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Idolatry and Mystery

Karl Barth's Protestant Doctrine of Mystery as a Challenge to Apophaticism

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Abstract

This article contrasts the accounts of mystery used to combat idolatry found in the theology of Karl Barth and in contemporary apophatic theology. It describes Barth's account of mystery as distinctly Protestant in its soteriological nature and basis in contrast to recent apophatic accounts of mystery based on the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. These divergent theologies of mystery—as either light or darkness based on different dogmatic *res*—ultimately reveal contrasting commitments in the doctrine of God. For both, Jesus Christ is the light of God's gracious revelation. However, the movement in apophatic theology is from the light of Christ to the mystery of divine darkness, while in Barth's theology Jesus Christ is the luminous mystery of God that dispels the *Deus absconditus*. This article argues that idolatry is better counteracted by Barth's positive concept that mystery is grace and filled with content in Jesus Christ.

Keywords

Karl Barth – apophaticism – mystery – *creatio ex nihilo* – Jesus Christ – grace

1 Introduction

In a tribute to Karl Barth at his death in 1968, Eberhard Jüngel captured the vitality and passion of Barth's life: "The light which shines in the darkness interested him more than the darkness."¹ Barth was single-mindedly a theologian

1 Eberhard Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, trans. Garrett E. Paul (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 16.

concerned to dwell on the light of God. However, the current general theological milieu negatively assesses devotion to the light. Darkness is now, in many avenues, the reigning metaphor: over the past twenty years, theology and post-modern philosophy experienced an “apophatic rage” that led to a distinctive “apophatic turn” in contemporary systematic theology.² The renaissance of the apophatic in theology shows no signs of slowing down, as evidenced by the recent reviews and critical interactions with Karen Kilby’s *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology*. Brad East employs a contrast between theology operating by light and theology operating by darkness in his review of Kilby’s work.³ East condemns theology that operates in the light for its supposed failure to recognize that God is not an item to be known in the universe and its constant temptation and easy slide into theological hubris.⁴ The different relationship of theology to light and darkness, as represented by Barth and East, results from their divergent accounts of mystery. At the center of this difference is the question: what does it mean to claim God is mystery? Does God as mystery lead to an ultimate unknowing or unspeakability of God? Is divine mystery darkness or light?

This article examines Barth’s doctrine of mystery as an unexpected counterpart and simultaneous challenge to the apophatic turn to darkness. Barth and apophatic theologians are aligned in their profound concern to resist idolatry and human mastery of God in theology, but each navigates this theological problem differently because of their contrasting understandings of mystery. Karl Barth is probably not the name that comes to mind when hearing the words ‘mystery’ and ‘theology’ together. Perhaps one thinks of Pseudo-Dionysius, Julian of Norwich, Sarah Coakley, or Karen Kilby. However, Barth has a robust doctrine of mystery that stretches across the entirety of the *Church Dogmatics*. This article seeks to draw attention to this. It argues that Barth’s doctrine of mystery is distinctly Protestant in its thoroughly soteriological nature and basis, contrasting apophatic accounts of mystery based on the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* (creation from nothing) and God’s simple transcendent nature. The aim of this article is not to argue for a reductive dialectic

2 The phrase ‘apophatic rage’ was termed by Martin Laird in his article, “Whereof We Speak: Gregory of Nyssa, Jean-Luc Marion and the Current Apophatic Rage,” *Heythrop Journal* 42 (2001): 1–12. Sarah Coakley discusses the ‘apophatic turn’ in *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 23 (hereafter *GSS*). For an overview and assessment of the apophatic turn to trinitarian theology, see E. Jerome Van Kuiken, “‘Ye Worship Ye Know Not What’? The Apophatic Turn and the Trinity,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 19, no. 4 (2017): 401–420.

3 Brad East, “Introduction: Theology in the Dark,” *Political Theology* 22, no. 5 (2021): 369–371.

4 East, “Theology in the Dark,” 369–370.

between light and dark, or creation versus soteriology, but to describe the emphasis and order of these concepts and doctrines in Barth and current apophatic theology. The article contends that the differing emphases upon mystery as darkness or mystery as light result from the different dependent dogmatic *res* of mystery in either creation or soteriology. The differing doctrinal location of mystery reveals contrasting commitments in the doctrine of God.

The argument of this article progresses in three movements. First, although contemporary apophatic theology is varied and nuanced, a summary of its key motivations and aims demonstrates the argument of this article that, for these thinkers, the foundation of mystery is found in the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. The result of a concept of divine mystery based in creation is a christological apophaticism. In apophatic theology, Jesus Christ is the light that unites the believer to God as an unknown and allows her to enter into divine darkness. The movement in apophatic theology is from the light of Christ *to* the mystery of divine darkness. Second, this article argues that Barth's doctrine of mystery is, by contrast, thoroughly soteriological in nature. The soteriological nature of mystery is established through an examination of the epistemological and ontological elements of Barth's account of divine mystery. For Barth, Jesus Christ, as the mystery of God, is light that reveals that there is no *Deus absconditus* (hidden God), and darkness is the human condition outside of revelation and reconciliation that can only be penetrated by God's gracious acts. Mystery is known and definite in Christ, who is the light that dispels the darkness. Third, this article concludes that Barth's doctrine of mystery honors the Protestant understanding of justification by grace through faith by its emphasis upon Jesus Christ as the light of God's gracious being turned toward humanity in revelation and reconciliation. Moreover, it will be demonstrated that the different doctrinal locations of mystery reveal divergent commitments in the doctrine of God. The way Barth and apophatic theologians combat idolatry by their contrasting views of mystery reveals competing notions of transcendence. Ultimately, Barth challenges apophatic theology with his claim that idolatry is best combatted by looking to the mystery that is the known light of God's gracious revealing and reconciling Godself to us in Jesus Christ.

2 Apophatic Theology: God Shrouded in Darkness

Contemporary apophatic theology's commitment to mystery emerges from the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, which leads to a desire to rid theology of

conceptual idolatry and mastery of God. To avoid idolatry, apophatic theology moves beyond an epistemological dialectic of the cataphatic/apophatic toward apophatically shaped theological practices. When it comes to Christology, apophaticism views the light of Christ as the means by which believers enter into divine darkness and unknowability.

