

Barth Society met in San Diego, CA November 16-17, 2007

Our meeting in San Diego featured our usual Friday afternoon session from 4:00 P.M. to 6:30 P.M. and a Saturday morning session from 9:00 A.M. to 11:30 A.M. The presenters for the Friday afternoon session were **Mark McInroy, Harvard University**, whose lecture was entitled: “**Karl Barth and Personalist Philosophy: A Critical Appropriation**,” and **John McDowell, Edinburgh University** whose lecture was entitled: “**“Openness to the World’: Karl Barth’s Evangelical Theology of Christ as Pray-er”**”. Both lectures, which will be summarized below, were very well received by a good sized audience. An excellent question and answer session followed the presentations. The **Saturday morning** session featured a discussion of **Alyssa Lyra Pitstick’s** book, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ’s Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007). The panelists were: **Paul J. Griffiths, University of Illinois at Chicago**; **David Lauber, Wheaton College** and **John Webster, University of Aberdeen**. **Alyssa Lyra Pitstick** graciously agreed to attend the meeting and to respond. **George Hunsinger, Princeton Theological Seminary** presided. Attendance was outstanding and a number of those present indicated that they thought this was one of the best book discussions we had at a meeting of the Barth Society in many years. Because **Alyssa Lyra Pitstick’s** comments along with those from **John Webster** and **David Lauber** will be published in an upcoming issue of the *Scottish Journal of Theology* the presentations will not be summarized in this Newsletter.

The Third Annual Barth Conference will be held at Princeton Theological Seminary
June 22-25, 2008

This Conference on Karl Barth is entitled:
“Karl Barth and Theological Ethics”

This conference is cosponsored by *The Center for Barth Studies at Princeton Theological Seminary*
and *The Karl Barth Society of North America*.

Brochures with full details about speakers, schedules and registration are enclosed with this Newsletter.

What follows are summaries of the papers presented at the November meeting on Friday afternoon the 16th.

Karl Barth and Personalist Philosophy: A Critical Appropriation

Mark J. McInroy

Harvard University

In my examination of Karl Barth’s engagement with so-called “personalist philosophy,” I argue that scholarship on the topic has attributed an exaggerated degree of influence to the following three sources: (1) the founders of an interdisciplinary society known as the “Patmos Circle;” (2) Barth’s fellow dialectical theologians, Emil Brunner and Friedrich Gogarten; and (3) Martin Buber, in particular his classic work, *I and*

Thou. As a corrective to these assessments, I claim that Barth’s engagement with personalism should be regarded as a highly critical appropriation in which he deeply criticizes and fundamentally recasts such categories as encounter (*Begegnung*), co-humanity (*Mitmenschlichkeit*), and the I-Thou relation (*Ich-Du-Beziehung*). When Barth does use personalist themes in his own theological anthropology—particularly in the *Church Dogmatics* III/2—he roots his notion of the human being as a “being in encounter” in his Christology and Trinitarian theology, comprehensively restructuring personalist categories and rebuilding them on a theological—not philosophical—foundation.

The group known as the “Patmos Circle” was founded in 1919 by Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy and

Hans Ehrenberg in response to the “absence of real personal encounter” in Western culture through their shared conviction of the significance of “a human being who has lived and experienced the *thou* and the *we* in their fullness.”¹ Eberhard Busch and Rosenstock both report that Barth was involved with the Patmos Circle from an early date,² and these biographical accounts have been used by Stuart McLean and Graham Ward to claim that the Patmos Circle exerted an early, deep influence on Barth’s use of personalist ideas.³

In matter of fact, however, Barth displays wariness toward Rosenstock and Ehrenberg beginning with their earliest encounters in the fall of 1919. My recent research at the Karl Barth Archive in Basel, Switzerland has shown that Rosenstock’s many letters to Barth were never answered, and what little correspondence Barth had with Ehrenberg was extremely lopsided (Barth wrote only five letters to Ehrenberg’s fifty eight between 1919 and 1934). Moreover, one observes in correspondence with Eduard Thurneysen that Barth’s first mention of Rosenstock and Ehrenberg in October 1919 advises that these new relationships be approached with caution.⁴ In the following months Barth’s stance becomes only more distanced: he writes Thurneysen in November 1919 to say that he has “extensive censure marks” for Ehrenberg’s foreword to Barth’s Tambach Lecture;⁵ in December 1919 Barth writes that he is preparing to

¹ Harold M. Stahmer, *Speak that I May See!: The Religious Significance of Language* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 121-2.

² Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 112; Rosenstock-Huessy, ‘Rückblick auf *Die Kreatur*’, in *Ja und Nein: Autobiographische Fragmente*, ed. Georg Müller, 107-19 (Heidelberg: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1968), 107.

³ Stuart McLean, *Humanity in the Thought of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), 2-3; Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 83-7.

⁴ Karl Barth to Eduard Thurneysen, 28 October, 1919, in *Barth - Thurneysen Briefwechsel 1913-1921, Gesamte Ausgabe V.3* (Zürich, Theologischer Verlag Zürich: 1973), 348 (hereafter *B-T B*).

⁵ Karl Barth to Eduard Thurneysen, 11 November, 1919, *B-T B*, 351. Bruce McCormack also highlights this fact as evidence of Barth’s resistance to the Patmos Circle. See Bruce McCormack, “Graham Ward’s *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology*,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49 (1996), 97-109, esp. 102-4.

“rebuke” Rosenstock, although he does not divulge the subject matter of their dispute.⁶ Given these facts, it seems unlikely that there was a period of time during which Barth was open to, and deeply influenced by, the original members of the Patmos Circle. Instead, the evidence points to a relationship that was guarded from its beginning, and it did not seem to improve as time passed.

