Regular Article

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Between the Times – and Sometimes Beyond: An Essay in Dialectical Theology and its Critique of Religion and “Religion”

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Abstract: This paper gives a systematic account of Dialectical Theology (DT) and its surprisingly ramified usage of the concept of religion on the backdrop of recent debates about the “return of religion.” First, the positional context between Schleiermacher and Barth is sketched. Second, the highly divergent positions of Bultmann, Barth, Brunner as well as Gogarten and Tillich are presented – always in regard to their sometimes programmatic, sometimes rather hidden references to “religion” between its facticity and normativity. Third and by way of conclusion, it is suggested to restrict “religion” as a concept to non-theological disciplines, i.e., to treat “religion” as a strictly empirical and sociological term, whereas theology is concerned with faith that belongs to a very different game than religion, as DT helps to clarify.

Keywords: Dialectical Theology, Barth, Brunner, Bultmann, Tillich, Gogarten, the concept of religion

*Has the dawn ever seen your eyes?
Have the days made you so unwise?
Realize, you are.
Had you talked to the winds of time,
Then you'd know how the waters rhyme,
Taste of wine,
How can you know where you've been?
In time you'll see the sign
And realize your sin.
Will you know how the seed is sown?
All your time has been overgrown,
Never known.
Have you walked on the stones of years?
When you speak, is it you that hears?
Are your ears full?
You can't hear anything at all.¹*

1 The liberal “heresy”: a prelude

Giving an account of the current state of religion in the West is, often enough, based on one specific metaphor: “return.” That metaphorical framework is intentionally or implicitly ambivalent, and it is precisely this ambivalence between sketching a specific development and leaving space for its

¹ Emerson, Lake and Palmer, *Tarkus* (1971); by the way, an absolute masterpiece of psychedelic rock music!

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interpretation that might explain the success of this metaphor for diagnosing religion and its conceptualizations nowadays. But obviously, that term itself just invites further questions: what exactly is it that “returns”? God, piety, spirituality, or religion?² With what kind of return are we dealing with here? Is it a sort of going back to a former state? Or is the “returning” a transformation that does not leave the original state untouched? And what does the reaction to that return look like? Is the return good news or rather something we should fear or even fight?

All three questions hang together in ramified ways. If, for instance, God is the object (or even subject and agent) of that return it would appear to be a highly metaphysical and precarious claim that he changed or even transformed Himself within and by that return.³ And this creates a difficulty that leads to the deeper problem of whether the idea of God’s return makes sense in the first place, independent of our reactions to it in “fear and trembling.” Rather, it seems religion as a social system or spiritual formation is a proper candidate of a return that is open to a transformation or even progress.⁴

It is, however, this alternative between God and religion that captures *the* essential option in modern theology: Is God and God’s reality the theological theme, or is it religion as the emblematic structure of a specific self-understanding and spiritual practice with which theological studies are or should be concerned? The return of God or religion is, *sociologically* speaking, the emergence of a topic and interest among particular forms of life. Thus, the return means that religious topics gain a formerly lost grip on social groups or layers. *Theologically* speaking, however, the return of God or religion denotes a decisive choice in dogmatics. Here, the return signifies a shift within theology from religion to God or, as in recent times, the other way around where religion gradually replaced God as the central and essential theme of theology as *theo*-logy.⁵

One could even categorize theology as a discipline alongside that very alternative: *either religion or God*.⁶ The return of the one was, accordingly, the theological decline of the other. Hence, either religious belief is considered to be in continuation with its cultural surroundings or God is the ultimate counterpart of what is called culture and religion as one important part of it; either religion is embedded in the varieties of cultural forms and structures or God’s reality is the interruption and crisis of human endeavors; either the gesture of affirmation and augmentation of culture’s latent potentials governs the intellectual scene, or the counterpolitics of limitation, critique, and delineation is at the heart of every theological comment that deserves its name.

Traditionally, Friedrich Schleiermacher is taken to represent the most effective turning point from God as the theological topos to religion as the post-enlightenment substitute. It would be inadequate to claim that the church father of the nineteenth century is not speaking of God anymore, but only of “God” as a non-cognitive expression and a conceptual entailment of one’s religious consciousness. If even classical elements of the doctrine of God cannot be reduced to or derived from a religious “feeling,” it is no longer justifiable as a proper chapter of theology.⁷

2 Cf. Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of*; Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*; Graf, *Die Wiederkehr der Götter. Religion in der modernen Kultur*, esp. 17.

3 We have the theological inversion of this scenario in Hegelian versions of the God-is-dead theology; see Altizer, “Theology and the Death of God,” esp. 136 and 139. Here Altizer includes interesting references to the early Karl Barth.

4 Obviously, Hegelian approaches (including process theologies) would react critically to that version above; see, for instance, Wagner, *Metamorphosen des modernen Protestantismus*, esp. chapter 2; see on Wagner’s account also Schnurrenberger, *Der Umweg der Freiheit. Falk Wagners Theorie des christlichen Geistes*, esp. part 3.

5 See Wittekind, *Theologie religiöser Rede. Ein systematischer Grundriss*, 60 and 72.

6 For Dialectical Theology this strict *either/or* is crucially more than a heuristically helpful orientation that allows for nuances and more concrete qualifications; cf. Brunner, “Die Grenzen der Humanität,” esp. 262 and 276.

7 It is, of course, not an easy task to draw that line between legitimate statements and statements exceeding the realm of religious consciousness. For instance, it is not clear at all whether the Trinitarian dogma is an element of theological reflection on the basis of human consciousness and its religious signature, according to Schleiermacher himself and within Schleiermacherian conditions resp. See Slenczka, “Das Dogma als Ausdruck des religiösen Selbstverhältnisses. Trinitätslehre bei Schleiermacher, Troeltsch und Tillich,” esp. 674 (Slenczka holds that the Trinitarian dogma plays a major role for Schleiermacher and is indeed an essential expression of the human religious consciousness; referring to Schleiermacher, *Der*

Now, it is true that Schleiermacher conceptualizes theology as a quasi-transcendental analysis of human piety (*Frömmigkeit*).⁸ More precisely, theology unfolds the (conceptual or logical) conditions for the actually existing duality between ultimate freedom and the feeling of absolute dependence, between grace and sin. Nevertheless, there is a different line of thought in Schleiermacher, not only in his *Glaubenslehre* but also in his early 1799 *Speeches*, when he attempts to give an account of religion's autonomy. His famous distinction between metaphysics, morals, and religion serves precisely that very purpose. As soon as this is taken into consideration, one might have less difficulty appreciating Schleiermacher's "anthropocentric" starting point while admitting that it implies, at the same time, the serious endeavor to avoid every mixture between religion as a genuine human expression and the variety of its counterparts. The fact that Schleiermacher concentrates on metaphysics as well as morals is, partly, due to the topics of the debate among his contemporaries, ca. 1800. "Metaphysics" represents, to a large extent, the classical tradition of *theologia naturalis* in its attempt to infer God from the world. "Morals," however, stands for the attempt to reduce religious utterances to their moral relatives as in the Kantian and Fichtean traditions.⁹

Schleiermacher clarifies these distinctions by connecting metaphysics, morals, and religion to *specific activities or faculties*. Even though all three of them are woven with the same fabric, as Schleiermacher holds, that fabric is dealt with in different modes: metaphysics has to do with classifying the universe and inferring the necessary from the contingency of the world (*thinking*); morals is concerned with elaborating a system of duties or a class of certain goods (*acting*); religion, however, is the "sense and taste for the infinite" (*"Sinn und Geschmack für's Unendliche"*).¹⁰ Although Schleiermacher theologizes "from below" he defends the claim that religion has its "own province" in contrast to other modes of relating to oneself. Religion possesses, as he also states, its specific "point of view," that allows for doing everything "with religion" (or "religiously") and not because of or "out of religion."¹¹ Accordingly, religion constitutes its own, i.e., a specific and irreducible mode of relating to the "universe," a way of dealing and interacting with everything in seeing the "infinite" and "absolute" in the finite and relative.¹²

Schleiermacher's claim, then, is twofold: theology has to analyze religion (and by doing that, God and "God") to fulfill its task; and religion is an autonomous "province" of the human mind. The first claim is a *methodological* one, the second a *theological* proposal;¹³ both are *normative*. While it is true that the Schleiermacherian way of doing theology entails at least the danger to lose God as theology's object by reducing the theological work to religion,¹⁴ it is equally true that Schleiermacher tries to build a cordon around religion for separating it against a devastating mixture with other modes of relating to the "universe." Now, it is crucial to appreciate the combination of both normative claims, because Schleiermacher's critics (such as Barth, see Section 3.2) tend to concentrate only on the first one, while neglecting the second.

