

BARTH RECEPTION IN BRITAIN

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D. DENSIL MORGAN



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CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
Introduction	1
1 Adolf Keller and the Continental Introduction to Karl Barth in Britain, 1925–30	5
Barth and his work, 1914–25	5
Adolf Keller and ‘The Theology of Crisis’	8
The Anglo-German Theological Conferences	14
Adolf Keller and ‘The Dialectical Theology’	21
2 Hugh Ross Mackintosh, John McConnachie and the Reception of Karl Barth in Scotland, 1925–33	25
The earliest response to Barth: H. R. Mackintosh	25
The earliest response to Barth: John McConnachie	29
Deepening engagement	33
McConnachie’s initial volume	35
The continuing early impact	40
McConnachie’s second volume	43
3 The Reception of Karl Barth’s Theology in Wales, 1927–33	48
Wales and the Scottish precedence	48
Theology in post-Edwardian Wales	50
The triumph of liberalism	53
J. D. Vernon Lewis, E. Keri Evans and J. E. Daniel	56
4 English Nonconformity and the Reception of Karl Barth, 1926–32	63
The Nonconformist impulse	63
P. T. Forsyth, Nathaniel Micklem and ‘Orthodox Dissent’	67
Congregationalists and the early Barth: Sydney Cave and John Phillips	73
Congregationalism’s ‘sharp turn to the theological right’	76
R. Birch Hoyle and the Baptist response to Barth	84

CONTENTS

Further response	91
J. Arundel Chapman and the Methodist response to Barth	93
A Presbyterian response?	98
5 Barth Reception and the Church of England, 1927–33	100
Barth reception and Anglican modernism	100
Barthianism and evangelicalism	105
Anglo-Catholicism: John Kenneth Mozley and Edwyn Clement Hoskyns	109
Hoskyns and Barth	115
6 Barth, Britain and the Mid-1930s	119
Hoskyns's translation of <i>Romans</i>	119
F. W. Camfield's <i>Revelation and the Holy Spirit</i>	123
The 'first blast' of the German Church Struggle	128
Gerhart Kittel, Cambridge and Edwyn G. Hoskyns	134
A. J. Macdonald and opposition to the Confessing Church	138
Barth by mid-decade	142
7 Towards the Second World War	149
Edwyn C. Hoskyns's 'Letter from England'	149
Developments in Wales	154
The Scottish connection in the later 1930s	160
Nathaniel Micklem and 'Natural Theology'	165
The Gifford Lectures and their implications	171
8 Barth Reception in Wartime and Beyond	174
Daniel T. Jenkins and the catholicity of the Word	174
The mission of <i>The Presbyter</i>	183
<i>This is the Message</i> and <i>Good News of God</i>	189
J. E. Daniel, R. Ifor Parry and developments in Wales	194
Towards <i>Reformation Old and New</i>	200
The growing critique	206
9 Barth Reception during the Post-War Years, 1948–56 (I)	210
The World Council of Churches and the clash with Reinhold Niebuhr	210
The establishment of <i>The Scottish Journal of Theology</i>	218
Torrance, Brand Blanshard and 'Reason and Belief'	224
The English Baptists, Wales and Northern Ireland	228
10 Barth Reception during the Post-War Years, 1948–56 (II)	235
Barth and the demythologizing controversy in Britain	235
Ronald Gregor Smith	238
The eschatological note	242

CONTENTS

Evangelicalism and British Barth reception	244
Torrance, Barthianism and the IVF	248
The growing divide	251
11 Barth Reception in Britain during the Final Decade, 1956–68	257
The translation of the <i>Church Dogmatics</i>	257
The decade of the secular	260
British Barthianism during the mid-1960s	267
Postlude: Barth in Britain 1968–86	276
<i>Bibliography</i>	285
<i>Index</i>	304

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The following study is an exercise in Bangor theology. It evolved from my ongoing researches in nineteenth and twentieth century Welsh religious history in its European context. Theology and biblical studies have been part of the remit of what was the University College of North Wales, latterly Bangor University, from its inception in the 1880s. Given the soundly biblical character of Bangor theology and its Calvinistic background, it is hardly surprising that Karl Barth's thought resonated here early. Lewis Valentine and Ivor Oswy Davies were Bangor graduates while J. E. Daniel taught Christian doctrine to Bangor ordinands for two decades and more. As a BD student my own teachers, J. Alwyn Charles and E. Stanley John, encouraged me to take Barth's theology with the seriousness that it deserved. It is a privilege to have inherited such a rich tradition.

Research for the volume began in 2008 with a residential term in Regent's Park College, Oxford, and was concluded with my membership of the Center for Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey, during the latter part of the year. I would like to register my thanks the principal and fellows of Regent's Park College, and to the director, staff and colleagues at CTI for support, facilities and stimulating companionship during my time in residence. Library staff at Regent's Park, the Bodleian, Pusey House and the Theology Faculty Library in Oxford showed me much kindness, as did colleagues in Princeton. Dr Clifford Anderson and Kenneth Henke at Princeton Theological Seminary's Barth Center were especially helpful. Thanks are due too to Dr Iain Torrance, president of PTS. Here in the United Kingdom, Professor David Fergusson of New College, Edinburgh, and Professor John Webster of the University of Aberdeen have shown interest in this project and given encouragement throughout. Thomas Kraft and Anna Turton at Continuum have provided great support while P. Muralidharan has been a pattern of conscientiousness in the production of the text. Robert and Helen Roberts entrusted me with the papers of Helen's late father, the Revd Ivor Oswy Davies, which are now deposited in the Bangor University archive.

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INTRODUCTION

Despite some early studies,¹ it was not until a decade following his death that the beginnings of a measured scholarly assessment of Karl Barth's impact on British theology began to emerge. Commencing with S. W. Sykes's 1979 essay 'The study of Barth',² a number of chapters and articles describing his influence and accounting for his significance began to appear. If Richard H. Roberts' 'The reception of the theology of Karl Barth in the Anglo-Saxon world: history, typology and prospect'³ was the most wide-ranging and substantial, other contributions, most notably Geoffrey W. Bromiley's 'The abiding significance of Karl Barth'⁴ and 'The influence of Barth after World War II',⁵ had already marked out the bounds of the study and suggested that Barth's fullest effect was yet to come. The first book length study of British Barth reception, Anne-Kathrin Finke's *Karl Barth in Grossbritannien*, an excellent summary of Barth's impact on English and Scottish religion between the 1920s and the 1980s was published in 1995. Written for a German readership, it contains a perceptive analysis of the early context and the way in which P. T. Forsyth, especially,

¹ John McConnachie, 'Karl Barth in Great Britain', *Union Seminary Review* 46 (1935), 302–7; idem., 'Der Einfluss Karl Barths in Schottland und England', in Ernst Wolf (ed.), *Theologische Aufsätze Karl Barth zum 50. Geburtstag* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1936), pp.559–70.

² S. W. Sykes, 'The study of Barth', in idem (ed.), *Karl Barth: studies of his theological method* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp.1–16.

³ Richard H. Roberts, 'The reception of the theology of Karl Barth in the Anglo-Saxon world: history, typology and prospect' in S. W. Sykes (ed.), *Karl Barth: centenary essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp.115–71.

⁴ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 'The abiding significance of Karl Barth', in John Thompson (ed.), *Theology Beyond Christendom: essays on the centenary of the birth of Karl Barth* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1986), pp.331–50.