Susannah Ticciati's definition of apophatic theology is helpful: "Theology done in the acknowledgment of the failure of all language with respect to God."⁵ This definition clarifies that apophatic theology cannot quickly be characterized as exclusively concerned with negation. As Denys Turner emphatically states, following Pseudo-Dionysus: "You can no more 'capture' God in denials than you can capture God in affirmations."⁶ Crucially, apophaticism is paradoxically not just about silence but what enables the theologian's profuse speech about God. Silence comes after the overabundance of language in the face of the reality of the divine: "The apophatic therefore presupposes the cataphatic 'dialectically' in the sense that the silence of the negative way is the silence achieved only at the point at which talk about God has been exhausted. The theologian is, as it were, embarrassed into silence by her prolixity."⁷ In this definition of apophatic theology, *both* apophatic and cataphatic language ultimately fail in the attempt to speak adequately of God.

However, two theological convictions—*creatio ex nihilo* and divine simplicity—establish the affirmation of God as a fundamentally incomprehensible mystery and the failure of all speech about God.⁸ For brevity's sake, this article focuses on the role of the doctrine of creation in establishing divine mystery.⁹ Ticciati helpfully analyzes contemporary apophaticism and identifies the theological nexus that underlie its claims: "God creates out of nothing; that God is not a thing; and that God is an incomprehensible and unutterable mystery."¹⁰ In other words, the belief that God is an unutterable mystery results from the prior

5 Susannah Ticciati, *The New Apophaticism: Augustine and the Redemption of Signs* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 1. Ticciati's definition is in line with Denys Turner's definition, cf. Denys Turner, "Apophaticism, Idolatry and the Claims of Reason," in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and the Incarnation*, ed. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 16; Denys Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 56–62, 232–233.

6 Turner, *Faith*, 156.

7 Turner, "Apophaticism," 18.

8 Ticciati, *The New Apophaticism*, 4, 20, 24–39.

9 For more on the significance of simplicity for apophatic convictions, see Ticciati, *The New Apophaticism*, 32–39; Turner, *Faith*, 40–60; Karen Kilby, "Aquinas, the Trinity and the Limits of Understanding," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7, no. 4 (October 2005): 414–427.

10 Ticciati, *The New Apophaticism*, 28.

two theological convictions. First, God's creating *ex nihilo* is a doctrine that is inherently destructive of the human conception of causality—the failure of language is immediately apparent. Creation out of 'nothing,' with no before or material something from which to create, is simply incomprehensible babble to humans.¹¹ Causality is always bound to created spatiotemporal reality and renders *ex nihilo* inconceivable. That Creation *ex nihilo* is unthinkable renders the God who creates in this manner *the* great mystery.

Second, a further conclusion drawn from *creatio ex nihilo* is that God is not a thing among things. As the ground of all being, "God is not among the 'whats' of creation, and so we lack any category by which to identify God. At any rate, so holds the historic Christian grammar of God-talk rooted in the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*."¹² Although Coakley is not explicit that she bases apophaticism on the doctrine of creation, she also implicitly gestures toward this in her discussion of God as the ground of being and not an item in the universe, while she frames theology's talk of God as a "fundamental submission to mystery."¹³ God as Creator both licenses the use of creaturely language about God from whom all things have their being and guarantees the failure of that speech at the same time because God is no thing.¹⁴ There is an unbridgeable distance or discontinuity between God and creaturely life, including human words and concepts. This is a particular conception of God's transcendence: the God who creates *ex nihilo* is the ultimate unknown mystery to creatures.

There is simply no way to relieve this mystery since God cannot be classed among any of the items of the universe.¹⁵ Turner emphasizes that it is precisely because of creation and not sin that language fails of God: "What else could speech be but that which, before God, fails? That failure is down to language, not to sin; to our being human, not to our failure to be human."¹⁶ What the human comes to recognize in creation is the very limit of human reason vis-à-vis God: "[S]uch is the 'reason' which knows God, the God who can be proved: in proving which, reason proves but the existence of a mystery, the mystery of creation. And in proving that, reason discovers itself to have been created

11 Ticciati, *The New Apophaticism*, 28; Turner, *Faith*, 29–36, 251; East, "Theology in the Dark," 369.

12 East, "Theology in the Dark," 369.

13 Coakley, *GSS*, 44.

14 Ticciati, *The New Apophaticism*, 26; Turner, "Apophaticism," 19–21; Turner, *Faith*, 121–122.

15 Turner summarizes Pseudo-Dionysus: "As 'the Cause of all' God stands in the same relation to the whole hierarchy [of being] as its Creator: he does not stand as top being *on* that hierarchy." Turner, *Faith*, 161.

16 Turner, *Faith*, 103.

by the mystery it shows to exist."¹⁷ For the apophatic theologian, the ineffable and incomprehensible mystery of God is founded on the doctrine of creation. This mystery of the Creator God is at the heart of apophatic theology's greatest concern—idolatry.

Idolatry, reification, projection, and mastery are the repeated theological worries of apophatic theologians, and they rightly desire to avoid any theological methods that master God due to their keen awareness that God is not an object among other objects in the world. Ticciati explicitly links *creatio ex nihilo* with the theological imperative to fight against all forms of idolatry in theology.¹⁸ With the focus on God as Creator comes the distinct awareness and understanding of the theological task to ward off idolatry, which is the mistaking of the creature for the Creator.

Apophaticism sets limits on theology and language to prevent the idolatrous tendency to confuse God with creatures.¹⁹ Coakley responds to the charge that systematic theology, when it is a form of 'onto-theology,' necessarily engages in a false reification of God. She argues that this charge does not accurately account for the apophatic dimensions in classical Christian theology. However, she concedes that the accusation still has bite because the temptation to idolatry is present whenever systematic theology does not practice appropriate apophatic sensibilities.²⁰ One of Coakley's central convictions is "that no trinitarian language is innocent of sexual, political, and ecclesiastical overtones and implications."²¹ There is always projection and idolatry simmering within theological language. Coakley's *théologie totale* advocates apophatic practices to ward off the ever-present danger of idolatry in theology.²²

Similarly, Kilby's theology is animated by her grave concerns about overconfidence and projection in the discipline of theology, both of which turn God into an idol. Kilby articulates this worry repeatedly: "And ultimately of course one might wonder about the danger of idolatry, about the possibility of being so robust, so confident that we know what we are talking about when we talk about the Trinity, that we are in fact projecting our most pleasing ideas onto God and making those the object of our worship."²³ Kilby opposes "robust Trini-

17 Turner, *Faith*, 122; cf. Ticciati, *The New Apophaticism*, 26–28.

18 Ticciati, *The New Apophaticism*, 31.

19 Ticciati, *The New Apophaticism*, 31.

20 Coakley, *GSS*, 44–45.

21 Coakley, *GSS*, 308.

22 Coakley, *GSS*, 44–47.

23 Karen Kilby, "Is an Apophatic Trinitarianism Possible?," *International Journal of System-*

tarianism,” and anything resembling social Trinitarianism.²⁴ Kilby counters the all-too-confident and all-too-specific theology of robust trinitarians with her own apophatic Trinitarianism.²⁵ While the era of social Trinitarianism has been declared over by some, the conviction to counter the problem of human projection onto God still stands at the center of apophatic theology.²⁶ Apophatic theology avoids idolatry by respecting God as a mystery through knowing what it does not know.

