Issues in Systematic Theology

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Covenanted Solidarity

The Theological Basis of Karl Barth’s Opposition to Nazi Antisemitism and the Holocaust
To my beloved wife and son,

Sonia and Jack...
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Preface

The germinal idea of this book was sown in late 1994, a year of personal *Krisis* and intellectual stimulation, during which time I began to explore the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and, through them, the life and work of Karl Barth. Since that time, an initially hazy idea evolved and spawned a dozen new trains of thought which, in turn, melded and were moulded together to form the current work.

The core of the project grew from the rather naively constructed suspicion that, if Karl Barth did in fact resist the antisemitic policies of the Third Reich (an assumption which, on the basis of much historical literature, was not to be immediately accepted), then his resistance would surely have been predicated upon more than simple humanitarianism. It was almost unthinkable to me that on such a critical issue as the Nazis’ genocide of European Jewry, this most influential of Protestant theologians would leave his theology at home, as it were, when it came to formulating his own views and responses to it. Thus, the thesis to be explored very quickly crystallized into the following question: if Barth was opposed to the Holocaust and to (Nazi) Antisemitism more generally, on what *theological* basis was this opposition grounded? A thorough answer to this question was clearly never going to be provided simply by recourse to the index volume of the *Church Dogmatics* in an effort to find where and how Barth spoke of ‘Israel’ or ‘the Jews’. Rather, the motifs of revelation and election were the perhaps less obvious but ultimately more fruitful avenues down which an answer was to be found. Partly, this is due to the dominant place both motifs have within Barth’s dogmatic work. Partly also, it is due to the realization that both motifs were embraced and transformed by National Socialist ideology to legitimize the regime’s genocidal policy. Without losing sight of the historical context, the present work thus provides a more completely theological response to Barth’s understanding of and reaction to Nazi racism than has hitherto been produced by historians of the Holocaust and the *Kirchenkampf*.

Throughout the course of this project, which represents a slightly revised version of my doctoral dissertation, my research has been at times isolated and lonely. Nevertheless, if this loneliness has accrued to me, that does not mean that the ideas and insights which emerge
are likewise mine alone, although the mistakes most certainly are. On the contrary, there are many people whose help and guidance have been ingredient to the completion of this project, and to whom I owe grateful acknowledgment.

First, I must register my sincere thanks to the Australian Academy of the Humanities and the Faculty of Arts at the University of Western Australia, which provided me with grants of $1500 and $2000 respectively without which the publication of this book would have been severely hampered.

I must also pay warm tribute to my doctoral supervisor, Professor John Tonkin (History Department, University of Western Australia). His guiding counsel—first as a supervisor and then as a faculty colleague—has been a gentle constant throughout the course of my work. Moreover, his sensitivity to the differing needs in the various stages of the project has ensured smooth progress, even and especially when I could not see the way forward. It has been a joy to work with him, and his encouragement of both my project and my academic career has been vitally important.

More generally, the History Department at the University of W.A. as a whole has been overwhelmingly supportive, even when the theological nature of my research has been to them perhaps a trifle baffling. Australian universities, unlike their northern hemisphere counterparts, rarely include theological study as part of their core teaching or research programs and so it was necessary for me to phrase my theological endeavors in the language of historical discourse. I am grateful to the Department of History for allowing me that leeway! The Department was also most generous in its financial support for a research trip I undertook in 1995 to Europe, the United Kingdom and Canada (not a cheap excursion from the southern hemisphere!), despite laboring recently under severe budgetary constraints. Without this help, I would not have been able to complete the research and interview program which has proved crucial to my work.

From the first weeks of my doctoral candidature through to the present time, I have been expertly guided by Professor John S. Conway, one of the indisputable doyens of Kirchenkampf scholarship. With his cheerful readiness to offer suggestions, advice and comments on my draft chapters he most certainly ranks as a de facto co-

supervisor whose help has been invaluable. He was also more than willing to offer me a room in his house while I was in Vancouver, and the conversations we shared together during those few days were more significant than I can express. I am exceedingly grateful to him also for mentioning my name to others in the field, with many of whom I have since been able to have contact.