⁵ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 'The influence of Barth after World War II', in Nigel Biggar (ed.), *Reckoning with Barth: essays in commemoration of the centenary of Karl Barth's birth* (Oxford: Mowbray, 1988), pp.9–24.

paved the way for a positive assessment of Barth, and how T. F. Torrance became the Swiss theologian's most influential British interpreter.⁶ With Alister E. McGrath's impressive intellectual biography of Torrance published in 1999, the magnitude of Barth's reputation was, after decades of disparagement, afforded its due: 'Karl Barth is widely acknowledged to be one of the greatest theological luminaries of all times'.⁷ Torrance, for his part, was deemed essential in the process of evaluation, appropriation and assimilation of Barth's theology within the English-speaking world.

If the present study follows Finke in mapping out chronology, it approximates McGrath in noting that regional, indeed national differences have been elemental for the reception of Barth's theology in the British Isles. The mechanics of Barth reception, it is claimed, demanded a workable translation into English of key texts including, ultimately, the whole of the *Church Dogmatics*; a reputable journal, namely the *Scottish Journal of Theology*, in which Barth's theology was taken seriously and not marginalized; in T & T Clark a company willing to take on the publishing venture as a whole; and in the faculty of divinity in New College, Edinburgh, a powerful institutional base in which creative theology in Barth could be carried out and perpetuated.⁸ This occurred, as it happens, not in England but in Scotland where a Reformed tradition, European in sympathy and moulded by Genevan standards, was already open to Barth's insights. Within the divinity faculties of the Scottish universities, Christian dogmatics, where theology *per se* rather than phenomenology, the philosophy of religion or patristic studies of a historical nature, had been the staple fare since the days of John Knox, meant that Barth's views, even when queried, could never be sidelined or ignored.

It could also be argued that the Augustinianism of Scottish Enlightenment thought, illustrated by the work of the philosopher Norman Kemp Smith and others, was also highly conducive to the acceptance of Barth's theology. Smith, his younger contemporary John Anderson and, more recently, the ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre, all challenged the easy optimism of the reigning progressive liberal or Marxist orthodoxies in order to restate a classical epistemology radically at odds with prevailing trends. Kemp Smith's 'secular Calvinism' and its derivatives signalled 'a theoretical moment which has both a secular and a theological dimension',⁹ and served to characterize

⁶ Anne-Kathrin Finke, *Karl Barth in Grossbritannien: rezeption und wirkungsgeschichte* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1995).

⁷ Alister E. McGrath, *T. F. Torrance: an intellectual biography* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), p.113.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.113–33.

⁹ Craig Beveridge and Ronnie Turnbull, *Scotland after Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1997), p.121; see their whole discussion in chapter 7, 'The Augustinian Moment', pp.111–34.

INTRODUCTION

Scottish intellectual history in a way which was not replicated elsewhere. The fact is that during his lifetime Barth's reputation was persistently higher in Scotland than south of the river Tweed.

If this was true of Scotland, English theology was dominated by an established religion of a very different kind. Doctrinally the Church of England was minimalist, its mores were insular rather than European, and its key doctrine, since the *Lux Mundi* synthesis of 1889 at least, was that of the incarnation. It eschewed antipathies between nature and grace, philosophy and revelation, and due to its massive institutional presence and indissoluble link with the power of the state, it would instinctively trivialize all alternative theological constructs and ecclesiastical traditions. Along with Roman Catholicism, this was particularly true of Protestant Dissent. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that 'the practice of theology deriving from the English tradition of interpretation disallows challenges that ... Barth offer[s]. Meanwhile, theology is carried on by experts whose norms are drawn from elsewhere'.¹⁰ According to Daniel W. Hardy's analysis, the English tradition was dominated by epistemological pragmatism, moralism and an aversion to claims of revelation which could not be verified according to rationalistic norms. It was also beholden to a class based social structure organized under monarch and bishops: 'English theologians live and work in a unified English culture that has its own largely hidden standards of value'.¹¹ There was little wonder, therefore, that Barth, whose programme existed to subvert radically such a scheme, could hardly be understood by English theology during much of the twentieth century, much less embraced.

Even in England this was not the whole story. Anglicanism itself possessed a dissident tradition of Anglo-Catholic Biblicism, represented by Edwyn C. Hoskyns, which reminded the national church that it should not be in thrall to the state and that the gospel existed to judge the people as well as to redeem them. More potent still was Protestant Dissent which, in its churchly, Genevan form, provided the most effective bridgehead for Barthian influence outside Scotland and Wales prior to the work of T. F. Torrance and others. If the *Scottish Journal of Theology* served as a forum where Barth's thought could be debated seriously from the 1950s on, that function had been fulfilled by *The Presbyterian* during the 1940s, and if New College, Edinburgh, provided an institutional base for Barthian influence during the post-war decades, the Congregationalists' Mansfield College, Oxford, had performed that purpose during the 1930s and beyond. Like Scottish Presbyterianism, Genevan high church Dissent, replete with

¹⁰ Daniel W. Hardy, 'The English tradition of interpretation and the reception of Schleiermacher and Barth in England', in James O. Duke and Robert F. Streetman (eds), *Barth and Schleiermacher: beyond the impasse?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), pp.138–62 [161].

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.142.

BARTH RECEPTION IN BRITAIN

its alternative vision of the link between gospel, church and state,¹² had been remarkably open to Barth's contribution, not least during the German Church Conflict and the Second World War.

Then, of course, there was Wales. Intellectually Wales has been mostly invisible to the rest of the world. It has certainly been ignored by its neighbour to the east. Yet Barth's theology registered forcefully in Wales at a very early juncture, his work was known through translation in Welsh even earlier than in English, while the standard of Welsh language discussion of Barth has been uniformly high. In the influential Bangor theologian J. E. Daniel, during the 1930s and 1940s Barth found an advocate second to none.¹³ The reasons for this receptivity are not hard to find. Barth was, after all, not a hierarchical German Lutheran but a democratic Swiss from a minor European country overshadowed by its neighbours whose principal ecclesiastical tradition was Reformed. Welsh Nonconformity was Calvinistic in creed and put a huge premium on the value of the preached Word. The early Barth was known as a preacher and an exponent of preaching. A vital theology of the Word of God was bound to attract.¹⁴

'Barth reception', according to McGrath, 'is a developing and contested discipline, in which a "settled" or "received" view is subject to change and modification'.¹⁵ The following assessment is aimed as a modest contribution to that ongoing debate.

¹² Cf. Daniel T. Jenkins, *The British: their identity and their religion* (London: SCM, 1975), pp.96–113.

¹³ D. Densil Morgan, *The Span of the Cross: Christian religion and society in Wales, 1914–2000* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), pp.133–6.

¹⁴ See D. Densil Morgan, *Wales and the Word: historical perspectives on Welsh identity and religion* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), pp.120–41 and below.

¹⁵ McGrath, T. F. *Torrance: an intellectual biography*, p.114.