Advocates of apophatic theology are not exclusively concerned with maintaining an epistemological dialectic between the apophatic and the cataphatic to avoid idolatry. Instead, they aim to move beyond mere verbal declaration to apophatic practices. The nature of these practices varies. Practices become the locus for spiritual transformation and the *topos* (place/location) of positive content for the discipline of theology. Coakley’s *théologie totale* rests upon contemplative graced apophatic prayer. As she encapsulates her theological method and the centrality of practices for theology:

Apophatic theology, in its proper sense, then, can never be mere verbal play, deferral of meaning, or the simple addition of negatives to positive (‘cataphatic’) claims. Nor, on the other hand, can it be satisfied with the dogmatic ‘liberal’ denial that God in Godself can be known *at all*: it is not ‘mysterious’ in *this* sense. For contemplation is the unique, and wholly *sui generis*, task of seeking to know, and speak of God, unknowingly; as Christian contemplation, it is also necessarily bodily practice of dispossession, humility, and effacement which, in the Spirit, causes us to learn incarnationally, and only so, the royal way of the Son to the Father.²⁷

atic Theology 12, no. 1 (January 2010): 66; cf. Karen Kilby, “Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity,” *New Blackfriars* 81, no. 956 (2000): 432–445; Kilby, “Aquinas”; Karen Kilby, “Trinity, Tradition, and Politics,” in *Recent Developments in Trinitarian Theology: An International Symposium*, ed. Christophe Chalamet and Marc Vial (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 73–86. See also Kilby’s latest edited volume which includes some of these essays, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2020).

24 Kilby, “Is an Apophatic Trinitarianism Possible?,” 65–77, esp. 65–67; cf. Kilby, “Perichoresis and Projection,” 432–433.

25 Kilby, “Is an Apophatic Trinitarianism Possible?,” 66.

26 Coakley makes this claim in her review of Kilby. Sarah Coakley, “Beyond Understanding,” *Political Theology* 22, no. 5 (2021): 399n2. Kilby agrees that its prominence among systematic theologians is probably over. Kilby, “Reply to Critics,” 428.

27 Coakley, *GSS*, 46; cf. 15–26, 81–92, 340–344. For more on dark contemplation, bodily practices, and epistemology, see Sarah Coakley, “Dark Contemplation and Epistemic Transformation: The Analytic Theologian Re-Meets Teresa of Avila,” in *Analytic Theology: New*

In Coakley's adamant denial of apophatic theology as the rejection of all knowledge of Godself or a mere language game used when speaking of God, her program of bodily practices of contemplation comes to the fore.

For Coakley, through the long, arduous journey of purgative contemplation and prayer, one is "afford[ed] certain distinctive ways of knowing."²⁸ Coakley claims a wide compass for what apophatic contemplation accomplishes. The theologian is enabled to think, act, desire, and see correctly, while contemplation also leads to philosophical insights that are not available otherwise.²⁹ It is *only* through these practices that God is known unknowingly. These practices are themselves transformative of the human through the Spirit's interruption that joins the contemplative to the intra-trinitarian life in Christ.³⁰ It is through this "reconstitution of human selfhood in God" that one knows or can speak of God.³¹ It is vital to note that God is still a fundamentally unknown mystery in this transformative journey:

Once there is a full and ready acknowledgement that to make claims about *God* involves a fundamental submission to mystery and unknowing, a form of unknowing more fundamental even than the positive accession of contentful revelation, the 'onto-theological' charge loses its edge.³²

Contemplation is a practice that moves one beyond the contentful revelation of God in Jesus Christ into the dark, unknown mystery of God. For Coakley, such divine darkness is the very condition of revelatory presence.³³ Ticciati, Kilby, and Turner similarly argue for practices as well. Ticciati's apophaticism seeks to manifest (not refer to) the divine difference in the redemptive transformative semiosis of interpersonal encounter and doctrine.³⁴ For Kilby, the Christian is called to contemplation *in* the Trinity, not of the Trinity.³⁵ The

Essays in the Philosophy of Theology, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 280–312. It is on the issue of knowledge of God in Godself that Coakley critiques Kilby. Coakley believes Kilby eschews all knowledge of Godself based on a modern Kantian basis. Coakley, "Beyond Understanding," 399, 402.

28 Coakley, *GSS*, 19.

29 Coakley, *GSS*, 19–20, 16.

30 Coakley, *GSS*, 111–115. Coakley differs from her fellow apophatic theologians in asserting some knowledge of Godself for the human, which the others would deny. However, apophatic contemplative practices obtain this knowledge of Godself.

31 Coakley, *GSS*, 23.

32 Coakley, *GSS*, 44.

33 Coakley, *GSS*, 23.

34 Ticciati, *New Apophaticism*, 195–246.

35 Kilby, "Aquinas," 425–426; Kilby, "Trinitarian Apophaticism," 71–72.

contemplative is taken up by grace into the life of God through the work of the whole Trinity. This contemplation focuses one on what God has done in Christ, but, importantly, the economic reality does not afford one knowledge of Godself.³⁶ Kilby maintains that one knows the richness, excess, and overwhelming infinite depth of God through contemplation *in* the Trinity.³⁷ For Turner, the theologian encounters and participates in the failure of all speech about God in the “failed communication” of the presence of Christ in absence in the Eucharist.³⁸ In the move to practices that involve knowing unknowingly, the question becomes: what is the relationship of the revelation of Christ to the mystery of God?

Apophatic theology vehemently denies that the incarnation of Jesus Christ solves the problems of speech and knowledge of God. Apophaticism views the light of Christ as that which unites or allows one to enter into the darkness of God. Ticciati argues that apophaticism based on the doctrine of creation is fully compatible with christological apophaticism.³⁹ During her discussion of idolatry, she summarizes and agrees with contemporary apophatic theologians who emphatically deny that revelation, including the incarnation, relieves the Christian of *any* of the pressure of God’s incomprehensibility. There is the ever-present danger that Christians will reify God as an ‘It’ in their understanding of revelation in Christ.⁴⁰ Coakley asserts that the desire to see God is not “unproblematically ‘solved’ through the incarnation.”⁴¹ The mystery of God remains completely incomprehensible in Jesus Christ, though one can enter into that mystery through him by contemplative practices empowered by the Spirit.