One must be similarly cautious regarding the claim that Barth’s personalism was decisively influenced by his fellow dialectical theologians, Emil Brunner and Friedrich Gogarten. On this topic it should be noted, as Bruce McCormack has observed, that the dissolution of the dialectical theologians was actually precipitated, at least in part, by Barth’s disagreement with the use of personalist categories in the theologies of Brunner and Gogarten.⁷ John Hart, too, has recently suggested that Barth’s suspicion of Ebnerian personalism in Brunner’s theology intensified their differences in the late 1920’s.⁸ Ultimately, Barth’s critique of their personalism overlaps with his concern with natural theology more broadly considered. That is, Barth sees personalism as yet another philosophical tool used in a *general* analysis of humanity independent from revelation, and this non-theological investigation is then used by Brunner and Gogarten to form the basis of Christian theology.⁹

It is often assumed that Martin Buber had an influence on Barth’s use of the I-Thou pairing in the *Church Dogmatics* III/2. In that volume Barth speaks of the human being as a “being in relation” for whom there can be no “self” prior to encounter with another. That is, to Barth the human being does not exist as a discrete entity separated from his

⁶ Karl Barth to Eduard Thurneysen, 14 December, 1919, *B-T B*, 361.

⁷ Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), esp. 361, 393-395, 402-411.

⁸ John W. Hart, *Karl Barth vs. Emil Brunner: The Formation and Dissolution of a Theological Alliance* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), esp. 41, 54, and ‘The Barth-Brunner Correspondence’, in *For the Sake of the World: Karl Barth and the Future of Ecclesial Theology*, ed. G. Hunsinger, 19-43 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), esp. 26.

⁹ See Karl Barth, ‘Nachwort,’ in *Schleiermacher-Auswahl: Mit einem Nachwort von Karl Barth*, ed. H. Bolli, 290-312 (Gütersloh: G. Mohn, 1968).

or her meeting with a *Thou*; rather, the human being is *constituted* in such encounter with another. Although this formulation bears some likeness to that of Buber, Barth distinguishes his own position from Buber's on two counts. First, Barth grounds his notion of fellow humanity in his doctrine of the Trinity and his Christology. That is to say, human beings may be regarded as beings in relation because they are made in the *imago Dei*, and the Triune God is God in relationship. In other words, relationality inheres in the Triune God, and it is on *that* basis, to Barth, that the human being, as the image of God, is a fundamentally relational being.¹⁰ Christologically speaking, too, the human being may be regarded as a "being in relation" because in Jesus, we find one who is "Man for other Men."¹¹ For Barth, Jesus' humanity (his "I") should be understood as always determined by the Thou of his fellow human beings. Because of the fact that our humanity bears *some* similarity to that of Jesus—despite the indissoluble difference between our humanity and his—we are also at root directed toward our fellow human beings.¹²

Second, and more controversially, Barth says that his notion of the I-Thou encounter differs from that of Buber in regard to the *gladness* with which one human being greets another in his theological anthropology. Barth puts special emphasis on the notion of gladness, the freedom of heart and spontaneous joy of encounter with another human being. In fact, he goes so far as to say that without this gladness, there *is* no "humanity" by his definition.¹³ Buber, Barth says, may have "had in view this freedom of the heart, and only failed by accident to tread it to its ultimate consequences, and thus to come to this final conclusion."¹⁴ Unfortunately, however, Barth does not offer his assessment of how this "accident" occurred; he does not say how or why this freedom of the heart was not followed to its conclusion. Nor, for that matter, does he elaborate on the sense in which Buber did in fact have this freedom of the heart "in view." Barth thus suggests that this "gladly" was seen to some extent, yet Buber's rendering of it is still unsatisfactory for an unknown reason. It is precisely at this point that a long-unpublished

lecture on Buber's *I and Thou* given by Barth in 1944 illuminates what would otherwise remain a cryptic and imprecise criticism.¹⁵

After beginning this lecture with praise for the depth and widespread influence of Buber's work, Barth articulates a number criticisms of *I and Thou*. Most significantly, Barth is directly critical of the anthropology that underlies Buber's conception of the I-Thou and I-It relations. Specifically, Barth argues that, for Buber, human beings are *made* so as to be dually directed, so to speak, and as a result they slide from the I-Thou relation to the I-It relation with relatively little consequence.¹⁶ In not attributing the descent into the I-It relation to the *sinfulness* of the human being, Barth is concerned that Buber has admitted the tendency toward the I-It relation into the very structure of humanity itself.¹⁷ For Barth, by contrast, the human being is *created* so as to be directed toward the other gladly. One thing this means is that *by nature* he or she is not capable of another choice. I submit that Barth holds Buber's to be an anthropology that posits the human being as doubly directed toward the I-Thou and I-It relations, not singly directed toward the I-Thou relation that occurs with gladness. Buber's anthropology, then, on this reading of Barth, "falls short" in that it admits to the very structure of human nature another possibility, the I-It relation,

¹⁵ The manuscript from this lecture was integrated into Barth's first draft of the *Church Dogmatics* III/2, although it was never actually published in the volume. It has recently been released on a compact disc of Barth's unpublished texts; there it is titled "Exkurs über Martin Buber." See Karl Barth, 'Exkurs über Martin Buber', in *Karl Barth, Unveröffentlichte Texte zur Kirchlichen Dogmatik*, Supplemente zur Karl Barth-Gesamtausgabe, 1, ed. Hans-Anton Drewes, 1084-1109 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2005).

