

Barth and the Shadow of Nothingness

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A Post-Soeharto Contextual Reading

Barth en de Schaduw van het Nietige
Een post-Soeharto contextuele lezing

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in het Nederlands*

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Introduction

In this study, I conduct a *contextual* reading on Karl Barth's elaboration of the doctrine of nothingness in the *Church Dogmatics*. The *contextual* element of this study shall be manifested in *two* ways. *First*, in the genetic-historical reconstruction on the development of the doctrine of nothingness in the *Church Dogmatics*. And *second*, in the recontextualization of the insights gained from the first step of the study in the post-Soeharto Indonesian context. I shall introduce the topic and explain the rationale for this endeavour as well as the plan for its execution in the following sections.

What is Nothingness?

Nothingness (*das Nichtige*) is the term that Barth uses in the *Church Dogmatics* in his discussion on the ontological reality of evil. Barth uses this term in a specific way, and one has to understand the theological context of his use of the term in order to grasp its meaning. Geoffrey Bromiley, the editor of the English translation of the *Church Dogmatics*, speaks about this point in his testimony about the difficult process of translating *das Nichtige* into English.

Many terms have been considered for *das Nichtige*, including the Latin *nihil* which has sometimes been favoured. Preferring a native term, and finding constructions like 'the null' too artificial and 'the negative' or 'nonexistent' not quite exact, we have finally had to make do with 'nothingness'. It must be clearly grasped, however, that it is not used in its more common and abstract way, but in the secondary sense, to be filled out from Barth's own definitions and delimitations, of 'that which is not'.¹

The most complete explanation from Barth on what he means with this term can be found in §50.4 in *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 'The Reality of Nothingness'. There he sketches seven points in his description about this reality that exhibit the theological context as well.

First, nothingness is called 'nothing' because its 'is-ness' is objectionable. 'Only God and his creatures really and properly are', he says, and nothingness does not belong to any of those categories. Nevertheless, when we look on what God does in Jesus Christ, this reality appears as something real. For God takes it seriously and fights against it wholeheartedly. Therefore it has to be considered to exist in a unique way other than the way God and his creatures exist.²

Second, nothingness is also not a mere negation of God or the creatures. The creatures are not God and God is not the creatures, but neither of them are nothingness.³

Third, because of its ontic peculiarity, the true knowledge about nothingness depends on the revelation of God. It cannot be attained merely through natural means. The presence of nothingness is felt by the creatures, in their continual encounter with it. But without a view to God's work, particularly in Jesus Christ, they will perceive nothingness in a flawed way.

¹ CD III/3, 289.

² CD III/3, 349.

³ CD III/3, 350.

Calumniating God and His work, it misrepresents it as a necessity of being or nature, as a given factor, as a peculiarity of existence which is perhaps deplorable, perhaps also justifiable, perhaps to be explained in terms of perfection or simply to be dismissed as non-existent, as something which can be regarded as supremely positive in relation to God, or even as a determination of God Himself.⁴

These misperceptions would lead to unawareness about how one should approach this unique existence. That's why it is so important to see it in the light of God's revelation.

Fourth, nothingness does not exist by itself. Its peculiar existence depends on God's eternal election, which is the ground of all his activity. In the eternal election God rejects what he does not will and reveals his wrath to what he opposes. He is holy, and therefore his Being and activity always involves a clear demarcation on what he wills and what he does not. The existence of nothingness depends on this holiness of God. It would have not existed if God were not holy or if he does not say a clear Yes to what he wills which means that he also says a clear No to what he does not will.⁵

Five, nothingness is evil in character because of its ontic nature. Creation is good because it is the object of God's Yes. It is the object of God's will, of his *opus proprium*. Nothingness, on the other hand, is the object of God's *opus alienum*. God orients his wrath to this direction. It is the possibility that he does not will.⁶

Six, the fight against nothingness is primarily a contest that belongs to God. The creatures are often the victims of this threat, and sometimes they fight side by side with God against this menace. But its main contender is God himself.⁷

Seven, nothingness has no perpetuity. Only God has perpetuity and he even confers it to creation, to be in a fellowship with him. Nothingness, on the other hand, is only a past reality. It is a possibility that has been rejected when God decided to create the world.⁸

The clearest reference to nothingness in the Bible, for Barth, is the second verse of the book of Genesis: 'The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters' (Gen. 1:2, NRSV). In Barth's eyes, this verse refers to the chaotic reality that God 'rejected, negated, passed over and abandoned' before he spoke his 'first creative Word' in the next verse (Gen. 1:3): 'Let there be light!'

Chaos is the unwilled and uncreated reality which constitutes as it were the periphery of His creation and creature. It is that which, later depicted in a very suitable mythological terms and conceptions, is antithetical both to God Himself and to the world of heaven and earth which he selected, willed, and created. It is a mere travesty of the universe. It is the horrible perversion which opposes God and tempts and threatens His creature. It is that which, though it is succeeded and overcome by light, can never itself be light but must always remain darkness.⁹

This chaotic reality does not only remain in its dark character after being succeeded by the creative act of God, but also remain to be a threat that possibly actualize itself in the realm of creation. The sin of human beings is a sign of its persisting menace to the willed domain.

One of the terms that Barth uses in the *Church Dogmatics* to express this reality is 'shadow'. The title of the present study follows this expression.

⁴ CD III/3, 351.

⁵ CD III/3, 351.

⁶ CD III/3, 353.

⁷ CD III/3, 354-5.

⁸ CD III/3, 360.

⁹ CD III/3, 352.

The Location of the Doctrine in the *Church Dogmatics*

While the most complete explanation from Barth on the doctrine of nothingness can be found in §50, a comprehensive study on this topic cannot be solely focusing on that section. John Hick speaks about this point in his discussion on Barth and the problem of evil.

In the course of the more than thirty years of his work on his *Kirchliche Dogmatik* Barth has written extensively on the problem of evil. Indeed if one were to bring together the 98-page section on evil in volume III/3, paragraph 50; the 40-page exegesis of Genesis i, 1-5 in volume III/1, paragraph 41, 2; the 58-page discussion of the goodness of the created world in volume III/1, paragraph 42, 3; and the 178-page treatment of sin and the fall in IV/1, paragraph 59, one would have assembled a full-scale and even massive treatise on the subject.¹⁰

Despite the many texts of the *Church Dogmatics* that Hick mentions, he neglects the role of the second volume, where Barth discusses the doctrine of God. In contrast to this neglect, Scott Rodin's monograph, *Evil and Theodicy in the Theology of Karl Barth*, presents an argument that actually Barth's most important treatment of evil is not found in his famous section in §50, but rather in his doctrine of God. In that study, Rodin also mentions that a closer examination on *Church Dogmatics* would show a much larger number of texts that need to be observed in regard to the topic of nothingness, 'A close examination of the work as a whole will show that in no less than 28 of its 73 sections, evil, sin and death are given major treatment'.¹¹ The long list signals to us that the discussion on nothingness is widely spread across the many volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*.

A Difficult Reception

In the history of its reception, the doctrine of nothingness as proposed by Karl Barth has often received negative reactions. Joseph Mangina, for instance, believes that Barth's explanation of nothingness only manages to gain 'few followers'.¹² Because of its inability to satisfy the intellect, Christopher Green notices that 'the dissatisfied readings of Barth's account of evil and its demons are legion'.¹³ The complexity of Barth's explanation can also be a factor. As John Webster acknowledges, the section in which Barth's elaboration of this theme centers (§50) is one of the two most difficult sections throughout the whole *Church Dogmatics*.¹⁴

Among the critics of Barth's account of nothingness, Gerrit Cornelis Berkouwer is a classic example. In *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, he questions whether the kind of triumph over nothingness that Barth depicts in §50 is in accord with the message of

¹⁰ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (Basingtoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 132-3.

¹¹ The twenty-eight sections that Rodin mentions are as follows: '§14, §28, §29, §30, §31, §32, §33, §34, §35, §39, §41, §42, §47, §48, §49, §50, §51, §56, §57, §59, §60, §61, §64, §65, §69, §70, §73, and §78 in the *Christian Life*'. R. Scott Rodin, *Evil and Theodicy in the Theology of Karl Barth*, Issues in Systematic Theology, v. 3 (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 4-5.

¹² Joseph L Mangina, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Christian Witness* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 102.

¹³ Christopher C. Green, *Doxological Theology: Karl Barth on Divine Providence, Evil and the Angels*, T&T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology, v. 13 (London ; New York: T&T Clark International, 2011), 154.

¹⁴ The other one is §47. J. B. Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 61.

the Scriptures. In his view, Barth's depiction of nothingness *downplays* the real threat that evil poses and neglects the continued struggle against it that Christians are called to take part in.

The question has more than once been asked whether this kind of triumph is indeed the message of the Scriptures. On the one hand, we constantly meet in the Bible the appeal not to fear, to be of good courage and to believe steadfastly in the victory of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, we see that the believer is continually called to resistance and to struggle. We do not in the Bible gain the impression that the battle is all 'an emptied matter' in the sense in which Barth speaks of it. On the contrary, we are warned against a danger that is still very real. When Barth continually speaks of 'not-dangerous' and of 'apparent power' it is difficult to harmonize this 'objective situation' with the New Testament.¹⁵

Berkouwer believes that even though the motif of victory over evil is very strong in the Bible, the victory is always related to 'the *new struggle* and the *new warning*'.¹⁶ This is something that he finds to be missing in Barth's optimistic tone in his depiction of nothingness as a past reality.

While Berkouwer doubts the biblical compatibility of Barth's elaboration of nothingness, Mark Lindsay points to 'historical applicability' as the most vulnerable aspect of Barth's explanation of nothingness. It is perplexing for him to see that there is no mention of the Holocaust in this section, considering that the text was written after the Second World War when the atrocity against the Jewish people had been revealed. Lindsay got the impression that the horror of Auschwitz is underestimated by Barth through his portrayal of evil as a past shadow.¹⁷

Lindsay's concern resembles the accusation that has often been made against Barth that his theology does not do justice to history (*Geschichtslosigkeit*). In his monograph on §50 of the *Church Dogmatics*, Matthias Wütrich provides a survey on this charge and discusses the issue.¹⁸ He concludes that the accusation is not unfounded. As a consequence of Barth's christocentric approach, Wütrich believes that the theologian has paid the price by becoming unhistorical.¹⁹ He considers that Barth's doctrine of nothingness not only neglects the reality of nothingness in the individual and common life stories, it also denies the ability of human beings to properly identify in their experience the reality of nothingness as such and to be able to speak about it.²⁰

Beyond Theodicy

The accusations about Barth's neglect of history in his doctrine of nothingness seems to be related to the fact that most of the studies on this topic have approached it from the question

¹⁵ G.C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 237.

¹⁶ Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace*, 238.

¹⁷ Mark R. Lindsay, "'Nothingness' Revisited: Karl Barth's Doctrine of Radical Evil in the Wake of the Holocaust," *Colloquium* 34, no. 1 (2002): 13-5.

¹⁸ Matthias D. Wütrich, *Gott und das Nichtige: eine Untersuchung zur Rede vom Nichtigen ; ausgehend von § 50 der kirchlichen Dogmatik Karl Barths* (Zürich: Theol. Verl. Zürich, 2006), 274f.

¹⁹ Wütrich, *Gott und das Nichtige*, 334.

²⁰ 'Barths Rede vom Nichtigen tendiert also nicht nur dazu, die Wirklichkeit und Wirksamkeit des Nichtigen in den individuellen und gemeinsamen Lebensgeschichten analogisch herunterzubrechen, sondern ihre christologische Erkenntnislehre spricht auch den Menschen eine letzte Fähigkeit ab, von sich aus erfahrendes Nichtiges als solches angemessen zu erkennen, benennen und zur Sprache bringen zu können'. Wütrich, *Gott und das Nichtige*, 335.

about theodicy. John Hick discusses Barth's treatment of evil in his book about the theodicy problem, *Evil and the God of Love*.²¹ The title of Scott Rodin's monograph, *Evil and Theodicy in the Theology of Karl Barth*, already says much about how he approaches the topic. In that book, Rodin actually acknowledges that Barth himself 'does not attempt a specific theodicy', but he believes that through an analysis of Barth's doctrine of evil in his theology as a whole, it is possible to find 'a resultant theodicy'.²² Lindsay's concern about 'historical applicability' that has been mentioned earlier is clearly coming from the question about theodicy. In the light of the horror of the Holocaust, Barth's triumphant way of speaking about the reality of evil seems to be unjust. Matthias Wütrich, who questions the adequacy of Barth's treatment of evil, develops his critique to an analogy that Barth actually posits himself on the side of Job's friends, giving inadequate theological explanation about evil in the midst of the neglected reality of human suffering.²³

I suspect that the tendency to discuss Barth's doctrine of nothingness within the framework of the question of theodicy is driven by the over-focus on §50.²⁴ The theme of *Church Dogmatics* III/3 is the doctrine of providence, and the part-volume was published in 1950, a few years after the disclosure about the tragic reality of Shoah. It is only natural for a reader to have an intuition that Barth is mainly dealing about the issue of theodicy in this text.

Not everybody discusses Barth's doctrine of nothingness within the framework of the question about theodicy though. Christopher Green's monograph on Barth's doctrine of providence in *Church Dogmatics* III/3, which contains — among others — a long chapter on §50, is an example. Green's proposal is to read §50 and the whole *Church Dogmatics* III/3 in the context of the Lord's Prayer, as he believes that the whole part-volume follows this arrangement. For him, §50 reflects the sixth petition of the prayer: 'lead us not into temptation'.²⁵ Wolf Krötke's book, *Sin and Nothingness in the Theology of Karl Barth*, is another example. His study is a systematic treatment of the theme of nothingness in Barth's theology that does not specifically touch on the problem of theodicy. It attempts to clarify the coherence of Barth's treatment of this topic throughout different sections of *Church Dogmatics* by testing its consistency.²⁶

What I am trying to do in contrast to these previous studies is a reading that seriously explores the *political dimension* of Barth's account of nothingness, in a way that his treatment of evil is not seen as an attempt to provide another answer to the theodicy problem, but as a doctrine that *encourages resistance*. John Webster already initiates this direction in his study on Barth's treatment of the doctrine of original sin:

And so, again, as an ethical account of wickedness, Barth's theology takes with great seriousness the command for rebellion against sin: the defeat of sin is not merely a

²¹ Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*.

²² Rodin, *Evil and Theodicy in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 1.

²³ Wütrich, *Gott und das Nichtige*, 369.

²⁴ John McDowell also points to the over-focus on this section. John C. McDowell, 'Much Ado about Nothing: Karl Barth's Being Unable to Do Nothing about Nothingness,' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 4, no. 3 (November 2002): 319.

²⁵ Green, *Doxological Theology*, 153-5.

²⁶ Wolf Krötke, *Sin and Nothingness in the Theology of Karl Barth*, Studies in Reformed Theology and History, N.S., 10 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Theological Seminary, 2005). There is another work that does not specifically deal with Barth, but also considers him as somebody who does not favor a theodicy approach to evil. See Petruschka Schaafsma, *Reconsidering Evil: Confronting Reflections with Confessions*, Studies in Philosophical Theology 36 (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 15.

vicarious achievement, passively received from the hands of an omnipotent Lord, but a summons to us to recover our agency and assume the liberty in which we stand.²⁷

Whereas others perceive Barth's account of evil as downplaying the serious threat of evil or neglecting its horror throughout human history, Webster is able to see that it is instead a 'command for rebellion'. This is the perspective that I intend to develop further in this study. My conviction is that the key to reach that objective is the execution of a contextual reading.

A Contextual Reading

As I mentioned earlier in the opening paragraph, the present study demonstrates a contextual reading of Barth's account on nothingness in *two* senses.

The *first* one is a contextual reading of Barth's account of nothingness that will uncover its *political* dimension. I borrow this method from Timothy Gorringer, who uses this approach in his treatment on Barth's theology in general.²⁸ He believes that the development of Barth's theology was very much in response to the social and political problems that he faced. Barth himself mentions several times throughout his theological career how politics is never a separate topic in his theological works. He famously told the students in Leiden during his tour of the Netherlands in February 1939 that 'wherever there is theological talk, it is always implicitly or explicitly political talk also'.²⁹ That sentence was his response to an attempt to censor his lectures from their political contents, out of fear of National Socialism. Barth also indicates clearly that his major works, *Church Dogmatics*, contain political intent. In the preface to the first part-volume, he writes:

I am firmly convinced that, especially in the broad field of *politics*, we cannot reach the clarifications which are necessary to-day, and on which theology might have a word to say, as indeed it ought to have, without first reaching the comprehensive clarifications in and about theology which are our present concern. I believe that it is expected of the Church and its theology—a world within no less than chemistry or the theatre—that it should keep precisely to the rhythm of its own relevant concerns, and thus consider well what are the *real* needs of the day by which its own programme should be directed. I have found by experience that in the last resort the man in the street who is so highly respected by many ecclesiastics and theologians will really take notice of us when we do not worry about what he expects of us but do what we are charged to do. I believe in fact that, quite apart from its ethical applications, a better Church dogmatics might well be finally a more significant and solid contribution even to such questions and tasks as that of German liberation than most of the well-meant stuff which even so many theologians think in dilettante fashion that they can and should supply in relation to these questions and tasks. For these reasons I hold myself forbidden to be discouraged. For these reasons I venture upon what is really a venture for me too, addressing myself in the middle of 1932 to a dogmatics, and to a dogmatics of such compass.³⁰

²⁷ John B. Webster, *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought* (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 76. Followed by McDowell, 'Much Ado about Nothing,' 335.

²⁸ Timothy Gorringer, *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

²⁹ Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 292.

³⁰ CD I/1, xvi *emphasis on the word 'politics' is mine.*

The passage points out clearly that *Church Dogmatics* is a programmatic project which is especially aimed to clarify and (re-)direct political praxis. The commencement of the would-be theological *magnum opus* of the former 'Red Pastor from Safenwil' was not a sign of his retreat from politics.

Gorringe is not alone in using this approach, as he attributes this way of reading to several figures that predate him. They are mainly coming from the German-speaking scholarly world, and a name that is mostly associated with this approach is Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt.³¹

Another way of speaking about this approach is a *genetic-historical* reconstruction of Barth's account on nothingness.³² What I mean with this expression is an elaboration of the doctrine of nothingness in Barth's theology that considers the development of the concept through the surrounding social and political contexts. Bruce McCormack attributes the pioneering role of the use of this approach in the world of Barth studies to Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt. On Marquardt's book about Barth and socialism that was published in the 1970s,³³ McCormack gives the following comment:

For the first time, a scholar had made the question of the impact of Barth's historical (social, political, and cultural) context upon his theology to be of central significance for interpreting that theology as a whole. The great merit of Marquardt's book (and the further research into the social-political determinants of Barth's theology which it spawned) was its insistence that Barth's theology was always *zeitgemäß*; that is, it was always directed to a particular situation and really had no intention of being 'timeless'.³⁴

That Marquardt's genetic-historical study results in an interpretation of Barth's theology that bears a strong political character should not be so unexpected. For then the theology that Barth developed throughout his life *is not abstracted* from its living context: the life of a theologian full of theological and political audacities.³⁵

The *second* element of the contextual reading in the present study is 'recontextualization'. I borrow this term from Gerrit Neven who uses it in his proposal about 'doing classical theology in context'. What he means with this term is an engagement with a thinker in the past that does not stop with explicating what is meant in the writings, but moves further into an intense dialogue about what is at stake in the *present*.

By recontextualisation I do not mean the explication or even actualisation of theological positions of the past. Of course we incessantly record our history by means of oral

³¹ The other figures are Peter Winzeler, Sabine Plonz, Helmut Gollwitzer, Georges Casalis, Peter Eicher, Dieter Schellong, and Michael Weinrich. He also mentions that this approach is rebuked by Klaus Scholder, Gerhard Sauter, Friedrich Gogarten, R.H. Roberts, and T.F. Torrance who preferred a 'scholastic' approach. Gorringe, 16-18.

³² In contrast to Matthias Wüthrich's 'genetic-systematic' (*genetisch-systematisch*) approach. See Wüthrich, *Gott und das Nichtige*, 59.

³³ Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, *Theologie Und Sozialismus: Das Beispiel Karl Barths*, Gesellschaft Und Theologie. Abt.: Systematische Beiträge, Nr. 7 (München: Kaiser, 1972). See also the introduction of this 'school' to the English-speaking world in George Hunsinger, ed., *Karl Barth and Radical Politics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976); George Hunsinger, ed., *Karl Barth and Radical Politics*, Second edition (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2017).

³⁴ Bruce L McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology Its Genesis and Development, 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 26-27.

³⁵ Gorringe believes that McCormack's genetic-historical method is 'a historical and material reading in all but name'. This is a statement that he mentions when explaining Marquardt's claim that Barth's 'genetic' method in his lectures on the nineteenth century Protestant thinkers is 'a "model example" of historical materialist interpretation'. Gorringe, *Karl Barth*, 8.

tradition and written texts. We cannot but listen carefully to what our fathers and brothers and sisters tell. We call this listening simply interpretation, and the discipline in which we make rules for those activities we call hermeneutics. But in some cases, our predecessors are so important that interpretation does not suffice. As far as Karl Barth is concerned, it is my conviction that a real encounter with the event or truth in the theology of Karl Barth cannot limit itself to correct interpretations and respectful questions. Barth was a vehement and militant thinker, as almost all great thinkers are. I think you can only be faithful to him if you are prepared to cope with him in the form of an intensive and critical dialogue, in which the practice of truth is at stake again and again.³⁶

When we look at the way Barth himself studies theologians of the past, we can see how he also does not stop in the graveyard of his predecessors, but tries to listen to their *living* voice in the present. An example of this procedure can be found in his lecture on Calvin.

[...] we cannot stop at establishing that four hundred years ago Calvin said this or that. We may have excellent documentation. We may argue the point cogently. What we establish may be interesting in itself. But to stop there would be to deny that history is life's teacher, and, I would add, it would be to deny the immortal Spirit of God whom Calvin heard speaking through Paul even though Paul was long dead. It may well be true and worth noting that Calvin said this or that, but if we are not taught by it then—I venture to say—his statements are not historical. The historical Calvin is the living Calvin who, as he did say this or that, wanted to say something specific, one thing, and who, insofar as his works are preserved, still wants to say it, perhaps in a way that he could not do in his lifetime and to earlier readers of the works.³⁷

In other words, a recontextualization of Barth's theology in a specific conjuncture other than his own is something that he would most likely commend, as this is what he also did with the 'clouds of witnesses' (cf. Heb. 12:1) from the past.³⁸ The method that Neven suggests could also be regarded as Barth's own.

The practice of recontextualization demands that one must not only be well-versed about how truth was at stake in the context of the theologian that is being read, but also how it is so in one's own context. As Neven says, 'recontextualisation means that in order to read and reread theologians and other writers of the past, you must have a solid knowledge of the situation you live in; of the way truth and justice are practised or have been betrayed'.³⁹

The context in which the present study aims to do the recontextualization task is post-Soeharto Indonesia.

The Conjuncture of the Post-Soeharto Indonesia

After a series of student demonstration in 1998, Soeharto, the second president of Indonesia, resigned from his position, thus marked an end to the so-called 'New Order' regime in this country. For thirty-two years this man has led a significant turn in the course of history,

³⁶ Gerrit W. Neven, 'Doing Classical Theology in Context', *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 63, no. 4 (May 7, 2007), 1417.

³⁷ Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1995), 3-4.

³⁸ Cf. Rinse Herman Reeling Brouwer, *Karl Barth and Post-Reformation Orthodoxy*, *Barth Studies* (Farnham, Surrey ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 248.

³⁹ Neven, "Doing Classical Theology in Context," 1418.

converting the country that was a pioneer of the Asian-African anti-imperialist movement to become a humble servant of US imperialism in Southeast Asia.⁴⁰ To fulfil such a huge task, he engineered mass genocide⁴¹, cultural propaganda⁴², and a reign of terror.⁴³

More than two decades after his fall, it is still difficult to say that his legacy has passed. The crime of mass genocide against alleged communists in 1965-1966 is still continually denied by the government.⁴⁴ The military commanders who were involved in serious crimes in the past are still present at the top level of Indonesian politics. Names that bear memories of crimes and atrocities such as Wiranto, Ryamizard Ryacudu, Hendropriyono, and Prabowo Subianto are either included in the present cabinet or team, or frequently become the main challenger for power.⁴⁵ An anti-communist paranoia is so visible, as a result of decades of propaganda.⁴⁶ Neoliberal policies strongly dominate and affect the majority of the citizens, as institutions such as the IMF and World Bank are still dictating to the government.⁴⁷ Low labor-costs are maintained to ensure 'competitiveness' in the investment market, in order to attract multinational corporations to come and exploit the labor power.⁴⁸ Even the current president, Joko Widodo (also known as 'Jokowi') who declared a fight against neoliberalism just before

⁴⁰ Cf. Eric Toussaint and Damien Millet, *Debt, the IMF, and the World Bank Sixty Questions, Sixty Answers* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010), chp 2, Kindle.

⁴¹ The most recent publications on this topic are two books from Geoffrey Robinson, *The Killing Season: A History of the Indonesian Massacres, 1965-66*, Human Rights and Crimes against Humanity (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); and Jess Melvin, *The Army and the Indonesian Genocide: Mechanics of Mass Murder*, Rethinking Southeast Asia 15 (New York: Routledge, 2018). Both of them were written in the light of the latest revelation of CIA documents which indicate US involvement in the affair. Other important sources for this topic are two documentaries made by Joshua Oppenheimer. One of them, *The Act of Killing* (2012), was nominated for Oscar in 2014.

⁴² The publication of Wijaya Herlambang's doctoral dissertation, Wijaya Herlambang, *Cultural Violence: Its Practice and Challenge in Indonesia* (Germany: VDM Verlag, 2011), and its Indonesian translation, Wijaya Herlambang, *Kekerasan budaya pasca 1965: bagaimana Orde Baru melegitimasi anti-komunisme melalui sastra dan film*, Cetakan pertama (Serpong, Tangerang Selatan: Marjin Kiri, 2013) has brought pathbreaking discussions on this topic. Throughout the book, Wijaya Herlambang reports his detailed investigation about the collaboration of the New Order regime, CIA, and several cultural institutions in Indonesia in the massive anti-communist propaganda during the reign of Soeharto.

⁴³ An important study on the reign of terror under Soeharto, Julie Southwood, *Indonesia: Law, Propaganda, and Terror* (London: Westport, 1983) has been translated and distributed in Indonesia as Julie Southwood, *Terror Orde Baru: penyelewengan hukum & propaganda, 1965-1981* (Jakarta: Komunitas Bambu, 2013).

⁴⁴ Marguerite Afra Sapiie, 'Indonesia Denies Foreign Involvement, Genocide in 1965 Communist Purge', *The Jakarta Post*, July 21, 2016, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/07/21/indonesia-denies-foreign-involvement-genocide-in-1965-communist-purge.html>.

⁴⁵ See Damien Kingsbury, 'Wiranto and Indonesia's New Cabinet', *New Mandala*, August 1, 2016, <http://www.newmandala.org/wiranto-indonesias-new-cabinet/>; Paul Millar, 'The Key to Suspected War Criminal Prabowo Subianto's Campaign against Jokowi', *Southeast Asia Globe*, June 8, 2018, <http://sea-globe.com/prabowo-subianto-presidential-campaign/>; 'Hendropriyono's Appointment Raises Eyebrows', *The Jakarta Post*, August 10, 2014, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2014/08/10/hendropriyono-s-appointment-raises-eyebrows.html>; Farouk Arnaz and Ezra Sihite, 'Kontras: Ryamizard Appointment Shows Jokowi "Negligent" on Human Rights', *Jakarta Globe*, October 27, 2014, <http://jakartaglobe.id/news/kontras-ryamizard-appointment-shows-jokowi-negligent-human-rights/>.

⁴⁶ The most recent outcome of such paranoia is the attack on a public discussion in September 2017. See 'Anti-Communists Besiege, Attack Office of YLBHI', *The Jakarta Post*, September 18, 2017, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/09/18/anti-communists-besiege-attack-office-of-ylbhi.html>.

⁴⁷ See Eric Toussaint, 'The World Bank and the IMF in Indonesia: An Emblematic Interference', *CADTM*, November 2, 2014, <http://www.cadtm.org/Nouvelle-traduction-La-Banque>.

⁴⁸ Cf. Intan Suwandi, *Value Chains: The New Economic Imperialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2019).

he was elected in 2014⁴⁹, immediately fell into the same trap.⁵⁰ Despite being seen by many to be the symbol of a new era, Jokowi's governance has started to be compared to Soeharto's. Eve Warburton, for example, notes that Jokowi's vision of development, policy focus, and leadership style echo the model of Soeharto. Both emphasize the urgent need to modernize Indonesia through de-regulation and de-bureaucratization, prioritize infrastructure building, and can be ruthless at times, despite their passive appearance.⁵¹ As a result to this approach, protests from the marginalized groups who have become the victim of Jokowi's policies have grown rapidly. In September 2019, a huge student protest, joined by the alliance of labor unions and other organizations of social movement, declared that the Reformation progress since 1998, when Soeharto stepped down from his position, has been corrupted. They cried for alternative politics.

Theological reflections are never immune from the contest of power. They always reflect certain postures towards the struggle in history. The mystifying power of theology has always been an active force that either legitimizes the powers that be or resists the establishment. This is also the case in post-Soeharto Indonesian state of affairs. Along with the yearning for liberation from the New Order legacy, it is important to think about how Indonesian theologians in the past and the present have dealt with this issue.

Julianus Mojau's study, *Meniadakan atau Merangkul? Pergulatan Teologis Protestan dengan Islam Politik di Indonesia*, has advanced a significant contribution in this area of study by providing a survey on how Indonesian theologians in the past have dealt with the New Order regime.⁵² In the first section of that study, he discusses some of the main theologians from Indonesia whose programs were in line with the New Order agenda: Oerip Notohamidjojo, T.B. Simatupang, P.D. Latuihamallo, S.A.E. Nababan, and Eka Darmaputera. Notohamidjojo was an early supporter of the New Order regime during the transition from the previous one. Among the five theologians, he is probably the most optimistic in his attitude towards the New Order regime. Simatupang is more ambiguous, as he tried to maintain a critical distance while at the same time working within the framework provided by the regime. Simatupang's ambiguity also mirrors the approach from the other three theologians: Latuihamallo, Nababan, and Darmaputera.⁵³

Critical reflections on the task of theology in Indonesia after Soeharto have also been discussed by Indonesian theologians.⁵⁴ One of the most consistent participants in the conversation is Emanuel Gerrit Singgih, who has published some books and chapter articles on the topic. Singgih's works resonate with the topic of the present study since he has been interested in the discussion about creation and nothingness.

⁴⁹ See Luqman Rimadi, 'Deklarasi Capres Di Rumah Pitung Diprotes, Jokowi: Salah Kaprah', *Liputan 6*, March 23, 2014, <https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/2026712/deklarasi-capres-di-rumah-pitung-diprotes-jokowi-salah-kaprah>.

⁵⁰ Faisal Basri, a respected Indonesian economist, mentions in 2015, just a year after the election of Jokowi, that his policies are even more neoliberal than the predecessor. See Faisal Basri, 'Faisal Basri: Jokowi Lebih Neolib Dibanding SBY', *Kompas*, June 6, 2015, <https://ekonomi.kompas.com/read/2015/06/16/103300726/Faisal.Basri.Jokowi.Lebih.Neolib.Dibanding.SBY>.

⁵¹ Eve Warburton, 'Jokowi and the New Developmentalism,' *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 52, no. 3 (September 2016): 315-6.

⁵² Julianus Mojau, *Meniadakan Atau Merangkul? Pergulatan Teologis Protestan Dengan Islam Politik Di Indonesia*, Cetakan ke-1 (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2012).

⁵³ Mojau, *Meniadakan atau Merangkul?*, 30-119.

⁵⁴ Cf. John M. Prior and Alle Hoekema, 'Theological Thinking by Indonesian Christians, 1850-2000,' in *A History of Christianity in Indonesia*, ed. Jan S. Aritonang and Karel A. Steenbrink, Studies in Christian Mission, v. 35 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2008), 787-8; A. A. Yewangoe et al., eds., *Teologi Politik: Panggilan Gereja Di Bidang Politik Pasca Orde Baru*, Cetakan ke-1 (Makassar: Yayasan Oase Intim, 2013).

Three Parallels

The contextual reading in this study will be conducted in *three main parts*, following the stages of development in Barth's account of nothingness. Earlier I have mentioned about the twenty-eight sections in the *Church Dogmatics* which discusses the topic of nothingness. The list stretches from *Church Dogmatics* I/2 to all the rest part-volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*, including *The Christian Life*. At first, the impression might be that the subject is too extensive for one to handle. However, the nature of Barth's presentation in the *Church Dogmatics* requires its reader to focus more on the *main structure* of a subject rather than individual passages.⁵⁵

The earlier part of this introductory chapter on what is nothingness already gives a clue on the main structure of the doctrine of nothingness in the *Church Dogmatics*. The knowledge about nothingness relies on God's revelation in *Jesus Christ*. The ontology of nothingness depends on God's eternal *election* and his attribute as a holy God who has a definite will. And the threat of nothingness takes action in the realm of *creation* through the sins of humankind, as an opposition to God's covenant and providence.

This main structure leads us to focus on *three* divisions: christocentrism as the epistemological basis of the doctrine of nothingness; divine election and divine will as the ground of the peculiar existence of nothingness; and creation, man, and providence as the location of the struggle. Following this division, the texts from *Church Dogmatics* II constitute the basis for the second part, and the texts from *Church Dogmatics* III/1 to III/3 for the third, while the first part traces the development of christocentrism in Barth's texts during the 1930s. Other sections will not be neglected, but they will be treated more as supplements rather than the center of attention. The historical reconstruction will follow the shape of the main divisions. The supplementary sections will inform the discussion in these divisions, according to how they fit into the main structure.

In accord with the period of the composition, the three divisions represent the period *before*, *during*, and *after* the Second World War. The *first* one, on the development of christocentrism, was mainly developed around 1933-1936. The *second*, on the development of the doctrine of divine omnivolence and divine election, emerged between 1937-1942. The *third* one, on the doctrine of creation, man, and providence, was developed towards the end of the war and afterwards. If the period of Hitler's reign is used as a point of reference, then this division represents the period of its *rise*, its *peak*, and its *fall*. As I will show in the following chapters, this division also represents the dynamic of Barth's tone in his struggle in these three different periods: *prevention*, *opposition*, and *re-creation*.

For the recontextualization task, three counterparts are chosen, following the three divisions in the genetic-historical reconstruction. The first one, in parallel to the presentation on christocentrism, is Oerip Notohamidjojo, a Neo-Calvinist Christian thinker who showed his support for Soeharto during his *rise*. T.B. Simatupang follows as the second case, due to his ambivalent stance to the New Order regime at the *peak* of its power through his principle of realism — inspired by Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism. The third one is Emanuel Gerrit Singgih, who through his exposition on creation and nothingness from the opening verses of Genesis 1 displays an optimistic attitude to the political trajectory in Indonesia *after* the fall of Soeharto.

Plan of the Study

⁵⁵ Cf. Geoffrey William Bromiley, *An Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), x; Rodin, *Evil and Theodicy in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 5.

The main question that guides the study is the following: *in the search for theological existence in the post-Soeharto Indonesian context, what is the contribution that a contextual reading on Barth's doctrine of nothingness can make?* To answer this main question, six sub-questions follow to guide the discussions in each chapter: (1) What does a contextual reading on the development of christocentrism tell us about its theologico-political tendency? (2) What is the counter-proposal that Barth's christocentrism offers in the predicament of Notohamidjojo's support of Soeharto? (3) What does a contextual reading of Barth's doctrine of divine omnivolence tell us about its theologico-political tendency? (4) What is the counter-proposal that Barth's doctrine of divine omnivolence offers in the dilemma of Simatupang's ambivalence in Soeharto's time? (5) What does a contextual reading on Barth's treatment of creation and nothingness tell us about its theologico-political tendency?⁵⁶ (6) What is the counter-proposal that Barth's account of creation and nothingness offers in the case of Singgih's optimism about the trajectory of Indonesian politics after Soeharto?

The six sub-questions lead us into six chapters in which those questions shall be answered. In the following lines, I provide a short description on the contents of each chapter.

Chapter *one* discusses the development of christocentrism as the epistemological basis of the doctrine of nothingness and explores how this development is related to the context Barth was facing at that time: the rise of Hitler. Discussions on his opposition to natural theology and the struggle of Barth to find a firm theological ground for his praxis will be the main issues here. Texts from Barth and his theological counterparts which bear relation to the struggle during this time will be studied, especially those which were published around 1933-1936. These materials will be read in the light of Barth's activism during this period that bears the character of *prevention*: the establishment of Confessing Church, the Barmen Declaration, his refusal to swear an oath to Hitler that led to his return to Switzerland, and so on.

Chapter *two* deals with the case of Oerip Notohamidjojo. He was an influential leader of a Christian political party and a Christian university in his time, who quickly supported Soeharto's regime after its rise. Theologically, Notohamidjojo was heavily influenced by the Dutch Neo-Calvinist theological tradition, which was founded by Abraham Kuyper. The social and political context of Notohamidjojo's works will be explained, and his theology will be analyzed. A particular focus will be drawn to his adoption of Kuyper's doctrine of common grace and how it might affect his political stance at that time. The possibility that Barth's christocentrism might be an alternative to his predicament will be discussed.

Chapter *three* is about the doctrine of nothingness in Barth's exposition of the doctrine of God, on divine omnivolence in the paragraph on the reality of God in *Church Dogmatics* II/1 and divine election in *Church Dogmatics* II/2. *Church Dogmatics* II/1 was written during 1937-1939, which means that the context of those expositions is the time when the Second World War was about to begin, during which Barth was actively campaigning in various countries to promote concrete actions to resist Hitler. The other text in *Church Dogmatics* II/2 was published in 1942, after the Second World War had already started. The close connection between Barth's discussion of the doctrine of nothingness in the doctrine of God to what he was facing at that time and what he was actively struggling for will be demonstrated. Several other texts which were written by Barth during this period will also be studied and read in the light of his activism in this period that bears the character of *opposition*.

Chapter *four* deals with Tahi Bonar Simatupang. He was a former general in the army and a national hero in Indonesia who retired early from his military career and he has been

⁵⁶ I borrow the term 'theologico-political' from the Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Žižek, who endorses the use of that 'old syntagm', for 'not only that every politics is grounded in a "theological" view of reality, it is also that every theology is inherently political'. Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London ; New York: Verso, 2011), 119.

working as a Christian leader since. Simatupang is known for his principle about realism which he learned from Reinhold Niebuhr's idea of Christian Realism. This principle has influenced his stance on Soeharto's regime, on which he suggests a somewhat critical stance, yet realistically accepting it as the best possible alternative. The question about how this principle works in his thoughts and actions, and theological assumptions that ground them will be analyzed. The possibility that Barth's doctrine of divine omnivulence might be an alternative to this dilemma will be explored.

Chapter *five* discusses the doctrine of nothingness in the doctrine of creation (*Church Dogmatics* III/1), the doctrine of man (III/2), and the doctrine of providence (III/3). The first part of the volume was written during the final part of the Second World War (beginning in 1942, first published in 1945), when according to Eberhard Busch, Barth was starting to reflect on the pathology of the Western intellectual tradition that resulted in the inferno.⁵⁷ Here the doctrine of nothingness appears in his exposition of the first two chapters in the Bible. The second part of the volume, on the doctrine of humanity, was the first part of the *Church Dogmatics* that was composed after the war, during which Barth had more time to do his theological reflection. The third part of the volume was written a few years after the war (1948-1949), when he was concerned with the issue of rebuilding a new society after the ruins. Barth's vision about a new world after the war as reflected in his elaboration on creation and nothingness will be explored, with a view to the other texts he wrote during this period and his political activism that bears the character of *re-creation*.

Chapter *six* deals with Emanuel Gerrit Singgih, who presented a lecture on chaos in Genesis 1:1-3 on his inauguration as a professor in 2005. Singgih's interpretation on chaos in that lecture deals with the political situation after the fall of Soeharto. He sees the chaotic situation in the Reformation period in an optimistic way, based on his interpretation of Genesis 1:2. The possibility that Barth's treatment of creation and nothingness might be an alternative to the proposal of Singgih will be probed.

The Conclusion summarizes the findings that are presented at length in the main chapters. It also presents the thesis that I propose in response to the main research question and offers suggestions for further research on the topic.

⁵⁷ Eberhard Busch, *Unter dem Bogen des einen Bundes: Karl Barth und die Juden 1933-1945* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1996), 503.

PART ONE

CHRISTOCENTRISM

Chapter 1

The Development of Christocentrism

In the third sub-section of §50 in *Church Dogmatics* III/3, ‘The Knowledge of Nothingness’, Barth contends that the knowledge about the existence of nothingness and its menacing character and threat can only be derived from ‘the source of all Christian knowledge, namely the knowledge of Jesus Christ’.⁵⁸ In other words, in this theological scheme, christology functions in his theological scheme as the epistemological ground of the doctrine of nothingness. This contention has a background in Barth’s theological development in the 1930s. In Barth’s testimony on his own theological development, he considers the period between 1928-1938 as the years when he *deepened* his understanding and developed christocentrism.

In these years I had to learn that Christian doctrine, if it is to merit its name and if it is to build up the Christian church in the world as she must be built up, has to be exclusively and conclusively the doctrine of Jesus Christ — of Jesus Christ as the living Word of God spoken to us men.⁵⁹

Centering or concentrating on Christ, though, is never exclusively Barth’s claim. Many theologians in the past and the present have made similar claims. Therefore when speaking about Barth’s christocentrism, one always needs to specify its particular nature.

Marc Cortez attempts to clarify the ambiguity present in this term by offering five qualifications: ‘(1) a veiling and unveiling of knowledge in Christ, (2) a methodological orientation, (3) a particular christology, (4) a Trinitarian focus, and (5) an affirmation of creaturely reality’.⁶⁰ Particularly important for the discussion is the second qualification. In Cortez’s explanation, as a methodological rule, christocentrism has two aspects:

First, he argues that the directionality of all theological thinking must move primarily *from* Christ to any given theological formulation. Barth recognized that the directionality of theological thinking has important consequences for the content of our theologies and consistently maintained that theological thought must always begin with christology. Second, this methodological principle not only affirms the *directionality* but the *universality* of christological thinking. As indicated above, Barth maintained that properly theological thinking, whether addressing doctrine or some other mode of discourse, must begin with christology.⁶¹

⁵⁸ CD III/3, 302.

⁵⁹ Karl Barth, *How I Changed My Mind* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew P, 1969), 44.

⁶⁰ Marc Cortez, “What Does It Mean to Call Karl Barth a ‘christocentric’ Theologian?,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60, no. 02 (May 2007): 127.

⁶¹ Cortez, 134–5.

The ‘directionality’ and ‘universality’ of ‘christological thinking’ explains the reliance on christology as the source of all Christian knowledge to understand the reality of nothingness.

Barth did not arrive at this understanding overnight. As mentioned earlier, it was developed through time, during which Barth *deepened* his understanding based on the previous knowledge he had gained before. With respect to this process, it is important to do some reconstruction of the development process, in order to understand better what christocentrism implies.

Through his groundbreaking work, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, Bruce McCormack has established a solid theory that the development of christocentrism in Barth’s theology during the 1930s reached its final moment in 1936, following his discovery of the christological doctrine of election.⁶² From then on, all doctrinal *loci*, including man, creation, providence, reconciliation, and even God himself are grounded in christology. Despite its superb achievement, McCormack’s study does not sufficiently expose the *political* thrust in Barth’s theological discovery. This is the gap that I intend to fill.

My *aim* in this chapter is to uncover the theologico-political tendency in christocentrism through a contextual reading of its development that pays attention to the socio-political context that Barth was facing at that time and his responses. Following McCormack, the peak of the development of this idea is presumed to happen in 1936. At that time Barth had returned to Switzerland for one year, after being dismissed from his teaching position in Bonn for his refusal to swear an oath of allegiance to Hitler. In Barth’s own testimony, it is the engagement with Hitler that inspired him to the *deepening* of his theology that led to the discovery of christocentrism.

Just about this same time of the year in 1928, I sat at this same desk in a small house of my own in Münster in Westphalia — a Prussian professor and, after seven years spent in Germany, nearly on the point of becoming something like a ‘good German.’ But seven years later, in 1935, during which time I had moved from Münster to Bonn, I had been discharged from my excellent teaching work there, and today I find myself, like a mariner temporarily rescued from the gale, here in my native city, Basel. A decade ago I should never have dreamed that such a thing could happen to me. Doubtless between that time and today a considerable change in my position and line of action has taken place, not with regard to the meaning and direction of my accumulated knowledge but rather with regard to its application. For this change I am indebted to the *fürher[sic]*!⁶³

Barth’s statement, ‘not with regard to the meaning and direction of my accumulated knowledge but rather with regard to its application’, indicates that christocentrism is part of the trajectory of his earlier theology and that its maturation process was catalyzed by his engagement with Hitler. Barth’s activism against Hitler in mid-1930s was mainly characterized as an act of *prevention*. At that time, the alliance between the Nazis and the Christians grew strongly in the form of the German Christian movement (*Deutsche Christen*). Barth’s aim was to block this trend. He wanted to prevent the submission of theology and the churches to this growing movement.

I contend that *the key to unlock the theologico-political tendency of christocentrism is to read it as a matured version of Barth’s seminal insight in Tübingen Lecture 1919 that was deepened through his engagement with Hitler in the 1930s*. In the following pages, I will demonstrate this reading in three sequences: the *first* section deals with Barth’s theological

⁶² McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 453f.

⁶³ Barth, *How I Changed My Mind*, 44-45.

development from 1919 to 1932, the *second* discusses the period of German church struggle in 1933-1935, the *third* section reviews Barth's mature version of christocentrism in 1936. To summarize the whole discussion, a concluding section will follow.