Turner also reflects at length on the dialectic of the light of Christ and the darkness of God. Turner analyzes Bonaventure’s Christology as a positive resource for understanding this dialectic:

In Christ, therefore, is there not only the visibility of the Godhead, but also the invisibility: if Christ is the Way, Christ is, in short, our access to the *unknowability* of God, not so as ultimately to know it, but so as to be brought into participation with the *Deus absconditus* precisely as *unknown*.⁴²

36 Kilby, “Trinitarian Apophaticism,” 71–72, 76.

37 Kilby, “Trinitarian Apophaticism,” 72.

38 Turner, “The Darkness of God and the Light of Christ: Negative Theology and Eucharistic Presence,” *Modern Theology* 15, no. 2 (1999): 153–154; Turner, *Faith*, 48–74.

39 Ticciati, *The New Apophaticism*, 30.

40 Ticciati, *The New Apophaticism*, 28–31.

41 Coakley, *gss*, 21.

42 Turner, “Apophaticism,” 23.

In Christ, one moves from the visibility of the Godhead to the unknowability of the Godhead.⁴³ Apophatic theology makes this move precisely to avoid human mastery and control of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ—to avoid idolatry.

It is important to note the direction of movement here: one moves from knowing in Christ, which *leads* to the unknowing of God. Turner repeats Aquinas's teaching that revelation by grace leads one further into the darkness of God—grace makes us one with something *unknown*.⁴⁴ The pattern is to move from the light of revelation into the darkness and unknowability of the mystery of God. This movement is particularly evident in Turner's definition of successful theological speech: “[Y]ou know you are talking about God when all your theological talk ... is demonstrably ultimate, when, through the grace of revelation, we are led *deeper* than we otherwise might be, into the unknowability of the Godhead.”⁴⁵

Does acknowledgement of divine mystery as the unknowability of God solve the problem of idolatry? Ultimately, that depends on one's doctrine of God. These differences in the doctrine of God become apparent when one begins to consider what Karl Barth might say about mystery and idolatry given his Christocentrism. The assertion of a christological apophaticism is the exact move that Barth's doctrine of mystery would protest. Christological apophaticism is the result of a conception of transcendence (and simplicity) that requires God to remain a *Deus absconditus* even in God's revelation in Christ. For Barth, Christ is the full mystery of God, which means God's mystery is light and not darkness. If the light of Christ is the entry into an unknowing beyond knowing and the divine darkness, then the Christ event is not final: Christ becomes the mere starting point for certain apophatic and ecclesial practices. These practices themselves, rather than the incarnation, become the medium of one's knowledge of God. The light of the Christ event is not final in this approach to theology and the knowledge of God. But the Christ event drives Barth's own account of mystery. Unlike contemporary apophatic theologians, Barth locates mystery in soteriology rather than in creation, and this drastically changes the relationship between light and darkness. The question becomes: Does Barth's account of mystery, with its robust account of our knowledge of God's being through revelation in Christ, also address apophatic theologians' rightful concern to avoid idolatry and discursive mastery over God? For Barth, Christ as the mystery of God ensures mystery's character as light behind which there is no darkness—no *Deus absconditus*.

43 Turner, “Apophaticism,” 22.

44 Turner, *Faith*, 43, 45, 76, 107, 121.

45 Turner, *Faith*, 42–43; cf. “Apophaticism,” 29–30.

3 Mystery in *Church Dogmatics*: Jesus Christ: The Epistemological and Ontological Mystery

Mystery, for Barth, is not devoid of content, neither is it the realm of noumenal darkness. Mystery is, rather, what is revealed in the event of revelation: God is the mystery that enters into this creaturely world in the concrete history of Jesus Christ. The light of Jesus Christ, who is the mystery of God, dispels the notion of an unknown, divine darkness. For Barth, mystery is both epistemological and ontological because it indicates not only how God is known, but also that the content revealed in Jesus Christ is the very being of God. In unpacking these points, this article borrows the helpful terminology, but not the definitions, of epistemological and ontological mystery from Nicholas Griffin's work on mystery.⁴⁶ Griffin defines ontological mystery as the encounter with a holy Other and follows Rudolf Otto's idea of the holy.⁴⁷ For Griffin, epistemological mystery is the attempt to render this encounter in linguistic form.⁴⁸ We take epistemological mystery to be something that must be revealed by God because it is not within human conceptual capacities, while ontological mystery indicates the mystery of God's being (which is graciously revealed to humanity in the event of revelation).⁴⁹ Such a differentiation of mystery as epistemological and ontological is purely heuristic, a logical move to help better understand Barth's wide-ranging theology of mystery, for these are not inherently separated in his theology, as will be made clear: "He [Jesus Christ] is not merely the revelation of the mystery of God. He is the thing concealed within the mystery, and the revelation of it is the revelation of Himself and not of something else."⁵⁰ Christ not only reveals the mystery of God but is the very thing, the mystery, itself.

Two points need explication. First, examination of the epistemological function of mystery establishes that Barth utilizes mystery to indicate humanity's complete incapacity and lack of any inherent ability to know God outside of

46 Nicholas Philip Griffin, "The Use and Function of Mystery within Contemporary Systematic Theology with Special Reference to the Doctrine of Providence in Karl Barth and Maurice Wiles" (PhD diss., King's College London, 2019).

47 Griffin, "The Use and Function of Mystery," 89–99.

48 Griffin, "The Use and Function of Mystery," 110.

49 Griffin acknowledges that Barth always uses the term mystery of God but then proceeds to critique him for failing to name evil and nothingness as a negative mystery (165–166). It is exactly because mystery is related solely to God and God's action that Barth refused to name evil or *das Nichtige* (the nothingness) as a mystery.

50 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. in 13 pts., ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956–1975) (hereafter *CD*), II/2, 104.

the event of revelation. Human knowledge of the mystery of God is thoroughly soteriological because the event of revelation is entirely an act of God's saving grace. Barth is just as concerned as apophatic theologians to avoid any theological mastery over God, and mystery is one of his attempts to head off this danger. Second, examination of the ontological nature of mystery for Barth establishes his identification of Jesus Christ with the mystery of God's being. Here, again, mystery is soteriological since God has eternally elected Godself to graciously fulfill the covenant in Jesus Christ. At this juncture, the importance of Barth's soteriologically driven conception of mystery appears in his denial of any God behind God or *Deus absconditus*. It is here that the difference in Barth's doctrine of God becomes evident. His theology of God's transcendence is derived from what God has done in Jesus Christ. A soteriological doctrine of mystery, such as Barth's, vehemently opposes christological apophaticism in which believers are led to and joined with the darkness of God through the revelation of Christ. Such an approach makes plain that Barth's theology of mystery is distinctly Protestant in nature because it is an analogue to the doctrine of justification by grace in the knowledge of God's act and being.

