

COMMITTEE IV

The Relationship Between Science and the
Arts and Its Relevance to Cultural
Transformation

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**THE INTELLECTUAL "EARTHQUAKE"
IN
TWENTIETH-CENTURY WESTERN RELIGION**

by

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Although much has been written concerning the warfare of science and religion in the modern period, the major upheavals in western religious thought have been more a consequence of the impact of historical events and the discipline of history itself upon religious beliefs than a conflict between the scientific and the religious world view. It has, for example, been less difficult to reconcile the religious and scientific views of the origin of the universe than to reconcile contemporary historico-critical scholarship with religious claims concerning the literal historicity of Scripture as a work infallibly inspired by God. <1> Even Darwin's theory of evolution has posed less of a challenge to biblical faith than historical studies of Scripture. <2>

This is hardly surprising in view of the historical character of western religion. The roots of western religion, both Jewish and Christian, are to be found in the Bible where God is depicted as a sovereign, transcendent Creator who brings into existence the human and the natural order out of that which is "unformed and void" and who thereafter enters into a special relationship with the Primal Human Parents and their progeny. Unlike most non-western traditions, all of the western religions affirm the existence of a Creator-God-who-acts-in-history. They differ concerning their understanding the character and significance of his acts not his being. While Islam insists that Mohammed is the Last of the Prophets, Christianity holds that God himself entered history in the person of Jesus of Nazareth as the Incarnate Redeemer of humanity, an affirmation Judaism is incapable of making.

1 For an informed attempt at reconciliation of religion and modern physics, see Lawrence Kushner, The River of Light: Spirituality, Judaism, and the Evolution of Consciousness (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981). For an overview of the conflict between historical scholarship and biblical belief, see Van A. Harvey, The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Religious Belief (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966).

2 See Gertrude Himmelfarb, Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), pp. 397-411.

The special divine-human relationship entered into by God was understood by Scripture to be one of covenant and election. In the ancient Near East, a covenant was originally a type of political agreement between a superior and an inferior ruler. Among the earliest known covenants are those between Hittite suzerains of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries B.C. and their dependent client kinglets. In these pacts the suzerain would normally recount the past benefits he had bestowed upon the client and then stipulate the conditions under he would continue his protection. The suzerain would further stipulate the penalties consequent upon the client's infidelity. The covenant was sealed when the client swore an oath, that is, a conditional self-curse, calling on his own ancestral gods, who were usually not the same as the suzerain's, to visit upon him the threatened punishments were he to fail to abide by the pact. <3>

Although originally a political device utilized in international relations, the covenant came to be understood as the prototypical model of the divine-human relationship. In the biblical account of the covenant at Sinai the Children of Israel are offered the possibility of a felicitous life in an Israelite polity secure in God's protection, provided they are obedient to their God's commandments. (Deut. 28:1-14) Should, however, Israel prove disobedient, the punishments to follow include exile, the indignities of conquest and servitude to an alien overlord, rapine, torture, and even extermination. (Deut. 28:15-68)

Given this understanding of the divine-human relationship, whenever the community of Israel experienced a radical communal rather than individual misfortune, her religious teachers interpreted the event as divine punishment inflicted upon the nation for its failure to fulfill the terms of the covenant. This was the case in 586 B.C.E. when Jeremiah prophesied concerning the impending fate of Jerusalem which was then threatened by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon:

These are the words of the Lord to Jeremiah: I am the Lord, the God of all flesh; is anything impossible for me? Therefore these are the words of the Lord: I will deliver this city into the hands of the Chaldeans and of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. The Chaldeans who are fighting against this city will enter it, set it on fire and burn

³ See George Mendenhall, Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East (Pittsburgh: 1955) and article "Covenant" in Encyclopedia Judaica (Jerusalem: 1972) 5:1012-22. See also Delbert R. Hillers, Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969).

it down, with the houses on whose roofs sacrifices have been burnt to Baal and drink-offerings poured out to the other gods, by which I was provoked to anger. From their earliest days Israel and Judah have been doing what is wrong in my eyes, provoking me to anger by their actions, says the Lord. (Jer. 32:26-30)