While on my travels overseas, I was honored that a number of leading scholars in Barthian, Kirchenkampf and Holocaust studies willingly donated their time to my questions. Doctor Hinrich Stoevesandt and his wife Elisabeth, the long-time curators of the Karl Barth-Archiv in Basel, not only helped me sort through various primary sources from among the Barth papers but they also arranged for me to meet Professor Eberhard Busch in Göttingen who was, at that time, finalizing his own book on Barth and the Jews. The Stoevesandts were a source of help to me even after I returned from my travels, by sending me archival material I needed. The Karl Barth-Archiv has been well-served by them over the years, and I wish them a long and happy retirement.

Professor Busch in Göttingen, on hearing that I was engaged in a similar project to his own, was kind enough to let me study the typescript of his seminal book, Unter dem Bogen des einen Bundes. He provided me with a room at the Karl Barth-Institut (Göttingen) in which to study the typescript, and readily answered my questions as they arose. Obviously, my own work differs substantially from his, but I am indebted to him for the direction in which he pointed me.

Similarly, it was a delight to spend a day in the home of the late Professor Eberhard Bethge and his wife Renate. They lavished kindness, food and drink upon me, and were exceedingly generous in showing me the original letters and papers from prison written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The talks I had with Professor Bethge will remain in my memory for a lifetime, not only because they were replete with information about Barth and Bonhoeffer and their understanding of the Jewish question, but also—indeed, particularly—because of the kind encouragement I was given. I count it a joy to have had the chance to meet with such a truly Christian couple, and I am enormously grateful to Professor Bethge for his encouragement to continue with the project at a time when I was considering giving it away. The academic world is the poorer for his
death, but is infinitely the richer for his years of dedication to keeping
alive Bonhoeffer’s legacy and for promoting most tenaciously Jewish-
Christian reconciliation.

Both Professors Thomas and James Torrance were a source of
much information about Barth when I visited them in Edinburgh. The
informal lessons in theology I was honored to receive from them
during my all-too brief stay in Scotland have been a major point of
reference to me throughout the course of my research. I am especially
grateful for their insistence that I return to the Reformers
(particularly Calvin) and the Church Fathers such as Athanasius in
order truly to understand Barth’s theology. Both men are giants in the
English-speaking theological world, and I am deeply thankful that
they were so willing to offer their time, advice and knowledge to such
a novice as myself.

Professor David Demson (Emmanuel College, Toronto) was also
thoroughly welcoming. The discussions I had with him, in the college
and at his home, served a very great purpose in clarifying and
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Demson for drawing my attention to the link in the Church
Dogmatics between the rejection of Israel and the rejection of the
apostolate as the two sides of the same term. More concretely, he was
my first link with Professor George Hunsinger at the Princeton Center
for Karl Barth Studies who was, in turn, instrumental in getting my
dissertation accepted for publication.

Professor Bruce McCormack of Princeton has been another
constant source of advice, most particularly in terms of Karl Barth’s
early years. Email correspondence with him, as well as his ground-
breaking 1995 book, have been an invaluable source of instruction for
me. It will be obvious to all who read this book, and who are familiar
with Professor McCormack’s work, that I owe a heavy debt of
gratitude to him, despite the fact that we have as yet been unable to
meet.

Lastly, to my wife and son. I am immensely grateful to them both
for their love, encouragement and support throughout these past
years. They, more than anyone, know the highs and lows with which
we as a family have had to contend during the writing of this book.
Even when practicalities and commonsense suggested that to continue
the work would have been unwise, they have maintained their faith in

me and in the validity of the project. But for them, this book would
simply be the product of five years’ isolated and lonely research. As it
is, it stands as the culmination of the five most enjoyable years of my
life so far. And so it is with deep love and immense gratitude that I
dedicate this work to Sonia and Jack, without whom...