3.1 *Epistemological Elements of Mystery*

Barth's concern to avoid idolatry and religious mastery of God are prominent from the first volume of *Church Dogmatics*. The Word of God must be understood as the mystery of God.⁵¹ Essential for Barth is that revelation as the mystery of God destabilizes theology, serving as "a theological warning against theology, a warning against the idea that its propositions or principles are certain in themselves like the supposed axioms of the mathematicians and physicists."⁵² Mystery cuts off any ability of the theologian or church to master God. God is the one in control of the event of revelation, not the theologian.⁵³ From the very beginning with Barth, to engage with divine mystery is to encounter the grace of revelation and reconciliation.

Barth never tires of reminding us that revelation *is* reconciliation.⁵⁴ In *Church Dogmatics* II/1, the epistemological elements of mystery are evident

51 CD I/1, 162–165.

52 CD I/1, 165.

53 For more on the above-to-below dimension of Barth's theology of revelation and a defense of Barth against charges of fideism or subjectivism, see Kevin Diller, "Karl Barth and the Relationship between Philosophy and Theology," *Heythrop Journal* 51, no. 6 (2010): 1035–1052; Kenneth Oakes, *Karl Barth on Theology & Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 224–244.

54 Cf. CD II/1, 38; IV/3, 9–10, 38, 220.

when Barth claims that to leave behind or dissolve the mystery of revelation and knowledge of God is to leave the realm of grace.⁵⁵ Humanity has *no* capacity or ability to know mystery. Therefore, knowledge of mystery always indicates revelation, which is solely initiated by God:

“In His mystery.” In these words we are saying only that we know Him as He gives Himself to be known by us. But in these words we also make the important declaration: thus and only thus, in this clarity and certainty and no other. The fact we know God is His work and not ours ... To deny, or not to know, or to cease to know the mystery in which God exists for us, is to deny, or not to know, or to cease to know the clarity and certainty of the revelation of His existence for us.⁵⁶

The mystery of revelation is that it happens at all, and even more shocking is that revelation comes with clarity and certainty. Clarity and certainty do not mean the direct knowledge that God has of Godself—which Barth’s terms God’s primary objectivity—but knowledge of God in God’s secondary objectivity, i.e., mediately through the creaturely veil.⁵⁷ However, it is vital to recognize that God’s secondary objectivity is not different in content from God’s primary objectivity but differs only in *form*.⁵⁸ God ordains and initiates humanity’s true knowledge of Godself in a form suitable to the creature’s status, which is through the veil of the flesh of Jesus Christ.⁵⁹ For Barth, God stoops down to humanity, and this condescension is true of who God is. The human calling is not to ascend beyond where God has already met her in Jesus Christ.⁶⁰ That a person knows God at all is itself a consequence of the mystery of the God who *is* graciously *pro nobis* (for us).⁶¹ The epistemological is inextricably intertwined with the ontological for Barth.

55 “The being of God is either known by grace or it is not known at all.” *CD* II/1, 27.

56 *CD* II/1, 40, 42; cf. *CD* I/1, 165; *CD* IV/1, 108.

57 *CD* II/1, 16–17.

58 *CD* II/1, 16–17. For further discussions on primary and secondary objectivity see Darren O. Sumner, *Karl Barth and the Incarnation: Christology and the Humility of God*, T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology 27 (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 126–128; George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 76–79.

59 *CD* II/1, 18–21.

60 Cf. *CD* II/1, 10–12, 46–47, 199–200.

61 Barth locates the doctrine of the knowledge of God in Theology Proper and not in the prolegomenon because human knowledge of God concerns the being and activity of God. *CD* II/1, 32.

Clarity and certainty go hand in hand with mystery, and it is on this vital point that Barth's doctrine of mystery is profoundly misunderstood. It is important to note the enduring character of revelation as a mystery for Barth, but this does not mean that revelation and mystery are something unknown. Graham Ward's and William Stacy Johnson's postmodern interpretations of Barth construe mystery as God's unknowability. Ward argues that mystery is part of the "enshrining agnosticism" that pervades Barth's two models of language used for apophatic ends.⁶²⁶³ Similarly, Johnson claims that in Barth's dialectic, despite God being made known in Christ, God "remains profoundly unknown in the impenetrable depths of mystery."⁶⁴ This is described as theology's "ceaseless interplay between the 'no' and the 'yes.'"⁶⁵ However, Barth's mature dialectic is not a ceaseless back and forth between the 'no' and the 'yes,' but is a dialectic that is teleologically ordered.⁶⁶ Failing to recognize this essential aspect of Barth's dialectic leads to misconstruing mystery as an unknown.

For Barth, revelation is the mystery in which God gives Godself in clarity and certainty to those who have no intrinsic capacity or access to knowledge of God. Left to the creature's own devices, yes, God is an impenetrable unknown; but the true mystery of God is precisely that God does not will to leave humanity in that state but reveals Godself entirely.⁶⁷ Barth's rejection of natural theology, of

62 Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 14.

63 Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology*, 24. For a strong rebuttal of the crux of Ward's argument based on his interpretation of Barth's discussion of God's knowability, language, and analogy in 11/1, see Bruce McCormack, "Graham Ward's Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49, no. 1 (1996): 97–109.

64 Johnson, *Mystery of God*, 2.

65 Johnson, *Mystery of God*, 2. Marc Cortez aptly summarizes the problem of Johnson's interpretation of Barth: "Although Barth does describe his theology using his famous metaphor of 'the opening in the centre of a wheel,' he does not mean to suggest that this centre is indeterminate or without particular content but that knowledge of the centre can only be provided through the revelatory *event* and cannot be *possessed* by conceptual knowledge." Marc Cortez, "What Does It Mean to Call Karl Barth a 'Christocentric' Theologian?," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60, no. 2 (2007): 137.

66 CD 11/1. 236.

67 CD 11/1, 51–52. Barth's notion of the hiddenness of God is an explicit rejection of the way apophatic theology frames the incomprehensibility of God. For Barth, God's hiddenness is not based on the inapprehensibility of the infinite, Cause of all, or the absolute, which are all products of human reason; rather, God's hiddenness is only known in grace because it means the recognition of one's utter inability to know God. This recognition means that one stands within revelation. The revelation of Jesus Christ is the judgment on all human

the *analogia entis*, and of any attribution of analogy as intrinsic to humanity is intimately tied to his understanding that God is the one who graciously establishes and reveals God's own mystery.⁶⁸ It is the human condition outside of revelation that is complete blindness and darkness. The mystery of revelation in clarity and certainty is God's gracious Yes and No that is always ordered to God's Yes; veiling is always for the sake of God's unveiling and never reversed.⁶⁹ The enduring character of revelation as a mystery is not a nebulous unknowing but the concrete knowledge of the mystery that is Jesus Christ.

