

“The Christian in society”: Reading Barth’s Tambach lecture (1919) in its German context

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Abstract

This article analyses Karl Barth’s 1919 Tambach lecture on “The Christian in society” in the context of post World War I Europe. After describing Barth’s early life and his move away from liberal theology, the five sections of the Tambach lecture are analysed. Barth’s early dialectical theology focussed on: Neither secularising Christ nor clericalising society; Entering God’s movement in society; Saying Yes to the world as creation (regnum naturae); Saying No to evil in society (regnum gratiae); respecting God’s reign as beyond our attempts (regnum gloriae).

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The approach of this paper

This article should be read together with the one following it, since the two papers were conceived and born together. Rev B B Senokoane and I made a joint presentation to the conference on “Reading Karl Barth in South Africa today,” which was held in Pretoria on 10-11 August 2006. In the subsequent reworking of the material for publication, it became two articles. This article analyses the 1919 Tambach lecture of Karl Barth in its post World War I German context, to get a sense of the young Barth’s theological method and commitment. The second article uses Barth’s approach, as exhibited in that lecture, to theologise in South Africa, stepping into his shoes and “doing a Tambach” today. The first move is an exercise in historical interpretation and the second in contemporary imagination. By making these two distinct moves we experiment with reading a document both in a context-historical and in a (re)contextualising way. To use the language of some contemporary scholars in hermeneutics, the first article reads “in” and “behind” the text of Tambach, whereas the second reads primarily “in front of” the text. Since Karl Barth’s

Tambach lecture is not well known, this article will quote a few key passages from it to acquaint readers with its contents.¹

Before looking at the Tambach lecture itself, we need to examine the context within which it was delivered, both the context of Barth’s own intellectual development and the larger socio-political context of Europe in 1919. We need to do this in order to understand the lecture, for, as Barth himself wrote in an obituary for both Friedrich Naumann and Christoph Blumhardt: “To take a person seriously means to understand him in the context of the things that move him to action” (Barth 1962b:38 – own translation).

1.2 The early life and ministry of Karl Barth

Karl Barth was a Swiss citizen, who was born in 1886, attended school in Bern, and studied theology in Bern, Berlin, Tübingen and Marburg before becoming an assistant pastor of the Reformed Church in Geneva (1909-1911) and later (1911-1921) a pastor in the Swiss town of Safenwil. Barth had a strong socialist commitment since his student days and he was deeply influenced by the Religious Socialism of the Swiss theologians Herrmann Kutter and Leonhard Ragaz.

As a minister in a congregation of industrial workers in Safenwil, Barth joined the Social Democratic Party and engaged himself alongside of workers in their struggle for better working conditions and decent wages.² He made a study of socialist literature and presented many lectures and courses on political questions, particularly at trade union meetings.³ As a result he was called “the red pastor of Safenwil” and experienced criticism from managers and industrialists (Thurneysen 1973:7). The Safenwil congregation had established itself as a separate congregation primarily with the financial

¹ I wish to acknowledge the role of a German colleague, Dr Rainer Ebeling, in the origin of this article. It was he who drew my attention to the significance of Barth’s Tambach lecture.

² Since that time (January 1915) the workers in Safenwil called him “comrade pastor.” Barth explained his membership of the SDP as follows: “I set such emphasis Sunday by Sunday on the last things, I could no longer remain suspended in the clouds above the present evil world. I had to demonstrate that faith in the Greatest does not exclude work and suffering in the realm of the imperfect but includes them” (in Busch 1976:82). Graf (1986:427) points out that Barth joined the SDP not only in solidarity with workers but also because he was disillusioned with the compromises that “European socialism” was making with bourgeois society and that his motive in joining the Swiss SDP was to struggle against this *Verbürgerlichung* of socialism, from the inside. So also Marquardt (1976:47): “He [Barth] now wanted to criticize the party from within for having lost its radical socialist principles”.

³ In fact, Barth was responsible for helping establish trade unions, against strong opposition from factory owners: “The aspect of socialism which interested me most in Safenwil was the problem of the trade union movement. I studied it for years and also helped to form three flourishing trade unions in Safenwil (where there had been none before). They remained when I left” in Busch (1976:103).

support of the Hüsey family, who owned a number of factories and mills in the Aargau area – and who paid their workers low wages (Busch 1976:69). After a lecture of Barth on “Jesus Christ and the movement of social justice” (*Jesus Christus und die soziale Bewegung*) to a trade union in Safenwil in 1911, Walter Hüsey (one of the factory owners) attacked Barth openly in a letter to a local newspaper, ridiculing Barth as an ignorant idealist: “My dear pastor, you are still very young. Therefore let an older man say to you that even in the twentieth century there is still a difference between theory and praxis that even the most ancient, and hence today no longer pertinent, Bible sayings do not help to remove” (Barth [1911] 1976:39).

In the ensuing public debate, Gustav Hüsey, Walter’s cousin, resigned as chairperson of the Safenwil church council. But this opposition did not stop Barth. He wrote: “I regard socialist demands as an important part of the application of the gospel, though I also believe that they cannot be realised without the gospel” (in Busch 1976:70) and also:

The real contents of the person of Jesus can in fact be summed up by the words: “movement for social justice.” Moreover I really believe that the social justice movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is not only the greatest and most urgent word of God to the present, but also in particular a quite direct continuation of the spiritual power which, as I said, entered into history and life with Jesus Jesus wanted to help those who are least, he wanted to establish the kingdom of God upon this earth, he wanted to abolish self-seeking property, he wanted to make people into comrades *Real* socialism is real Christianity in our time.

(Barth [1911] 1976:19f, 36)

In addition to Barth’s growing political awakening, he was also undergoing a theological conversion.⁴ He became more and more disillusioned with the “liberal” theology he had learnt at German universities, particularly due to their ethical failure in the face of the political and economic challenges facing Europe at the time.⁵ However, he did not merely criticize liberal *theology*; he saw liberalism as more than a theology, a political theory or a party position. He saw it as a worldview (*Weltanschauung*) characterised by “... individualism, autonomism, personality cult, self-idolisation, abstract isolation

⁴ Graf (1986:427) explains the two sides of Barth’s political-theological journey as follows: “In the same way that bourgeois Christianity needs to be reformed by genuine socialism, political socialism now also needs to be reformed by genuine Christianity.”

⁵ See Jung Rhee (1995), who highlights the fact that Barth’s conversion away from German liberal theology was an ethical decision, related to his concern with sanctification.