1

ADOLF KELLER AND THE CONTINENTAL INTRODUCTION TO KARL BARTH IN BRITAIN, 1925–30

Barth and his work, 1914–25

On 11 November 1918 the guns of the Great War were finally silenced and an armistice was signed. For four long and bloody years Germany and Britain and their allies had been at war and the whole of Europe as far east as Turkey had been convulsed. From his Alpine parish of Safenwil in neutral Switzerland the 32-year-old Reformed pastor Karl Barth had been following the progress of the conflict from the beginning. If the unconditional truths of the gospel had been suspended in early September 1914 when 93 German intellectuals, including the great Marburg theologians Martin Rade and Wilhelm Herrmann, had signed a statement supporting the Kaiser's policy: 'It is truly sad! Marburg and German civilisation have lost something in my eyes by this breakdown, and indeed forever',¹ on armistice day Barth was correcting the proofs of a commentary on St Paul's epistle to the Romans on which he had been working since the summer of 1916. Although his main concerns throughout the war had been with his parish, from the economic conditions of the few hundred industrial workers who lived in Safenwil to the preacher's problem of finding an adequate theology in which to convey the gospel message to his congregation Sunday by Sunday,² he was

¹ James D. Smart (ed.), *Revolutionary Theology in the Making: Barth–Thurneysen correspondence, 1914–25* (London: Epworth Press, 1964), p.26; cf. Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (London: Collins, 1961), pp.12–13.

² Eberhart Busch, *Karl Barth: his life from letters and autobiographical texts* (London: SCM, 1976), pp.60–125.

nevertheless perpetually engaged with what was happening in the world round about. In his almost daily correspondence with his friend and ministerial colleague Eduard Thurneysen in the nearby village of Leitwil, he affirmed what had now become a solid conviction, that a truer theology would have equipped them to respond more effectively to the cataclysmic clash that had taken place: 'If only we had been converted to the Bible *earlier* so that we would now have solid ground under our feet! One broods alternately over the newspapers and the New Testament and actually sees fearfully little of the organic connection between the two worlds'.³ More an attempt to get to grips anew with the ever-pertinent thought of the apostle than an elucidation of the connection between the biblical world and the present, the commentary at least had a cathartic effect on its author. He had written in his diary, with a sense of relief, on 16 August: 'Romans finished!'⁴ Although the Berne publisher had printed the year 1919 on the title page, the volume's print run of a thousand copies had reached the bookshops by December 1918. No-one, its writer least of all, realized the extent of the effect that it was about to have.

Between the publication of the first edition of the Romans commentary and the first impact that his work would have on the English-speaking public both in Britain and elsewhere, Barth had left parish work for a professorship in Reformed theology in the German university of Göttingen. In October 1921 he became the sole Reformed member in a staunchly Lutheran faculty and, without an earned doctorate of his own, he had been obliged to work hard to master not only key reformation texts but a whole body of patristic and medieval teaching. His earliest lecture series, on the Heidelberg Catechism (1921–22), Calvin (1922), Zwingli (1922–23) and the Reformed Confessions (1923) as well as a highly perceptive course delivered during the winter semester of 1923–24 on Schleiermacher, the father of liberal theology (whom he found that he had to challenge at every turn),⁵ built up in him sufficient confidence to begin expounding a doctrinal scheme of his own. His first attempt at a systematic theology, a course entitled 'Instruction in the Christian Religion', purposely echoing Calvin's own *Institutio*, was given over two semesters, the summer of 1924 and the winter of 1924–25, the first part treating revelation and the doctrine of God⁶ and the second the doctrine of reconciliation. This would become the

³ Smart (ed.), *Revolutionary Theology in the Making*, p.45.

⁴ Busch, *Karl Barth: his life from letters*, p.105.

⁵ Karl Barth, *The Theology of Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); idem, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002); idem, *The Theology of Schleiermacher* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982).

⁶ Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics: instruction in the Christian religion* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991).

basis for his first published volume of dogmatics, *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf: Die Lehr vom Worte Gottes* (1927) ‘Christian Dogmatics in Outline: The Doctrine of the Word of God’. He also gave regular expository lectures on such biblical texts as the Epistle of James, the First Epistle of John, Paul’s letters to the Ephesians and the Philippians and the Sermon on the Mount.

If the small band of Reformed students and ministerial candidates at Göttingen knew something of the detail of his developing thought, from 1923 the German and Swiss public knew Barth through his growing reputation as a lecturer at religious gatherings, from the pages of a new theological publication *Zwischen den Zeiten* (‘Between the Times’) and a highly contentious, if courteous, controversy with one of the most learned exponents of contemporary liberal theology, the church historian Adolf von Harnack from Berlin. From its first number in January 1923 *Zwischen den Zeiten* became the mouthpiece of the new school of ‘dialectical theologians’ including Barth, Thurneysen, Emil Brunner soon to be elected to the chair of theology in Zürich, Friedrich Gogarten, Rudolf Bultmann and others. They were all young, hardly identical in their emphases, but all disenchanted with the prevailing liberalism and seeking a new beginning for the evangelical pulpit and for Protestant theology generally. Also in January 1923 on the pages of the Protestant periodical *Die Christliche Welt* (‘The Christian World’) Barth crossed swords with Harnack, his senior by more than three decades and among the most revered of his former teachers. Whereas Harnack held out for ‘scientific’ theology, meaning ostensibly objective Christian theology which took the presuppositions of the Enlightenment as its starting point and sought common ground with secular academic disciplines, Barth was adamant that the object of Christian theology was God and therefore it could never accept naturalistic assumptions as being axiomatic. For Harnack, the younger man was nothing less than ‘a despiser of academic theology’ whereas for Barth, the great Berlin professor had radically secularized the whole Christian scheme. Although they retained respect for one another, there was no doubt that the abyss which had come to separate them was vast.⁷

Neither was there any doubt of the terrific support that Barth was gleaned, and that the younger generation of theological students and post-war ministers felt that a new phase in European religious life had dawned. 1924 saw the publication of three works by Barth, a theological exposition of 1 Corinthians *Die Auferstehen der Toten* (‘The Resurrection of the Dead’) centring especially on chapter 15,⁸ a collection of essays and lectures

⁷ H. Martin Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology: an analysis of the Barth–Harnack correspondence of 1923* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

⁸ Karl Barth, *The Resurrection of the Dead* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1933).

entitled *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie* ('The Word of God and Theology'),⁹ and a volume of sermons written jointly by him and Eduard Thurneysen, *Komm, Schöpfer Geist!* ('Come, Holy Spirit!').¹⁰ None of these works conveyed the range of Barth's dogmatic interests or the nature of his reappraisal of the Protestant tradition, but they did serve to show that his work could not be ignored and that new life was being breathed into the evangelical faith from a group of extraordinarily gifted young theologians. After four hectic and exceptionally fruitful years, in October 1925 Barth and his family moved once more, this time to take up an appointment as professor of theology in the University of Münster, Westphalia.

Adolf Keller and 'The Theology of Crisis'

Among those who could not help taking a lively interest in Barth and his companions and in changes in the religious situation generally was a fellow Swiss Adolf Keller (1872–1963). Both men knew one another well, in fact between 1904 and 1909 Keller had been senior pastor of the Swiss Reformed Church in Geneva when Barth, who was 14 years his junior, had begun his ministerial apprenticeship as curate serving the church's German congregation. During succeeding decades Keller would become a leading ecumenical figure and interpreter of continental thought to the churches of Britain and America. His student career had taken him to the universities of Basel, Geneva and Berlin before ordination and 3 years service in Cairo as assistant pastor of the city's Protestant parish as well as teaching in the international school there. From Egypt he had done research at the monastery of St Catherine on Mount Sinai as part of a team collating the Greek text which James Moffatt would use as a basis for his English translation of the New Testament, and later joined an expedition studying archaeological remains in the Coptic monasteries of the Western Desert. Having returned to take up the Geneva pastorate, he had been called in 1909 to the church of St Peter's in Zürich. He became secretary to the Swiss Church Federation in 1920 and throughout the political and financial crisis which had hit post-Versailles Germany he served as secretary to the European Central Bureau for Inter-Church Aid. This led, in turn, to his work with the World Alliance for International Friendship through the Churches. 'The soul of the enterprise was Adolf Keller, a pastor from German Switzerland', recalled Marc Boegner, a leader in the French Reformed Church, 'a man with uncommon capacity for hard work . . . He had the ability to focus attention on the most striking

⁹ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York: Harper and Row, 1928).

