

Barth and Postmodernism

Graham Ward

There has been a resurgence of interest in Karl Barth's work over the last decade in both this country and the States. It has been an interest paralleling a growing recognition that 'postmodernity' best characterizes (if such a chameleon noun can characterize anything) our cultural situation. It is no surprise, then, to find studies of Karl Barth's work which interpret him as a deconstructionist *avant la lettre*¹ and interpret his Weimar culture as "a first postmodernity".² But, in the main, what is understood by 'postmodernism' and 'postmodernity' in these studies is left inadequately defined. Therefore, there is a certain lack of clarity about why it is that Karl Barth's theology resonates with contemporary culture. Furthermore, the majority of studies comparing Barth's work with postmodern thinking concentrate upon his early, dialectical theology, in particular his metaphor of 'crisis' in the second edition of his *Epistle to the Romans*.³ In this essay, then, I wish to attempt two things. First, to try and provide a clarity concerning Barth's relatedness to postmodernism and establish the rationale for the interest in Barth's work today. Secondly, to show that the profundity of the parallels between Barth's work and postmodernism lies not in the similar use of the 'crisis' metaphor, but in respective approaches to the nature of discourse itself.

Read positively, postmodernism is concerned with liberation; a liberation from self-legitimizing structures. Postmodern thinkers like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard problematize this legitimation. They ask, what or who authorizes the power certain discourses have to explain the world? They ask, upon what basis are certain forms of explanation privileged when all explanations are the way we tell the story to ourselves? They propose that the narratives by which our experience of the world is made meaningful—narratives of historical progress, of the metaphysical correspondence of beings with Being, of the autonomy and integrity of the self, of the universalism of reason, of scientific, sociological and psychological explanation—are all forms of theodicy. They are each grounded upon a presupposed unity and stability; a unity and stability that cannot be validated and which is, ultimately, theological. Theory, writes Jean Baudrillard, is a "challenge to the world to exist. Very often a challenge to God to exist." What Baudrillard wishes to announce is

550

that the “secret of theory is that truth doesn’t exist.”⁴ Enlightenment’s rationalism, modernity’s ego, *Lebensphilosophie*’s historicism, idealism’s structures are all questioned on the basis of a pervasive constructivism. Language makes our worlds. We too are made by language. Grand narratives of explanation are pragmatic means of making sense of our condition. If some seem to have a greater explanatory value than others then that is because knowledge-claims are integrally related to power structures. Discourses of knowledge (scientific discourse, for example) become embodied in, and promoted by, social practices and institutions. But all knowledge is an expression of the will-to-power. All theory involves ideology. With postmodernism the ideology is unmasked and we are each presented with the burden that we choose what is. Our existence is pictured as a protracted walk down a shopping mall. Shopping is a paradigm and a praxis *par excellence* of postmodernity. And so, in tones both prophetic and apocalyptic, and prose styles tortured by a recognition they are doing something they logically should not be able to do (make claims for a ‘truth’ in inverted commas), postmodern thinkers speak of the end of metaphysics (Foucault), the end of History (Lyotard), the end of the subject (Barthes), the end of patriarchy (Irigaray) and the end of the sign (Derrida). With their pronouncements, the marginalized, the dispossessed and the subjugated are all given a new prominence.

Read negatively, postmodernism is the systematic shedding of the veil which masks the void; the void modernism carefully concealed with its configurations of order. Its concern is to remind us of the wilderness lying at the edges of our ‘worlds’. The Modernity’s polis is a necropolis and we, like Beckett’s Winnie in *Happy Days*, are slowly being buried in detritus. Postmodernism is nihilistic, atheistic, apolitical and amoral. It proclaims the inevitability of violence, polysemy and eclecticism. The basis for the construction of reality is understood to be signs. Hence, the preoccupation with linguistics, particularly the structural linguistics of Ferdinand Saussure, Louis Hjelmslev and Roman Jakobson, evident in the early work of many of the postmodern thinkers.⁵ Postmodernism is a polemic against modernity’s insistence that reality informs thought and thought informs language. Postmodernism emphasizes the catex of language and thought and the simulacra of reality that is product of this catex. The mind does not mirror nature; truth is not an equivalence between reality and its representation. One of the axioms of postmodern thinking, then, is the crisis of representation.