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from others and alienation from community” (Graf 1986:428 – own translation). Barth was deeply shocked that most of his German professors of theology had signed the “Manifesto of the Ninety-Three German Intellectuals to the Civilised World” in August 1914, supporting the German war effort (Thurneysen 1973:8; Busch 1976:81).⁶ The following extract from that Manifesto shows the “blind” loyalty of these intellectuals to the German nationalist-military establishment:

As representatives of German Science and Art, we hereby protest to the civilized world against the lies and calumnies with which our enemies are endeavoring to stain the honor of Germany in her hard struggle for existence – in a struggle that has been forced on her It is not true that Germany is guilty of having caused this war. Neither the people, the Government, nor the "Kaiser" wanted war It is not true that we trespassed in neutral Belgium. It has been proved that France and England had resolved on such a trespass, and it has likewise been proved that Belgium had agreed to their doing so. It would have been suicide on our part not to have been beforehand. It is not true that the life and property of a single Belgian citizen was injured by our soldiers without the bitterest defense having made it necessary It is not true that our troops treated Louvain brutally. Furious inhabitants having treacherously fallen upon them in their quarters, our troops with aching hearts were obliged to fire a part of the town, as punishment. The greatest part of Louvain has been preserved It is not true that our warfare pays no respects to international laws. It knows no undisciplined cruelty. But in the east, the earth is saturated with the blood of women and children unmercifully butchered by the wild Russian troops, and in the west, dum-dum bullets mutilate the breasts of our soldiers It is not true that the combat against our so-called militarism is not a combat against our civilization, as our enemies hypocritically pretend it is. Were it not for German militarism, German civilization would long since have been extirpated We cannot wrest the poisonous weapon – the lie – out of the hands of our enemies. All we can do is proclaim to all the world, that our enemies are giving false witness against us Have faith in us! Believe, that we shall carry on this war to the end as a civilized nation, to whom the legacy of a Goethe, a Beethoven, and a Kant, is just as sacred as its own hearths and homes.

⁶ Barth wrote as follows about this: “I did not know what to make of the teaching of all my theological masters in Germany. To me they seemed hopelessly compromised by what I regarded as their failure in the face of the ideology of war a whole world of exegesis, ethics, dogmatics and preaching, which I had hitherto held to be essentially trustworthy, was shaken to the foundations, and with it, all the other writings of the German theologians” (in Busch 1976:81).

In 1915, at his brother Peter's wedding in Marburg to the daughter of Martin Rade, a leading German theologian, Barth heard the influential German pastor-turned-politician, Friedrich Naumann, say excitedly: "Now we can see how well religion can be used for the purpose of war;" to which Barth replied: "What are you saying? Use religion? May one, can one do that?" (Thurneysen 1973:8 – own translation). Busch (1976:84) records that Barth had a "passionate argument" with Naumann at the wedding, since the latter had said: "All religion is right for us ... whether it is called the Salvation Army or Islam, provided that it helps us to hold out through the war." For Barth this "selling out" to German nationalism and militarism (in the defence of a capitalist economy)⁷ was a sign of the bankruptcy of "liberal" German theology, which became a strong "push factor" that moved him to seek a new theological approach.

An important "pull factor" in Barth's life that drew him away from 19th century liberal theology was the influence of the two Blumhardts, Johann Christoph (1805-1880) and his son Christoph Friedrich (1842-1919), preacher-activists of Bad Boll in southern Germany, where the elder Blumhardt had established a Christian retreat centre in 1853. Both of them combined a charismatic spirituality (with the motto "Jesus is Victor" and a practice of healing and occasionally exorcism) with a public commitment to justice for the poor and excluded. The younger Blumhardt shocked all his friends and relatives (and was defrocked as a church minister in the State of Württemberg) when he joined the Social Democratic Party and even served as a member of parliament in Württemberg for this socialist party from 1900-1906. (Busch 1976:85). What attracted Barth to Christoph Blumhardt's theology and ministry was the latter's emphasis on the radical nature of God's coming kingdom, his fervent expectation of Jesus' return as Victor, and his ability to hold together "hurrying" (social activism) and "waiting" (devotion, healing and preaching): "The unique feature, indeed the prophetic feature ... in Blumhardt's message and mission was in the way in which the hurrying and the waiting, the worldly and the divine, the present and the future, met, were united, kept supplementing one another, seeking and finding one another" (Busch 1976:85). According to Brinkman (1982:63), Barth was attracted by the firmness of Blumhardt's faith in the ultimate victory in Christ, which freed him from the revolutionary "desperateness" (*krampachtigheid*) of the Religious Socialists, and by the power generated by that hope for concrete transformative action in society.

⁷ Graf (1986:424) points out how the early Barth correctly exposed the leftist liberalism (*Linkoliberalismus*) of Friedrich Naumann as a combination of industry and democracy with militarism and nationalism (*Kaisertum*), "in which the capitalist mode of production was not fundamentally challenged but merely reformed.

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Barth became actively involved in the debates among Swiss Religious Socialists on the response they should make to World War I. The two leading figures of the movement, Hermann Kutter and Leonhard Ragaz, who both exercised a huge influence of Barth, were disagreeing more and more about this; Kutter put more emphasis on the prophetic knowledge of the living God and wanted a tranquil reappraisal of the situation, whereas Ragaz was concerned with active discipleship along the lines of the Franciscan ideal of poverty, appealing for pacifist action (Busch 1976:86). Barth believed it was possible to find a way that overcame these differences, in which “Kutter’s radical tranquility and Ragaz’s energetic tackling of problems” could meet (Busch 1976:86).

While seeking this political mediation, the theological realisation dawned on Barth that only God could bring about something new in history. Therefore God should be at the centre of theology: “We should begin at the beginning and recognize that God is God” (Busch 1976:90). All the time one of Barth’s central concerns was the predicament of the *preacher*:

This familiar situation of the pastor on Saturday at his desk and on Sunday in his pulpit crystallized in my case into a marginal note to all theology It is not as if I had found any way out of this critical situation. Certainly not. But this critical situation became to me the explanation of the character of all theology. What else can theology be but the truest possible expression of this quest and questioning on the part of the minister, the description of his embarrassment into which a man falls when he ventures upon this task and out of which he cannot find his way – a cry for rescue arising from great need and great hope? ... Why, I had to ask myself, did those question marks and the exclamation marks, which are the very existence of the pastor, play really no role at all in the theology I knew ...?

(Barth 1928:101f)

Out of this embarrassing situation Barth and his close friend Eduard Thurneysen started making an intensive study of the Bible.⁸ In 1917 Barth presented a talk in Leutwil, where Thurneysen was the pastor, on “The strange new world within the Bible.” In this talk he said: “We have found in the Bible, a new world, God, God’s sovereignty, God’s glory, God’s incomprehensible love. Not the history of man but the history of God!” (Barth

⁸ Barth wrote about this: “We tried to learn our theological ABC all over again, beginning by reading and interpreting the writing of the Old and New Testaments, more thoughtfully than before. And lo and behold, they began to speak to us – but not as we thought we must have heard them in the school of what was then ‘modern theology’” (in Busch 1976:97).