¹⁰ Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen, *Come Holy Spirit* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1934).

aspects of the often unhappy lives of the churches which the committee felt itself obliged to support by financial assistance'.¹¹ The much-travelled and urbane Keller was soundly Reformed in his faith. Barth was fortunate to find in him such a knowledgeable, well-connected and sympathetic interpreter of his early work.

In a two-part essay entitled 'The Theology of Crisis' in *The Expositor*, the journal edited by James Moffatt, for March and April 1925, Keller described the new theological mood and put Barth's still evolving thought into context. 'Overnight, so to speak, continental theology, at least in Germany and Switzerland', he wrote, 'was found to be in a new position, since Karl Barth has thrown his *Römerbrief* into the field of theological discussion'.¹² The book had caused huge excitement and unprecedented discussion with animated responses by Harnack, Jülicher, Gogarten, Tillich and a host of others. Barth's second edition of the Romans commentary of 1922 had strengthened his position, while his early volume of sermons *Suchet Gott, so werdet ihr leben* ('Seek God and You Will Live'), written jointly with Eduard Thurneysen and published in 1917, and his later publications, *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie* and *Komm, Schöpfer Geist!* as well as the essays in *Zwischen den Zeiten* had made his position known. Keller provided his readers with biographical information mentioning the Safenwil pastorate and the Reformed professorship in Lutheran Göttingen: 'The new professor attracted at once unusual interest, and started, especially among the students and younger theologians, a movement which fertilized theological interests over the whole field'.¹³ Neither Barth nor his colleagues claimed to belong to a new theological school: 'The whole group would rather consider its work as a necessary criticism of every theology, as a critical footnote to be put under all theological and ecclesiastical activity, or as a bit of cinnamon strewn on every theological dish which present day Protestantism is enjoying'.¹⁴ Their precursors were Blumhart, Overbeck, Luther, Zwingli and Calvin but especially St Paul. As for the tradition embodied in Schleiermacher, Harnack and Troeltsch: 'In the eyes of Barth and his friends the tendency represented by this latter group of modern theologians . . . is a deplorable deviation from the truth underlying the Christian religion, a kind of theological fall for which they should do penance in sackcloth and ashes'.¹⁵

¹¹ Marc Boegner, *The Long Road to Unity* (London: Collins, 1970), p.74; cf. Ruth Rouse and Stephen C. Neill, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517–1948* (London: SPCK, 1967), pp.554–8.

¹² Adolf Keller, 'The Theology of Crisis', *The Expositor*, 9th series 3 (1925), 164–75, 245–60.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 165.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 166.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

According to Keller, Barth's theology began with the inevitable crisis which occurs when men and women encounter the living God: '*Crisis* is the only word which depicts adequately this situation'.¹⁶ It is the discovery that God is radically different from that which human religiosity or logic had perceived God to be. Humans desire to know, possess or contact God but have to realize that God is uncontactable, 'that there is no way from man to God, that no human thinking, not even the highest moral or religious vision, can get hold of Him . . . Barth blames the whole of modern theology for laying too much emphasis on the immanence of God and for suppressing thereby the distance between God and men'.¹⁷ Orthodoxy and mysticism no less than liberalism had taken for granted that God could be known, while Barth challenged forcibly the blasé nature of their assumptions. In their pious hubris even sound orthodoxy and supernaturalism had forgotten that God was God, the Unknown, who cannot be possessed, domesticated or lived with in a comfortable way. It was Barth's 10-year experience as a parish minister which forced this conviction upon him: 'The preacher who realises the depth of this crisis can no more preach. He is unable to take God's Word on his lips'.¹⁸ God is inaccessible in his sovereignty, a fact that modern theology had blithely ignored. It had based a huge structure of natural theology on what was, in fact, an erroneous supposition: 'It is *hubris* to build a theology . . . on the religious data which are to be found in human souls, on a religious self-consciousness or experience which is fallacious and unable to throw a bridge to the unknown world of God'.¹⁹

For Barth even revelation was indirect: 'As soon as Christians pretend to express his being in specific concepts or to represent his action in visible forms or in symbols, He disappears, wraps himself in clouds of an unapproachable mystery, till only a questionable human image remains in man's soul'.²⁰ God certainly exists, and he exists within creation, but he does so in his hiddenness, as the *Deus absconditus* in all earthly forms including that of the human soul, *finitum non est capax infiniti*: 'What men mean when they speak of the God they feel present or immanent in their feelings, in their subjectivity, is not God but an idol'.²¹ The error of much current academic theology, and that which was popular in the churches, was the easy belief that God's ways could be known through the historical process: 'It is a specific mistake of the school of Ritschl to pretend to find God in history'.²² Neither could there be a synthesis between God and spirit as

¹⁶ Ibid., 166.

¹⁷ Ibid., 167.

¹⁸ Ibid., 168.

¹⁹ Ibid., 168.

²⁰ Ibid., 168.

²¹ Ibid., 169.

²² Ibid., 169.

in mysticism: ‘Mystical theology is quite the same utter impossibility as natural theology. God is not within human reach’.²³ God, therefore, is only known as the unknown or, in crisis, as the God who is against us: ‘A terrible wrathful “No!”, condemning the world and men as they are, is the only direct way by which his presence is made known to the human heart and conscience’.²⁴ On the basis of Keller’s exposition, it was difficult to know whether the crisis theologians were condemning human beings for their creatureliness or their sinfulness, a common criticism of the early Barth, but he continued: ‘If God transcends all human cognition, then the only positive element in our knowledge of him lies in negation’.²⁵ Religion, for its part, presupposes not a negation but an affirmation of the genius of human spirituality and as such was false: ‘The church tries to transform the impossible God into a possible, intelligible deity’.²⁶ For Barth and his friends this trivialized the whole process, and they felt that they had scriptural warrant for their view: ‘All the woes which Jesus spoke against the synagogue are applied by Barth to the Christian church’.²⁷ Yet despite everything the church is inevitable and necessary: ‘An everlasting “No!” is thrown by God into the face and ears of all men who claim to know him, to do his work, to work for his kingdom, to possess his Spirit’.²⁸ In the face of the divine crisis, all that people can do is despair of their own righteousness and turn in humble submission to God.

The gospel, moreover, is good news and not a matter for despair. Into this crisis comes Christ, the unique revelation of the transcendent God though as such he is only obliquely apparent: ‘Even in the historic life of Christ God touches the human soul only as a tangent touches a circle . . . In so far as the life of Christ forms a part of history, it is quite as problematic as everything else in history’.²⁹ On the cross Christ places himself at the disposal of the crisis and God breaks through in the resurrection. This is the supreme negation leading to a new reality. Even then its reality is indirect: ‘We cannot see, know, prove or feel that Jesus is the Christ, that God is in him as the killing and vivifying power of supreme life. All that we see on the cross is . . . the outstretched finger pointing towards something which is hidden and which can only be *believed*’.³⁰ All is oblique, contradictory, tangential and indirect. Even faith itself is mysterious and paradoxical: ‘Faith is faith only in so far as it does not pretend to yield any historic or

²³ Ibid., 169.