The crisis of representation issues from the recognition of what is left unsaid, what is repressed, denigrated or left out in giving priority to the content communicated by any statement. Such a priority

presupposes that language is a vehicle, a transparent means of expression. The crisis is provoked when the *body of the text*, the chain of signifiers which substantiate statements about the world, is given priority, and the content is demoted. Claims to truth are understood as ambivalently intertwined with metaphor and metonymy, irony, and allegory.

Epistemology and ontology are then understood, not as reflections upon our relationship with the world, but as effects of tropology or rhetoric. Derrida writes that the entire surface of philosophical discourse “is worked over by metaphors” with the result that “the theory of metaphor remains a theory of meaning.”⁶ The crisis of representation is a radical judgement [*kinein*] upon the meaning we have made. History, philosophy, sociology, science, or theology are not simply discourses about things “out there”; they are also, and profoundly, language-games.⁷ Since reality is the construct of language, then the crisis of representation leads to the crisis of culture. Gianni Vattimo, in his book *The End of Modernity*⁸, refers to several interrelated crises of postmodernity: the “crisis of reason”, the “crisis of humanism”, the “crisis of civilization”, the “crisis of metaphysics”, the “crisis of the future” and the “crisis of value” or hermeneutics.

In fact, postmodernism has to be read both positively and negatively. It has to move between two antithetical readings of a situation, without prioritizing one or the other. It is the double-faced characteristic of this procedure which profoundly relates postmodernism to Barth’s own theological method. Its prophetic and apocalyptic tones have to be read as *both* hyperbole and irony. It speaks not of the end [*la fin*], but the limits [*la clôture*] of truth-claims. It draws attention to what Philip Lacoue-Labarthe has described as the need for philosophical (and *a fortiori* theological) modesty. “Modesty is the recognition of a limit”.⁹ Every limit is recognised as a potential horizon upon which the excluded other presses. Postmodernism is not then the great denial. Of ‘deconstruction’, Derrida explains that it “put[s] aside all the traditional philosophical concepts, while affirming the necessity of returning to them, under erasure.”¹⁰ Postmodernism places all claims to truth and reality in a paradoxical suspension. All things stand under the crisis of the question. Question is the very crux of postmodern method.

The postmodern understanding of crisis has frequently led to readers of Barth finding parallels, first between his work and the crisis of culture evident in post-Great War Weimar, and then between that crisis of culture and present postmodernity. Comparisons have been drawn between Expressionism and Barth’s second edition of *Romans*¹¹, dialectical theology and the Weimar crisis with its “quasi-eschatological

unease"¹², the contemporary crisis of the sign and anxiety over language evident in German *Sprachphilosophie*.¹³ There are certainly cultural parallels between Barth's work and his socio-political and historical context in which 'crisis' acted as a root metaphor. But something must be understood here that is as yet unclarified. 'Postmodernism' is not a period concept.¹⁴ It is understood, by Lyotard and Vattimo, and I think correctly, as a moment within modernism itself. Its state is constant and accompanies modernism. One cannot have post-modernism without modernism and *vice versa*. 'Postmodernity', on the other hand, as a form of society within which postmodern reflection defines dominant institutional and social praxes, is a period concept. Certainly, it is as a period concept that the sociologists Zygmunt Bauman and Ernst Gellner and the culture-critic Frederic Jameson employ it.¹⁵ There is, no doubt, a socio-historical connection between post-Great War Germany or the pessimism in turn-of-the century Vienna and post-'68 France, the work of the Expressionists and the hybrid architectural styles of the Neue Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart. But, as far as I know, a comparative cultural study has yet to be written. As for the affinities between Barth and postmodern thinking, they go much deeper than common themes and the metaphor of 'crisis'. This has not been appreciated in the main because studies of the parallels have confined themselves to Barth's early work.