1928:45).⁹ Thurneysen suggested one day in a conversation “What we need for preaching, instruction and pastoral care is a ‘wholly other’ [*ganz andere*] theological foundation” (Busch 1976:97). Barth was struck by this expression and it became a key theme in his ongoing theological development. He started making a special study of Paul’s letter to the Romans, reading it “as though I had never read it before” (Busch 1976:98).

Over a period of three years, Barth then wrote a commentary on Romans, which appeared in 1919 and caused a stir in theological circles, both in Switzerland and later in Germany. Many of the ideas expressed in the first edition of the *Römerbrief* also appear in his Tambach lecture, although there were also differences. Barth reflected intensely on the responses he received to *Römerbrief I* and his unique theological approach was fast developing, in the cut and thrust of the theological debates that he unleashed. He delivered the Tambach lecture between the first and second editions of his Romans commentary, so it provides an interesting window into his fast changing theological insights. One interpreter characterised this development as: “From Religious Socialism to Barthianism” (Robinson 1968), and Marquardt (1972:204) believes that the Tambach lecture reveals how Barth was busy developing a methodology for the revelational theology of his later work (*eine Methodologie für ein künftiges Offenbarungstheologisches Denken*). However, Busch (1978:81f) is of the opinion that at Tambach Barth still spoke essentially the language of the first edition of *Römerbrief*. He points out that Barth himself in 1927 identified another paper (entitled “Biblical questions, insights and vistas”, read at the annual Aarau student conference in April 1920) – rather than Tambach – as the turning point in his thinking between his first and second Romans commentaries (Busch 1978:82).

1.3 The immediate historical context of Tambach 1919

The end of World War I in November 1918 caused deep political uncertainty and chaos in the countries of central Europe (McCormack 1995:185). In October 1917 the Bolshevik revolution took place in Russia, bringing a communist government to power. The Second International had broken up in 1914, at the start of the war, and negotiations started to establishing the Third International, based on Lenin’s idea of the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” This had a deep impact on the Religious Socialists in Switzerland, who were split

⁹ It is interesting to note what the influential Canadian theologian, Douglas John Hall (2005:33 n 3) says about this paper: “This 1916 essay by Barth ... remains for me one of the most important statements I have ever read on the nature of the Bible. It ought to be made compulsory reading for every candidate for ministry in our Bible-belted North American continent.”

on the question whether they should join the Third International, which was established in Moscow in March 1919.

In November 1918 there was a revolution in Germany, in the dying days of the war.¹⁰ The socialist movement was well organised in Germany and tens of thousands of workers demonstrated on the streets of German cities for an end to the monarchy and the installation of socialism. However, since most of the German socialist leaders had sided with the German war effort since 1914, they were opposed to a Bolshevik revolution and struck a deal with the German nationalists and the military establishment.¹¹ On 9 November, Prince Max von Baden ceded the chancellorship to the Socialist Friedrich Ebert. Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated and fled to the Netherlands. The Social Democrat, Philipp Scheidemann, proclaimed a republic on the same day, to prevent the Spartacists (Communists) under Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg from proclaiming a Soviet republic. Friedrich Ebert signed a deal with the German military establishment and elections for a general assembly were called for January 1919. The Spartacists attempted a coup in Berlin but it was violently suppressed, with the result that Liebknecht and Luxemburg were killed. The crushing of the Spartacist coup in Berlin and of the attempts to establish Soviet republics in Munich and Budapest, averted a Communist take-over and paved the way for the formation of the “Weimar Republic.” The Treaty of Versailles, which formally ended World War I, was signed on 28 June 1919, containing several humiliating conditions for Germany, causing deep resentment among Germans. All these things were fresh in the minds of German participants as they assembled at Tambach in September 1919 to consider the connection between Christian faith and social justice in the aftermath of World War I.

Those turbulent times also impacted Switzerland, which had remained neutral in World War I but was nevertheless deeply affected by the devastation of the war. Swiss socialism was unique in that it “affirmed the state and its democratic institutions of referendum and initiative” (McCormack 1995:185). However, the war radicalised the Swiss socialist movement, since the Swiss parliament suspended the existing legislation that had given a measure of protection to workers, in the interest of increasing productivity

¹⁰ The information in this paragraph was obtained from McCormack (1995:184ff) and *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Macropaedia, Vol 8, 116.

¹¹ The attitude of the Bolsheviks to this decision by the German socialists was harsh: “During this period (1889-1914) the working-class movement gained strength and matured in a number of countries. But the workers’ leaders in most of the parties had become accustomed to peaceful conditions and had lost the ability to wage a revolutionary struggle. When, in 1914, there began the war that drenched the earth with blood for four years, the war between capitalists over the division of profits, the war for supremacy over small and weak nations, these leaders deserted to the side of their respective governments. They betrayed the workers, they helped to prolong the slaughter, they became enemies of socialism, they went over to the side of the capitalists” (Lenin 1919).

during the war. Twelve hour workdays were not uncommon and child labour was widespread. The Swiss army was used to disperse demonstrating crowds and the right of public assembly was curtailed. All of this heightened the tension between the government and the workers, leading them to advocate the refusal of military service. The Social Democratic Party and several trade union leaders appointed a committee of ten (the Olten Action Committee) to decide on a common response. In November 1918 they called a general strike, unless the government agreed to demands such as the immediate election of a new parliament, a 48 hour working week, the right of women to vote, and a national system of old-age and disability insurance. Due to various factors the strike was called off, in spite of the fact that the government had not acceded to any of the demands. This caused great disillusionment among Swiss workers, and forced Barth and Thurneysen to reflect more deeply about their public theology, particularly about the relationship between God's coming kingdom and human actions for justice. All of this influenced Barth as he prepared his Tambach lecture.

1.4 The origin and structure of the Tambach conference

Two pastors from Hessen, Otto Herpel and Heinrich Schultheis, called a conference for Religious Socialists at Tambach in Thuringia for 22-25 September 1919. The purpose was to allow a number of key Swiss Religious Socialists to present their approach to Germans who may be interested (Busch 1976:109). Ragaz was an obvious choice as speaker but he declined, choosing to give his full attention to canvassing among Swiss socialists not to join the Third International. Barth was invited to Tambach in his place.

About a hundred people attended, a wide variety of Christians from all over Germany who were "deeply concerned at the revolution which had taken place in recent years and now as Christians were on the look-out for new ways in political and church life" (Busch 1976:110). It is important to notice the nature of the audience: according to one observer, they were mostly "people who saw no personal place for themselves in existing church trends and who felt that these trends held out little promise of solving the tasks which faced the church after the collapse of 1918" (in Busch 1976:110).

Barth's lecture was the last of three major addresses. On the first day, Rudolf Liechtenhan spoke on "The Christian in the church" (followed by a formal response of Hans Hartmann); on the second day, Hans Bader spoke on "The Christian in the State" (with a response by Kurt Woermann); and on the final day Barth spoke on "The Christian in Society" (followed by the response of Eberhard Arnold, a radical pacifist) (Busch 1976:110; Marquardt 1980:18f). Barth's lecture had a powerful effect on the audience, and it clearly

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divided the house. Some were excited about his approach, but others, like Kutter and Ragaz were deeply disappointed.