Preparatory Stage: 1919-1932

In this period, the trajectory of Barth's theological development is marked by *ambivalence*. The *radical* proposal that he presents in Tambach Lecture 1919 is followed by comparably *modest* program in his following works such as *Göttingen Dogmatics* (1924-1925) and *Church and Culture* (Amsterdam Lecture 1926).

This period also witnesses Barth's growing ability to speak in dogmatic terms. Following his appointment as an honorary professor of Reformed theology in Göttingen in 1921, he learned the style of the older Protestant theologians and felt encouraged to work on his own version of dogmatics. The ambivalent character of his theological trajectory at this period has to do with the fact that he was still a novice in dogmatics at that time.

Tambach Lecture: The Christian in Society (1919)

In Tambach Lecture (1919), *The Christian in Society*, Barth displays a seminal insight into his mature version of christocentrism in the late 1930s. He employs the Hegelian dialectic scheme to explain the relationship between *creation*, *redemption*, and *completion*. The completion is called the *synthesis*, creation the *thesis*, and redemption the *antithesis*. But *unlike* the progressivist model in the Hegelian dialectic where the synthesis is the outcome of the tension between the thesis and the antithesis, here the synthesis is seen as both the *origin* and the *final* thing — not in the sense of an outcome, but as a constantly 'radical interruption' to the penultimate.

The original, eternally productive power of the synthesis is the root of the power of thesis and antithesis alike.⁶⁴

For the final thing, the synthesis, is *never* the continuation, the outcome, the consequence or the new stage of the penultimate. It is exactly the *opposite*. It is the radical interruption of every penultimate thing, including its very own original meaning and moving power.⁶⁵

It means that the definition of this origin and final thing cannot be established from the earthly history. It is instead its persistent critic. As for being the origin of both creation and redemption, it implies that the antithesis of redemption presupposes an *affirmation* of creation, and that the thesis of creation does not rest in itself.

⁶⁴ Karl Barth, 'The Christian in Society', in Karl Barth, *The Word of God and Theology*, trans. Amy Marga (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 65.

⁶⁵ Barth, 'The Christian in Society,' 67.

This will save us from allowing a form of the *denial of life* [...], the *affirmation of life* should not be turned into a theme in its own right either.⁶⁶

[...] the antithesis is more than a mere reaction to the thesis. It springs forth from the synthesis by means of its own original power. Then it encompasses the thesis in itself and thereby overcomes it, surpassing the thesis in worth and meaning every moment along the way. There is no rest here.⁶⁷

The brilliance of this scheme is found in its ability to provide a realist view on creation *without* falling into the deification of its order—such as nation, race, state, etc. (for the antithesis does not allow the thesis to rest) and to encourage a critical stance towards reality without becoming an escapist out of a complete denial of creation (for both the thesis and the antithesis originated from the same source). Creation is the realm where the redemption is happening, and this redemption is not merely a reaction to what happens in creation. In summary:

Only out of the most radical knowledge of redemption can we place life as it is into its proper context, as Jesus did. Only from the standpoint of the antithesis that has its roots in the synthesis can one accept the validity of the thesis. The position of redemption, and it alone, lends the platform from which we can stand in *absolute* criticism of life.⁶⁸

Barth's posture here is very radical. One could compare his statement 'stand in absolute criticism of life' with the slogan of the other Karl, the young Marx: 'ruthless criticism of everything existing'. What the latter Karl means with the slogan is an encouragement to be brave in the practice of critical thinking, no matter what the conclusions would be, and to be audacious in the possible conflict with the ruling power.⁶⁹ It wouldn't be an overstatement to say that the theological counterpart of that spirit can be found in Barth.⁷⁰

Göttingen Dogmatics (1924-1925)

Despite the appearance of such a radical insight in Tambach, what we find in *Göttingen Dogmatics* is a loose relationship between creation and redemption (now: reconciliation), nature and grace. The ruthlessly critical standpoint grounded on the knowledge of grace that appears in Tambach Lecture is gone in the *Göttingen Dogmatics*. This disappointing result probably follows the fact that Barth was still a novice in dogmatics at that time. *Göttingen Dogmatics* was his first experiment after his encounter with the dogmatic tradition of the post-reformation orthodoxy that inspired him to start his own dogmatics. Later on he will recover the critical posture in dogmatic terms.

⁶⁶ Barth, 'The Christian in Society,' 59.

⁶⁷ Barth, 'The Christian in Society,' 59.

⁶⁸ Barth, 'The Christian in Society,' 55.

⁶⁹ The full quote is the following: 'a ruthless criticism of everything existing, ruthless in two senses: The criticism must not be afraid of its own conclusions, nor of conflict with the powers that be'. Karl Marx, 'For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing', in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2d ed (New York: Norton, 1978), 13.

⁷⁰ As Barth himself says in the lecture on Feuerbach in 1920, 'If only the Church had been compelled before Marx to show in word and action, and had been able to show, that it is just the knowledge of God which automatically and inevitably includes within itself liberation from all hypostases and idols, which of itself can achieve liberation!'. Karl Barth, *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings 1920-1928*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith (Eugene, Or: Wipf&Stock, 2015), chp 7, Kindle.

The Göttingen Dogmatics is also a witness to the fact that at the beginning of his experiment in dogmatics, Barth was an opponent of the christocentric approach. Some theologians to whom he was very critical, like Adolf von Harnack, Albrecht Ritschl, and Wilhelm Hermann, were known as having a christocentric approach in their theology, although in a very different sense to what Barth later developed. For Harnack and Ritschl, to be christocentric means centering their theology on the life of the historical Jesus figure. For Hermann, it is less on the historical figure than on the example of his inner life.⁷¹

Barth's discord towards christocentric approach in *Göttingen Dogmatics* (1924-1925) has to be understood in this context. There he criticizes the theological trend from the eighteenth century onward that focuses on the human Jesus rather than the crucified and risen One. This is not the case in the older Protestant dogmatics, he argues, nor in Paul and the Reformers, for whom the content of revelation is always God alone, and not some historical-contingent entity. For Barth, it is not a coincidence that the growth of this theological trend concurs with a decline in the belief and use of the concept of revelation.

For make no mistake: there is something more than suspicious about this apparently laudable movement in which an increasingly fervent christocentrism goes hand in hand with an increasingly defective understanding of the concept of revelation. In all its exaggeration, it simply means that because the Logos, the *Deus dixit*, which is the meaning and content of the incarnation, was no longer on the throne, and because on the other side there was need of a contingent presence of God to give life and relationship to personal divine inwardness, it was thought that the desperate measure should be taken of making the empty throne, that is, the historical Jesus without the content of divine *autosia*, into an object of ever more ardent worship, but it was not realized that when a bad conscience produced such actions, the result could only be a confusion of above and below, a deifying of the creature, which older theologians had wisely avoided.⁷²

Barth's counter-proposal to this historicized christology is to return the Logos to his throne, by focusing again on God's Self-revelation. Christology is the ground for its possibility, for in Jesus Christ we see a reality in history, but at the same time a completely *new* force intervening in history. This is a scheme that Barth adopted from his study of the old Protestant orthodox theology, from which he discovered the anhypostatic-enhypostatic christological dogma.⁷³ That 'the humanity of Christ [...] is nothing subsistent or real in itself'. It 'has not personhood of its own. It is *anhypostatatos* — the formula in which the description culminates. Or, more positively, it is *enhyposstatos*. It has personhood, subsistence, reality, only in its union with the Logos of God'.⁷⁴

So already in *Göttingen Dogmatics* christology is utilized as a grounding theory. Yet its function is rather *limited* to the demonstration of the possibility of revelation. Barth's doctrinal exposition there is not christological enough as in the latter stage of his theological development, where each doctrine is formulated according to christology. Rinse Reeling Brouwer observes some points in *Göttingen Dogmatics* which exhibit the case:

⁷¹ McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 453.

⁷² Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion*, 1st English ed, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 90-91.

⁷³ See Reeling Brouwer, *Karl Barth and Post-Reformation Orthodoxy*, 211.

⁷⁴ Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics*, 157.

1. 'In anthropology, as the doctrine of man apart from Christ and apart from Christ and apart from the redemption accomplished by him, we have to abide by the revelation that declares man guilty.'
2. 'The possibility of condemnation and condemnation itself, potential and actual guilt and delinquency coincide, apart from the actual progress of revelation as a revelation of grace, which it cannot sensibly be about in 'the doctrine of man.'
3. 'Only when one has spoken genuinely and emphatically about sin is one able to speak genuinely and emphatically about grace.'
4. 'What is to be said about reality in the light of redemption must be learned from what it is in the light of apostasy.'⁷⁵

These points show the tendency of Barth in *Göttingen Dogmatics* to detach doctrinal constructions on humanity and sin from christology, grace, and redemption. Such a way of doing theology would be reproached by Barth himself were the would-be-discovered christocentrism be applied.

Amsterdam Lecture: Church and Culture (1926)

When Barth gave a lecture in Amsterdam in 1926, *Church and Culture*, the basic idea of Tambach Lecture features again, only in different terms. Barth speaks about this return explicitly in the lecture, as he refers to Tambach and says, 'Today, seven years later, I do, in fact, speaks somewhat differently from these points of view. But I have not yet been persuaded to adopt any others.'⁷⁶ Whereas in Tambach he uses the triadic of creation-redemption-completion, now this formula is reshaped as *creation-reconciliation-redemption*.⁷⁷ In this new scheme, redemption becomes the final point, while reconciliation is 'the restoration of the lost promise'⁷⁸ that has already started with Christ. This new formulation of the triadic remains until his final work in *Church Dogmatics*.

In a similar way to his lecture in Tambach, the eschatological point of view is functioning dominantly again, as visible in the final point of this lecture: 'The last, the eschatological, point of view is that under which the Church of our time must begin again to learn to ask God's will and way,' in which Barth critically refers to the church support of the nationalistic First World War in 1914-1918 as an example of a failure to see this point.⁷⁹ Indeed, that war signified the regression of the vision of international solidarity in exchange for the rising nationalism. From an eschatological point of view, that is surely a failure, since an order of creation such as 'nation' is on its way to be redeemed. It is far from having the ultimate character. The church's support of nationalistic agenda should be a questionable practice.

From the eschatological point of view too the realm of culture is assessed. It is the area where a Christian should practice his or her faith, although it should be done with an eye that is oriented to the final goal, the redemption.

With this eschatological anticipation, the Church confronts society. Not with an undervaluation of cultural achievement, but with the highest possibility evaluation of

⁷⁵ Reeling Brouwer, *Karl Barth and Post-Reformation Orthodoxy*, 219.

⁷⁶ Barth, *Theology and Church* (Eugene, Or: Wipf&Stock, 2015), chp 12, Kindle.

⁷⁷ See Reeling Brouwer, *Karl Barth and Post-Reformation Orthodoxy*, 220-1, for an analysis of that change.

⁷⁸ Barth, *Theology and Church*, chp 12, Kindle.

⁷⁹ Barth, *Theology and Church*, chp 12, Kindle.

the goal for which it sees all cultural activity striving. Not in pessimism, but in boundless hope. Not as a spoilsport, but in the knowledge that art and science, business and politics, techniques and education are really a game—a serious game, but a game, and *game* means an imitative and ultimately ineffective activity—the significance of which lies not in its attainable goals but in what it signifies.⁸⁰

What Barth mentions as ‘the eschatological point of view’ in Amsterdam Lecture 1926 reminds us of ‘the synthesis’ that radically interrupts the penultimate in Tambach 1919. Although here the function of eschatology as ‘origin’ is not visible as in Tambach. Later on when his new triadic scheme ‘creation-reconciliation-redemption’ has been developed fully through the final version of christocentrism, the function of ‘origin’ would reappear in a new way. For now, it is sufficient to say that the fiery tone of Tambach 1919 which is not present in the *Göttingen Dogmatics* comes into view again in Amsterdam 1926. And the new triadic of creation-reconciliation-redemption that would be used in the *Church Dogmatics* starts to be used.

At this stage of Barth’s theological development, the *ambivalence* between creation and redemption (now thus between creation and reconciliation) that is visible in the *Göttingen Dogmatics* can still be seen. The work of grace is said to be only perfecting the existing nature that was not fully destroyed by sin, instead of a complete overhaul of it from the newness of God. In Barth’s own words: ‘It is true that “Grace does not destroy nature but completes it” (*Gratia non tollit naturam sed perficit*). The meaning of the Word of God becomes manifest as it brings into full light the buried and forgotten truth of the creation’.⁸¹ Unlike in Tambach Lecture where he rejects to see the antithesis of redemption as a reaction to the thesis of creation, here he places creation (nature) as the *presupposition* for reconciliation (grace).

This ambivalence in Barth’s dogmatic formulation remained until the discovery of christological concentration in the 1930s. The development towards it was happening under a growing tension in his relationship with other dialectical theologians within *Zwischen den Zeiten* as a background. With Gogarten he suspected an interest ‘in secularity’ greater ‘than in the gospel itself’.⁸² With Bultmann he saw a danger of the subsumption of theology into philosophy (existentialism).⁸³ And with Brunner, he despised his ‘reconsideration of natural theology’.⁸⁴ His greatest dissension was with Gogarten, which reached its climax when he later joined the German Christian movement that Barth strongly opposed.⁸⁵ Bultmann, despite their disagreements, was on Barth’s side during the German church struggle. He signed a joint statement that rejects the dismissal of pastors who had Jewish background and ‘wrote a public letter objecting to Hitler’s order that university professors of theology could not participate in the Church Struggle’.⁸⁶ As for Brunner, it was his attraction since the late 1920s to a pietistic-revivalist community with a connection to the Nazi circle, the Oxford Group Movement, which Barth later criticized.⁸⁷ What connects these people is the growing tendencies in their theological path to be more lenient towards what Barth would call *natural theology*. These are parts of the story of what was happening around the dawn of the Third Reich.

⁸⁰ Barth, *Theology and Church*, chp 12, Kindle.

⁸¹ Barth, *Theology and Church*, chp 12, Kindle.

⁸² See Busch, *Karl Barth*, 194.

⁸³ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 195.

⁸⁴ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 195.

⁸⁵ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 223-4.

⁸⁶ Dean Garrett Stroud, ed., *Preaching in Hitler’s Shadow: Sermons of Resistance in the Third Reich* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 144.

⁸⁷ See John W. Hart, *Karl Barth vs. Emil Brunner: The Formation and Dissolution of a Theological Alliance, 1916-1936*, Issues in Systematic Theology, vol. 6 (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 179-83.

The German Church Struggle: 1933-1935

In this period, Barth's theological trajectory developed as he faced the challenge of the German Christians and the rise of the Nazi-party, and through his activism in the German church struggle. The critical posture from the standpoint of redemption that he proposed in Tarnbach is strongly presented against the fascist threat, with *a growing focus on christology*.

In Barth's own testimony, he admits his regret that the deepening of knowledge that led towards christocentrism did not happen earlier. He says, 'If I look back from this point on my earlier studies, I may well ask myself how it ever came about that I did not learn this much sooner and accordingly to speak it out. How slow is man, above all when the most important things are at stake!'⁸⁸ The reference to 'the important things at stake' here refers to the rise of Hitler. Already during his time in Göttingen Barth felt disturbed by the growing National Socialist movement. But he did not take any action at that time, something that he regretted later on.⁸⁹ But as the movement grew over time, so did also his responses. Especially when Hitler took power in 1933 and the German Christian movement that supported him significantly grew.

German Christian Movement

The German Christian movement was an attempt to fuse Christianity with National Socialism. It had already started in the early 1920s — long before Hitler took power, and although it never reached a majority number within the Protestant church in Germany, it managed to gain considerable influence.⁹⁰ At the beginning of this movement, anti-Semitism was not the main issue that was targeted. The main enemies were rather 'Bolshevism, secularism, materialism, internationalism, pacifism', which were perceived to be the threats towards German nationalism.⁹¹

In *The Original Guidelines of the German Christian Faith Movement*, published in 1932, Pastor Joachim Hossensfelder declares the foundational commitments of this movement and the future direction it envisions. The guidelines contain ten points, in which an alignment with the Nazis is visible. Here is the summary: (1) the guidelines are not meant to replace the confessions in the Protestant church, (2) the movement wants to unite the Protestant churches in Germany into one national church, (3) the German Christian movement dissociates itself from an ecclesiastical political party known before, (4) the movement is built on the so-called 'German Lutheran spirit and heroic piety' (a similar point appears in a Nazi document), (5) the movement wants to strengthen the church in the struggle against Marxism and the Center Party, (6) the movement seeks to push the church struggle against Marxism and the Christian Socialists to be more explicit, (7) the recognition of race, ethnicity, nation as God-given and for that reason race-mixing must be opposed, (8) the intention to restrain charitable actions as it softens people, (9) acknowledgment of the great danger of the Jewish people for the race-blurring of the German folk and considers a prohibition of marriages between Germans and

⁸⁸ Barth, *How I Changed My Mind*, 43.

⁸⁹ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 189-90.

⁹⁰ Mary M. Solberg, 'Introduction' in *A Church Undone: Documents from the German Christian Faith Movement, 1932-1940*, ed. Mary M. Solberg (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 23.

⁹¹ Angela Dienhart Hancock, *Karl Barth's Emergency Homiletic, 1932-1933: A Summons to Prophetic Witness at the Dawn of the Third Reich* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 69.

Jews to be important, (10) the rejection of the spirit of Christian cosmopolitanism, internationalism, and pacifism.⁹²

These ten points indicate how seriously the movement assimilates the National Socialism project with German Protestantism. At this period, the anti-semitic element has become more explicit. The theological justification for such attempt is founded in the belief that race, ethnicity, and nation are some fixed identity marker given by God that has to be kept pure and glorified. They are part of the order of creation that has to be celebrated and protected.

The situation became worse in 1933, as within two months after Hitler's appointment as chancellor, there was a new law saying that civil servants (including pastors) who cannot prove their Aryan descent or considered not in line with national interests can be removed from their positions. Even marriages with non-Aryans were not allowed and may result in dismissal.⁹³ Here are some points within the so-called 'Aryan Paragraph':

Those of non-Aryan descent or married to someone of non-Aryan descent may not be called as clergy or officials in the general church administration. Clergy or officials who marry a person of non-Aryan descent are to be dismissed. Who counts as a person of non-Aryan descent is to be determined by the regulations accompanying the laws of the Reich.⁹⁴

Clergy or officials who given their previous activities offer no guarantee that they will act at all times and without reservation in the interests of the national state and the German Protestant Church [may] be retired.⁹⁵

Clergy or officials of non-Aryan descent or married to someone of non-Aryan descent are to be retired.⁹⁶

The law was passed in April, two months after Hitler became chancellor.

The First Commandment as an Axiom of Theology

The rise of the German Christian movement was a serious challenge for the church in Germany, and in March 1933, Barth called for faithfulness to God and his revelation through his lecture, *The First Commandment as an Axiom of Theology*. The lecture was delivered in Denmark, in Copenhagen and Aarhus,⁹⁷ and not in Germany. But the content of this lecture would be the grain of Barmen Declaration and *Theological Existence To-Day!*, two documents that would make a significant impact on the German soil. There Barth argues that theology, just like any other discipline, should have an axiom that forms 'the ultimate and decisive presupposition to the proof of all other statements' within the discipline.⁹⁸ And that axiom, in theology, should be the first commandment of the Decalogue: 'You shall not have any other god!' Presupposing the first commandment as an axiom implies the demand for theology to bear an attitude of

⁹² Joachim Hossensfelder, 'The Original Guidelines of the German Christian Faith Movement,' in *A Church Undone*, 47-50.

⁹³ 'The Aryan Paragraph in the Church and Responses,' *A Church Undone*, 56.

⁹⁴ Paragraph 1, sub-paragraph 2, 'The Aryan Paragraph in the Church and Responses,' *A Church Undone*, 56.

⁹⁵ Paragraph 3, sub-paragraph 1, 'The Aryan Paragraph in the Church and Responses,' *A Church Undone*, 56.

⁹⁶ Paragraph 3, sub-paragraph 2, 'The Aryan Paragraph in the Church and Responses,' *A Church Undone*, 56.

⁹⁷ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 224.

⁹⁸ Karl Barth, *The Way of Theology in Karl Barth: Essays and Comments*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 8, ed. Martin Rumscheidt (Allison Park, Pa: Pickwick Publications, 1986), 63.

obedience. For the first commandment is about an event in history, in which God reveals himself in the presence of other gods and ‘makes them into nothings’.⁹⁹ It demonstrates a ‘definite position’ and demands one’s decision on his/her allegiance.¹⁰⁰ The possibility of doing theology merely as ‘a spectator or an arbiter’ is automatically rejected.¹⁰¹

An example of how theology can be done in disobedience to the axiom of the first commandment is the weighty recognition of other criterion than God’s revelation.

If theology is aware of its responsibility but deems it necessary to relate the concept of revelation to some other criterion, which for some reason is important, by means of that little but so weighty word ‘and,’ then this responsibility will express itself by speaking of revelation with a notably heightened seriousness and interest, and by speaking of that other criterion only secondarily and for the sake of revelation.¹⁰²

Barth does not reject the possibility that theology needs ‘other criterion’ in its formulation. This has always been the way theology was done in the past. He mentions that the Protestant reformers themselves ‘did not refuse all recognition to nature, natural theology and natural religion’.¹⁰³ The use of ‘other criterion’ becomes a problem when its service is not pledged to God’s revelation, which should be the primary criterion.

Barth points to the trend in modern Protestant theology as examples of this growing compromise. His former colleagues, Brunner and Gogarten, are also mentioned here, as they were considered to have been flirting too much with natural theology.

In recent protestant theology however, from Buddeus and Pfaff to Hirsch and Althaus, Gogarten and Brunner, it is not clear whether or not their zeal and passion is meant for that other authority. [...] It began in the eighteenth century with the apology for a certain *petit-bourgeois* morality. Today it seems to end (or indeed does not seem content to end) with the apology for nationhood, morality and the state.¹⁰⁴

Here Barth indicates the motivation of bringing up this theme. He sees that ‘the apology for nationhood’ and for the state, which are what we find in the German Christian movement, are the consequences of the perversion in theological priority. Even if theology cannot avoid speaking about other things, theologians are responsible to interpret those things ‘according to revelation and not the other way round’.¹⁰⁵

Theological Existence To-Day!

Two months after the announcement of the ‘Aryan Paragraph’, June 1933, Barth responded with a tractate, *Theological Existence To-Day!*. In this text, Barth pleads for what he calls ‘theological existence’. It is something that he sees to be losing that day, as many theologians and the church in Germany no longer prioritize obedience to the Word of God. Barth detects the expression of this problem in the cry for reform in the German Evangelical Church at that time that does not ‘spring from the internal requirement of the Church’s life’, which is the

⁹⁹ Barth, *The Way of Theology*, 66, 71.

¹⁰⁰ Barth, *The Way of Theology*, 67.

¹⁰¹ Barth, *The Way of Theology*, 66.

¹⁰² Barth, *The Way of Theology*, 73.

¹⁰³ Barth, *The Way of Theology*, 73.

¹⁰⁴ Barth, *The Way of Theology*, 73.

¹⁰⁵ Barth, *The Way of Theology*, 74.

Word of God.¹⁰⁶ Instead, the demand for reform came from a recognition of a great movement at that time, the rise of National Socialism, and how the church felt the urge to join herself in what was perceived to be the great event.¹⁰⁷ One of the intended reform was the appointment of *Reichs*-Bishop, to imitate the leadership style of the state under the *führer*.¹⁰⁸ Against this tendency, Barth reminds his fellow preachers and teachers of the Church of their calling to regard the preaching of the Word as the most ‘urgent demand in the whole world’ and that without this sense of urgency, one may lose his/her existence as theologians.¹⁰⁹

Barth’s *growing concentration* on christology can be recognized in this document. He mentions that the Word of God that should be the primary reference for theologians and the church ‘has no other name and content but Jesus Christ’.¹¹⁰ When he discusses the problem in the reorganization of the leadership in the church, he also appeals to christology: ‘And can anything else be said but this, that it is high time for the Church to become self-controlled again, sober to the recognition that the German Evangelical Church, so far as she is in the One, Holy, Universal Church, *has* the ‘Leader’ in Jesus Christ, the Word of God, Who can provide her with human ‘leaders’?’.¹¹¹ The reference to Jesus Christ as the Leader implies the deployment of Christ *vis-à-vis* the *führer* (leader). One may recall Barth’s testimony that his theological development in the 1930s that led to the discovery of christocentrism owes itself to none other than the *führer*! This emphasis is not visible in the earlier lecture on the first commandment as a theological axiom. There is a continuity to the former lecture in the deployment of theology as singular science, but now the development towards christological concentration is more visible.

The complete picture on Barth’s stance regarding the rising German Christian movement can be seen in the following statements.

1. The church has not ‘to do everything’ so that the German people ‘may find again the way into the Church,’ but so that *within* the Church the people may find the Commandment and promise of the free and pure Word of God.
2. It is not the Church’s function to help the German people to recognise and fulfil any one ‘vocation’ different from the ‘calling’ from and to Christ. The German people receives its vocation from Christ to Christ through the Word of God to be preached according to the Scriptures. The Church’s task is the preaching of the Word.
3. Speaking generally, the Church has not to be at the service of mankind, and so, not of the German people. The German Evangelical Church is the Church with reference to the German people: she is only in service to the Word of God. It is God’s will and work, if by means of His Word mankind, and of course, the German people, are ministered unto.
4. The Church believes in the Divine institution of the State as the guardian and administrator of public law and order. But she does not believe in any state, therefore not even in the German one, and therefore not even in the form of the National Socialistic State. The Church preaches the Gospel in all the kingdoms of this world. She preaches it also *in* the Third *Reich*, but not *under* it, nor in *its* spirit.
5. If the Church’s Confession of Faith is to be expanded it must be according to the standard of Holy Scripture, not at all according to the examples, positive or

¹⁰⁶ Karl Barth, *Theological Existence To-Day! A Plea for Theological Freedom*, trans. R. Birch Hoyle (Eugene, Or: Wipf&Stock, 2011), 18.

¹⁰⁷ Barth, *Theological Existence To-Day!*, 21-27.

¹⁰⁸ Barth, *Theological Existence To-Day!*, 34.

¹⁰⁹ Barth, *Theological Existence To-Day!*, 11-14.

¹¹⁰ Barth, *Theological Existence To-Day!*, 12.

¹¹¹ Barth, *Theological Existence To-Day!*, 44.

negative, of a view of things existing at some one particular period of time, be it a political philosophy, or otherwise. Therefore, she must not widen the Creed to include the National Socialists' 'world-view.' Nor has the Church to 'provide weapons' for 'us,' or any one whatever.

6. The fellowship of those belonging to the Church is not determined by blood, therefore, not by race, but by the Holy Spirit and Baptism. If the German Evangelical Church excludes Jewish-Christians, or treats them as of a lower grade, she ceases to be a Christian church.
7. If the office of a *Reichs*-Bishop should be possible at all, then that office, like every other Church office, must not be established according to political programmes and methods at all. That is to say, methods of primary elections, political programmes, etc., but by the representatives of the regular administration within the Churches, from the point of view of what exclusively empowers him for a *Church* office.
8. Not 'in the sense of a closer approach to life and connection with the community' is 'the training and leading of the ministry to be transformed' (as the Faith-Movement declares), but on the lines of a stricter, broader education, with pith and substance for the development of the work solely charged upon pastors, viz. the work of preaching the Word according to Scripture.¹¹²

The common thread of all these eight points is the conviction that the identity of the church has to be grounded in and determined by the Word of God, and not by national identity, race, or a political programme like National Socialism. Only by focusing on its primary calling to preach the Word of God would the church be relevant to the society where it exists, and not the other way around. When this principle is applied, the submission of the church to the agenda of the Third Reich, the exclusion of the Jews in the church, and the establishment of the office of *Reichs*-Bishop should be rejected.

Barth also made a famous remark in *Theological Existence To-Day!*, saying that under the situation where the rise of the Third Reich is so visible, he understands his task at that time as mainly 'to carry on theology, and only theology, now as previously, as if nothing had happened'.¹¹³ This statement has sparked serious debates since, as many of his interpreters were having difficulties to reach an agreement on what Barth really meant there and on what it politically implies.¹¹⁴

'Doing theology as if nothing had happened' indeed might sound ignorant and apolitical at first. But Barth's activism and theological work during that period was far from having an apolitical character or ignorance to the world. *Theological Existence To-Day* itself was a reaction to the growing German Christian movement. 'Doing theology as if nothing had happened' was not a call to escape from a context, but to seriously doing it in the correct manner so that it is not the context that becomes the final word, but the Word of God itself. Only in such manner would theology fulfil its role in that context. At the time when so many pastors and church leaders fall to the hype of the National Socialist movement, only a strong theological reasoning could *prevent* the growth of such assimilation of churches and theology to the Third Reich agenda. As Marquardt once says, Barth's intention at that time was 'to prevent the political affirmation of the 'yes' to Hitler', the 'yes' of the church to the National-

¹¹² Barth, *Theological Existence To-Day!*, 51-53.

¹¹³ Barth, *Theological Existence To-Day!*, 9.

¹¹⁴ See the survey of Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt in *Theological Audacities: Selected Essays*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 137, ed. Andreas Pangritz and Paul S. Chung (Eugene, Or: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 190-2, and Eberhard Busch and Martin Rumscheidt, "'Doing Theology as If Nothing Had happened"—The Freedom of Theology and the Question of Its Involvement in Politics,' *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 16, no. 4 (December 1987): 459-71.

Socialist ‘promise’ that seemed still unavoidable at that time among even Barth’s closest allies in spirit. Radical political abstinence, total concentration on theology alone could meet that danger’.¹¹⁵ At this stage, his agenda was more about *prevention* rather than direct confrontation.

Barth sent a copy of *Theological Existence To-Day!* to Hitler himself in July 1933. One year later it was banned by the ruling power. Nevertheless, many of its copies were already distributed.¹¹⁶ Since then the tractate gained an influential role in the German church struggle.

Reformation as Decision

A few months later in October 1933, on the celebration of the Protestant Reformation, Barth gave a lecture in Berlin, *Reformation as Decision*. In that lecture, Barth claims that faithfulness to the spirit of Reformation demands a decision to resist the pseudo-Protestant German Christian movement. A notable incident happened during the lecture when Barth calls for resistance. The audience applauded him, causing his speech to be interrupted for a few minutes.¹¹⁷

Barth begins the lecture with an observance about the legacy of Reformation that has been claimed by different kind of groups. One of them emphasizes the national element (*nationale Gehalt*) of the Reformation, as Luther was important to the history of the German people, and Calvin to the French.¹¹⁸ Clearly he hints at the German Christian movement and National Socialism with their view on the ‘German Lutheran spirit’ that animates the movement. As if what matters most about Luther is his German nationality!

Barth quickly disproves this way of reasoning, claiming that the greatness of the reformers lie in their recovery of the forgotten Christian truths in the church: the authority of the Bible, the Lordship of God the Creator, the prestige (*Geltung*) of Jesus Christ as the Reconciler, the power of believing in Christ, the freedom of the Christians in the world, and the necessary humility and courage of the true church. In other words, the concerns of the reformers were in the right doctrines and the right practices that follow, and the liberation from church practices that do not conform to these doctrines.¹¹⁹ The reformers made a decision, they stepped out from the range of possibilities that lie behind them, and stood firm to say yes or no.¹²⁰

Yet the decision of the reformers to say yes or no presupposes the decision that precedes all human decisions. This ultimate decision is God’s decision to be found where he wants to seek us, in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

It is in the Reformation doctrine of the Holy Scripture as the only real and authoritative witness of the revelation of God that the simple knowledge lies: God is to be found where he likes to seek us. So not where we think we can find him for us: not in the range of our own possibilities, whether they are called reason or experience, nature or history, inner or outer universe. Not where we should speak in our wisdom about him, but where he spoke to us in his wisdom. And he talked to us, once and for all. And of perfection: *Deus dixit* bears witness to the Scriptures and only to them. Therefore, the

¹¹⁵ Marquardt, *Theological Audacities*, 197.

¹¹⁶ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 227.

¹¹⁷ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 231.

¹¹⁸ Karl Barth, *Der Götze wackelt* (Berlin: Käthe Vogt, 1961), 72.

¹¹⁹ Barth, *Der Götze wackelt*, 73.

¹²⁰ Barth, *Der Götze wackelt*, 75.

proclamation of the Christian church can and should in no sense be a philosophy, that is, i.e. to be a development of some self-founded world and life-vision. That is why it is bound to be Scriptural interpretation. All other teaching has no right and no promise in the church. This Reformation doctrine of the Scriptures is immediately understandable to the one who understands: she speaks of the final decision. She says that after God has sought us in the miracle of his incarnation in Jesus Christ, whose witnesses are the prophets and the apostles, all our efforts to find him by ourselves have not only become purposeless but have been made impossible. After God has spoken to man, man simply has no time to teach himself about God.¹²¹

Here we see a focus on christology, specifically in the moment of *incarnation*. This moment defines how theology should be done. It should follow the direction that resembles God's incarnation and not the reverse. He claims that the theology of Reformation follows this line of thinking, as exemplified by its major doctrines. The doctrine of original sin and the doctrine of humanity, for example, follow the consequence of God's incarnation in Jesus Christ, for that moment implies that human beings are pathetic and dependent on God's mercy. Then the doctrine of justification by faith follows, since we are too incapable of righteousness and it can be sought after only in the incarnated Christ.¹²²

While here Barth is merely portraying the theology of Reformation rather than offering his own theological formulation, it is important to note how he reads the theology of Reformation in a way that recognizes the *centrality of christology* in the formulation of other doctrines, and that this is done in the context of his call for *resistance*. However, the focus on christology here is still pointed to the moment of incarnation, and *not yet* to the decree of election as in the mature version of christocentrism.

Barth was not alone in his struggle. A rivalling movement within the church was also emerging, calling itself 'Pastor's Emergency League', which then developed into the Confessing Church. About more than a third of Protestant pastors in Germany, both Lutherans and Reformed, joined the movement in early 1934 by signing up a declaration that opposes the Aryan paragraph.¹²³ For Barth, this movement as such is not enough, for it is limited within the sphere of the church and does not go directly against National Socialism. But considering the situation at that time, he reckoned such a movement as already a 'real resistance'.¹²⁴

¹²¹ 'Es handelt sich in der reformatorischen Lehre von der heiligen Schrift als dem einzigen Zeugnis wirklicher und maßgeblicher Offenbarung Gottes um die einfache Erkenntnis: Gott ist von uns Menschen da zu finden, wo es ihm gefallen hat, uns zu suchen. Also nicht da, wo wir meinen, ihn von uns aus suchen zu können: nicht im Bereich unserer eigenen Möglichkeiten, ob sie nun Vernunft oder Erfahrung, Natur oder Geschichte, inneres oder äußeres Universum heißen mögen. Nicht da, wo wir in unserer Weisheit über ihn meinen reden zu sollen, sondern da, wo er in seiner Weisheit zu uns geredet hat. Und er hat zu uns geredet, einmal für allemal. Und von diesem Perfektum: Deus dixit zeugt die heilige Schrift und nur sie. Darum kann und darf die Verkündigung der christlichen Kirche in keinem Sinn eine Philosophie, d. h. eine Entwicklung irgend einer selbstgefundenen Welt- und Lebensanschauung sein. Darum ist sie gebunden als Schriftauslegung. Alle andere Lehre hat in der Kirche kein Recht und keine Verheißung. Diese reformatorische Lehre von der heiligen Schrift ist sofort verständlich für den, der versteht: sie redet von der endgültig gefallenem Entscheidung her. Sie sagt, daß, nachdem Gott uns gesucht hat im Wunder seiner Herablassung in Jesus Christus, dessen Zeugen die Propheten und die Apostel sind, alle unsere Bemühungen, ihn von uns aus zu finden, nicht nur gegenstandslos geworden, sondern als in sich unmöglich hingestellt worden sind. Nachdem Gott zum Menschen geredet hat, hat der Mensch ganz schlicht keine Zeit mehr, sich selber über Gott unterrichten zu wollen'. Barth, *Der Götze wackelt*, 78.

¹²² Barth, *Der Götze wackelt*, 79.

¹²³ Frank Jehle, *Ever against the Stream: The Politics of Karl Barth, 1906-1968* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 50.

¹²⁴ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 235.

Barmen Declaration

In April 1934, Barth became the main composer of Barmen Declaration which marked the refusal of the Confessing Church to surrender the Protestant churches in Germany to the agenda of the German Christians and the Nazis. The document consists of six theses, with each thesis made up of three paragraphs in the similar sequence: biblical verse(s), the thesis, and then a rejection statement.

Christology serves as the ground for the declared stance in the document, as can be seen in the opening thesis: 'Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in the Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death'.¹²⁵ The thesis is followed by a statement of rejection: 'We reject the false doctrine, as though the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation'.¹²⁶

The opening thesis sets the tone for the following five, which are in line with the statements in *Theological Existence To-Day!*, although with a slightly more aggressive tone. Their resolute character can be seen in the statements of rejection that begin with the phrase 'we reject the false doctrine'.

We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords - areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.¹²⁷

We reject the false doctrine, as though the church were permitted to abandon the form of its message and order to its own pleasure or to changes in prevailing ideological and political convictions.¹²⁸

We reject the false doctrine, as though the church, apart from this ministry, could and were permitted to give itself, or allow to be given to it, special leaders vested with ruling powers.¹²⁹

We reject the false doctrine, as though the state, over and beyond its special commission, should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the church's vocation as well. **We reject the false doctrine**, as though the church, over and beyond its special commission, should and could appropriate the characteristics, the tasks, and the dignity of the state, thus itself becoming an organ of the state.¹³⁰

We reject the false doctrine, as though the church in human arrogance could place the word and work of the Lord in the service of any arbitrarily chosen desires, purposes, and plans.¹³¹

¹²⁵ Eberhard Busch, *The Barmen Theses Then and Now: The 2004 Warfield Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary*, English ed, trans. Darrell L. Guder, and Judith J. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 19.

¹²⁶ Busch, *The Barmen Theses*, 19.

¹²⁷ Busch, *The Barmen Theses*, 35.

¹²⁸ Busch, *The Barmen Theses*, 49.

¹²⁹ Busch, *The Barmen Theses*, 61.

¹³⁰ Busch, *The Barmen Theses*, 71.

¹³¹ Busch, *The Barmen Theses*, 87.

The arrangement of the theses indicates the deployment of christology as the grounding principle for the resistance against the submission of the churches to the Nazi ideas. Out of obedience to Jesus Christ as the one Word of God, the Confessing Church rejects another source of proclamation, and the capitulation of the church to another lord.

Eberhard Busch believes that the five words ‘the One Word of God’ is definitely ‘the center and the provocation of the thesis — that is, that which provokes the *church* in the situation of that time, which calls out of it to stand and not to fall, to resist and not to conform, to confess and not to remain silent’.¹³² In this way, Barth continues his proposal in *The First Commandment as an Axiom of Theology* to have no other criterion for theology other than God’s revelation.¹³³ The formulation in Barmen Declaration displays a development of his focus towards christology, from ‘there is no other God’ to sole obedience to ‘the One Word of God’.

At this stage, the resistance towards the Nazi was still more on the level of *prevention*. As Barth once said, for him Barmen was a ‘necessary action’ from the church ‘with its back to the wall, so that it just *could not* fall’.¹³⁴ It was more like building a barricade than arming for war. Its was more an act of *preventing* further losses *rather than* a direct opposition aiming to take over power. Several years later Barth recalls the declaration in Barmen as a miraculous event: ‘But all the same it was impossible, and in the end a miracle, in the eyes of those who saw it at close quarters’.¹³⁵

Nein!

The experience of witnessing the growth of the German Christian movement seems to have affected Barth to posit a more hostile stance toward his former ally, Emil Brunner. When Brunner published *Nature and Grace* in that same year to defend the place of natural theology within a biblical and reformational faith, which received a ‘warm reception by the German-Christians’,¹³⁶ Barth immediately replied in an angry manner. He published a treatise, *Nein!*, in which he argues for the impossibility of any ‘point of contact’ between God and man that enables theology to be built from the natural knowledge of humans.

Barth defines natural theology as a way of doing theology that does not respect Jesus Christ as its subject: ‘By “natural theology” I mean every (positive *or* negative) *formulation of a system* which claims to be theological, *i.e.* to interpret divine revelation, whose *subject*, however, differs fundamentally from the revelation in Jesus Christ and whose *method* therefore differs equally from the exposition of the Holy Scripture’.¹³⁷ Here we see the centrality of Christ that Barth emphasizes, in continuation with the spirit of the Barmen Declaration: a rejection of other source of proclamation other than the one Word of God Jesus Christ.

What Barth aims to defend is ‘the purest theology based on grace and revelation’, which he believes is being compromised by Brunner.¹³⁸ He questions whether Brunner’s insistence on the possibility of a natural knowledge of God is consistent with the notion on the ‘sovereign,

¹³² Busch, *The Barmen Theses*, 22.

¹³³ Busch, *The Barmen Theses*, 23.

¹³⁴ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 246-7.

¹³⁵ CD II/1, 176.

¹³⁶ Hart, *Karl Barth vs. Emil Brunner*, 155.

¹³⁷ Karl Barth, ‘NO! Answer to Emil Brunner,’ in John Baillie et al., *Natural Theology* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 74-75.

¹³⁸ Barth, ‘NO!’, 77.

freely electing grace of God'.¹³⁹ If there is such a preparatory stage for grace, would grace still deserve to be called grace? Barth reproaches Brunner: 'Is it his opinion that idolatry is but a somewhat imperfect preparatory stage of the service of the true God? Is the function of the revelation of God merely that of leading us from one step to the next within the all-embracing reality of divine revelation?'.¹⁴⁰ For Barth, an openness towards the possibility of a natural knowledge of God would imply that there is a double version of grace. This is unacceptable for him. Grace is grace, and that is the grace of God in Jesus Christ: 'By what right and in what sense does Brunner speak of another special (or rather "general") grace which as it were precedes the grace of Jesus Christ?'.¹⁴¹ Barth's insistence on the singularity of divine grace in Jesus Christ again displays the growing centeredness on christology in his theological thinking at this period.

Barth's insistence that revelation and grace bring something completely *new* instead of completing the preceding natural knowledge also reminds us of the radical stance he presents in Tambach Lecture 1919. In that lecture he talks about the completion or synthesis which is the origin and final thing from which ruthless criticism to all that exists or the penultimate is rooted. This is in line with what he urges in his argument against Brunner. Revelation should not be understood as an outcome of a natural development. Its possibility can only be categorized as a *miracle*.¹⁴²

In the next year, Barth was expelled from his chair in Germany for his refusal to swear an oath of allegiance to Hitler. In March 1935 he moved to Basel, under police escort.¹⁴³ It is only after he returned to Switzerland that the process of *deepening* would result in the final breakthrough.

Debrecen and After: 1936 Onwards

In 1936 christocentrism reached its mature version as expressed in Barth's lecture titled 'God's Gracious Election', which he presented in Debrecen, Hungary. The material in that lecture was inspired by Pierre Maury's lecture on election, which he listened to during the celebration of the 400th anniversary of Genevan Reformation in 1936.¹⁴⁴ In his Debrecen lecture, Barth decides to treat the topic of election strictly grounded in christology, and therefore marks a development not visible before. Here is McCormack's summary:

The Subject of election is the eternal Son of God (together with the Father and the Holy Spirit). He it is who chooses Himself for the human race, to be the bearer of our sin and all of its consequences. It follows that the object of the divine election is in the first instance the eternal Son in His human nature. In Him, the full reality of the divine predestination in both of its aspects is realized. In both of its aspects: that means that Jesus Christ was elected to take our rejection upon Himself. We only rightly comprehend the divine reprobation when and where we see it realized in Him. 'There and only there!' Jesus Christ experienced the outpouring of the divine wrath in our place. He made Himself to be the object of the divine reprobation. In that this has occurred, it is made clear that rejection is 'not a final but rather a penultimate word'.

¹³⁹ Barth, 'NO!', 79.

¹⁴⁰ Barth, 'NO!', 82.

¹⁴¹ Barth, 'NO!', 83.

¹⁴² Cf. Lenin, who famously expressed that revolution is a 'miracle'. Roland Boer, *Lenin, Religion, and Theology*, First edition, New Approaches to Religion and Power (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 135f.

¹⁴³ David Guretzki, *An Explorer's Guide to Karl Barth* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2016), 34-35.

¹⁴⁴ McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 457-8.

'The relation of election and rejection is not to be seen as a fixed juxtaposition. The two concepts describe a way which amounts to an immense change. The New Testament describes it as the transition from death to life.' The goal of His rejection is the election of the human race.¹⁴⁵

By putting Christ at the center of the moments of election and reprobation, Barth departed from the traditional Calvinist version of predestination that horrifies so many people including Calvin himself.¹⁴⁶ The object of the eternal reprobation is Jesus Christ, so that the redemptive power of election can bear a universal character.

The consequences of this choice are substantial. For not only does the new understanding overcome the horror in Calvin's *decretum horribile* and provide a template for the christological constriction on each doctrine, it is also remarkably yields the key to develop the insight he has shown earlier in Tumbach 1919 and Amsterdam 1926. Whereas in those two lectures eschatology is posited as the origin and the goal from which the triadic (in Tumbach creation-redemption-completion, while in Amsterdam creation-reconciliation-redemption) is rooted, now eschatology is no longer holding that role. The origin of the creation-reconciliation-redemption triadic is relocated in the eternal election of Jesus Christ, which he calls 'the primal history' (*Urgeschichte*) from which the meaning and goal of history, creation, and humanity are defined. This is expressed in the full exposition of the doctrine of election later on in *Church Dogmatics* II/2:

That other to which God stands in relationship, in an actuality which can neither be suspended nor dissolved, is not simply and directly the created world as such. There is, too, a relationship of God to the world. There is a work of God towards it and with it. There is a history between God and the world. But this history has no independent signification. It takes place in the interests of the primal history which is played out between God and this one man and His people. It is the sphere in which this primal history is played out. It attains its goal as this primal history attains its goal. And the same is true both of man as such and also of the human race as a whole. The partner of God which cannot now be thought away is neither 'man' as an idea, nor 'humanity,' nor indeed a large or small total of individual men. It is the one man Jesus and the people represented in Him. Only secondarily, and for His sake, is it 'man', and 'humanity' and the whole remaining cosmos.¹⁴⁷

Whereas in Tumbach 1919 Barth still uses the terminology and the scheme that were borrowed from Hegelian philosophy, the triadic *thesis-antithesis-synthesis*, and in his first attempt to write dogmatics at Göttingen the function of christology is rather limited, the concentration in the election of Jesus Christ in 1936 provides Barth with a way to formulate the radical insight in Tumbach in a *fully* dogmatic term and at the same time to implement this insight in his whole new dogmatic project. When Barth mentions in his testimony that in the 1928-1938, 'I have had to rid myself of the last remnants of a philosophical, i.e., anthropological (in America one says 'humanistic' or 'naturalistic', foundation and exposition of Christian doctrine)',¹⁴⁸ it seems that the terms and the scheme that he borrowed from Hegelian philosophy that he

¹⁴⁵ McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 458-9.