Incomprehensible light is how Barth terms mystery. God's gracious and overwhelming revelation of mystery means that the nature of mystery is overwhelmingly luminous and not darkness. The nature of mystery as radiant is central to Barth's discussion of election: "Even the mystery that it [election] takes place at all, ... is not as such dark but luminous; it is not obscure but clarity itself."⁷⁰ Barth assails the traditional doctrines of election and the *decretum absolutum* for making God and humanity a twofold *unknown* mystery.⁷¹ Only when the theologian takes her eyes off Jesus Christ as presented in the Bible can one postulate an unknown and dark mystery.⁷² This dark mystery is precisely what Barth intends to fight against with the mystery of the election of Jesus Christ.⁷³ Barth highlights the significant differences between mystery viewed as light and mystery viewed as darkness:

We have to do with this mystery too—the mystery of God, and the mystery of man which arises as man is caught up by the eternal will of God into God's own mystery. But what matters here is really the nature of this one and twofold mystery, whether it is incomprehensible light or incomprehensible darkness ... The mystery must be manifest to us as such, i.e., it must have a definite character ... Otherwise it is inevitable that we ourselves should try to fill in the gap, that of ourselves we should try to make known the unknown.⁷⁴

attempts to know God. For Barth, it is a denial of Jesus Christ to value human incapacity to know God above God's conferring the capacity to human incapacity in revelation. *CD* II/1, 179–204.

68 For Barth's rejection of natural theology and the *analogia entis*, see *CD* II/1, 162–178, 79–84, 237–243.

69 *CD* II/1, 236.

70 *CD* II/2, 192–193.

71 *CD* II/2, 153, 158–161.

72 *CD* II/2, 146–147.

73 *CD* II/2, 146–154, 160.

74 *CD* II/2, 146–147.

The power of mystery as definite light provokes in us “an equally definite silence and humility and adoration.”⁷⁵ Barth claims that mystery as darkness leaves the human in a position where she projects her own images onto the blank canvas of the unknown God. Vital for Barth is where one directs one’s attention. When one seeks the mystery of God in Jesus Christ and the mystery of one’s own being caught up in God’s mystery, one encounters light. This is the light of God who eternally elects to fulfill the covenant and bear humanity’s rejection in Jesus Christ.

At this juncture, apophatic theologians could object that Barth has merely reified revelation in Jesus Christ. Has Barth not mastered and controlled God through his theology of mystery? Has Jesus Christ become a conceptual idol? This accusation would have serious weight if Barth did not emphasize the *event* of revelation. Revelation is always indirect, even in Jesus Christ, which means it is never a given *datum*. Borrowing Barth’s language from “Fate and Idea,” revelation is not there, but comes to us.⁷⁶ Although God has given a full revelation of Godself to humanity in Jesus Christ, one cannot simply access this knowledge with one’s intellectual capacities. Rather, all knowledge of God in Jesus Christ is made possible by the Holy Spirit in the event of revelation: “In His Word He comes as an object before man the subject. And by the Holy Spirit He makes the human subject accessible to Himself, capable of considering and conceiving Himself as object.”⁷⁷ Bruce McCormack summarizes this as Barth’s abiding desire to conceptualize God’s revelation “as a *dandum* (‘to be given’) rather than a *datum* (‘given’).”⁷⁸ For Barth, God is the unique object of knowledge who *gives* Godself to be object for the human in the event of revelation.

Barth is abundantly clear that humanity on its own has absolutely no readiness for knowledge of God, including God’s revelation in Jesus Christ.⁷⁹ Jesus

75 *CD* II/2, 147. This is not the same as apophatic silence. For Barth, with the doctrine of election we stand in front of God’s primal decision behind which we cannot go because there is no higher height or deeper depth to God’s being. Election is God’s final (and first) word about Godself and about us. There is nothing left to be said about God or ourselves when the election of Jesus Christ is known in revelation. This is not the apophatic silence of unknowing but the silence of being overwhelmed with the knowledge of the depths of God’s being.

76 Karl Barth, “Fate and Idea in Theology,” in *The Way of Theology in Karl Barth*, ed. H. Martin Rumscheidt, trans. George Hunsinger (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1986), 40.

77 *CD* II/1, 10; cf. *CD* II/1, 157–162; *CD* I/1, 181–186; 450–466; *CD* I/2, 242–279; *CD* IV/2, 126–132.

78 Bruce L. McCormack, “What Has Basel to Do with Berlin? Continuities in the Theology of Barth and Schleiermacher,” in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 81.

79 *CD* II/1, 128–134.

Christ is the only human who has a readiness for knowledge of God.⁸⁰ In the event of revelation, which is grace, the Holy Spirit joins the person to Christ so that she participates in Christ's own work and knowledge.⁸¹ Humans do not grasp or appropriate God in revelation; rather, God grasps and appropriates the human through the work of the Holy Spirit.⁸² The work of the Holy Spirit is never independent of the work of Jesus Christ—the Holy Spirit's witness is not the numinous and unknown—but always points to Jesus Christ.⁸³ Although revelation is objectively and ontically true in Jesus Christ, the subjective and noetic appropriation of revelation in faith only takes place as an event through the Holy Spirit. The consequence of this theology of revelation is that the human never possesses or controls knowledge of God:

We can never control our knowledge of this fact and therefore our authority to speak of it ... It does not become our possession. We cannot put it in our pocket and carry it around with us ... For if our knowledge of this fact from its self-revelation is not new every morning, if it is not newly received from it, with empty hands, as a new gift, it is not this knowledge at all. And its flimsiness will be quickly and radically enough exposed. Its power consists in the divine act of majesty in face of which those who really know will always find and confess that they do not know. The attitude of those who know in this power can only be one of the greatest humility.⁸⁴

One observes Barth's deep concern about idolatry and mastery of God. Since the human must continually rely on God to give Godself in new events of revelation, knowledge of God is never given as such. God cannot be mastered, controlled, or encompassed by the knowing human. The whole event of revelation from the objective truth of Jesus Christ to the subjective recognition in the human by the Holy Spirit is the work of God. Through recognizing the work and grace of God in all elements of knowledge of God, Barth seeks to avoid idolatry and the reification of Christ.

80 *CD* II/1, 147–154.

81 *CD* II/1, 157–162.