Because of Jeremiah's belief in the covenant between God and Israel, it was impossible for him to view the fall of Jerusalem as other than a divinely-inflicted punishment. Undoubtedly, Jeremiah was mindful of the terrible warning uttered by his predecessor, the Prophet Amos:

Listen, Israelites, to thee words that the Lord addresses to you, to the nation that he brought up from Egypt: For you alone have I cared among all the nations of the world: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities. (Amos 3:1-2)

A similar conception of the covenant is to be found in the New Testament. Both Christianity and Judaism are religions which affirm covenant and election. Christianity insists that the covenant is to be understood in the light of God's entrance into time and history in the person of Jesus. Christianity identified the keeping of God's commandments with faith in and obedience to Jesus as the Christ. Just as the prophets interpreted historical misfortunes such as the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. as God's punishment, Christian teachers saw the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the subsequent misfortunes of the Jews as God's punishment for the Jews' unwillingness to accept Christ as well as for their alleged responsibility for his crucifixion. <4>

Nor is the view that God punishes those who fail to keep his covenant limited to first century Christianity. We find the motif repeated in two of twentieth-century Protestantism's most significant figures. In 1933 Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote approvingly of Hitler's initial anti-Semitic decrees as expressions of divine punishment against the Jews:

Now the measures of the state towards Judaism in addition stand in a quite special context for the church. The church of Christ has never lost sight of the thought that the 'chosen people,' who nailed the redeemer of the world to the cross,

4 See, for example, Matthew 21:40-22:7 and Norman Perrin, Rediscovering the Teachings of Jesus (New York: 1976), pp. 110 ff.

must bear the curse for its action through a long history of suffering. <5>

In spite of his opposition to National Socialism for which he was executed in 1944, there is no evidence that Bonhoeffer ever changed his mind about the theological significance of Hitler's policies even when the full extremity of those measures became known to him. Bonhoeffer saw meaning in history through the prism of the biblical doctrines of covenant and election.

Similarly, although Karl Barth consistently opposed the anti-Semitic measures of the Nazis from the start, he nevertheless interpreted the program of destruction as God's punishment. In 1949 four years after the full horror became known, Barth asserted that "the evil that had come to the Jewish people was the result of its unfaithfulness," that the Jew "pays for the fact that he is the elect of God," and that the Jewish nation is "no more than the shadow of a nation, the reluctant witness of the Son of God and the Son of Man." <6>

Thus, biblical religion, whether Jewish or Christian, sees history as having a transcendent reference. It also regards it as having an ultimate goal, an issue which we need not pursue in this context. While there are large domains of the profane in history, history, especially the history of the Church and the Synagogue, is ultimately regarded as sacred history, Heilsgeschichte, which looks forward to the salvation of humanity through the ultimate reconciliation of man and God.

There is nothing comparable to this view of God, nature and man in any of the non-biblical religions. One cannot speak of "religion" in general without taking cognizance of the irreconcilable difference between this worldview and that of, for example, Buddhism, Hinduism, or Confucianism. The credibility of the biblical view of God cannot be divorced from the veracity of Scripture's account of certain concrete historical events. This does not mean that every last word in the Bible must literally be the word of God as Fundamentalists, both Jewish and Christian, insist. Nevertheless, unless there is truth to Scripture's account of the covenant at Sinai as a real, objective event, the biblical analysis of Israel's history as a drama of disobedience, punishment, exile, and redemption will be seen as a human attempt to ascribe cosmic significance to a

5 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, No Rusty Swords, trans. H. Robertson and John Bowden (London: Fontana, 1974), p. 226.

6 Karl Barth, "The Jewish Problem and the Christian Answer," cited by Emil L. Fackenheim, To Mend the World: Foundations of Future Jewish Thought (New York: Schocken, 1982), p. 133.

series of power struggles in which the Israelites were usually the losers. Similarly, unless there is genuine credibility to the New Testament account that God literally took human form in the person of Jesus of Nazareth in order to offer himself as the Crucified and Resurrected Savior of humanity, Christianity will be seen as a purely human attempt to give meaning, structure and hope to human beings wholly enmeshed in the natural order. <7> If the biblical analysis of the human predicament and the biblical promise of redemption are to have any credibility, the Bible must be seen as the true and accurate expression of an extra-human, divine revelation. This is especially important for the Christian criticism of Judaism. The plausibility of the Christian interpretation of the suffering and extermination of the Jews as righteous divine punishment rests upon the objective, historical truth of Jesus as Nazareth as the Incarnate Christ. Certainly, Jews and other non-Christians can hardly be faulted for failing to affirm an event for which, as we shall see, many of the best Christian scholars find no convincing historical evidence.