¹⁶ Barth, "Exkurs über Martin Buber," 1100.

¹⁷ Barth is also critical of the cosmology that accompanies such an anthropology: namely, that Buber allows the I-It relation just as much of a place in the cosmos as the I-Thou relation. "In the beginning is relationship," Barth writes, quoting Buber; then Barth adds, "Yes, but the I-It relationship just as well as the I-Thou relationship (1102)". This criticism leads quite naturally into another: namely, Barth's concern about the doctrine of God that is suggested in Buber's thought. Not only would God seem to be responsible for the existence of the I-It relation, on Barth's reading of Buber, but God is also unable to offer any sort of eternal deliverance from the dual-directedness of human beings. See "Exkurs über Martin Buber," 1105.

¹⁰ CD III/4, 117.

¹¹ See CD III/2, §45.1 'Jesus, Man for other Men'.

¹² CD III/2, 222-223.

¹³ CD III/2, 273.

¹⁴ CD III/2, 278.

not as a result of sin, but as a result of the way the human being is *made* by the Creator.

In sum, Barth's engagement with personalist philosophy entails a highly critical appropriation that seeks to restructure comprehensively such notions as co-humanity, encounter, and the I-Thou relation. In Barth's correspondence regarding the Patmos Circle we see *that* there was resistance to their rendering of personalist thought, even if we do not receive much indication of exactly *why* this was the case. In his dealings with the dialectical theologians, more substantively, we find Barth's concerns with natural theology propelling much of his resistance to Brunner and Gogarten's uses of personalist philosophy. Barth's fundamental reconstructive move in recasting personalist categories occurs as he roots his understanding of co-humanity and the I-Thou encounter in the humanity of Christ and the intra-Trinitarian relations. In putting the relationship between I and Thou on this new foundation, Barth not only circumvents the natural theology he so forcefully resists in his engagement with the dialectical theologians; he also, of course, distinguishes his thought from that of Buber. Additionally, Barth's notion of co-humanity entails a different sort of creature than that of Buber: namely, one who is fundamentally directed toward meeting the other in gladness with no other possibility within his or her nature.¹⁸

***"Openness to the World":
Karl Barth's Evangelical Theology of
Christ as the Pray-er***

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In accounts of prayer that set their faces towards the question 'what does prayer do?' it is rare to find

¹⁸ My thanks go to George Hunsinger for the opportunity to present my work to the Karl Barth Society of North America. Thanks also to Hans-Anton Drewes of the Karl Barth Archive in Basel, Switzerland, for so helpfully accommodating me in my research. Bruce McCormack, Ronald Thiemann, and Sarah Coakley all provided invaluable insight, guidance, and encouragement throughout the writing of this paper; to each of them I am deeply grateful.

significant indication of the interrogative dynamic of prayer, and especially of sophisticated and self-aware consideration of what it means to pray to *God*. Yet what is at stake in accounts of 'prayer' is reflection on a practice that cannot be readily spoken of free from the most important considerations of not only human identity and the shape of its performance, but of world and God. Consequently, if prayer "is not to become a harmless game and an endlessly babbling chatter" (Karl Rahner), attention needs to be paid to the god or gods that practices of so-called 'prayer' encounter, and it may be that much of what moves in the name of the God of Jesus Christ is, in Barth's terms, no-god.

Barth's *Evangelical Theology* lectures of 1962 are instructive in reflecting on the nature of prayer and its distortions, especially as his theology of prayer emerges from this series' deconstruction of any sense of theology being an act of possessive power, control, or self-aggrandizement. Instead, theology properly functions in the faithful obedience and response-ability that take shape in and through the performance of prayer, and operates "Precisely [in] the knowledge that by our own power nothing at all can be accomplished" [*ET*, 148]. In fact, by our own power it is not even *theo-logia* or God-talk.

Four main claims drive lecture 14 on prayer that may be summarized under the headings of the nature of the 'subject-matter' of prayer, the 'subject-matter' as nothing, incompleteness, and an interrogation of the so-called 'answers' to prayer.

The first dimension Barth identifies here is familiar from his much earlier discussions of biblical hermeneutics – theology must be open to its subject matter – and his concern is that theology should live in a 'gift' not of its own making. Its legitimacy is ultimately a question about whether or not the Church is committed to beginning in hearing and responsibly obeying the Lord it lives to proclaim. Correspondingly, prayer too has its place in this movement of "hearing [that] really precedes the asking" and the responsive dependency of "receiving" [*CD* III/3, 270], and the subsequent 'following after' or 'corresponding to' the "gift" of the God who elects God's Self not to be "without human beings." This sensibility concerning the prayer that is "a kind of breathing necessary to life" is expressed in Barth's theology of *prayer as*

petition, following the practice of the Lord's Prayer itself.

Motivated by responsive gratitude, human obedience in invoking 'Our Father' manifests right awareness of being "absolutely dependent and conditioned." [*The Christian Life*, hereafter: *CL*, 57; cf. *CD III/4*, 88, 99] Consequently enquiries about prayer's meaning begin with, and are dominated by, questions of efficacy ('what does prayer do?', 'how is prayer efficacious?', 'how does God answer prayer?', and so on) only when reflections are improperly abstracted from the irreducible actuality of grace and disorderedly assume a 'success-oriented' perspective and an instrumentalizing of 'god'. Among other things, this sense of dependency on grace indicates that the God invoked cannot primarily be responsive or reactive, and the human consequently positioned as the primary praying agent. Human agency does not find or activate a position in God's universe; it does not create the favorable conditions for divine agency; nor does it "present something worthy to God" but instead requests "with empty hands ... as the one who has to receive all things from Him." [*CD*, III/4, 97]

Barth opens his second point with the general, but iconoclastically significant claim, "The object of theological work is not some *thing* but some *one*. ... This object is not an 'It' but a 'He.'" [*ET*, 152] These reflections are significant, particularly since several theological accounts of prayer in one way or other relegate God to something of a dispensary Thing, a *deus ex machina*, and thus reduce prayer to a mechanistic process. However, such an approach attempts, Karl Rahner laments, "to subject God to himself with some form of conjuration", and thus becomes an exercise in *controlling* the divine *object* of prayer.