82 *CD* I/2, 265–279; *CD* II/1, 188, 212–213, 229; *CD* IV/2, 124.

83 *CD* IV/2, 126–131. "The numinous is not by a long way the holy. It is certainly quite inadequate as our present reference to the Holy Spirit because in practice it is a reference to the unknown, and the unknown may actually be, in part or in whole, the demonic." (*CD* IV/2, 128). The Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Christ is vital to avoid subjectivism and mysticism.

84 *CD* IV/2, 124–125. Cf. *CD* II/1, 187–190.

Epistemologically, mystery means that all that humanity knows of God is based exclusively on God's decision and act; therefore, its basis is in grace and Barth's soteriology. Humans are incapable of any knowledge of God based on their capacities; however, in the mystery of God's will in Jesus Christ, God graciously wills to meet the human in the veil of the creaturely so that God is objectively known. Mystery is God moving a person from epistemic darkness to light. Mystery is known, luminous, and filled with content in Jesus Christ.

3.2 *The Ontological Elements of Mystery*

For Barth, mystery is ontological because Jesus Christ, who *is* the mystery of God, reveals God's very being. The mystery of God can never be separated from the work of Jesus Christ in reconciliation for Barth. Prior to Barth's revolutionary doctrine of election, he already identifies the mystery of God's being with the reconciliatory work of Christ. As Barth sets out his theology of the being of God, he begins with an enlightening discussion concerning Melancthon's view of the *beneficia Christi* and the *mysteria divinitatis*.⁸⁵ Barth rejects two theological methods, both of which separate the benefits of Christ and the mystery of God from consideration together.⁸⁶ Barth argues: "To this we must say surely the *beneficia Christi* also belongs to the revealed *mysteria divinitatis* which are only to be investigated at some risk; that the *beneficia Christi* cannot be properly investigated if some consideration of the *mysteria divinitatis* as such has not been undertaken in its proper place."⁸⁷ Two key convictions that Barth holds regarding the mystery of God's being must be considered. First, Barth has indissolubly related the mystery of God and the benefits of Christ. The mystery of the being of God is soteriological in nature: God really is the one who saves humanity in Jesus Christ. Second, Barth spends considerable effort to avoid swallowing God up or collapsing God into the work of the economy.⁸⁸ These two theological convictions ground how Barth consistently employs mystery to highlight the gratuitous nature of revelation and reconciliation as God's work alone, which is the revealed mystery of God in Jesus Christ who freely wills to be *pro nobis*.

God's revelation in Jesus Christ is entirely the unconditioned decision of the event of God's being, but, crucially, the event of God's being is self-determined

85 Many thanks to Tyler Frick for conversations about this essential excursus on mystery and the being of God.

86 CD II/1, 259–260.

87 CD II/1, 259.

88 CD II/1, 260.

in the election of Jesus Christ.⁸⁹ Election and covenant are not additions to God's proper, eternal being. Rather, this is the primal decision and history that one cannot get behind in any way.⁹⁰ Barth's doctrine of election and supralapsarian commitments are exactly why mystery is fully soteriological: even creation itself is brought into existence for the history of God's covenant and fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Creation is for election and the fulfillment of the covenant.⁹¹ After the doctrine of election, the content of mystery as Jesus Christ receives even greater focus and specificity as Barth steadfastly seeks to understand the mystery of God solely through the history of Jesus Christ.⁹²

One example from Barth's doctrines of creation and reconciliation highlights how Barth speaks even more straightforwardly about the ontological element of mystery as the essence of God is filled with concrete content from the eternal and temporal history of Jesus Christ. For Barth, the mystery that God determines Godself to be God in this way is that grace is who and what God *is*. In the doctrine of creation, Barth reasserts that divine mystery is clear and certain in God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, but its ontological elements are now front and center.⁹³ In Christ's self-sacrifice, the mystery of God's eternal being is laid bare in God's secondary objectivity. Mystery is God's eternal life and being, which are made known, and includes God's determination to be *pro nobis* in the giving of the Son. Barth further argues that Jesus Christ is the one, as the real man, who reveals the mystery of the *inner* life of God:

The giving of the Son by the Father indicates a mystery, a hidden movement in the inner life of the Godhead. But in the self-sacrifice of the man Jesus for His friends this intra-divine movement is no longer hidden but revealed. For what the man Jesus does by this action is to lay bare this mystery, to actualize the human and therefore the visible and knowable and apprehensible aspect of this portion of the divine history of this primal moment of divine volition and execution.⁹⁴

Even though Jesus reveals what was hidden, it is still a *mystery* even now that it is made known. Not only is God's mystery graciously made known in Christ,

89 CD II/2, 6–13, 54, 76, 146–147.

90 Cf. CD II/2, 8–9, 25–26, 50–53, 99–106.

91 CD III/1, 42–329.

92 CD II/2, 147; several rather striking examples are found in the doctrine of creation CD III/1, 381–382; CD III/2, 66, 218, 220.

93 CD III/1, 381.

94 CD III/2, 66.

but the mystery revealed is the primal divine volitional moment. Mystery is nothing other than God's being eternally determined to be unrelenting *pro nobis* despite the sacrifice and cost this required of God in the giving of Jesus Christ.

In the mature Christology of his doctrine of reconciliation, Barth argues for entirely deriving one's knowledge of the divine nature from the mystery of Jesus Christ. Mystery is both thoroughly epistemological and ontological for Barth because it indicates how God is known through grace alone, and the mystery made known is God's being in Jesus Christ. Since the mystery of God's being is Jesus Christ, mystery is nothing other than soteriological, based on God's essential and eternal grace and turning toward humanity in love.

In *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, Barth describes the mystery of the deity of Christ as an offense.⁹⁵ The mystery of Jesus Christ's *essential* and *eternal* obedience is an affront to human sensibilities.⁹⁶ The content of the mystery of God in Jesus Christ disturbs and confronts all human concepts about the divine—conceptions that do not include the lowliness of humility and obedience. This echoes and further specifies Barth's earlier claims that in reckoning with the reality of revelation, humanity encounters "the hiddenness in which God is who He is, and therefore does not regard it as too small a thing to be who He is even in the sphere of our apprehension."⁹⁷ There is no dark nature of God behind Jesus Christ, no *Deus absconditus*; that is the force of Barth's declaration, "When we have to do with Jesus Christ we have to do with God."⁹⁸ The mystery of the deity of Jesus Christ requires one to understand that the true and majestic divine nature is deduced *only* from the divine nature revealed in Jesus Christ.⁹⁹ It is precisely the revelation in Jesus Christ that smashes all of humanity's idolatrous notions of God, because the divine nature revealed in Christ is a God who is eternally and essentially gracious.