¹⁴⁶ 'The decree is dreadful indeed, I confess'. John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 955.

¹⁴⁷ CD II/2, 7-8.

¹⁴⁸ Karl Barth, 'How My Mind Has Changed in This Decade. Part Two,' *Christian Century* 101, no. 22 (July 4, 1984): 684.

displays in Tambach Lecture 1919 are also among what he dismisses. In the new scheme, the triadic *thesis-antithesis-synthesis* is no longer present. Although Barth uses eschatology as the *locus* from which a persistent critique to the penultimate can be launched and in that way counters the Hegelian progressivist dialectic, the dialectical scheme remains present in that formula. This is not so anymore when the primal moment is relocated in the eternal election of Jesus Christ. Moreover, the consequence of the new understanding of the doctrine of election would be applied to all of his expositions in the *loci* of *Church Dogmatics*. No longer would the ambivalences that are present in the *Göttingen Dogmatics* be allowed. All doctrines in the dogmatics have to be reformulated according to the eternal election in Jesus Christ.

The concentration in the election of Jesus Christ implies that everything now has to be redefined in the light of this *event*.¹⁴⁹ Not only do the dogmatic terms find their mature expression, this newly developed scheme is even more radical in character than the ones in Tambach 1919 and Amsterdam 1926 because now God himself is also affected.¹⁵⁰ When eschatology functions as the origin and goal, as in Tambach and Amsterdam, *theologia proper* is left untouched by the critical posture. That is not the case in the new scheme. In the light of the election event, God is not just a sovereign ruler in heaven who demands blind obedience of the human race to his arbitrary needs, but the One who in his act of election is a Self-giving God. Bruce McCormack is right in pointing the remarkable eminence of Barth's discovery of the christological doctrine of election:

When the history of theology in this century is written from the vantage point of, let us say, one hundred years from now, I am confident that the greatest contribution of Karl Barth to the development of church doctrine will be located in his doctrine of election. It was here that he provided his most valuable corrective to classical teaching; here, too, that his dogmatics found both its ground and its capstone.¹⁵¹

Since the election of Jesus Christ is the ground for the election of the whole of humanity, the redemptive purpose is not only exclusively and limitedly aimed at a particular race and nation. It is intended for humanity as a *whole*. Thus the project of National Socialism consequently falls under judgment, because of the privilege they aim to bestow on only a limited group of humanity.¹⁵² But the scheme also does not favor a kind of universal humanism that preserves the *status quo*. It is instead a movement that replaces the present order with the new one.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ In recent years, the category of 'event' is becoming more popular due to its use by the French philosopher Alain Badiou. But while Badiou adopted the *scheme* from Paul (see Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, Cultural Memory in the Present [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003]), he avoided the use of the *content*. Of course Badiou is an atheist philosopher and not a believer. But could it be that an elaboration (such as Barth's) that fully respects not only the scheme *but also* the content of the event that Paul and many other witnessed prove to be a better explanation of that category? Attempts to answer such a question would surely be interesting and important in our time.

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Bruce L. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 183ff.

¹⁵¹ McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, 183.

¹⁵² Thus Barth's reluctance to support gender equality is inconsistent to the general tendency in his christological doctrine of election. The liberation of women from patriarchal structures should have been part of its implications. Cf. Gary J. Dorrien, *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology: Theology without Weapons*, 1st ed (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 166.

¹⁵³ Cf. Marx and Engels' famous statement: 'We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things'. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970), 56-57.

In my reading, this theological motif has a kind of ‘elective affinity’ (*die Wahlverwandschaften*) or ‘spiritual isomorphism’ with the international-socialist vision.¹⁵⁴ I adopt these categories from Michael Löwy, who uses them to express the ‘structural homology [...] between two cultural universes, apparently set in completely distinct spheres’.¹⁵⁵ There is a strong resemblance and natural attraction between Barth’s christological doctrine of election and socialist internationalism, since both have universal aim and radically envision a total redemptive goal in history.

Interestingly, a year before his death in 1943, Leonhard Ragaz, one of the leaders of the religious socialist movement in Europe, made a very positive review on the most recent volume of *Church Dogmatics* at that time, *Church Dogmatics* II/2, in which Barth’s mature doctrine of election is expressed. Barth was surprised of Ragaz’ agreement on his part-volume and Ragaz then considered Barth’s gratitude to be an ‘act of discipleship which casts a glow of reconciliation’ for his final days.¹⁵⁶ The positive reaction of Ragaz was unexpected, since he had developed a conflicting relationship with Barth, especially after the lecture in Tambach in 1919.¹⁵⁷ Ragaz’ appreciation of *Church Dogmatics* II/2 strengthens the claim about the socialist elements in Barth’s mature doctrine of election.

The fuller explanation of the consequences of this discovery will be discussed more in the next chapters as we read closely some *loci* in the *Church Dogmatics*. For now we can say that the 1936 discovery is the climax of the deepening process that Barth went through for some years. In that process in which Barth learned to develop his own dogmatics, the German situation added to Barth’s conviction about the urgency of the task and the centrality of christology. The search for a theological ground that led to the discovery of the christocentrism serves as the *prevention* part of his resistance against National Socialism.

¹⁵⁴ Cf. Carys Moseley, who in his study on Barth and nationalism concludes, ‘From the very beginning of Barth’s career, the Kingdom of God entails for him a commitment to both socialism and internationalism’. Carys Moseley, *Nations and Nationalism in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 1st ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 203.

¹⁵⁵ See Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe: A Study in Elective Affinity*, Radical Thinkers, trans. Hope Heaney (London: Verso, 2017), chp 2, Kindle.

¹⁵⁶ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 322.

¹⁵⁷ Paul S. Chung, *Karl Barth: God’s Word in Action* (Eugene, Or: Cascade Books, 2008), 86.

Chapter 2

The Case of Notohamidjojo

In his survey on Indonesian political theology at the time of the New Order, Julianus Mojau portrays Oerip Notohamidjojo as the theologian who most explicitly supported that regime. This stance is expressed, for instance, when Notohamidjojo commented that the new ruling power led by Soeharto in the 1960s which was built on the massacre of millions was bringing order and promise for the realization of God's kingdom on earth.¹⁵⁸

Oerip Notohamidjojo (1915-1985) was a lay theologian who had a respectable influence in the field of education and politics. He was born in Blora, a small town in Central Java. His father, Abdullafatah, was a scholar of Islamic law and a leader of an Islamic movement, following a tradition in the family of having a leadership role in the society. The young Notohamidjojo studied in Christian schools, and although his father sent him there to grasp the secret of the evangelizing method, he ended up asking his father's permission to be baptized. At the age of twenty, he publicly became a Christian.¹⁵⁹ For the following years he was working as a teacher in Christian schools, before studying law at Universitas Indonesia between 1949-1956. In the same field of study he gained an honorary doctorate from the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in 1972. The award was given for three major reasons: his service in the field of education in Indonesia, his popular works in the field of politics, and his campaign for Christian participation in the social and political life in Indonesia.¹⁶⁰ Notohamidjojo never studied theology formally. But he was an active voice in the Christian circles, mostly on the topic of Christianity and politics. He was a leader of Parkindo (Indonesian Christian Party) and also the first rector of Satya Wacana Christian University in Salatiga, Central Java. He was also known for having a theological leaning to the Dutch Neo-Calvinist tradition.¹⁶¹

This chapter discusses the case of Oerip Notohamidjojo in the light of the presentation on christocentrism in the previous chapter. It serves as the *recontextualization* step that follows the political reading of christocentrism in the context of the 1930s. Barth's mode of resistance at that time was rather *preventive* and the present discussion will look for what can be learned in a more concrete way from that insight in the Indonesian context. In parallel to the German Christian support during the rise of the *führer* in early 1930s, which was the main context for the development of christocentrism, Oerip Notohamidjojo was one of the Christian leaders who immediately showed his support of the New Order regime at the beginning of its ascendancy. For sure his support to the New Order was not as explicit and as strong as the German Christians' to the Nazis. But still what came out of him was a celebration of a regime that massacred millions of his fellow countrymen. *My claim is that Notohamidjojo's adherence to Soeharto's regime was rooted in his Kuyperean doctrine of common grace, for which the christocentrism of Karl Barth offers an alternative proposal.* I shall explain this point in three

¹⁵⁸ Mojau, *Meniadakan Atau Merangkul?*, 30f.

¹⁵⁹ O. Notohamidjojo, *Kreativitas yang Bertanggung Jawab: Kumpulan Pidato dan Karangan Dr. O. Notohamidjojo S.H.* (Salatiga: LPIS, 1973), vi.

¹⁶⁰ Notohamidjojo, *Kreativitas yang Bertanggung Jawab*, 273-74.

¹⁶¹ Notohamidjojo, *Kreativitas yang Bertanggung Jawab*, vii-xii.

steps. *First*, a general overview on Oerip Notohamidjojo's political theology. *Second*, an attempt to trace the theological root of Notohamidjojo's political theology in Abraham Kuyper's doctrine of common grace. *Third*, a discussion on what Barth's christocentrism can offer within this set of problems.

Notohamidjojo's Political Theology

Among the few books that Notohamidjojo published during his life, two titles stand out among the rest in its relevance to our topic of discussion: *Iman Kristen dan Politik* (Christian Faith and Politics) and *Tanggungjawab Geredja dan Orang Kristen dibidang Politik* (The Responsibility of the Church and the Christians in the Political Sphere). The first mentioned title was published in 1951 and the second in 1966. It means that each was written in a different era. In 1951 Indonesia was still under the leadership of Soekarno and 1966 was the year when Soeharto took power from Soekarno and completely changed the course of history in this country.

Despite the fifteen years gap that separates the two books, the theological stance that Notohamidjojo displays in both texts are very similar. It is predominantly inspired by the Dutch Neo-Calvinist notion of sphere sovereignty grounded in the doctrine of common grace. Both texts also display a theological legitimation of the authority of the state apparatus, including its repressive function. However, a close reading on those texts will also reveal Notohamidjojo's ambivalent attitude towards the ruling power in his time.

Iman Kristen dan Politik (1951)

Iman Kristen dan Politik was Notohamidjojo's first book. It was published in 1951, just six years after the proclamation of Indonesian independence. The book was meant to be an explanation to his fellow Indonesian Christians about their duties in building the new country.¹⁶² It consists of seventeen chapters, wherein he discusses a general view on Christian faith and politics, the relationship of church and state, the source, purpose, duties, form, and limits of the state, parliamentary democracy, the need for political parties and a Christian political party, citizens' rights (freedom of religion, freedom of education, freedom of opinion, freedom to organize and to convene), the state apparatus, the relationship of the ruler of the state with culture, economy, and social life, and international relations.¹⁶³

Notohamidjojo presents two dangers that are persistently faced by the Christians in relation to politics. *First*, the assumption that politics is an independent sphere, so that there is no connection between God and Christ and the rulers, law, and citizenship.

There are so many people who in their practice separate their Christian identity from the political life. As a citizen they never ask the question: 'God, what do we have to do in accord with God's will in the political sphere?' In the political sphere, those people only know about the will of the people or their own feelings or thoughts, but disrespecting God and his Word.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Notohamidjojo, *Kreativitas yang Bertanggung Jawab*, x.

¹⁶³ O. Notohamidjojo, *Iman Kristen dan Politik* (Jakarta: BPK, 1952).

¹⁶⁴ 'Banjak sekali orang-orang jang dalam praktek memisahkan kekristenannja daripada hidup politik. Mereka itu dalam hidup kenegaraan tidak pernah bertanja: "Tuhan, apakah jang harus kami perbuat menurut kehendak

The *second* danger is that many people choose to avoid the responsibility in political life. Notohamidjojo calls it *politicophobie*, fear of politics.¹⁶⁵ Whereas the first attitude is normally identified with the secular circles, the second one is typically associated with the pietists. He argues that both attitudes have to be resisted.

Notohamidjojo believes that the state is endowed with *some* authority by God. God confers the state with some authority, but *only* some. It means that forms of absolute control of power in politics should be rejected. He considers those forms as expressions of idolatry. Their examples are the idolatry of *nationhood* as in Hitler's Germany (the sovereignty of the nation or the state itself), the idolatry of the will of the *people* as in the French Revolution (the sovereignty of the people itself), and the idolatry of the *leaders* as in the past kingdoms (the sovereignty of the kings).¹⁶⁶ The absolute sovereignty should only belong to God, who is the source of the authority of the state. Here we can see how in principle, Notohamidjojo should not have gone as far as the German Christians in his support to a political regime. He maintains a reservation in his support of political authority on the ground of the doctrine of divine sovereignty. Notohamidjojo's reluctance to absolutize a particular form of government or political system should have kept him away from a close affiliation to the powers that be, whose authority he considers to be only relative to the sovereign God.

One of the elements of the authority endowed to the state by God, according to Notohamidjojo, is the authority to use violence. Notohamidjojo derives his argument for this point from the apostle Paul, who he believes advised the Christians through his letters to submit themselves to the government whom God instituted. He claims that those who are against the government are acting against God, because the government is the servant of God. Its task is to punish all kinds of evil and protect the good. So it is legitimate for the government to use violence as long as it is used for the installment of God's righteousness and justice among the people.¹⁶⁷ Its task is to restrain the sins of human beings in the society.¹⁶⁸ The Christians are 'obliged to acknowledge the task of the government gratefully and help the ruler in the fulfillment of its task'.¹⁶⁹

However, Notohamidjojo believes that the task of the state should also be limited. He mentions about the presence of independent spheres in which the state should not interfere. Just like the state, they are directly derived from God himself, and hold responsibility to him only. These spheres are spiritual freedom, family, church, and society. The state has to protect and respect the independence of these spheres.¹⁷⁰ That is why the idea of a totalitarian state is always going to be rejected by him.¹⁷¹ Notohamidjojo's insistence on the existence of the independent spheres whose relative autonomy should be respected reflects his reliance on the notion of sphere sovereignty in the Dutch Neo-Calvinist tradition.

The form of government that Notohamidjojo considers to be the best option to exercise this task is parliamentary democracy. According to Notohamidjojo, parliamentary democracy

Tuhan dilapang politik ini?" Mereka itu pada lapang politik hanja mengenal kehendak rakjat atau perasaan dan pikirannja sendiri, tetapi tidak mengindahkan Tuhan dan firmanNja.' Notohamidjojo, *Iman Kristen dan Politik*, 6.

¹⁶⁵ Notohamidjojo, *Iman Kristen dan Politik*, 6.

¹⁶⁶ Notohamidjojo, *Iman Kristen dan Politik*, 19-20.

¹⁶⁷ Notohamidjojo, *Iman Kristen dan Politik*, 22-23.

¹⁶⁸ Notohamidjojo, *Iman Kristen dan Politik*, 25.

¹⁶⁹ 'Orang Kristen wadjib mengakui tugas Pemerintah dengan rasa terima kasih dan membantu Penguasa itu dalam pelaksanaan tugasnja menurut kadarnja.' Notohamidjojo, *Iman Kristen dan Politik*, 30.

¹⁷⁰ Notohamidjojo, *Iman Kristen dan Politik*, 25-26.

¹⁷¹ 'Negara-diktatur wadjib ditolak, sebab penguasa mensita kekuasaan totaliter terhadap seluruh kehidupan fihak-jang-diperintah dan mengira tiada perlu bertanggung djawab kepada Tuhan ataupun kepada rakjat.' Notohamidjojo, *Iman Kristen dan Politik*, 32.

opens up ‘the widest opportunities for the development of the rights and freedom of the citizens’ and provides a platform for the ruler to be constantly reminded of his duty.¹⁷² The preference here is not grounded in an optimistic view on parliamentary democracy as such, but the belief that it is the best possible option in minimizing the defects in politics as the result of the sinful tendency in human nature, both of the rulers and of the people.¹⁷³ It appears that Notohamidjojo sees parliamentary democracy as a form of government that prevents totalitarian forms of government that he considers to be in opposition to the sovereignty of God. It is not a perfect option, and there would not be such a form of government in this sinful world. It is just the least evil one to have.

Interestingly, Notohamidjojo associates totalitarianism with Asian culture. In one of his lectures about the role of Christian universities in Asia, he mentions the danger of totalitarianism which he claims to be a system that follows the ‘primitive concept’ (*primitief begrip*) of totality. He believes that this primitive concept of totality is typical of Asian culture.¹⁷⁴ For him the pervasive worldview in Asia is monistic and naturalistic, with the tendency to see the whole universe as one unit, to see everything in relation to nature, and to seek harmony in all.¹⁷⁵ The task of a Christian university, he believes, is to take part in the prevention of the syncretism of Christian faith with such culture and the dangers that it brings, and to enhance the possibility for democracy to flourish in the midst of that totalitarian tendency.¹⁷⁶ It is visible here that he associates Christianity with the idea of progress in the modern-Western civilization. Both parliamentary democracy and the modern university are considered as indispensable means for the enhancement of this project. It becomes very clear now why Notohamidjojo was very active in these two areas. He was modernizing and Westernizing Indonesia with the cross of Jesus on his banner.

But despite his affinity with the Calvinist tradition and his inclination to Western civilization, Notohamidjojo also shows a critical stance towards the history of its practice during the colonial period. He sees the diminishment of colonialism as an opportunity for Calvinism in Indonesia to change and to learn from its mistakes in the past: ‘In this way, it is good if the Indonesian Christians take lessons from the history of Calvinism and try to avoid the catastrophe that often times has plunged the political life of the Calvinists in other countries’.¹⁷⁷ He also shows his support for the development of an independent theological inquiry for the specific situation in Indonesia.

We can learn on how to deal with political matters from the ecumenical fellowship with the Christians from other countries. But for us, in our country, it is not enough to repeat the decisions that have been suggested in other places. We in our own condition have to look for ourselves the will of God in the sphere of politics.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷² ‘Dalam bentuk-negara *Demokrasi-parlementer* terdapatlah kesempatan-kesempatan jang seluas-luasanja bagi perkembangan hak2 dan kebebasan warga-negara, sedangkan Penguasa senantiasa diperingatkan kepada tugasnja untuk menjelenggarakan adalat.’ Notohamidjojo, *Iman Kristen dan Politik*, 33.

¹⁷³ Notohamidjojo, *Iman Kristen dan Politik*, 32-33.

¹⁷⁴ Notohamidjojo, *De Christelijke Universiteit en de heersende ideologieen in Azië (Dumaguete: Silliman University, 1962)*, 7.

¹⁷⁵ Notohamidjojo, *De Christelijke Universiteit*, 6.

¹⁷⁶ Notohamidjojo, *De Christelijke Universiteit*, 7-8.

¹⁷⁷ ‘Dalam hal ini baiklah kaum Kristen Indonesia mengambil ibarat dari sedjarah Calvinisme dan mentjaba menjingkiri bentjana jang atjapkali mendjerumuskan hidup politik Calvinis dinegara-negara lain.’ Notohamidjojo, *Iman Kristen dan Politik*, 13.

¹⁷⁸ ‘Kita dalam menjelami soal-soal politik dapat berguru kepada pertalian oikumene (*oikumenische verbondenheid*) dengan kaum Kristen dari negeri-negeri lain. Akan tetapi bagi kita dinegeri kita ini tidaklah tjukup mengulang mentah-mentah penjelesaian2 jang dikemukakan ditempat-tempat lain.’ Notohamidjojo, *Iman Kristen dan Politik*, 17.

That inquiry, for him, has to do with God's calling for the Christians to participate in directing the new state to the right path. It is a vocation that must be fulfilled:

The voice of this calling is now clearer than in the past. A sovereign and independent Indonesian state has born. Now the important thing is to guide this newborn state to the right direction. The Christians in this country are also called to participate in determining that orientation through words and works. The disavowal of that call is a great sin and betrayal to our Lord Jesus Christ. The fulfillment of that duty is among the commandments which are received by the Christians here from their Lord.¹⁷⁹

That was his political stance in 1951. In the early years of Indonesian independence under the leadership of Soekarno, Notohamidjojo encouraged the Indonesian Christians to participate in politics 'to guide this newborn state to the right direction'. His preference for the meaning of 'the right direction', as we have seen, is the development of parliamentary democracy and the prevention of what he calls 'totalitarianism'.

Tanggungjawab Geredja dan Orang Kristen dibidang Politik (1966)

There are not many differences that can be found between the views presented in *Iman Kristen dan Politik* and Notohamidjojo's second book, *Tanggungjawab Geredja dan Orang Kristen dibidang Politik*. The book was written during the period of Soeharto's rise to power in 1966. The installment of the new regime was preceded by a bloodbath, with about a million suspected communists being massacred without trial under the command of Soeharto.¹⁸⁰ Notohamidjojo talks about this incident in the introductory part of the book. His tone signals a feeling of relief, for the success of Soeharto's *coup d'état* means that the socialist stage of the Indonesian Revolution which was planned by the previous regime to be started in 1970 has been cancelled, thanks to 'God's wisdom which is above all the ways of men'.¹⁸¹

In the chapter where he discusses the role of the state as the means for the development of the Kingdom of God, Notohamidjojo provides a further elaboration on the topic of the state's use of violence. In comparison to the discussion on the same topic in *Iman Kristen dan Politik*, this time his emphasis on the right of the state to use violence is stronger.

¹⁷⁹ 'Panggilan itu sekarang lebih djelaslah suaranya dari pada zaman jang lampau. Suatu negara Indonesia jang merdeka dan berdaulat telah lahir. Sekarang jang penting ialah pembimbingan negara jang muda ini kearah jang benar. Kaum Kristen dinegeri ini terpanggil djuga untuk turut menentukan arah itu dengan kata dan kerdja. Pengabaian panggilan itu merupakan suatu dosa jang besar dan chianat terhadap Tuhan Jesus Kristus kita. Penepatan kewadjiban itu termasuk dalam suruhan-suruhan jang oleh kaum Kristen disini diterima dari Tuhannya.' Notohamidjojo, *Iman Kristen dan Politik*, 17.

¹⁸⁰ In the last few years, Joshua Oppenheimer made two documentary movies about this genocide, *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence*. The first one was nominated for Oscar in 2014. Both films incite controversies in Indonesia until now and have recently been officially banned. In 2016, an International People's Tribunal on this issue was held in Den Haag, in which it was decided that the crimes against humanity were really happened at that time (see 'International People's Tribunal [IPT] 1965,' tribunal1965.org, <http://www.tribunal1965.org/en/international-peoples-tribunal-ipt-1965/> [accessed November 17, 2017]).

¹⁸¹ 'Tahap kedua ialah Sosialisme jang akan mengkomunikasikan negara dan masjarakat Indonesia. Tahap kedua ini semula akan dilaksanakan pada tahun 1970, tetapi karena hikmat Tuhan jang djalannya diatas semua djalan manusia, oleh P.K.I. tahap Sosialisme itu diperkosakan pada tahun 1965, sehingga coup d'état gagal dan Indonesia diselamatkan dari atheisme jang kedjam. Pujilah nama Tuhan.' O. Notohamidjojo, *Tanggungjawab Geredja dan Orang Kristen dibidang Politik* (Jakarta: BPK, 1967), 9.

The state is equipped with a special authority, which is the authority that is not given to other institutions. The authority which is given to the state to enable itself to fulfill its task to defend and develop the order of the world from God, is the authority to use sword. What the authority to use sword means is the authority to force by using weapons. In the times of the Roman Empire the sword was the most effective weapon. Perhaps now the term authority to use sword has to be translated into authority to use tank or machine guns. The use of forcing authority to defend justice, law, peace, and prosperity, against evil and violations is the monopoly of the State. It is this authority to use sword that has to support the authority of the State, which is needed to fulfill its calling in opening the path for the growth of the Kingdom of God.¹⁸²

When this quotation is read in the context of his appraisal of the mentioned event in the introduction of *Tanggungjawab Geredja dan Orang Kristen dibidang Politik*, it is hard not to get an impression that with this elaboration on the authority of the state Notohamidjojo justifies the genocide in 1965-1966 and the installment of the New Order regime which was founded on that action.

In 2016, the International People's Tribunal 1965 (IPT 65) in Den Haag decided that the genocide in 1965-1966 was clearly a crime for which the state was responsible:

It has been established that the State of Indonesia during the relevant period through its military and police arms committed and encouraged the commission of these grave human rights violations on a systematic and widespread basis. The judges are also convinced that all this was done for political purposes: to annihilate the PKI (Communist Party of Indonesia) and those alleged to be its members or sympathizers, as well as a much broader number of people, including Sukarno loyalists, trade unionists and teachers. The design was also to prop up a dictatorial, violent regime, which the people of Indonesia have rightly consigned to history. It cannot be doubted that these acts, evaluated separately and cumulatively, constitute crimes against humanity, both in International Law and judged by the values and the legal framework of the new reformist era accepted by the people of Indonesia 17 years ago. This Tribunal has heard the detailed and moving evidence of victims and families as well as the evidence of established experts. It saw this evidence as no more than the mere tip of the iceberg—a few tangible, graphic and painful examples of the devastation of the human beings who appeared before them, as well as the wholesale destruction of the human fabric of a considerable sector of Indonesian society.¹⁸³

This tribunal was initiated by 'Indonesian exiles in the Netherlands and Germany and international researchers', drawing its evidence from 'victim testimonies and academic

¹⁸² 'Negara dilengkapi dengan kekuasaan istimewa, yaitu kekuasaan yang tidak diberikan kepada lembaga2 lain. Kekuasaan yang diberikan kepada Negara untuk memungkinkan pelaksanaan tugasnya mempertahankan dan mengembangkan tatanegara Tuhan, ialah kekuasaan pedang. Yang dimaksud dengan kekuasaan pedang yaitu kekuasaan paksa dengan menggunakan senjata. Pada zaman Romawi maka pedang adalah senjata yang paling ampuh. Mungkin pada zaman sekarang istilah kekuasaan pedang itu harus diterjemahkan dengan kekuasaan tank atau kekuasaan Bren. Penggunaan kekuasaan paksa untuk mempertahankan keadilan, hukum, damai dan kesedjahteraan, melawan kejahatan dan pelanggaran adalah monopoli daripada Negara. Kekuasaan pedang inilah yang harus menopang wibawa Negara, yang diperlukan untuk memenuhi panggilanja dalam memaparkan djalan bagi meluaskan Keradjaan Allah. Notohamidjojo, *Tanggungjawab*, 42.

¹⁸³ 'Final Report of the IPT 1965: Findings and Documents of the IPT 1965,' tribunal1965.org, <http://www.tribunal1965.org/en/final-report-of-the-ipt-1965/> (accessed November 17, 2017).

research'. About forty international researchers were involved in the gathering of evidence and the hearings were covered by the international press. Other than mass killing, the crimes for which the Indonesian state is deemed to bear responsibility are imprisonment, enslavement, torture, enforced disappearance, sexual violence, exile, and propaganda campaign that has stirred forms of discrimination against the victims and their relatives.¹⁸⁴

Sadly, Notohamidjojo believed that these actions were necessary and hold an important role in the advancement of the Kingdom of God in Indonesia. He saw them as the expressions of God's wisdom for which our response should be gratefulness. Most of the aforementioned crimes were done around the year when Notohamidjojo published *Tanggungjawab Geredja dan Orang Kristen dibidang Politik*. Yet in that very book he puts more emphasis on the authority of the state to use violence.

The theological justification for the authority of the state in *Tanggungjawab Geredja dan Orang Kristen dibidang Politik* is indeed very strong. Along with the church, the state is seen as God's instrument for the advancement of his Kingdom in Indonesia. As Notohamidjojo himself mentions, 'In the preparation for and the development of the Kingdom of God in this world, God wills to use two institutions: which are the church and the state'.¹⁸⁵ The formulation might sound Lutheran at first, but it actually is not. The theological scheme that Notohamidjojo uses is typically the Kuyperian Neo-Calvinist one, in which the church is seen as the institution in the sphere of the particular grace (*gratia specialis*), while the state is recognized as the institution in the sphere of the common grace (*gratia communis*).¹⁸⁶

The mass murder in 1965-1966 was not only done by the state apparatus though. Non-state actors such as Pemuda Pancasila (Pancasila Youth) was largely involved in the execution process.¹⁸⁷ Yet Notohamidjojo is silent about this matter. Since he insists that the right to use the force of violence is 'the monopoly of the state', shouldn't he at least be a little bit reluctant to celebrate so much about the genocide? One possible reason for this silence would be that Notohamidjojo considers the non-state actors as merely the hand of the state in their role during the mass murder at that time. For indeed these groups wouldn't have acted without the encouragement from the state under Soeharto's command. As Geoffrey Robinson argues recently, despite the high involvement of non-state actors during the mass genocide in 1965-1966, their actions were 'neither inevitable nor spontaneous, but was encouraged, facilitated, directed and shaped by the army's leadership'.¹⁸⁸

Notohamidjojo's almost complete support of Soeharto in 1966 is a curious case, considering his explicit political stance a few years earlier. Prominent historians of Christianity in Indonesia, Thomas van den End and Jan Sihar Aritonang, note that Notohamidjojo also supported Soekarno a few years before the *coup d'état*. In 1962 when Soekarno was still in power and the communist group had an influential role, Notohamidjojo gave his encouragement to the members of the Christian political party at that time to 'be positive and actively participate' in the trajectory set by that government.¹⁸⁹ That was only five years before

¹⁸⁴ Aboeprijadi Santoso and Gerry van Klinken, 'Genocide Finally Enters Public Discourse: The International People's Tribunal 1965,' *Journal of Genocide Research* 19, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 596f.

¹⁸⁵ 'Dalam persiapan dan perluasan Keradjaan Surga didunia ini Tuhan Allah berkenan mempergunakan dua lembaga untuk mendatarkan djalan Keradjaan: jaitu *Geredja* dan *Negara*.' Notohamidjojo, *Tanggungjawab*, 22.

¹⁸⁶ O. Notohamidjojo, *De Christelijke Universiteit*, 2.

¹⁸⁷ In his first documentary movie on the 1965-1966 genocide, *The Act of Killing*, Joshua Oppenheimer portrays the non-state actors' role during the mass murder.

¹⁸⁸ Geoffrey Robinson, "'Down to the Very Roots": The Indonesian Army's Role in the Mass Killings of 1965-66,' *Journal of Genocide Research* 19, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 465-86.

¹⁸⁹ Th. van den End and Jan S. Aritonang, '1800-2005: A National Overview,' in *A History of Christianity in Indonesia*, vol. 35, Studies in Christian Mission (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2008), 200.

he expressed his appraisal to God and sense of gratefulness for the fall of Soekarno's regime. As far as I found, Notohamidjojo does not give an explanation about his switch of allegiance. The real reasons behind the sudden shift will always incite speculations. In this regard, I prefer to restrict myself to theological analysis.

So far we have looked at the ambivalence of Notohamidjojo in his attitude towards the two regimes before and after 1965. His problematic theological legitimation of the state, especially on its authority to use the force of violence and its important role in enhancing the growth of God's kingdom on earth, has also been demonstrated. Given Notohamidjojo's dependence on Kuyper's theology, and the underdeveloped shape of his theological grounds, it is important for us to trace the theological roots in Kuyper, so that the theological conundrum can be seen more clearly.

The Theological Root: Abraham Kuyper

The affinity of Notohamidjojo and Kuyper is recognized by Julianus Mojau in his critique of Notohamidjojo's political theology in the period of the New Order regime. Mojau believes that Kuyper's doctrine of common grace functions as the doctrinal framework that led Notohamidjojo to legitimize the New Order.¹⁹⁰ Following Mojau's suggestion, the discussion on Kuyper in this section will focus on his notion of common grace and its reception in Notohamidjojo's theological view on the state. In the following, I will show how much Notohamidjojo depends on Kuyper's theology and demonstrate the tension that emerges when both figures are compared. It appears that despite Kuyper's legitimation of the repressive function of the state apparatus, he did not go as far as Notohamidjojo.

In the section on Calvinism and politics in his *Lectures on Calvinism*, Kuyper endorses the acknowledgment of the authority of the state. He believes that this authority is God-given. Nevertheless he also reminds his audience that this support does not mean that he idealizes the idea of the nation-state as such. The ideal condition for him is the unity of the whole human race, beyond the boundaries of nation-states, which he thinks is unfortunately not possible because of sin.

Man is created from man, and by virtue of his birth he is organically united with the whole race. Together we form one humanity, not only with those who are living now, but also with all the generations behind us and with all those who shall come after us pulverized into millions though we may be. All the human race is from one blood. The conception of States, however, which subdivide the earth into continents, and each continent into morsels, does not harmonize with this idea. Then only would the organic unity of our race be realized politically, if one State could embrace all the world, and if the whole of humanity were associated in one world empire. Had sin not intervened, no doubt this would actually have been so.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ 'Apa yang ditekankan oleh Notohamidjojo ini sejalan dengan apa yang ditekankan oleh Kuyper di atas, yakni bahwa negara dan pemerintah adalah lembaga yang memperoleh otoritas dari Allah sendiri untuk mendatangkan keadilan, kebaikan, dan ketertiban sosial. Kuyper menilai bahwa pemerintah adalah alat dari "anugerah umum" (*an instrument of "common grace"*)'. Mojau, *Meniadakan Atau Merangkul?*, 38.

¹⁹¹ Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, chp 3, Kindle.

The necessity of the installment of the state is caused by the depraved condition of humankind. ‘Without ruling authority’, there ‘would be a veritable hell on earth’.¹⁹² It is ‘an instrument of “common grace” to thwart all license and outrage and to shield the good against the evil’.¹⁹³

The notion of ‘common grace’ (*gratia communis*) is one of the predominant ideas in the Dutch Neo-Calvinist tradition. It is the idea that despite the particular orientation of God’s saving election, he also provides the one that aims generally, not for the saving purpose, but ‘for the restraint of ruin that lurks within sin’.¹⁹⁴ It is grounded in the story of God’s covenant with Noah after the great flood in which God promises not to be angry or to rebuke humankind again. As Kuyper writes, ‘The fixed historical starting point for the doctrine of *common grace* lies in *God’s establishment of a covenant with Noah after the flood*’.¹⁹⁵ For Kuyper, the acceptance of such a belief does not contradict the confession about the pervasively depraved condition of humankind under sin. It just strengthens it. For without such kind of grace, the depravity that is visible in this world would be total. And that’s not the case in the world we are living in.

One of the rights that is coming from the authority that God gave to the state is the right to use violence to keep the order. And for Kuyper it is important that the state has this authority:

The principal characteristic of government is the right of life and death. According to the apostolic testimony the magistrate hears the sword, and this sword has a threefold meaning. It is the sword of justice, to mete out corporeal punishment to the criminal. It is the sword of war to defend the honor and the rights and the interests of the State against its enemies. And it is the sword of order, to thwart at home all forcible rebellion.¹⁹⁶

Here Kuyper shows a point that echoes again in Notohamidjojo: the theological legitimation of the repressive function of the state apparatus. Kuyper himself explicitly refers to himself as an ‘excellent antirevolutionary’, after the name of his party, and positing himself ‘against the total overturning of all natural order’.¹⁹⁷

Despite his theological legitimation of state authority through the doctrine of common grace, Kuyper actually shows a belief in the transient nature of it. The state is going to be replaced in the future. This is the reason why the church is not supposed to honor the state either.

The church does not function in a human society that is by nature governed by the state, but she carries within herself the germ of the all-encompassing worldwide kingdom, which will one day replace every state and assume its function. It is therefore decidedly incorrect to honor the state as the palace in which the church is assigned no more than a side wing.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹² Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, chp 3, Kindle.

¹⁹³ Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, chp 3, Kindle.

¹⁹⁴ Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace: God’s Gifts for a Fallen World. Volume I: The Historical Section* (Bellingham: Lexham, 2015), chp 1, Kindle.

¹⁹⁵ Kuyper, *Common Grace*, chp 2, Kindle.

¹⁹⁶ Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, chp 3, Kindle.

¹⁹⁷ Mark James Larson, *Abraham Kuyper, Conservatism and Church and State* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2015; kindle edition), chp 1, Kindle.

¹⁹⁸ Abraham Kuyper, ‘State and Church’ in *On the Church* (Bellingham: Lexham, 2016), Kindle.

A world-empire neither cannot be established nor ought it to be. For in this very desire consisted the contumacy of the building of Babel's tower.¹⁹⁹

The state is not eternal, but until the *eschaton* it has a legitimate role. Its authority is derived from God himself, as it is an instrument of his common grace. Therefore it has a certain, yet relative authority. Its role is limited. It must not interfere in other spheres in life. It cannot be absolute. For Kuyper, this anti-absolutism of the state is one of the valuable inheritance of Calvinism.²⁰⁰

In line with Notohamidjojo's association of Christianity with the idea of progress, Kuyper also justifies his promotion of Calvinism by claiming it to be a worldview that deserves to be honored for its role in 'having led humanity, as such, up to a higher stage of development'.²⁰¹

The exploration on Kuyper shows Notohamidjojo's *dependence* on the Dutch theologian. Not only in Notohamidjojo's reception, the employment of the doctrine of common grace by Kuyper himself reveals a theological legitimation of the state and its repressive function. The Eurocentric progressivist view of history held by Notohamidjojo is also visible in Kuyper.

However, on the legitimation of the repressive function of state apparatus, Kuyper shows a milder stance. Whereas Notohamidjojo celebrated the genocide of a million of his fellow compatriots, Kuyper was against the war in Aceh and promoted ethical policy in Indonesia, although the reasons for these might not only be theological, but also financial.²⁰² This contrast provides us the material for the final reflection in the closing section.

Christocentrism and the Case of Notohamidjojo

In the case of Notohamidjojo, we find a theological legitimation on the repressive function of the state apparatus, grounded in Kuyper's doctrine of common grace, that led him to justify and celebrate the 1965 massacre in Indonesia. There is also a noticeable easy conformism to the ruling power. In the time of Soekarno Notohamidjojo pledged his allegiance to the left-wing government. Then suddenly after Soeharto rose to power he welcomed it with laudation. The doctrine of common grace seems to have contributed to this predicament in its tendency to promote an acceptance to the present order through a theological legitimation of the state as an entity endowed with God-given relative authority.

To be more balanced, there are elements of Kuyper's conceptual scheme that could have led one to reject an allegiance with Soeharto. Both Notohamidjojo and Kuyper, referring to Calvin, reject an absolutist state. While Notohamidjojo uses this idea to criticize Soekarno after Soeharto's rise to power, the government of Soeharto was in fact even more absolutist than the previous one. It did not respect the independence of other spheres, something that Kuyper and Notohamidjojo would demand from the state. All institutions, including the church, had to be in accord with the ideology of the government. Even if that policy came a bit later, the massacre of around a million suspected communists without trial that preceded the transfer of power was certainly an indication of a coming absolutist state.

¹⁹⁹ Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, chp 3, Kindle.

²⁰⁰ Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, chp 3, Kindle.

²⁰¹ Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, chp 3, Kindle.

²⁰² Robert J. Joustra, 'Abraham Kuyper among the Nations,' *Politics and Religion* 11, no. 1 (March 2018): 146–68.

It seems that Notohamidjojo justified the massacre from his concept of the state. That it has the right to use violence against uprisings, against revolution, to maintain order. At that time the suspicion that it was the communists who started a revolution was very strong. It was the story that was used by Soeharto as a pretext for the massacre. Nowadays that assumption is becoming more and more challenged in historical research, with strong evidence speaks against it.²⁰³ Considering the fact that the course of the country completely changed the other way around after Soeharto took power, it is Soeharto and the gang who should be accused of bringing revolution against the order that he previously supported.

What would the christocentrism of Karl Barth offer to this dilemma? To be fair, the legitimization of the state through the doctrine of common grace is not as strong as the nationalist doctrine of the German Christian movement. Both Kuyper and Notohamidjojo reject the idolatry of the state. Notohamidjojo even mentioned the National Socialist movement in Germany as an example of that kind of idolatry. The authority of the state should only be perceived relatively, since it is given by God in whom only the absolute can be found. The state only exists because of sin. Its function is to restrain the consequences of sins. In the future, when God's redemption comes, it will vanish. Yet the case of Notohamidjojo can give us a reason to sound an alarm. Give too much room for the order of creation, provide theological legitimation for the order, grant it a license to be the instrument of God to advance his Kingdom in this world, and one may possibly slip into a conformist attitude like Notohamidjojo's.

In his article on Kuyper and Bavinck's doctrine of common grace, Jeffrey Skaff exhibits a concern for the separation of common grace and special grace in Kuyper that can potentially 'lead to bifurcation of the work of Christ'.²⁰⁴ A fast separation between the two might lead to a sort of independence of one realm and insignificance to the other: 'Kuyper in particular risked being co-opted by whatever contemporary norms seemed to indicate the development of the potentialities of creation because he associated the movement of common grace with progress and development in human history'.²⁰⁵ There is a risk in Kuyper's theological scheme that creation might have an independent end apart from the history of salvation in Jesus Christ, and that Christ's redemption does not really effect this realm. The word *risk* is employed here since this possibility does not represent Kuyper's theology as a whole. As Skaff notices, there is an ambivalence in Kuyper about this issue, partly due to the lack of systematicity in his work.²⁰⁶ It is possible to find in him the opposite picture where the separation of common and special grace is not so fast.²⁰⁷

This ambivalence seems to have opened the way for Notohamidjojo to follow the *risky* path that Kuyper's doctrine of common grace provides. Notohamidjojo's ambivalence towards both Soekarno's and Soeharto's regime in such a short period of time appears to be theologically rooted in the large space of independence given to creation apart from the redemption in Jesus Christ. When the goal of creation is seen independently, conformism to the powers that be is a sensible option.

²⁰³ See John Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement and Suharto's Coup d'état in Indonesia*, New Perspectives in Southeast Asian Studies (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006). Also recently some declassified documents from the US Embassy show that the US officials were aware that the Indonesian communists leaders knew nothing about the September 30th movement that was used to blame the communists and became the pretext for the massacre. See 'The National Security Archive,' nsarchive2.gwu.edu, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/dc.html?doc=4107024-Document-14-Telegram-1516-from-American-Embassy> (accessed November 13, 2017).

²⁰⁴ Jeffrey Skaff, 'Common Grace and the Ends of Creation in Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck,' *Journal of Reformed Theology* 9, no. 1 (2015): 10.

²⁰⁵ Skaff, 'Common Grace,' 11. For he was eager to assert that Calvinism is a major force in the progress towards modernity.

²⁰⁶ Skaff, 'Common Grace,' 12.

²⁰⁷ Skaff, 'Common Grace,' 13.

This bifurcation is precisely what Barth's christocentrism abolishes. The christological grounding of the doctrine of election blocks the consequences of the traditional Calvinist doctrine of election that are visible in Kuyper's doctrine of common grace. When God's election is only applied to a select group of people (and the majority of the society are doomed) there arises the need for another kind of grace to negotiate with the reality. There the compromise begins. In contrast, through his christological doctrine of election Barth envisions that creation is not allowed to have an independent goal at all, apart from the history of salvation in Christ. God's grace is *singular* and *universal*. It is very specific and particular as the grace of God is always his grace in Jesus Christ, decreed in eternity as primal history. There is nothing that preceded it and there is no reality left unaffected or independent to this history. Its scope is universal. Everything is under the judgment of this particular history. This history intervenes in world history, instead of legitimizing its course. It is from the standpoint of this particular history that one should judge the course of world history. By following this path, easy conformism to the current of history like the one we see in the case Notohamidjojo can be prevented. Seen from the perspective of God's election in Jesus Christ, the massacre encouraged by Soeharto and the army is a counter-revolution to God's decision in Jesus Christ to redeem the whole humanity. It has to be condemned instead of being celebrated, even though the state was its main actor. For instead of being authorized by God to use the force of violence, the state is now seen as one that is moving towards the goal of redemption. It is withering away.

As the particular history of Jesus Christ intervenes in human history instead of legitimizing its course, the Eurocentric progressivist view of Kuyper and Notohamidjojo is also countered. Although Notohamidjojo never explicitly shows it, this view could have contributed to his celebration of Soeharto who brought Indonesia closer to the Western modern civilization.

This is how Barth's christocentrism that was developed in the 1930s can be recontextualized in the post-New Order Indonesian context. In the case of Notohamidjojo's support of Soeharto's rise to power we can see how Barth's insight on christocentrism operates as a counter-proposal. It abolishes the bifurcation of Christ's work, the fast separation of creation and redemption, and provides a clear ground to posit oneself in a radical way to the current of history, in faithfulness to the primal history of God's election in Jesus Christ.

PART TWO

GOD AND NOTHINGNESS

Chapter 3

Divine Omnivulence

This chapter discusses the doctrine of nothingness in the second volume of *Church Dogmatics* within the framework of the doctrine of divine will. The main focus of the reading will be directed to the exposition on divine omnivulence, which is one of the characteristics of divine perfections in *Church Dogmatics* II/1, and the discussion on will of God as expressed in the election of Jesus Christ in *Church Dogmatics* II/2. Both of the part-volumes were composed in 1937-1942. Barth started to write the first one in 1937 and published it two years afterwards in 1939 as *Church Dogmatics* II/1. Three years later in 1942 the second part-volume, *Church Dogmatics* II/2, followed. During this period, Barth remained active in the struggle against the Nazis and even raised it to another level. Whereas previously his concern was more in *preventing* the submission of theology and the church to the National Socialist ideology, at this period his stance was more characterized by the word *opposition*.