While, we cannot, in fact, guarantee any non-idolatrous use of the word 'God', to abstract what is meant by 'prayer' from the 'God' confessed to be revealed in Jesus Christ is at least to distort theology's very conditions of intelligibility and trespass the first commandment that is theology's axiom. Now, and this is crucial to recognize, to say this is not in any way to claim a private discourse such as that the Christian use of the word 'prayer' is logically entirely different from other uses, but it is to warn that an appropriate account of 'prayer' needs to pay attention to the particularities and

differences in the talk and the way Christology revolutionizes what we commonly refer to as 'prayer'. Christ is, as Barth explains, the Teacher and Leader in prayer [*CD III/3*, 274], our example [*CL*, 64], and our prayer a *conformatio* or *imitatio Christi*. Yet, equally, prayer is not merely something he *does* but something he *is*, and for this theological reason Barth approvingly cites Calvin's assertion that "He, Jesus Christ, is properly and really the One who prays."

Such an ontology of prayer necessarily accords special regulating significance to the Lord's Prayer, what Barth calls "the essence of prayer" [*CD III/3*, 268]. This prayer is something of a rule for ensuring that we are still talking to *God* in what we call 'prayer' rather than an idol of our distorted imaginings.

Barth's third point grows out of the first two: the event of the confession of the eventfulness of God has implications for understanding the nature of the confession and of theology, its critical self-reflection, as involving *the making of life together*. Barth's language here functions, firstly, as a further way of articulating a theology of self-dispossessing non-mastery, and non-possibility. "Christians", Barth referring to Luther proclaims, "have never become but are always becoming ... in their journey or pilgrimage", and therefore *always* remain "beginners" and never become "masters and virtuosos" through "euphoric fluency" in their work of invocation under grace [*CL*, 78f.]. It serves, secondly, to enable Barth to resist the individualization and privatization of prayer, especially since that all too easily slips into self-interest and self-centeredness. Instead, "the communal character of true prayer" [*CD III/4*, 112] reminds us that prayer takes place within the context of the church and has as its end the coming of God's kingdom to God's world, and the hallowing of God's name within it.

As faithfully performed by Christ prayer becomes an "indispensable ... antidote" [*CL*, 101] by holding up a mirror to other forms of sociality and their dislocations, placing them under the "holy discontent" of a radical subversion given by grace's liberating judgment and drawing them into God's radical reordering of living as it has been actualized in Jesus Christ's royal and priestly work and is being consummated through his prophetic work. Consequently Barth, then, speaks of "prophetic

prayer” [CL, 102] offering a “provisional and very relative and modest resistance” [CL, 174]. And it does so against the false locatability of persons in places that demand the kinds of relations of mastery and possessiveness and instrumentalization that dominate the economic, cultural, social and even theological landscape of modernity. Crucially instead all things have their lives “*ec-centrally*” [CL, 94] in the giving of divine grace.

Barth’s fourth and final point explicates the reverse side of the theological proposals, the conditions under which the human following takes place – in frailty and hope. So the Lord’s Prayer involves self-dispossession, or a training, as Calvin says, of those who are “otherwise idle and lazy” to become the freely obedient people that we are in Christ so as “to present” ourselves “before God wholly and utterly as an application directed to Him.” [CD III/4, 87] Prayer relativizes or suitably situates human desire, and thus reorders our relationship to things and persons. It even radically disposes us of our tendency to speak of ‘answers’ to prayer when this requires a dispensatory God whose grace is possessedly perceivable in world affairs. Barth’s doctrine of providence is not event-making in any simple sense and is thus not “testable in a crudely experimental way”. After all, the case of the *concursum dei* is *sui generis* and “can never be perceived within the framework of a general philosophy.” [CD III/3, 140] Any meaningful talk of ‘answers’ to prayer has to refer to Jesus Christ as the proper question and “the Answer to the great and small questions of our life and common human history” [God Here and Now, 38]. From the flow of this sensibility, then, Barth’s account refocuses theology away from the ‘what does prayer do?’ question and onto the ‘who prays and who is prayed to?’.

BOOK REVIEW

Incarnation and Resurrection: Toward a Contemporary Understanding. By PAUL D. MOLNAR. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007. Pp. 418. \$35.00.

Those who recognize the importance of Christian Doctrine for shaping the church’s speech and witness to the saving self-display of the triune God owe, yet again, an enormous debt of gratitude to Professor Paul D. Molnar, and to his fine book on

the theological work undertaken by the doctrines of incarnation and resurrection. I say fine because it is a text which shows forth with passion and conviction the doctrinal deficiencies of many of the most fashionable practitioners of theology today, especially with regard to their tendency to almost universally collapse the doctrines of incarnation and resurrection into the experience of the disciples and their faith. But Molnar does not only bring to light contemporary theology’s many shortcomings in these areas: he also presents a constructive dogmatic vision of why these classical doctrines matter for the church’s self-understanding and articulation of, as well as its witness to, the risen Lord. Steeped in the theology of Barth and, to a lesser extent, T.F. Torrance, Molnar offers a sharp account of why these two theologians offer far more promise than many of the offerings available today, mainly because of their willingness to allow the eternal Son’s self-revelation in Jesus to dictate the terms of the discussion as to the meaning and the ethical implications of incarnation and resurrection.