²⁴ Ibid., 169.

²⁵ Ibid., 169–70.

²⁶ Ibid., 170.

²⁷ Ibid., 170.

²⁸ Ibid., 171.

²⁹ Ibid., 171–2.

³⁰ Ibid., 173.

psychological realities, but exclusively the hidden reality of God'.³¹ It submits to that which is never its own possession. It is a human impossibility and belongs to the category of the divine.

In his pioneering article, Keller tried to give a feel for Barth in Barth's own words. The Swiss theologian's use of dialectic would have been unfamiliar to his readers: 'A too direct statement concerning the transcendent world has at once to be corrected or annulled by its opposite, containing as much truth as the positive utterance'.³² Barth's whole scheme was dynamic, not rigid: 'Neither the affirmation alone nor the negation alone expresses the truth'.³³ But was this just another philosophy like Hegel's or Schelling's? Were the dialectic to become a formal method of elucidating truth, that may have been the case, but Barth's point was that divine truth could only be glimpsed rather than commandeered: 'The source of any understanding of God's intention for man lies not in any human method, not even in the dialectic one, but in Jesus Christ exclusively'.³⁴ What the dialectic method could do was to witness to the transcendent Christ who, in the freedom of revelation, retained his absolute sovereignty: 'With Jesus the new *aeon* appears vertically from heaven, miraculously placed amidst us by God's will'.³⁵ In direct contradiction to liberalism which had domesticated God, and distinct from orthodoxy which, through the soundness of its formulae, had mastered God, the real God breaks in from beyond: 'A new creation has begun, the reign of grace has replaced the reign of sin, Christ has revealed it as the *Kurios*, as the Son of God'.³⁶ This Christ cannot be known after the flesh, the scholarly consensus of secular history and profane rationality but can only be known through the miracle of revelation. The same was true of the resurrection. Although Christ's resurrection occurred within history, it could not be comprehended according to the canons of history, 'it is not a miracle in the sense of an exceptional case in the world'.³⁷ Barth's scheme was wholly eschatological: 'The day of the kingdom, of the resurrection, is the last day of man and therefore not to be found in the relativity of time'.³⁸ True Christian faith was transcendent, miraculous, having to do with eternal realities not bound by time, though manifested, paradoxically, within both space and time. For Barth, the evangelical preacher, the greatest miracle was the forgiveness of sin, that in Christ God recreated humankind

³¹ Ibid., 174.

³² Ibid., 246.

³³ Ibid., 246.

³⁴ Ibid., 247.

³⁵ Ibid., 248.

³⁶ Ibid., 249.

³⁷ Ibid., 251.

³⁸ Ibid., 251.

in the midst of sin: ‘Barth thus revives in its entirety the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith’.³⁹

In bringing his description to a close, Keller repeated the fact that the crisis theology was sweeping much of the younger European world before it, and that there was much more to come. If Barth was the movement’s exegete, Brunner was its systematic theologian, Gogarten its philosopher and Thurneysen its pastoral theologian, and during its short life its effect had been salutary and bracing. In fact it was engendering more excitement than any religious movement in recent times. There were, however, questions to be asked and for Keller they had exclusively to do with the matter of ethics. ‘Only a constant watchfulness and a very strong sense of responsibility will preserve this exclusion of the human will from a fatal consequence’, he claimed, ‘namely, a paralysis of the ethical effort’.⁴⁰

For Adolf Keller, the most detailed and perceptive interpreter of Barth’s work in Britain during its earliest stage, the most significant aspect of the new Swiss theology was its spirited challenge to a doctrinal status quo that had become jaded and self-satisfied. The older liberal establishment was in denial over the part it had played in the tragedy which had beset Europe during the preceding decade. In Germany the post-war crisis was deepening and the attitude of its traumatized people was ambivalent and difficult to discern. The galloping inflation of the winter of 1922 had added to the already ruinous economic situation and the sullen, suppressed anger over the French invasion of the Ruhr in 1923 exacerbated circumstances which were already dire. Keller would do much to convey the implications of the unfolding tragedy to the British and American churches during the next two decades, and have the invidious task of explaining before long who Adolf Hitler was and what the Nazi Party stood for. Yet however real the context of the mid-1920s was, the new theological movement could not be accounted for glibly as though it were only the product of its milieu; it was, rather, a genuine renewal of Protestant faith. Its weakness, however, was in its apparently unstable ethical base: ‘Indeed the ethical problem is the weak point of the whole system’.⁴¹ The movement’s protest against historicism, psychologism and the general secularization of the Christian mind was timely and valid. Neither was its critique of a moral law which was based on extra-theological criteria wholly misplaced. Its challenge was to work out an ethics of grace founded on revelation and the doctrine of the Word. A perusal of Barth’s essays in *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie*, notably ‘The Christian’s Place in Society’ (1919) and ‘The Problem of Ethics Today’ (1922),⁴² should have alerted him to that fact that a confession of God’s

³⁹ Ibid., 252.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 257.

⁴¹ Ibid., 259.

⁴² Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, pp.272–327, 136–82.

sovereignty did not eradicate morality or inhibit personal or collective responsibility in any way. This is something which he would work out with enormous skill and innovativeness in his lecture course on theological ethics at Münster in 1928 and 1929.⁴³ Keller, however, still needed to be assured: 'We may expect that the whole group will still have to show how an ethic is possible on such a basis'.⁴⁴

The Anglo-German Theological Conferences

It was the context rather than the content of Barth's scheme which was the subject of a second paper assessing the state of contemporary Europe which followed Keller's initial essay. Writing in the *Church Quarterly Review* in October 1926, Willy Schuster, a theologian from Leipzig, described in breathless terms the sharp reaction against Weimar nihilism which he saw happening around him. 'Since the Reformation', he claimed, 'we in Germany have never experienced a time when religion was so sympathetically received as it is today'.⁴⁵ Although in many of the *Landeskirchen* Protestantism was the state religion supported by taxes, since the nineteenth century the intellectual classes had turned their back on Christianity believing it to be discredited while the bulk of the workers had absented themselves from their parish churches and affirmed a materialistic creed instead. By the latter part of the war even the middle classes were in open revolt. As recently as 1923 as many as 111,866 had withdrawn from church membership stating that they were atheists. Since then the tide was on the turn. The shallowness of Enlightenment materialism and emptiness of cosmopolitan hedonism had now been exposed, and people were taking both God and church seriously once more: 'There is a widespread conviction that a new epoch is dawning for the Church'.⁴⁶ Shuster's essay appeared at the same time as the young Prussian church leader Otto Dibelius's popular volume *Das Jahrhundert der Kirche* ('The Century of the Church') was making its mark. The instability, anarchy and moral vacuum of the ideologically secular Weimar republic provoked a vigorous counter reaction spearheaded by Dibelius and others: 'Truly it is high time that someone seized the helm with a strong hand, applied the criterion of an absolute morality to the new conditions and restored humanity to an awareness of what is good and what is evil.

⁴³ Karl Barth, *Ethics: lectures at Münster and Bonn* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981); cf. John Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: human action in Barth's thought* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), pp.41–64.

⁴⁴ Keller, 'The Theology of Crisis', 259.