Mark R. Lindsay
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November 2000.
Introduction

The significance of comparative genocide studies notwithstanding, the Jewish Holocaust of the Second World War stands undoubtedly in a league of its own. Not only does it do so as an event *sui generis* in its own right, but it also stands apart on account of the vast array of Holocaust-related books, films and other memorials that have accumulated over the past fifty-odd years. According to George Kren and Leon Rappoport, by the end of the twentieth century more would have been written about the Holocaust than about any other single topic in history.1 Nevertheless, the Nazis’ ‘Final Solution to the Jewish Question’, with its particularly searing brand of Antisemitism, must be regarded not in isolation but in conjunction with the presence or absence of opposition to it, including the problematic question of theological-ecclesiastical resistance. It is in this context that the German *Kirchenkampf* of the 1930s—the struggle “of the Church against itself for itself”2—emerges as a defining theme of Holocaust studies, as has been demonstrated annually since 1970 in the form of the International Scholars’ Conference on the German Church Struggle and the Holocaust. While this type of multivalent approach may appear to run the risk of expanding the topic into even more unmanageable proportions, it has become increasingly clear within scholarly study of the Holocaust that the Churches, and their theology, are inextricably connected with both the perpetration of and opposition to the Jewish genocide. The topic is thereby expanded—but necessarily so.

The reason for adopting this theology-oriented approach to the Holocaust is not to exalt individuals, still less the institutional Churches. Such a project would lack legitimacy for, as Barth himself said, the visibility of the Church renders all exaltations impossible. “We cannot take refuge from [the Church’s visibility] in a kind of wonderland. The *credo ecclesiam* can and necessarily will involve much distinguishing and questioning, much concern and shame. It can and necessarily will be a very critical *credo*” (CD IV/1, 654). This is particularly true of the Church in the Third Reich. The reason behind the adoption of this approach is, rather, to put into their proper historical perspective the theological-ecclesiastical reasons why resistance was, or was not, offered. In other words, this particular
methodology implies no hidden agenda. There is no appropriate place for positing post hoc excuses for the Churches' silence in the face of—and, at worst, implication in—the Holocaust. It was an ecclesiastical silence that was recognized and condemned by only a very few at the time, among whom rank Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth. A somewhat larger, but by no means overwhelming or representative, number of leading Protestants confessed the Church's guilt in the Stuttgart Declaration of October 1945. Even there, however, there was no mention made of the Church's failure in respect of "the worst atrocity of all, the extermination of the Jews." It was not until the 1950s that official Church synods were willing to accept Christian guilt for the Holocaust.

If there is an agenda within this methodology it lies, rather, in taking the theological element seriously, and assessing it on its own grounds, while keeping it embedded in the actuality of historical enquiry. Tom Torrance has argued that

Rigorous scientific procedure makes it incumbent upon us first to essay an interpretation of the Bible within its own distinct framework, on its own intelligible grounds, and to try to make rational and religious sense of what it has to say about God and the world... without prejudging all that from an alien framework of thought.4

Barth himself insisted on this point. As Eberhard Jüngel has put it, theology is possible only on a theological basis.5 The same principle can and should be applied to this project. That it is the theologically-conditioned protests of Karl Barth against National Socialism and its inherent Antisemitism that is the focus of this study impels us to judge these protests historically, according to the temporal and spatial context in which Barth was situated. But these protests must also, indeed predominantly, be judged theologically, according to the standard by which Barth judged his own life and work. In Camfield's words, "no understanding of Barth is possible wherein he is not taken seriously as a theologian."6

It is regrettably true, however, that in the field of historical scholarship, the work done on the Holocaust has remained largely historical. Since 1968 when, in his book The Nazi Persecution of the Churches,7 John Conway lamented the lack of material on the Nazi era that dealt with the Church situation, much has been done to redress the balance. Conway himself has further added to the corpus through numerous articles and conference papers. Ernst Helmreich took up the challenge in 1979 in one of the most comprehensive studies of the German Church Struggle to have appeared so far in English.8 Even in his study, however, while the book is laudable in many respects, it is the internal and external Church-political conflicts that predominate. The Nazi anti-Jewish measures are noted, but scarce attention is paid to the deeper theological issues involved. As a piece of historical research, Helmreich's study is hard to ignore. But it is unfortunate that the image of the Church that is presented, in this as in most other scholarly analyses of the Kirchenkampf, is of the Church as primarily a political rather than a theological entity. It could be argued that such a representation is no more than a realistic depiction of the German Church as it in fact acted. Even if that is the case, the political stance adopted by the German Church in the Third Reich was theologically defended. Consequently, to understand the process by which the Church found itself in that position, it is necessary to consider the developments in theology that enabled that compromise to be made.