By the time Barth came to write *Church Dogmatics*, *Krisis* is replaced by 'event' (*Ereignis*) and the nature of that revelatory event dictates the theological method whereby the salvific significance of that event for the Church can be examined. *Krisis* and *Ereignis* both determine approaches to doing theology; they determine the character of the theological discourse, the language-game, itself. But the examination of *Ereignis* was not Barth's concern alone; it was also Heidegger's. Though, indeed, Barth seems to have employed the word technically before Heidegger. Heidegger's analysis of *Ereignis* is, like Barth's, an analysis of encountering what is exterior and other to particular discourses. Heidegger's analysis of *Ereignis* is, like Barth's, an analysis of a fundamental dichotomy. The opposition yet juxtaposition of two foci constitute, for both of them, the nature of the problematic they are engaged upon. For Heidegger, these foci are Being and beings, between which lies a difference never to be bridged or appropriated. For Barth, these foci are God and creaturely reality between which no *tertium quid* offers ground for a natural theology. The radical distinctiveness of the two foci leads to the borders of agnosticism and equivocation. The question how can there be knowledge of what is wholly other circulates within and galvanizes both their theses. For both Barth and Heidegger the two foci operate upon each other and, in doing so, institute a

dialectical movement which insists that philosophical thinking for Heidegger, and theological thinking for Barth, are always and only 'auf dem Wege', on the way. This is not an Hegelian dialectic, although the economy of the *Aufhebung* plays an important role for both of them. It remains, though, a dialectic without synthesis. There will be no final appropriation of Being (for Heidegger), and there will be no final knowledge of God, (for Barth). There will always be, for both of them, the question, the quest, the putting into question. "Human existence is put into question by Him as it hears, really hears, God speak; from God, that is, who is the Governor of antitheses", Barth writes.¹⁶ Therefore, the task of dogmatics is the "human task of criticising and revising its speech about God."¹⁷ Theology, he writes "can have no epistemological basis," its insight is partial and it is only "In, with and under the human question [that] dogmatics speaks of the divine answer." Heidegger, from the Introduction of *Being and Time* to his seminar on 'Time and Being' is concerned with the act of seeking and the relation between what is being asked [*Gefragtes*], the act of questioning [*Anfragen bei*], the object of interrogation [*Befragtes*], and that which is found out by the asking [*Erfragte*]. Like postmodern thinkers, both Barth and Heidegger proceed along a knife-edge ridge created by two antithetical escarpments. Likewise, for postmodern thinkers, Barth and Heidegger, the sphere for the operation of this questioning and this procedure is discourse itself.

Heidegger's work on *Ereignis* and the ontological difference that is revealed by the appropriating event have deeply influenced postmodern thinking. And here lies the crux, I believe, of the affinity between Barth and postmodernism. Heidegger's legacy to Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Philip Lacoue-Labarthe, Julia Kristeva and others is his reflection upon that which lies outside the immanence of language and yet constitutes it; difference itself as it inheres to discourse. And this is precisely Barth's problematic of the Word in the words upon which the *Church Dogmatics* is built. The interpretation of this phenomenon at the root of signification is not the same. Heidegger, like Derrida and Lacoue-Labarthe later, does not wish to name the trace of this difference in language God or even give it moral colouring. But Emmanuel Levinas does wish to call this radical otherness [*autre* or what he terms *illeity*] God, and interpret the Saying in the said as the Word in the words. "This first saying is to be sure but a word. But the word is God."¹⁹ And Julia Kristeva, though more guardedly, has recognised parallels between Christianity and the crisis of otherness as it manifests itself in discourse: "Christ's Passion . . . reveals a fundamental depression which conditions access to human language. . . . The

'scandal of the cross' or the language of the cross . . . is embodied . . . even more profoundly in the essential alienation that conditions our access to language . . . Christianity . . . supplies images for even the fissures in our secret and fundamental logic."²⁰ Even Derrida, when discussing the relationship between *différence* and negative theology, raises the question of who has the right to say that a theological interpretation of the crisis of representation is wrong.²¹

In this essay, I do not wish to enter the troubled waters of space opened by postmodern thinking for theological exploration.²² I wish to point to a fundamental affinity between Barth's awareness of the brokenness of human language (a theme dominating both the second edition of *Romans* and *Church Dogmatics*) and postmodernism's concern with the crisis of representation. For both Barth and many postmodern thinkers, this awareness dictates the kind of texts they write and the method of their explorations. Just as Barth's theology issues from the dialectic of "Man before God" and "God before Man"²³ as that dialectic is mediated and reconciled within Jesus Christ as the Word in words; so Derrida can speak of deconstruction as issuing from "Two texts, two hands, two visions, two ways of listening. Together simultaneously and separately."²⁴ Just as Barth recognised *Krisis* and, later the event of revelation [*Ereignis*] as grounding theology, because in it "we are invited and summoned to know Him as the One who acts and rules"²⁵; so Derrida can affirm that the "instance of the *krinein* or of *krisis* . . . is itself . . . one of the essential 'themes' or 'objects' of deconstruction."²⁶