Admittedly, this book is not for the theologically faint of heart, as Molnar asks his readers to reflect anew on the degree to which their own Christology agrees with the subject matter at hand—the Lord Jesus as attested in Scripture. Indeed, it would be fair to say that what Molnar is really doing is engaging in an exercise in how various contemporary theologians fail to appreciate Barth’s own basic insights regarding how revelation commandeers our language and thus our thought patterns and actions. If revelation is allowed to do just that, then the doctrine of the incarnation will not denote a kind of vague identification of God with values deemed to be politically and socially serviceable and expedient, but rather will point to a particular person whose identity is eternally established in perichoretic relations with the Father and the Spirit. And in the case of the doctrine of the resurrection, it does not refer to some contentless sense of a new beginning or to the overcoming of the negative by the positive, but rather to a particular person who assumed our sin and death in order that we may have life.

Molnar uses David Fergusson’s classic article “Interpreting the Resurrection” as his primary resource for framing his analysis of contemporary theology. According to Fergusson, liberals as well as so-called radicals refer the resurrection primarily to the religious experience of the disciples, whereas

traditionally-minded theologians view the resurrection as “an event in the life of Jesus that gave rise to the faith of the disciples.” (x) For the former views, the doctrines of incarnation and resurrection are constructivist in nature, denoting an effort on the part of the disciples to describe pre-linguistic experiences of a reality that cannot quite be expressed. For the latter, incarnation is the starting point for Christology, as it concerns the actions of a particular person, actions which are revelatory of that person’s being as vindicated by his resurrection.

Barth provides Molnar with the dogmatic resources needed to make such an argument for the more traditional view. For Barth, Ebionitism and Docetism are the two great heresies, and it is into one or the other of these two heresies that the contemporary theologians whom Molnar surveys fall. Regarding the former, Jesus is thought to be the highest human creature, one exalted to the place of divinity; and regarding the latter, Jesus is the confirmation in experience of our *a priori* ideas of divinity. The only view that can possibly sail clear of such theological shoals is, for Molnar, a view that accounts for the events of Jesus’ life as revelatory precisely because God is their subject. Stated differently, it is Barth’s and therewith Molnar’s sense that Jesus himself, truly God and truly human, *dictates* “the meaning of revelation, salvation and ultimately our knowledge of the Trinity.” (22) He can and does so as one who, together with his Father and the Holy Spirit, has a history in himself—the safeguarding of which is precisely the function of a doctrine of the immanent Trinity.

One sees these basic insights drawn from Barth put to work in the following seven chapters. In the important second chapter of the text, “Incarnation and Resurrection in the Theology of Karl Rahner,” Molnar criticizes Rahner’s ultimately futile attempt to safeguard traditional Christological confession on the basis of human transcendentals. Thus, the question posed to Rahner by Molnar is whether or not the incarnation and resurrection are events in the life of Jesus or events realized by or within the faith of the disciples. To begin to understand Rahner aright—which is no easy thing—Molnar points one to Rahner’s notion of transcendental experience, the very condition that makes revelation possible and that from which he attempts to deduce the meaning of Jesus’ person and work. God’s self-

communication, for Rahner, is indeed a kind of transcendental, something that we can discover in our own self-experience as the “innermost dynamism of our spirit.” (49) Such a move indicates, for Molnar, a mutual conditioning of natural and revealed theology: our experience of hope becomes in the case of the resurrection the starting point for and the verification of the resurrection. Rahner’s treatment of the incarnation evidences a similar confusion. In effect, what funds this confusion is Rahner’s degree Christology, a Christology of a divinized man, which leads to Rahner’s equating of “Jesus’ divinity with his humanity.” What makes this so problematic for Molnar is that incarnation (and resurrection) “receive their meaning from developments within history rather than as unique actions of God coming into history from outside.” (70) Such thinking leads Rahner to conclude that revelation is the becoming historical of what is embedded in the world.

The ethical implications of Rahner’s account are significant: morality thus becomes faithfulness to natural structures, and becoming Christian is a matter of one choosing for oneself: for to choose for oneself is to choose the grace that is present within one’s spirit. The result is troubling, namely, a “subjectivist view that actually leads to a kind of universalism and self-justification.” (80) By giving an account of the character of the ethical action engendered by Rahner’s Christology, Molnar is keen through his text to show how a given theologian’s primary dogmatic commitments have profound implications for his or her ethics. In the case of Rahner, ethics is thus no longer action undertaken in agreement with how things *are*, but rather action undertaken in accordance with the grace present in transcendental dynamics.

Barth is not the only theologian who does considerable work for Molnar. As mentioned, T.F. Torrance is regularly called upon as one who further advances, albeit not always satisfactorily, the understandings advocated by Barth. For Torrance, the right place to begin in thinking about the resurrection is with Jesus Christ himself as the Word of God incarnate, with him who is the acting subject. The Jesus who was and is as God incarnate *dictates* our understanding of the incarnation rather than Christian *experiences* of faith and hope, which is precisely what Molnar views as being the problem with Rahner. Thus, following Torrance the incarnation and resurrection were actual events in

Jesus' life, the latter bringing the former to fulfillment. In no way then can there be any *a priori* knowledge of God, for the incarnation and resurrection "interpret themselves to us . . . [for] that is the nature of scientific theology." (87) In other words, the reality controls our interpretation of itself; the reality commandeers our thought and speech, as each event is, for Torrance, a means of God's self-communication.