Pleasingly, the historiography of the Holocaust within the English-speaking academic world is no longer as blind to the necessity of theological analysis as it once was. Robert Ericksen's Theologians Under Hitler9 offers a comparative study of three gleichgeschaltet theologians, Paul Althaus, Emanuel Hirsch and Gerhard Kittel. Ericksen does not discuss the Kirchenkampf as such. Rather, and this is the merit of his book, he takes in utter, but critical seriousness, the theologies of the three men under scrutiny. He is, therefore, able to critique their nationalistic, pro-Nazi, antisemitic theologies on their own grounds, without divorcing his assessment from the particular historical context. Richard Gutteridge has passed a similarly critical judgment on the antisemitic theology of the German Evangelical Church.10 As with Ericksen, his aim is not to plumb the depths of the Kirchenkampf, but to demonstrate how the non-Naziified Church failed the Jews and justified this callousness by its theological dogmas. The approach Gutteridge takes is worthy of note. Conversely, by trying to encompass the entire DEK (Deutsche Evangelische Kirche) in his
scope, he passes all too briefly over the figure of Karl Barth. The Swiss theologian receives quite some attention from Gutteridge but, because of the superficiality with which his theology is considered (a function of Gutteridge's wide field of view), Barth's actual understanding of the Jewish issue emerges only ambiguously and, at times, erroneously.

Victoria Barnett has recently contributed to the flow of Kirchenkampf literature with her 1992 offering, For the Soul of the People. In this book, Barnett views the opposition to the totalitarian claims of Nazism from the perspective of the Confessing Church, making particular note of the internal tensions and divisions which hindered that part of the Protestant camp. Barnett is not as exhaustive on the political intricacies of the Church Struggle as are Conway and Helmreich and, once again, her understanding of the Bekennende Kirche's attitude towards the Jews and Antisemitism, although discussed at some length, lacks real theological depth. What is especially gratifying about her book, however, is the extended treatment given to the post-War legacy of the Confessing Church, notably in terms of 'guilt confession'. Furthermore, by making frequent use of oral testimony given by Confessing Church members, Barnett has been able to take into serious account the self-conscious perspectives of the Confessors themselves. By doing so, she opens the door to a more profound assessment of the theological issues involved in the Kirchenkampf and the Holocaust, even though she does not herself fully exploit this potential.

Arguably the most significant and comprehensive piece of scholarship on the Kirchenkampf is Klaus Scholder's two volume work The Churches and the Third Reich. In this magisterial study, Scholder details the convolutions and complexities of the German Church Struggle so deeply that, after one thousand pages, his narrative has reached only October 1934. Sadly, Scholder died prematurely in 1985, and was unable to extend his project beyond the Dahlem Synod. Perhaps more than any other scholar of the subject, however, Scholder has successfully constructed a synthesis of the historical, social and political forces of the period, and the theological arguments and counter-arguments that gave a metaphysical potency to the conflict. It is this synthetical methodology that, despite Scholder's work, has remained under-utilized, and which this study intends to exploit more completely. That Scholder did not tackle the vexing problem of the Churches and their relationship to the Holocaust is a function of his untimely death. There is little doubt that, had he lived to complete his work, he would have confronted both the historical and theological issues of that matter head-on.

It is this gap which the present book intends to go some way towards filling. Neither the Kirchenkampf nor the Holocaust themselves form the focus of this study. They are, instead, the ever-present definitional events around which the discussion revolves. Neither will the diverse theologies within the German Evangelical Church as a whole be the focal points, for such a project would suffer from the same deficiencies as Gutteridge's book without building on its positive features. Rather, in the foreground will stand Karl Barth or, more precisely, his words and deeds of protest against Nazism and its antisemite program, and their theological foundations. Will Herberg has correctly written that Barth's overriding concern was always to preach the Word of God. But, precisely inasmuch as he did so, he was necessarily led to concern himself with, and comment on, the political and social issues of the day. In fact, as Eduard Thurneysen said, "Karl Barth's words from the beginning was a 'political word'...Karl Barth as a proclaimer of the biblical Word had also a very vigorous and concrete word to speak to the actual political problems...in the context of the world events of those days." The responsible Christian, in Barth's view, needs and uses both Bible and newspaper, never one without the other, because political existence is a part of theological existence.