The affinity between Barth and postmodernism, then, lies not simply in cultural parallels between post-Great War Weimar and our contemporary *Zeitgeist*. These parallels have yet to be thoroughly investigated. There is work still to be done relating Barth's theology to the negative dialectics of Adorno and Horkheimer and then relating the culture which produced these forms of Janus-faced thinking with the products of postmodernity. Neither does the affinity simply lie in comparative themes and metaphors. The real affinity lies in the structures of Barth's thinking and those of postmodernism; the theological method, on the one hand, and the philosophical method on the other. It is an affinity, I suggest, issuing from the continuation of the problem of what is other (bequeathed by German idealism and neoKantianism) as it conditions, collapses, and perpetuates acts of representation.

1 These studies began with Stephen G. Smith's *Argument to the Other* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1983), which outlined the parallels between Barth's cultural situation and the subsequent development of his theology and the work of the

- contemporary French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas. The approach was taken up and extended by relating Barth's work to Jacques Derrida's in a stimulating article by Walter Lowe, 'Barth as a Critic of Dualism: re-reading *Der Römerbrief*' (*Scottish Journal of Theology*, 41, pp.377-95). The substance of the article was incorporated into Lowe's recent book *Theology and Difference: The Wound of Reason* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993). The case for Barth as a proto-deconstructionist has also been made by Stephen H. Webb in *Re-Figuring Theology: The Rhetoric of Karl Barth* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992).
- 2 Webb draws out the cultural parallels between post-Great War Weimar and contemporary society, but the explicit use of 'first postmodernity' is Richard Roberts'. He employs it in his chapter 'Barth and the Eschatology of Weimar: A Theology on its Way?' in his book *A Theology on Its Way?* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark).
 - 3 This particularly so in Lowe's article and book, Webb's book, Roberts' book and also David Klemm in his article 'Toward a Rhetoric of Postmodern Theology: Through Barth and Heidegger', *Journal of the Academy of Religion*, LV/3, pp.443-69.
 - 4 Jean Baudrillard, 'Forget Baudrillard' in *Forget Foucault* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1987), pp.124 and 130.
 - 5 Lacan, Derrida, Kristeva, Lyotard, and Foucault have all written important books on signification and its relationship to knowledge.
 - 6 *Margins of Philosophy*, tr. Alan Bass, (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), p.232-3.
 - 7 There is an important article on Barth's own relation to Wittgenstein's 'language-games' by Ernstpeter Maurer, 'Biblisches Reden von Gott—ein Sprachspiel!', in *Evangelische Theologie*, 50.1, pp.71 ff.
 - 8 *The End of Modernity*, tr. Jon R. Synder (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).
 - 9 *Heidegger. Art and Politics*, tr. Chris Turner (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p.2.
 - 10 'Lettre à un ami japonais' in *Psyché* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), p.390.
 - 11 Vattimo suggests the parallel, but Webb draws it out in some detail (pp.8-18).
 - 12 Roberts, p.190.
 - 13 I examine this in 'The Revelation of the Holy Other as the Wholly Other: Between Barth's Theology of the Word and Levinas's Philosophy of Saying', *Modern Theology*, 9.2 (1993). This is part of an extended study, *The Language of Theology: Karl Barth and Jacques Derrida* (forthcoming).
 - 14 See Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, tr. G. Bennington (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p.79 and Vattimo, p.xlviii and chapter 10.
 - 15 Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1992); Ernst Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1992); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).
 - 16 *Die Christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, Gesamtausgabe: Erster Band (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1982), p.96-7.
 - 17 *Church Dogmatics*, I.1, (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1975), p.3.
 - 18 *Ibid.*, pp.7 and 12.
 - 19 *Collected Philosophical Papers*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), p.126.
 - 20 *In the Beginning was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*, tr. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp.40-2.
 - 21 *Psyché*, p.539.
 - 22 Cf *Shadow of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion*, ed. Philippa Berry and Andrew Wernick (London: Routledge, 1992).
 - 23 The titles of the two sections comprising section 25 of *Church Dogmatics*.
 - 24 *Margins of Philosophy*, p.65.
 - 25 I.1, p.210.
 - 26 *Psyché*, p.390.