⁴⁵ Willy Schuster, 'Present day religious movements in Germany', *Church Quarterly Review* 103 (1926–27), 135–63 [135].

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

Who can do it if the Church does not?’⁴⁷ According to Schuster, ‘A new interest in the Church is being awakened everywhere . . . indifference is being thrust out and new life is emerging. It is a joy today to be a theologian. Above all, one has the impression that the world is expecting something from us’.⁴⁸

In describing this scenario, the Leipzig theologian listed the somewhat inchoate religious groupings that had been garnering support. There was the liturgical or High Church movement, a romanticized reaction to the cerebralism and word-centredness of the orthodox Lutheran Church; the followers of the charismatic Christoph Blumhart and his healing mission at Bad Boll; the utopian Christian socialism of the Swiss leaders Leonhard Ragaz and Hermann Kutter; Rudolf Steiner’s esoteric anthroposophy, and, in more sinister vein, the ‘German Christian’ or *Volk* movement. ‘The patriotism which has been awakened afresh by the youth movement has led in some instances to a desire to revive the old German mythologies based as they are on a deep reverence for nature’.⁴⁹ This recrudescence of paganism was pointedly anti-Christian, despite retaining the title of Christian, and disturbingly anti-Semitic: ‘Bitter hatred of modern Judaism has led to a passionate rejection of the Old Testament and does not stop short of the Person of the Lord Jesus’.⁵⁰ This crude aberration, however, was hardly significant. What was noteworthy was the vibrant renewal of evangelical Christianity that the Barthian movement was bringing about. ‘The Baptist’s call to “Repent” is heard in the new theology. It started in what is generally known as the “Dialectical Theology” of Karl Barth in Münster, Friedrich Gogarten at Jena, Emil Brunner at Zürich’, and through it ‘the rediscovery of the gospel has in fact begun’.⁵¹ For Willy Schuster, a new day was dawning for the German Protestant Church: ‘It is in the theology of the present day that the new religious force in German Protestantism is revealing its spiritual character most clearly’, he claimed. ‘Theology would seem to have realized once again her own particular nature. The conception of God has become again the centre of her thought. Indeed, a new discovery of the gospel would seem to be making itself known’.⁵² By 1926, therefore, the British religious public was being clearly informed of the startling changes that were occurring in the field of continental religious thought.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Klaus Scholder, *The Churches and the Third Reich*, Vol 1, *The Time of Illusions*, 1918–34 (London: SCM, 1987), p.35; cf. Otto Dibelius, *In the Service of the Lord: the autobiography of Bishop Otto Dibelius* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964).

⁴⁸ Schuster, ‘Present day religious movements in Germany’, 140.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 159–60.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 159.

Perhaps the most detailed description of both Europe's malaise and its undoubted signs of theological renewal was Adolf Keller's *Protestant Europe, its Crisis and Outlook*, a panoramic assessment of continental church life which appeared in 1927. 'In fourteen countries', he stated, 'due to an accumulation of calamities, the Protestant Church is fighting for its life'.⁵³ Like Schuster, Keller referred graphically to the moral degeneracy which had come to the surface in Weimar Germany. 'Drunken men and prostitutes reeled down the avenues in the night life of capitals which have been the watchwords of culture and beauty in the human spirit'.⁵⁴ The Swiss ecumenist was more high-minded than prurient, realizing that 'the mad saturnalia of the dance halls and cafes'⁵⁵ was an inevitable aspect of a deep spiritual turmoil which commanded sympathy rather than censoriousness. Yet by 1927 there were modest signs that the situation was set to improve. A new idealism was emerging: 'It is slowly eliminating the poison of that deadly relativism and scepticism which undermined culture and society. A new realism or objectivity, including all relative values, is rising in philosophy and theology as well as in literature',⁵⁶ while a consensus was forming in favour of international co-operation and brotherhood. Like Willy Schuster, he mentioned the romanticism and nature mysticism of the popular *Volk* groups: 'The Christian experience of sin is void of meaning for the larger part of these self-conscious groups, and pantheism is much nearer their hearts than Christian theism'.⁵⁷ Much more significant was the renewal of evangelical life. It was an evangelicalism, however, which diverged radically from the comfortable nineteenth-century norm. The notes of harmony, immanence and synthesis were yielding to something more jarring and confrontational. If for the liberals 'human reason is easily understood as the expression of the creative universal Spirit, as a part and function of divinity, and the laws of reason are taken as laws of divine truth',⁵⁸ the new theologians rejected this as indolence and intellectual complacency at best and, at worst, a betrayal of the gospel: 'A Christian humanism is the natural consequence of this philosophical conception . . . The supernatural elements in religious history have been more or less eliminated by liberal theology and the moral element emphasized in the Christian message'.⁵⁹ The new 'Crisis Theology', which was undoubtedly

⁵³ Adolf Keller and George Stewart, *Protestant Europe: its crisis and outlook* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1927), p.19.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.20.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.20.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.55.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.69.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.142-3.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.143.

the most exciting development on the contemporary scene, had challenged this conception at its source:

This movement of thought sprang up in Switzerland and Germany and is spreading like wildfire throughout the continent. It is of immediate importance because of the power and influence it is having especially over large sections of the idealistic youth who feel frustrated by the devastating effects of the war. In it, the aversion of the present generation from the spirit which led to war, becomes a genuine spiritual revolution.⁶⁰

‘Barth is the leader of the movement’, Keller continued, repeating his contention that ‘a large number of the younger theologians of central Europe are under the spell of this new dialectic theology’.⁶¹

Keller’s volume was part of the campaign which had been launched immediately following the Great War to inform the British and American public of the situation abroad. Despite dispiriting odds, much was being done to alleviate hardship and bind the wounds in the Body of Christ which had been caused by the still recent conflict. The committee of the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches had taken the bold step of calling a meeting at Oud Wassenaar in Holland less than three months after the signing of the Versailles Treaty in order to begin a process of reconciliation and reconstruction. For the first time since the advent of the hostilities churchmen from Germany had come face to face with their co-believers from France, Britain, Belgium and the United States. The meeting was not devoid of tension, especially between the German delegation and the French, but it afforded the opportunity for Christian leaders who would play a key role in inter-war collaboration to meet one another and begin making their plans. Its key personnel were the Swedish Lutheran Nathan Söderblom, archbishop of Uppsala, the Berlin New Testament scholar Adolf Deissmann, George Bell, dean of Canterbury and chaplain to the Archbishop who would, in 1929, be elevated to the see of Chichester, and others. Adolf Keller was present representing the Swiss Reformed Church. It was from this gathering that a vision arose for an international conference of the churches to exhibit their solidarity in Christ and try to ensure that a calamity like 1914–18 would not happen again. Its result was the 1925 Stockholm conference of the Christian Council for Life and Work, the first great ecumenical gathering of the post-war era. Archbishop Söderblom set the scene: ‘In the region of moral and social

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.147.