That both theologians and historians have overlooked this nexus between theology and political-ethical action evident in Barth with respect to the Jewish question, is the presupposition of this book. Arthur Duncan-Jones, Scholder and Helmreich totally ignore Barth when they discuss the Nazi persecution of the Jews. In his book, The Church's Confession Under Hitler, Cochrane also fails to make clear Barth's rejection of Antisemitism, despite seeing correctly the intimate link between the Kirchenkampf and the Jewish Question. To be fair, in his contribution to Littell and Locke's 1974 collection of essays, he takes note of Barth's sermon on 10 December 1933, in which Barth insisted that the Jewish Question was the question of faith in Jesus Christ. With this in mind, Cochrane is able to argue that,
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although the Barmen Declaration had little if anything to say at a superficial level to the question of Israel, “The fact is that except for Israel there would have been no Synod of Barmen and no Barmen Declaration.” That Cochrane has elsewhere understood that “Barth and Barmen are inextricably bound together”, allows one to argue that if, in fact, the Barmen Declaration did have a profound message of solidarity with Israel, it was largely due to the realization to which Barth had come in December of 1933. More recently, Daniel Jonah Goldhagen has harshly implied that Barth was an ecclesiastical representative of that “eliminationist antisemitism” which, according to Goldhagen’s thesis, has permeated German culture throughout history. Goldhagen (reluctantly) admits that Barth was a theological defender of the Jews, but tenaciously insists that this was in spite of a deep-seated personal Antisemitism. What is of greater scholarly concern is Goldhagen’s propensity to cite quotations out of context, which he does with one of Barth’s lectures from July 1944. By quoting only a fragment of the lecture which on face value does appear to support his claim, Goldhagen totally ignores the lecture’s theological nature. He also passes over the broader historical context in which the lecture was given. He ignores the fact that at the same time as this lecture was delivered, Barth was organizing a petition for aid on behalf of the Hungarian Jews, and was working on Church Dogmatics III/1 which is, if anything, more theological and practically compassionate towards the Jews. It is this complete failure, which Goldhagen personifies, to interact with Barth’s theology, and even with the basic chronology of his life, which motivates the present study.

There is no doubt that, by the outbreak of World War II, Barth was very much aware of Jewish suffering and was doing and saying what he could in protest. After Kristallnacht in November 1938, he lamented that “[m]any of the best men in the Confessing Church still close their eyes to the insight that the Jewish problem...[has] become a question of the faith.” Indeed, from as early as 1936, Barth was financially supporting the Confessing Church in its underground aid to German Jews.

The most intriguing and controversial question, however, is how early Barth came to a recognition of the significance of the Jewish Question. The traditionally accepted thesis is that it was Bonhoeffer,

not Barth, who first correctly realized the danger of Nazi Antisemitism. Gerlach, for example, claims that Barth judged Bonhoeffer to be “too dramatic” in the latter’s radical opposition to the Aryan Paragraph. Certainly, in a letter dated 11 September 1933, Barth suggested that Bonhoeffer wait, for “[it] could well be that the conflict [Zusammenstoß] might take place at a still more central point” (GS, 125). It is also true that Barth wrote to Bethge in 1967 admitting his slowness, relative to Bonhoeffer, in comprehending the seriousness of the Jewish persecutions.

Does this, however, exhaust the question? Barnett’s study suggests that it most certainly does not. While some scholars, in the theological-ethical twilight after Auschwitz, see aspects of Barth’s and Bonhoeffer’s Christology as problematic in relation to Christian-Jewish relationships—Willis argues that Barth’s theology produces an “eternal Antisemitism”—Barnett prefers to claim that, in 1933–34, these two men were almost alone in their opposition to the government’s racial policies. As Helmut Gollwitzer has said, At first, we thought that the Jews deserved our pity, and that the Jewish Christians needed our brotherly solidarity...[That] we had to help the Jews in Germany because they were a threatened people. In the meantime, Karl Barth had progressed further theoretically. His basis for demanding that we help the Jews was that they are the people of God.