It is a common phenomenon that a label given to an intellectual school, direction, or orientation is, often enough, not a self-description but rather derived from its adversary. This is also true for

christliche Glaube, § 186); see deHart, "Eberhard Jüngel on the Structure of Theology;" for a different account cf. von Sass, "Nachmetaphysische Dreifaltigkeit;" Barth, "Jüngel und die Transformation der Trinitätslehre," 308–9.

⁸ See Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube*, § 4 ("Leitsatz").

⁹ Cf. Fichte, "Der Grund unsers Glaubens an eine göttliche Weltregierung," esp. 125 and 130–1.

¹⁰ Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion*, 24. English version: *On Religion*, 21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 38–9, German version.

¹² Cf. *ibid.*, 37 and 70. This apologetic endeavor was not sufficiently valued and estimated by Dialectical Theology; see, in particular, Emil Brunner's polemic against the Schleiermacherian "provinces" in his *Mysticism and the Word*, 25 and 60.

¹³ However, it is a disputed question in which sense this proposal is a "theological" one. There is a weaker version saying that it is theological only to the extent that religion(s) is/are concerned; there is a stronger version entailing that Schleiermacher's claim in regard to different "provinces" is a genuinely theological (or, dogmatic) one. I am inclined to prefer this second option. Thanks to Notger Slenczka and a reviewer of this journal for commenting on this issue (whereas both go with the first version [or the opposite of the second one], it seems, i.e., both think that the claim about different "provinces" is a non-dogmatic and, thus, philosophical doctrine).

¹⁴ That was already Hegel's fear; see Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*, 106.

Schleiermacher and the aftermath of his influence on the theology of an entire century. What has been criticized as “liberal theology” is, hence, a retrospective characterization provided by those who said eagerly “farewell” to what has been considered to be Schleiermacher’s legacy: replacing God with religion and substituting *theo*-logy with a religious analysis of culture and human consciousness.¹⁵ As we have seen, this is only one side of the truth. This judgment is only based on the observation that liberal theologians tend to start with religion, not with God; but the other side of Schleiermacher’s approach is often suppressed, namely, the attempt to establish religion as an irreducible “province.”

It is, I think, fair to say that Karl Barth, the antipode to this kind of liberal theology, is irresponsible for this one-sided critique. Barth is, at least sometimes, open about his admiration for Schleiermacher who is the “head” of modern theology.¹⁶ Nevertheless, for him Schleiermacher turns the doctrine of God into religious humanities; the classical position that God, faith, and the Word had claimed within the framework of reformation theology is now, Barth holds, taken by religion, culture, and feeling.¹⁷ Barth will stick to this assessment in his later *Church Dogmatics* by saying that modernistic theologies base the dogmatic insight on non-theological grounds and, therefore, fulfill what Ludwig Feuerbach has (in)famously claimed for theology in general: that the “secret” of theology lies in or even is anthropology.¹⁸

Schleiermacher or Barth – religion or God as theology’s starting point; that is, what the simple (or, simplistic) alternative looks like. The more prominent the one party had been, the stronger the critique of it had become. It is this critical interplay that creates theological identities and gives rise to labels that help to orient oneself by deliberately (and heuristically) neglecting nuances, details, differences, and ambivalences to be found in what has now been easily and comfortably categorized.¹⁹

What has been called Dialectical Theology (DT) is, partly, a result of this theological battle. Theologians such as the early Barth, and also Rudolf Bultmann, Emil Brunner, and Friedrich Gogarten, to some extent even Paul Tillich, reacted, with strong criticism, to their teachers who were, for them, all influenced – or even “poisoned” – by Schleiermacher and liberal theology. It was the devastating impression of the first World War that led to the most important breaking point in twentieth century theology. After decades of optimism, humanistically underwritten progress, and human self-confidence, an entire realm had fallen apart. The idea that faith and its institutionalized company, the church, could infiltrate culture and successively realize the “kingdom of God” on earth came, finally, to an end – that, at least, had been the debatable impression in the early 1920s. The extensive destruction, esp. in Europe, undermined the explicit coalition between faith and culture, between God and human endeavors. The group of dialectical theologians changed decisively the way of relating both poles to each other: not the “permanent wedding” between God and culture was now on the theological agenda, but the opposite statement that God means the ultimate crisis of culture. Not *God and culture*, but *God against culture* was now the slogan.²⁰

¹⁵ Interestingly, Ronald Dworkin presents himself implicitly as a Schleiermacherian in holding that religion is something “deeper” than God; and that the real religious element is the reality of values (similar to the “value philosophy” of Max Scheler and Nicolai Hartmann); see Ronald, *Religion without God*, 11, 19, 24.

¹⁶ Barth, *Die protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert*, 379.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 410. – It is, however, important to see that Schleiermacher tries to exclude a radical atheism by defending religion as a fact of human life. Furthermore, Schleiermacher stands for a different move than the Kantian one; whereas Kant saves a place for religion in restricting justified knowledge, Schleiermacher separates knowledge from feeling “religiously” altogether. N.B.: Schleiermacher belonged to the “educated despisers of religion” when he was reading Kant before changing sides ten years later; see Arndt, “Schleiermacher und die Religionskritik der Aufklärung,” 653 and 655–6.

¹⁸ See Barth, KD I,1 §§ 1–7, 35–6 and 41; Feuerbach, *Wesen des Christentums*. Vol 1, 6 and 19–20.

¹⁹ Cf. Nimmo, “Real Insights along False Paths: With Karl Barth and Against the Stream in Theological Ethics,” esp. 139–40.

²⁰ These labels are borrowed from Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*, chapters 2 and 3.

2 “Religion” and its counterparts. A very short terminological sketch

As things stand, it could seem that Schleiermacher serves as the “bad cop” seen from a dialectic-theological perspective, and that the concept of religion is the terminological tool for dismissing the dogmatic counterpart.²¹ The result would be a clear cut between theological programs starting with religion and from God, respectively. An unhappy either/or-situation would emerge that is basically structured as a strict dualism between religion as the sum of the human condition and God as its fundamental crisis.

The logic of dualistic distinctions has further implications.²² First, if the duality between God and religion is taken to be *complementary* (either/or – and no third element), then the question arises whether both elements are on the same level, i.e., whether there is an equilibrium between both poles. In other words, is the distinction a neutral one or is it normatively charged? Second, one has to establish that twofold distinction from a certain perspective, that is necessarily included by the duality, i.e., either it is provided from one side of the duality or the other. In other words, distinguishing between God/religion could be made by a theology as doctrine of God or by its counterpart, theology as a religious analysis of culture. Third, this latter element is relative to what Niklas Luhmann has described as *re-entry* (following George Spencer Brown’s *Laws of Form*).²³ The duality A/B is drawn from the A- or B-perspective; and, the duality of A/B reemerges on both sides as a mode of self-critical reflection, i.e., one could distinguish between A and B on the A-side as well as on the B-pole. In other words, A criticizes itself by asking whether it is truly A or B, while B is making the analogous move.²⁴ Applying the combination of these three aspects to DT amounts to stating that (i) the distinction in question is, in fact, normative, and necessarily so, (ii) the distinction is an act of self-location since DT itself belongs to one side of the duality, and (iii) the critic against the other side should lead to critical reflexivity by “re-entering” the initial distinction on the level of the distinguished elements.

The result of this strict duality is simple but also simplistic: (i*) DT disregards the other side, because it represents a theological confusion, at least seen from DT’s perspective; hence, the duality is, obviously, normative and, more precisely, pejorative. (ii*) In defending God as theology’s nucleus, DT tends to be critical of religion (as a given reality) and “religion” (as a concept). (iii*) By applying the distinction between the two types of theology to DT itself, DT shows its self-awareness for the danger of missing God as its essential theme, i.e., to latently confuse God and religion, or to implicitly confuse God with an idol.²⁵

Now, things become a little bit more complicated, since the concept of religion as it is used by dialectical theologians oscillates between different meanings that are not fully captured by the scenario just outlined. In general, the following six meanings of “religion” should be differentiated:

- (a) *Substantial*: This meaning of religion is based on *specific contents* that a practice (or a set of convictions) has to entail for it to be legitimately called religion; for instance, religion must imply the claim that there is a transcendent reality or that religion is necessarily connected to the institution of prayer (allegedly, encompassing the commitment to that transcendent – and personal – reality).²⁶
- (b) *Functional*: This meaning of religion is derived from the *purpose* of that very practice; for instance, religion must orient its members or unify them under a certain idea, ideal, or experience.²⁷

²¹ Arguably, this is the reading of earlier reactions to DT after World War II, such as God-is-dead theologies and their cognates; see Hamilton, “The Death of God Theology,” 27–8; Lyas, “On the Coherence of Christian Atheism.”