As a result of his Tambach lecture, Barth suddenly became known in Germany, and people started reading his *Römerbrief*, which had appeared earlier that year. At Tambach Barth met Friedrich Gogarten and soon afterwards Georg Merz (from Munich). In 1922 these three colleagues, together with Eduard Thurneysen, established the journal *Zwischen den Zeiten*, in which they published their new theological vision, which soon became known as “dialectical theology.”

2. BARTH’S TAMBACH LECTURE¹²

2.1 Title and structure

Horton translated the title “Der Christ in der Gesellschaft” as “The Christian’s place in society” (Barth 1928:272). This wording is too static to do justice to the content of the lecture, since “movement” plays such a central role in it. It is more appropriate to translate it literally as “The Christian in society.”

The lecture consists of five sections, which can be given the following captions, to indicate the flow of Barth’s ideas:

- Christ in us, Christians in society: neither secularising Christ nor clericalising society
- Our “standpoint”: understanding and entering God’s movement in society
- The reign of nature: Saying YES = seeing the worldly as analogy of the heavenly
- The reign of grace: Saying NO = struggling against darkness
- The reign of glory: Saying YES and NO = respecting God’s reign as beyond our attempts

This is a complex lecture, and it takes a while to see the connections between the different sections and the main lines running through it. Barth himself, with characteristic wit, described it as “a rather complicated kind of machine that runs backwards and forwards and shoots in all directions with no lack of both visible and hidden joints” (in Busch 1976:110).

¹² For the sake of communication I quote from the English translation of the Tambach lecture, made by Douglas Horton, which appeared in *The word of God and the word of man* (Barth 1928:272-327). However, at various points I highlight the inadequacy of this translation and adapted it by referring to the original German text (Barth [1919] 1962a).

2.2 Christ in us – Christians in society: Neither secularising Christ nor clericalising society

Barth starts his lecture by pointing out the separation and awkward relationship, between the two entities referred to in his title, namely “the Christian” and “society.” The former represents *hope* and the latter *need*. And then he says about “the Christian”:

Here is a new element in the midst of the old, a truth in the midst of error and lies, a righteousness in the midst of a sea of unrighteousness, a spirituality within all our crass materialistic tendencies, a formative life-energy within all our weak, tottering movements of thought, a unity in a time which is out of joint.

The Christian: we must be agreed that we do *not* mean *the Christians*, not the multitude of the baptized, nor the chosen few who are concerned with Religion and Social Relations, nor even the cream of the noblest and most devoted Christians we might think of. The Christian is *the Christ*. The Christian is that within us which is not ourself but Christ in us. “Christ in us” understood in all its Pauline depth is not a psychic condition, an affection of the mind, a mental lapse, or anything of the sort, but is a presupposition of life. “Over us.” “Behind us,” and “beyond us” are included in the meaning of “in us.”

And “Christ in us” understood in its whole Pauline breadth is a warning that we shall do well not to build again the fence which separated the chosen from the rest – Jews from Gentiles and so-called Christians from so-called non-Christians. The community of Christ is a building open on every side, for Christ died for all – even for the folk outside.

There is in us, over us, behind us, and beyond us a consciousness of the meaning of life, a memory of our own origin, a turning to the Lord of the universe, a critical No and a creative Yes in regard to all the content of our thought, a facing away from the old and toward the new age – whose sign and fulfilment is the cross (Barth 1928:273f).

A few important features of Barth’s theology are expressed in this section:

The initiative lies with *God*. Barth makes it very clear that he does not expect hope or renewal from “the church” or “Christendom.” The “formative life energy” of which he speaks here can come only from God, “vertically from above,” as he says later (Barth 1928:323). This life energy comes from the *resurrection*¹³ of Christ, as he points out repeatedly throughout the lecture.

¹³ Barth mentions the cross of Christ only once explicitly in the whole lecture, namely in this passage (Barth 1928:274). His whole lecture “breathes resurrection” as he says of the four Gospels, quoting Bengel (see 2.2 below and Barth 1928:286).

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Only the risen Christ, as “Christ in us,” can bring hope to a Europe in transition after the devastation of World War I.

The Christian in society that can bring *hope* to a society in *need*, cannot be a “chosen,” exclusivist Christianity that builds high walls around itself. The “community of Christ” (*die Gemeinde Christi*) is “a house (building) open on every side,” because “Christ died for all” (Barth 1928:274). It is important to note that Barth does not operate with a “church-world” schema in this lecture; instead he works with a “God-society” schema. Faced with the huge challenges of post-World War I Europe, Barth focuses on *God*: “God alone can save the world” (Barth 1928:281); “There is only one solution, and that is in God himself” (Barth 1928:282);

In his explanation of the awkward relationship between “Christ in us” (or “the divine”) and “society,” Barth goes to great lengths to explain that these are two *distinct* entities, each with its own integrity: “The Divine is something whole, complete in itself, a kind of new and different something in contrast to the world. It does not permit of being applied, stuck on, and fitted in” (Barth 1928:277); likewise: “On the other hand we have *society*, also a whole in itself ... outwardly solid – without connections with the kingdom of heaven” (Barth 1928:278).

However, they should *not* be *separated* from each other, nor should they be connected too closely, which leads to the one dominating the other. Barth rejects three views of the relationship between the divine (Christ in us) and society: a) First, he rejects a “docetic” view, in which Christians withdraw from society and live in isolation from contemporary realities: “An isolated sanctuary is no sanctuary” (Barth 1928:276 – translation adapted); b) Secondly, he rejects views in which *Christ is betrayed*. This happens when Christians make “hyphenated” connections with society and its ideologies, in which the divine and society relate in a way that compromises and “uses” the divine, thus secularising Christ. Examples of such “hyphenated” approaches according to Barth were the “Social-Christian” and “Christian-socialist” movements of his time. According to Barth (1928:277), such approaches “betray” Christ once again, since the “society” pole dominates the “divine” pole and compromise its distinctiveness and power. Barth regards such approaches are “dangerous short-circuits” which avoid the healthy hesitation and consternation before God of figures like Moses, Jeremiah and Jonah (Barth 1928:277); c) Thirdly, he rejects a view in which *society is betrayed*; This happens when Christians wish to *clericalise* society, as medieval Catholicism tried to do (Barth 1928:280), not respecting the own integrity of society. This happens when the “divine” pole wishes to dominate the “society” pole.

In conclusion, we could say that for Barth the divine and society stand in an awkward relationship to each other. Society – with all its complex institutions of family, art, economy, education and politics – runs on its own rails¹⁴ and is not simply going to submit to the claims of God in Christ or the new life in the resurrection of Christ. In fact, Barth (1928:279) speaks of “the brutal fact that the autonomy (*Eigengesetzlichkeit*) of social life is by no means done away by our having become thoroughly tired of it” and he says that “the giant evils of the day against which we have come up to do battle will stand and defy us” (Barth 1928:281).