As long as Christianity maintained a cognitive monopoly within the territory in which it had achieved dominance, the problem of the objective, historical truth of Scripture was of little consequence. The cognitive monopoly came to an end with the Reformation. However, the full consequences of the demonopolization were not felt until the rise of the nineteenth-century, historico-critical school of biblical scholarship. In the case of Judaism, the unity of authorship of the Five Books of Moses, known in Judaism as the Torah, had until modern times been regarded as the indispensable precondition of Judaism's claim that its religious traditions were divinely legitimated and, as such, binding on all generations of Jews. By demonstrating that the Torah was not a single document but a group of documents arising from schools that flourished at different times and possessed differing religious and political interests, modern historical scholarship raised the possibility that religious traditions which had been regarded as of divine origin were actually reflections of a particular group's earthly values and interests. The scholarly reduction of texts, hitherto regarded as of divine origin, to the relativities of historical context rendered questionable the authority of Scripture. Undoubtedly, a principal reason for the uncompromising rejection of the use of historico-critical scholarship by Protestant Fundamentalism and Orthodox Judaism has been the correct perception that such scholarship relativizes the claims of Biblical religion to divinely-certified authority.

7 The indispensability of an objective historical basis for Christianity's assertions about Jesus as the Christ is discussed by Van A. Harvey, op. cit., pp. 103-59.

In addition to the question of the unity of the Five Books of Moses, the historical veracity of Gospel narratives concerning the life and activities of Jesus has been challenged since the publication in 1834 of David Friedrich Strauss' Life of Jesus. <8> Strauss applied critical historical scholarship to the study of the New Testament. He rejected the historicity, among others, of the Gospel traditions concerning Jesus' infancy, his temptation ascension, baptism by John the Baptist, transfiguration and resurrection. Strauss argued that these traditions arose as messianic legends and myths that had become attached to Jesus after his followers had come to believe that he was Israel's Messiah. Later critics argued that Mark was the earliest Gospel upon whom both Matthew and Luke were largely dependent. However, the critics held that, far from being an historical account of the life or message of Jesus, Mark had taken isolated stories and sayings and had edited them in accordance with his own theological perspectives. <9> From the point of view of historical scholarship, the Gospels were a far more reliable source for what the early Church believed about the life of Jesus than the life of Jesus itself.

According to the Protestant sociologist, Ernst Troeltsch, the methods and presuppositions of historical scholarship are incompatible with traditional Christian faith. This writer would add that they are equally problematic for normative Judaism. Judaism and Christianity assert claims concerning the exclusive and objective truth of their revelation which ultimately rest on belief in the supernatural inspiration of Scripture. Thus, the believer has little choice but to affirm the Bible's supernatural inspiration. By contrast, the critical historian must start with the methodological assumption that the Bible can only be understood in terms of its historical context. Moreover, the methods and the principles of interpretation by which he or she studies the Bible are no different than those used to investigate any other ancient historical document. As a methodological assumption, Scripture must be treated by the scholar as he or she would treat any profane document. Troeltsch insisted that every expression of truth and value was historically conditioned and that the critical historian was obliged to reject supernatural intervention as a principle of explanation. "History," Troeltsch argued, "is

8 David Friedrich Strauss, The Life of Jesus Critically Examined, trans. George Eliot (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1906).

9 See Werner Georg Kummel, The Theology of the New Testament, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1973).

no place for absolute religion and absolute personality."
<10>

As a result of these challenges, the biblical religions were faced with a crisis of plausibility which continues to this day. It should be noted that the crisis of plausibility was not occasioned by Newtonian physics, Darwinian biology or twentieth-century physics or biology. It was very largely a consequence of the application of critical historical scholarship to the study of religion. It was also a consequence of the dissonance between the sacred and secular interpretations of history.