Having given a brief account of the scientific character of Torrance's theology in ch. III, Molnar in ch. IV compares the views of the three theologians treated thus far with a view to mapping the relation of the resurrection to the incarnation. Molnar begins by arguing that if that mapping is to be dogmatically responsible, it must be ever mindful of the salutary work that the doctrine of justification undertakes in relation to all talk of and witness to the triune God. This is to say, Barth and Torrance begin their reflections exclusively with Jesus Christ, confident that he is present to his people by his Spirit, ever anew mortifying and vivifying their words and deeds so that they may correspond to his own. At issue for Barth and Torrance, especially when compared to Rahner, is the notion of whether human beings have resources internal to themselves to rightly understand the incarnation and resurrection, and thereby to what extent human nature is naturally participant in grace. For Rahner humanity does participate, for it exists in a graced state. But such a move on Rahner's part indicates a basic confusion of nature and grace: hence revelation is that which modifies of our transcendental consciousness, rather than being an object that, for Barth and Torrance, gives meaning to faith and hope. This leads to an intolerable form of self-justification, for Molnar: self-acceptance becomes the same as accepting the Gospel. To sum up, for Barth and Torrance grace is not part of human nature: the divine command and the saving activity of God which is its basis in the incarnation and resurrection cannot be reduced to transcendental dynamics.

Rahner, however, is not nearly so off the mark for Molnar as two other leading contemporary theologians, John Macquarrie and Paul F. Knitter. For Macquarrie, the resurrection is reduced to being an event in the consciousness of the disciples. That Macquarrie thinks so is because of his basic methodological separation of Jesus' humanity and divinity. In effect, Jesus is, for Macquarrie, a man

with an infinite potentiality for the divine. We, too, have such a potentiality within, argues Macquarrie, a notion which is of course an utterly Pelagian one equating as it does revelation with natural knowledge. Similarly, Paul F. Knitter argues that the resurrection is something that happens within us, originating within our experience. Such thinking is funded by the notion that there is an underlying identity between God and the world: each needs the other. As with so many others surveyed, Molnar is rightly very critical of Knitter's assumption that revelation arises from experience, showing and revealing what is already here.

Unfortunately this kind of theological thinking and the ethics to which it gives rise also comes to the fore in the work of American theologians, Gordon Kaufman and Sallie McFague. Both Kaufman and McFague begin with a social, religious, and political agenda. For the former, the resurrection is an inner experience which remakes lives. The resurrection appearances become ways of discussing how love, mercy, and forgiveness live on, becoming incarnate in the community's way of being. Rather than being an event in the life of Jesus which gives meaning to faith, as Barth and Torrance would argue, resurrection thus becomes "an event within the life of the community." (200) The doctrine of God which makes such a view possible is a largely symbolic one, argues Molnar: "God is a symbol used by the community as its ultimate point of reference to order its existence in ways that will make people more humane and peaceful." (200) The result of Kaufman's thinking: the immanent trinity is rejected and yet another form of self-justification embraced, for salvation becomes a matter of reordering one's life in accord with Jesus' vision of human existence. And in the case of McFague, things do not get any better. Molnar demonstrates the extent to which for her the resurrection is simply God's presence which takes place in every present. For McFague, Jesus is a matter of "our historical choice as the premier paradigm of God's love." (216) As a result, God's actions become located in the world itself: God and world are collapsed into one another. For Barth and Torrance, however, God's essence is a free essence: God does not need creation in order to be God; whereas for McFague, the world is God's body, the divine presence. Salvation then becomes a matter of world preservation.

Although it would be difficult to imagine a less rigorously dogmatic approach than that of either Kaufman or McFague, Roger Haight and John Hick certainly rise to the challenge. For Haight, the resurrection arises from experience: “our transcendental experience of faith-hope ... confers meaning on Jesus himself and on his resurrection.” (235) For Haight, Jesus is a symbol of God, one “in whom God is present and revealed” to a higher degree, rather than one who is God. (237) In this context, then, salvation is not an act of God: “it is that which takes place wherever humans actualize their own self-transcendence.” (241) For Hick, a similar understanding is at work, namely that of a “mythological understanding of the incarnation and ultimately... his unitarian view of God.” (244) Accordingly, the resurrection denotes that the Jesus movement survived the death of its founder as a kind of numinous transforming experience later deified by the community. Two stark alternatives arise for Molnar: either Jesus Christ is unsubstitutable, the subject of his own actions, or else he simply is a foil for values or ideals that lie beyond himself, values which the community thinks worthy and handily finds exemplified in him.