²² Cf. for a version of “theological dualism” Ebeling, “Luther und Schleiermacher,” 413; von Sass, “Zur Genese des theologischen Dualismus. Ein problemgeschichtliches Exposé in drei Akten.”

²³ See Luhmann, *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft*, 83–91 and 479–91.

²⁴ Cf. Dalferth, “Andererseits. Zur Phänomenologie des Entscheidens.”

²⁵ See also, from a phenomenological perspective, Marion, *God Without Being*, 7–24.

²⁶ See the insightful discussion in Stenmark’s “The End of the Theism-Atheism Debate? A Response to Vincent Brümmer.”

²⁷ In this (isolated) sense, sports could be regarded as religion. As another and more classical example serves, again, Hegel holding that religion is the virtual “space where a race gives itself the definition of truth;” see Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt*, 100.

- (c) *Hermeneutical*: This meaning of religion underlines a certain dynamic that is realized in religious practices, groups, and institutions, namely, that religions locate the space where its members interpret their world, themselves, and God in a certain way and by certain (conceptual, narrative, and pictorial) means; for instance, religion gives the interpretive tools to deal with the senseless, unexplainable, or even evil in a symbolically structured way.²⁸
- (d) *Heuristic*: This meaning of religion is a tribute to the problems connected to (a), (b), and (c). From the difficulties in finding general contents, purposes, or dynamics common to what one wants to denote as religion, one can infer the heuristic status of religion as something that is not “out there,” but that is based on our grasp on certain phenomena that we want to call “religious.”
- (e) *Sociological*: This meaning of religion is, arguably, the common one in treating religion as a social system in relation to others; including the shift from religion as a dominating system via integrating it with other systems such as politics, arts, and economics too, finally, abandoning religion as a proper system combined with a new leading system, like economics nowadays. Central here are questions regarding the institutional membership or spiritual allegiance to churches or religious orientations, as well as the declining or increasing influence of religion in the public sphere and the transformation of religion itself.²⁹
- (f) *Theological*: This meaning of religion is necessarily normative since “religion” is here considered to represent the human endeavor of relating to God under the condition of fallenness and sin. “Religion,” then, serves as a critical term in contrast to its dogmatic counterpart: God. Hence, a religion without religion or “Christianity without religion” (Bonhoeffer, “religion loses Christendom”)³⁰ is, theologically, good news.

Now, it is obvious that the dualistic scenario of normative distinctions belongs to this last meaning (f), when it comes to DT and their assessment of religion and usage of “religion.” It might nevertheless be helpful to differentiate these six meanings of religion (that partly overlap, complement each other, or are combined with one another). As we will see, dialectical theologians, sometimes, jump from (f) to, mainly, (a) or (e) and, often enough, they are not very explicit about that terminological leap.³¹ Let us take a closer look.

3 Dialectical theology and its critique of religion. Four concise studies

As we have seen, the rise of DT in the early 1920s was essentially connected to the historical horror after the first World War and the theological disappointment among younger scholars about the helplessness or even blindness of their teachers faced with the catastrophe of so far unknown violence. For authors such as Bultmann, Barth, Tillich, Gogarten, and Brunner (all born between 1884 and 1889), an entire epoch of theological orientation had come to an end – at least, in *their* view. The attempt to regard God and faith in continuation with religion and culture appeared to them to be the crucial confusion of modern Protestantism in the wake of Schleiermacher, Ritschl, and his school, as well as Ernst Troeltsch.³²

²⁸ See Graf, *Die Wiederkehr der Götter*, 207; Dalferth, *Malum*, 519–47.

²⁹ The debate about the notion, sense, and truth of secularization belongs, partly, to this dimension; see Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 20–5 and 211–2; Glendinning, “Three cultures of atheism: on serious doubts about the existence of God.”

³⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung*, 139 and 204.

³¹ See Ebeling, “Evangelium und Religion,” esp. 29.

³² Cf. Zachhuber, “Albrecht Ritschl and the Tübingen School. A neglected link in the history of 19th century theology.”

It is far easier to hint at what they dismissed than working out what they constructively stood for. The critical side explains why “religion” was turned into the emblematic formula for the human condition whose breakdown and crisis are God’s judgment on human hubris. The constructive side is the attempt *to speak of God dialectically*, i.e., combining God’s “No” to the world as a realm of sin and godlessness with God’s “Yes” to the world as God’s good – and reconciled – creation. Now, dismissing religion in a normative sense (as in f) still leaves space for dealing with religion in an empirical and social sense (as in a, or e). Clearly, both approaches to religion are not independent of each other: the more the factually given religion is criticized, the more a normative critique of religion seems to be comprehensible and justified; and the other way around: the more conclusive the critique of religion as a concept appears, the bigger the reservation against all “positive” religions will be.

From the very beginning, trying to understand how to deal with religion and “religion” in their ambivalences between normativity and facticity was a latent source of tensions internal to DT. There was one group holding that without actual (religious) existence, God-talk loses its grip and significance; that was Bultmann’s standpoint – “theology as hermeneutics.”³³ There was, however, another group holding that God-talk has to be freed from all given specifications to gain the proper meaning of speaking of and to God; that was Barth’s standpoint – a “theology of preaching.”³⁴ Whereas Bultmann considers talking “out of” (not: about) God as the result of genuine theological work, Barth lets theology start with the fact that God has already spoken. Hence, DT was a combination of divergent and, eventually, rival orientations in dogmatics. In its foundations was already the seed sown to its downfall but also the resources for transforming it into new theological programs.³⁵

3.1 Bultmann and the dialectics of existence

For Rudolf Bultmann, the relation between religion and culture becomes a theological question at a very early stage. In 1920, he published a lecture titled “Religion und Kultur” that entails already the specific tension in Bultmann’s work between a critique of the human condition by theological means and an appreciation for culture as the unavoidable social framework in which human beings are leading their lives in faith or unbelief. Religion as a cultural phenomenon will necessarily remain ambivalent, and yet, there is no other realm in which even the *vera religio* could be realized. Bultmann’s entire hermeneutical work will be accompanied by this telling tension.

Bultmann starts off his lecture by drawing on the increasing autonomy of the “spiritual life” against the backdrop of the formerly dominating religion.³⁶ With a certain kind of appreciation he describes the emancipation of all social systems – he focuses on science, arts, and morality – from religion and underlines that the effect of religion on these other systems had been highly dubious. Religion had, obviously, often enough a retarding effect on developments that turned out to be fruitful. Instead, religion should be radically neutral toward these other systems.³⁷

The conclusion Bultmann is ready to draw – or, is at least in danger to allow – is *privatizing as subjectivizing religion*. Relying on Schleiermacher he relegates religion, i.e., the religious consciousness of absolute dependence, to the individual sector: there is no general validity of insights within religion as a symbolic framework of “feelings,” but only its individual relevance.³⁸ Nevertheless, humans live in a

³³ Moltmann, “Vorwort,” XVIII.

³⁴ Ibid., XVII.

³⁵ The still best account of that background story gives Gestrich in his *Neuzeitliches Denken und die Spaltung der Dialektischen Theologie. Zur Frage der natürlichen Theologie*, esp. 265–93; see also Jüngel, “Von der Dialektik zur Analogie. Die Schule Kierkegaards und der Einspruch Petersons”; Beintker, *Die Dialektik in der “dialektischen Theologie” Karl Barths*.

³⁶ See Bultmann, “Religion und Kultur,” 15.

³⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 19.

specific tension between “nature” and “culture;” and, Bultmann adds, one can only have religion in living in *both* worlds. Hence, culture as a “second nature” and “first order” nature is presented as the conditions for leading one’s religious existence. There is, however, also the converse relation between culture and religion when, as Bultmann states, the “power of experiencing something” is strengthened by religion. He even adds that by this support, culture is “justified by religion,” because it is religion that humanizes humans.³⁹

Bultmann immediately recognizes that he is about to run into the theological danger of divinizing culture and, paradoxically, writing as if he is a liberal theologian that he criticized so eagerly in other contexts (this does *not* deny that Bultmann would himself regard as a liberal theologian).⁴⁰ This is precisely what Barth will be criticized in Bultmann’s approach, but that criticism misses the equally strong countervoice in Bultmann’s work that underlines the contingent condition of every culture and the strict impossibility of absolutizing any cultural state and stage as allegedly God-given. There are even passages in Bultmann where he changes the layer of meaning in using “religion” as a normative term to contrast it with “faith” that is the only adequate human response to God’s call and order.⁴¹

The second trait gets more prominence in papers and lectures since the middle of the 1920s. In one of Bultmann’s best-known texts, “Liberal Theology and the Most Recent Theological Movement” (1924), the tone of his assessment concerning Schleiermacher and his legacy has changed considerably. Now the criticism against the liberal tradition is that it has lost God as the topic of theology; God, however, is the radical negation of human beings, their complete verdict, and sentence.⁴² Although this sounds far more like a DT voice, Bultmann does not hesitate to add that God is the object of theology, while theology speaks of God in speaking of human beings as they stand before God (*coram Deo*).⁴³

We find a similar ambivalence in Bultmann’s – I think – most important book that is based on a lecture given several times between 1926 and 1936, the *Theological Encyclopedia*. Here, the “fact of religion” is for human beings only the “question of God.” More than “religion” – which is identical to that question – is not possible among human beings.⁴⁴ And yet, God is not an object outside of our existence, since God is precisely the reality that determines our existence in faith. Then – in that very “moment” – God is no longer the object of faith, but its subject and agent. To exist as a believer entails, accordingly, this paradox of substituting and inverting subjects.⁴⁵ Faith is, for Bultmann, the response to the preaching (“Kerygma”) in which God addresses man. And this trusting faith is only credible in explicit contrast to the world.⁴⁶

This leads to consequences concerning the status and structure of theological propositions. The classical DT-view claims that every statement is only true (or at least not inadequate) when it is said in conjunction with its denial; hence, we would have to deal with a dialectics of propositions. Bultmann seems to distance himself from this approach by holding that the real dialectics is not a propositional one, but lies between question and answer, between the human act of asking and the revelatory act of God’s reply. The paradox then is that the question is actually the answer as a real possibility for every existence and that it becomes an instantiated reality if and only if God shows Godself *within* the boundaries of human existence.⁴⁷

³⁸ See *ibid.*, 18–9.

³⁹ The German original reads: “Ist die Religion ein Kulturfaktor? Im letztbeschriebenen Sinne gewiß, und zwar der stärkste. Ohne die Kraft des Erlebens würde die Kultur sinnlos, und so ist nun nicht eigentlich die Religion gerechtfertigt vor der Kultur, sondern die Kultur gerechtfertigt durch die Religion.” (*ibid.*, 27).

⁴⁰ See, on this ambivalence, Bultmann, “Die liberale Theologie und die jüngste theologische Bewegung,” esp. 1.

⁴¹ See Bultmann, “Religion und Kultur,” 28.

⁴² Cf. Bultmann, “Die liberale Theologie und die jüngste theologische Bewegung,” 18–9.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 25; the German original reads: “Gegenstand der Theologie ist ja Gott, und von Gott redet die Theologie, indem sie redet vom Menschen, wie er vor Gott gestellt ist, also vom Glauben aus;” see also Bultmann, “Die Frage der ‘Dialektischen’ Theologie,” 86.

⁴⁴ See Bultmann, *Theologische Enzyklopädie*, 86 and 88.

⁴⁵ See *ibid.*, 55–6.

⁴⁶ Cf. Bultmann, “Zum Problem der Entmythologisierung,” 188.

⁴⁷ See “Die Frage der ‘Dialektischen’ Theologie,” 77.

In sum: Bultmann uses “religion” *neither* normatively *nor* in a straightforward theological manner (as f); his account, however, does not imply an empirical or sociological meaning either (as e). According to Bultmann, human beings as belonging to culture are living in its tension between community and individuality. Since “religion” is, for Bultmann, an individual practice (or: the communal element does not play, for him, a significant role), he draws on “existence” to describe the religious orientation. Existence, however, is a structural term; hence, “religion” denotes a structure too, namely, the more specific one of relating one’s existence to something that transcends this very existence (similar to the functional meaning b).⁴⁸ This structure is itself ontically neutral and allows for a reference that is, theologically speaking, *either* idolatrous *or* authentic. It is the second insofar as the existence is truly determined and governed by God’s reality – which is the *vera religio*. Bultmann’s notion of religion is, thus, a modal or hermeneutical one (c).

Bultmann belongs to DT, not because *God’s reality* is taken to be dialectical, and not because the *theological statements* about that divine reality have to be dialectical, but rather because *religion itself* is a dialectical structure between judgment and promise. On a first level, religion remains ambivalent, since it is a neutral structure of existence open to genuine faith or fallenness. On a second level – the one of re-entering the initial duality – religion turns out to be dialectical, since here faith relates critically to itself in asking whether it is genuine faith or idolatry, whether the whole reality, as Bultmann says, is determined by God,⁴⁹ or if even this thought is an “impossible possibility” (as Barth also put it). Bultmann’s dialectic is, in its core, a *paradox*, namely, the one between the human question *as* religion and the trust that it is answered by God *within* – the true – religion.

3.2 Barth on religion as unbelief

It is interesting to see how Karl Barth oscillates between a deep reservation and a deep appreciation, even love, for Schleiermacher. It seems, for him, one has to go through the liberal project and to theologically live with it to fully recognize that it is an impossibility. From Barth’s perspective, Bultmann’s verdict according to which the liberal tradition has lost God as its object is the sad truth; but he adds, though much later, that Bultmann himself belongs to that very tradition, he is “a true pupil of Schleiermacher.”⁵⁰

The correspondence between Bultmann and Barth, running from 1911 until 1966, is a document of increasing alienation and reflects in an almost tragic way how hidden differences come successively to the fore, not without being confounded with misunderstandings and personal irritations. Very early during that correspondence, Barth expresses his fear that “a huge explosion” among the dialectical theologians is directly ahead of them and will erupt soon.⁵¹ As a background of these conflicts, Barth alludes again to divergent readings of Schleiermacher while expressing his theological aversion against him:

The devil should take him, I do not like him and am still searching unsuccessfully for a mode to speak of him with a sanctimonious justice that is called for by the university nowadays.⁵²

Bultmann, however, Barth adds, sticks to the liberal program regarding faith as a human possibility; the dialectical endeavor is turning out to be just another way of continuing with liberal premises. Bultmann is witnessing this, and Barth’s “attempt to understand him” is doomed to fail. Bultmann represents a “pre-Copernican gesture”⁵³ to start theologically – again – not with God, but with human existence instead.

⁴⁸ Bultmann even seems to share the idea that *every* individual has religion in this neutral sense of relating oneself to something that transcends the existence; see “Religion und Kultur,” 28.

⁴⁹ See Bultmann, “Welchen Sinn hat es, von Gott zu reden?,” 26.

⁵⁰ Barth, “Nachwort,” 300 and 302.

⁵¹ Barth, *Karl Barth – Rudolf Bultmann, Briefwechsel*, 71.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 24.