The structure of the chapter will be the following. It begins with an elaboration of Barth's activism and his surrounding context at the time when *Church Dogmatics* II/1 and II/2 were composed. This elaboration will inform the succeeding exposition of the texts on divine omnivulence in both part-volumes and help us to understand the theologico-political tendency in his discussion of the topic. Then in the final section I shall summarize and conclude the whole discussion.

Barth's Politics: 1937-1942

There are four moments in Barth's political activity between 1937-1942 that I want to highlight in order to show that in this period his struggle against the Nazis was raised to another level: *opposition*. The *first* one is his Gifford Lecture in 1938, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God according to the Teaching of the Reformation*, where he digs into the relatively neglected confession in the Reformed tradition and calls attention to its urge for resistance. The *second* one is his alienation from the Confessing Church because of his campaign for active resistance against Hitler. The *third* is his lecture in the Netherlands in 1939 under the title *The Sovereignty of the Word and the Decision of Faith*, in which he insists his audience decide their stance on the present danger and leave the option of neutrality. The *fourth* is the difficulties that he faced in his own country, as Barth's active campaign for resistance against the Nazis was in conflict with the neutral policy of Switzerland. These moments happened at the time when the Nazis were getting more aggressive and the allied group was relatively silent.

The Knowledge of God and the Service of God

In March 1938, Barth delivered the second part of his Gifford Lectures in Aberdeen. This is a special event which is annually held in Scottish universities discussing the topic of the knowledge of God. The title of the whole lecture that Barth presented there is *The Knowledge*

of God and the Service of God according to the Teaching of the Reformation. The reference to 'the teaching of the Reformation' in the title refers to his use of the Scottish Confession of 1560 as the basis of his presentation.

In the section about the state's service to God, Barth suggests that the service of God also includes an 'active resistance to certain political authorities'. He mentions it as he discusses the particular passage in Article 14 of the Scottish Confession, which is an exposition of the Ten Commandments.

It is explicitly stated there that to the fulfillment of the commandment 'Thou shall not kill' belongs also the command 'to repress tyrannie' and not to allow the shedding of innocent blood when we can prevent it. What does it mean? It means that, according to the Scottish Confession, under certain conditions there may be a *resistance* to the political power, which is not merely allowed but enjoined by God. John Knox and his friends have supplied the unambiguous commentary to this by their words and deeds. This may be not only the passive resistance but an *active* one, a resistance which can in certain circumstances be a matter of opposing *force* by force, as did occur in Scotland in the sixteenth century. It may be that the repressing of tyranny and the prevention of the shedding of innocent blood can be carried out in no other way.²⁰⁸

The statement in Article 14 of the Scottish Confession itself says: 'To honour father, mother, princes, rulers, and superior powers; to love them, to support them, yea, to obey their charges (not repugning to the commandment of God); to save the lives of innocents; to repress tyranny; to defend the oppressed.'²⁰⁹ So there is a command to obey the ruling government, but only when it does not conflict with our obedience to God. Barth himself, in his comment on the article, says that the demand to oppose tyranny out of obedience to God does not mean the evasion of the exhortation to pray for the rulers of our society in 1 Timothy 2:1-4. It's just that in certain circumstances the form of this obedience and prayer may be different, because our obedience to God is more important.²¹⁰ A struggle against certain governments that are threatening the lives of the innocents is an act of obedience to the sixth commandment, even if it has to be expressed through a struggle by force. Barth shows that he concurs with the spirit of this article.

It is important to note here that the main composer of the Scottish Confession is the Scottish reformer John Knox, who is known for his rallying call for a violent revolution against the authority. Although he drew a lot of inspiration for that stance from Calvinism, Knox went further than many of the early Reformed theologians, including Calvin himself.²¹¹ He went on to become a hero of Scotland, but the function of the Scottish Confession in the Church of Scotland was superseded by the Westminster Confession in 1647. By grounding his lecture in Scotland on the Scottish Confession, it seems that Barth was trying to remind them of the precious treasure they have and its call for resistance! At that time, Hitler's army was annexing Austria, indicating its growing aggressive stance, and therefore adding a greater sense of urgency to the lecture.

²⁰⁸ Karl Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God according to the Teaching of the Reformation, Recalling the Scottish Confession of 1560: The Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Aberdeen, in 1937 and 1938*, trans. J. L. M. Haire and Ian Henderson (Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005), 229.

²⁰⁹ *Scottish Confession of Faith (1560)* (Christian Classics Ethereal Library), accessed September 3, 2018, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/anonymous/scotconf.xvii.html>.

²¹⁰ Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God*, 229-30.

²¹¹ See the study on this topic in Richard L. Greaves, 'John Knox, the Reformed Tradition, and the Development of Resistance Theory,' *The Journal of Modern History* 48, no. S3 (September 1976): 1-36.

The theme ‘political service of God’ was used again in June, when he gave a lecture called *Rechtfertigung und Recht*. Barth also talked about the task of political resistance for the Christians on this occasion. While previously in Aberdeen the theme is connected to the knowledge of God, this time it is conversed with the doctrine of justification in the tradition of Protestant reformation.²¹²

Alienation from the Confessing Church

Barth’s suggestion for church resistance in the realm of politics has led to his alienation from the Confessing Church. It was rejected by most of its leaders as the Confessing Church grew into a more passive stance. A certain compromise towards the regime was even made. In the summer of 1938, when there was a demand that German pastors should swear an oath of allegiance to Hitler, the Confessing Synod recommended for the requirement to be fulfilled. Barth was strictly against this posture. He stated his position in May and in a lecture in Zürich in September.²¹³

In the same month, Barth wrote a letter to Josef Hromádka, a theologian and church leader in Czechoslovakia, commenting on the threat imposed by the Nazis to his country. In that letter, Barth laments the silence of England, France, America, and Switzerland on this danger and considers that this quietism is even more terrible than the reality of Germany under Hitler itself.²¹⁴ He also mentions that the struggle of the Czech soldiers in facing this threat will be decisive not only for Europe, but also for the church of Jesus Christ.²¹⁵ The letter provoked many responses. The German press published articles with headlines that accuse him as a warmonger, Jewish, or Czech. Protests and critiques rained down on Barth, even from those who were his friends and sympathizers before. Leaders of the Confessing Church broke their association with Karl Barth through a formal letter. Barth’s trepidation increased in time as England and France authorized Hitler’s attack on Czechoslovakia in late September through the Munich agreement. Later on, he reflected on this period and saw that it was the time when everybody seems to think that *realism* means believing in the words of Hitler.²¹⁶ Not only to Hromádka, Barth also wrote a letter to Holland that suggests resistance, using the sword if necessary. According to Frank Jehle, Barth was known all over Europe as a very early advocate of armed resistance against Hitler and one of the most eloquent proponents of this cause.²¹⁷

In October, there was a ban on all of Barth’s writings, in Germany. Barth responded in a lecture afterwards that a threat to political order and freedom is also a threat to the church.

²¹² The original version of the lecture in German can be found in Karl Barth, *Eine Schweizer Stimme 1938 - 1945*, 3. Aufl (Zürich: Theol. Verl, 1985); and the English translation in Karl Barth, *Church and State*, Church Classics, trans. G. Ronald Howe (Greenville, S.C: Smyth & Helwys Pub, 1991).

²¹³ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 288-9.

²¹⁴ ‘Das eigentlich Furchtbare ist ja nicht der Strom von Lüge und Brutalität, der von dem hitlerischen Deutschland ausgeht, sondern die Möglichkeit, daß in England, Frankreich, Amerika - auch bei uns in der Schweiz - vergessen werden könnte: mit der Freiheit Ihres Volkes steht und fällt heute nach menschlichem Ermessen die von Europa und vielleicht nicht nur von Europa. Ist denn die ganze Welt unter den Bann des bösen Blickes der Riesenschlange geraten?’ Barth, *Eine Schweizer Stimme*, 58.

²¹⁵ ‘Dennoch wage ich es zu hoffen, daß die Söhne der alten Hussiten dem überweich gewordenen Europa dann zeigen werden, daß es auch heute noch Männer gibt. Jeder tschechische Soldat, der dann streitet und leidet, wird es auch für uns - und, ich sage es heute ohne Vorbehalt: er wird es auch für die Kirche Jesu Christi tun, die in dem Dunstkreis der Hitler und Mussolini nur entweder der Lächerlichkeit oder der Ausrottung verfallen kann.’ Barth, *Eine Schweizer Stimme*, 58.

²¹⁶ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 289.

²¹⁷ Frank Jehle, *Ever against the Stream: The Politics of Karl Barth, 1906-1968* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2002), 59.

Barth also campaigned against anti-Semitism, which he considered to be a sin against the Holy Spirit.²¹⁸

The Sovereignty of the Word of God and the Decision of Faith

In early 1939, Barth visited France, Holland, and Denmark. His lecture in a series of Dutch cities was entitled *The Sovereignty of the Word of God and the Decision of Faith*. Barth starts this lecture with a statement that the subject of what he speaks is not the god of the world in its various forms. The reality and power of this god, according to Barth, is very clear, and the Holy Scripture also speaks about it. It also has plenty of faithful servants. But that should not be the concern of the Christians.

This does not mean that we have or can overcome him; but then we do not need to overcome him, for he has been overcome already. He will continue to tempt us powerfully and we will continue to suffer at his hands, but he will not devour us. We live in a freedom which he cannot harm, even if he appears to master half or all of the world, for the judgment has been pronounced and the end of his power has been determined. Therefore we need neither fear nor honor him, for he has nothing to say or to teach us. We would be fool to listen to, or take our stand upon, his word for even a moment, for then, when his time comes, as come it will, we would be destroyed along with him.²¹⁹

Christians are not supposed to fear this false god who often times appears to be the ruler of the world, because the real ruler of the world is the true and living God.

Instead of this god, the concern of Barth in his lecture is the living God and His Word, before whom the god of this world is ‘only His ape, not His competitor’.²²⁰ The Word of the living God, Jesus Christ, is instead depicted to be sovereign, in its omnipotence, exclusiveness, and that it is spoken and reaches us in divine freedom.²²¹ But we could not speak about the sovereignty of the Word of God, Barth proposes, ‘without immediately speaking also of ourselves, namely of the *decision* of faith’.²²² For the nature of the sovereign act is that ‘it is related to, and directed toward us, that we are the objects of this act and to that extent participate in its completion’.²²³ Such a decision, Barth argues, must always be large in compass, ‘as large as demanded by the sovereignty of the Word of God under which it comes to pass’.²²⁴ It cannot be sufficient if it remains an intention and a reflection, private moral life, or even the realm of the Church! For the Word of God to which we respond in our decision of faith concerns God, the world, and man.

A limited decision is as such not the decision of faith. Every ‘inner’ in this matter points to an ‘outer’, indeed to a new and as such ambiguous, dangerous, compromising ‘outer’. Every honest, theological dialectic as such makes clear as its end and goal a most undialectical Yes and No, in word and deed! He who believes is no reasonable fellow. He who believes does not run away. He who is concerned about his alibi in the face of

²¹⁸ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 289-90.

²¹⁹ In Karl Barth, *God Here and Now*, Routledge Classics (London/New York: Routledge, 2003), 13-14.

²²⁰ Barth, *God Here and Now*, 14.

²²¹ Barth, *God Here and Now*, 20-22.

²²² Barth, *God Here and Now*, 23.

²²³ Barth, *God Here and Now*, 24.

²²⁴ Barth, *God Here and Now*, 30.

temptation and danger, which are surely to be expected from ‘out there’, does not believe at all. Such a man might be quite convinced that the highest possible triumph of faith took place when he was nicely ‘inside’ somewhere, saying nothing and doing nothing. But in fact it is ‘outside’ where the Devil goes about like a roaring lion, and we have been summoned to *resist* him, in soberness and watchfulness, not to run away from him.²²⁵

For Barth, the persistence in neutrality is secretly already the decision of unbelief. And that’s what happened in Europe at the time. It stands in horror, threatened with the loss of its humanity, and the problem lies in the fact ‘that Europe itself *has chosen not to decide*, that it does not dare to choose and thereby has chosen evil, which means it has chosen inhumanity’.²²⁶

Prior to Barth’s arrival to give this speech, there had been an attempt to censor his lecture. He was also asked not to say anything on political issues. His response was to reject that request, arguing that theological talk would always imply political talks.²²⁷ Holland’s Prime Minister at that time, Colijn, was being vigilant to the presence of Barth in his country, and ordered the police to watch him.

Against Swiss Neutrality

In his own country, Switzerland, Barth also had some problems because of his political position. In general, the Swiss people did not like Hitler and his rule, although some also did. But many of these people think that it is not a good thing to provoke Hitler, and Barth’s growing reputation as an advocate of armed resistance against him started to make them worry.²²⁸ A recent publication on the documents of Swiss Intelligence at that time shows that Barth was seriously suspected and spied upon. His phone calls were secretly listened to, his provoking lecture was banned for publication, and there was even a protest from the German government to the Swiss’ for the presence of Barth in that country. The Swiss government did all of these things to preserve their *neutral* stance. Some people in the government and also in the leadership of the army were on his side too, but these measures were still enacted against him.²²⁹ Barth responded to those rejections by saying that one needs to distinguish between dangers we need to stay away from, and dangers which are necessary. For him, the dangers that follow an act against Hitler belongs to the category of the latter. Avoiding this necessary danger would only increase the dangers that are already present.²³⁰

Those are the events that happened at the time when *Church Dogmatics* II/1 was composed. The volume was completed in the summer semester of 1939, just a few months before the outbreak of the world war.²³¹ In these two years, Barth was often alone in speaking for the need to act quickly in response to the growth of the *Reich* in Germany.

When Barth was writing *Church Dogmatics* II/2, the world war had already started. That did not stop his activism, for he did not see the task of composing the dogmatics and the political resistance as two separate things. At that time he did not join any party, although he

²²⁵ Barth, *God Here and Now*, 31.

²²⁶ Barth, *God Here and Now*, 32.

²²⁷ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 292.

²²⁸ Jehle, *Ever against the Stream*, 61.

²²⁹ See Eberhard Busch, ed., *Die Akte Karl Barth: Zensur und Überwachung im Namen der Schweizer Neutralität 1938 - 1945* (Zürich: TVZ, Theol. Verl. Zürich, 2008).

²³⁰ Jehle, *Ever against the Stream*, 65.

²³¹ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 292.

agreed with the line of the Social Democrat Party in Switzerland. He simply considered his participation in the resistance movement as a demand for a Christian.²³²

In April 1940, Barth volunteered for Swiss military service. He was almost fifty-five years old by the time, and was given the task to protect the border. In total, he served for 104 days. He enjoyed giving sermons on some occasions to his fellows there.²³³ In a letter to a bishop in Britain in 1942, he enclosed a picture of himself wearing his uniform with an insistence to use all means to resist evil.²³⁴

Apart from the military service, Barth was also a member of a secret organization in Switzerland, which prepared for the possibility of the Nazi's successful invasion to this country. He worked together with the conservatives and the liberals there, although he remained critical towards the bourgeois character of the movement.²³⁵

In the summer 1941, Barth was not allowed by the Swiss government to speak about politics in the whole country. His phone was tapped, and there was some consideration whether he should be imprisoned. This measure was triggered by the protest from the German government about some lectures from Barth.

The Swiss ambassador in Berlin, Frölicher, 'made great efforts' on July 12 to ask the government in Bern 'to put a muzzle on Barth because of diplomatic concerns'. Barth was accused of 'disturbing a 'proper' relationship to Germany,' of 'endangering Swiss neutrality', and of 'possible charges of treason'.²³⁶

It became normal then that Barth's lectures were censored by the Swiss government, and his publications were attacked. In contrast, his colleagues such as Emil Brunner and Georg Thüner were freely giving ideal speeches about Swiss democracy.²³⁷

The criticism towards the Swiss government from Barth increased because of accusations that the Swiss government had not only been passive or neutral in this time of crisis, but was even helping Hitler with some of its policies. These include matters in the economic realm. Barth attacked the policy of exports towards Germany which he considered to be helping the *Reich*. He also offended the government, for claiming that the Swiss government has been the financial backer of the Nazi regime. It was also a strange thing for Barth that the Swiss government kept its border closed for the refugees, while the Germans, who might be National Socialists, were freely welcomed in.²³⁸

This is the context of the composition of *Church Dogmatics* II/1 and II/2. Far from being written in a peaceful setting, they were born in the time of upheaval. They were composed in the midst of Barth's struggle to resist the growing aggression of Nazism and the ignorance of many. Often he faced the situation when he was alone and rejected by so many people and institutions. Barth's insistence was that it is not enough to stand neutral when there is an evil reality growing in front of you. One needs to organize an active resistance. It is the duty of the Christians to resist, even using arms when necessary. That is the spirit of Barth's activism between 1937-1942. I call it *opposition*. With this picture in mind, I shall continue with my exposition on divine omnivulence and nothingness in *Church Dogmatics* II/1 and *Church Dogmatics* II/2.

²³² Busch, *Karl Barth*, 303.

²³³ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 306.

²³⁴ Jehle, *Ever against the Stream*, 69.

²³⁵ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 308.

²³⁶ Jehle, *Ever against the Stream*, 70-1.

²³⁷ Jehle, *Ever against the Stream*, 72-73.

²³⁸ Jehle, *Ever against the Stream*, 77-78.

Divine Omnivulence and Nothingness

Church Dogmatics II/1 was seen by Barth as a positive voice, after so many years speaking in a negative tone. At that time, he considered that the fights he had against theologies and heresies in the early 1930s were already over. It was the time to concentrate fully in speaking about God and not just attacking other gods, and Barth enjoyed this opportunity. Without neglecting the urgency of the quarrels he had before, Barth believed that the latter task is more vital.²³⁹

It is important to note that the development of Barth's theology towards a more positive tone, was happening *in parallel* with the development in his political strategy, from a *preventing* aim in the early 1930s towards a more actively *opposing* stance. The shift to the latter is related to the fact that in the late 1930s he concentrated on speaking about God. The connection between his theological and political development is visible.

Barth's exposition of the doctrine of God in *Church Dogmatics* II/1 is divided into two chapters. The first chapter deals with the knowledge of God: its possibilities and limits, and the second one with the reality of God. The theme 'divine omnivulence' appears in this latter chapter, as one of the divine perfections.

In the following, I will show the course of Barth's argument about the reality of God and how divine omnivulence fits in it. I shall begin with an explanation on Barth's notion of God as being-in-action and the One who loves in freedom, which is crucial for understanding his picture of the reality of God. After that I will enter the discussion on divine omnipotence, omniscience, and omnivulence, where the notion of nothingness appears. Throughout the exposition, I shall use the discussion in the previous section to inform the reading.

The Being of God in His Act

Barth's reference to God as being-in-act is the key to understand his exposition on divine attributes throughout *Church Dogmatics* II/1. It grounds his definition of God as the One who loves in freedom, from which the whole discussion on divine perfections is ordered. God *is* the One who is Him in the *act* of His revelation. 'What God is as God, the divine individuality and characteristics, the *essentia* or "essence" of God, is something which we shall encounter either at the place where God deals with us as Lord and Saviour, or not at all', in Barth's words.²⁴⁰ The implication of this condensed statement is remarkable. As Christopher Holmes says, it is '[...] the cornerstone of Barth's doctrine of God in that the theological work peculiar to the doctrine is to describe the action of God — not to develop a general philosophical account of the being and attributes appropriate to God'.²⁴¹

By this declaration, Barth rejects the deduction of the doctrine from the premises of formal logic or free speculations. Instead of beginning with a general formulation about God and only then proceed to the particular, the order is reversed to be one in which the particular precedes the general. The error in this sequence, he comments, dominated the doctrine of God of the older Protestant theology or the Protestant orthodoxy.

We stand here before the fundamental error which dominated the doctrine of God of the older theology and which influenced Protestant orthodoxy at almost every point. For the greater part this doctrine of God tended elsewhere than to God's act in His revelation, and for the greater part it also started elsewhere than from there. It is of a

²³⁹ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 284.

²⁴⁰ CD II/1, 261.

²⁴¹ Christopher R. J. Holmes, *Revisiting the Doctrine of the Divine Attributes: In Dialogue with Karl Barth*, *Eberhard Jüngel and Wolf Krötke*, Issues in Systematic Theology, v. 15 (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 44.

piece with this fact that with a surprisingly common thoughtlessness it was usual to begin by deducing the doctrine of the Trinity—theoretically maintained to be the basis of all theology—from the premises of formal logic. In the vacuum which this created, there was no place for anything but general reflections on what God at any rate could be—reflections arising from specific human standpoints and ideas as incontestable data, and then interwoven rather feebly with all kinds of biblical reminiscences. In this way there was created a doctrine of God which could have either no meaning or only a disastrous one for the remaining contents of dogmatics. And also in this way there was created, involuntarily, the basis on which an anti-Christian philosophy (and at the same time and later a heretical theology) could only too easily attack the dogma of the Trinity, and with it all the decisive articles of faith and its knowledge of the Word of God.²⁴²

A particular example among the older Protestant theologians that Barth mentions here is Amandus Polanus (1561-1610), who in his *Syntagma theologiae Christianae* departs from a general reflection on God and only then proceeds to the doctrine of Trinity. But Polanus actually never really abstracts his general understanding of God from the dictation of the Scripture. As Rinse Reeling Brouwer shows in his detailed study on this topic, the dichotomy of the general and the particular in the *Syntagma* is part of the method that Polanus uses without any intention to dictate the latter from the former. Also that, ‘In scholastic times the method which proceeds from the general to the particular point of view was conceived rather as a way of *intensification* within the one, simple reality’.²⁴³ Barth’s over-concern with this issue is more a reflection of his position as a modern person. After Kant, Hegel, Feuerbach, and other thinkers of the Enlightenment, there was a different challenge from the one that Polanus and his fellow theologians of Protestant orthodoxy had. He was afraid that theology would easily lose sight from the beginning without a correct sequence of thought. One has to start with the economy of the Trinity, with God’s actions of creating, reconciling, and redeeming, through which he reveals Himself as the Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer, and only then reflecting on his Being.

The economy of grace itself, however, is an outcome of the eternal decision by God in the election of Jesus Christ. Whether that decision has a constitutive role in God’s Being itself or not has been an area of debate that has divided certain Barth scholars into groups that George Hunsinger calls the ‘revisionists’ and the ‘traditionalists’.²⁴⁴ The disputation was provoked by Bruce McCormack’s essay on the role of election in Barth’s theological ontology,²⁴⁵ in which he claims that the election, as the first act of God prior to his *opera ad extra*, has an ontological significance to God’s Being. McCormack goes as far as proposing that God’s immanent trinity itself is constituted by that act of election. This is for him what the implication of the mature version of Barth’s christocentrism should be, something which he acknowledges that Barth himself for some probable reasons did not pursue.²⁴⁶ McCormack’s opponents, such as Hunsinger and Molnar, on the other hand insist on the independence of the immanent Trinity

²⁴² CD II/1, 261.

²⁴³ For a fuller discussion on the conversation between Barth and Polanus, see Reeling Brouwer, *Karl Barth and Post-Reformation Orthodoxy*, 35-74.

²⁴⁴ George Hunsinger, *Reading Barth with Charity: A Hermeneutical Proposal* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2015), introduction, Kindle.

²⁴⁵ Bruce McCormack, ‘Grace and Being: the role of God’s gracious election in Karl Barth’s theological ontology,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, Cambridge Companions to Religion, ed. J. B. Webster (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 92-110. Re-published in Bruce L. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 183-200.

²⁴⁶ McCormack, ‘Grace and Being,’ 103.

from this eternal decision, fearing that the freedom of God would be renounced by such constriction.²⁴⁷

I wouldn't go as far as McCormack does, but I concur with his notion on God's eternal Self-determination to be God for humanity in the election of Jesus Christ. In his eternal decision to be the Subject and the Object of election at once in Jesus Christ, God has determined himself to be the God of the covenant, and although I *wouldn't* say that this decision was *constitutive* on his Being, it somehow *affected* him, in a way that God cannot be other than the God who is revealed in the economy of grace anymore.²⁴⁸ Instead of giving up God's freedom, it is better to say that this 'constriction' has advanced the clarity on the Divine Subject and the anti-speculation character of Barth's project to another level. Even an immanent Trinity independent of this decision, one that the 'traditionalists' suggest, would be considered an abstraction which leaves room for speculation. The mature version of christocentrism has enabled Barth to speak more firmly about who God is and what he wills. There cannot be a God other than the One who eternally wills to be the God for humanity.

The One who Loves in Freedom

In Barth's subsequent exposition, the being of God which is revealed in his action is the being of the One who loves in freedom. Following this depiction, he started the discussion on 'the being of God who loves' prior to 'the being of God in freedom'. Christopher Holmes sees that this way of treatment:

[...] signals his intention to reverse the traditional treatment of God's being. Instead of beginning with an (abstract) metaphysical account of being, Barth attends to God's loving activity, and develops an ontology appropriate to it which occasions, in turn, an account of the freedom peculiar to his own self-demonstration.²⁴⁹

This sequence does not mean that the one can be isolated from the other. There is the word 'in' between 'loves' and 'freedom'. God loves in freedom, but his freedom is never abstracted from his decision to love.

As the One who loves, 'God is He who, without having to do so, seeks and creates fellowship between Himself and us. He does not have to do it, because in Himself without us, and therefore without this, He has that which He seeks and creates between Himself and us'.²⁵⁰ In other words, he loves in freedom. Nobody demanded him to do it, but he does. His love comes out of his own initiative. In his further explanation, Barth says that:

It implies so to speak an overflow of His essence that He turns to us. We must certainly regard this overflow as itself matching His essence, belonging to His essence. But it is an overflow which is not demanded or presupposed by any necessity, constraint, or obligation, least of all from outside, from our side, or by any law by which God himself is bound and obliged.²⁵¹

²⁴⁷ Although Molnar has written several works to argue for his position in this debate, his most complete argument can be found in Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology*, 2nd ed. (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2017).

²⁴⁸ Perhaps my inclination within this debate would be towards Kevin Hector's position which he argues for in Kevin W. Hector, "God's Triunity and Self-Determination: A Conversation with Karl Barth, Bruce McCormack and Paul Molnar," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7, no. 3 (July 2005): 246–61.

²⁴⁹ Holmes, *Revisiting the Doctrine of the Divine Attributes*, 46. Cf. CD II/1, 344-50.

²⁵⁰ CD II/1, 273.

²⁵¹ CD II/1, 273.

See how Barth mentions the essence of God to be matching and belonging to the decision to bind himself with humankind. It is indeed something which is not demanded from a figure other than himself, but by that own decision of him, he has constrained himself from the possibility to be another kind of God. His loving is an unnecessary overflow that can only come from his willingness to have a fellowship with us. Thus, 'God is' means 'God loves'.²⁵²

After the discussion on 'the being of God as the One who loves', Barth continues with 'the being of God in freedom'. In this part he discusses God's aseity and His absoluteness, a topic which is very prone to be treated with a tendency towards natural theology, the discourse about God in an abstract manner. Again, he insists on his rejection:

[...] we are not enquiring about the content of a universal idea of the divine, as though we could glean from this instruction concerning the special and distinguishing essence of God. We make our enquiry on the assumption that the object of this universal idea of God, i.e., of any idea of God formed otherwise than in view of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, is necessarily other than He who is Lord and salvation, and therefore the object of the faith of the Church and the only true God.²⁵³

The approach that Barth proposes is that the aseity and absoluteness of God are treated in close connection with his movement of love. God's freedom is a freedom bounded by his love towards humankind. His loving is 'utterly free, grounded in itself, needing no other, and yet also not lacking in another, but in sovereign transcendence giving, communicating itself to the other. In this freedom it is divine loving'.²⁵⁴

This understanding sets the stage for the subsequent exposition on the perfections of God. Here he enters what is traditionally called 'The Doctrine of the Attributes of God'. He chooses the term 'perfections', instead of 'attributes', because:

It points at once to the thing itself instead of merely to its formal aspect, and because instead of something general it expresses at once that which is clearly distinctive. The fact that God's being has attributes is something which it has in common with the being of others. But that it is identical with a multitude of perfections—if the term is taken strictly—is something which is the 'attribute' of God and God alone.²⁵⁵

The decision to shift the term reflects Barth's insistence about the *singularity* of God and his confidence in his theological speech. What he is discussing here is not just an abstract speculation on some divinity or a projection of human ideals, but the Wholly Other God who has revealed himself *concretely* in Jesus Christ. His attributes are perfections, and he alone deserves such ascription.

The exposition on the perfections of God is then divided into two parts, following the antecedent sequence, 'the perfections of the divine loving', and then, 'the perfections of divine freedom'. This division does not mean that each can be discussed in isolation from the other. Such an approach, according to Barth, will not do justice to 'the intrinsic mode of God's being', as 'there is no love of God in itself and as such, just as there is no freedom of God in itself and as such'.²⁵⁶ The respect for the interconnectedness of God's love and his freedom leads Barth to design the discussion on the perfections of God in a consistently twofold combination: one

²⁵² CD II/1, 283.

²⁵³ CD II/1, 298-9.

²⁵⁴ CD II/1, 321.

²⁵⁵ CD II/1, 322.

²⁵⁶ CD II/1, 352.

of divine loving, and one of divine freedom. Thus, in the discussion on the perfections of the divine loving, the combinations are the grace and holiness of God, the mercy and righteousness of God, the patience and wisdom of God. Grace, mercy, and patience represent divine loving, while holiness, righteousness, and wisdom represent divine freedom. In the discussion on the perfections of divine freedom, the order is reversed. He begins with the aspects of divine freedom and proceed to its pair of divine love. The combinations are the unity and omnipresence of God, the constancy and omnipotence of God, and the eternity and glory of God.

The themes ‘divine omniscience’ and ‘divine omnivulence’ appear in the passage that discusses the omnipotence of God. It is one of the characteristics of the omnipotence of God that he is all-knowing and all-willing. There we also find a reference to nothingness.

Divine Omnipotence, Omniscience and Omnivulence

The concept of divine omnipotence, according to Barth, ‘occupies a kind of key position for the understanding of all the perfections of the divine freedom and therefore indirectly of all the divine perfections whatsoever—a view which was obviously that of the earliest Christian creeds’.²⁵⁷ The reason of this high regard is what he calls the positive characteristics of divine omnipotence: that it is the power of the divine knowledge and divine will.

The inter-connectedness of divine knowledge and divine will is something that Barth adopted from the tradition of Reformed orthodoxy. For many theologians of this tradition, God’s will is considered to be a rational faculty. Its character as *appetitus intelligens* makes it inseparable from divine knowledge.²⁵⁸

The sub-paragraph on divine omnipotence in *Church Dogmatics* II/1 is divided into three parts: the analysis on the concept of omnipotence, the explanation that the power of the God who loves in freedom includes both his knowledge and his will, and an exegesis on the grounding biblical passages and the name of Jesus Christ as the power of the cross. I will focus on the second part.

That God’s omnipotence is the omnipotence of his knowing and willing, implies that his power has a *definite* direction and content.

It is both His power to will and His power not to will. It is, therefore, His power to know both what has been willed by Him and what has not been willed by Him. What God’s omnipotent will wills or does not will is characterized by the fact that He wills or does not will as light or darkness, as the object of His omnipotent capacity and His equally omnipotent in-capacity. And what God’s omnipotent knowledge knows as that which in omnipotent positivity He wills and therefore has done, does or will do, is thereby distinguished from what in *equally omnipotent negativity* He does not will and therefore never has done, does or will do. ‘Everything’ is the object of His omnipotence, but, because His omnipotence is the omnipotence of His knowledge and His will, it is its object in a definite, distinct, and concrete way. He is the master of His omnipotence and not its slave. He is the judge of what is wise and foolish, possible and impossible. He is, therefore, always holy and righteous in His actions. Because it is not willed by Him, and only the object of His will and knowledge in this sense, sin is *always* sin, folly folly, and the devil the devil, with no prospect even in eternity of ever becoming the object of His omnipotence in any other sense. And the reason is that His omnipotence

²⁵⁷ CD II/1, 545.

²⁵⁸ See Roelf T. te Velde, *The Doctrine of God in Reformed Orthodoxy, Karl Barth, and the Utrecht School: A Study in Method and Content*, Studies in Reformed Theology, volume 25 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2013), 189ff.

is that of His personal judgment and decision, which is negative towards sin, folly and the devil, and can only continue to be so for all eternity, since God does not cease to be God.²⁵⁹

The knowledge of God and the will of God are so definite and clear. He wills the light and not darkness, holiness and righteousness instead of sin. The clarity of his knowledge and will is equally applicable to what he does not will too. Here we see a reference to nothingness, as the reality that God does not will.

The fact that divine omnipotence has a definite direction and content implies that this capacity is not capacity in itself, but the capacity of *somebody* with definite knowledge and will. Barth emphasizes here that he is talking about a living God, and not ideas attributed to him. The definite character of his knowledge and will is the basis for other perfections of God: his constancy, his unity and his omnipresence, and even the perfections of his love.

That it is constant and living is based on the constancy of this person and His life, on the continuity of His judgment and decision. Defined in this way, God's omnipotence is also the *root* of the relationship between His unity and His omnipresence. In virtue of the unity of His constant knowledge and will and in the continuity of His judgment and decision God is unique and simple. In this personal activity of His, which is also His judging and deciding, He is omnipresent in that He creates and maintains objects for Himself, and is already an object to Himself and wills and knows as such. Above all, this is the basis of all the perfections of His love [...] these are not merely ideas added to Him or titles attached to Him, only if He can be and really is all this as the One who knows and wills omnipotently, and not merely in our conception of Him or in His relation to us.²⁶⁰

The definite character of God's knowledge and will becomes clearer when both are seen in their connection with the other perfections. God's knowledge and will are constant. There is a continuity in his judgment and decision, which are unique. But at the same time, this knowledge and will are far-reaching because of his omnipresence. Barth believes that the knowledge that God knows and wills is the simplest of simple truths, the surest of all, and therefore the most wonderful. In his revelation, God meets us as the One who knows us and all things between him and us.²⁶¹ But He does *not* merely look at us as a passive knower, in relation to which we on our side can continue *neutral*. For God reveals himself in the definite act, reconciling the world to himself. What he establishes with the revelation of his knowledge, then, is fellowship between him and us. Thus, it is a complete act of will, an utterly definite willing.²⁶² Before such a definite will, we are but to be *confronted*.

God's reconciling the world to Himself means the confronting of our will by His, its subordination to Him, fear and joy before Him, the prayer: "Thy will be done," and therefore a fundamentally new direction for our created and sinful wills, the establishment of divine sovereignty over them [...] To have fellowship with God means always to be drawn into the decision made by His being as God (which is itself His will), and therefore to be placed face to face with a real decision of His will.²⁶³

²⁵⁹ CD II/1, 544 *emphasis mine*.

²⁶⁰ CD II/1, 545 *emphasis mine*.

²⁶¹ CD II/1, 545-6.

²⁶² CD II/1, 547.

²⁶³ CD II/1, 548-50.

The logical consequence of the insight on the unity of divine knowledge and will, according to Barth, is that ‘we must revere God’s being wholly under the form of His will, and in His will His being. This means that we cannot think of God at all without being summoned in the same instant to faith, obedience, gratitude, humility and joy [...] We do not think of God if confrontation with His will does not in some way challenge us, bringing us face to face with a *decision* [emphasis mine]’.²⁶⁴ Robert Price summarizes this point as follows, ‘As one who knows and wills, it is constitutive of God’s essence to be one who confronts others as intending and purposive’.²⁶⁵

The political bearing of this emphasis on God confronting human beings and demanding a decision, and where neutrality is not an option is clear. It corresponds to his political actions at that time where he demanded decisions to stand against the Nazis from the Confessing Church, Switzerland, and others. Before such a looming danger, those who encounter the living God cannot remain neutral.

Nothingness

Now we are going to look more closely on Barth’s reference to the reality of nothingness in his exposition on divine omniscience and divine omnivolence. I shall start with the former and continue with the latter.

Barth contends that God’s knowledge is *infinite* in power, but at the same time is a *finite* knowledge. It is infinite in the sense that it is an omnipotent knowledge, ‘complete in its range, the one unique and all-embracing knowledge’.²⁶⁶ Yet it is finite in the sense that for God, who knows everything, the realm of knowledge, which is infinite for us, is finite, exhausted and limited by His knowledge.²⁶⁷ It is the knowledge of God—and with it His will—which defines the limits of being. For this reason God’s knowledge is a knowledge which is finite, not limited from without, but by itself. There is no limit set to it, but it sets itself a limit, declaring that which is not its object as null and void (*als schlechterdings nichtig erklärt*).²⁶⁸

Here the theme ‘nothingness’ appears. Among the ‘everything’ whose limit is imposed by God, included in this category are even the ‘non-being, even the merely possible and the impossible, even evil, death and hell’. This ‘non-being’ also exists in its own way, not as something infinite, but as something finite, conditioned by the fact that God knows it. Therefore, Barth continues, there is nothing hidden from God. There is, of course, a desire for self-concealment from God, which is the direct consequence of sin.

There is the ostrich’s strategy which confirms and seals the headlong fall into the realm of the non-existent and impossible before God, the overpowering by death and hell. But this policy can have no success. There can be no real secession to a realm hidden from God, the realm of a being or non-being independent of Him, the kingdom of another god. For there is no such kingdom. Even the non-being to which we turn, and into which we can fall, actually is before God even though He turns away from it. In the form of His turning away from it, it is no less the object of the divine knowledge than that which is before Him.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁴ CD II/1, 550.

²⁶⁵ Robert B. Price, *Letters of the Divine Word: The Perfections of God in Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics* (London: T & T Clark, 2013), 151.

²⁶⁶ CD II/1, 552.

²⁶⁷ CD II/1, 552.

²⁶⁸ CD II/1, 553.

²⁶⁹ CD II/1, 554.

Such an escaping attempt, according to Barth, would only fail, because being an escape from God, it has no goal. It has no goal because every goal that can be reached lies within the realm of the one God and therefore within the realm of His knowledge. Barth continues, 'At every one of these goals we again stand before God. We are seen and known by Him. We are no more inaccessible to Him than He is to Himself. We may fall into sin and hell, but whether for salvation or perdition we cannot fall out of the realm of God's knowledge and so out of the realm of His grace and judgment'.²⁷⁰ This understanding, Barth acknowledges, is the comfort and warning contained in the truth of the divine omniscience in the simplest sense of the term.²⁷¹ One of the biblical quotations he uses to fortify this statement is taken from Psalm 94, 'They break in pieces thy people, O Lord, and afflict thine heritage. They slay the widow and the stranger, and murder the fatherless. Yet they say, The Lord shall not see, neither shall the God of Jacob regard it. Understand, ye brutish among the people; and ye fools, when will ye be wise? He that planted the ear, shall he not hear? He that formed the eyes, shall he not see?'.²⁷²

In summary, within the context of the doctrine of divine omniscience, nothingness is a unique existence which exists in its own way, but limited by the categories that God sets. It is the realm where the sinners would seek and fall into, and think they could hide themselves from God, but it is not hidden. It is dependent, limited and conditioned by the all-reaching knowledge of God.

Now within the context of divine omnivolence, Barth argues that God's will, being an omnipotent will, is a complete and exhaustive will, embracing and controlling all other wills, without detracting from their character as wills. All beings are subject to the will of God. It doesn't mean that God wills everything, *infinite* in its objects. The infinity is in the power. But the object of God's will is fixed and *definite*. 'It is a will which is finite in its compass'.²⁷³ One could notice a parallel with the preceding contention about divine omniscience. God's will is infinite in power, because of its root in divine omnipotence, but its direction is really definite. If we say that God wills everything, it has to be interpreted in the sense that it is only what He wills that can be.

For whatever cannot be willed in some way by Him, and is not sooner or later willed by Him in some way and under some determination, simply is not. Only what in some sense can be and is willed by Him is. It is by God's affirming and accepting will that the actual is, and also the possible which has not yet received actuality from God's will or may never receive it.²⁷⁴

Here everything means every object that belong to the realm of his will. In *Church Dogmatics* III we understand this realm as creation. But in that passage he also mentions 'the possible which has not yet received actuality from God's will or may never receive it'. Barth here refers to nothingness, the realm of non-being, which only exists in its particular form out of God's rejecting will.

But it is by God's refusing and rejecting will that the impossible and non-existent before Him is, since it is only by God's rejecting will, His aversion (*Widerwillen*), that it can have its particular form of actuality and possibility. Outside the sphere of God's will

²⁷⁰ CD II/1, 554.

²⁷¹ CD II/1, 554.

²⁷² CD II/1, 554-5.

²⁷³ CD II/1, 555.

²⁷⁴ CD II/1, 556.

there can only be the pure, negative nothing to which we have already referred. There is no outside this sphere.²⁷⁵

Barth speaks paradoxically here. What is actual can only be so because God wills it. Yet what God does not will, because of the omnipotence of his will, has a particular form of existence. It does not exist in the same category with the object of his will, but rather as an impossible possibility and as a non-existent existence.

The practical significance (*praktisch disziplinäre*) of this understanding for Barth is that human beings deceive themselves if they think they can will infinitely much. On the contrary, the extent of what can be willed is always limited and fixed by the will of God which exhausts everything. Whatever can be willed by human beings is either affirmed by God's will or denied and rejected by it.

All volition is dependent on and limited to this finite sphere, to the decision marked out by the pattern given by God Himself. For God Himself does not will except in this way, i.e., in this sphere. He therefore prescribes the law and limit of all volition. Within the sphere our willing may be in harmony with the will of God or in opposition to it. But it can possess no other sphere. We can choose differently from God, but we cannot make any other kind of choice than that delineated by His will. We cannot make a third, neutral choice, and will something outside that which God has either accepted or rejected. This first possibility out of the apparently infinite other possibilities of choice simply does not exist, not even as a possibility. We cannot will at all if we are not willing to decide within the sphere fixed by the will of God.²⁷⁶

The implication of the doctrine of divine omnivolence is that one is either with God or against God. There is no middle ground between the two available options. Before the all-reaching but definite will of God, neutrality is just impossible. Humankind are only delusional if they think they can escape from this limit to his or her will.

The sphere where God's will is directed to, is the only sphere of being. He wills it, which means He loves, affirms, and confirms it. He creates, upholds and promotes it out of the fullness of His life. But His willing to this sphere also means that:

[...] in virtue of the same love He hates, disavows, rejects and opposes it as that which withstands and lacks and denies what is loved, affirmed and confirmed by Him and created, upheld and promoted by Him. He still wills it in the sense that He takes it seriously in this way and takes up His position over against it. He wills it in so far as He gives it this space, position, and function. He does not do so as its author, recognising it as His creature, approving and confirming and vindicating it. On the contrary, He wills it as He denies it His authorship, as He refuses it any standing before Him or right or blessing or promise, as He places it under His prohibition and curse and treats it as that from which He wishes to redeem and liberate His creation.²⁷⁷

Although God is not its author, this rejected and cursed reality, according to Barth, cannot exist without Him. It is under His control and government. As there is nothing hidden from God's knowledge, there is nothing that is withdrawn from his will. Whatever exists belongs either to being (what he affirms) or to non-being (what he disavows). There is no escape from what he

²⁷⁵ CD II/1, 556.

²⁷⁶ CD II/1, 556.

²⁷⁷ CD II/1, 556-7.

wills. Of course, there is the desire to escape, to hate what God loves and love what he hates, to accept what he rejects and reject what he accepts.

This is our sinful will. But it does not lead us to a sphere where we have withdrawn from the will of God. If we will to sin, we enter the sphere of the divine prohibition and curse, disavowal and rejection; the realm of death. We can certainly attain this goal. But even if we do, we do not leave the sphere of the divine will or escape from God. Here, too, we cannot actually govern ourselves. In fact we are under no other government than that of the will of God.²⁷⁸

Again, before the all-reaching will of God, Barth proposes that there is no neutral ground. But this time he emphasizes further that even a willingness to be neutral is already a mode of *disobedience*.

Besides willing and deciding for God or against Him there is no third possibility of choice or decision. There is no neutrality in which we can slip between the divine Yes and the divine No (which circumscribe the area of being), thus saving ourselves in this neutrality from the will of God in a middle position between faith and belief. There is no such place outside that area. The Yes and No of the divine will are absolutely and definitely the true circumscription of the area of being. There is nothing beyond. If we want to be neutral, we definitely want to be disobedient. For to struggle against adopting the position of agreement with the divine Yes and No, to look instead for a third possibility beyond the antithesis set up by the divine decision, to make a refusal to will the object of our will is a piece of folly in which we have already hated what God loves and what He hates and therefore sinned. If there is no neutrality towards God, we are already against God if we will to remain neutral.²⁷⁹

Here we see how Barth's emphases on the urgency of decision and his persistent critique of neutrality become more lucid in his exposition on the doctrine of divine omnivulence. It is in his exposition of this doctrine that we find the most explicit theological expression of his political tendency at that time. Resistance is urgent. It is God demands. Neutrality means disobedience.

The Will of God in Jesus Christ

Although the doctrine of divine omnivulence is mainly discussed in *Church Dogmatics* II/1, many of the ideas in that part-volume are actually rooted in the theological concepts that are explained in *Church Dogmatics* II/2. The dual concepts of God's will and his rejection, and the definite character of his decision are grounded in his *eternal* decision in Jesus Christ. In the second part-volume we also find another discussion on divine will in a specific section.

The main discussion on divine will in *Church Dogmatics* II/2 is located in §33.2, 'The Eternal Will of God in the Election of Jesus Christ'. Having reconstructed the doctrine of election in a christocentric way, the formulation that Barth proposes can be summed up in the statement that Jesus Christ is both the electing God and the elected man.

²⁷⁸ CD II/1, 557.

²⁷⁹ CD II/1, 557.

Starting from Jn. 1^{1f}, we have laid down and developed two statements concerning the election of Jesus Christ. The first is that Jesus Christ is the electing God. This statement answers the question of the Subject of the eternal election of grace. And the second is that Jesus Christ is the elected man. This statement answers the question of the object of the eternal election of grace. Strictly speaking, the whole dogma of predestination is contained in these two statements.²⁸⁰

This is the core of Barth's doctrine of election. It may sound simple, but in reality, the implications are huge. These implications are the main topic of §33.2. They are organized into four points.