⁶¹ Ibid., p.150.

questions we desire all Christians to begin at once to act together as if they were one body in one visible fellowship. This could be done by all alike without injury to theological principle'.⁶² The theological question could not be so easily avoided, especially as the friction between English pragmatism, American activism and the eschatological nature of the Kingdom of God as revealed in Schweitzer's *Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1910) manifested itself tenaciously if in the conference's debates.⁶³

The need for theological enlightenment if not wholesale consensus came to the fore in the series of remarkable Anglo-German theological conferences convened by Bell and Deissmann between April 1927 and March 1931.⁶⁴ Among the delegates were, on the English side, the Anglo-Catholic biblical theologian Edwyn C. Hoskyns who was even then being drawn towards the theology of Karl Barth, the Congregationalist C. H. Dodd, professor of New Testament at Mansfield College, Oxford, A. E. J. Rawlinson, canon of Durham, E. G. Selwyn, editor of the volume *Essays Catholic and Critical* (1926) and J. K. Mozeley, a large-hearted Anglo-Catholic theologian much indebted to the great Nonconformist P. T. Forsyth. Among the Germans were Karl Ludwig Schmidt, Gerhart Kittel, New Testament professor at Tübingen, Wilhelm Vollrath from Erlangen, Heinrich Frick, a systematician based in Marburg, Paul Althaus, professor of dogmatics from Erlangen and Wilhelm Stählin, professor of dogmatics at Münster. The theme chosen for discussion at the first consultation, at Canterbury in April 1927, was the Kingdom of God not least because of the diametrically opposed ways in which optimistic, evolutionary Anglo-Saxon liberalism and conservative, two-kingdom Lutheranism had tended to treat the subject. '[The Kingdom of God] cannot represent a kingdom which can be established by a natural development of worldly circumstances or by human exertions', stated Karl Ludwig Schmidt bluntly, 'but only by the interference of God from heaven . . . The Kingdom of God is beyond all ethics, a cosmic catastrophe, which is caused by God'.⁶⁵ When many Britons were putting their faith in the League of Nations and investing it with a quazi-religious aura, Paul Althaus reminded his co-delegates that the eschatological kingdom

⁶² Quoted in W. A. Visser't Hooft, *Memoirs* (London: SCM, 1973), p.25.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp.23–8; Kenneth C. Barnes, *Nazism, Liberalism and Christianity: Protestant social thought in Germany and Great Britain, 1925–37* (Louisville: University of Kentucky Press, 1991), pp.40–70.

⁶⁴ See Anon, 'Conference of German and English theologians', *Theology* 16 (1927), 247–95, 17 (1928), 183–260; G. K. A. Bell and Adolf Deissmann (eds), *Mysterium Christi: Christological studies by British and German theologians* (London: Longmans Green & Co, 1930), introduction.

⁶⁵ Karl Ludwig Schmidt, 'The other-worldly kingdom of God in Our Lord's teaching', *Theology* 9 (1927), 255–8 [256].

could never be equated with any human or churchly attempt to build or even advance the Kingdom of God on earth:

The service of the church cannot . . . mean the transformation of world organizations into the Kingdom of God. The church knows the difference between any possible world order or form of civilization and the coming of the Kingdom of God . . . Therefore she does not forget the narrow bounds against which any Christian activity actively runs up.⁶⁶

Yet even in Britain, the divide between the older liberalism and the newer biblical theology was becoming stark. ‘A learned and pious professor of divinity has recently defined the immediate task of Christian theologians to be the expression of Christian faith in terms of evolution’, stated Edwyn Hoskyns. ‘But to those who regard the beliefs of the primitive Christians as in any degree normative for Christian theology, it would appear that the task of Christian theology is rather to preserve the Christian conception of God from the corrupting influence of the dogma of evolution, at least as that dogma is commonly understood’.⁶⁷ The tragedy was that the bifurcation between a this-worldly, gradualist, works-based concept of the Kingdom and a traditional Lutheran two-kingdoms dualism could justify not only pietistic inactivity but political pragmatism and, before long, the grotesque enormities of Hitler’s policies. Both Kittel and Althaus would become keen supporters of the Nazi Party and, much to the disgust of many of their colleagues, theological apologists for the Third Reich.⁶⁸

Such was the stimulation provoked by this conference that in August 1928 a second gathering was called at Eisenach, in the historic castle of the Wartburg where Luther had translated the Bible into German in 1530. The company was joined this time by the Swedish theologian Gustav Aulén, the English Congregationalist Nathaniel Micklem, then teaching in Queen’s University, Ontario, Canada, and Archbishop Söderblom, the leading figure in Life and Work. The theme this time was the doctrine of the Person of Christ. Whereas the German contingent saw Christology in the context of soteriology and brought the discussion back repeatedly to the concept of justification by faith alone, the English were more beholden of the patristic witness and the Chalcedonian formula of the unity of the two natures

⁶⁶ Paul Althaus, ‘The Kingdom of God and the Church’, *Theology* 9 (1927), 290–2 [292].

⁶⁷ Edwyn C. Hoskyns, ‘The other-worldly Kingdom of God in the New Testament’, *Theology* 9 (1927), 249–55 [253].

⁶⁸ See Robert P. Eriksen, *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhart Kittel, Paul Althaus and Emanuel Hirsch* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

of Christ. The one British theologian who was least enamoured of the traditional formulae was, ironically, Nathaniel Micklem. 'If today we proclaim the divinity of Jesus it must be not in virtue of omnipotence or omniscience or other supposed metaphysical attribute of deity', he claimed, 'but in virtue of that perfection of his soul which his teaching and life make known to us and which we ourselves recognize as divine'.⁶⁹ Such unreconstructed liberalism would hardly characterize Micklem after his return to the United Kingdom in 1931 when he would champion the cause of Chlacedonian orthodoxy and Genevan churchmanship among the English Congregationalists. But he could still claim, in 1928, that '[Jesus] did not repudiate the term Messiah but there is reason to think that He was not himself the subject of his preaching'.⁷⁰ The Anglicans were much more soundly orthodox in their claims. They would have nothing to do with the humanistic suppositions of liberal Protestantism. 'Christology is evacuated of its true content', stated Mozeley, 'when the relation between Jesus and God is regarded as typical or illustrative of a general fundamental relation between man and God'.⁷¹ Hoskyns was even more incisive. On the basis of the synoptic material including the parables, the sayings and the miracle stories, there was no doubt that 'Jesus is completely distinct and unique not in degree but in kind'.⁷² Whereas liberal Protestantism had sought to cast Paul in the role of the one who had deified the simple rabbi of Nazareth, for Hoskyns Christ's deity was soundly rooted in the synoptic material: 'The death of Jesus is not primarily the death of a martyr in the cause of reform, but a redemptive, voluntary and liberating act'.⁷³

The student of the synoptic gospels cannot and must not use the language of orthodoxy at the moment he is interpreting the New Testament. He cannot move easily with such terms as the deity of Christ, his human and divine nature, his pre-existence, but this does not mean that they are not necessary for bringing out what is latent in the synoptic gospels.⁷⁴

It was the patient, scholarly and careful elucidation of the synoptic texts he insisted, which led to claim that '[the] figure of Jesus is not an epiphany of the Son of God, but neither is it an ascending deification of a man'.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Nathaniel Micklem, 'Jesus as Prophet and Teacher', *Theology* 17 (1928), 208–11 [209].

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁷¹ J. K. Mozeley, 'What is Christology?', *Theology* 17 (1928), 188–90 [189].

⁷² Edwyn C. Hoskyns, 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour', *Theology* 17 (1928), 215–7 [216].

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 217.