It is difficult to escape the impression that Barth, due to the Christological concentration of this paper (“The Christian in society *is* Christ in society”), thinks along the lines of Christological dogma (particularly Chalcedon) to express the complex relationship between the divine and society. The way in which Barth construes the relationship between these two main “entities” in his paper – the *divine* (Christ-in-us) and *society* – can perhaps be characterised in Chalcedonian terms: they are not to be “confused or changed, divided or separated.” At the same time, though, there is no balance or static dualism between the two.¹⁵ Since the risen Christ is actively at work “in us”, there is a dynamic influence from the one to the other, and therefore there is hope for society.¹⁶

2.3 Understanding and entering into God’s movement

2.3.1 “Standpoint”

In this section Barth develops what he calls his basic theological “standpoint”, although he immediately qualifies this word by saying:

“Standpoint,” however, is hardly the right word. For our position is really an instant in a movement, and any view of it is comparable to

¹⁴ Barth uses the term *Eigengesetzlichkeit*, to express the fact that these social institutions have their own intrinsic “laws” according to which they operate: “... the profane asserts its rights over against the Holy. Society is now really ruled by its own logos; say rather by a whole pantheon of its own hypostases and powers” (Barth 1928:279f). The term *Eigengesetzlichkeit* was common in 19th century liberal theology, influenced by the two kingdom doctrine of Luther, to limit the scope of theology and ministry to the creation of pious and virtuous individuals, not allowing the gospel to speak a judging or guiding word for the broader social reality. Barth uses the term in a related way, but with a very different purpose.

¹⁵ Stadland (1966:25) shows how Barth, in the period between 1915-1920, on the basis of a “monism of grace” (*Gnadenmonismus*), emphasised the impossibility of positing a static dualism between God and world.

¹⁶ One could almost say that the whole Tambach lecture is an exposition of the phrase from Col 1:27: “Christ in you, the hope of glory,” since Barth alludes to this verse throughout the paper.

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the momentary view of a bird in flight. Aside from the movement it is absolutely meaningless, incomprehensible, and impossible. By “movement,” to be sure, I do not mean either the socialistic movement, the social movement in religion, or the general, somewhat problematical, movement of so-called Christianity. I mean *that* movement which comes, so to speak, vertically from above and penetrates all these movements as their hidden and transcendent inner meaning and motivation; *that* movement which has neither its origin nor its aim in space, in time, or in the contingency of things, and yet is not a movement apart from others: I mean the movement of God’s history [*die Bewegung der Gottesgeschichte*; God in history] or, put differently, the movement of the knowledge of God [*die Bewegung der Gotteserkenntnis*; God in consciousness], the movement whose power and significance [import] are revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

(Barth 1928:282f. – translation adapted)

The key features of Barth’s approach in this second section are:

- The initiative of God is at the heart of this approach, and God enters our society “vertically from above”;
- God’s movement from above, God’s power to realise the new age among us, is revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. His whole lecture “breathes the resurrection”;¹⁷
- God’s history or movement is not a movement apart from the movements of our society, but one that works in and through them as their inner power and meaning;
- Theology doesn’t make sense as an aloof and isolated theorising about God and society; it only has meaning when we *take part in God’s movement in society*. The epistemology of Barth seems to be one of praxis and engagement. He describes an abstract approach to theology as similar to drawing a flying bird. Theology is not for “innocent bystanders” but for people willing to commit themselves to God’s movement in history.

¹⁷ Barth quotes this expression (*spirant resurrectionem*) from Bengel, who said this of the four Gospels. Bengel meant that the Gospels should be read “backwards” since the resurrection (coming at the end) supplies the key to understanding the whole narrative (Barth 1928:286).

2.3.2 God, the Wholly Other, not religion

Our concern is *God*, the movement originating in *God*, the motion which *he* lends us – and it is not religion. Hallowed be *thy* name. *Thy* kingdom come. *Thy* will be done The new life revealed in Jesus is not a new form of godliness. That is the reason why Paul and John are interested not in the personal life of the so-called historical Jesus but only in his resurrection Christ is the absolutely *new from above*; the way, the truth, and the life of *God* among men; the Son of Man, in whom humanity becomes aware of its *immediacy* to God (Barth 1928:285f).

Barth is critical of religion, also Christian *religion*. It is not religion that saves or renews society. What matters is that people should take God seriously as God, who is totally different and transcendent (*der ganz Andere*) and yet who is deeply involved in society, working “vertically from above” (*senkrecht von oben*) in society. This is confirmed by the following:

The Wholly Other in God – itself resisting all secularization, all mere being put to use and hyphenated – drives us with compelling power to look for a basic, ultimate, original correlation between our life and that wholly other life. We would not die but live. It is the living God who, when he meets us, makes it inevitable for us to believe in our own life (Barth 1928:288).

2.3.3 Understanding

Barth (1928:293) also emphasises the importance of context analysis, of *understanding* one’s society. This underscores his well-known saying that a theologian should have the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. What is needed is prophetic (or priestly, see 2.4) insight into what is going on in society, *understanding* the “strangely confused and ambiguous movements of our time.” This includes understanding the “mighty God-given restlessness of man:”

Life has risen up against life in death. Our task is not to read something into the strangely confused and ambiguous movements of our time but rather to understand them sympathetically, hopefully, and in their deepest meaning (Barth 1928:291) To *understand!* Let me compress into one word the meaning of our part in this unbroken movement of life into death and out of death into life: to understand! We must understand the mighty God-given restlessness of man and by it the mighty shaking of the foundations of the world. We must understand the raw primordial elements of motives and motions. We must understand our contemporaries, from Naumann to Blumhardt, from Wilson to Lenin, in all the different stages of the one movement in which we see them. We

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must understand our times and their signs, and also understand ourselves in our own strange unrest and agitation.

- To understand means to have the insight of God that all of this must be just as it is and not otherwise.
- To understand means to take the whole situation upon us in the fear of God, and in the fear of God to enter into the movement of the era.
- To understand means to be forgiven [given] in order to forgive [give]

(Barth 1928:293f)

These three (“bulleted”) points indicate the structure of the rest of the lecture. The first bullet describes Section 3 (saying Yes to creation as it is); the second refers to Section 4 (saying No to evil in society; entering God’s movement of transformation; the third bullet (about receiving and giving forgiveness) refers to Section 5 and highlights an important dimension of living our Christian lives *in hope*. The next quote expands this in a fascinating way:

To *understand* the meaning of our times in God, to enter into God-given restlessness and into critical opposition to life, is to *give* meaning to our times in God. For in contrast to all ideologies, which want to whitewash the autonomous existence of things and make them look better than they are, forgiveness is the power of God on earth that creates a new reality.