If Rahner is the contemporary Catholic interlocutor whom Molnar takes most seriously, Pannenberg is the Protestant one. For Pannenberg, the incarnation is the *conclusion* of Christological inquiry. This is because, according to Molnar, Pannenberg refuses “to begin his theology in faith because of his fear of authoritarianism and subjectivism that forces him to look to history rather than to the incarnate Word and to the Holy Spirit (as the one who enables faith) to validate his Christology.” (265) Pannenberg’s theology represents a kind of third way, in that, although he is closest to the traditional view among the theologians surveyed, he nonetheless contends that the resurrection finds its intelligibility within a “historically demonstrable apocalyptic horizon within which Jesus’ resurrection is then given meaning by us.” (275) If such is the case, then, Pannenberg’s method ends up compelling him to base his faith on the community’s historical investigations and on an apocalyptic horizon, rather than in the one who is himself the subject of these events. But “Christology can never begin with a view of history, apocalyptic expectation or a supposed openness of humanity for the divine without calling into question Jesus’ actual Lordship from the outset,” argues Molnar. (286) However, this is precisely what Pannenberg does, for Jesus’

divinity is not coterminous with his eternal Sonship which is grounded antecedently in his relation to the Father. Such a way of proceeding marks Christologies from below, in that they suppose “we can actually explain *how* Jesus can be God and man at the same time.” (292) Where Molnar is particularly helpful in his account of Pannenberg is in his demonstration of the fact that Pannenberg gets into many of the problems that he does precisely because of his lack of a doctrine of the immanent trinity. Were Pannenberg to acknowledge the work that such a doctrine undertakes, he would recognize that Jesus’ Sonship is established by his eternal relation with the Father, and not his human dedication to the Father.

Molnar concludes his text by elaborating upon the basic assumption with which he began, namely, the starting point for Christology cannot be the experience of the disciples or our present experiences of faith and hope, but rather must be the eternal Son of the Father become incarnate in the man Jesus and recognized in faith. If such is the case, then, incarnation and resurrection will not be simply ways for us to speak about our relations with the world or about people’s attitudes, either past or present, toward Jesus. Rather, incarnation and resurrection bespeak the eternal God “who manifests himself in history as our Lord, Savior, Helper and Friend in the man Jesus and in his particular resurrection from the dead.” (321) In short, it is for Molnar always a matter of starting in the right place: we cannot fit a historically reconstructed Jesus into “*a priori* anthropological views,” indeed into any *a priori* understanding of grace and revelation. (323) We must flee from an approach which separates the incarnation from the resurrection, placing the emphasis on “our approach to God rather than on God’s approach to us in his Word and Spirit.” Such an approach for Molnar will necessarily be deficient, for the simple reason that Christ’s true divinity is definitive, authentic and essential for who he is and thus in his self-relation to us. (328)

Molnar’s book matters, for the simple reason that it reminds us that the various doctrines coinhere and do their intended work only to the extent that they find their Center in another who is prophetically present, who thereby resides outside of us, and thus outside of the realm of our inner-experiences and faith. Moreover, this book especially matters for it points to the inter-dependence of doctrine and

ethics: for if incarnation and resurrection are invariably ways in which we describe our experience of divinity, then ethics becomes a matter of realizing those forms of life deemed to be most in accordance with our *a priori* understandings of divinity. But if ethics is rooted in God's command and thus bound to a living person who justifies and thereby takes up all human witness in word and deed unto himself making it good, then one is hard-pressed to say that ethics involves action in a realm where one or one's community decides to act in a way that seems right in light of its *a priori* assumptions about what deity demands.

When one reads Molnar's exposition and analysis, one cannot also but help to be reminded of Barth's sense that theology really is about *God*, and because it is about God it is also about us, as those to whom God has come. But so many contemporary practitioners, as Molnar points out, embrace the obverse, and so construct Christian doctrine as if the various actualities in which we find ourselves were in fact reality, and therewith the very basis on which theological statements were to be judged. In effect, contemporary theology, as Molnar maps it, is quite content to assimilate God and God's own self-disclosure into itself, judging that to be a salutary and humanizing endeavor. In so doing, it has occluded the scandalous particularities of the Center's self-presentation, arguing in favor that this Center is really in the service of some other to be welcomed for its social and political utility, rather than being identical with his own enactment of the Kingdom in the power of the Spirit to the glory of the One from whom he eternally comes.

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It is with heartfelt sorrow that the members of the **Karl Barth Society** mourn the loss of its **past-President, Dr. Ronald G. Goetz** who taught at Elmhurst College until his retirement in 1999. A memorial statement will follow in the Fall, 2008 Newsletter.

A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT OF THE KARL BARTH SOCIETY

Dear Friends,

Our Society faces new challenges because of the split between the AAR and the SBL. When a show of hands was taken at our AAR annual meeting last year, those present divided rather evenly about whether we should stay with the AAR or hold our meetings in conjunction with the SBL.

Because it seemed impossible to make a satisfactory choice, we are going to try an experiment. This November the KBSNA will hold sessions in both Chicago (AAR) and Boston (SBL). We will try to keep them as comparable as possible, but there will inevitably be differences, since the papers and presenters will be different in each case. But this way we will be in a better position to assess what we should do for the next couple of years until the AAR and SBL again start holding their meetings concurrently.

Although our annual dues are modest, they really make a difference. Because of them we are able to bring in speakers like David Bentley Hart, Alyssa Pitstick, and now Lewis Ayres who would not otherwise be likely to attend our sessions. We have also been able to help bring in high quality presenters to the Princeton June Barth conferences. Of course, holding double sessions at both the AAR and the SBL meetings will also add to our expenses.

I am indeed grateful for the enthusiastic level of support that you, our members, have shown for our Society's work. Please take a moment to send in your dues of \$20.00 for the current year. Make the check out to KBSNA and send it to Paul Molnar at the return address given with this Newsletter. Thank you.