From the beginning on and despite all later upheavals in his theology Barth underlines that the theologically significant dynamic is not located within existence, but comes “vertically from above,” from God Himself. Not religious experience and moods or feelings are the theological subject matter, but “God’s breakthrough in the human realm.”⁵⁴ The naive and transfiguring optimism shared by liberal theology (esp. in Richard Rothe’s work) was, for Barth, exactly the critical target of theology in the wake of the Reformation and, later, of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche – a reservation against the human condition and therefore against “religion.”⁵⁵

Barth’s famous “commentary” on Paul’s letter to the Romans is a highly metaphorical, even poetic elaboration on this divine veto and protest against religion. Following Kierkegaard, Barth highlights the “essential, qualitative, and eternal difference” between God above and the human being here on earth; and explicitly treats religion as a constant attempt to discard that very difference.⁵⁶ Although the “commentary” includes passages that seem to entail a more positive or, at least, non-normative view on religion,⁵⁷ Barth concentrates on polemizing against religion as an essentially human (mis)deed; “religion” means, for Barth, experience, attitude, feeling.⁵⁸ It is, as such, “the most dubious gesture” of the human; religion is just another circumscription of turning God’s revelation into a human possibility, while faith is not about religion, but related to God.⁵⁹ In contrast, on Calvary the “religious possibility” had been “sacrificed;” Calvary is, Barth states, the ultimate “limit of religion;” accordingly, religion and mercy relate to each other exactly as death and life do.⁶⁰

Thus, Barth sticks to the strict duality that we observed above. He uses different conceptual pairs to present that clear cut: “time” and “eternity,” “faith” and “sin,” “God’s reality” and “human religion.”⁶¹ In his writings leading to the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth tries to find the right assessment of that duality and to deal with it adequately; it is interesting to see that he appreciates the “dialectical” way between affirmation and its denial on the one hand and that he shows his reservation against that approach on the other, because of its inability to reach God’s reality. Speaking of God is only God’s possibility.⁶² Hence, Barth’s following “goodbye” from DT and its journal, “Zwischen den Zeiten” (“Between the Times”) was only consistent.⁶³ For him, DT turned out to be just another chapter of the liberal enterprise – with the dangerous disadvantage of not being aware of it. The entire program was for him a disappointing, but “productive misunderstanding.”⁶⁴

It is, then, no surprise that Barth’s first volumes of his *Church Dogmatics* thematize this “goodbye” in giving a retrospective justification for leaving that movement. Barth is, in these passages, highly self-critical in admitting to have not fully taken seriously what has become now his theological agenda: giving up finding a theological starting point by acknowledging that God has already begun with us. The direction is not bottom-up, but top-down, a theological “one-way street,” which means that all theological anthropology in disguise has to be abandoned – including the quasi-liberal DT.⁶⁵ Barth clarifies:

⁵³ Barth, *Rudolf Bultmann. Ein Versuch, ihn zu verstehen*, 61.

⁵⁴ See Barth, “Der Christ in der Gesellschaft,” 9, 12 and 13.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵⁶ Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Zweite Fassung 1922)*, XX.

⁵⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 78.

⁵⁸ See *ibid.*, 82 and 91.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 122, 176, 210.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 235–6 and 240.

⁶¹ Barth, “Not und Verheissung der christlichen Verkündigung,” 89; see also Barth, “Wagnis des Glaubens,” esp. 301.

⁶² See Barth, “Das Wort Gottes als Aufgabe der Theologie,” 167–8 and 173.

⁶³ See, on that “farewell” including the end of the journal, Beintker, “Barths Abschied von ‘Zwischen den Zeiten’. Recherchen und Beobachtungen zum Ende einer Zeitschrift.”

⁶⁴ Barth, “Abschied von ‘Zwischen den Zeiten,’” 318; for a similar assessment idem, *Fides quaerens intellectum*, 17–8; see Jüngel, “Von der Dialektik zur Analogie,” esp. 129–30; also Congdon, “Dialectical Theology as Theology of Mission.”

⁶⁵ Barth, KD I,1 §§ 1–7 (1932), 130–5 and 178.

In faith, we have to understand the cognizability of God's word, as it is given in faith. It is, so to say, born in the event of faith, comes in sight and wants to be searched for and to be found there. (...) Hence, one cannot begin with the analysis of humankind.⁶⁶

Coming from this angle, Barth draws drastic consequences for the concept of religion. Paragraph 17 of *CD* I/2 has as its title "God's revelation as the nullification of religion;" as is well-known, the second section of that paragraph is headed "Religion as Unbelief." Barth holds that there is a strict rivalry between revelation and religion, an exclusive either/or. Against what he calls "modern Protestantism," religion is to be understood from God's revelation, not the other way around. This revelation, however, annihilates or suspends human religion.⁶⁷ It is only the human being in the light of revelation that is theologically to be taken seriously, because faith and unbelief stand against each other in an irreconcilable contrast.⁶⁸ Barth finally states:

Religion is *unbelief*; religion is a business, one has to say: *the business of the godless man*.⁶⁹

In sum: For Barth, religion is the signature of human crises. Therefore, "religion" is, right from the outset, considered as a normative concept of theological evaluation and criticism. Accordingly, religion as a phenomenon appears to be the totality of human self-assertion against God. The idea of a *vera religio* is, for Barth, a contradiction in terms, because there cannot be any truth in religion.⁷⁰

We find a strict dual conception in Barth along these lines: "faith" and "unbelief," "faith" and "religion," "God's revelation" and "religion" as its denial. Since Barth does not rely on an existential or factual concept of belief or religion and since he draws that distinction strictly, a re-entry of the initial duality seems to be excluded, because it would be, again, a human endeavor of hybrid self-reflexivity. Here, however, we are faced with a strict either/or: either God's revelatory word determines our existence, or one is living "religiously." A re-entry as a reflexive act belongs only to the second pole, whereas the first does not possess any ambivalence.⁷¹ Therefore, the DT-Barth is the most obvious proponent of a decisively normative concept of religion (f) in repudiating even the possibility to affirm a potentially positive form of religion. Although, as we will see shortly, Brunner also defends a negatively normative version, he presents a slightly softer form of (f), hence: (f*).

Although Barth, I think, shows the biggest loyalty to the critical approach of DT, namely, its theological reservation toward the human condition and the intellectual optimism accompanying the liberal tradition, dialectics as a dogmatic structure loses its weight during Barth's development in the late 1920s and 1930s. It is true that Barth's commentary on Romans relies on dialectical assertions between the "Yes" and "No" as elements of God's judgment being the crisis of the world. As we have seen, however, Barth will quickly distance himself from this way of working theologically. Nevertheless, there is one moment in his later work that inherits the dialectical thinking: the programmatic decision to construct theology as christology and, by doing this, setting the paradox of the *vere Deus – vere homo* at theology's center. Barth's christology is itself an essential tool to suspend religion. Only theology, and hence christology, could overcome religion.⁷²

⁶⁶ Ibid., 241 and 255.

⁶⁷ Barth, *KD* I,2 §§ 16–18 (1938), 309, 321.

⁶⁸ See *ibid.*, 323.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 327.

⁷⁰ Obviously, this is not Barth's final word on that matter; in later *CD* volumes there are more cautious evaluations leading back to the possibility of a tentative *theologia naturalis*; see Ensminger, *Karl Barth's Theology as a Resource for a Christian Theology of Religions*. However, the Barth of DT stands for a very different approach that is incompatible with applying "religion" constructively in theology.

⁷¹ This is also the reason for Barth's struggles with dealing sensitively with "religious" phenomena such as doubt or spiritual trial; see (for a Kierkegaardian perspective) Podmore, *Kierkegaard and the Self before God. Anatomy of the Abyss*, chapter 6.

⁷² This last sentence is an allusion to Milbank's nice title for a paper, "Only Theology can Overcome Metaphysics."

3.3 Brunner on psychologism and revelation

In his polemics against human hubris and self-affirmation is Emil Brunner in no way inferior to Barth's devastating post-War critique of culture and theology starting with anthropological abilities and faculties. What the commentary on *Romans* is for Barth, is the 1924 book *Mysticism and the Word* for Brunner. While Barth presents his critical case as a Pauline reading, Brunner's fury is directed to Schleiermacher as the "theological Paganini" and "the greatest concept virtuoso of the century."⁷³ However, that was not meant to be a compliment, but the entrance door to a comprehensive refutation of the man who created the "lentil dish of religious studies compatible with culture."⁷⁴ In a less polemical form Brunner's critique reads as follows:

We can recognize both now: the reason why Schleiermacher time and again continued to claim the (relative) autonomy of religion, and why others could never believe him and his claim. Schleiermacher never speaks of the faith to which the Gospel refers, but rather of the merely pious sentiments that – as long as they last and assert no proposition concerning objective truths – do not conflict with philosophy.⁷⁵

There are four crucial aspects of this critique: first, Brunner explicitly refutes theological forms of *psychologism* in the wake of Schleiermacher. By "psychologism" he addresses the strong concentration on religious "feelings" (as substitute of "vision" or "intuition" (*Anschaung*) in the second edition of the *Speeches*). By that term he also means the function that is fulfilled by the concept of "(pure) consciousness" in the *Glaubenslehre*.⁷⁶ Both accounts suffer from the same crucial confusion: they start with man, not with God. Second, Brunner refutes the *mystical* element encapsulated by "feeling" as well as, later, by "absolute dependence." What Brunner finds so problematic here is the human attempt to experience God in an *immediate and direct mode* making God's consciousness and human self-consciousness identical. This "dream" has to end, since revelation means mediation (by Christ through the Word) as a miracle, the absurd, the incomprehensible *pace* mysticism's wrong-headed immediacy.⁷⁷ Third, Brunner eagerly criticizes Schleiermacher's major move in the *Speeches* to defend a "province" for the sake of religion's autonomy and independence from metaphysics and morality (see above, the introduction). This provincialism created by Schleiermacher (and Kant) does not defend religion in its own right, but restricts it in a "dishonorable" way (however, Brunner won't take the exit presented by Tillich's "theology of culture" either; cf. the next section).⁷⁸ Fourth, Brunner thinks Schleiermacher's religion simply *lacks content*; in other words, what is traditionally taken to be the substantial nucleus of religion is transformed by Schleiermacher (and his followers) into secondary figurations of feelings and consciousness.⁷⁹ That, however, turns the theological hierarchy between attitudes and doctrines, between modes of existence and doctrinal content upside down.