(Barth 1928:294, translation adapted)¹⁸

Whoever is willing to enter into this God-given restlessness, can *give meaning* to life and bring about change and renewal in society. God’s movement in history and in human consciousness works differently from *ideologies*. An ideology is a set of ideas or theories about society that also contains a blueprint of the ideal world (or justifies existing power relations) as well as a plan of action on how to achieve it. Barth implies that Christians are not

¹⁸ The original text (Barth 1962a [1919]:17) reads “Denn die Vergebung ist im Gegensatz zu allen Ideologien, die eine Dinglichkeit beschönigen und verklären wollen, die Macht Gottes auf der Erde, die ein Neues schafft.” The translation of Horton completely misses the point about the power of forgiveness. He translated: “For giving contrasts with all the theories which attempt to palliate and explain a reality; it is the power of God upon earth; it makes new.” (Barth 1928:294). The Dutch translation reads: “Want de vergeving is in tegenstelling tot alle ideologieën, die een dingmatigheid willen vergoeilijken en met glans omkleden, de macht Gods op aarde, die iets nieuws schept” (Stichting Karl Barth 2005).

ideological, and that forgiveness is the power of God on earth to bring about renewal and change.

This view of Barth raises all sorts of important and complex questions: a) Is it helpful to see ideology as a form of “false consciousness,” which can be clearly distinguished from a “true consciousness” (based on forgiveness) which is received from God? b) Are all ideologies reductionist, in that they “whitewash” one or more aspects of life, which they choose to overemphasise or glorify? c) How does forgiveness become a social or public “power on earth” to bring about a new reality? In the second paper we return to this issue.

2.3.4 Victory

And so it is the light of victory into which our hope and our need have entered. The hope rather than the need is decisive, the supreme moment. Godly and worldly interests, tendencies, and powers are not balanced. God applies the lever to lift the world. And the world is being lifted by the lever which he has applied. God in history is *a priori* victory in history. This is the banner under which we march. This is the presupposition of our being here. The real seriousness of our situation is not to be minimized; the tragic incompleteness in which we find ourselves is not to be glossed over. But it is certain that the last word upon the subject has been spoken. The last word is the *kingdom of God* – creation, redemption, the perfection of the world through God and in God.

(Barth 1928:297)

Barth returns a few times in his lecture to the notion of *victory*. Politically speaking it is a strange word to use in September 1919 – in a Germany recently defeated in a brutal war between the “Christian nations” of Europe, spoken by a theologian from Switzerland, which remained neutral in the conflict. It is clear that the victory of *God* here is not the victory of a particular church, nation or culture. It is the victory of God’s kingdom, which comes vertically from above into society, which enters into and works through human plans and attempts. The “lever” that God uses to “lift” the world refers to the metaphor of the “Archimedean point,” which Barth uses at key points in his lecture. Because of this, hope can triumph over need, even though the “tragic incompleteness” of society is not denied.

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We live in the midst of a tragically incomplete but purposeful series of divine deeds and evidences. We live amidst transition – a transition from death to life, from the unrighteousness of men to the righteousness of God, from the old to the new creation. We live in society as those who understand, as those who intervene, and those who initiate.

(Barth 1928:297, translation adapted)

On the basis of God’s victory, Christians who believe themselves to be living in the transition from the old to the new creation, need to become actively involved in God’s movement in history. This implies that they need to understand (*begreifen*), intervene (*eingreifen*) and initiate (*angreifen*) (Barth 1928:297).

2.4 Interlude: The three “essential viewpoints”

At the end of Section 1, Barth admits that he cannot present a “solution” to the complex questions related to Christ/Christians and society, since the solution is to be found only in God: “Our task is nothing more than to initiate a (let me risk this word) priestly *movement* [agitation] of this need and hope, through which the way may be prepared for the solution, which is in God, to come to us. This priestly movement should be sincere and should penetrate in all directions” (Barth 1928:282 – translation adapted). Barth then states that the purpose of his paper is no more than to set up the essential (and the only) viewpoints [“points of departure” – *Gesichtspunkte*] in terms of which this movement must proceed.

These three essential viewpoints are explained in Sections 3, 4 and 5 respectively. They may be characterised as affirming creation (*regnum naturae*), striving for the salvation of the world (*regnum gratiae*), and respecting that the perfection of the world (*regnum gloriae*) is God’s work. Barth contends that the only way to respect the integrity of the divine and of society, as he argued in Sections 1 and 2, is to understand that there is a *dialectical* relationship between these three viewpoints. Rinse Reeling Brouwer (Stichting Karl Barth 1995) points out that Barth’s use of these three concepts from theological tradition represents a “radical innovation:” Whereas these three “kingdoms” were understood in the feudal Middle Ages as three superimposed layers in a static cosmos, and in the bourgeois reformation as successive historical periods, Barth sees them as simultaneously functioning

“viewpoints” or “perspectives” on reality that have a dialectical relationship with each other.¹⁹

Before looking at each of these viewpoints in some detail, it will be helpful to look at how he construes this dialectic:

- The *thesis* is the affirmation of creation; accepting the world as it is;
- The *antithesis* is the experience of salvation, which amounts to struggle against darkness;
- The *synthesis* is the full realisation of the kingdom of God, the new world of justice and peace.

The important thing to realise is that, for Barth, the synthesis is not only the End but also (and in the first place) the Origin: “It is the original and spontaneous productive energy of the synthesis from which the energy of the thesis and the energy of the antithesis both derive” (Barth 1928:321). So the synthesis does not stand only at the end of history; the whole of history flows from the synthesis in the first place: “The original is the synthesis. It is out of this that both thesis and antithesis arise” (Barth 1928:299). Another way to formulate this is to characterise the three moves of the dialectic as rest, unrest and reserve:

- rest and patience with created reality as it is;
- unrest with the brokenness of reality, struggling to work within it for change;
- eschatological reserve towards the totally different (*totaliter aliter*) coming reign of God.

It is helpful to understand this big picture before looking at each of the moves of Barth’s dialectic.

2.5 The reign of nature: Saying YES = seeing the worldly as analogy of the heavenly

In this section Barth makes the important point that a Christian praxis which begins and ends with salvation – whether this is construed as individual

¹⁹ Brouwer (Stichting Karl Barth 1995) indicates that these three “viewpoints” articulated by Barth at Tambach became the basic structure of his whole later theology. In a paper on “Church and culture” presented in Amsterdam in 1926, Barth confirmed that he regarded the three “viewpoints” of his Tambach lecture as essential for addressing the relationship between church and culture, but that he had decided to call these categories creation-reconciliation-completion (*Schöpfung, Versöhnung, Vollendung*) instead. According the Brouwer, this threefold scheme provided the basic structure for Barth’s whole *Church Dogmatics*.