In the *first* one, Barth explains the epistemological implication. If God's eternal will is the election of Jesus Christ, then it gives clarity on certain obscurities that may result from the traditional version of the doctrine. These obscurities concern both the Subject and the object of the election. On the Subject, one may question the arbitrariness of God's choice. On the object, one may question who are really the object of this election. These two mysteries are immediately solved when the doctrine is grounded in christology. Thus the doctrine of election which for centuries have been pondered with a dark nuance can now be seen in light.²⁸¹

The *second* one is about the *defining* function of this election in clarifying the eternal will of God. Barth guards against the possibility of thinking that there is an eternal will of God before this event. No, the election of Jesus Christ is the defining moment. In freedom, God tied himself to the universe through this event.

And this decree is really the first of all things. It is the decision between God and the reality distinct from himself. It is a decision which is the basis of all that follows. And this decree is itself the sum and substance of all the wisdom and power with which God has willed this reality and called it into being. It is the standard and source of all order and all authority within God's relationship to this reality. It is the fixing of an end for this reality, foreordained, valid without question, unfailing in efficacy. It is itself the eternal will of God. The will of God is Jesus Christ, and this will is known to us in the revelation of Jesus Christ. If we acknowledge this, if we seriously accept Jesus Christ as the content of this will, then we cannot seek any other will of God, either in heaven or earth, either in time or eternity. This will is God's will. We must abide by it because God Himself abides by it; because God Himself allows us and commands us to abide by it.²⁸²

God's will is to be sought and clarified in the decision he made in the election of Jesus Christ, the electing God and the elected man.

The significant consequence of this refinement can also be seen in comparison with the perplexity in the tradition of Reformed orthodoxy on the relationship between the will of God and the presence of evil. Roelf te Velde, in his account on the doctrine of God in the tradition of Reformed orthodoxy, shows that the question on God's will and the reality of evil is the most important question on the topic of divine will in this tradition. It seems that there is a confusion among the theologians who are convinced that God's will must be wholly positive, but on the other hand try to reconcile their thoughts with the reality of evil in this world. Among these theologians, Velde mentions one who makes a 'compromise' by accepting that God might will evil to some degree on certain cases, as he responds to the sin of humans.²⁸³ A

²⁸⁰ CD II/2, 145.

²⁸¹ CD II/2, 146.

²⁸² CD II/2, 157-8.

²⁸³ The theologian that he mentions is Amandus Polanus. Velde, *The Doctrine of God*, 195.

christocentric approach to this dilemma would settle the case, for the will of God would already be clarified in his eternal decision, unaffected by the choices that humans decide in the natural history.

The *third* implication is related to the purpose of this election: to save the humankind. ‘The eternal will of God in the election of Jesus Christ is His will to give Himself for the sake of man as created by Him and fallen from Him’, said Barth. It implies that the content of this act is positive. The emphasis is on the Yes and not the No. It is in this point that Barth mentions the idea of nothingness the most. For God elected Jesus Christ as an act of solidarity with humankind who is under the constant threat of nothingness. Nothingness is the reality that God rejected in his No. Rodin calls it the ‘necessary antithesis’.²⁸⁴ While Berkouwer uses the phrase ‘the unavoidable reverse side of election’.²⁸⁵ Precisely because of the distinctive goodness of the Yes which God opted for humankind, there is this unavoidable shadow. It is not eternal, only a passing reality, and a possibility.

In ordaining the overflowing of His glory God also and necessarily ordains that this glory, which in Himself, in His inner life as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, cannot be subjected to attack or disturbance, which in Himself cannot be opposed, should enter the sphere of contradiction where light and darkness are marked off from each other, where what God wills, the good, stands out distinctively from what He does not will, the evil, where by the very existence of good there is conceded to evil and created for it a kind of possibility and reality of existence, where it can and does enter in as a kind of autonomous power, as Satan. The possibility of existence which evil can have is only that of the impossible, the reality of existence only that of the unreal, the autonomous power only that of impotence. But these as such it can and must have. How can God ordain the overflowing of His glory, how can He choose the creature man as witness to this glory, without also willing and choosing its shadow, without conceding to and creating for that shadow—not in Himself, but in the sphere of the outward overflowing of His glory—an existence as something yielding and defeated, without including the existence of that shadow in His decree?²⁸⁶

The election of Jesus Christ reveals that God does not will this reality. He rejected it. Precisely because the rejection happened in eternity, in the election of Jesus Christ, we know that it is not humankind who is rejected by God. Even not humankind in its fallenness! As Barth says, ‘In so far, then, as predestination does contain a No, it is not a No spoken against man. In so far as it does involve exclusion and rejection, it is not the exclusion and rejection of man’.²⁸⁷ The will of God is instead meant to be a blessing and life for humankind: ‘The portion which God willed and chose for him was an ordination to blessedness’.²⁸⁸ Remember how Barth was continually reminding Europe that its non-decisive attitude towards the growing threat from Germany means that it has chosen inhumanity. That is not the attitude of God!

And the *fourth* implication is about the historical nature of the enactment of the eternal will of God. ‘Because it is identical with the election of Jesus Christ, the eternal will of God is a divine activity in the form of the history, encounter and decision between God and man’, thus Barth opens the section. The eternal will of God is so because it is manifested in his Self-giving activity in the history of the man Jesus of Nazareth.²⁸⁹ Predestination, just like creation,

²⁸⁴ Rodin, *Evil and Theodicy in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 110.

²⁸⁵ Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 220.

²⁸⁶ CD II/2, 169-70.

²⁸⁷ CD II/2, 166.

²⁸⁸ CD II/2, 169.

²⁸⁹ CD II/2, 175-6.

reconciliation, justification, and others are divine activities and should not be interpreted as static.²⁹⁰ It is manifested in the concrete history, yet at the same time precedes history. Here Barth shows again his theological criticism towards Hegelian historicism. The history of salvation is not an outcome of natural history. It is something which interrupts the progress within history. It is out of this world, yet manifested in this world.

In saying this we do not launch predestination upon the general stream of world-events in time. Nor do we launch it upon the particular stream of the saving events in which world-events as a whole find their meaning and end. This history, encounter and decision between God and man was in the beginning with God, and is identical neither with the one nor the other. It is, rather, the secret which is hidden in world-history as such and revealed in the history of salvation as such.²⁹¹

It is interesting that in the subsequent paragraph on the election of the community, in the section where Barth exegetes Romans 11 in the discussion about the fate of Jews (§34.4), we can see how this interruption happens. On the presence of the double *vōv* in verse 31, he sees a demand for the Christians that comes from the *decision* of God beyond the realm of history, to counter anti-semitism which was very much an actual issue at that time.

The second *vōv* in v. 31, which is well established critically, seems to be rather out of place because the demonstration of the divine mercy towards the Jews, of which the verse speaks, is after all still future. What is not future but present is the mercy shown to the Gentiles. But this is the means of divine mercy for the Jews too, so that in this sense the latter is already present. The mercy of God is already secretly operative in relation to the Jews. What this striking second *vōv* makes quite impossible for Christian anti-semitism (he that has ears to hear, let him hear) is the relegation of the Jewish question into the realm of eschatology.²⁹²

Again we find the same motive, the eternal decision of God beyond history confronts humankind to make a decision in this history. There is no neutral space.

Excursus: On Carl Schmitt's Political Theology

How does Barth compare with Carl Schmitt? The conservative political theorist was known for his theory on political theology. He argues that political absolutism has its root in theology.

All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development—in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent god became the omnipotent lawgiver—but also because of their systematic structure.²⁹³

Schmitt contends that ‘the exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology’, and that the concept about the sovereign who can bypass laws is rooted in the theological idea

²⁹⁰ CD II/2, 184.

²⁹¹ CD II/2, 185.

²⁹² CD II/2, 305.

²⁹³ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, University of Chicago Press ed (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2008), 36.

of divine intervention.²⁹⁴ As Barth's theology that we discussed earlier also bears heavy emphases on divine sovereignty and divine omnipotence, can we say that it actually promotes political absolutism?

The problem with the association would be that the political tendency in Barth's notion of theological sovereignty is precisely an *opposition* to political absolutism. We recall his call to resist tyranny in Gifford Lecture, and his description that the false god often appears in the form of the rulers of this world in his series of lecture in Netherlands, to refuse this connection.

In fact, we can say that many of Barth's maneuvers that have been discussed throughout this chapter are meant to prevent the move that Schmitt took in his argument. By drawing a distinction between the living God who reveals himself in his *concrete* action in Jesus Christ, Barth avoids the *abstract* discourse about God as exemplified in Schmitt's notion of theological sovereignty. Barth is talking about the sovereignty of the Word, and not of a general idea of divinity. In the action of Jesus Christ, this specific God reveals that his *definite* will is to redeem the humankind and to live in a harmonious relationship with them, instead of exercising absolute power over them for his own gain. This living God would resist a secular counterpart, since the decision that grounds the direction of his finite will is an *eternal* decision, and precisely because it is an eternal decision *beyond* the realm of history, it keeps confronting humankind in their decisions *within* the realm of history.

In addition to that, Jacob Myers argues that the concept of divine sovereignty in Barth serves as a counter-testimony to Schmitt's theory in three points. *First*, the omnipotence of God in Barth is an omnipotence of *love*. It is powerful over everything, but its power is a power of love. *Second*, it is the sovereignty which is exclusively mediated by Jesus Christ. No other mediator is allowed to define the sovereign. *Third*, it reaches humanity in divine freedom, in infinite patience. It does not enforce its rule over humanity.²⁹⁵ These three points may sharpen our understanding of the case. It is clear now that Barth's notion of theological sovereignty is not in parallel to Schmitt's. Concretely defined in the revelation of Jesus Christ, the God that Barth witnesses about appear to be a counter-testimony to the abstract notion of divine sovereignty.

Conclusion

Barth's exposition of divine omnivolence in *Church Dogmatics* II/1 and II/2 is grounded in his political activism between 1937 and 1942 where he raised his mode of resistance towards the Nazis to another level: *opposition*. This change of tone can be seen in his Gifford Lecture, his alienation from the Confessing Church, his lecture in the Netherlands, and the difficulties that he had in Switzerland. This change is also reflected in his exposition of divine omnivolence in this period where he emphasizes again and again the God who confronts humankind and demands decision. Before this God, neutrality is not an option. Both the exposition on divine omnivolence in the framework of the discussion on divine omnipotence and omniscience manifest this contention, as well as the exposition on the eternal will of God in the second part-volume. Barth rejects an abstract discourse on God and insists on his readers to focus on the living God who reveals himself in the *concrete* reality of Jesus Christ. An encounter with such a living God will demand a decision from humankind. God's omniscience means that nothing is hidden from him. There is no place for us to hide from his demand. His omnivolence means that the idea that we are autonomous and able to escape from his will are only illusions. God's knowledge and will have infinite power, but *definite* direction. The definite character of his

²⁹⁴ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36-37.

²⁹⁵ Jacob D. Myers, 'God's Sovereign Word: Reading the Theological Foundations of Political Sovereignty,' *Political Theology* 14, no. 3 (January 2013): 349-50.

will follow his *eternal decision* in Jesus Christ. The options for us humankind are only two. Either following its direction or preferring disobedience. There is no *neutral* ground. Compared to Carl Schmitt's notion of sovereignty, Barth's theological concept is different, for the sovereign God in his theology is not an abstract God who might be easily secularized without resistance, but a concrete Being revealed in his *definite* action in Jesus Christ.

Chapter 4

Simatupang's Realism

Tahi Bonar Simatupang (1920-1990), also known as 'Pak Sim', is an official national hero of Indonesia: the award was given post-humously in 2013 by the President of Indonesia at that time, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, for his contribution in the struggle for independence. He was an army general before his early retirement in 1959, when he was only thirty-nine years old. The early retirement was provoked by his disagreements with Soekarno, at that time the president of Indonesia. After the early retirement, Simatupang spent much of his time and energy in the realm of the church and made a great influence as he became an active leader and spokesperson in both national and international levels. He was a leading member of the National Council of Churches in Indonesia, and served as the president of the Christian Conference of Asia (1973-1977), and as the president of the World Council of Churches (1975-1983).²⁹⁶ According to John Prior and Alle Hoekema, in Indonesia, Simatupang was 'perhaps the most authoritative Protestant leader until his death in 1990'.²⁹⁷

Simatupang was born in a devoted Christian family. His father was active in church and Christian schools, and also in the society. He routinely contributed articles for newspapers in several languages, including Dutch. He was also the founder of a group that became the predecessor for the Christian political party.²⁹⁸ With this family background, it is not difficult to understand the path that the young Simatupang took for his own life.

Despite his huge role in the history of theology in Indonesia, Simatupang actually never undertook formal education in that subject. Nevertheless, when he migrated to Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia, to enter high school, he lived nearby HTS (now STFT Jakarta), the oldest theological school in Indonesia. There he made friends with many of its students who later on became leaders in Indonesian churches.²⁹⁹ It seems that from these connections, he gained access to theological studies.

So in theology, Simatupang was more of an independent learner. He famously claimed that he was influenced by two giants in theology, Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr. According to Mojau, in the period between the late 1960s and early 1970s his theology reflected the influence of the first, while during the mid-1970s to late 1980s it was Niebuhr who influenced him more.

The sign of Barth's influence in Simatupang's theological standpoint during the first mentioned period, in Mojau's observance, is his critical stance towards Soekarno's attempt to parallel the goal of the Indonesian national revolution with the Christian faith. For Simatupang, it is important for the Indonesian Christians to maintain a critical space towards the idea of

²⁹⁶ Lothar Schreiner, 'Simatupang, Tahi Bonar,' in Gerald H. Anderson, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, paperback ed (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publ, 1999), 621.

²⁹⁷ John M. Prior and Alle Hoekema, 'Theological Thinking by Indonesian Christians, 1850-2000,' 781.

²⁹⁸ Frank L. Cooley, 'In Memoriam: T. B. Simatupang, 1920-1990,' *Indonesia*, no. 49 (1990): 145.

²⁹⁹ Cooley, 'In Memoriam,' 145.

national revolution which was promoted by Soekarno. Because of this position, he had a polemic with Leimena, another important Christian leader at that time.³⁰⁰

As for the influence of Niebuhr, Mojau does not precisely point to a specific idea. But Simatupang himself gives a hint in one of his autobiographical notes. He mentions the period after the conflict with Soekarno during which he spent much of his time reading books. There are ‘three Karls’ that he claims to be his mentors: Carl von Clausewitz in his study of war, Karl Marx on the revolution, and Karl Barth on theology.³⁰¹ Yet he also claims that it was Reinhold Niebuhr who impressed him much more than Barth.

I have mentioned Karl Barth. But actually Reinhold Niebuhr’s work has left a far stronger impression, especially when I was reflecting again theologically on the national struggle for freedom and justice, where I have been involved since the ‘40s. Niebuhr’s work, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, gave me a key to understand the struggle for liberation and justice more realistically and gave more hope. He also gave me a fresh understanding on the modern Western society, against which we were fighting intensively, but on the other hand in some areas we try to match.³⁰²

The quotation already provides some indications on the orientation in Simatupang’s thoughts. But to understand it more clearly, it is necessary for us to have a general overview first on his political theology and its expression in his political stance in relation to the New Order.

In this chapter the realism of Simatupang will be addressed in the light of the discussion on divine omnivulence in the previous chapter. In a similar way to the presentation in chapter two about Notohamidjojo, my treatment on Simatupang will serve as a recontextualization step, in which I bring the political reading of divine omnivulence in the preceding chapter to the Indonesian context. In parallel to the context of Barth’s elaboration of divine omnivulence where the power of Hitler was at its peak, Simatupang’s main works were composed at the time when Soeharto was an established ruler. It is in that context that Simatupang promotes his principle of realism.

I shall discuss the problem with Simatupang and his principle of realism in the following order. *First*, I will give a picture of his political theology and his famous principle: positive, creative, critical, and realistic. *Second*, I will trace his dependence on Reinhold Niebuhr and his idea of Christian Realism, as well as scrutinizing its problem. *Third*, I will discuss the problem of Simatupang’s realism in the light of the discussion on divine omnivulence in the previous chapter.

³⁰⁰ Julianus Mojau, *Meniadakan Atau Merangkul? Pergulatan Teologis Protestan Dengan Islam Politik Di Indonesia*, Cetakan ke-1 (Jakarta, Indonesia: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2012), 43.

³⁰¹ T.B. Simatupang, *Kehadiran Kristen dalam Perang, Revolusi dan Pembangunan: Perjuangan Mengamalkan Pancasila dalam Terang Iman* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1995), 1-2.

³⁰² ‘Saya telah menyebutkan nama Karl Barth. Namun sebenarnya karya Reinhold Niebuhr telah meninggalkan kesan yang jauh lebih kuat, terutama ketika saya memikirkan ulang, di dalam perspektif teologis, tentang perjuangan nasional bagi kebebasan dan keadilan, di mana saya telah terlibat di dalamnya sejak tahun empatpuluhan. Karya Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, memberikan kepada saya sebuah kunci untuk memahami perjuangan bagi pembebasan dan keadilan secara lebih realistis sekaligus lebih memberi pengharapan. Ia juga memberikan kepada saya sebuah pemahaman yang segar tentang masyarakat Barat modern, yang pada satu pihak kami perangi dengan hebatnya tetapi, pada pihak lain, di dalam beberapa hal berusaha untuk kami samai.’ Simatupang, *Kehadiran*, 4.

Simatupang's Political Theology

Simatupang's writings consist of short essays. Most of them are dealing with the theme of Christianity and politics, especially in relation to several issues like the modernization of Indonesia, the ideology of the state (Pancasila), the New Order regime with its development agenda and the question of its relationship to the previous regime.

One of the ideas that he so often promotes is the four attitudes that he considers to be essential for the Indonesian Christians in their engagement with the agenda of the state. They are *positive, creative, critical, and realistic*. These attitudes have been suggested by Simatupang even before the rise of Soeharto. It would be wrong to suppose that the idea was purely in response to the New Order regime. One of the longer explanations of these four attitudes can be found in his speech, which was presented at the fifth general assembly of the Communion of Churches in Indonesia in 1964, a year before the chaotic phase in Indonesian history which witnessed the beginning of the New Order period. At that time, the dominant theme in the national discourse was 'revolution'. That explains Simatupang's choice for the title of his speech, *Tugas Kristen dalam Revolusi* (Christian Duty in the Revolution).

In Simatupang's explanation, the *first* attitude, *positive*, is expressed through a participation and pioneering efforts in:

Overcoming forms of injustice, exploitation, discrimination, like imperialism, colonialism, racial discrimination and social pride; building a just and prosperous society, renewing the world's structure which still has residues from the period of Western European imperialism that has ruled the world for centuries, establishing the conditions for a better growth for human beings in the material, spiritual, physical fields; modernization, industrialization, while developing our own identity.³⁰³

All of these things according to him had to be considered as positive in the light of the gospel and therefore the Christian participation in these efforts was to be encouraged.

The *second* attitude, *creative*, is related to the needs for novelty in the revolution. The Christians should be actively participating in the creation of new ideas and new forms in the field of politics, socio-economy, and culture. The theological justification for this is that: 'Human beings have been endowed with capacities to contribute greatly in the present revolution in which the old things which are not suitable anymore to the contemporary demands are to be left and the new things are going to be invented.'³⁰⁴

The *third* attitude, *critical*, expresses the encouragement to grow a critical attitude to the revolution out of faithfulness to the gospel's demands.

The gospel is showing a very critical attitude towards humankind, its ideals, and its works. The gospel declares that humankind, even in its activities and in its noblest dreams, as in its dreams of a new society, a new world, a new humanity, is still a fallen creature. Because of that, in the light of the gospel, it is important to maintain a critical

³⁰³ 'Berjuang untuk melenyapkan bentuk-bentuk ketidakadilan, bentuk-bentuk eksploitasi, bentuk-bentuk diskriminasi seperti imperialisme, kolonialisme, diskriminasi rasial dan kecongkakan sosial, membangun masyarakat adil dan makmur, membaharui susunan dunia yang masih mengandung sisa-sisa yang ditinggalkan oleh jaman imperialisme Eropa Barat yang selama beberapa abad menguasai dunia, menegakkan syarat-syarat bagi pertumbuhan yang lebih baik bagi manusia dalam bidang-bidang material, spiritual, fisik, modernisasi, industrialisasi sambil mengembangkan kepribadian sendiri.' Simatupang, *Kehadiran Kristen dalam Perang, Revolusi, dan Pembangunan*, 41.

³⁰⁴ Simatupang, *Kehadiran Kristen dalam Perang, Revolusi, dan Pembangunan*, 41.

attitude in this revolution towards all kinds of dreams, thoughts, activities, and hope which are coming from the sinful humans.³⁰⁵

The combination of 'positive' and 'critical' seems to lead an observer towards curiosity. The question is how somebody will be able to have both attitudes at once in a specific situation. Perhaps, for Simatupang, it is the final attitude that will be able to manage the tension between the two.

That is the *fourth* one, *realistic*, which means that the Christians should realize the limit of human efforts and the impossibility of reaching perfections in this world.

The gospel convinces us that the realization of the perfect 'new world' lies only in God's power. The story about the tower of Babel explains to us, that human beings with their own efforts cannot reach the sky. The human creativity that makes new things and new forms of life is a great gift. But we also have to be realistic that the ultimate purpose is not to create an absolutely perfect society. Realism also teaches us to always be prepared to face the possibilities that new forms of injustices and new forms of exploitations may arise after the abolition of the old forms of injustices and exploitations, because ultimately all injustices are rooted in the sinfulness of humankind.³⁰⁶

A perfect society is impossible and the obsession to build one parallels the biblical story of the tower of Babel. Realism provides a balancing principle, so that one is not trapped in a utopian delusion.

These four attitudes were also continually repeated by Simatupang in the New Order period. Whereas in Soekarno's time the attitudes were oriented towards the 'revolution', in Soeharto's time it is adapted to the New Order's agenda such as development and modernization under the banner of Pancasila as the only legitimate ideology in the state. For example, on one occasion he says:

The national development guided by Pancasila for the coming take-off era is not identical with the kingdom of God. But compared to other models of development, this model gives a broader space for the efforts to establish peace, justice, humanity and welfare for all people and for the environmental sustainability and also a broader space for everyone to repent. Because of that, in the light of the gospel of the kingdom of God, the Indonesian churches are taking part positively, creatively, critically, and

³⁰⁵ 'Injil memang mempunyai sikap yang sangat kritis terhadap manusia dan cita-cita serta pekerjaannya. Injil menyatakan, bahwa manusia juga dalam kegiatannya dan dalam cita-citanya yang seluhur-luhurnya, seperti dalam cita-citanya akan masyarakat baru, dunia baru, manusia baru, tetaplah makhluk yang telah jatuh ke dalam dosa. Oleh sebab itu dalam terang Injil sikap kritis terhadap segala cita-cita, pikiran-pikiran, kegiatan-kegiatan dan harapan manusia yang berdosa itu, juga dalam Revolusi ini, haruslah dipertahankan.' Simatupang, *Kehadiran Kristen dalam Perang, Revolusi, dan Pembangunan*, 41.

³⁰⁶ 'Injil meyakinkan kita, bahwa "dunia baru" yang sempurna terletak dalam kuasa Allah sendiri untuk menggenapkannya. Cerita mengenai menara Babil menjelaskan kepada kita, bahwa manusia dengan usahanya tidak dapat mencapai langit. Kreativitas manusia untuk menciptakan barang-barang baru dan bentuk-bentuk peri kehidupan yang baru adalah anugerah yang besar. Akan tetapi kita juga harus realistis bahwa tujuan dari semuanya itu bukanlah untuk menciptakan masyarakat yang mutlak sempurna. Realisme juga mengajarkan kepada kita untuk selalu bersedia menghadapi kemungkinan timbulnya bentuk-bentuk ketidakadilan yang baru, bentuk-bentuk eksploitasi yang baru, apabila bentuk-bentuk ketidakadilan dan bentuk-bentuk eksploitasi yang lama telah dilenyapkan oleh karena pada tingkat terakhir semua ketidakadilan itu bersumber pada dosa manusia sendiri.' Simatupang, *Kehadiran Kristen dalam Perang, Revolusi, dan Pembangunan*, 41-42.

realistically in the national development guided by Pancasila for the coming take-off era.³⁰⁷

Although Simatupang maintains a critical space towards the New Order agenda, just like he does towards the previous regime, the fact that he was also able to be positive towards both shows the embedded problems in his principles. For the trajectories of Soekarno's regime and Soeharto's were completely the opposite and the transition from the one towards the other were so brutal and full of blood. How is it possible for one to maintain the proposed attitudes: positive, creative, critical, and realistic, in any kind of situation, especially towards two strikingly opposite agendas?

There must be a problematic theological assumption beneath this tendency. To see the root of the problem more clearly, it is important for us to follow Simatupang's acknowledgment of his debt to Reinhold Niebuhr. This name is the subject of the investigation in the next section.

Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism

In the earlier quote, Simatupang mentions his indebtedness to Niebuhr for a more realistic understanding about the struggle for justice. He also points to Niebuhr's work, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. This information gives us the direction for the enquiry in this section.

The Nature and Destiny of Man contains the materials which were presented by Reinhold Niebuhr in the 1939 Gifford Lectures. What Niebuhr proposes throughout this work is the superiority of the Christian view of man compared to the ones to be found in various modern philosophies. The notion of sin holds an important role in his argument, as he believes that a serious acknowledgment of this reality may lead one to grow an attitude towards life which is neither too optimistic nor too pessimistic. On the opposite side of over-optimism and over-pessimism lies his proposal: Christian Realism.

While Niebuhr mainly talks about man and sin throughout *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, his presuppositions about God are also visible in this work. Some of Niebuhr's intriguing ideas in relation to the discussion in this chapter can be found in the fifth chapter of the first volume, in which he speaks about the relevance of the Christian view of man.

In that section, Niebuhr declares that Christianity is a religion of revelation. But the revelation that he understands here is one in which the special presupposes the general. The quotation below shows how high is the regard for the general revelation in Reinhold Niebuhr's theological scheme:

The revelation of God to man is always a twofold one, a personal-individual revelation, and a revelation in the context of social-historical experience. Without the public and historical revelation the private experience of God would remain poorly defined and subject to caprice. Without the private revelation of God, the public and historical revelation would not gain credence. Since all men have, in some fashion, the experience of a reality beyond themselves, they are able to entertain the more precise revelations

³⁰⁷ 'Pembangunan nasional sebagai pengamalan Pancasila menuju tinggal landas tidak identik dengan Kerajaan Allah. Namun dibandingkan dengan model-model pembangunan yang lain, model pembangunan kita ini memberikan ruang yang lebih luas bagi upaya-upaya untuk menegakkan perdamaian, keadilan, kemanusiaan dan kesejahteraan bagi semua orang dan bagi kelestarian lingkungan hidup serta ruang yang lebih luas bagi setiap orang untuk bertobat. Oleh sebab itu dalam terang Injil Kerajaan Allah, gereja-gereja di Indonesia mengambil bagian secara positif, kreatif, kritis dan realistik dalam pembangunan nasional sebagai pengamalan Pancasila menuju tinggal landas itu.' Eka Darmaputera (ed.), *Konteks Berteologi di Indonesia: Buku Peringatan 70 Tahun Dr. P.D. Latuhamallo* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1988), 39.

of the character and purpose of God as they come to them in the most significant experiences of prophetic history. Private revelation is, in a sense, synonymous with 'general' revelation, without the presuppositions of which there could be no 'special' revelation. It is no less universal for being private.³⁰⁸

At first glance, it might seem that both the general and the special revelations are equally important for Niebuhr. For God always reveals himself in a twofold way, and both the general and the special need each other. The tricky part is where he considers both of them to be 'synonymous' and that without the presuppositions of the general there couldn't be the special. There Niebuhr shows his real face. Actually he presupposes that the general is more important than the special. It is the general that determines the special and not the other way around.

This presupposition is visible more concretely as he talks about the specific designation of God in his three types of revelation as Creator, Judge, and Redeemer. Lying behind these titles are the varieties of personal human experience:

The general revelation of personal human experience, the sense of being confronted with a 'wholly other' at the edge of human consciousness, contains three elements, two of which are not too sharply defined, while the third is not defined at all. The first is the sense of reverence for a majesty and of dependence upon an ultimate source of being. The second is the sense of moral obligation laid upon one from beyond oneself and of moral unworthiness before a judge. The third, most problematic of the elements in religious experience, is the longing for forgiveness. All three of these elements become more sharply defined as they gain the support of other forms of revelation. The first, the sense of dependence upon a reality greater and more ultimate than ourselves, gains the support of another form of 'general' revelation, the content of which is expressed in the concept of the Creator and the creation. Faith concludes that the same 'Thou' who confronts us in our personal experience is also the source and Creator of the whole world. The second element in personal religion, the experience of judgment, gains support from the prophetic-Biblical concept of judgment in history. The whole of history is seen as validation of the truth in the personal experience that God stands over against us as our judge. The third element, the longing for reconciliation after this judgment (and it must be regarded provisionally as a longing rather than an assurance), becomes the great issue of the Old Testament interpretation of life.³⁰⁹

So the designation of God as Creator, Judge, and Redeemer in the biblical revelation is for Niebuhr actually a reflection of the experience of having the 'sense of reverence', 'moral obligation', and 'longing for forgiveness' in the dynamic of human consciousness. The general revelation in human experience defines and the special revelation fulfils. Despite frequently using the term 'revelation', Niebuhr's theology is, in reality, anthropology.

Stanley Hauerwas strongly criticizes the naturalization of theological speech in Niebuhr. He thinks that this preference has to do with Niebuhr compromising Christian theology to the common presuppositions in his day, including the ones in the political realm:

Niebuhr assumed with his liberal forebears that theology was first and foremost an account of human existence. Niebuhr's project was not natural theology, if by that you mean the attempt to 'prove' God; rather, he sought to naturalize theological claims in a manner that would make them acceptable to the scientific and political presuppositions

³⁰⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, 1st ed, Library of Theological Ethics (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 127.

³⁰⁹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 131-2.

of his day [...]. Niebuhr's theology seems to be a perfect exemplification of Ludwig Feuerbach's argument that theology, in spite of its pretentious presumption that its subject matter is God, is in fact but a disguised way to talk about humanity.³¹⁰

In Hauerwas' view, Niebuhr's later role in American politics as 'the *pontifex maximus* to Cold War liberals' is only a natural consequence of his theological stance.³¹¹ The kind of theological trajectory that Niebuhr pursues could only lead him to become 'the theologian of a domesticated god capable of doing no more than providing comfort to the anxious conscience of the bourgeoisie'.³¹²

A closer look at what the Christian Realism project is about would justify Hauerwas' critique. Initially aimed as a critique towards the Social Gospel movement in the United States, Christian Realism disapproves all sorts of moral idealisms that do not consider the complexities of the reality whereto such idealisms are intended to be applied. Robin Lovin summarizes this point in the following passage:

Given the complexities of human situation, a moral ideal alone cannot dictate what we ought to do and will not settle the outcomes of history. To devote oneself exclusively to determining and proclaiming the right thing to do is most probably to render oneself powerless in the actual course of events, and it may — in the unlikely event that the proclamation is heeded — prove horribly destructive, abolishing the necessary balances of power and unleashing potent fanaticisms. Attentiveness to the 'factions and forces' at work in each specific situation is the key to effective resolution of conflicts, although the shifting equilibrium of power insures that each solution is only temporary and the creative work will shortly have to begin again.³¹³

The consequence of this move is a politics which is ultimately only about maintaining the balance of power. One ought to be creative and attentive to the power struggle and the reality of history in each specific situation, but not for the acknowledgement of the revolution of God and of the fulfilling of God's will on earth. Instead, what is being encouraged here is the prevention of serious attempts to transform reality.

Divine Omnivulence and Christian Realism

The exploration on Niebuhr's Christian Realism in the previous section gives us a clearer understanding about the implicit theological presuppositions in Simatupang's realism. It prepares us for the engagement with Barth.

Barth himself had an encounter with Niebuhr in the founding assembly of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948. What was expected to be an exciting meeting between the two representatives of theology from the Anglo-Saxon world and the continental Europe turned out to be one of dispute. Niebuhr criticized Barth for overemphasizing eternity and that his theology is only relevant in the time of crisis, while Barth on the other hand complained that Niebuhr plays too much with the categories of 'good and evil, freedom and

³¹⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology: Being the Gifford Lectures Delivered at the University of St. Andrews in 2001* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013), chp 5, Kindle.

³¹¹ Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, chp 5, Kindle.

³¹² Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, chp 5, Kindle.

³¹³ Robin W. Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge [England] ; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 6.

necessity, mind and matter, and counts too little about the other dimension: the Word of God'.³¹⁴ We can sense here the tension between Niebuhr's realism which is grounded in his reservation about divine revelation, and Barth's strong affirmation of it. Both are standing on different bases and the clash of their theological presuppositions is expressed clearly in the conflict in their encounter in Amsterdam. Despite their opposite standpoints, it would be inaccurate though to categorize Barth's as an idealist in opposition to Niebuhr as a realist. To explain this point, I will delve into Barth's discussion of idealism and realism to inform our discussion.

Between Idealism and Realism

Barth's series of lecture in 1929, *Fate and Idea in Theology*, is not specifically a presentation of the doctrine of God. It is a testimony of his theological struggle in dealing with the two main tendencies in philosophy, idealism and realism. There Barth presents his view on the relationship between theology and philosophy in general, and specifically in relation to the tension between realism and idealism. Barth believes that both theology and philosophy operate in the realm of human thought and reflect on fundamental questions about reality. These are the reasons for their close affinity and the ever-present temptation for theologians to join the occupation of the philosophers instead of staying true to their calling. For Barth, it is the commitment to the priority of God's revelation that distinguishes a theologian from a philosopher.³¹⁵ 'Theology operates in the same context as philosophy. It must, however, attend to its own affairs', he claims.³¹⁶ The presupposition of theology has to be 'God's gracious miracle'.³¹⁷

The failure to prioritize revelation can be seen in the case of theological adaptations on two philosophical streams that Barth discusses, realism and idealism. While realism focuses on the givenness, the actuality, the reality of the observed object, idealism tries to press further than the given reality. Barth believes that theology has to deal with both aspects, but he warns theologians not to compromise their obedience to God's Word, and instead 'to surpass the relativity of this two-fold aspect—not through a conceptual synthesis of our own, but by attributing this aspect to God himself as the Lord of all reality'.³¹⁸ For example, theology needs to speak about the reality of God, and to talk about him as a real object, and not just as an idea.³¹⁹ But there is a huge difference between speaking on God on the basis of the reality of the Word of God and accepting the givenness of God in the reality of life or human experience as those whom Barth calls 'theological realists' do. Among these theological realists, Barth mentions Thomas Aquinas and his doctrine of *analogia entis*.

That is in fact how Thomas Aquinas presented the matter. For him the experience of God is a unique possibility at the disposal of human existence, precisely by virtue of revelation, because even at its lowest level human existence participates in the *lumen divinum* of the highest level. *Gratia non destruit, sed supponit et perficit naturam*. (Grace does not destroy, but supplements and perfects nature.) *Analogia entis* means

³¹⁴ '[...] goed en kwaad, vrijheid en noodwendigheid, geest en materie, en te weinig rekent met de andere dimensie: het Woord Gods.' See Ernst Johannes Beker, *Libertas: Een Onderzoek naar de Leer van de Vrijheid bij Reinhold Niebuhr en bij Karl Barth* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1953), 33-34.

³¹⁵ Karl Barth, *The Way of Theology*, 32.

³¹⁶ Barth, *The Way of Theology*, 51.

³¹⁷ Barth, *The Way of Theology*, 29.

³¹⁸ Barth, *The Way of Theology*, 32.

³¹⁹ Barth, *The Way of Theology*, 35.

that every existing being and we as human beings participate in the *similitudo Dei*. The experience of God becomes an inherent human possibility and necessity.³²⁰

For Barth, the presupposition that human beings have a natural possibility for divine revelation would contradict the testimony about the revelation of God in the Bible. For he is fully convinced that revelation in the Bible is always about something new to the human receivers.

That is in fact how things always stand between human beings and God's Word. God's Word announces something new to them. It comes to them as light into the darkness. It always come to them as sinners, as forgiving and thus as judging grace. In relation to it human beings are never once those who are already pardoned, and thus those to whom God's Word no longer or only partially proclaims something new. If they hear something that basically they already know, then they certainly hear something other than God's Word. 'God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble'. Human beings are always pardoned in this way, that God's grace comes to them, not otherwise, not beforehand and also not afterwards. The heavenly manna in the wilderness does not, as we know, let itself be saved up. 'What have you that you did not receive?'³²¹

Barth's concern about theological realism is that it will surrender God to 'fate', for its neglect of the novelty in God's revelation and its theological justification of human experience, human existence, and the reality of life.

The hesitation necessary toward theological realism—I intentionally do not put it any stronger than that—can be summarized like this. Doesn't realism come dangerously near to conceiving God as given by fate at the very point where God has nothing in common with fate, namely, at the point of his coming? Aren't we threatened here with the idea of a God whose being is merely there instead of a God who comes? Wouldn't it perhaps be better for this God to be called simply nature? And might it not be better for the theology of this particular God to be called demonology rather than theology?³²²

The problem with theological realism Barth mentions here can be seen in Niebuhr's theological presupposition of his Christian Realism principle that we have discussed earlier. It is a naturalization of theology that consequently results in the surrender to fate.

On the other side of theological realism is theological idealism. Barth is equally concerned with this alternative, despite his acknowledgement that some sort of idealism cannot be fully avoided in a good theology.

Isn't the idealist principle of differentiating the non-given from the given justified by our need to understand revelation as God's revelation in contrast to whatever else might somehow be revealed? And isn't all theology a matter of understanding, a matter of rendering to ourselves an account of God in the form of human concepts, in other words, in the form of intellectual work, by abstracting from the given and interpreting the given? Doesn't it have to be said that all theology must be just as necessarily idealist as realist? Isn't all theology necessarily idealist to the extent that thinking about God's

³²⁰ Barth, 38-39. For a comprehensive study on Barth's engagement with *analogia entis*, see Keith L Johnson, *Karl Barth and the Analogia Entis* (London; North York: T&T Clark, 2011).

³²¹ Barth, *The Way of Theology*, 39.

³²² Barth, *The Way of Theology*, 42.

given reality always involves referring to its non-given truth? Doesn't all theology understand the given in light of the immanent reality not given to it?³²³

But just like the problem with theological realism, once idealism itself determines the theological occupation, and not the Word of God, it is not 'beyond jeopardy'.³²⁴ For God is indeed transcendent and a mystery, but he is also revealed. The God of the Bible is not pure transcendence or unknown mystery. He is a reality in his revelation and he has clear demands for human beings whom he encounters in his revelation.

Similarly, in his lecture 'The Word of God as the Task of Theology' in 1922, Barth outlines the ways theologians speak about God. The *first* one is dogmatism, in which theologians follow the path of orthodoxy. Barth acknowledges the benefit when theologians choose this path, for orthodoxy contains 'a powerful, living memory of what is necessary and not necessary' and theologians cannot avoid using dogmatic expressions in speaking about God, even the anti-orthodox ones.³²⁵ The problem with this approach is one 'cannot get past making this content into an object, a thing, even when it is the word 'God''.³²⁶

The *second* path is self-criticism, or the way of mysticism. Barth also mentions that this path 'can also be understood as a form of idealism'.³²⁷ By following this path, theologians question human possibility of speaking about God. In Barth's words, 'The strength of mysticism lies where dogmatism is at its weakest. Something happens here, we are not left standing with the message that we must simply believe'.³²⁸ The problem with this approach is that it is finally a claim that God is something that fulfills the inability of humankind as such. It is not an acknowledgment of human incapacity *after* one encounters God in his revelation. This is completely different to Luther's theology of the cross, for example, where *theologia crucis* is never abstracted from Christology. As Barth illustrates, 'The cross is erected, but the resurrection has not yet been proclaimed. And ultimately it is not the cross of Christ that is being erected here, but some other kind of cross. The cross of Christ certainly does not need to be erected by *us* first!'.³²⁹

The *third* way that Barth mentions is dialectic, which contains elements from both dogmatism and self-criticism. A dialectician tries to stand in the center and posit both the positive claim and its negation from that standing point. He never affirms without also negating, and never negates without also affirming, 'because the one, like the other, is not the ultimate thing'.³³⁰ The problem with this approach, however, is that both the affirmation and the negation, the Yes and the No, come from the center which is the standpoint of the theologian himself and not from the Word of God. Since the dialectician always seeks the center, he is actually never really able to speak about God. As Barth says, 'Precisely *because* he wants to say *it all*, and in view of the living truth itself no less, he becomes only more painfully aware of the unavoidable *absence* of this living truth in his saying it all'.³³¹

Barth contends that neither dogmatism, self-criticism, nor dialectic are in themselves adequate means to speak about God. The priority given to the Word of God is essential for this task. This is also what Barth emphasizes in his lecture on fate and idea in 1929. We have to speak about the reality of God and his hiddenness, but from the standpoint of his revelation and

³²³ Barth, *The Way of Theology*, 45.

³²⁴ Barth, *The Way of Theology*, 47.

³²⁵ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and Theology*, trans. Amy Marga (London ; New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 186.

³²⁶ Barth, *The Word of God and Theology*, 187.

³²⁷ Barth, *The Word of God and Theology*, 188.

³²⁸ Barth, *The Word of God and Theology*, 188.

³²⁹ Barth, *The Word of God and Theology*, 189-90.

³³⁰ Barth, *The Word of God and Theology*, 192.

³³¹ Barth, *The Word of God and Theology*, 194.

not the reality of human existence or mysticism as such. We can say that the spirit of these lectures persists in *Church Dogmatics* II. Barth confidently speaks about the reality of God (chapter VI), yet he also acknowledges his hiddenness (§27). And both are grounded in the revelation of God in the election of Jesus Christ, and not in the philosophy of realism or idealism. The living God who reveals himself in his action in Jesus Christ is not imprisoned in the complex struggle for power on earth, but the One who decided in eternity to be the God for humanity and intervenes in history by confronting humankind to make their stand before his definite will.

This priority towards God's revelation is what strikingly separates Barth and Niebuhr. As we have seen in the previous section, although at first glance Niebuhr appears to value both the general and the special revelations, in reality he submits the special to the general. In his case, the submission follows the path of realism. His God becomes the God of fate. The reality of sin imposes too much weight on his theological reflection that salvation seems to be too far away. The nearness of the kingdom of God in Jesus' preaching seems to be forgotten, as we only see its remoteness, added with a warning sign not to get too close. For once you get too close, the power of sin shall reveal its magnificent power, denying the possibility of salvation. Instead of pursuing the command of God or the will of God, one would do better with keeping the balance of power and try to swim within the stream.

It is clear that a similar spirit is operating in Simatupang's stance towards the Soeharto's regime. Although he acknowledged some defects in the New Order dictatorship, he managed to keep promoting the regime, using the principle of realism as a justification for his actions.

The Scandal of Goenawan Mohammad

A comparison to the phenomena of Simatupang and his teacher Niebuhr in the cultural field is going to be exercised in the following case. A few years ago, the publication of Wijaya Herlambang's doctoral dissertation about the politics behind the spread of some cultural ideas in Indonesia during the establishment of the New Order regime sparked a heated debate.³³² The figure who was under judgment is Goenawan Mohammad, a respected thinker in Indonesia, whom Herlambang discovered in his book to have a connection with Ivan Kats, a man who worked for the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), an organization founded and funded by the CIA.³³³ Goenawan, who was a receiver of CCF scholarship to study in Europe, managed to have an intense correspondence with Kats, who took notice of his talent. A letter from Kats tells us about a project that he suggested to Goenawan, for which the payment will be guaranteed by Kats himself. This project resulted in the publication of a compilation of Albert Camus' works in the Indonesian language. Goenawan authored the preface to this volume, in which he shares his opinion that the pessimistic-existentialist values that Camus expresses in his works are well-suited for the project of cultural development in Indonesia. Herlambang discerns through this account that the 'subversive infiltration' of the CCF to Indonesia through its agents is not a myth. It is very real.³³⁴

³³² Herlambang, *Cultural Violence*; Wijaya Herlambang, *Kekerasan budaya pasca 1965: bagaimana Orde Baru melegitimasi anti-komunisme melalui sastra dan film*, Cetakan pertama (Serpong, Tangerang Selatan: Marjin Kiri, 2013). Wijaya Herlambang was also one of the important witnesses in the International People's Tribunal 1965. He died a few years ago at a relatively young age.

³³³ For the history of CIA support to CCF, see Sarah Miller Harris, *The CIA and the Congress for Cultural Freedom in the Early Cold War: The Limits of Making Common Cause*, Studies in Intelligence (London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016).

³³⁴ Herlambang, *Kekerasan budaya pasca 1965*, 100-101.

Martin Suryajaya, a young philosopher who decided to investigate further about this story after reading Herlambang's book, found out that the contact between Kats and Goenawan was more intense than Herlambang reported. He also elaborates on how the philosophy of Camus might work for the CIA's interests. In his analysis on one of Camus' works that has been translated into Indonesian, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Martin portrays what is promoted through this work: acceptance of reality and the futility of resistance. As the story of Sisyphus in Greek mythology tells us, the huge stone will roll back from the top of the hill despite our efforts to push it upwards. One has to accept such reality and be happy with it.³³⁵

Martin's depiction of Camus might be too harsh. Despite the fact that the stone keeps rolling back, nevertheless Sisyphus does not stop trying. He keeps resisting. It is not a story of defeat. As David Carroll says, Camus' *Myth of Sisyphus* actually shows "a 'will to resist', even or especially when resistance appears hopeless or turns out in fact to be completely fruitless—a will to resist that is not simply a product of history but also a resistance to history."³³⁶ Camus himself had a lifelong commitment towards social justice. He was not a passive nihilist. According to Martin Rowley, the topic of 'justice' is even one of most persistent themes in his whole writings.³³⁷ Camus was only rather skeptical towards human attempts in history to establish justice and this posture is reflected in his *Myth of Sisyphus*. In Carroll's words, '*Le Mythe de Sisyphe* thus inaugurates Camus's long struggle against philosophical, religious and political ideologies that promise salvation in the future at the expense of living human beings in the present'.³³⁸ It reflects Camus' anti-utopian spirit. He does not leave the struggle in this world, but his struggle is a struggle out of desperation rather than of hope. So to be fair, Camus might have been used by the CIA through Goenawan to weaken the radicalism of the people's struggle in Indonesia against the imperialist power, but he actually could have also been used to question the optimism about the path of capitalist development under Soeharto. Although it is questionable for me what one could expect from a struggle without a salvific vision, and what is going to be the outcome of a resistance which already admits its futility since the beginning.