All four aspects create a strictly dualistic structure as well as a terminological dualism that is so emblematic not only for DT in general but also for Brunner's work during the 1920s in particular: faith and historicism are "completely incommensurable;"⁸⁰ faith is the decisive "crisis of morality" and is the "spark" jumping out "under the hammer of God's word;"⁸¹ the content of faith is the opposite of

⁷³ Brunner, "Die Grenzen der Humanität," 272.

⁷⁴ Ibid. This is also the reason for repudiating Bultmann's reliance on Heidegger's analysis of *Dasein* in *Being and Time*; see Brunner, "Theologie und Ontologie," esp. 111–2.

⁷⁵ Brunner, *Die Mystik und das Wort*, 25.

⁷⁶ It is interesting to see that Schleiermacher does *not* present a theology of religious feelings (or, emotions), but is almost exclusively concerned with the "feeling of absolute dependence" as a "meta-feeling" in his *Glaubenslehre* – in only presupposing the variety of feelings to which this second-order-feeling is qualitatively related; cf. Moxter, "Gefühl und Ausdruck. Nicht nur ein Problem der Schleiermacherinterpretation," esp. 132.

⁷⁷ See Brunner, *Die Mystik und das Wort*, 76, 119, 294.

⁷⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 262 and 276.

⁷⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 41 and 43.

⁸⁰ Brunner, "Geschichte oder Offenbarung? Ein Wort der Entgegnung an Horst Stephan," 272.

⁸¹ Brunner, *Die Mystik und das Wort*, 166.

everything that is rational, open to proof; it is a paradox and wonder – something (not irrational, but) *anti-rational* being the ground for reason and rationality.⁸²

What does all this imply for Brunner's take on religion and "religion"? Answering that question brings telling ambivalences to the fore but also – despite all polemical similarities to Barth – crucial differences. On the one hand, we have – in accordance with the aforementioned dualisms – a highly polemical attitude toward religion as part of human culture. Here, we find the typical DT-radicalism of programmatic denial and negation. To begin with, "religion" is, Brunner holds, a pagan term, not to be found in the Bible and, rarely, in reformation theologies. Revelation stands to the cultural and religious sphere in "sharpest contrast" and constitutes a "strict divide between God and man, God and world;" there is no "continuation between human spiritual life and God's revelation," since "God is God and the world is world."⁸³ Revelation is the "irruption of the wholly other" into this world, "not lyrics but drama, not stability but unheard upheaval, fraction, discontinuity with everything that is in man himself."⁸⁴ And in regard to "religion" Brunner states:

Religion does not only offer criticism of this or that form of culture, but rather calls humanity itself into question, because it questions the human being.⁸⁵

This is the fairly typical DT take based on a strict demarcation line between religion and culture (including all their derivatives). On the other hand, however, Brunner uses "religion" also in a more positive, even constructive way. Here, he presents two different versions: one – it is possible to speak, Brunner says, "in the right way" of religion insofar as religion signifies or entails the *content of faith*. Hence, what Brunner criticizes in Schleiermacher's notion of religion as feeling without content is revised and rectified now.⁸⁶ It is, however, quite another question what this content exactly implies; two – there is, for Brunner, the possibility of an authentic religion under the condition that religion remains "unspoiled" (*urwüchsig*). And this is the case, when...

religion could unfold its own life, when it does not acknowledge the authority of culture consciousness (*Kulturbewußtsein*) in rather ignoring it or even by openly fighting it.⁸⁷

Obviously, Brunner sticks to the old dialectical dualism here, but without excluding a *potentially positive role for religion*. Thus, Brunner – in significant contrast to Barth – allows for the possibility of a *vera religio* deserving its name. And yet, the truth of religion, the truly vivid and vital religion, is only achievable from a point "beyond humanity."⁸⁸ Religion – "in the sense of faith" – must not be absorbed by culture,⁸⁹ otherwise it will be reduced to a merely cultural matter, as has happened in the Schleiermacherian provincialism of pious feelings and isolated privacy.

The later dispute with Barth concerning the sense and (im)possibility of natural theology might be the best studied chapter of Brunner's work. As early as in 1925, Brunner stated that truth needs a context and is never "dot-like."⁹⁰ As well-known, circumventing this "dot-likeness" led Brunner to searching for a

⁸² See Brunner, "Die Offenbarung als Grund und Gegenstand der Theologie," 317.

⁸³ Ibid., 312; see also idem, "Die Grenzen der Humanität," 275.

⁸⁴ Brunner, "Die Offenbarung als Grund und Gegenstand der Theologie," 313 and 345.

⁸⁵ "Die Grenzen der Humanität," 262; the German original reads: "Die Religion übt nicht nur an dieser oder jener Form der Kultur Kritik, sondern stellt sie selbst, die Humanität selbst in Frage, weil sie den Menschen in Frage stellt." – There is an additional dimension to this critique of "humanity": it is not insignificant for Brunner's early take on religion that it stands for the "law" and not for the gospel. Therefore, religion has the tendency to lead to *legalism* that has to be overcome by the grace of the gospel; thanks to a reviewer of this journal for drawing my attention to this aspect; see, in particular, Gilland, *Law and Gospel in Emil Brunner's Earlier Dialectical Theology*, 125–36.

⁸⁶ Cf. Brunner, "Die Grenzen der Humanität," 275.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 261.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 262.

⁸⁹ Brunner, *Die Mystik und das Wort*, 302.

⁹⁰ Brunner, "Die Offenbarung als Grund und Gegenstand der Theologie," 301.

human “point of contact.”⁹¹ And it is, in fact, interesting to see Brunner’s surprise about Barth’s later development and Barth’s tentative openness, in later volumes of his *CD*, to the similarities between God and human despite human sin; to the connections and relations between both poles beyond the divide of pagan and Christian humanity, as Brunner puts it; and to the continuity of human nature that is not undermined or even destroyed by sinfulness and existential failure. One has to speak of a “new Barth,” Brunner concludes that seems to say “No” to his initial while famous first “No” to Brunner’s *theologia naturalis*.⁹²

In sum: This judgment might overestimate Barth’s cautious reorientation in the 1940s. As surprising as the “newness” in Barth might have been for Brunner, it is equally astonishing to detect Brunner’s ambivalence concerning religion and his almost inconsistent dealing with that term: insofar as religion is part of human culture or humanity it falls under theological attack, similar to Barth’s normative refutation of religion (version f); insofar as religion stands, in turn, for faith’s content – God’s revelation mediated by Christ – the concept is, again, normatively while positively loaded in mirroring a *substantial* account of the term (version a).⁹³

3.4 Tillich and Gogarten on religion as culture’s crisis

Paul Tillich – arguably in his early days as a critical member of DT too – claims that religion and the concept of religion should be overcome by the philosophy of religion.⁹⁴ While pointing to the main problem of DT, as he sees it, namely, the undialectical foundation or the uncritical nucleus of the “Theology of Crisis,”⁹⁵ he underlines the paradox as a necessary element of every theological assertion.⁹⁶

By neglecting that paradox, the philosophy of religion contributes to finitizing the infinite, either in dissolving or subordinating it. Tillich holds that the philosophy of religion has to elaborate on the absolute that is *in* everything relative. It has to start with God as the absolute and in being loyal to that task it has two options: integrating religion into culture or regarding the absolute to be the rupture of the finite.⁹⁷ In the first case, the danger consists in losing the absolute; in the second case, the danger consists in losing the relative. Now, a *heteronomous* theology, as the liberal one is, starts with religion, but without God and succumbs to the first temptation. A *theonomous* theology, however, follows the absolute as being a potential of everything relative.