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“salvation of the soul” or as a reform movement or a social revolution – is a distortion of the gospel. He goes so far as to call it a “blundering and godless time” if Christ is thought of only as Saviour or Judge (Barth 1928:298f).

We shall have to remember that the relation between God and the world is so thoroughly affected by the resurrection, and the place we have taken in Christ over against life is so unique and preëminent, that we cannot limit our conception of the kingdom to reform movements and social revolutions in the usual narrower sense. A protest against a particular social order, to be sure, is an integral moment in the kingdom of God, and there have been dark, blundering godless times when this moment of protest was suppressed and hidden. But it is also a blundering and godless time when Christ is thought of as a Saviour, or rather Judge, who up to that hour for some incomprehensible reason has kept himself concealed, and is now emerging into this sin-stricken world for the first time. The kingdom of God does not begin with our movements of protest. It is the revolution which is before all revolutions, as it is before the prevailing order of things Naturally, we shall be led first not to a denial but to an affirmation of the world as it is. For when we find ourselves in God, we find ourselves committed to the task of affirming him in the world as it is and not in a false transcendent world of dream. Only out of such an affirmation can come that genuine, radical denial which is manifestly the meaning of our movements of protest. The genuine antithesis must follow the thesis: it is through the thesis that it derives from the synthesis.

(Barth 1928:298f)

Barth sees the kingdom of God as the “revolution before all revolutions,” which is also before creation (“before the prevailing order of things”). When we affirm creation, we can “find ourselves in God” and avoid all false affirmations and denials of the world. The church constantly faces the temptation of practising subtle forms of Marcionism, in which creation is devalued and the Creator separated from the Redeemer. Barth takes this viewpoint as the “thesis” in his dialectical theology of Christian praxis: “Created by him and for him.” In this “by him” and “for him,” by Christ and for Christ, lies our victory over a false denial of the world and also our absolute surety against a false affirmation of the world (Barth 1928:300). It is the affirmation of the “thesis” (creation) that prevents us from a “false denial of the world” in our understanding salvation. What prevents us from a “false affirmation of the world” is an affirmation of the “antithesis” (the reign of God as struggle against evil in society) as well as the insight that the “thesis” flows from the “synthesis” (the original-and-final reign of God) in the first place.

The attitude we should have towards the world, people and ourselves is “a grateful, happy, understanding patience” (Barth 1928:303), thus avoiding the mistaken idea that asceticism or protest are the only options available to us. This implies that one can “in perfect peace ... recognize in the worldly the analogy of the heavenly and take pleasure in it (Barth 1928:305). This leads to a highly distinctive lifestyle, characterised by Barth as “freedom of movement”:

A humble but purposeful and really happy freedom of movement will always, to some degree, be allowed us even in this age – the freedom, that is, of living in the land of the Philistines: the freedom of going in quiet strength in and out of the house of publicans and sinners; in and out of the house of the mammon of unrighteousness, in and out of the house of the state, which, call it what you will, is the beast of the bottomless pit; in and out of the house of secular social democracy; in and out of the house of falsely heralded science and the liberal arts; and finally even in and out of the house of worship.

(Barth 1928:309)

Once again it is clear that Barth does not spare church or religion in this public theology. For Barth the house of worship is as much the domain of the Philistines as is the house of the state, science, or secular social democracy. This is a critical public theology that is based on a “far-seeing happy patience in which all transitory things are seen in the light of the eternal (Barth 1928:305), thus giving the present world as such a parabolic character (Barth 1928:307).

We affirm life. Even the *regnum naturae*, the vast time-being, within the frame of which all thought, speech, and action now take shape, may always become the *regnum Dei*; and such it will be when we are in the kingdom of God and the kingdom of God is in us. This is not worldly wisdom. This is truth in Christ. This is the solid and fundamental Biblical perception of life.

(Barth 1928:310)

2.6 The reign of grace: Saying NO = struggling against darkness

Having affirmed “the world as it is” as the thesis in his dialectical public theology, Barth (1928:314) now moves on to the antithesis, to the struggle between light and darkness, as the kingdom of God “advances its attack on society.”

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So the free outlook upon the order of creation is the very thing that presently leads us on to the region where light is locked in arduous but victorious struggle with darkness – leads us from the *regnum naturae* over into the *regnum gloriae*, where, in Christ, the problem of life becomes at once serious and full of promise The same moving force that bids us take life as it comes presently prohibits us from doing so

(Barth 1928:313)

For God the Creator, of whom we have been thinking, is also God the Redeemer, in whose footsteps we must follow of ourselves; and the onward march of God in history, in which we are voluntarily taking part, necessitates our advancing from the defense to the attack, from the Yes to the No, from a naïve acceptance to a criticism of society.

(Barth 1928:316)

It is important to note that Barth does not construe salvation in an individualist way, but in a collective and historical way, as a voluntary joining of God’s onward victory march through history, and as a criticism of society. This does not mean that Barth ignores the deeply personal dimension of Christian faith, but he emphasises the social and communal dimensions here because he was invited to speak about “The Christian in society”.

Here Barth answers the well-known Marxist critique of religion as “the opium of the people”. He points out that there is no rest in relegating our hopes to a Beyond (“one day in heaven ...”). Instead he points out that “it is the Beyond itself standing outside and knocking on the closed doors of the here-and-now that is the chief cause of our unrest (Barth 1928:317). Well conceived Christian hope is not a drug but, on the contrary, the power of the resurrection empowers believers for transformative action in society, on our way into God’s future (Barth 1928:318): “We must enter fully into the subversion and conversion of this present and of every conceivable world, into the judgment and the grace which the presence of God entails, unless, remaining behind, we wish to fall away from Christ’s truth, which is the power of the resurrection” (Barth 1928:318).

Today there is a call for large-hearted, far-sighted, characterful conduct toward democracy – no, not toward it, but within it, as hope-sharing and guilt-sharing comrades; – and it is largely in this field that we must work out the problem of opposition to the old order, discover the likeness of the kingdom of God, and prove

whether we have understood the problem in its absolute and in its relative bearings.

(Barth 1928:319)

According to this vision, the kingdom of God is not a movement alongside of other social institutions or movements, but a leaven *in* the lump, carried by “hope-sharing and guilt-sharing comrades” (Barth 1928:319) *within* democracy.

2.7 The reign of glory: Saying YES and NO = respecting God’s reign as beyond our attempts

In his concluding section, Barth (1928:320) reiterates the key concerns of his paper, starting with a repudiation of any false affirmation or false denial of society:

But as we had to guard ourselves against thinking that we could set up our overturned idols again by confining ourselves objectively to the world as it is, we must now fortify ourselves against expecting that our criticizing, protesting, reforming, organizing, democratizing, socializing, and revolutionizing – however fundamental and thoroughgoing they may be – will satisfy the ideal of the kingdom of God. That is really beyond us.