Among his works, Goenawan Mohammad also published a book on theology, *On God and Unfinished Things*.³³⁹ The kind of theology that he promotes there is a sort of negative theology, emphasizing the mystery of an unknown divinity at the limit of human knowledge and efforts. It belongs to the same category to the God of idea in Barth's lecture on fate and idea, or the way of mysticism, if we compare it with the Emden lecture. Goenawan's preference for Camus and negative theology does not seem to be a coincidence. Both the pessimistic-existentialist philosophy and negative theology emphasize the limit of human efforts. In the former, this acknowledgment is translated to the idea of futility in resistance. Should we be surprised if the negative theology also goes in that direction?

So here we see two lines that represent realism and idealism. The God of fate and the God of idea. Realism in Simatupang and Niebuhr is clouding the visibility of the God revealed

³³⁵ Martin Suryajaya, 'Goenawan Mohammad Dan Politik Kebudayaan Liberal Pasca-1965,' *IndoProgress*, December 4, 2013, <https://indoprogress.com/2013/12/goenawan-mohamad-dan-politik-kebudayaan-liberal-pasca-1965/>. For Goenawan's reply, see Goenawan Mohammad, 'Jawaban untuk Martin—Bagian Pertama,' *IndoProgress*, December 13, 2013, <https://indoprogress.com/2013/12/jawaban-untuk-martin-bagian-pertama/>.

³³⁶ David Carroll, 'Rethinking the Absurd: *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*,' in Edward J. Hughes, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Camus*, Cambridge Companions (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 53.

³³⁷ Martin Rowley, 'Camus and Social Justice,' in Edward J. Hughes, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Camus*, Cambridge Companions (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 93.

³³⁸ Carroll, 'Rethinking the Absurd,' 59-60.

³³⁹ Goenawan Mohammad, *Tuhan dan hal-hal yang tak selesai*, Cet. 2 (Jakarta: Kata Kita, 2008); Gunawan Mohamad and Laksmi Pamuntjak, *On God and Other Unfinished Things*, Revised edition (Jakarta: PT Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2015).

in the Bible, while the theological idealism in Goenawan is a form of unbelief in God's revelation. Both are two sides of the same coin. Despite their opposite differences, we can see a similar problem: an inability to overcome the confines of history. Without a priority to God's revelation that Barth keeps suggesting, it is tempting to go with the currents either because of acceptance of reality or pessimism about possible alternatives. In other words, in the preference to the story of Sisyphus rather than the birth of Jesus Christ. In the decision to come to terms with the powers that be rather than proclaiming the God of the slaves in Egypt. Here we see again how actual and relevant the insights of Barth are.

One might say that the reverse attitude, an overconfident belief about what 'God' wills is also a dangerous thing, perhaps more dangerous than the uncertainty about it. Given the history of religious wars and terrorism throughout the past centuries and in recent times, one does not need a reminder about the danger of religious fanaticism that Niebuhr warns about. That suspicion might be proven to be true when it is applied to other versions of god. But definitely not if we are talking about the God who is revealed in the economy of the Trinity, who eternally made a decision in the election of Jesus Christ to be the God for all humanity, to salvage the world of its loss and misery, from the constant threat of nothingness. That is his will, and that is what he demands to human beings who encounter him: to make a decision in history based on his decision in the *eternal* history. Such an insight has been the source of inspiration for Barth in the midst of the Europe's indecisiveness and pseudo-neutrality from 1937-1942. When human beings have forgotten the cause for humanity, this God reminds them and insists that they act. This insight could have been vigorously proclaimed too in Soeharto's time in Indonesia had Simatupang followed the path of Barth rather than Niebuhr's. Unfortunately, he decided to go the other way.

PART THREE

CREATION AND NOTHINGNESS

Chapter 5

The Site of Struggle

In this chapter, I present my theologico-political reading of Barth's exposition of the doctrine of nothingness throughout the first three part-volumes of the *Church Dogmatics* on the doctrine of creation, with a view to its living context. Earlier in the preceding chapters, I have dealt with christocentrism and divine omnivulence. The eternal decision of God in Jesus Christ grounds the whole discussion about creation, and his eternal will affirms creation. Following the sequence is the discussion in the present chapter on creation and nothingness, where the concrete struggle between the willed reality and the haunting spectre happens in the realm of history.

The first three part-volumes of *Church Dogmatics* III were composed at the end of the Second of World War and after. Barth's political activism at that time shifted from his earlier mode of resistance. Now it is aimed towards the *rebuilding* of the world after the war. This new tendency is reflected throughout the texts of *Church Dogmatics* III. Instead of excessively getting buoyant about the fall of the *Reich* and the end of the war, he was lamenting the predicament of modern society that has produced such horror and warning the church against conformism in the new situation after the war.

The argument that I want to present is that *Barth's exposition of the doctrine of nothingness in the doctrine of creation functions as a post-war lament and a constructive theological critique to modern philosophy, through his strong message that creation would never be left behind by God, his warning that humanity is situated on the brink of nothingness, and his insistence on the christological grounding of the knowledge of nothingness.* I shall present the argument in the following order. *First*, a depiction of Barth's political activism and his theologico-political vision during this period to provide the context of my reading of the *Church Dogmatics* texts. *Second*, the discussion on nothingness in the first part-volume, where I will tackle the overarching idea of that volume about the interconnection of creation and covenant, the category of saga that he applies to the creation text, before focusing on his exposition of the first chapter of the Bible. *Third*, the discussion in the second part-volume, the doctrine of humanity, where I will focus on the sub-section on 'The Real Man'. *Fourth*, the discussion in the third part-volume, the doctrine of providence, where I will focus on §50, 'God and Nothingness'. And *lastly*, I will summarize and conclude the whole discussion.

Rebuilding Germany and Beyond

Barth's political vision towards the end of the war and afterwards was the *rebuilding* of the world. This orientation is expressed in his concern for the rebuilding of a new Germany after the war, his call for reconciliation with the Germans, and his non-conformist politics at the height of the Cold War. Barth also used the opportunity in this period to reflect on the failures of modern civilization and the theological lessons that follow.

To present the dynamic in a more systematic way, I shall divide this section into three parts. *First*, I start with his concern for the rebuilding of Germany and the reconciliation with

its people. This is mainly expressed in his address to his fellow Swiss people when the war was coming to an end. The title of this lecture is *The German and Ourselves*, which he delivered in early 1945. *Second*, I proceed with his politics during the Cold War. The main text that represents this position will be *Die Kirche zwischen Ost und West*, which he lectured in 1949. And *third*, I will explain how *Church Dogmatics III* was meant to be a work of lament and post-war reflections.

The German and Ourselves

Towards the end of the war, there was a shift in Barth's tone. Whereas earlier he was very outspoken in suggesting resistance, at this time he was rather soothing. Frank Jehle notices this alteration.

Barth, who, at the end of the thirties and the beginning of the forties, had tirelessly called for resistance—even for armed resistance—against Germany, now interceded politically in a new direction: *even the German people now lying on the ground deserve to be treated humanely* and not with utter vindictiveness. In his lecture in Dürrenroth, Barth said that Jesus Christ, 'the reconciliation of our sins', was also meant for Germans, 'even for that unhappy man in whose name all the horrors of these years have been summed up'. Barth meant by this Adolf Hitler, against whom, three days earlier on July 20, 1944, an unsuccessful assassination attempt had been made.³⁴⁰

This new direction was partly expressed in his lecture in early 1945, *The German and Ourselves*. Barth presented this lecture in Switzerland. There he spoke to his compatriots about the importance of restraining from the desire for vengeance. Although the Swiss people were not directly attacked by the Germans, he sensed that hatred towards the Germans was going to be a trend.³⁴¹ Barth saw that the German people were going to be in a low situation, and what they needed was sincere friendship, and not judgment.³⁴² He argues that although many of the Germans voluntarily participated in the evil done by the Nazis, many of them did not, and many of them perhaps even opposed the regime from the beginning.³⁴³ It is really important for Barth in the coming reconstruction after the war to convince the German people that real fellowship among human beings is possible, since he believes that it is what the Germans 'have always lacked'.³⁴⁴ In my reading, here Barth refers to the harsh nature of the Treaty of Versailles after the First World War that contributed to the rise of ultra-nationalism in Germany. The rise of Hitler to power was a consequence of the unjust treatment of the losing side after the war. Barth displays this interpretation about Versailles and National Socialism in his lecture in Wipkingen on December 1938, titled *Die Kirche und die Politische Frage von heute*.³⁴⁵ It helps us to understand why he insisted so much on the importance of forgiveness and solidarity with the Germans. One of the reasons would be that he wanted to avoid a possible consequence, that 'history repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce'.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁰ Jehle, *Ever against the Stream*, 82.

³⁴¹ Karl Barth, *The Only Way: How Can the Germans be Cured?* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1947), 68.

³⁴² Barth, *The Only Way*, 93.

³⁴³ Barth, *The Only Way*, 70.

³⁴⁴ Barth, *The Only Way*, 94.

³⁴⁵ Karl Barth, *Die Kirche und die politische Frage von heute* (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1938), 98.

³⁴⁶ A famous quote from Marx, see Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: Mondial, 2005).

Between East and West

Barth didn't pick a side in the East-West conflict after the war. He was not a supporter of the totalitarian state of the Soviet Union, but he was also critical to the capitalism of the West. Barth refused to equate communism with National Socialism, as he regarded the intention of the former as virtuous, while the latter was purely destructive. He was against the anti-communist attitude that was prevalent in the West, arguing that the self-confidence of the West is the real danger. His challenge was that if the people in the West were so afraid of communism, they better seriously build socialism and establish social justice in their society.³⁴⁷ On the other hand, Barth was very critical to some of his friends in the East who were inclined to support communism. He reproved Albert Berezky and Josef Hromadka, figures that he supported before, for their endorsements of the communist regimes.³⁴⁸

Barth's position on this issue is mainly reflected in his lecture at Berne Synodal Council on February 1949, *Die Kirche zwischen Ost und West*. There he invites his audience to look beyond the clear and present danger. He reminds them that the world is torn apart by the power conflict between two empires, the Soviet Union and the United States of America, but it would not be able to shake nor overthrow the secret reign of Christ. The church has survived many past empires before, and what they need to do is to focus on the content of Christian testimony.³⁴⁹ Both the East and the West were strong in their ideologies, and Barth tries to restrain his listeners from the temptation of partisanship. He acknowledges that this suggestion might sound contradictory to what he insisted ten years earlier, but this one is a different case.³⁵⁰ For unlike National Socialism, communism was intentionally positive, and it never attempted to reinterpret Christianity in a false way.³⁵¹ Barth's suggestion is that the Christian church should place herself between East and West, and to proclaim the gospel of Christ to both sides.³⁵²

Church Dogmatics III as Lament

Barth started to write *Church Dogmatics* III/1 in the summer semester 1942. Actually he was not too confident to write on the topic. He felt that others had better qualifications than him. The problem is that he did not really trust their presuppositions. Barth insisted that the proper knowledge on God's creation should not be abstracted from God's revelation in Jesus Christ.³⁵³ Thus it is clear that *Church Dogmatics* III is a continuation of his preceding works.

At that time, the Allied forces seemed to be winning. So Barth happily kept himself silent and concentrated on his theological work.³⁵⁴ He considered the writing of *Church Dogmatics* to be the best aid that he could give.³⁵⁵ As Eberhard Busch notes:

³⁴⁷ Jehle, *Ever against the Stream*, 89-91.

³⁴⁸ Jehle, *Ever against the Stream*, 97.

³⁴⁹ Karl Barth, *Die Kirche zwischen Ost Und West* (Berlin: Käthe Vogt Verlag, 1949), 126-8.

³⁵⁰ Barth, *Die Kirche*, 133-4.

³⁵¹ Barth, *Die Kirche*, 137-8.

³⁵² Barth, *Die Kirche*, 141. This posture also reflects the situation in 1949 when the tension between the East and the West was not as strong as in the years after. There were no military treaty organizations at that time, and the German state was not divided into two yet.

³⁵³ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 315-6.

³⁵⁴ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 319.

³⁵⁵ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 322.

For Barth, too, the task faced by the ‘world’ after the Second World War was that of reconstruction, and it needed to be tackled on all fronts. Barth wanted to play his part. Indeed he thought that in the volumes of the Dogmatics already written he had attempted ‘to make a small contribution towards the fundamental basis of a future reconstruction of the German Church and German culture’. Early in 1946, however, the question arose whether he should not share in the reconstruction in another more direct way. ‘The problem of German reconstruction seemed to me personally to be so vast, and made so complicated both by the world around and by the Germans themselves, that I saw myself faced with an alternative: either to return to Germany for good and devote what time and strength remain to me completely and exclusively to German problems and tasks; or to keep on with my real work—namely, the continuation and possibly the completion of my Church Dogmatics—confining my direct participation in German affairs, as well as in other foreign affairs that might possibly arise, to specific occasions. I felt that I ought to decide in favour of the second’.³⁵⁶

So the third volume was actually intended to bear the task of *rebuilding* after the war. The first part of it was published when the Second World War had just ended. The next part-volume was completed in early 1948. After that, Barth started his lectures on the doctrine of providence in summer 1948, which became the foundation of *Church Dogmatics* III/3.³⁵⁷ The latter was completed the next year, in the summer of 1949.³⁵⁸

Eberhard Busch observes that the project of *Church Dogmatics* III is a project composed in grief and mourning. Throughout this work Barth traces what is wrong with modern intellectual history and seeks what is wrong which have resulted in the hellish reality of the Second World War. He believes that the evil fruit must have been coming from an evil tree.

It was the task of the exposition on the doctrine of creation and of man (both should be handled in a single volume) to encounter the history of ideas in the modern age. His thesis was that there is a dangerous error woven into this history, which more and more reveals the ungodly and inhuman content that led to the inferno. It is about a thesis that the recent chaos is rooted in a certain European and especially German pre-history and can only be overcome by removing this root. One can describe the piece as a work of mourning [*Trauerarbeit*].³⁵⁹

This tracing effort is the reason why we see names of modern figures such as Descartes, Fichte, and Nietzsche, whom Barth discusses and criticizes in the excursions throughout the volume. As Kenneth Oakes notices, the number of engagements with philosophers in *Church*

³⁵⁶ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 332. Frank Jehle also elucidates this intention in a chapter of his book, see Jehle, *Ever against the Stream*, 80-86.

³⁵⁷ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 352.

³⁵⁸ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 364.

³⁵⁹ ‘Es war die Aufgabe, sich in und mit der Darlegung seiner Lehre von der Schöpfung und vom Menschen (beides sollte in einem einzigen Band behandelt werden) umfassend mit der neuzeitlichen Geistesgeschichte useinanderzusetzen. Seine These war, daß in diese Geschichte ein gefährlicher Irrtum eingewoben ist, der mehr und mehr seinen gottlosen wie inhumanen Gehalt enthüllte und folgerichtig auf dieses Inferno hinauslief. Es ging um die These, daß das gegenwärtige Chaos seine Wurzel in einer bestimmten europäischen und speziell deutschen Vorgeschichte habe und sich nur durch die Beseitigung dieser Wurzel überwinden lasse. Man könnte die Arbeit an jener Aufgabe als ein Stueck – Trauerarbeit – bezeichnen.’ Eberhard Busch, *Unter dem Bogen des einen Bundes: Karl Barth und die Juden 1933-1945* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1996), 503.

Dogmatics III surpasses those in other volumes.³⁶⁰ Most of these names are proponents of ‘transcendental subjectivity’, an idealistic way of perceiving the reality of creation from the basis of human subjectivity alone. This modern anthropology, he observes, led towards the tendency of modern humans to conquer the world for themselves. Barth’s alternative proposal is to see humanity as the covenant partner of God, as a being-in-relationship.³⁶¹ With this proposal, the doctrine of creation complements his work in 1933 on the Protestant theology in the nineteenth-century,³⁶² in which he criticizes Western philosophers and theologians of the modern period. This time, he comes with the alternative proposal. The setting of the 1933 work was the rise of Hitler. The setting of the latter was the beginning of the downfall of the Third Reich. Put together, the two forms an *inclusio*.

Creation and Nothingness

In this section, I will probe into Barth’s discussion on nothingness in *Church Dogmatics* III/1. I shall start with Barth’s proposal on the relationship between creation and covenant which functions as the conceptual framework of the whole volume. Then I will look into the category of saga that he applies to the creation text in Genesis 1, before delving into his exposition of the biblical text. The point that I want to make is that throughout these texts Barth portrays how creation is never left behind by God and his Word. No matter how fallen the creation may choose to be, there is always a possibility for redemption.

Creation and Covenant

The conceptual framework of the doctrine of creation throughout *Church Dogmatics* III which Barth establishes in *Church Dogmatics* III/1 is expressed in his statement that creation is ‘the external basis of the covenant’ and that covenant is ‘the internal basis of creation’. The interconnectedness of creation and covenant that Barth proposes here is the outcome of his insistence to build the doctrine of creation on a christological basis. Creation is not to be seen as an independent reality without a specific goal. It is meant to be the site where God’s covenant is to be constituted and accomplished.

The aim of creation is history. This follows decisively from the fact that God the Creator is the triune God who acts and who reveals Himself in history. God wills and God creates the creature for the sake of His Son or Word and therefore in harmony with Himself; and for His own supreme glory and therefore in the Holy Spirit. He wills and creates it for the sake of that which in His grace He wills to do it and with it by His Son or Word in the Holy Spirit. The execution of this activity is history. What is meant is the history of the covenant of grace instituted by God between Himself and man; the sequence of the events in which God concludes and executes this covenant with man, carrying it to its goal, and thus validating in the sphere of the creature that which from all eternity He has determined in Himself; the sequence of the events for the sake of

³⁶⁰ Kenneth Oakes, *Karl Barth on Theology and Philosophy*, 1st ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 200.

³⁶¹ ‘Das göttliche Sein-in-Beziehung, daß im Gnadenbund offenbart wird setzt und offenbart auch das menschliche Sein als ein Sein-in-Beziehung.’ Busch, *Unter dem Bogen*, 508.

³⁶² Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background and History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

which God has patience with the creature and with its creation gives its time—time which acquires content through these events and which is finally to be ‘fulfilled’ and made ripe for its end by their conclusion. This history is from the theological standpoint *the history*.³⁶³

Here we see a continuation from the election-based christocentrism that Barth discovered in 1936. It is in the eternal election moment that God decided to be the covenant partner of human beings. This election is the point from which the covenant of grace emerged.³⁶⁴ The creation of the world is an act that creates a sphere in which the covenant can be executed, and not the other way around. The possibility that creation is left to be an independent sphere *apart* from God’s intervention is rejected from the beginning.

In my eyes, this insight is compatible to Walter Benjamin’s vision in his theses on the philosophy of history: ‘History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time [*Jetztzeit*]’ (Thesis XIV).³⁶⁵ And ‘every second was the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter’ (Thesis B).³⁶⁶ The concept of ‘now-time’ or *Jetztzeit* represents an opening in history, through which a dialectical leap may occur and explode the continuum. History is not homogenous or empty. It is neither purely linear nor circular, for it contains the room from which a radical break is made possible. As a Jewish philosopher, Benjamin speaks about this opening as a ‘small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter’. We can see its parallel in Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* in his idea of an interlink between creation and covenant. That covenant is ‘the internal ground of creation’, a consequence of the eternal election of Jesus Christ, means that there is a *hidden* messianic line in the general history of humankind: ‘The covenant of grace has its origin, takes place, and is accomplished in histories; not alongside, behind or above these histories in the form of ideas, but really *in them*’.³⁶⁷ The statement implies that there is an ever-present possibility for redemption in the creaturely realm. Barth also speaks about two kinds of time. The *first* one is what he calls ‘our time’, which refers to ‘the time of man as isolated from God and fallen from sin’.³⁶⁸ And the *second* one is ‘the time of grace’, or ‘the time in which the covenant takes place’.³⁶⁹ This second kind of time, the time of grace, happens *within* the first time, our time, but turns it into something *new*.

Within ‘our’ time, i.e. the time of the man who has fallen into sin and is isolated from God, there is initiated with God’s acceptance of man in grace the new time which God has for us and which, now that we have lost the time loaned to us, He wills to give to us again as the time of grace. With the commencement of this time, our lost time as such is condemned to perish but also transformed and *renewed*.³⁷⁰

‘Nothingness’ is not explicitly mentioned in this part of the text, but the insight on the interlink between creation and covenant is crucial in our understanding on the relationship between creation and nothingness. Because of the presence of covenant as the internal ground of

³⁶³ CD III/1, 59.

³⁶⁴ Although this insight, as Rinse Reeling Brouwer observes, already appeared as early as 1925 in *Göttingen Dogmatics*, in which Barth already formulates the link between election and the covenant of grace. See Reeling Brouwer, *Karl Barth and Post-Reformation Orthodoxy*, 114-5.

³⁶⁵ Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s On the Concept of History*, trans. Chris Turner (London ; New York: Verso, 2005), chp 1, Kindle.

³⁶⁶ Löwy, chp 1, Kindle.

³⁶⁷ CD III/1, 66 *emphasis mine*.

³⁶⁸ CD III/1, 72.

³⁶⁹ CD III/1, 73.

³⁷⁰ CD III/1, 73 *emphasis mine*.

creation, there is always a reason to hope, even when the spectre of nothingness seems to prevail in the realm of creation in ‘our time’, the time of sin.

The argument for the idea about the interlink between creation and covenant in *Church Dogmatics* III/1 is built mainly throughout Barth’s exposition on the first two chapters of the Bible, which Barth considers to be ‘the kernel of the doctrine of creation’. Because of its crucial role in the book, this exposition also occupies most of the pages in the volume (330 pages).³⁷¹ I will delve into some parts of this exposition and my focus will be on the exposition of Genesis 1:1-8 as it is the text that depicts the encounter between creation and nothingness. But before I dip into the text, I will deal first with Barth’s employment of the category of ‘saga’ for the creation story in the book of Genesis.

The Category of ‘Saga’

The two narratives in Genesis 1 and 2 are described by Barth as ‘saga’. What he means with that term is ‘an intuitive and poetic picture of a pre-historical reality of history which is enacted once and for all within the confines of time and space’.³⁷² This definition already indicates the reason why this category is picked. It is because the creation event which the texts of Genesis 1 and 2 recount belongs to the time of grace and not the time of sin. In fact, the time of grace is ‘the true continuation and sequel of the days, the week, in which God in His goodness created all things and finally man’.³⁷³ Creation is the *first* moment of the fulfilled time.

For the time of creation is also a turning point, a time of transition, a time of decision by God’s gracious volition and execution. Already in creation it is the direct Word and work of God himself which constitute time by fashioning the creature as such and causing it to live, i.e., by bringing it out of non-existence and giving it existence, thus giving it both present and future and therefore past.³⁷⁴

Since the time of creation is a fulfilled time, and not just the normal time, other categories are inadequate for its depiction. The category of ‘history’, for instance, is excluded, for the moment of creation cannot be equated to other events in the natural history. It does not belong fully in our time, although it happened *within* this realm. The insistence of modern people that only what is ‘historical’ is worthy is denounced by Barth by saying that it is ‘a ridiculous and middle-class (*bourgeoise*) habit of the modern Western mind’.³⁷⁵ Comfort might suppress one’s view on history, to the insistence that it is homogenous and empty and therefore has no possibility for a radical break. Unfortunately, this is also the habit of the ‘orthodox’ group that equates ‘the Word of God with a “historical” record’.³⁷⁶ Both orthodoxy and liberalism for Barth originate in ‘the unfortunate habit of Western thought which assumes that the reality of a

³⁷¹ Eberhard Busch observes that Barth’s exposition on Genesis 1-2 is even as long as the commentary of Hermann Gunkel and B. Jacob on the same texts. ‘*Es ist bislang nicht beachtet worden, daß Barth in seiner als Paraphrase zu Gen 1-2 vorgetragenen Schöpfungslehre das damals Ungewöhnliche tat: Er benutzte dazu so ausgiebig wie sonst nur noch den Kommentar von H. Gunkel den des jüdischen Exegeten B. Jacob, Genesis.*’ Busch, *Unter dem Bogen des einen Bundes*, 504.

³⁷² CD III/1, 81.

³⁷³ CD III/1, 74.

³⁷⁴ CD III/1, 74.

³⁷⁵ CD III/1, 81. The original German version is more precise here, as ‘middle-class’ is not the exact equivalent of ‘bourgeoise’. Cf. KD III/1, 87.

³⁷⁶ CD III/1, 82.

history stands or falls by whether it is “history”,³⁷⁷ and not from the Bible. Despite their unending dispute, they share a similar spirit.

The other category that Barth excludes is ‘myth’. What he means with ‘myth’ is the story of gods that covers ‘the essential principles of the general realities and relationships of the natural and spiritual cosmos which, in distinction to concrete history, are not confined to definite times and places’.³⁷⁸ The point of myth is not the gods it portrays nor the storyline, but the principles about reality that it bears. *Enuma elish*, for example, is a myth. It does not speak about the creation of something new, but the ‘inner rhythm of the cosmos’.³⁷⁹ This is completely different with the creation narratives in the Bible, which despite their use of some of the materials from the Babylonian myth, depict a complete *novum*.

In Gen. 1 and 2 no less than everything obviously depends on the uniqueness and sovereignty of the Creator and the creative act—so much so that a reciprocity of creaturely speech or activity is not even mentioned in the first account, and only incidentally at the end of the second (in the naming of the animals and the saying about the woman brought to man). Gunkel is not wrong when, with reference to the ‘development of the action’ in Gen. 1, he almost complains that ‘there is no real plot and no opponent. The whole narration consists of related words and acts of God’.³⁸⁰

While Genesis 1 and 2 emphasize the sovereignty of God and his decisive act, the gods of *Enuma elish* are portrayed as ‘weak and helpless’, without ‘qualitative difference’ to the non-divines.³⁸¹ It does not speak about a beginning, but ‘a deep insight into the already existing reality of the world and of man’.³⁸² It merely portrays the general condition of the world in the form of a story about gods and humans. It only speaks about the time of sin, but not the time of grace.

Exposition of Genesis 1:1-8

The *first* verse of the Bible is for Barth a superscription that preludes the event that is narrated from verse 3 onwards. ‘In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth’ is the summary of what is recounted in the story about the creation of the universe in six days that begins with the creation of light. This decision has to do with Barth’s rejection to see the second verse in a ‘positive relation’ to the first. He refuses to follow the common opinion (*opinio communis*) held by Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Protestant and Catholic orthodoxy, and Julius Wellhausen who perceive the expression ‘heaven and earth’ in verse 1 as a reference to the unformed material (*materia informis*) in Genesis 1:2. The view that God first created chaos and after that used it as the material to create the world for him is ‘not only entirely foreign to the rest of the Bible but also to these first verses of Genesis’.³⁸³

That the creation of heaven and earth in six days is ‘the beginning’ (*b^ereshit*) which is initiated by God and creation for Barth implies that creation did not emerge by itself accidentally, but truly as an expression of divine will. It is willed by God to be a ‘theatre of the

³⁷⁷ CD III/1, 82.

³⁷⁸ CD III/1, 84.

³⁷⁹ CD III/1, 88.

³⁸⁰ CD III/1, 89.

³⁸¹ CD III/1, 88.

³⁸² CD III/1, 89.

³⁸³ CD III/1, 100.

covenant’, and that’s why it is good.³⁸⁴ The phrase ‘theatre of the covenant’ is an allusion to Calvin’s famous idiom, *theatrum gloriae dei*. Whereas for Calvin creation itself is the theatre of God’s glory, for Barth it is the hidden presence of covenant as the internal ground which makes creation so.³⁸⁵

The *second* verse, which is considered to relate only negatively to the other verses, is about God’s rejection of the possibilities other than what he wills—nothingness.

Everything else, i.e., everything neutral or hostile to God’s purpose, ceased to be when time commenced with this divine volition and accomplishment, and the world was fashioned and ordered by God in time. It is that which, denied by God’s will and act, belongs only to the non-recurring past of commencing time. It is that which is excluded from all present and future existence, i.e., chaos, the world fashioned otherwise than according to the divine purpose, and therefore formless and intrinsically impossible.³⁸⁶

This chaotic, ‘formless’, and ‘intrinsically impossible’ reality is what Genesis 1:2 mentions as *tohu wa-bohu*. At the beginning of his exposition, Barth already excludes the possibility to interpret *tohu wa-bohu* as a condition before creation, a primeval reality independent of creation and distinct from God. It is a possibility, as the idea would not be strange to Babylonian myth, with which the author worked, but it would clash too much with the decisive concept of *bara*. On the other hand, Barth also rejects the other alternative which has been mentioned above: the common opinion that God created chaos first, and only then created the world out of it. The decisive objection against this long-held tradition, Barth argues, is that in view to the expression ‘heaven and earth’ in the first verse, the connection between the first verse and the second is inadmissible. And apart from this verse, there is no explanation in the text about a prior creation of the world in a raw or rudimentary state. If this was in the author’s mind, Barth believes, the author would not keep silent about it, would include the explanation in his narrative on the work of creation in six days, and would have described the primal reality postulated by the Babylonian myth as the beginning of the true work of creation. In fact, in Isaiah 45:18, we read the opposite: ‘[...] God that formed the earth and made it; he established it, he created it not a waste (*lo-tohu beraah*)’.³⁸⁷

The third alternative that Barth proposes is to see *tohu wa-bohu* in Gen. 1:2 as ‘the possibility which God in His creative decision has ignored and despised’.³⁸⁸ He uses the analogy of a builder when he chooses one specific work and rejects another, leaving it unexecuted. Since creation only commenced after the Word of God has been spoken, the theme of v. 2 is the state of the world without the Word of God. It is ‘a portrait, deliberately taken from myth, of the world which according to His revelation was negated, rejected, ignored and left behind in His actual creation’.³⁸⁹ Strangely, the Spirit of Elohim that broods over this chaotic reality in v. 2 is also interpreted negatively by Barth. For him, such an impotent and irrelevant God before the monstrous reality cannot be the God of Israel, the God of the Old and New Testaments.

³⁸⁴ CD III/1, 99.

³⁸⁵ Although Barth seems to confidently believe that Calvin goes along with him in this line (see CD III/1, 47). Cf. Yaroslav Viazovski and Paul Helm, *Image and Hope: John Calvin and Karl Barth on Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 159.

³⁸⁶ CD III/1, 101-102.

³⁸⁷ CD III/1, 102-104.

³⁸⁸ CD III/1, 108.

³⁸⁹ CD III/1, 108.

How could we recognize in Him, even vaguely, the God of the rest of Genesis and the rest of the Old and New Testaments? Where in the Bible is there any suggestion that this passive-contemplative role is ascribed to God? But if what is characterized at the start is the utter irrelevance and untrustworthiness of the god of myth, in conscious and cutting contrast to the real God of creation and His work and in a picture of devastating irony, at once everything becomes clear. Full justice is done to this god and his spirit, i.e., to the god who is not known as the God of Israel in this ignorance as such, who is as little the God of Israel, and therefore the only true God, as this monstrous world is the world created by Him.³⁹⁰

It seems that the divine spirit that hovers over the water unable to do anything is interpreted by Barth as a general idea of divinity abstracted from the Word of God that is only spoken in the next verse. This abstract and impotent divinity is also rejected by God's Word and therefore is a past reality, only a shadow, which can only appear 'when God's Word, and therefore the real choice, and the true work of God and therefore the reality of the cosmos itself are forgotten and disregarded'.³⁹¹ This ignorance can happen for the creatures can be so foolish that they rebel against the Word of God by looking back and returning to the state of chaos. The cosmos created by God can become a monstrous and evil one that God Himself can repent of creating man and the whole world (Gen. 6:5). It all happens because the freedom of the creatures is non-divine, and therefore is distinct from God's freedom. There is a risk of its misuse, but it is the one that God took upon Himself, and the one for which He was 'more than a match and thus did not need to fear'.³⁹² The Word of God that created the world and rejected this monstrous possibility has made the chaos, essentially, a past reality—this world *was*. It will always show itself to be a possibility, but 'God will not allow the cosmos to be definitively bewitched and demonized or His creation totally destroyed, nor will He permit the actual realization of the dark possibility of Genesis 1:2. He will not allow the myth to become a reality'.³⁹³ And if the wrath to such a chaotic world is only a possibility in Genesis 1:2, it became actual only on the cross of Calvary, directed to His Son, Jesus Christ, whose exaltation then became a sign of the promise given to the cosmos, the new form in which the sinister possibility will not threaten anymore.³⁹⁴

Catherine Keller, in her constructive proposal on the idea of *creatio ex profundis* (creation out of depths) as an alternative to all previous interpretations on the creation event, accuses Barth of displaying a *tehomophobic* attitude in his exposition on Genesis 1:2. This accusation is part of her critique towards Christian theology, which in contrast to science, 'shuns the depths of creation' through its negative depiction on indeterminate chaos in its views on creation.

Christianity established as unquestionable the truth that everything is created *not* from some formless and bottomless something but from nothing: an omnipotent God could have created the world only *ex nihilo*. This dogma of origin has exercised immense productive force. It became common sense. Gradually it took modern and then secular form, generating every kind of western originality, every logos creating the new as if from nothing, cutting violently, ecstatically free of the abysses of the past. But Christian theology, I argue, created this *ex nihilo* at the cost of its own depth. It systematically and symbolically sought to erase the chaos of creation. Such a maneuver, as this book

³⁹⁰ CD III/1, 107-8.

³⁹¹ CD III/1, 108.

³⁹² CD III/1, 108-9.

³⁹³ CD III/1, 109.

³⁹⁴ CD III/1, 110.

will suggest, was always doomed to a vicious circle: the nothingness invariably returns with the face of the feared chaos—to be nihilated all the more violently.³⁹⁵

Keller acknowledges that Barth does not belong to the group of theologians in the *ex nihilo* camp. But his treatment on the chaos of creation is considered by her to be as negative, if not worse. She says, ‘If the early fathers repress the dark waters, if Augustine more indulgently sublimates them, Barth’s opus performs their demonization’.³⁹⁶ For Barth not only neglects this chaos by denying its existence, he judges it as a reality which has been rejected by God. In other words, ‘Barth’s desublimation is not a nihilation but a repudiation’.³⁹⁷ For a feminist-postmodern theologian like Keller, this is a typical picture of a hypermasculine theology which is full of the language of domination and repressing queerness.

The critique of Keller has been responded by Rinse Reeling Brouwer in his examination on Barth’s exposition of the creation stories in the book of Genesis. He questions Keller’s presuppositions and defends Barth’s depiction of nothingness.

(a) Is it true that the language of Nothingness, Nihilism, etc., is only a construction, an ideological framing of reality, invented by masculine thinkers from Nietzsche to Barth? Can you really neglect the ‘metaphysical danger’ as an object of serious fear on the part of human beings? Is ‘tehomophobia’ really a phobia, a disease, a misunderstanding of the actual state of being? Do you take seriously all those people who are afflicted with such an alleged phobia, sometimes up to the boundaries of madness? It is my feeling, that Barth is honest in acknowledging the actuality of the threat of what he calls Nothingness, and at the same time is leaving the confrontation with this actuality of the non-being only to God, because its weight is too heavy to be borne by creaturely beings. (b) Connected with that last remark is the question, whether a complex as Gen. 1:1-2:3 should only be the expression of the need to control the ideological field by a caste of priests by way of a logocentric ordering narrative? Do not such texts bear witness to an astonishment that the God of Israel is able to speak and act in such an unexpected otherness, compared with the given world-views? And (c) Is it true that such a phenomenon as ‘queerness’, undermining repressive order, can only be found in the ambivalent deep of *tehom*?³⁹⁸

I agree with all three of the points from Brouwer. In addition to these remarks, my comment would be that this fear about the language of domination and omnipotence might be exaggerated. Such a suspicion towards power is rightly pointed to the gods of the kings whose function is to be an ideological pretext for a dominion of the ruling class over the subjugated many, but surely not towards the God of Exodus who opposes oppressive structures. The slogan *ni dieu ni maître* can be regarded as biblical when the rejected *dieu* is any god other than the God of Exodus. In some sense, this God is ‘queer’ compared to other gods, for his preference to the nation of slaves, and the *novum* that entails all his acts. This queerness is wholly other. It brings something new, not just a twist in the balance of power. For those who are facing a desperate situation, this kind of God is more promising than the weakened version that Keller favors. They need salvation, not chaos.

The exposition on the next verses (3-5), serves as the ground for the idea of what Barth would later in *Church Dogmatics* III/3 call ‘the shadowy side of creation’ (*die Schattenseite*

³⁹⁵ Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London/New York: Routledge, 2003), xvi.

³⁹⁶ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 84.

³⁹⁷ Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 84.

³⁹⁸ Rinse H. Reeling Brouwer, ‘The Work of the Spirit in Creation: According to Barth’s Exegesis of the First Chapters of Genesis (§41)’, *Zeitschrift für Dialektische Theologie* 34, no. 1 (2018), 134-5.

der Schöpfung). By this term he is saying about the natural darkness: the darkness which declares the reality that was rejected, but unlike the reality that it refers, was created by God, and therefore, is part of the good creation. This darkness was only created in its separation from light. As opposed to darkness, light declares life, the willed cosmos, and is the one which God calls as 'the day'. It is the light, not darkness, which was ordained to be 'the unit of time and therefore the measure of our life-span'.³⁹⁹ God also gave this natural darkness name, and numbers it among His creation. In that way He fitted darkness into the realm of His lordship. It does not mean that the two, light and darkness, have a 'fusion of essence'. The two are adversaries. But as it is only the light that God calls 'the day', the darkness, however powerful it is, is not a constitutive part of time, and therefore 'is in no way presented as a second concept of time beside day, but only as its negation and limitation'.⁴⁰⁰ And the vision of the disappearance of night in the heavenly Jerusalem in Revelation 21:25 and 22:5, reveals that the presence of the natural darkness along with the day in the present world is only provisional in nature.⁴⁰¹ The power of the darkness will not last forever.

After the creation of light, the next step in which God established the creation that He willed was the creation of the firmament in the second day. It is the boundary that separates the 'waters above' and the 'waters below'. God crushed the threats that threaten His creation and provided protection.

Its commencement consists in the radical crushing of the sovereignty of the element of chaos; in the liquidation of its finality, form and structure; in a division into 'waters above' and 'waters below' in which it can no longer speak a final inimical and mortal word, but can only be a last threat which cannot make man and his world impossible and thus destroy them. It is separated. It can exist only in this separation. Hence it has completely ceased to be what it was. It is no longer the one and all. As the one and all it merely *was* in the past posited by God's creative Word.⁴⁰²

This firmament forms an 'unbreachable wall' and ensures the existence of the lower cosmos. 'Thus the upper, hidden cosmos cannot be an object of real terror to man. He need not fear that chaos, death and destruction will crash down upon him from heaven'.⁴⁰³ The presence of this firmament 'testifies that no matter how weak or impotent the creature might be, no matter how great the burden imposed upon it, no matter how sinister the overhanging threat, it may at least breathe, since there is no last and therefore no first thing that can rob it of its confidence to exist before and with God, but every threat can only be intermediate, and therefore limited and restrained'.⁴⁰⁴ No wonder that the psalmists claim that the firmament is God's witness (Ps. 8:3; 19:1; 102:25). It proclaims the works of his hands, His wisdom and omnipotence, His decision and capacity to uphold the cosmos, and also His mercy.⁴⁰⁵

³⁹⁹ CD III/1, 126.

⁴⁰⁰ CD III/1, 127.

⁴⁰¹ CD III/1, 129.

⁴⁰² CD III/1, 133.

⁴⁰³ CD III/1, 134.

⁴⁰⁴ CD III/1, 135.

⁴⁰⁵ CD III/1, 139-40.

Humanity and Nothingness

In this section, I proceed to Barth's discussion on nothingness in his elaboration of the doctrine of humanity in *Church Dogmatics* III/2. My focus will be on sub-section §44.3, 'The Real Man', where the theme nothingness appears quite frequently. I intend to show that Barth's treatment on the real humanity and nothingness in §44.3 is meant to be a counter-proposal to the optimistic view of humanity in the Enlightenment tradition and the reactionary myth of 'abstract humanity'. God's revelation in Jesus Christ incites an awareness that human beings are always situated on the brink of nothingness and are called into obedience to God in the struggle against that reality.

The Real Humanity and Nothingness

In my reading, Barth's explication on the real humanity in §44.3 functions as a critique and alternative proposal to the over-optimistic view on humanity in the Enlightenment tradition. Instead of following this anthropological trend in his time, Barth's christocentric approach led him to recognize the human being as a creature positioned in a fragile spot. Human beings are always standing on the brink of nothingness.

The adjective 'real' that Barth uses in §44.3 is utilized as a contrast to what he mentions as the 'phenomena of the human' in §44.2. Any understanding based on observation alone, without reference to God's revelation in Jesus Christ, will merely reach the phenomena of the human, without grasping the real ontological determination of humanity.

The ontological determination of humanity is grounded in the fact that one man among all others is the man Jesus. So long as we select any other starting point for our study, we shall reach only the phenomena of the human. We are condemned to abstractions so long as our attention is riveted as it were on other men, or rather on man in general, as if we could learn about real man from a study of man in general, and in abstraction from the fact that one man among all others is the man Jesus. In this case we miss the one Archimedean point given us beyond humanity, and therefore the one possibility of discovering the ontological determination of man. Theological anthropology has no choice in this matter. It is not yet or no longer theological anthropology if it tries to pose and answer the question of the true being of man from any other angle.⁴⁰⁶

Here we see the controlling function of christocentrism. Any Christian doctrine, including the doctrine of humanity, has to be built on christology if it is to merit its name. Without this presupposition, he claims that :

We have been unable to accept those determinations of man in which his relationship to God, his participation in the history inaugurated between him and God, and the glory, lordship, purpose and service of God, are not brought out as the meaning of human life. We have also had to be critical even where the concept of God seemed to play a certainly not unimportant role, but where it remained empty to the extent that there did not emerge anything of His saving action and the related actuality of the being of man.⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰⁶ CD III/2, 132.

⁴⁰⁷ CD III/2, 133.

On christological basis, on the other hand, godlessness appears to be an impossibility. For Jesus Christ, who was elected by God, shares the same humanity with every other human. Because of the fact that Jesus was human, his fellow human beings cannot but be confronted with the divine Other. Not just a general and abstract idea of divinity or deity, but the God who is revealed through his works in Jesus Christ.⁴⁰⁸ The fact that it is in the form of human, and not other creatures, that God chooses to reveal himself in Jesus Christ, also speaks about the special purpose and task that human beings are endowed with.⁴⁰⁹ They are meant to be the witness of the saving event in Jesus Christ where the will of God is revealed: the preservation of his creation from the power of nothingness.⁴¹⁰ Human beings are elected in Jesus Christ for this purpose, and summoned by the Word of God to follow the path that leads to life instead of death, chaos, or non-being.⁴¹¹ And all of this takes place in the sphere of history. As the work of Jesus Christ happened in history, so human's dependence on God must be understood not only in terms of being, but also in history where he took responsibility in gratitude and obedience.⁴¹²

Barth does not explicitly mention an interlocutor in his discussion on the real humanity in *Church Dogmatics* III/2, but when his earlier work in 1933, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, is considered, it is visible that his proposal about the real humanity in *Church Dogmatics* III/2 is presented as an alternative to the set of problems around the modern ideas of humanity that he diagnosed in *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*. As I mentioned earlier, those two texts form an *inclusio* where the former is more of diagnosis and the latter proposes the solution.

Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century started with a chapter titled 'Man in the Eighteenth Century'.⁴¹³ It depicts the human being in the optimistic spirit of the Enlightenment period as he/she who grew to be more and more absolutistic, self-centered, self-confident, and authority denouncing: 'For the yardstick is quite simply the man of the present with his complete trust in his own powers of discernment and judgment, with his feeling for freedom, his desire for intellectual conquest, his urge to form and his supreme moral self-confidence'.⁴¹⁴ The seven major tendencies in the century's philosophy, in Barth's observation, are: the conviction that human beings are superior, the shaping of the objective world according to human's will, the belief in God as the perfection of the goodness that the human pursues, the close link between human and God, the God who justifies man's conviction, theodicy for the sake of anthropodicy, and the dominating role of subjective reason.⁴¹⁵ The best representative for these tendencies, according to Barth, is Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, for his optimistic view about the harmony of human and his surrounding world.⁴¹⁶ The same figure reappears in *Church Dogmatics* III/3 in the section on 'God and Nothingness'. There Barth criticizes Leibniz for not recognizing the threat of nothingness, because of his neglect of revelation.⁴¹⁷

The neglect of the reality of nothingness is the crucial difference that separates the christocentric anthropology from the Enlightenment version. If the revelation of God in Jesus Christ brought the Elected One to death on the cross, surely the comfortable view on the harmony of humanity and his surrounding and all the optimistic convictions about human

⁴⁰⁸ CD III/2, 133-6.

⁴⁰⁹ CD III/2, 137-9.

⁴¹⁰ CD III/2, 143-5.

⁴¹¹ CD III/2, 150-7.

⁴¹² CD III/2, 160-86.

⁴¹³ Karl Barth, *From Rousseau to Ritschl* (London: SCM, 1959), 11-57.

⁴¹⁴ Barth, *From Rousseau to Ritschl*, 36.