Evidently, the questions of Barth’s response to Nazi Antisemitism and the chronology of its development remain open. Gollwitzer’s comment, however, gives a clue to its resolution. Whatever the answer may be, it is to be found in Barth’s theological journey, for throughout his life and career, the primacy of the Word of God remained unchallenged. Above all, Barth wanted to speak of the grace of God, which necessarily entailed speaking about Jesus Christ. But in speaking of Christ, Barth had also to speak of Israel.

[What] are we then, without Israel? Anyone who rejects and persecutes the Jews also rejects and persecutes the One who died for the sins of the Jews and therefore for our sins, too...[A]ntisemitism is a sin against the Holy Spirit, for Antisemitism means the rejection of the grace of God.
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If historical scholarship is to approach a more sharply defined answer to the question of Barth’s response to Antisemitism, it must cease its preoccupation with Barth’s overtly ‘political’ statements. It will be in his dogmatic work, if anywhere, that we shall find the key. Conversely, if theological scholarship is to adequately assess Barth’s understanding of Israel, covenant and election, it must be prepared to locate his views on these subjects in the historical specificity of Nazism.

Within the vast expanse of Holocaust and Church Struggle literature, therefore, this project finds its uniqueness and clarity through its focus on a single figure. Whereas at the start of this book the anticipated criticism was that a Church-theological approach to Holocaust research broadened the topic into unmanageability, the potential criticism now is that this Barthian focus narrows the gaze too tightly. This book will show that, not only is this reservation unfounded, but that it is only by such a concentration that a theology as complex as Barth’s, with all it has to say—explicitly and implicitly—about the Jews and Antisemitism, can be adequately assessed.

Introduction

NOTES

7. J.S. Conway, The Nazi Persecution of the Churches, 1933–1945, (London: Weldenfeld & Nicolson, 1968). There was, of course, scholarly work done on the Kirchenkampf prior to the late 1960s. In 1948, Wilhelm Niemoller produced Kampf und Zeugnis der Bekennenden Kirche, (Bielefeld, 1948). Heinrich Hermann’s Kirche in Kampf—Dokumente des Widerstands und des Aufbaus in der Evangelischen Kirche Deutschlands von 1933 bis 1945, (Tübingen, 1950) should also be mentioned. These works were, however, representative of the corpus of books written by Confessing Church members, and motivated by a desire to justify the actions of the Confessing Church.
Chapter One
The Context of Resistance: Theological and Political Inhabitants to Widerstand

The Church-State Relationship in History

The Historikerstreit of the 1980s is ample evidence that the concept of ‘Sonderweg’ in any historical analysis of Germany is both highly problematic and at times viciously controversial. If one takes a theologically-conditioned historiography into account, it becomes apparent that one of the reasons for the controversy is that it inevitably seems to surround the concept is because to adopt it is to risk an at least partial validation of the idea that the German Volk is or was in some sense divinely ‘chosen’ for political and cultural greatness; an idea that was widely and passionately believed in the nineteenth century.1 Nevertheless, in spite of its risky and debatable nature, the Sonderweg theory does appear to hold some credibility when one considers the complex relationship that has existed between the (Protestant) Church and the State in Germany since the Reformation. John Moses has spoken of a “uniquely Lutheran attitude towards the State”, a statement which perhaps implies as much about Germany as the land in which Lutheranism was born as it does about Lutheranism as a religious confession.2 If this unique attitude was originally intended to protect the integrity of both the secular and the spiritual realms—the one against theocracy, the other against Erastianism—it nevertheless, in time, inculturated a politically quietistic stance by the German Evangelical Church, regardless of who held civic power. The result was a curiously symbiotic relationship between Lutheranism and the State, summed up neatly in the phrase cius regio, eius religio. It was this symbiotic relationship which, during the years 1933–45, acted as a powerful inhabitant to effective and generalized resistance by the Evangelical Church to the Nazi regime.

One of the first indications that Martin Luther’s Church would actively follow a politically pragmatic approach was in the mid-1520s when it appealed for secular protection in response to the Peasants’ Revolt. Initially intended as an emergency measure, this intrusion of