What Tillich means by this (paradoxical) potential comes to the fore in what he develops as “theology of culture.” Tillich regards this type of theology as “concrete-normative science of religion,” a science, that

⁹¹ See Brunner, “Die Frage nach dem ‘Anknüpfungspunkt’ als Problem der Theologie,” 113.

⁹² Cf. Brunner, “Der neue Barth: Bemerkungen zu Karl Barths Lehre vom Menschen,” esp. 90 and 95 – referring to KD III/2, 83, 245, 330.

⁹³ Interestingly, a committed pupil of Brunner was the young John Rawls. Brunner had a visiting research stay at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1938/1939. The scene there was still influenced by Brunner when Rawls studied at Princeton University in the early 1940s – before drafted for military service and before losing his faith during the war. See Rawls’ senior thesis (Princeton, 1942) called *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith*. This volume also includes a brief 1997/1998 essay by Rawls entitled “On My Religion” and a very insightful contextualization by Robert Merrihew Adams. The unlikely connection between Brunner and Rawls is, strangely enough, rather neglected. However, this is not the Brunner of DT, but of personalism, anti-naturalism, and the later critique of collectivism (one might underline, however, the continuities in Brunner’s work and, hence, downplay the aforementioned contrast between an early and later Brunner). Cf. Gregory, “Before the Original Position. The Neo-Orthodox Theology of the Young John Rawls;” and, Habermas, “Das ‘gute Leben’ eine ‘abscheuliche Phrase.’ Welche Bedeutung hat die religiöse Ethik des jungen Rawls für dessen Politische Theorie?”.

⁹⁴ As the title of his important early paper reads: “Die Überwindung des Religionsbegriffs in der Religionsphilosophie.”

⁹⁵ Tillich, “Kritisches und positives Paradox. Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Karl Barth und Friedrich Gogarten,” 166 and 172.

⁹⁶ See “Die Überwindung des Religionsbegriffs in der Religionsphilosophie,” 63.

⁹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 77.

has no specific object.⁹⁸ This is meant to be a direct criticism of Schleiermacher's distinguishing "provinces" since religion does not match a specific realm, section, or area (thus, this way of putting the criticism is different from Brunner's; see previous section). There is no "religious" feeling either; rather, religion is a state of the mind that is realized in *all* "provinces." It does not denote a new reality beyond the one we are living in, but the absolute is "through" all things – the "hyper-being," as he puts it.⁹⁹ Accordingly, religion is for Tillich the experience of the absolute and "ultimate reality" – based on the experience of "absolute invalidity."¹⁰⁰ A theology of culture pays heed to this dialectics in giving an analysis of *all* parts of culture in the light of its absolute potential under – and despite – the human condition.

Friedrich Gogarten – beyond all differences when compared to Tillich in terms of style, philosophical background, and theological orientation – shares crucial features of method and thinking, an alliance that expresses their membership in DT. First, Gogarten is highly critical of the liberal tradition too, in a rigor that is on the same polemical level as Barth's and Brunner's. Liberal protestantism has "tormented" believers and it belongs, fortunately, to a different time that has now fallen apart and is past. It is the "hour of downfall," and one "does not feel comfortable among dead bodies."¹⁰¹ Second, both in fact claim that a religious way of seeing things makes only sense, as Gogarten puts it when everything human disappears to give God His space.¹⁰² The absolute new is the absolute transformation of everything (*metabasis*) with the consequence that the human being vanishes completely as agent; God is now the only acting person, since God does not need "human's dozing states" to be present and effective on earth.¹⁰³ As soon as one recognizes God's reality, there is no place for the human being in the world.¹⁰⁴ Third, Gogarten shares with Tillich (as well as Barth) a disillusioned view on the situation as it is – "between the times." The war had only been a "parable" of the crisis to come, a "complete crisis" of culture.¹⁰⁵ The question remains, however, whether this crisis denies culture or is itself part of it. Fourth, Gogarten as well as Tillich hold (against Barth) that there is a theologically significant meaning of religion. Liberally speaking, religion is culture's soul; the alternative proposed by DT is that religion is itself the crisis of culture. Thus, every cultural crisis only mirrors the theologically relevant crisis, namely, the one that is religion itself.¹⁰⁶ Fifth, Tillich and Gogarten draw a similar conclusion concerning the form of theological statements: they have to be dialectical, i.e., that no assertion could stand without its suspension by a negating assertion: there is no "No" without a "Yes," as Gogarten states about negative theology.¹⁰⁷

In sum: It is revealing to see how Tillich and Gogarten use the concept of religion as a terminological tool within the DT-framework, while sharing with Barth (and Brunner) the deep reservation concerning the human condition and culture. Religion signifies here the crisis of culture; or the other way around: the ultimate cultural crisis is defined as religion. That is almost a heuristic concept of religion (d). Certainly, they defend a normative meaning of the term: not, however, as Barth did in a pejorative sense, but as the decisive fraction of an era and time that has become suspect, dubious, and, eventually, impossible for them. However, in sharp contrast to Barth, religion stands here at the heart of DT, either as "theology of

⁹⁸ See Tillich, "Über die Idee einer Theologie der Kultur," 14.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 18.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Gogarten, "Zwischen den Zeiten," 95 and 97–98.

¹⁰² See "Die Krisis der Kultur," 104.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 106.

¹⁰⁴ See ibid., 110. This is also Gogarten's reason for giving a genuine theological reading of secularization as something that frees the world to be just this, namely the world; see his *Verhängnis und Hoffnung der Neuzeit*, esp. chapter 9; cf. von Sass, "Inverse Apologetik. Zur theologischen Verarbeitung des Atheismus."

¹⁰⁵ See "Die Krisis der Kultur," 104 and 114.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 113 and 121.

¹⁰⁷ "Wider die romantische Theologie. Ein Kapitel vom Glauben," 150; see also Wenz, "Tillichs Kritik des Supranaturalismus," 194.

crisis” or as “theology of culture,” but in both cases as saving the absolute against various modes of relativizing it.

Now, every tool for circumventing the crisis or finitizing the absolute is itself critical or finite and relative. It is this constellation that creates the dialectics between both poles of negation and affirmation as well as the necessity of binding every theological assertion to its counterpart.¹⁰⁸ Hence, the strict duality between religion and culture – a duality for the sake of both – turns a re-entry superfluous because religion as a normative concept denotes a pure phenomenon from whose perspective a re-applied distinction between itself and its counterpart lacks sense. It is what it is in pure contrast to the other side. Hence, theologically speaking, religion, for Gogarten and Tillich, does *not* belong to culture. There is a strict duality between religion in a normative sense and culture in a sociological meaning (cf. versions e and f). If there is a religion, then it is the true one; there is only, and can only be, the *vera religio*. The rest is silence (and culture).

4 Finally. Theology after religion/without “religion”?

As we have seen, there are two basic moves to be found in DT in relation to the theme of “religion”: first, the various members of that school refer to the concept of religion in highly divergent ways – up to the point of incompatibility in using this term. Hence, there is no way of mediating or combining these meanings of “religion,” apart from the rival meanings that the term has outside theology. Second, and beyond all conceptual differences, “religion” is integrated with a normative and dualistic structure between faith and unbelief (or their equivalents). After summing up both aspects, I would like to ask in which relation these aspects stand to each other – with consequences for the theological usability of “religion” from a DT-perspective.

Let us start with the first aspect: despite several common features of DT, “religion” is treated in divergent and, partly, incompatible ways. Bultmann’s work entails a hermeneutical or modal concept of religion (version c). “Religion” serves as a specification of “existence” and, hence, denotes an individual structure of relating to a transcendent entity, person, sense, or reality. The theologically crucial duality between faith and unbelief is located *within* religion, while faith and unbelief allow for a re-entry of that distinction as a self-reflective act. Accordingly, Bultmann formalizes and neutralizes religion that is, thus, open to be a genuine expression of faith or one of its opposites, seen from a theological perspective. The neutral formality of “religion” reflects the fact that human existence is the only possible sphere where man could encounter God.