It was left to Heinrich Frich to describe the change of emphasis which was being felt everywhere on the content in the wake of the Barthian movement. The post-war generation had reacted ferociously against the optimistic and leisurely theology of Schleiermacher, Ritschl and Herrmann. Rather than being objective and uninvolved, the call now was for repentance, commitment and obedient faith. ‘The human hearer is involved not in *investigare*, but to listen faithfully’ to the Word from beyond. That Word was none other than Christ himself, the divine saviour, therefore ‘[t]heology is Christology, and vice versa’.⁷⁶ Theology was no longer a speculative science but an existential, eschatological and salvific reality which manifested itself through the crisis of revelation: ‘Speaking of God means speaking of Christ, that is, of the saving *historia*’.⁷⁷ Such was the impact of Barth, Gogarten, Bultmann and their school that these were the categories which had captured the imagination of the bulk of the younger theologians.

A third and final symposium took place at Chichester in March 1931 by which time the substantial volume *Mysterium Christi: Christological Studies by British and German Theologians* (1930), edited by Adolf Deissmann and George Bell, had been published. It showed the older liberalism to have been largely superseded, among a younger generation of English and German scholars at least. Barth was not named, but the influence of his ideas was readily apparent. Theology was no longer speculative but biblical; its principal categories had become revelation, intrusion, the miraculous, mystery and crisis; synthesis had yielded to antithesis; the iron laws of human rationality were no longer the touchstone for the divine. Over a decade later the aftershock of Barth’s ‘bomb which had exploded on the playground of the theologians’, namely his 1919 Romans commentary, was still being felt and its crater was highly visible to all.

Adolf Keller and ‘The Dialectical Theology’

Keller’s final contribution to the British reception of Barth’s theology during its earliest phase came in January 1928 with an extended essay in the *Congregational Quarterly* entitled ‘The Dialectical Theology: a survey of the movement of Karl Barth and his friends’. It was, in essence, an updated version of his 1925 article ‘The Theology of Crisis’ from the *The Expositor* and a recapitulation of the pertinent chapter from his volume of the previous year. By now the movement’s main characteristics were becoming easier to clarify: its still violently expressed break with liberalism: ‘The theology of Karl Barth is a frontal attack on the whole line of the theology

⁷⁶ Heinrich Frich, ‘Christology in contemporary German theology’, *Theology* 17 (1928), 193–200 [195].

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

of consciousness and against all the “historicism” and “psychologism” it implies’.⁷⁸ ‘Barth and his friends’, he continued, ‘are directing a furious attack against a theology of immanence professed by the neo-Protestantism of *Kulturprotestantismus* as well as against a theology of experience or any mystical theology, which is considered as the most dangerous self-illusion;’⁷⁹ that any valid theology must begin with God’s sovereign transcendence and self-revelation in his Word: ‘If man can speak of God, it is because He has spoken first;’⁸⁰ that the crisis of grace begins with the church and its specific object is ‘religion’; and that the way in which that crisis manifests itself is through dialectic: ‘Barth attacks the false security of those who are flying into the sure port of *one* fact, *one* word, without knowing that a clandestine dialectic is dominating all human words by which we try to express [the] divine’.⁸¹ The divine Word is broken, antithetic, dialectic, which leads to an existential aspect to Barth’s work: ‘This dialectic theology means, in fact, the refusal to accept the ordinary theory of knowledge for theological thinking’.⁸² Although the Word became flesh within the ambiguities of human history, it remains authoritative even though it is only indirectly perceptible: ‘In so far as it is God’s hidden Word, although revealed in human relativity, it has supreme authority by placing before us the eternal God’.⁸³

The advantage that Keller now had was that Barth himself had published his *Christliche Dogmatik* (1927) and observers did not have to depend on gleaning his thoughts from the Romans commentary and the occasional writings of earlier years. Barth the *enfant terrible* had now become Professor Barth, a constructive theologian in his own right. ‘[It is] clear that, in his main positions, he is reproducing the ancient orthodox doctrine of the incarnation as the revelation of God in the descent from heaven of the Logos, the eternal Son, who *descendit de caelo et verbum caro factum est*’,⁸⁴ though he had his own take on this truth, namely, that Christ had taken upon himself sinful humanity which was, by definition, under judgement; that the revealed Christ remained hidden and veiled: ‘We could not stand a real direct revelation of God’s sovereignty: the miracle of it consists of the veiling of the revealed God in the flesh of sin, in deepest humiliation;’⁸⁵ and, echoing both Lutheran and Reformed convictions, that the believer was forced to respond to revelation in the crisis of justifying faith and

⁷⁸ Adolf Keller, ‘The Dialectical Theology: a survey of the movement of Karl Barth and his friends’, *The Congregational Quarterly* 6 (1928), 56–68 [61].

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 65.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

through radical costly obedience. ‘The movement which he started is indeed sweeping like a whirlwind over a large part of the younger generation of theologians, especially in Switzerland, where it originated, and in Germany where Karl Barth is now teaching in the theological faculty of the University of Münster’.⁸⁶ What was remarkable, according to Keller, was the excitement which this new movement had caused, and that its practitioners, Barth, Brunner and Thurneysen who were Swiss Reformed, and the Lutherans Gogarten, Karl Ludwig Schmidt and Rudolf Bultmann, were an exceedingly able group of people. ‘The movement has brought up fresh problems and inspired dogmatic theology with a new interest, a new earnestness and new life, to such an extent that the older schools and many of the great leaders of past decades are really bewildered and cannot quite understand whence the new wind came so suddenly’.⁸⁷ There were criticisms a plenty. Exegetes like Jülicher faulted Barth for not taking critical minutiae seriously; church historians like Harnack blamed him for not taking history with the seriousness it deserved; the *Religiongeschichte* school thought that he slighted the whole phenomena of religion, cultic activities and human spirituality; ‘Orthodox theology . . . is not thoroughly satisfied with this son of the old theology, who has Esau’s hands but Jacob’s voice’.⁸⁸ For liberal theology Barth’s view, to which it is ‘the sworn enemy’, is a grave regression, ‘a simple representation of an old supernaturalism and an outworn biblicism’.⁸⁹ The main anxiety was that the dialectical method made all this unsure: ‘a dialectical theology, it is said, is undermining and basis of ultimate truth by opposing a contra-verity to any truth which has been discovered’.⁹⁰

By 1930 Barth’s work was known in the British Isles, with a particularly positive response having occurred in Scotland, Wales and within a section of English Congregationalism. The more muted impact on Anglican theology, chiefly through the mediation of J. K. Mozley and Edwyn C. Hoskyns, would emerge after 1933. In Adolf Keller British readers were especially fortunate in having such a well-informed, insightful and astute interpreter, rooted in Barth’s own Swiss Reformed faith. Although these were still early days, before the Barmen Synod, the German Church Conflict and the clash with Hitler, and preceding the publication of the fundamentally significant *Church Dogmatics* (1932–67), Keller’s work helped English readers to make an informed judgement on Barth’s early work. According to another report on continental theology, by the Anglican Frank Gavin in November 1929: ‘Barth’s supporters have developed an ardent partisanship, and friends and

⁸⁶ Ibid., 56.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 57–8.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 67.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 67.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 67.

foes alike speak of him with intense feeling'.⁹¹ For Gavin, Barth's work was a timely and wholesome corrective to the subjectivism of much German piety: 'The iterated affirmation of the three-ness and transcendence of God, the insignificance of man apart from correspondence with his will, and the fresh study . . . of Holy Scripture all come as unique contributions to the present religious thought of Germany'.⁹² It was through Keller, however, that the door had first been opened and the interest of the British religious public had been initially engaged.

⁹¹ F. Gavin, 'Contemporary religion in Germany', *Theology* 19 (1929), 272–82 [279].

⁹² *Ibid.*, 279.