In a well structured summary statement, Barth spells out his whole vision as follows:

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the power which moves both the world and us, because it is the appearance in our corporeality of a *totaliter aliter* constituted bodiliness [corporeality]. More we cannot say

- We believe there is an inherent meaning in relations already existent, and we believe also in evolution and revolution, in the reform and renewal of relations, and in the possibility of comradeship and brotherhood on our earth and under our heaven, *for the reason* that we are expecting wholly other things; namely a new heaven and a new earth.
- We throw our energies into the most humdrum tasks, into the business nearest to hand, and also into the making of a new Switzerland and a new Germany, *for the reason* that we look forward to the new Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven.
- We have the courage in this age both to endure limitations, chains, and imperfections and also to do away with them,

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for the reason that, enduring or not enduring, we are thinking of the new age in which the last enemy, death, the limitation par excellence, shall be destroyed.

- We enjoy the liberty of living naïvely with God or critically with God *for the reason* that in either case our eyes are open to the day of Jesus Christ, when God shall be all in all.

If we understand ourselves rightly, we shall see that the power to grow comes always from above and never from below. For the last thing, the *eschaton*, the synthesis, is not the continuation, the result, the consequence, the next step after the next to the last, so to speak, but, on the contrary, is forever a radical break with everything next to the last; and this is just the secret of its connotation as Origin and its moving power.

(Barth 1928:323f)

For Barth, this third perspective of the *regnum gloriae*, and the “eschatological reserve” that we need to observe in relation to it, is the key that holds his whole project together. This confirms his earlier statement that the thesis (*regnum naturae*) and the antithesis (*regnum gratiae*) both flow from the synthesis (*regnum gloriae*), which is not only the goal but also the origin of Christian praxis in society. In the final section of his paper he formulates it as follows:

When we look from creation and redemption toward perfection, when we look toward the “wholly other” *regnum gloriae*, both our naïve and our critical attitude to society, both our Yes and our No, fall into right practical relation to each other in God. The one as well as the other is freed from that danger of abstraction in which death lurks; and the one relates itself to the other not systematically but historically, in the manner of God in history, in the manner of inner necessity.

(Barth 1928:324f)

In the final paragraph of his paper, Barth asks the “so what?” question: “What ought we then to do?” (Barth 1928:326). He replies that, since we are moved by the truth of Christ, since we are grounded in God, since we have eternity in our hearts, we should be able to know what to do, and then concludes with the words: “We can indeed do only one thing – not many. But it is just that one thing which we do not do. What can the Christian in society do but follow attentively what is done by God? (Barth 1928:327)

God is moving in society, bringing the new life of God's reign into the world. Public Christian praxis, which is the only Christian praxis there is, means to be moved by the power of the resurrection of Christ in us:

- moved to affirm the goodness and reality of society as it is, seeing in ordinary everyday life parables of the kingdom;
- moved to become part of God's attack on evil in society, working within democracy towards greater democracy, working as hope-sharing and guilt-sharing comrades within those movements aimed at justice and humanity;
- learning how not only to run but also to wait, how to keep our activism and our spirituality in a creative correlation, as we pray: May *your* name be hallowed, may *your* kingdom come, may *your* will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

It may not be inappropriate to characterise this vision of Barth on the role of Christians in society in terms of *missio Dei*, as has become customary in ecumenical missiological circles since the Willingen conference of 1951.²⁰ Barth focusses only on the social dimension of God's mission in this paper, since that was the brief he received from the Tambach organisers, but it is clear how Barth's theological approach of this paper could become a framework for an inclusive, holistic understanding of Christian mission in society.

2.8 The significance of the Tambach lecture

By way of a preliminary conclusion, it could be helpful to mention a number of ways in which the Tambach lecture is significant, not merely as an interesting moment in the early development of Barth's theology, but as an important theological event in its own right.

The impact of the Tambach lecture at the time in Switzerland and Germany was multidimensional. As pointed out before, Tambach "opened doors into Germany" for Barth (Busch 1976:112-114). In a significant phrase Barth reflected as follows on this positive response to his ideas in Germany: "Here all at once I found a group and the prospect of further groups of people whose disquiet was related to my attempts like answers to questions –

²⁰ See, for example, the discussion of the *missio Dei* concept by Bosch (1991:389-393), in which he points to the "crucial influence" of Barth's theology in the adoption of this term in ecumenical theologies of mission.

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answers which, in the vigorous discussions with these German contemporaries that now got under way, themselves seemed in turn to become questions” (in Busch 1976:111).

It also alienated him from his former colleagues in the Swiss Religious Socialist movement. Leonard Ragaz was deeply disappointed that this golden opportunity to make Swiss Religious Socialism known in Germany was missed, since Barth’s dialectical distortion (“dialektische ... Entstellung”) of it was presented, whereby its revolutionary effect was paralysed (in Marquardt 1980:29). Barth confessed in 1933 (see Moltmann 1963:319), in his farewell editorial at the death of the journal *Zwischen den Zeiten*, that he “thoroughly spoilt” (gründlich ... verdorben”) the concept of Religious Socialism for the German Religious Socialists in 1919 (i.e., at Tambach). One could say that Tambach was Barth’s public farewell to Religious Socialism as a “hyphenated” compromise of the freedom of the gospel, and yet not a farewell to socialism. As Marquardt (1980:28) has pointed out, perhaps the most shocking aspect of Barth’s Tambach lecture (and of the first edition of his *Römerbrief*) was that he developed a *theological* argument for preferring “atheistic” social democracy to the hyphenated synthesis of Christian-socialism: “Sozialdemokratisch, aber nicht religiössozial.”

Barth at Tambach shows us a young theologian of 33 years, in the midst of a full-scale transition – personally, politically, theologically, professionally – busy processing the tumultuous changes that were taking place around him in Europe after World War I and responding to them intellectually and practically. We need not agree with all the views he expressed, but we will do well to emulate his dynamic engagement with the issues facing him:

- as a preacher standing on the pulpit from Sunday to Sunday in the congregation of Safenwil, trying to speak a liberating word to his congregation, while his socialist commitment was causing tension;
- as a friend and colleague of Eduard Thurneysen and a broader circle of colleagues, engaging in intense discussion, letter writing and publication.
- as a local social activist in Safenwil, working with the trade unions for a better deal for workers;
- as a theologian struggling intensely with the Bible to make sense of the Christian message for the Europe of his time;

- as a European socialist reflecting on the meaning of socialism in the light of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia and the establishment of the Third International in Moscow;
- as a socially and politically engaged theologian, wrestling himself free from the ideological narrowness of Religious Socialism into a more open and dynamic Christian worldview-and-praxis in the light of the coming reign of God;

To use Barth's own metaphor in a slightly different way, an interpretation like this can easily become an attempt to make a drawing of a bird in flight, which does no justice to the bird's dynamic movement. We would do well to emulate, in some measure at least, Barth's praxis as an organic intellectual – the dynamic interaction between his imaginative theological reflection and his practice as preacher, author and social activist.

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