Barth feels uncomfortable with the underlying premise that there is, at least, a structurally possible continuation between faith and unbelief. He uses “religion” normatively and, more specifically, pejoratively as the entirety of human fallenness and self-assertion against God (version f). Therefore, “religion” itself belongs to the theologically characteristic duality, whereas Barth has different terminological counterparts; the most prominent pair is “religion” and “revelation” and the latter is taken to be the overcoming of religion. God exceeds every human and mundane condition to which religion necessarily belongs.¹⁰⁹

At first sight, Brunner is fully on Barth’s side in refuting a theologically constructive meaning of the concept of religion. Here, “religion” denotes, again, the fallenness of human nature. However, Brunner already presupposes in these passages a Schleiermacherian framework that reduced religion to a particular realm among other activities in life, to a mere feeling without content. Contrary to Barth’s

¹⁰⁸ See, for a later adoption of this dialectics, Taylor, “Denegating God,” 601 and 603.

¹⁰⁹ In this sense, Barth’s approach is inherited by phenomenologists such as Jean-Luc Marion. His quasi-theological idea of a “saturation” exceeding the correlation between subject and horizon is relative to Barth’s enterprise; see, for instance, Marion, “The Event or the Happening Phenomenon;” Marion, “The Saturated Phenomenon.”

rigorous dismissal of the possibility of an authentic or true religion, Brunner allows for that option; then, religion is regarded as standing in absolute contrast to the cultural sphere by being integrated into faith as its very content – leaving Schleiermacherian premises behind. One might hold that both versions apply “religion” normatively – in the first case pejoratively (version f), in the latter one constructively (version f*).

Gogarten and Tillich share Barth’s (and Brunner’s) normative understanding of religion and they subscribe also to the claim that the human condition stands in protest against God’s revelation and, hence, must be broken and opened up. Contrary to Barth, the dynamics of breaking and opening is religion itself. Their normative understanding is, then, an affirmative one with the consequence that “religion” belongs here again to the theological duality, while having changed sides: now, religion stands in sharp contrast to culture as its crisis without being an integral part of it anymore. The one who lives religiously has left culture; and those who are still surrounded by culture are only living ahead of their “religious” crisis (version d//e + f).

At first sight, it might seem that the “return of religion” mentioned at the outset would have elicited very different reactions among the DT members. Bultmann would deny that such a return is a possibility that makes any sense because “religion” as a neutral and purely formal concept is among the possible qualifications of “existence.” As long as humans exist they might live religiously in one way or the other. From a Barthian perspective, a return of religion would be a catastrophe but also one that would not surprise Barth. For him, religion is not more than the empirically evident and theologically qualified fallenness of man. Now, every believer had been an unbeliever before; and that’s why even a return cannot make things worse because seen from a normative point of view the situation between God and man could not be worse. Hence, a return of religion as deepening the initial alienation between God and man lacks sense too. Brunner could agree on that matter while adding that religion as faith’s substance is a possibility which, however, crucially diverges from the meaning of the contemporary “return of the gods.” And a very similar claim has to be made with regard to Gogarten and Tillich, but now from another angle. As we have seen, here religion is contrasted with culture and indicates its eschatological crisis. A return of religion sounds like very good news then. That metaphor, however, presupposes God’s religious revival as if God’s presence suffered from “divine tiredness.” Since the cultural crisis is a permanent one (Gogarten), and since God’s presence is “theonomously” everywhere and persistent (Tillich), speaking of God’s return remains dubious here too.

A second look is required nevertheless: the reason for this lack of semantic sense lies in the simple fact that the “return-thesis” is an *empirical* and, more precisely, a *sociological* one capturing recent religious phenomena and indicating critically that the old common sense regarding an all-encompassing secularization is, in that generalized form, falsified.¹¹⁰ Obviously, this notion of religion (as in version e) is not the one used by DT. Their “ignorance” toward it is justified by the fact that theology *per se* has, for them, nothing to do with social developments and cultural tendencies. Neither Bultmann’s formalized “religion,” nor Barth’s and Brunner’s bashing of religion, nor Gogarten’s and Tillich’s promotion of religion to the crisis of culture refer to actual transformations within societies, states, or countries.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Cf. Berger, “The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview.”

¹¹¹ One might object that, at least, Barth, Brunner, and Tillich had been actively engaged in “religious socialism,” an early critique of capitalism, and an analysis of the “Arbeiterfrage” (and there are more examples available; thanks to one of the reviewers for pushing me on this point). Fair enough, but the question here would still stand: is there a *systematic* link between DT and this political commitment during the 1920s? Or, does the source for this political activity lie somewhere else? This might seem to be an unhappy alternative, but I am inclined – if forced to choose – to go with this second proposal. The major works of DT (arguably, Barth’s commentary on *Romans* and Brunner’s *Mysticism and the Word* strongly support this “a-political” reading; and here it is correct to add as well: there are more examples and evidences available from that time, not to speak of Bultmann and Gogarten where the case is quite clear – regrettably, I should add). The claim above does not deny that DT is highly embedded in a particular post-War scenery and represents a theological reaction to a specific dogmatic tradition in the wake of Schleiermacher and cultural Protestantism.

What is decisive for all authors we have dealt with in this *tour d'horizon* is the theologically normative duality between God and man. Not metaphors of continuation, mediation, and semblance are governing the theological scene here, but of fraction, breakthrough, and ending. This is the unifying element between Bultmann, Barth, Brunner, Gogarten, and Tillich – a dogmatic rigor that understands itself as mirroring the ultimate crisis of the human condition in which faith and unbelief, God's revelation and religion, and religion and culture are in almost irresolvable conflict.¹¹² No human could know on which side one stands; since that is God's judgment and His judgment alone. Or:

How can you know where you've been?
In time you'll see the sign
And realize your sin.

Will you know how the seed is sown?
All your time has been overgrown,
Never known.

In the end, it is not the first aspect – the concept of religion – that is the crucial element in DT, but the second one – the bivalent architecture between faith and unbelief, in which “religion” appears. Now, what I would like to propose is to use the latter aspect as an allusion to the way for how to deal with the first aspect, the incompatible meanings of “religion” within the DT-framework. The incompatibility just outlined leaves us with two options: either we accept the diversity of religion's meanings at the price of running into misunderstandings and the constant need of clarification or theology as *theo*-logy leaves “religion” to religious studies and sociology in concentrating on other, genuinely dogmatic notions that encapsulate and inherit what has been just unequivocally expressed by “religion.” Although all authors of DT stick to “religion,” the internal contradictions in their terminology may invite us to say “farewell” to “religion” as a *proper and genuinely theological* concept. Religion might be culture's crisis, as Brunner and Gogarten put it. The hopeless semantic inconsistency of “religion,” however, is at the same time the crisis of the concept of “religion” itself. Its terminological success since the Enlightenment period amounts, finally, to a conceptual inflation undermining the shape, precision, and even usability of the concept – a dynamic well-known from other prominent concepts, such as “metaphysics.”

Therefore, besides the *theological* duality between faith and unbelief, there is the *methodological* duality between theology as dogmatics and religious studies as an empirically oriented science. Both approaches refer to the same state of affairs, and yet, both signify two highly different perspectives on the “identical” subject matter. The difference between these methodological perspectives implies divergent vocabularies with which the material in question is approached, structured, and described. “Faith” and “unbelief” is a conceptual duality that is theologically normative, whereas “religion” should be – against the actual practice within DT, but along its basic underlying intention – reserved for the other side of the methodological duality.

The consequences entailed by this terminological proposal are widespread: first, we have to deal with the crossover of two dualities; the one between faith and unbelief belongs to the theological side of the methodological duality, whose second pole is religious studies to which the concept of religion belongs exclusively. Second, “religion” does not serve as a *genuinely theological* term with positive content anymore, whereas “faith” and “unbelief” are concepts having their proper context not in religious studies (or the sociology of religion) anymore. Third, a dogmatic reorientation from God to religion (or the other way around) is a confusion since it is in severe danger of just jumping from one scientific game to another methodological access that is both based on the dualism sketched in this paper.

¹¹² This is also a critical comment on attempts to downplay that opposition or to regard Barth, in the relevant respect here, not primarily as theologian, but rather as a scholar in religion; see for this latter account Green, “Challenging the Religious Studies Canon: Karl Barth's Theory of Religion.”

Dialectical Theology reminds us that there might be a return of religion, but not as religion's "ultimate concern." The only return theology could possibly be interested in is returning to God as its essential and only theme – after religion and without "religion."

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