With best regards,
George Hunsinger
 President, KBSNA

ANNUAL BARTH SOCIETY DUES

Everyone interested in joining the **Karl Barth Society of North America** is invited to become a member by sending your name, address (including email address) and annual dues of \$20.00 (\$10.00 for students) to:

Professor Paul D. Molnar
 Editor, KBSNA Newsletter
 Division of Humanities—Bent Hall
 St. John's University
 8000 Utopia Parkway
 Queens, New York 11439
 Email: molnarp@stjohns.edu

Checks **must be drawn on a U.S. bank** and made payable to the **Karl Barth Society of North America**

Many thanks to all who have paid their dues for this year

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

“The meaning of the incarnation is plainly revealed in the question of Jesus on the cross: ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ (Mk. 15:24). The more seriously we take this, the stronger becomes the temptation to approximate to the view of a contradiction and conflict in God himself. Have we not to accept this view if we are to do justice to what God did for man and what He took upon Himself when He was in Christ, if we are to bring out the mystery of His mercy in all its depth and greatness?

But at this point what is meant to be supreme praise of God can in fact become supreme blasphemy. God gives Himself, but He does not give Himself away. He does not give up being God in becoming a creature, in becoming man. He does not cease to be God. He does not come into conflict with Himself. He does not sin when in unity with the man Jesus He mingles with sinners and takes their place. And when He dies in His unity with this man, death does not gain any power over Him. He exists as God in the righteousness and the life,

the obedience and the resurrection of this man. He makes His own the being of man in contradiction against Him, but He does not make common cause with it. He also makes His own the being of man under the curse of this contradiction, but in order to do away with it as He suffers it. He acts as Lord over this contradiction even as He subjects Himself to it. He frees the creature in becoming a creature. He overcomes the flesh in becoming flesh. He reconciles the world with Himself as He is in Christ. He is not untrue to Himself but true to Himself in this condescension, in this way into the far country. If it were otherwise, if in it He set Himself in contradiction with Himself, how could He reconcile the world with Himself? Of what value would His deity be to us if—instead of crossing in that deity the very real gulf between Himself and us—He left that deity behind Him in His coming to us, if it came to be outside of Him as He became ours? What would be the value to us of His way into the far country if in the course of it He lost Himself? . . . A God who found Himself in this contradiction can obviously only be the image of our own unreconciled humanity projected into deity. We cannot, therefore, choose this alternative in understanding the possibility with which we can seriously reckon and sometimes toy. We have to reject it. . . .

We begin with the insight that God is ‘not a God of confusion, but of peace’ (1 Cor. 14:33). In Him there is no paradox, no antinomy, no division, no inconsistency, not even the possibility of it” (CD IV/1, 185-86).

“The work of the Holy Spirit is really done where there is real prayer, and the work of the Holy Spirit is the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and therefore the power of the divine justification of sinful man. When we pray, we are engaged in a decision for the truth, not of a doctrine of justification, but of justification itself. When we pray, justification speaks, specifically and conclusively, for itself. To refer to this point where the decision is made by God himself is the true purpose of the Christological explanation of justification. To the extent that the decision is made, justification—and it is only now that we can say this—is our justification by faith, by faith alone. For it is only faith that really understands its truth. It does so because faith in Jesus Christ is itself life in its truth” (CD II/2, 763).

“If there were even the shadow of a well-founded doubt in relation to the presupposition and possibility and truth of justification, that would mean that God Himself is not law, that His harmony with Himself is discord, His freedom is whim and caprice, He Himself is *exlex*, in short, He is not God. Or, to put it the other way round, to doubt the truth of justification is to doubt God Himself” (*CD* IV/1, 530).

Karl Barth Society will Meet In Chicago and Boston in the Fall of 2008

Chicago

Our Friday afternoon Session on October 31, 2008 in **Chicago** will feature the following lectures:

“‘The Invention of the Antichrist?’ Reconsidering Barth’s Rejection of the *Analogia Entis*.” **Keith Johnson, Wheaton College.**

“Election and the Trinity: How My Mind Has Changed.” **Kevin Hector, University of Chicago.**

Our Saturday morning Session in **Chicago** will feature a Panel Discussion on *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford University Press, 2004) by **Lewis Ayres.**

Panelists will be:

Paul D. Molnar, St. John’s University
Kathryn Greene-McCreight, St. John’s Episcopal Church
Aristotle Papanikolaou, Fordham University
Lewis Ayres, Emory University

Boston

Our Friday afternoon session in **Boston** on November 21, 2008 will feature the following lectures:

“‘The Path of Total Surrender’: Karl Barth and the Spiritual Nature of Theology.” **Michael Dempsey, St. John’s University.**

“Ecumenical Ecclesiology with Reference to Karl Barth.” **Joseph Mangina, Wycliffe College.**

Our Saturday morning Session in **Boston** will feature another Panel Discussion on *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford University Press, 2004) by **Lewis Ayres.**

Panelists will be:

Paul Molnar, St. John’s University
Willie Jennings, Duke University
Katherine Sonderegger, Virginia Theological Seminary
Lewis Ayres, Emory University

Remembering Thomas F. Torrance

Kent Richards, the **Executive Director** of the **Society of Biblical Literature**, has arranged for a special program in remembrance of **Thomas F. Torrance** who was and is known, respected and admired by many members of the **Karl Barth Society**. **T. F. Torrance** entered eternal life on December 2, 2007 at the age of 94 and was widely regarded as the most important British theologian of the twentieth century. His work on the early church fathers and on all the major *loci* of Christian dogmatic theology, especially the doctrines of the Trinity, atonement and the sacraments as well as his pioneering work on the relationship between science and theology will shape the theological landscape well into the twenty-first century and beyond. Invited speakers will be **Iain Torrance, David Fergusson, Bruce McCormack, George Hunsinger** and **Paul Molnar**. This promises to be a memorable program and is presently scheduled for Sunday, November 23, 2008. More details will follow in the Fall Newsletter.