⁴¹⁵ Barth, *From Rousseau to Ritschl*, 52-53.

⁴¹⁶ Barth, *From Rousseau to Ritschl*, 56.

⁴¹⁷ CD III/3, 317-8.

beings must be brought into question. Despite all the achievements gained through science and modern philosophy, the Second World War showed how prone human beings are to the possibilities of creating their own inferno. They are always standing on the brink of nothingness. And God summons them to come out of it:

As it is said to man that God is gracious to him, that He is his Saviour and keeper, the call goes out to him: 'Arise, and come to me. Come to be with Me and therefore to be man, to be saved and kept by Me from *chaos*. Come to live with Me and by Me.' Man cannot be merely by hearing this call. He can be, fulfilling his being as knowledge, only as he is obedient to this call.⁴¹⁸

Considering the persistent nature of this menace, neglecting its reality can only increase its potent threat. Thus, Barth's proposal about human self-awareness grounded in God's revelation in Jesus Christ suggests an alternative to the deficiency in the optimistic view of humanity in the Enlightenment tradition.

Another way to look at the problem of the nineteenth century's doctrine of humanity is that it *abstracts* human beings from the soil of history. Its optimism is the result of this abstraction. There was so much confidence in the power of a human subject, belittling the fact that this subject is always positioned under the condition of history. In the *Church Dogmatics*, this history is the theological history, the battle of God against nothingness in the realm of creation. The failure to see humanity's situatedness in this history leads towards blind optimism.

A few decades ago, Rinse Reeling Brouwer argued that Barth's critique towards the 'myth of an abstract human' resembles the critique of Karl Marx on Ludwig Feuerbach.⁴¹⁹ In his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx points to Feuerbach's critique of religion which successfully highlights religious alienation, but nevertheless leaves the human subject as an abstract, contemplative being who project his imagination of the ideals into imageries of transcendence apart from the struggle in history. Marx's proposal was to ground this human subject in history, 'the ensemble of social relations', as one who is conditioned by history and transforming it through his/her practical activity.⁴²⁰ I fully agree with Reeling Brouwer in looking at Barth's motion as a theological counterpart of Marx's critique of Feuerbach. My addition to his argument is that this point becomes more visible when we look at Barth's discussion on the real humanity and nothingness in *Church Dogmatics* III/2. Whereas Marx historicizes the human subject in the *material* history of class struggle, Barth locates the human subject in the *theological* history of the struggle against nothingness that takes place *in* the material history. Both also reprove the reactionary vision of humanity as a contemplative subject. Marx insists on *praxis*. Barth calls for *obedience* to God's call to stay on his side away from the chaos.

The parallel with Marx exposes the political character of Barth's discussion on the real humanity and nothingness in *Church Dogmatics* III/2. It promotes a theological vision which demands action from the humankind and liberates humanity from the illusory presumptions of its detachment from the history of God's struggle against nothingness.

⁴¹⁸ CD III/2, 180 *emphasis mine*.

⁴¹⁹ Rinse Herman Reeling Brouwer, *Over kerkelijke dogmatiek en marxistische filosofie: Karl Barth vergelijkenderwijs gelezen* ('s-Gravenhage: Boekencentrum, 1988), 141.

⁴²⁰ Karl Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach' in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 145.

Providence and Nothingness

In the preface of *Church Dogmatics* III/3, Barth announces that his doctrine of providence resembles the scheme of Protestant orthodox dogmatics and yet at the same time offers a ‘radical correction’ of it.⁴²¹ The parallel with the Protestant orthodox dogmatics can be seen in the adoption of the tripartite scheme, divine preserving-divine accompanying-divine ruling (*conservatio-concursus-gubernatio*), and the placement of the doctrine of providence in a very close relation to the doctrine of creation rather than the doctrine of God.⁴²² As for the ‘radical correction’, the christocentric approach enables Barth to resolve the problem of a capricious image of God in the traditional Protestant doctrine of providence and invites human participation in God’s salvific work. As Christopher Green mentions in his monograph on Barth’s doctrine of providence, by placing the doctrine of election as an ‘anterior doctrine’ to the doctrine of providence, Barth ‘not only identifies the God of providence as benevolent’, but ‘also expects the creature’s responsive praise in the context of his sustaining, accompanying and ruling work.’⁴²³ Divine providence now is focused on the ‘one narrow line of history of the covenant’ *within* the history of creation.⁴²⁴ The covenant as ‘the internal basis of creation’ is what providence is about. The doctrine of divine providence no longer provides a theological justification to the natural development of history, but speaks about the enduring presence of the possibility for ‘radical alteration and even transformation’ of the creaturely history.⁴²⁵ Humankind are invited to look at this ‘narrow line of history’ in faith, through the hearing of the Word, faith in God and Jesus Christ, and to respond accordingly. The belief in divine providence does not encourage fatalism. Instead, it calls for a *praxis* of liberation.

The liberative tone in *Church Dogmatics* III/3 can also be perceived in Barth’s unique treatment of divine preserving in §49. *Divine preserving is God’s preservation of his creation* by preserving the distinction of the existence of what He wills, from the reality that He does not will. He conserves it so that it is not overthrown by that which is not. This is what Genesis 1:3-9 describes as the division, the marking off and confirmation of light from darkness, of the waters above from the water below, of the dry land from the sea, in a word, of the cosmos from chaos. Because the creature rests in this division, it is God who preserves it. The story of the flood (Gen. 6-8) and the plagues of Egypt (Ex. 7-11) show that chaos can easily takeover when God turns away his face.⁴²⁶ One of the specific characteristics of Barth’s conception of divine preservation is the inclusion of the notion of deliverance (*servare*), so that divine preservation is not only about the conservation (*conservare*). This inclusion is rarely found in older theologies and it is due to their lack of attention on nothingness. In Augustine, Aquinas, and the Reformed theology of the seventeenth century, for example, we see that the notion of divine preservation is strictly constrained in the notion of the dependence of being or existence. Only in Anselm, as far as Barth recognizes, the notion of deliverance is found.⁴²⁷ With a view to the presence of the threat of nothingness, God’s preservation for the creation so that it can continue to exist is not only about letting it participate in his being, but his *deliverance* of the creation from the threatening reality that sometimes takes over the rule in creaturely history. Barth’s incorporation of the notion of nothingness in his treatment of the doctrine of divine preserving results in an insight about the *liberative* dimension in the doctrine.

⁴²¹ CD III/3, xii.

⁴²² In contrast to the approach in medieval scholasticism. See CD III/3, 3.

⁴²³ Green, *Doxological Theology*, 11-29.

⁴²⁴ CD III/3, 36.

⁴²⁵ CD III/3, 6.

⁴²⁶ CD III/3, 73-74.

⁴²⁷ CD III/3, 75-76.

In short, Barth's doctrine of providence in *Church Dogmatics* III/3 can be regarded as an account of God's enduring *struggle* against the persistent threat of nothingness in the creaturely history. This is a struggle that can only be seen through the eyes of faith, and its revelation calls for participation. In the history of covenant God is the ultimate victor and nothingness is only a past reality. He preserves, accompanies, and rules over creation, protecting it from nothingness. This is what happens in the creaturely history in the time of grace. But in the time of sin, nothingness prevails over creation, for a while. In this struggle, the angels personify God's messengers, while the demons are the ambassadors of nothingness.

Such is the framework in which the discussion about God and nothingness in §50 lies. Now we will look at that section closely.

God and Nothingness

In §50, Barth puts a lot of emphasis on the problem of knowledge about nothingness. He argues that whenever christocentrism is not applied, one would only gain a confusion about this reality, which will lead to its triumph. This point is demonstrated through the introduction of the concept of 'the shadowy side of creation' and his engagement with five thinkers: Julius Müller, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre.

What Barth calls 'the shadowy side of creation' (*die Schattenseite der Schöpfung*) refers to the 'negative aspect of creation' which is still part of the good creation. In the creation saga of the Bible, this aspect is depicted through the imagery of night and water, as they function as the negative side of 'creaturely existence' when paired with day and land.⁴²⁸ The presence of the shadowy side reminds the creatures that the good creation is constantly threatened by the abyss of nothingness. It functions as a 'frontier' where creation is 'continually confronted by this menace'. But in itself, the shadowy side is part of the good creation and moreover 'a mark of its perfection'.⁴²⁹

It is true that in creation there is not only a Yes but also a No; not only a height but also an abyss; not only clarity but also obscurity; not only progress and continuation but also impediment and limitation; not only growth but also decay; not only opulence but also indigence; not only beauty but also ashes; not only beginning but also end; not only value but also worthlessness. It is true that in creaturely existence, and especially in the existence of man, there are hours, days and years both bright and dark, success and failure, laughter and tears, youth and age, gain and loss, birth and sooner or later its inevitable corollary, death. It is true that individual creatures and men experience these things in most unequal measure, their lots being assigned by a justice which is curious or very much concealed. Yet it is irrefutable that creation and creature are good even in the fact that all that exists in this contrast and antithesis. In all this, far from being null, it praises its Creator and Lord even in the fact that all that it exists in this contrast and antithesis.⁴³⁰

Barth attributes the ability to see creation in these twofold aspects to his favorite composer, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. For him Mozart is 'incomparable' and should have 'a place in theology, especially in the doctrine of creation' because he was able to hear '[...] the harmony of creation to which the shadow also belongs but in which the shadow is not darkness,

⁴²⁸ CD III/3, 295.

⁴²⁹ CD III/3, 296.

⁴³⁰ CD III/3, 297.

deficiency is not defeat, sadness cannot become despair, trouble cannot degenerate into tragedy and infinite melancholy is not ultimately forced to claim undisputed sway'.⁴³¹ Barth's high regard for Mozart is further shown in his bold claim that on the understanding about the goodness of creation in its total aspects, the composer achieved a better comprehension even compared to theologians of the past, such as the church fathers and the reformers, and of the present.⁴³²

Barth insists on the correct distinction between the shadowy side of creation and nothingness because the confusion between the two, according to him, 'is a masterpiece and even a triumph of nothingness'. Why is this so? Because then we attribute to it a 'certain goodness' and the enemy also 'goes unrecognized'.⁴³³

Unfortunately, Barth's distinction of the shadowy side of creation and nothingness itself has evoked confusions among his interpreters. Rosemary Radford Ruether claims that 'the relation of radical evil to the shadow side of creation which expresses itself in darkness, suffering, decay, and death' seems to be 'the most difficult problem in Barth's treatment of evil'.⁴³⁴ William Stacy Johnson detects some contradictions in the idea of the shadowy side of creation, which on the one hand is 'a mark of creation's perfection' and yet on the other hand turned towards nothingness.⁴³⁵ Wolf Krötke perceives the difficulty that Johnson mentions, and proposes a 'corrective'.⁴³⁶ His critique is aimed towards Barth's decision to use Genesis 1:3ff. as an explanation to the origin of the shadowy side. For in an excursus on §50.4, Barth mentions:

Note that the first creative work (Gen. 1^{3f.}) is simply separation—the separation of light from darkness, of the waters on the earth from the threatening waters above the firmament, of the dry land from the seas. Note also that with this separation there *arises even within the good creation of God a side which is as it were the neighbour and frontier of chaos*. But chaos is not night, or the waters above the firmament, or the earthly sea. It still remains not merely distinct from the works of God, but excluded by *the operation of God*, a fleeting shadow and a *receding frontier*.⁴³⁷

This passage suggests that the shadowy side of creation was not part of God's good creation in the beginning. It only exists as a consequence of God's action separating creation from chaos. No wonder that Krötke questions whether in doing so Barth has drawn an image of declining levels of being: first, creation, then the shadowy side, and then nothingness.⁴³⁸ His suggestion is that the controversial exegesis on Genesis 1:3 should be avoided and instead the focus should be returned to its grounding in God's covenant. The light side and the dark side parallel Jesus' death and resurrection. Since death has been conquered in him, the shadowy side is not just a lesser part of creation, but 'a witness to God's victory'.⁴³⁹ On the other hand, the light side of creation, not just its shadowy side, is also under the threat of nothingness.⁴⁴⁰

⁴³¹ CD III/3, 298.

⁴³² CD III/3, 298.

⁴³³ CD III/3, 299-301.

⁴³⁴ Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Left Hand of God in the Theology of Karl Barth: Karl Barth as a Mythopoetic Theologian," *Journal of Religious Thought* 25 (1969): 14.

⁴³⁵ William Stacy Johnson, *The Mystery of God: Karl Barth and the Postmodern Foundations of Theology* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 98.

⁴³⁶ Krötke, *Sin and Nothingness in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 43.

⁴³⁷ CD III/3, 352 *emphasis mine*.

⁴³⁸ Krötke, *Sin and Nothingness in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 41-43.

⁴³⁹ Krötke, 43.

⁴⁴⁰ Krötke, 44.

More recent scholars such as Christopher Green and Matthias Wütrich handle the confusion about the distinction between the shadowy side and nothingness differently. Wütrich believes that Barth presents two versions of the shadowy side. The one in *Church Dogmatics* III/1 is rather negative, while the other in *Church Dogmatics* III/3 is more positive.⁴⁴¹ On the other hand, Christopher Green argues that Barth intentionally conflates the shadowy side and nothingness on several occasions, to emphasize the significance of prayer. When the creature ceases to pray, the distinction between the shadowy side and nothingness becomes blurry.⁴⁴²

Among the above proposals, my sympathy lies with Krötke's. I think the inconsistencies in Barth's account of the shadowy side of creation are clear enough. Rather than striving to harmonize the tensions, I prefer to turn Barth's argument back to his basic premise: christology. Krötke has masterfully exercised this move in his 'corrective'. Grounded in the story of Jesus' death and resurrection, the shadowy side is a witness to Christ's victory over the death, and the light side of creation undergoes a similar threat to the shadowy one. Both are situated on the brink of nothingness. This interpretation would suit perfectly with the opening lyrics of Mozart's *Requiem*. Indeed, it starts with *requiem aeternam dona ets, Domine*. But then it immediately continues with *et lux perpetua luceat ets!*

Another reason to support Krötke's proposal is because Barth himself emphasizes so much on the importance of the grounding of our knowledge of nothingness in christology throughout §50.

When God himself became a creature in Jesus Christ, He confirmed His creation in its totality as an act of His wisdom and mercy, as His good creation without blemish or blame. Yet much more than this was involved. It is written that 'the Word became flesh', i.e., that it became not only a creature, but a creature in mortal peril, a creature threatened and actually corrupted, a creature which in face and in spite of its goodness, and in disruption and destruction of its imparted goodness, was subject not to an internal but to an external attack which it could neither contain nor counter... . That God's Word, God's Son, God Himself, became flesh means no other than that God saw a challenge to Himself in this assault on His creature, in this invading alien, in this other determination of His creature, in its capture and self-surrender.⁴⁴³

Christology is key in recognizing the threat of nothingness, affirming the goodness of creation in its totality, and becoming aware about the fragile situation of the creature. The crucial role of christology in developing our knowledge of nothingness is further highlighted throughout the discussions with five thinkers in a long excursus where Barth discusses five different ways of approaching the problem of nothingness from two theologians (Julius Müller and Friedrich Schleiermacher) and three philosophers (Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre).

The *first* figure that Barth discusses in his long excursus is Julius Müller, a German theologian in the nineteenth century. Here he problematizes Müller's approach in grounding his understanding of sin on an observation of historical reality alone. Barth appreciates Müller for his acknowledgement of 'an utterly alien factor which is radically opposed and resistant to the nature of God and of man and their mutual relationship'.⁴⁴⁴ However, for Müller, this conclusion can be garnered through an analysis of socio-historical reality alone apart from theology. Barth compares Müller's approach to Kant who has also presented a similar argument, and he appreciates the remarkable accuracy of their thesis. What he perceives to be

⁴⁴¹ Wütrich, *Gott und das Nichtige*, 135-41.

⁴⁴² Green, *Doxological Theology*, 168.

⁴⁴³ CD III/3, 303-4.

⁴⁴⁴ CD III/3, 313.

lacking when the problem of sin is analyzed in such a way is its failure to see ‘that human sin is not an isolated phenomenon but only one important aspect of the fundamental phenomenon of nothingness’.⁴⁴⁵ As we can observe in the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth attributes the cause for the existence of evil to the reality of nothingness persistently tempting humankind to fall on its side. Sin happens when humanity chooses to follow this temptation, and it is expressed in three ways: pride, falsehood, and sloth.⁴⁴⁶ But sin does not just come out of nowhere. The threat that haunts this side of the world is much larger than just the frailty of humankind. By isolating the problem of evil to the phenomenon of human sin, Barth accuses Müller of neglecting the New Testament accounts of Jesus’ ministry, and especially his resurrection, which clearly reveal that there is a powerful adversary to God that is operating in this world. Müller’s doctrine of sin has domesticated something that in reality is truly a threat. It leaves us unaware of its danger and distracts us from the call to join God’s struggle against nothingness.

The *second* figure that Barth discusses in the excursus is Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. He is praised for his correct understanding of the shadowy side of creation, and Barth deems his view better than Müller’s.⁴⁴⁷ Leibniz’s theorizes that the world in which we live is the best possible world, because it corresponds to God’s perfection. Since its Creator is a perfect divine being, creation must be a perfect work as well. But the perfection of creation is only a relative perfection, not an absolute one, due to ‘the essential non-divinity of the creatures’. The absolute perfection belongs to God only, otherwise the creation would be the second god. Evil is simply caused by this ‘creaturely limitation’.⁴⁴⁸ It is grounded in ‘*causa deficiens*’ instead of ‘*causa efficiens*’. Apart from his appraisal for the recognition of the positive and negative sides of creation, Barth problematizes Leibniz’s ground of that understanding. It seems to come from an abstract view of God, lacking in christological grounding.⁴⁴⁹ More importantly, by defining evil merely as creaturely deficiency or limitation, Leibniz has really undermined the adversity of nothingness, denied the longing of the oppressed for redemption, and dismissed the contradictions in worldly history that have to be resolved in God’s reconciliation.

This domestication is such that the wolf not only dwells with the lamb, as depicted in Is. 11⁶, but actually becomes a lamb. There can be no thought of redemption or liberation, since there is nothing or no one from whom the created world needs to be redeemed and liberated. Again, there is no place for a reconciliation of the world with God, since the peace between them has never been broken.⁴⁵⁰

Leibniz’s oblivion reminds me of a popular Christian hymn, ‘All Things Bright and Beautiful’, which invites its singers to celebrate a beautiful life while ignoring the obvious contradictions and struggle on earth.

The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them, high or lowly,
And ordered their estate.

Although Leibniz took his view on evil from Augustine’s notion of ‘*malum est privatio boni*’, Barth denies that the church father meant it in Leibniz’s way. He believes that when Augustine

⁴⁴⁵ CD III/3, 314-5.

⁴⁴⁶ CD IV/1, 79.

⁴⁴⁷ CD III/3, 317.

⁴⁴⁸ CD III/3, 316.

⁴⁴⁹ CD III/3, 317.

⁴⁵⁰ CD III/3, 318.

uses the term *privatio*, what he means is ‘the purely negative character of evil’ and ‘its nature as opposition’ to God and his creature. Privation for him is ‘*corruptio* or *conversio boni*’, which ‘is not only the absence of what really is, but the assault upon it’.⁴⁵¹ This offensive nature is missing in Leibniz’s adaptation and results in a domesticated version.

The *third* figure that Barth discusses is Friedrich Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher’s conception of evil is taken from his discussion on religious self-consciousness. According to him, this consciousness is ‘antithetically determined as a consciousness of sin and grace’.⁴⁵² When God-consciousness is awakened, sin comes into view as the opposition, the ‘obstruction of our God-consciousness’. In other words, sin is ‘the repression of God-consciousness’ and original sin is the universal incapacity of humankind to develop a complete God-consciousness. Evil is the consequence of this corporate inability.⁴⁵³ What Barth appreciates from Schleiermacher is his insight that nothingness ‘owes its existence to God’, not because he willed it, but because he ‘rejected’ or ‘negated’ it.⁴⁵⁴ The consciousness of sin depends on and is revealed by the awakening of God-consciousness. This gravity to divine revelation is something that he does not find in Leibniz. However, Schleiermacher’s scheme presents ‘that good is only correlative to evil’, evoking Barth’s accusation that he ‘was thus guilty of not only a serious consolidation of evil but of an even more serious disintegration of good’.⁴⁵⁵ For then sin is placed ‘in the same category as grace’ and given a ‘legitimate standing’, and grace is seen as something which is bound to sin. Barth considers this proposal as another version of Leibniz, and therefore it has to be rejected.

It includes sin in the same category as grace, and thus esteems, justifies and even establishes it as the counterpart and concomitant as grace. Sin is given a legitimate standing in relative grace. It presents itself as an agent whose reaction to grace fulfils a function no less accredited than that of grace, and just as lawful and necessary and divinely ordained. This is a real return to Leibniz. Sin is now understood positively. Without sin grace could not exist. That evil is correlative to good now means that it balances it. At this point we can only protest.⁴⁵⁶

Just like Leibniz, Schleiermacher minimizes the seriousness of evil and the radical nature of grace. Barth attributes this fallacy, again, to the lack of christology. For by relegating the problem of evil to human subjectivity, Schleiermacher has neglected the story of Jesus Christ, in whom God ‘covenants with man and therefore genuinely confronts him, negating, judging and condemning sin and thus opposing it as an *objective* reality’.⁴⁵⁷

The *fourth* figure that Barth discusses is Martin Heidegger. Along with the next one, Jean-Paul Sartre, here we encounter two atheistic philosophers. What incites Barth’s interests in these figures is their recognition of the reality of nothingness, something that surpasses the three figures that he discusses earlier. Barth is always interested in looking at the historical and material basis of ideas,⁴⁵⁸ and in this case, the historical circumstances which he deems to have led Heidegger and Sartre to achieve such understanding are the experience of both the First and the Second World War. These events are what separated them from Schleiermacher and Leibniz. They experienced the horror of the war first-hand and were able to express the

⁴⁵¹ CD III/3, 317-8.

⁴⁵² CD III/3, 319.

⁴⁵³ CD III/3, 320-1.

⁴⁵⁴ CD III/3, 327.

⁴⁵⁵ CD III/3, 332.

⁴⁵⁶ CD III/3, 333.

⁴⁵⁷ CD III/3, 328 *emphasis mine*.

⁴⁵⁸ Gorringer, *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony*, 7-8.

anxieties of their contemporaries. Unlike the optimistic Enlightenment thinkers, these philosophers reflect on the 'obtrusion' towards modernity.⁴⁵⁹

Barth's discussion on Heidegger is mainly based on the latter's inaugural lecture in Freiburg in 1929, *Was ist Metaphysik?*, which he considers to be the summary of Heidegger's main work which was published earlier in 1927, *Sein und Zeit*. Barth understands that in that lecture, Heidegger describes nothingness as a dynamic factor that discloses itself in the mood of dread.⁴⁶⁰ It is not just a result of 'our rational act of negation'. It is a reality in itself. This factor is not discussed in science, for science observes only what is, and not what is not. Nevertheless, it is only by being projected onto nothing, or through the nihilating work of nothingness, that the human beings grasp their existence. Through the disclosure of nothingness in the moment of dread, humankind can perceive what is.⁴⁶¹ Barth appreciates Heidegger's insight which for him signifies the end of the Enlightenment optimism. The shock experience of the war has brought him to reach an understanding that even surpasses the ones in Christian literature. For in Heidegger, more than in many other theologians, the reality of this nihilating factor is really acknowledged.⁴⁶² However, Barth questions whether the nothingness that Heidegger describes is really a dread factor. For him, it seems that it is actually not.

But in its most real form this dread (and this is a direct agreement with Sartre) is already overcome. It is peace, serenity and even daring. And that as which nothing reveals itself in dread, Heidegger's nothing in itself and as such, has no power to awaken dread at all. Otherwise how could it arrogate the functions of God and become a substitute for Him, as in Heidegger's myth? Otherwise Heidegger would surely have had to say that the devil is the true God. But he never dreams of saying this, because for him nothing is not a dreadful, horrible, dark abyss but something fruitful and salutary and radiant.⁴⁶³

Although Heidegger associates nothingness with dread, in reality its disclosure is something that brings light. It has such a positive role in his scheme that Barth concludes that Heidegger actually performs 'the apotheosis of this designation'. The nihilating factor occupies the place of God himself as the criterion of everything that exists.⁴⁶⁴

It is a well-known and controversy-provoking fact that Heidegger was a supporter of National Socialism. As Matthew Sharpe documents in his recent survey on the debate about Heidegger's affiliation to the Nazis that has flourished since the publication of many of his previously unpublished writings in 1998, there is an ongoing intense discussion about this topic that would be difficult to settle at the moment.⁴⁶⁵ Heidegger was an intellectual supporter of Hitler during his reign, and despite his critique towards the regime after May 1945, he never resigned from his party membership,⁴⁶⁶ but to what extent does his philosophy bear the National Socialist elements? Barth himself does not touch Heidegger's affiliation to the Nazi party at all in his excursus on the philosopher. Certainly the scandalous documents were not published yet when Barth composed *Church Dogmatics* III/3, but he should have known about

⁴⁵⁹ CD III/3, 334.

⁴⁶⁰ Unlike Barth, Heidegger uses the German term 'das Nichts' instead of 'das Nichtige', in reference to nothingness. See CD III/3,

⁴⁶¹ CD III/3, 334-5.

⁴⁶² CD III/3, 345.

⁴⁶³ CD III/3, 347.

⁴⁶⁴ CD III/3, 343.

⁴⁶⁵ Matthew Sharpe, 'On Reading Heidegger—After the "Heidegger Case"?,' *Critical Horizons* 19, no. 4 (October 2, 2018), 17.

⁴⁶⁶ Sharpe, 'On Reading Heidegger,' 2.

Heidegger's status as a member of the party and the Nazi Rector of Freiburg in 1933-34, at the time when Barth was still active in the German academy.

While I reckon that Barth would have his reason not to mention Heidegger's Nazi connection in this passage, and that the debate about the National Socialism is far from being settled at the moment, this association is too intriguing to be missed, especially when the topic that is being discussed here is nothingness and its deceiving presence. Aren't we having a case here where the ambiguous posture towards a nihilating factor which discloses itself in dread but ultimately perceived as an illuminating reality needs to be questioned?

The *last* figure that Barth discusses is Jean-Paul Sartre. Unlike Heidegger who was a Hitler supporter, Sartre was a figure of the French Resistance. His philosophy reflects this image. Human beings exist in the world, situated before a terrifying reality called nothingness. There is no God that guarantees the meaning of life nor the promise that at the end of the day everything will be fine. It means that human beings are left by themselves to struggle in the harsh reality of life.

He cannot start anywhere or with anything. There is no corresponding something. He can start only with nothing. The ground is taken from under his feet. For as there is no God, so there is no human nature. There are no eternal and historical realities, nor conventions and ideals, to which he may cling, which he may believe and respect, which can help, secure or deliver him. He cannot take others as examples and imitate them. He is given no directives. Even in himself he is and has and finds absolutely nothing of any significance, authority, power or value, so that he cannot even fall back upon himself. There is nothing on which he can fall back. What is behind him is always nothing. In the light of what is behind he has no prospect but hell. *Continuons !*—as he says just before the final curtain in his *Huis Clos*.⁴⁶⁷

But this situation for him also means human freedom. There is nothing that determines oneself other than one's situatedness before nothingness, and hence the need to struggle against its threat. Existence precedes essence.

In comparison to the other four figures, Sartre is the one who realizes the threat of nothingness at best and the one who calls for resistance against it. This is an interesting detail, since he is also the most explicit atheist thinker among the rest. For unlike Heidegger who secretly deifies nothingness, Sartre's existentialism is basically a project that attempts to draw all the consequences of the atheistic position. Not by arguing for the non-existence of God, but through an exhibition of the banality of life.

Sartre clearly wishes existentialism to be understood as *un effort pour tirer toutes les conséquences d'une position athée cohérente* (p. 94).⁴⁶⁸ Unlike the radicals of the 18th and 19th centuries, he is not particularly concerned to demonstrate the non-existence of God. He can even say *qu'il est très gênant que Dieu n'existe pas* (p.35).⁴⁶⁹ The existence of God simply falls away because nothing of value, significance and capacity can precede human existence. Even if a proof of the existence of God were possible it could not alter the fact that there is nothing to precede the existence of man, to keep him from the 'damnation of freedom'.⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁶⁷ CD III/3, 340.

⁴⁶⁸ 'An attempt to draw out all consequences from a coherent atheistic position'.

⁴⁶⁹ 'That God does not exist is very unfortunate'.

⁴⁷⁰ CD III/3, 342.

Despite Sartre's strong rejection of God, I imagine that he is the one among the other four thinkers whom I think Barth would pick as an ally if he has to choose one. For he is the one with the clearest idea on how threatening and how real the reality of nothingness is.

However, Barth suspects that Sartre's confidence in the human capacity to deal with this reality by themselves ultimately means that Sartre, despite his rhetoric about how fearful the reality is, also belittles its real threat to the life of creation.

It may well be significant, violent, threatening and extremely aggressive, but if I can confront it with sovereign power, if I can deal with it, if I can even play with it in changing situations, if I can set it behind me, I cannot convince myself that I have to do with the true and deadly dangerous adversary of myself and man and life. As I project myself into my future, disposing of the enemy who can be disposed of in this way, i.e., of adverse circumstances, of human folly and evil and their consequent entanglements, of all the calamities of the age, might it not be that in the course of this most courageous and successful conflict of St. George with the dragon, the true and deadly dangerous enemy quietly leers over my shoulder from behind and mocks my manliness, the more secure because I have obviously forgotten him in learning and then happily outgrowing a little terror?⁴⁷¹

Again, the christological understanding of this problem shows its importance. If Jesus Christ fought his battle against this malice until death, what kind of attitude should we pose to this threat?

Conclusion

Barth's exposition of the doctrine of nothingness throughout the third volume of his *Church Dogmatics* is driven by his aim to *rebuild* the world after the Second World War. That volume is a work of lament and constructive critique of modern philosophy, which forms an *inclusio* when paired together with his 1933 work, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*. The overarching idea of the volume about the interlink between creation and covenant suggests that creation is never left behind by God and contains an ever-present openness towards redemption. God's act of creation itself, which is depicted in the biblical saga, is the prime example of a fulfilled time, the moment when God renews history dominated by sin. Barth's exposition on the biblical saga of creation points to the *tohu wa-bohu* in Genesis 1:2 as a portrayal of nothingness, the possibility of a world without the Word of God. God completely rejected this possibility and built a firmament to protect his creation from it.

In the second part-volume, Barth advances a counter-proposal to the optimistic view about humanity in the modern philosophy and the Enlightenment tradition, and to the reactionary myth of 'abstract humanity'. God's revelation in Jesus Christ provides us with a reminder that humanity is situated on the brink of nothingness and therefore is really prone to fallenness. Human beings are placed in the history of God's struggle against nothingness, and bound to decide where their allegiance resides. They are not detached from this struggle, and history is a test for their answer to God's call for obedience.

In the third part-volume, Barth develops an alternative view on divine providence that focuses on the particular history of the covenant. It secures the conviction about God's benevolence, invites human participation in the struggle in history, and ensures the enduring

⁴⁷¹ CD III/3, 346.

possibility for redemption in the history of creation. The third part-volume also contains §50 where Barth's lengthiest discussion on nothingness lies. There he develops the idea of the shadowy side of creation and insists on the christological grounding of our knowledge of nothingness. The lack of christology in our attempt to understand this menace can result in misleading notions that ultimately weaken our struggle against it, as exemplified in the cases of Julius Müller, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Whereas the conceptions from Müller, Leibniz, and Schleiermacher belittle the adversity and threat of nothingness, Heidegger mistakenly ascribes to this reality a positive role for human existence. In a slightly different way to the other four thinkers, Sartre acknowledges the hostility of nothingness and its posing threat. However, his rejection of God and his revelation in Jesus Christ ultimately led him to become over-confident about human sovereignty and to underestimate the real threat of nothingness.

Chapter 6

The Optimism of Singgih

Unlike Notohamidjojo and Simatupang, Emanuel Gerrit Singgih enjoyed formal education in theology to the highest level. He completed his PhD in Old Testament Studies from the University of Glasgow at a considerably young age (thirty-three years old). Since then he has developed a career in the university setting. He was awarded an honorary doctorate from the Protestant Theological University in the Netherlands in 2011, and he is one of the few theologians in Indonesia who has earned a professorship. Singgih has published a lot of books, ranging from his specialty in Old Testament studies to public and contextual theology.⁴⁷²

Aside from his expertise in Old Testament studies, Singgih's interests span a wide range of topics, from politics and culture to philosophy and interreligious dialogue. But if there is a theme that can be considered to be persistent in his writings, it is the theme of *creation*. Daniel Listijabudi, his ex-student and successor in teaching Old Testament studies in the faculty of theology of Duta Wacana Christian University (UKDW), Yogyakarta, gives the following testimony about him (EGS):

It seems that EGS really likes the theme of creation. Once he said that the theme that he has been writing about since his bachelor studies up to PhD level is all about creation. The scope is growing, but the genre and the theme are the same. The topic of his inaugural professorial lecture also revolves around the same topic: *Ex Nihilo, Nihil Fit*. When I write this article, I already knew from his facebook that EGS has finished his commentary on Genesis 1-11 in his sabbatical leave at the Radboud University (d.h. Nijmegen) Netherlands.⁴⁷³

The appeal of the theme of creation to Singgih seems to be in line with his persistent call for the development of public theology in Indonesia, especially one which draws inspiration from local traditions, builds dialogue with other religions, and intensifies empathy towards the poor and the oppressed. Throughout his writings on Old Testament studies, contextual theology, or other themes, a reader would easily discern a clear orientation towards these matters. The connection would only make sense because the doctrine of creation forms our perceptions on

⁴⁷² A general presentation on Singgih's theological career and his works in English can be found in Alle G. Hoekema, 'Genesis 1-11 from an Indonesian Perspective: A New Commentary by Gerrit Singgih', *Exchange* 42, no. 3 (January 1, 2013): 215–31.

⁴⁷³ 'Agaknya, EGS suka sekali dengan tema Penciptaan. Suatu kali, ia berkata bahwa sejak sarjana muda hingga Ph.D, tema yang ia bahas adalah tentang Penciptaan. Cakupannya mengembang, tetapi *genre* tema favoritnya sama. Pidato pada pengukuhan guru besarnya pun masih sama: *Ex Nihilo, Nihil Fit*. Ketika tulisan ini kutulis, aku tahu dari *facebook*-nya bahwa EGS sudah merampungkan tafsiran Kejadian 1-11 dalam *sabbatical leave* di Universitas Radboud (d.h. Nijmegen) Belanda.' Daniel K. Listijabudi, 'Sekilas Pandang tentang Pdt. Prof. E. Gerrit Singgih, Ph.D dan Tafsirannya, di Kelas dan di Buku: Sebuah Catatan Ringan,' in *Gerrit Singgih: Sang Guru dari Labuang Baji* (Jakarta: BPK-GM, 2010), 21-22.

the living space of humankind and other fellow creatures, with all the problems and promises that follow.

In his survey on models of public theology that were developed in the Soeharto era, Julianus Mojau categorizes Singgih as one of the theologians who was doing theology with a liberative approach. The others are Johannes Ludwig Chrysostomus Abineno, Josef Widyatmadja, Fridolin Ukur, Andreas Anangguru Yewangoe, and Henriette Marianne Katoppo. These are the names that Mojau places on the opposite side of theologians such as Notohamidjojo and Simatupang. In contrast to the latter, Singgih and those figures are seen as the theologians whose concern was directed to issues of poverty and structural injustices during the New Order era.⁴⁷⁴

In line with his critical stance towards the New Order regime, Singgih embraced the Reformation era that followed the fall of Soeharto in 1998. In 2000, he published a book titled *Iman dan Politik dalam Era Reformasi di Indonesia* (Faith and Politics in the Reformation Era in Indonesia). It is a compilation of his sixteen essays on Christianity and politics in the post-New Order context. A lot of the essays are critical looking back on how Indonesian churches posited themselves in the New Order era and how those lessons from the past should inform their praxis in the Reformation period. The publication of this book indicates Singgih's intention to engage with the political challenges in that context as a theologian.

The focus of the discussion in this chapter is Singgih's subsequent work, his inaugural professorial lecture in 2005, *Ex Nihilo Nihil Fit: A Commentary on Genesis 1:1-3*. The lecture mainly discusses the tension between creation and nothingness in those early verses in the Bible. It was delivered seven years after the fall of Soeharto, and the text contains Singgih's comments on the political struggle at that time. There he displays an optimistic attitude towards the future of the Reformation era, despite the seemingly chaotic circumstances.

My aim is to show what Barth's elaboration of nothingness in *Church Dogmatics* III might offer in the theological struggle in Indonesia after Soeharto, through an engagement with Singgih's own account on the same topic in *Ex Nihilo Nihil Fit*. I will start the discussion by introducing Singgih's argument in *Ex Nihilo Nihil Fit* and continue with the engagement with Barth.

Ex Nihilo Nihil Fit

Singgih's inaugural lecture was presented in January 2005, only a few months after the 2004 presidential election in Indonesia. It was the first direct presidential election in the history of Indonesia, one of the new developments in the Reformation era. Previously, it was the parliament who elected the president. Yet among the candidates in the election, two figures were coming from military background, one a presidential candidate, and the other a vice-presidential candidate. This phenomenon reminds many people about three decades of Soeharto's military regime and the anxieties about its return. Moreover, both of these candidates were suspected of crimes against humanity in the past. The presidential candidate, Wiranto, has been indicted by the United Nations for his role in the bloody election in East Timor in 1999.⁴⁷⁵ The other figure, Prabowo Subianto, Soeharto's son-in-law, is known for his responsibility in the abduction of student activists in 1998, just shortly before the fall of Soeharto. Some of these students are still missing until now. Fifteen years earlier, he also had

⁴⁷⁴ Mojau, *Meniadakan Atau Merangkul?*, 144.

⁴⁷⁵ 'UN indicts general for East Timor crimes',

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/feb/25/indonesia.unitednations> (accessed on June 7th, 2018).

a role in the massacre of East Timorese civilians.⁴⁷⁶ This is the situation that Singgih addresses in the final part of his lecture where he explicitly mentions the 2004 election:

The disorderly situation in Indonesia is usually mentioned as ‘chaos’. Every order seems to be relative—the innocent people can be severely punished, while a criminal who has been indicted is free and able to be a presidential candidate in the 2004 election. This anomic situation can animate people to make a comparison that the New Order era is a period of stability and the Reformation era is a period of chaos. This is one of the issues that were used by some presidential candidates during the campaigns for the 2004 election.⁴⁷⁷

The tensions between order and disorder, chaos and stability, in the light of the situation that surrounds the 2004 election become the background of Singgih’s interpretation of Genesis 1:1-3.

The inaugural lecture begins with Singgih’s acknowledgment of the domination of the *creatio ex nihilo* paradigm, creation out of nothingness, in the history of the interpretation of the text. In this paradigm, God created the world completely out of nothing. Nothing existed before God’s action. There was no material at all from which God created the world. In Singgih’s view, the dominance of this paradigm has to do with the influence of the traditional view in Christian theology that puts an emphasis on the sovereignty of God. One of the indicators of the dominating influence of that paradigm in Indonesia, he believes, is the emphasis on this perspective in the only local product of a historical-critical commentary on the whole book of Genesis in Indonesia, written by a former Old Testament Lecturer in Jakarta, Walter Lempp. It shows that despite the popularity of the historical-critical approach in Indonesia, the *creatio ex nihilo* paradigm is still dominant.⁴⁷⁸

The interpretation that Singgih proposes goes against this trend. He sees the *tohu wabohu* in Genesis 1:2 as the situation before creation (*situasi pra penciptaan*).⁴⁷⁹ So before God took his action, there was something. But these pre-creation materials according to him have a *neutral* sense. He rejects the interpretation which says that creation is an act of God against the powers that go against his will (*chaoskampf*).

I consider the reference to the natural elements as the chaos before creation in Genesis 1 to be unsimilar to the chaos which is depicted as *wiedergöttliche Macht* in Psalms 74, 89, 104 and Isaiah 51. The natural elements in Genesis 1 are not some creatures who have alternative powers to God. These elements are also portrayed as calm, non-turbulent (that’s why I disagree with the daily Indonesian translation that illustrates the sea as being always turbulent) and non-evil.⁴⁸⁰

⁴⁷⁶ Gerry van Klinken, ‘Prabowo and Human Rights’, <http://www.insideindonesia.org/prabowo-and-human-rights> (accessed on June 7th, 2018).

⁴⁷⁷ ‘Situasi umum di Indonesia yang sangat kacau balau ini biasanya disebutkan sebagai ‘kaos’. Segala tatanan tampaknya menjadi relatif — orang yang tidak bersalah dapat dihukum berat, sedangkan orang yang bersalah dan sudah mendapat keputusan pengadilan mengenai hal itu masih bisa bebas dan bahkan mencalonkan diri menjadi calon presiden untuk Pemilu 2004. Situasi yang demikian anomistik ini bisa menyebabkan orang membuat perbandingan, yaitu masa Orde Baru sebagai masa stabil dan masa Reformasi sebagai masa kacau. Inilah salah satu isu yang dipakai oleh beberapa calon presiden pada kampanye pemilu 2004’. Emmanuel Gerrit Singgih, *Dua Konteks: Tafsir-Tafsir Perjanjian Lama Sebagai Respons Atas Perjalanan Reformasi Di Indonesia*, Cet. 1 (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2009), 248.

⁴⁷⁸ Singgih, *Dua Konteks*, 206-7.

⁴⁷⁹ Singgih, *Dua Konteks*, 232.

⁴⁸⁰ ‘Saya sendiri menganggap bahwa referensi ke unsur-unsur alam sebagai kaos pra penciptaan di dalam Kejadian 1 tidak sama dengan kaos yang digambarkan sebagai “wiedergöttliche Macht” di dalam Psalms 74, 89, 104 dan Kitab Yesaya 51. Unsur-unsur alam di Kejadian 1 bukan makhluk hidup yang mempunyai kekuatan-

In Singgih's opinion, it is very clear that the elements that are mentioned in Genesis 1:2 are calm and non-turbulent. While he recognizes that there are other passages in the Bible where elements of chaos are depicted as some dark powers that oppose God, he believes that this is not the case with chaos in Genesis 1:2. Singgih imagines that the author or editor of Genesis 1 intentionally challenges the portrayal of chaos in those other texts. In other words, he supposes that the Priestly source (P) *neutralizes* the idea of chaos as some hostile forces.⁴⁸¹ At this point, he also mentions Karl Barth. On the one hand, he appreciates Barth for his acknowledgment of chaos in Genesis 1. But on the other hand, he disagrees with Barth on his conception about nothingness as a source of evil. Singgih insists that the chaos in Genesis 1 has a neutral sense. Evil does not come from it.⁴⁸²

The neutral sense of *tohu wabohu* in the interpretation of Singgih is expressed in his translation. He uses the phrase *padang gurun belantara* (empty desert), referring to Isaiah 34:11 and Jeremiah 4:23. Both verses portray the condition of barren lands, following the punishments from God. Yet Singgih believes that in Genesis 1:2 the term does not exclusively refer to emptiness, since it is connected to other elements such as darkness (*khosyek*), the sea (*tehom*), and waters (*hamayim*). In his opinion, these elements are the detail features of *tohu wabohu*, although he acknowledges that it is a bit strange that sea and water are associated with the image of an empty desert.⁴⁸³ This is the reason for his rejection of the interpretation which says that *tohu wabohu* only means emptiness and does not refer to real materials.

What about the use of the word *bara* in the first verse of the Bible? The history of biblical interpretation shows how this particular word has often been used to justify the belief that God created the world out of nothing. How does Singgih deal with this issue? He dedicates a specific section in his lecture to discuss it. He claims that the argument for the principle of *creatio ex nihilo* based on the use of the word *bara* in Genesis 1:1 is basically a circular argument, and therefore is rather weak.

Since *bara* always appears with God as the subject and never with human beings, and because *bara* is always translated as “to create”, while the phrase “God creates” is always presumed as creation out of nothing, then *bara* is always interpreted as “to create out of nothing”. So this is an argument that actually has a circular character!⁴⁸⁴

It appears that Singgih has held this stance for decades. He already contested the understanding that the word *bara* implies the principle of *creatio ex nihilo* in his doctoral dissertation in 1982. He does not mention about the circular character of such an argument there, but he observes that the appearances of this word throughout the Bible do not show that it specifically refers to the idea of creation out of nothing.

Both the MT and the LXX give no indication that ברא must be seen as implying the principle of creation out of nothing. Of course it is a special word because it only has God as subject. And it may be that there is an emphasis on the createdness of the object

kekuatan alternatif terhadap Allah. Unsur-unsur alam ini pun digambarkan tenang, tidak bergolak (karena itu saya tidak setuju pada BIS-LAI yang menggambarkan samudera raya sebagai harus selalu bergolak) dan tidak jahat'. Singgih, *Dua Konteks*, 226.

⁴⁸¹ Singgih, *Dua Konteks*, 227.

⁴⁸² Singgih, *Dua Konteks*, 226.

⁴⁸³ Singgih, *Dua Konteks*, 222, 224.

⁴⁸⁴ 'Oleh karena *bara* selalu muncul dengan Allah sebagai subjek dan tidak pernah bersubjekkan manusia, dan karena *bara* selalu diterjemahkan “menciptakan”, sementara frasa “Allah menciptakan” langsung memberi pengertian menciptakan dari ketiadaan, maka *bara* selalu dimaknai sebagai “menciptakan dari ketiadaan”. Jadi, sebuah argumentasi yang sebenarnya bersifat sirkular!'. Singgih, *Dua Konteks*, 237.

or the transcendentness of the subject whenever ברא is used. But apart from that ברא is not pregnant with a special meaning or specifically related to a certain context.⁴⁸⁵

So Singgih acknowledges that throughout the Bible the word *bara* is always associated with God, but he does not see that it necessarily means a creative act which is done without the pre-existing materials. Coming back to his lecture in 2005, there Singgih contemplates the possibility of interpreting *bara* as “to cut”. He likes the idea for two reasons. *First*, it would be consistent with the presence of pre-creation materials in Genesis 1. *Second*, he deems it suitable for the Indonesian context where the imagery of clearing a forest to open a settlement is familiar.⁴⁸⁶ Later on in his commentary on Genesis 1-11 (2011), he develops this idea further, drawing an analogy with a Batakese concept called *sipungka huta*.⁴⁸⁷ It is the title for village founders in North Sumatra which literally means ‘the one who clears the forest’.