95 *CD* IV/1, 192.

96 *CD* IV/1, 200–204. This is not the traditional idea of *taxis*. Barth's language is clear about the nature of the Son's eternal obedience and subordination as essential. See the following for more on the essential nature of obedience: Darren O. Sumner, "Obedience and Subordination in Karl Barth's Trinitarian Theology," in *Advancing Trinitarian Theology: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 130–146.

97 *CD* II/1, 244.

98 *CD* IV/1, 198.

99 *CD* IV/1, 188.

4 Conclusion: Look Where God is Found—“Whoever Has Seen Me Has Seen the Father”

Contemporary apophatic theology is rightly concerned to oppose idolatry and mastery of God, and it seeks to remedy this profound theological problem through apophatic practices. Apophaticism bases divine mystery in the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, which leads to an emphasis on mystery as darkness and unknowability. While grace is not irrelevant to apophatic theology’s understanding of mystery, yet, in contrast to Barth, divine mystery is not conceived as grace itself. God’s gracious revelation in Christ is light, but it leads to a union with God as unknown darkness. Apophaticism has reversed Barth’s teleologically ordered dialectic. Instead of veiling for the sake unveiling, apophatic theology understands the unveiling in Christ for the sake of a greater veiling. Ultimately, this leads one to look above and beyond where God has made Godself known. Christ is the entry into the mystery of God and not the mystery of God Godself. God remains a *Deus absconditus*.

Barth’s account of mystery, however, is squarely focused on the light of Jesus Christ, because Christ *is* the mystery of God. Mystery is grace from its revelation to its content and nature. The epistemological element of Barth’s doctrine of mystery means mystery is revealed by grace, known in faith through the Holy Spirit, and filled with content in Jesus Christ. Barth seeks to avoid mastery over God and idolatry by understanding revelation as a vital event, initiated and enacted by the triune God from start to finish. Barth’s doctrine of mystery is in this way an enactment of the Protestant doctrine of justification.¹⁰⁰ The knowledge of humanity’s inability and failure to know God comes solely through the mystery of God’s revelation in Christ. For Barth, there simply is no natural human knowledge of God, and this includes knowing one’s incapacity to know God. The only way one recognizes her failure in knowing God is by standing within the grace of revelation. There are no practices, ecclesial or spiritual, capable of drawing us closer to the divine mystery, because mystery is Jesus Christ graciously accomplishing reconciliation and revealing God’s being. Mystery is the definite and utterly unthinkable and unexplainable ontological mystery that God eternally wills Godself

100 Katherine Sonderegger makes a similar observation of Barth’s view of theological knowledge: “All theological knowledge, Barth concludes, is an enactment of the doctrine of justification, *sola gratia*. God remains mystery—‘an unveiling in veiling’ Barth writes (CD II/1: 224)—just because he remains Lord in this act of grace towards sinners.” Katherine Sonderegger, “God,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Barth*, ed. Paul Dafydd Jones and Paul T. Nimmo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 223.

to become the Son of Man and bear humanity's rejection.¹⁰¹ The unexpected but known mystery of Jesus Christ reveals that God is indeed encountered and known as God *is* in Christ's journey into the far country that concludes on the cross.

Barth and apophatic theologians locate and understand divine mystery within different doctrinal *loci*, which shapes their doctrine of mystery to drastically different ends. However, they both reach for the concept of mystery to counter the ever-human temptation of idolatry, mastery, and control of God. Which concept of mystery guards best against idolatry? Ultimately, the answer to this question depends on one's doctrine of God.¹⁰² Different decisions about the doctrinal location of mystery reflect divergent commitments in the doctrine of God. Darkness and unknowing are not neutral concepts but keep company with specifically theological claims. Kevin Hector identifies the equation of transcendence with distance as a key assumption in apophatic theology. The assumption is "that the otherness of God (or objects) requires that there be a gap between God and that which human persons can know or experience."¹⁰³ It is precisely this commitment that guarantees the failure of all language and requires a principled commitment to mystery as divine darkness and the *Deus absconditus*. However, this is a conception of transcendence that assumes what God can or cannot do before revelation in Christ is considered—it is derived from reflection on creation. If in Christ, "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,"¹⁰⁴ such that "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father,"¹⁰⁵ can invocation of darkness and unknowing really be the best way to avoid idolatry? Divine darkness is no less a possible idolatrous concept that can be used to master God than any other.

Barth locates mystery in soteriology due to his commitment to base the doctrine of God's eternal being on revelation in Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁶ Humanity learns what transcendence or love or freedom mean by looking to what God has

101 CD II/2, 159.

102 It is worth noting that the definition of idolatry changes based on one's concept of God. For Barth, idolatry is imposing human conceptions of the divine on God that are not derived from revelation in Christ. In contrast, apophatic theologians define idolatry as the mistaking of the creature for the Creator.

103 Kevin Hector, *Theology without Metaphysics: God, Language, and the Spirit of Recognition*, Current Issues in Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 26. Hector is specifically addressing John Caputo and Jean-Luc Marion; however, his observation applies to the theologians discussed here.

104 Colossians 2:9, ESV.

105 John 14:9, ESV.

106 CD II/1, 257–272, especially 261.

actually done in Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁷ For Barth, transcendence is christologically revealed transcendence. The transcendent God takes on creaturely flesh to reveal Godself to the creature—a full, indirect revelation. This is the heart of the difference between Barth and apophatic theologians. Barth's doctrine of God does not regard it “too small a thing” for God to be *who God is* in human apprehension of God. God's taking on and taking up the creaturely in Christ does not leave one in darkness, because this is the temporal revelation of who God is in eternity. Barth attempts to avoid any idolatry or mastery of Christ by focusing on the event of revelation in which the Holy Spirit reveals Christ.

The question becomes: What is the starting point for one's doctrine of God and theology of transcendence? In Christ, God smashes all false idols and conceptions of what God should be like. The following warning of Barth is a fitting conclusion:

If we really soar up into these heights, and really reduce all concepts, images, words and signs to silence, and really think we can enter into the *idipsum* [self-same], it simply means that we willfully hurry past God, who descends in His revelation into this world of ours. Instead of finding Him where He Himself has sought us—namely, in His objectivity—we seek Him where He is not to be found, since He on His side seeks us in His Word.¹⁰⁸

The question is not whether theology has a concept of mystery, but where mystery is dogmatically located and what it emphasizes. For Barth, divine mystery is the light of Jesus Christ that cannot be surpassed.

107 Hector provides an excellent overview of Barth's theology of meaning and how revelation norms and judges our concepts, see *Theology without Metaphysics*, 125–146.

108 CD II/1, 11.