as such, it springs – as, presumably, all faith ultimately must – from hope in the transcendent goodness of God who cannot condone evil and who, Christianity teaches, will be vindicated as the Redeemer at the End of Time.

Thus it would seem, for instance, to be the case that the Israelites experienced the shortcomings and painfulness of existence, and in consequence perceived God first and foremost as a redeemer and only subsequently as a creator, and not vice versa. The Book of Job is a powerful, if still ambiguous, example of this process. And in the New Testament, Jesus is seen primarily as the redeemer or saviour and only secondarily as the mediator of creation. It is interesting to find the same priority given to existential as opposed to factual – or, one might even say, scientific – questions by Theodor Adorno, when he writes on the question of the value of philosophical knowledge:

The only form of philosophy which could be justified in the face of despair, is the attempt to see everything in the perspective of redemption. Knowledge has no light other than that which shines from redemption onto the world. Everything else is empty and imitative, sheer technical effects.⁹

In short, knowledge – whether knowledge of creation or of anything else – is only of use, to put it in religious terms, in so far as it is salvific or redemptive for human existence. When knowledge of the world has no reference beyond itself, it can seem,

⁸ Quoted in J. M. and M. J. Cohen (eds.), *The New Penguin Dictionary of Quotations* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1993), 321.

⁹ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1973), 333, quoted by Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, tr. V. Green (London/New York: Burns & Oates/Paulist Press, 1977), 56.

literally, pointless. For its part, theology, as a discipline, is of course no better placed in this respect than any other intellectual activity. If theology has no reference beyond itself, if it becomes an end in itself, it inevitably becomes sterile. It only begins to live when or if it seems to be assisting people to cope with the human predicament, even if – indeed, perhaps, *only if* – this is not its self-conscious or deliberate primary aim. Its first aim can only ever be to seek and speak the truth.

Whether or not we find Barth convincing on creation – and on the role reason can or cannot play in convincing us of the truth of the doctrine of creation – is a question we should probably not wish to answer too hastily. It would certainly be foolish to dust down as sly a thinker as Barth, and then dismiss him for being – in any crude sense – irrational or uncritical.