So there are three positions that Singgih rejects: *creatio ex nihilo* which denies the existence of chaos, a negative view on chaos which associates this reality with evil, and *tohu wabohu* as mere emptiness. What he proposes is that chaos existed before creation, but not as a power that fights against God or mere emptiness. He sees it as some raw materials that existed before creation which God used when he created the world. These elements might be in disarray before God used them, but they are not by nature evil.

Singgih believes that the theological insight about chaos as the elements before creation that he proposes is highly relevant in Indonesia. It provides an alternative to the ambiguity that he observes in the common theological reflections in that country. On the one hand, there is a strong emphasis on the sovereignty of God which is not supposed to be questioned despite the miserable reality in the country which he describes as ‘paradise full of tears’ (*firdaus yang penuh air mata*). But on the other hand, he is concerned about the attitude of many Christians in Indonesia who often place themselves within the apocalyptic narrative, standing against the evil powers. He classifies the first attitude as *ignorant*, while the other one for him is a *panic* mode. In Singgih’s claim, the theological insight that he promotes would provide a more balanced view: ‘Perhaps the insight about chaos as the elements before creation can help us to get a more balanced theological understanding. God is sovereign, but his sovereignty does not cover everything. He did not create chaos, but he appeared and organized chaos to become an ordered creation’.⁴⁸⁸ By accepting this insight, he believes that one would be able to avoid the ignorance that comes from the heavy emphasis on the sovereignty of God and yet also avoid succumbing to panic.⁴⁸⁹

As long as chaos is understood to be within some tension with creation, Singgih suggests that it is even possible to see it in a *positive* sense. Since God also created the world from the disarrayed materials, he believes that it is therefore also possible that the chaotic situation in the present will be transformed into something good. It is already mentioned before about how the Reformation period is regarded as a chaotic time and the New Order era a period of stability. As Singgih mentions, there is a possibility that people might buy into the ideas that were used by some candidates in the 2004 election, that the stability that the military regime

⁴⁸⁵ Emanuel Gerrit Singgih, *The Concept of Creation in Prophetic Tradition from Amos to Deutero Isaiah* (Doctoral thesis, University of Glasgow, 1982), 465. Retrieved from <http://theses.gla.ac.uk/1272/1/1982singgihphd.pdf>.

⁴⁸⁶ Singgih, *Dua Konteks*, 238.

⁴⁸⁷ Emanuel Gerrit Singgih, *Dari Eden ke Babel: Sebuah Tafsir Kejadian 1-11* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2011), 34. Batak is one of the ethnic groups in Indonesia, based in North Sumatra.

⁴⁸⁸ ‘Barangkali pemahaman mengenai kaos sebagai unsur-unsur pra penciptaan dapat menolong kita mendapatkan pemahaman teologis yang lebih seimbang. Allah berdaulat, tetapi kedaulatan-Nya tidak mencakup segala sesuatu. Ia tidak menciptakan kaos, tetapi Ia muncul dan menata kaos sehingga menjadi ciptaan yang teratur.’ Singgih, *Dua Konteks*, 247.

⁴⁸⁹ Singgih, *Dua Konteks*, 248.

brought in the New Order period is something good and now it is missing in the Reformation era. But here Singgih declares that he is standing with the Reformation project. He summons his readers to embrace the hard process in the Reformation period which at times might seem to be chaotic. Just as God transformed the elements before creation into something good, he believes that God *will* also transform these chaotic moments into something new.⁴⁹⁰

A few years later, when Singgih published his commentary on Genesis 1-11, he reconfirms this position. In the section where he comments on Genesis 1:2, he refers to his inaugural address and the position that he proposes there. Although he says that now he can understand other possible interpretations more clearly, Singgih still maintains his view.

[...] I consider the post-New Order era as a 'chaotic time', 'chaos'. But, while being concerned about this era, I still see this era as something positive. Just like God in the ancient time created the world out of chaos, God will act to restore this chaotic situation towards something better. We cannot return to the New Order period, although some people dream for it.⁴⁹¹

Here we find again Singgih's judgment about the chaos in the Reformation era, or the post-New Order period, as something *positive*.

The Engagement with Barth: Biblical Interpretation

We have seen that Singgih prefers to interpret *tohu wa-bohu* in Genesis 1:2 as the pre-creation materials that God used when he created the world. He rejects what he calls the traditional *creatio ex nihilo* paradigm that emphasizes the sovereignty of God, and chooses to acknowledge the presence of chaos in the text. This chaos is believed to have existed before creation and regarded as having a neutral sense, not as the powers that conflict with God. It is also considered as the materials that God used when he created the world, and not as mere emptiness.

The perspective on *tohu wa-bohu* as materials for creation is actually mentioned in Barth's survey of the different angles of interpretation on Genesis 1:2. It appears in the discussion on what he mentions as the *opinio communis*, the common opinion among theologians such as Augustine, Ambrose, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin, that *tohu wa-bohu* refers to the rudimentary materials or *materia informis* that God used in creation. However, the difference of this *opinio communis* to Singgih's position is that those theologians consider these rudimentary materials as God's creation, while Singgih does *not*. In the *opinio communis*, God created the world in several steps. First, he created the rudiments of heaven and earth, which were still 'unfashioned, and waste and void', and then continued the work in six days.⁴⁹² Singgih, on the other hand, who tries to go against the emphases on the sovereignty of God in traditional interpretations, wants to see these materials as pre-existing, as something that was already there, before God's act. These pre-existing materials are chaos understood in a neutral sense.

⁴⁹⁰ 'Tinggal kita pada masa kini yang harus menentukan dalam konteks apa kita mau membaca Kejadian 1:1-3, dalam konteks ciptaan sebagai sesuatu yang positif dan dalam rangka menilai pemerintahan Orde Baru sebagai masa stabil yang baik, atau dalam konteks ciptaan sebagai sesuatu yang negatif, sehingga dengan demikian masa Reformasi dapat disambut sebagai masa yang memang kaotis, tetapi akan diubah oleh Roh Allah menjadi ciptaan baru!'. Singgih, *Dua Konteks*, 249.

⁴⁹¹ Singgih, *Dari Eden ke Babel*, 39.

⁴⁹² CD III/1, 100, 103.

Along with Singgih, Barth also does not favor the *creatio ex nihilo* reading of Genesis 1 and the *opinio communis*. He is convinced that the text itself clearly shows no sign of such orientation: ‘It may well be that the concept of *creatio ex nihilo*, of which there is no actual hint in Gen. 1-2, is the construct of later attempts at more precise formulation’.⁴⁹³ For him, it is very clear that chaos is present in the text: ‘Certainly according to 1² there is a chaos’.⁴⁹⁴

However, Barth also denies the alternative that this chaos is an independent reality from God that is able on its own to oppose him. For him, it would have contradicted the context of the passage and the Bible as a whole. It would not fit the use of the word *bara*.⁴⁹⁵ Barth here, in contrast to Singgih, follows the tradition in biblical scholarship that regards *bara* as a special word that specifically points to the divine act of creation.

Among the words used by the Bible to describe the divine creation ... the Old Testament *bara*’ is lexicographically unequivocal to the extent that in the strict sense—as in its immediate appearance in Gen. 1¹—it can denote only the divine creation in contrast to all other: the creation which does not work on an existing object or material which can be made by the Creator into something else; the *creatio ex nihilo* whose Subject can only be God and no one apart from Him—no creature.⁴⁹⁶

The way Barth speaks about *creatio ex nihilo* in this passage might seem contradictory to his claim that it is ‘the construct of latter attempts’. However, Barth is only speaking about the implication of the use of the word *bara* here. On the one hand, he recognizes that there is chaos in Genesis 1, so the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* does not do justice to the biblical text. But on the other hand, he is convinced that the usage of the word *bara*’ implies a refusal to the idea that there were existing materials before creation. Here he differs with Singgih. For Barth, the idea about an independent reality apart from God and prior to creation is not acceptable. Despite his acknowledgment about the presence of chaos in Genesis 1:2, he refuses to join the scholars that understand Genesis 1 within the *chaoskampf* framework. So even though Barth does not understand chaos in a neutral sense like Singgih, he also does not see creation as a primordial battle between God and some pre-existing alternative powers.

What Barth proposes is that the *tohu wa-bohu* in Genesis 1:2 refers to a possible world without the Word of God, the possibility that was rejected by God when he created the world. It is ‘a caricature of the tellural universe’ which stands in ‘contradiction’ to God’s good creation. In this alternative universe, the situation is ‘hopeless’, ‘the very opposite of promising’.⁴⁹⁷

What is at issue is the possibility which God in his creative decision has ignored and despised, like a human builder when he chooses one specific work and rejects and ignores another, or it may be many others, leaving them unexecuted. It is to be noted that it is when God utters His Word that we see which is the real work chosen by Him and what are the heaven and earth to which anticipatory reference is made in v. 1. The theme of v. 2, however, is a world-state over which the Word of God had not been uttered.⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹³ CD III/1, 103.

⁴⁹⁴ CD III/1, 100.

⁴⁹⁵ CD III/1, 103.

⁴⁹⁶ CD III/1, 16.

⁴⁹⁷ CD III/1, 104.

⁴⁹⁸ CD III/1, 108.

By using the analogy of the human builder, and categorizing chaos as ‘possibility’, Barth might give an impression that this alternative universe is merely a thing of the past, and not an existing menace in the present anymore. However, in a paradoxical way, Barth also emphasizes that this ignored and despised possibility is also very real, although in an ‘absurd way’.

Because this sphere is also real in its absurd way, very differently from the world willed and created by God, as a sphere of that which has no existence or essence or goodness, reference is here made to it (*hay^ethah*), for it is only too well known to the author and all the biblical witness as the shadow which actually lies over the world willed and created by God. This ugly realm did exist.⁴⁹⁹

It exists, but only in a very peculiar way. It exists, but only as a shadow lying over the reality made and designed by God. It exists, but not in the same way that creation does.

But even as a shadow, this ‘ugly realm’ can appear and become more visible in history whenever the Word of God is ‘forgotten and disregarded’. Human beings are the agents that bring its appearance and visibility into history, whenever they rebel against God and follow the enticement of this past reality.

It is only behind God’s back that the sphere of chaos can assume this distinctive and self-contradictory character of reality. This can, of course, happen. The creature can be so foolish. It can become guilty of the inconceivable rebellion of looking past the Word of God and the ground and measure of its own reality, and therefore looking back and returning to its essential past, to this *hay^ethah* and therefore to this state of chaos.⁵⁰⁰

So even though this peculiar existence is mentioned as a past and ignored reality, and only exists as a shadow, it is a shadow that is very real and active. It is an ‘acute and enticing danger’.⁵⁰¹ It actively tempts and allures human beings to keep looking back to this abandoned caricature, instead of focusing on the good creation.

It is clear now that Barth’s understanding on chaos in Genesis 1:2 provides an alternative proposal to the discussion that Singgih brings out. Barth recognizes *bara* as a unique word that indicates the sovereignty of the Word of God that created the world without any pre-existing materials. But at the same time, he acknowledges chaos. He does not perceive it in a neutral sense like Singgih, but he also does not regard it as an independent reality that was battling with God in the primeval age (*Chaoskampf*). He recognizes the danger and persistent threat of chaos, while at the same time confessing the sovereignty of God.

Another Proposal

Let us now check their respective arguments. I shall begin with Singgih. It has been mentioned earlier that he proposes that the three elements in Genesis 1:2, darkness (*khosyék*), the sea (*tehom*), and waters (*hamayim*), function in the text as the detail features of *tohu wa-bohu*. And he insists that these elements are portrayed in the text as something that are characteristically neutral. So the situation before creation was not emptiness, but the existence of neutral elements, ready to be used as materials for creation. How should we assess this interpretation? On the one hand, it is true that the elements that are mentioned in verse 2 are something that

⁴⁹⁹ CD III/1, 108.

⁵⁰⁰ CD III/1, 108.

⁵⁰¹ CD III/1, 109.

God worked upon on the first three days, as we can see in the subsequent verses of the creation story in Genesis 1. They are not detached from the process of creation. The problem with this suggestion is whether all of those elements are characteristically neutral. The utmost challenge would come from the story of the creation of the firmament on the second day. If the element of waters here is so tame and harmless, why does God need to create a firmament? Why does some part of the waters need to be kept above the dome?

Barth's interpretation of Genesis 1:2 also generates some issues. The most notable one would be his suggestion that the *ruach Elohim* in that verse is not 'the real God of creation'. In his eyes, the character of the Spirit of God in verse 2 is too contradictory to the one in the next verses. Whereas the former displays 'complete impotence' before chaos, the latter powerfully creates the world out of nothing, only by his Word.

In that monstrous sphere even the Spirit of *Elohim* would have been as depicted in this clause, for it belongs to the very nature and essence of such a sphere that in it even the Spirit of *Elohim* is condemned to the complete impotence of a bird hovering or brooding over shoreless or sterile waters. This would have to be and would be the appearance of God's relation to the world. This God who for His part has become a caricature would be the God of this world. How could this be the God who is seen to speak and act in v. 3ff? How could we recognise in Him, even vaguely, the God of the rest of Genesis and the rest of the Old and New Testaments? Where in the Bible is there any suggestion that this passive-contemplative role and function is ascribed to God? But if what is characterized at the start is the utter irrelevance and untrustworthiness of the god of myth, in conscious and cutting contrast to the real God of creation and His work and in a picture of devastating irony, at once everything becomes clear. Full justice is done to this god and his spirit, i.e., to the god who is not known as the God of Israel in this ignorance as such, who is as little the God of Israel, and therefore the only true God, as this monstrous world in the world created by Him. All the questions which necessarily arise in connexion with the bird brooding over the waters are rightly addressed to this god. This god will as little create a cosmos out of chaos as chaos is inherently capable of becoming a cosmos.⁵⁰²

This passage is perhaps one of the most controversial parts of *Church Dogmatics*. How dare he ascribe the Spirit of *Elohim* to the category of 'the god of myth'! That's a very bold proposal from him. And, of course, he has his reasons. In his eyes, the *ruach Elohim* in Genesis 1:2 is too attached to the reality of nothingness and yet seemingly unable to generate any transformation. That 'passive-contemplative role' would contradict Barth's portrayal of the real God as being in action. However, it is also important to consider that Genesis 1 uses that very name throughout the whole story. From the superscription in verse 1, the brooding spirit in verse 2, to the creation of the world in the next verses, the name that is used to refer to God is always *Elohim*. Would it be a fair treatment of the text if we emphasize so much on the disjunction of the *Elohim* in verse 2 to the *Elohim* in the rest of the passage?

In his recent article on this topic, Rinse Reeling Brouwer offers a solution to this enigma. He suggests that it would be better if we locate nothingness in Genesis 1 in the waters above the firmament, rather than the *tohu-wabohu*, darkness and the deep in the second verse. In this way, the complications that arise from the image about a powerless God that cannot transform the chaotic reality can be avoided and considered unnecessary. His argument, inspired by Odil Hannes Steck and Kessler and Deurloo, is that the depiction in verse 2 is not meant to invite a speculation on the primeval state of earth before creation, but instead an

⁵⁰² CD III/1, 107-108.

anticipation of the coming story in the next verses.⁵⁰³ In that case, the account in verse 2 is seen as a ‘presentation of elements to be worked with’,⁵⁰⁴ or in the words of Kessler and Deurloo, a ‘stylistically hidden narrative’.⁵⁰⁵ The darkness, the waters, and the formless void in verse 2 are elements which God worked with on the first three days. The darkness is being ‘transformed’ during the first day, the waters are divided on the second day, and only after that the inhabitable dry land appeared on the third day – a transformation of the formless void (cf. Is. 45:16). When God called the darkness ‘Night’, it was being restricted and tamed. When he created the firmament to separate the waters on the second day, part of the waters that is located below is also tempered. However, the one that is above the firmament is still a powerful threat so that only God would be able to handle it. This is a better site to locate nothingness in Genesis 1, according to Brouwer, than the second verse. In this case, the *ruach Elohim* in verse 2 is not displaying incapability to deal with chaos, but preparing herself to speak in the coming verses. It is ‘the trembling breath as the beginning of the divine speaking.’⁵⁰⁶

Brouwer’s proposal provides us with a bridge that possibly connects Singgih and Barth. On the one hand, it recognizes that God did something with the elements in verse 2 on the first three days, and that there are some parts of those elements that have been tempered and limited by God. The darkness that has been called ‘Night’ and the waters below that have been gathered together and called ‘Seas’ have become neutral elements. On the other hand, it also acknowledges the reality of chaos and the serious threat that it poses to creation. Yes, there are elements that have been neutralized by God such as the ‘Night’ and the ‘Seas’. But there are remnants of those elements that remain wild and dangerous and thus posing a serious threat. This danger comes from the waters above the dome that have to be kept by the firmament so that they do not fall and wipe out the inhabitants of earth.

However, I want to go further than Brouwer. I would propose that it is not only the waters above the firmament that are representing chaos in this passage, although it is certainly the clearest example. I would say that the darkness and the formless void also remain as looming threats, although their existence are not as visible as the waters above. After all, Barth likens the unique existence of nothingness to a ‘shadow’,⁵⁰⁷ so it is good that some of its portrayal express invisibility. At the same time, the depiction about the waters above that have to be kept at bay by the firmament also reminds us that this ‘metaphysical danger’ is yet very real.⁵⁰⁸ So on the first day, God tempered the darkness and called it ‘Night’, but there is an untamed part of the darkness that remains, as a shadow. And then on the third day, God transformed the formless void into inhabitable earth. But a looming threat that would turn the world into *tohu-wabohu* remains. Whenever humankind turn their back on the Word of God, the darkness might cover the earth (cf. Is. 60:2) and the earth would become a wasteland (cf. Jer. 4:23).⁵⁰⁹ On that account, nothingness can still be located in verse 2, while the resemblance of formless void, darkness, and the deep in the following verses is also acknowledged.

⁵⁰³ Reeling Brouwer, ‘The Work of the Spirit in Creation’, 130-3. Cf. Odil Hannes Steck, *Der Schöpfungsbericht der Priesterschrift* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), 223f; Martin Kessler and Karel Deurloo, *A Commentary on Genesis: The Book of Beginnings* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 26-27.

⁵⁰⁴ Brouwer, ‘The Work of the Spirit in Creation,’ 130.

⁵⁰⁵ Kessler and Deurloo, *A Commentary on Genesis*, 27

⁵⁰⁶ Brouwer, ‘The Work of the Spirit in Creation,’ 133.

⁵⁰⁷ CD III/1, 108.

⁵⁰⁸ CD III/1, 139.

⁵⁰⁹ The recognition of these three elements as parts of nothingness also fits well with the canonical and eschatological perspectives. In the New Jerusalem there will be no more night (cf. Rev. 21:25, 22:5; CD III/1, 121, 129) and there will also be no more sea (Rev. 21:1; CD III/1, 149). And what about the formless void? We can presume that it would also have been passed away with the coming of the radiant city that has the river of the water of life and the tree of life in the middle of its street (cf. Rev. 21:9-22:3). There will be no more wasteland or empty desert.

What about Barth's confusion with the inability of *ruach Elohim* in verse 2 to transform chaos? I concur with Brouwer that it does not necessarily have to be interpreted that way. The presentation of formless void, darkness, and the deep in verse 2 can be read as a 'stylistically hidden narrative', a preparation for the coming work of creation on the first three days. Hence the *ruach Elohim* in verse 2 is not showing powerlessness. It is an image of God being in a preparation mode. The aforementioned analogy of human builder that Barth uses actually fits this interpretation really well. As God was preparing himself to create the world, he saw chaos as a possibility. But like a human builder, he chose another version of creation and pushed away the other alternative. And this choice was enacted fully and concretely on those three days.

Undermining Chaos?

And now, the final evaluation. We have seen that Singgih expects that his proposal to see chaos in a neutral sense, as pre-creation materials, would help to relieve the Christians in Indonesia both from the ignorance that downplays the misery in this land and from the tendency to panic. The first one is presumed to be the outcome of the traditional *creatio ex nihilo* doctrine that emphasizes the sovereignty of God, while the second one is a reaction to that (over-)emphasis. Singgih believes that this proposal would help us to acknowledge the complexity of societal problems, and confirm the chaotic reality, but also to see these problems as rudimentary materials that will be turned by God into new creation.

What I find to be an important insight from Singgih's proposal is its *grounded* positivity. It does not make grandiose claims about the sudden renewal of Indonesian politics, out of nothing. If this renewal is going to happen, it has to go *through* the existing conditions. Whether it is the threat of the return of a military regime or the chaotic situation that produces a vale of tears, it is important indeed to acknowledge that the chaotic situation as such *is* a reality and a persisting challenge in the Reformation period. The fact that Soeharto is no longer in power does not mean that the whole apparatus from the New Order period had also been taken down. The rise of two former military leaders from Soeharto's era in the 2004 presidential election is a strong indicator that the old powers were still among the real contenders.

Singgih's concern that many Christians in Indonesia would over-emphasize the sovereignty of God and downplays the misery in Indonesia is also reasonable. As a nineteenth century German philosopher used to say, religion is 'the opium of the people'. It is 'an expression of real suffering and a protest against a real suffering'.⁵¹⁰ In a country like Indonesia where a lot of people are suffering, the potential growth of the kind of religiosity that promotes illusory comfort will be very high.

However, given the actuality of the threat in the situation that he portrays, isn't his insistence to interpret chaos as neutral elements a curious thing? Moreover, as we have seen earlier in this chapter, sometimes he even dares to speak about it as something positive, since God will create something new from it. On the one hand, Singgih maintains a high concern on the downplaying of the misery and suffering by the Indonesian Christians, which he identifies as a consequence of the emphasis on the sovereignty of God in the *creatio ex nihilo* doctrine. But wouldn't this characterization of chaos as something that is neutral, followed by an optimism that God will make something new of it, also result in an attitude that underplays the predicament of the situation? Singgih is indeed a strong supporter of the Reformation. And after three decades of living under Soeharto, it is understandable to see such a hype. But isn't

⁵¹⁰ Karl Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction', in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 54.

he *too* positive on the trajectory of this project? At the moment, more than twenty years after the beginning of Reformation, there are more and more discussions on the growth of ‘illiberal democracy’ in Indonesia, as scholars recognize that the Reformation project is in a declining trend.⁵¹¹ It is true that Singgih was writing in 2004 and probably at that time this declining trend was not as obvious, but aren’t the recent developments showing that his point of view was too optimistic?

At this juncture, I believe that an elaborated doctrine of nothingness shows its urgency again. Singgih is correct in pointing out the tendency to neglect the reality of chaos in many theologies that emphasize the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. It does not do justice to the biblical text and to the suffering that many people had to experience in a country like Indonesia. Hence his acknowledgement of chaos in the creation story is very important. However, his treatment of chaos as neutral elements has shown its problems, both on the level of biblical interpretation and the implications. It neglects the function of the firmament in the creation story and the persistent threat of the waters above that are held at bay by the dome, a threat that it poses to life on earth. It encourages over-optimism to the current trajectory in history and, unfortunately, undermines the actuality of chaos and its threat, something that Singgih himself wanted to avoid. These shortcomings suggest that we need a more elaborate explanation of chaos.

In this case, Barth’s elaboration of the doctrine of nothingness might offer some contribution. Despite his emphasis on the doctrine of the sovereignty of God, Barth simultaneously takes the reality of chaos seriously. It is acknowledged as a reality that exists in a peculiar way, a shadow that looms over creation. It is a rejected reality, and yet it menaces persistently. It does not even have a name and therefore we call it ‘nothingness’, and yet God did not leave humankind to fight it by themselves. God is with us in this struggle. We are not alone. But we cannot let ourselves be caught off-guard. For whenever human beings turn their back on the Word of God, which happens over and over again, this peculiar existence will crawl back and seize the ground.

⁵¹¹ For a starter, see Iqra Anugrah, ‘The Illiberal Turn in Indonesian Democracy’, *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 18/8/1 (April 2020), 1-17.

Conclusion

Throughout the six chapters that represent the main body of this work, I have demonstrated a *contextual reading on Barth's doctrine of nothingness that unleashes a comprehensive theological framework that resists conformism, rejects defeatist realism, and avoids over-optimism*. In response to the stream of voices that tells us how Barth is undermining the reality of evil in his teaching on nothingness and questions its applicability in concrete historical situations, I have shown that it is actually a powerful resource for the struggle for liberation, even in a context that is fairly distant to Barth and his works such as post-Soeharto Indonesia.

The *first* chapter tracked down the development of christocentrism as a methodological rule in the 1930s. The selection of the Tambach Lecture in 1919 as a starting point proved to be illuminating, as the mature version of Barth's doctrine of election in *Church Dogmatics* II/2, the apex of Barth's christocentrism, evidently exhibits the main features of Tambach. The recognition of this parallel helps us to understand the political tendency within the central idea that would shape the rest of his *Church Dogmatics* project. In line with the theme of Barth's political activism in the 1930s, *prevention*, christocentrism provides a strong theological ground to resist conformism towards any order of society that goes against the reality of God for us in Jesus Christ.⁵¹²

Chapter *two* brought this methodological rule to the first testing ground of the present study. It is the case of Oerip Notohamidjojo, who explicitly supported the 1965-1966 massacres that commenced Soeharto's regime. Notohamidjojo's theological legitimation of the repressive function of the state apparatus is shown to be grounded in the ambivalent character of Abraham Kuyper's doctrine of common grace — the ambivalence that Barth sought to prevent and abolish through his christocentrism.

Chapter *three* turned to divine omnivulence in *Church Dogmatics* II/1 and II/2, which Barth developed in late 1930s and early 1940s, at the time when he was pushing for action against the rising Nazis (*opposition*). The theological clarity that he gained from the discovery of christocentrism in the earlier period proved to be fruitful as he was able to develop a clear perspective on divine will and the pressing need for the humankind to act accordingly.

Chapter *four* discussed Barth's perspective on divine omnivulence in the light of the case of T.B. Simatupang, an important figure in the history of Christianity in Indonesia during the New Order period. Simatupang was known for his principle of realism, inspired by Reinhold Niebuhr, which he used to legitimize his half-hearted support of Soeharto. This position is exposed and problematized through the encounter with Barth's strong perspective on divine will.

⁵¹² Nonconformism in itself is still an ambivalent position since it leaves a question towards what kind of order does somebody refuse to conform. Barth is definitely not a nonconformist in this regard precisely because of the clarity of his christological presupposition. It is his conformity to the reality of God for us in Jesus Christ that moves him to resist conformity to the world on many occasions. It is only within this definition that we can say that Barth promotes nonconformism. As Barth once writes about the life of a Christian, "As he confronts God and is in covenant with him and responsible to him, not only atheism and religiosity and nostrification but also the inhumanity which in the world can compete so strangely with the knowledge of God, and therefore with humanity, can be no alternative to him. In his acts he simply cannot take part in the great vacillation between his being without or against his fellows and his being for them. It is thus most striking that he presents himself to other men of the world as a *nonconformist*, as one who is zealous for God's honor, as a witness to what he, who is also a man of the world, has to advocate to others of his kind." (*ChrL*, 203-4 *emphasis mine*).

Chapter *five* moved to the discussion about nothingness in *Church Dogmatics* III, the doctrine of creation. Barth composed the volume when the Second World War was approaching its end and afterwards, when he was developing a vision about *rebuilding* the world from its ruins. Barth's idea about nothingness is most visible in this volume, where he portrays his vision about the struggle in the realm of creation due to the menacing threat of nothingness.

Chapter *six* put the discussion in chapter five into conversation with Emanuel Gerrit Singgih, an Indonesian theologian who celebrates the situation in Indonesia after Soeharto. Singgih's refusal to interpret the *tohu-wabohu* in Genesis 1:2 as a menacing chaos echoes his optimism towards the trajectory of Indonesian politics. The engagement with Barth sought to expose the theological presupposition behind this over-optimistic attitude, particularly in relation to one's acknowledgment of the reality of nothingness.

The focus on the question of theodicy that has dominated studies on this topic in Barth scholarship has been a notable factor in the neglect of the valuable insight that this study has offered. Eberhard Busch accurately portrays the third volume of *Church Dogmatics*, where Barth's main exposition on the doctrine of nothingness lies, as a 'work of mourning' (*Trauerarbeit*).⁵¹³ But the lament after the end of the war and the fall of the Third Reich was not isolated from his active resistance in the years before. The spirit of that volume was more about the continuation of struggle rather than consolation or apology over tragedy. The theologico-political impetus that underlies his account of nothingness is too precious to be overlooked.

The disregard of the political aspect of Barth's theology in general is common. James Cone, the pioneer of black theology, famously testifies on his personal struggle during his time as a seminary student when he was trained to be 'an expert on Karl Barth' and couldn't find its relevance at the time of the civil rights movement. He decided then to turn Barth 'right-side-up with a focus on the black struggle in particular and oppressed people generally'.⁵¹⁴

Barth himself can be partly blamed for this phenomenon. In his letter to Eberhard Bethge in 1967, he mentions how the theme of 'from Christian faith to political action' is too often associated with Bonhoeffer in Germany and not with him, and acknowledges his own contribution towards this impression.

First is what Andreas Lindt in his new essay in *Reformatio* has called Bonhoeffer's way from Christian faith to *political* action. This was my theme, too, when I left theological Liberalism, in the case of religious socialism in its specifically Swiss form. Did Bonhoeffer ever closely study Blumhardt, Kutter, and Ragaz, who were then my mentors? This theme slipped into the background for me when I got involved in the *Romans* and especially when I went to Germany in 1921. I made less of an impression on my German readers and hearers in this regard than in what was now my primary effort to reinterpret the reformation and make it relevant. In Germany, however, burdened with the problems of its Lutheran tradition, there was a genuine need in the direction which I now silently took for granted or emphasized only in passing: ethics, fellow-humanity, a serving church, discipleship, socialism, the peace movement, and in and with all these things, politics.⁵¹⁵

⁵¹³ Eberhard Busch, *Unter Dem Bogen Des Einen Bundes: Karl Barth Und Die Juden 1933-1945* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1996), 503.

⁵¹⁴ James Cone, *My Soul Looks Black* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986), 45.

⁵¹⁵ Karl Barth, *Letters 1961-1968* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 251 [Letter of 22 May].

This passage explains the reason behind so many misconceptions that Barth's theology is unpolitical in character. It is partially because Barth himself does not make his theologico-political standpoint explicit enough throughout his theological writings.

The fact that Barth himself acknowledges that he leaves out plenty of the implicit political content in his theological works confirms the importance of the present study and the likes. I hope that this work has made a contribution to our understanding of *Church Dogmatics* and Barth's theology in general, and will encourage more studies that expose the political aspect in Barth's theology.

It is also my hope that the present study will make a contribution to the reception of Barth in Indonesia. In 2004, Alle Hoekema published an article about how Barth exerted his influence in Asian countries, including in Indonesia, through personal contacts and writings. He notes how Barth displayed interest and encouragement to the newly independent Indonesian Republic during the first Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam, 1948.⁵¹⁶ Although he never visited Indonesia, Barth had a sympathy with the future of this republic. Hoekema also predicts in his article that 'Barth's time is yet to come in Indonesia', after surveying some theses and dissertations about Barth written by Indonesian theologians at that time.⁵¹⁷ Denni Boy Saragih responded to this prediction in 2018, arguing that although the future theological engagements with Barth in Indonesia seem to be bright, with 'the rise of a new generation of young theologians',⁵¹⁸ there are still too many misconceptions about his theology that need to be cleared.⁵¹⁹ Hopefully, the present study makes a small contribution in this area too.

Last but not least, as the present study is inspired by the real struggle of so many people in Indonesia who are craving for liberation, I hope that it might contribute in some way to their cause and spark an active hope⁵²⁰ that overcomes pessimism without falling into over-optimism, promotes realism while avoiding the trap of fatalism, and delivers us from the temptation of conformism.

⁵¹⁶ Alle Hoekema, 'Barth and Asia: "No Boring Theology,"' *Exchange* 33, no. 2 (June 1, 2004): 112.

⁵¹⁷ Hoekema, 'Barth and Asia,' 126.

⁵¹⁸ Denni Boy Saragih, 'Reading Karl Barth in Indonesia: Retrospect and Prospect,' *Exchange* 47, no. 2 (April 18, 2018): 110.

⁵¹⁹ Saragih, 'Reading Karl Barth,' 122.

⁵²⁰ In Jesus Christ! Cf. *CD* IV/3, 902f.

Postscript

The research on which this manuscript is based was mainly conducted up to 2021. Since then there may have been streams of publications in Barth studies or other relevant subjects that are not included in this literature. The author also realizes that the political landscape in Indonesia may have changed since and that the analysis that is presented in this study might not fully reflect the current dynamics in Indonesian politics.

In the last couple of years, there has also been a shift in the use of English language with regard to gender pronouns. The gender-neutral pronoun, singular they, has been introduced and more widely used. This manuscript uses the single male pronoun for God, following Karl Barth, because the author was not aware about the current system.

Dutch Summary

In deze studie verricht ik een contextuele lezing van Karl Barths uitwerking van de leer van 'het nietige' in de *Kerkelijke Dogmatiek*. Het contextuele element van deze studie komt op twee manieren tot uiting. *Ten eerste* in de genetisch-historische reconstructie van de ontwikkeling van de leer van 'het nietige' in de *Kerkelijke Dogmatiek*. En *ten tweede* in de recontextualisering van de inzichten uit de eerste stap van de studie in de Indonesische context van na Soeharto.

Het nietige (*das Nichtige*) is de term die Barth in de *Kerkelijke Dogmatiek* gebruikt bij zijn bespreking van de ontologische werkelijkheid van het kwaad. Hoewel de meest volledige uitleg van Barth over de leer van het nietige te vinden is in §50, kan een uitgebreide studie over dit onderwerp zich niet alleen op dat gedeelte richten. De discussie over het nietige is wijd verspreid over de vele delen van de *Kerkelijke Dogmatiek*.

In de geschiedenis van haar receptie heeft de door Karl Barth voorgestelde leer van het nietige vaak negatieve reacties gekregen. Zij wordt vaak als moeilijk te begrijpen beschouwd, veroorzaakt veel ontevredenheid, bagatelliseert de reële dreiging die van het kwaad uitgaat, doet geen recht aan de geschiedenis, en verwaarloost de voortdurende strijd waartegen christenen geroepen zijn deel te nemen.

De beschuldigingen over Barths verwaarlozing van de geschiedenis in zijn leer van het nietige lijken verband te houden met het feit dat de meeste studies over dit onderwerp het hebben benaderd vanuit de vraag naar de theodicee. Ik vermoed dat de tendens om Barths leer van het nietige te bespreken in het kader van de vraag naar de theodicee gedreven wordt door de overmatige nadruk op §50.

Wat ik probeer te doen in tegenstelling tot de voorgaande studies is een lezing die de *politieke dimensie* van Barths uiteenzetting over het nietige serieus onderzoekt, zodanig dat zijn behandeling van het kwaad niet wordt gezien als een poging om een ander antwoord te geven op het theodicee probleem, maar als een doctrine die *aanzet tot verzet*. Mijn overtuiging is dat de sleutel om dat doel te bereiken ligt in het uitvoeren van een contextuele lezing: via een genetisch-historische reconstructie en recontextualisering. En de context waarin deze studie de recontextualiseringstaak wil uitvoeren is het Indonesië van na Soeharto.

Na een reeks studentendemonstraties in 1998 legde Soeharto, de tweede president van Indonesië, zijn functie neer, waarmee een einde kwam aan het zogenaamde "Nieuwe Orde" regime in dit land. Tweeëndertig jaar lang heeft deze man een belangrijke wending in de loop van de geschiedenis geleid, door het land, dat een pionier was van de Aziatisch-Afrikaanse anti-imperialistische beweging, om te vormen tot een nederige dienaar van het Amerikaanse imperialisme in Zuidoost-Azië. Om zo'n enorme taak te volbrengen heeft hij massale genocide, culturele propaganda en een schrikbewind in werking gezet.

Meer dan twee decennia na zijn val is het nog steeds moeilijk te zeggen dat zijn nalatenschap voorbij is. Hoewel de huidige president, Jokowi, door velen wordt gezien als het symbool van een nieuw tijdperk, wordt hij ook vergeleken met Soeharto. De protesten van de gemarginaliseerde groepen die het slachtoffer zijn geworden van Jokowi's beleid zijn snel toegenomen.

Samen met het verlangen naar bevrijding van de erfenis van de Nieuwe Orde is het belangrijk na te denken over de manier waarop Indonesische theologen in het verleden en het heden met deze kwestie zijn omgegaan. Enkele van die theologen zijn Oerip Notohamidjojo, T.B. Simatupang en Emanuel Gerrit Singgih. Zij vertegenwoordigen de periode voor, tijdens en na de val van Soeharto.

De contextuele lezing in deze studie verloopt in drie grote delen, waarbij de ontwikkelingsstadia in Barths uiteenzetting over het nietige worden gevolgd: het christocentrisme als de epistemologische basis van de leer van het nietige; de goddelijke uitverkiezing en de goddelijke wil als de grond van het bijzondere bestaan van het nietige; en de schepping, de mens en de voorzienigheid als de plaats van de strijd. In overeenstemming met de periode van de vertegenwoordigen de drie onderdelen de periode *voor, tijdens en na de Tweede Wereldoorlog*. Deze indeling geeft de dynamiek weer van Barths toon in zijn strijd in deze drie verschillende perioden: *preventie, oppositie en herschepping*. Voor de recontextualiseringstaak worden drie tegenhangers gekozen, die de drie verdelingen in de genetisch-historische reconstructie volgen. De eerste is, parallel aan de presentatie over het christocentrisme, Oerip Notohamidjojo, een neocalvinistische christelijke denker die zijn steun aan Soeharto toonde tijdens diens opkomst. T.B. Simatupang volgt als tweede representant, vanwege zijn ambivalente houding tegenover het regime van de Nieuwe Orde op *het hoogtepunt* van zijn macht door zijn principe van realisme - geïnspireerd door het Christelijk Realisme van Reinhold Niebuhr. De derde is Emanuel Gerrit Singgih, die in zijn uiteenzetting over de schepping en het nietige uit de openingsverzen van Genesis 1 een optimistische houding aanneemt ten opzichte van het politieke traject in Indonesië na de val van Soeharto.

De hoofdvraag die de studie dan leidt is de volgende: *wat is de bijdrage die een contextuele lezing van Barths leer van het nietige kan leveren in de zoektocht naar theologische existentie in de Indonesische context na Soeharto?*

In de zes hoofdstukken die de kern van dit werk vormen, heb ik *een contextuele lezing van Barths leer over het nietige laten zien, die een alomvattend theologisch kader ontketent dat zich verzet tegen conformisme, defaitistisch realisme verwerpt en over-optimisme vermijdt*. In antwoord op de stroom van stemmen die ons vertellen hoe Barth in zijn leer over het nietige de realiteit van het kwaad ondermijnt en de toepasbaarheid ervan in concrete historische situaties in twijfel trekt, heb ik laten zien dat het in feite een krachtig hulpmiddel is voor de strijd voor bevrijding, zelfs in een context die vrij ver afstaat van Barth en zijn werk, zoals het Indonesië van na Soeharto.

Het eerste hoofdstuk volgt de ontwikkeling van het christocentrisme als methodologische regel in de jaren dertig van de vorige eeuw. De keuze van de Tambach-lezing in 1919 als uitgangspunt bleek verhelderend, omdat de volwassen versie van Barths leer van de uitverkiezing in *Kerkelijke Dogmatiek II/2*, het hoogtepunt van Barths christocentrisme, duidelijk de belangrijkste kenmerken van Tambach vertoont. De erkenning van deze parallel helpt ons om de politieke tendens binnen de centrale idee te begrijpen die de rest van zijn *Kerkelijke Dogmatiek* project vorm zou geven. In overeenstemming met het thema van Barths politieke activisme in de jaren dertig, biedt het christocentrisme een sterke theologische grond om weerstand te bieden aan conformisme ten opzichte van elke maatschappelijke orde die indruist tegen de werkelijkheid van God voor ons in Jezus Christus.

Hoofdstuk *twee* paste deze methodologische regel voor het eerst toe in deze studie. Het gaat om het geval van Oerip Notohamidjojo, die de massamoord van 1965-1966 waarmee het regime van Soeharto begon, expliciet steunde. Notohamidjojo's theologische legitimatie van de repressieve functie van het staatsapparaat blijkt gegrond te zijn in het ambivalente karakter van Abraham Kuypers leer van de gemeenschappelijke genade (de gemene genade) - de ambivalentie die Barth met zijn christocentrisme wilde voorkomen en opheffen.

Hoofdstuk *drie* ging over de goddelijke almacht in *de Kerkelijke Dogmatiek* II/1 en II/2, die Barth eind jaren dertig en begin jaren veertig ontwikkelde, in de tijd dat hij aandrong op actie tegen de opkomende nazi's (*oppositie*). De theologische helderheid die hij kreeg door de ontdekking van het christocentrisme in de eerdere periode bleek vruchtbaar, omdat hij een duidelijk perspectief kon ontwikkelen op de goddelijke wil — en op datgene dat begrensd wordt doordat God het niet wil, dat is het nietige — en op en de dringende noodzaak voor de mensheid om daarnaar te handelen.

Hoofdstuk *vier* besprak Barths perspectief op goddelijke almacht in het licht van het standpunt van T.B. Simatupang, een belangrijke figuur in de geschiedenis van het christendom in Indonesië tijdens de Nieuwe Orde. Simatupang stond bekend om zijn principe van realisme, geïnspireerd door Reinhold Niebuhr, dat hij gebruikte om zijn halfslachtige steun aan Soeharto te legitimeren. Dit standpunt wordt blootgelegd en geïnterpreteerd door de confrontatie met Barths sterke perspectief op de goddelijke wil.

Hoofdstuk *vijf* ging over naar de bespreking van 'das Nichtige' in *Kerkelijke Dogmatiek* III, de scheppingsleer. Barth stelde dit deel samen toen het einde van de Tweede Wereldoorlog naderde en daarna, toen hij een visie ontwikkelde over de *wederopbouw van de wereld* uit de puinhopen ervan. Barths idee over het nietige is het meest zichtbaar in dit deel, waar hij zijn visie weergeeft over de strijd in het rijk der schepping vanwege de kwaadaardige dreiging van het nietige.

Hoofdstuk *zes* brengt de discussie uit hoofdstuk vijf in gesprek met Emanuel Gerrit Singgih, een Indonesische theoloog die de situatie in Indonesië na Soeharto toejuicht. Singgih's weigering om de *tohu-wabohu* in Genesis 1:2 te interpreteren als een dreigende chaos weerspiegelt zijn optimisme over het traject van de Indonesische politiek. Het engagement met Barth probeerde de theologische vooronderstelling achter deze overoptimistische houding bloot te leggen, vooral met betrekking tot de erkenning van de realiteit van het nietige.

De nadruk op de kwestie van de theodicee, die in de Barth-wetenschap de studies over dit onderwerp heeft gedomineerd, is een opmerkelijke factor geweest in de veronachtzaming van het waardevolle inzicht dat deze studie heeft geboden. Barths klaagzang na het einde van de oorlog en de val van het Derde Rijk stond niet los van zijn actieve verzet in de jaren daarvoor. Het ging hem meer om de voortzetting van de strijd dan om troost of excuses voor de tragedie. De theologisch-politieke impuls die ten grondslag ligt aan zijn relaas over het nietige is te kostbaar om over het hoofd te zien.

De veronachtzaming van het politieke aspect van Barths theologie in het algemeen is niet iets wat zelden voorkomt. Dit fenomeen kan Barth zelf deels worden aangerekend. Hij maakt zijn theologisch-politieke standpunt niet expliciet genoeg in zijn theologische geschriften.

Het feit dat Barth zelf erkent dat hij veel impliciete politieke inhouden in zijn theologische werken laat staan, bevestigt het belang van deze en vergelijkbare studies. Ik hoop dat dit werk een bijdrage heeft geleverd aan ons begrip van de *Kerkelijke Dogmatiek* en Barths theologie in het algemeen, en dat het een stimulans zal zijn voor meer studies die het politieke aspect in Barths theologie blootleggen.

Ook hoop ik dat deze studie een bijdrage zal leveren aan de receptie van Barth in Indonesië. En tenslotte, aangezien deze studie is geïnspireerd door de werkelijke strijd van zoveel mensen in Indonesië die naar bevrijding snakken, hoop ik dat zij op enigerlei wijze aan hun zaak zal bijdragen en een actieve hoop zal aanwakkeren die pessimisme overwint zonder in over-optimisme te vervallen, realisme bevordert terwijl de valkuil van fatalisme wordt vermeden, en ons verlost van de verleiding van conformisme.

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Curriculum Vitae

Daniel Sihombing was born on October 16, 1986 in Bandar Lampung, Indonesia. He obtained a Bachelor of Divinity at Southeast Asia Bible Seminary in 2010 with a thesis on the union of Christ in Calvin's *Institutes*. He continued his study at Protestant Theological University in Netherlands and gained a Master in Theology in 2012. During his master study he took a specialization in Dogmatics and wrote a thesis on the political reading of Karl Barth's doctrine of nothingness. He was admitted to the PhD program at Protestant Theological University in 2014, where he followed the 'sandwich model' and took three short-term studies in 2016, 2017, and 2018 in the Netherlands, funded by Fondation pour l'aide au Protestantisme réformé (FAP). During the course of the program, he has presented his research at PThU Graduate School, Princeton Theological Seminary, and ANZATS Conference. He is now a Candidate for Ministry of the Word at the Uniting Church in Australia (Synod Victoria and Tasmania) and a Supply Minister at Korean Church of Melbourne.