Within Protestantism, the methodological denial of Scripture's privileged status by the historical school was attended by the rise of Protestant liberalism and the relativization of the dogmatic claims of biblical religion. Supernatural elements in Christianity were deemphasized in favor of a natural religion in harmony with reason. <11> The father of Protestant liberalism was Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834). Albrecht Ritschl (1822-89) was one of its great representatives. Ritschl's career was dedicated to the introduction of a form of the Christian religion which was free of the traditional, pre-scientific forms in which it had been encased and, at the same time, free from the excesses to which philosophical speculation and rationalistic interpretation had subjected Scripture. A fundamental aim of Ritschl and his school was the reconciliation of religion and culture. Ritschl's thought was rich, complicated and sophisticated. For our purposes it will suffice to note one of his leading ideas: Only by involvement in work in the larger community for the sake of the common good, that is, by faithfulness in one's social calling, can one truly become an example of Christ; God and man together have a common task of realizing his Kingdom, identified by Ritschl as

the association of mankind-an association both extensively and intensively the most comprehensive possible-through the reciprocal moral action of

10 Ernst Troeltsch, Die Absolutheit des Christentums (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1902) p. 41. I am indebted to Van A. Harvey, op. cit., for this citation.

11 For an overview of the rise of Protestant liberalism, see Karl Barth, Protestant Thought: From Rousseau to Ritschl, trans. Brian Cozens (London: SCM Press, 1959). For a succinct discussion of the development, see Peter Berger, The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociology of Religion (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1969), pp. 158-60.

its members, action which transcends all merely natural and particular considerations. <12>

Concerning Ritschl's conception of the "Kingdom of God," H. Richard Niebuhr has commented:

all references are to man and man's work; the word "God" seems to be an intrusion...the conception...is practically the same as Kant's idea of the kingdom of ends.<13>

Niebuhr adds that, in fairness to Ritschl, one must recognize that Ritschl's attempted to reconcile Christianity with those elements in the culture of his era which were most compatible with it. Unfortunately, those who came after Ritschl tended to identify Christianity with considerably less elevated aspects of German culture. For example, one of Ritschl's disciples, Wilhelm Herrmann, identified the traditional Protestant notion that the Christian is called upon by God to serve him in the workaday world with the idea of a citizen's "calling" (Beruf) in the Bismarckian Kaiserreich. In a period in which the first German Reich was undertaking its spectacular path toward becoming Europe's preeminent industrial power, Ritschl's disciple largely identified the Christian's vocation with worldly activity in the nascent Reich. Metaphysical and eschatological speculation were to be eschewed. Christian religious life took upon itself a practical, worldly and potentially nationalistic bent. <14>

The younger generation of Ritschlians tended to complete the historicization and, hence, the relativization of Christianity under the influence of the academic study of the history of religions. In place of a supernatural legitimation of Christianity, Christianity came to be characterized as the "highest stage" in the evolution of humanity's religious consciousness and, as such, largely identified with the values of German bourgeois culture. The latter was solipsistically seen as the highest stage in civilization's evolution.

12 Albrecht Ritschl, The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation, trans. and ed. H. R. Mackintosh and A. B. Macauley (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1900), p. 284.

13 H. Richard Niebuhr, Christ and Culture (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), p. 99.

14 Gustav Kruger, "The 'Theology of Crisis'" in W. Warren Wagar, ed., European Intellectual History Since Darwin and Marx (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), pp. 135-39. Kruger, a German Church historian originally delivered this paper as a lecture at New York's Union Theological Seminary in 1927.

Had it not been for the outbreak of World War I, it is quite likely that liberalism's reconciliation of religion and culture would have remained unchallenged for many decades. World War I revealed the night side of bourgeois "progress." The rapid transformation of the great European powers from agrarian to advanced industrial societies had extraordinarily destabilizing social consequences. Industrialization brought in its train competition for raw materials, markets and the capital necessary for further industrialization. The leaders of the Reich, a late-comer to European imperialism, became convinced that their nation's survival as an advanced industrial power required both territorial and economic expansion. <15> Once war began, it became obvious that slaughter could be mechanized as easily as any other process of production.

Karl Barth (1886-1966), perhaps the most important Protestant theologian of the twentieth century, was twenty-eight years old at the outbreak of World War I. Barth had been a student of Adolf Harnack and initially accepted the dominant liberal Protestantism of the period. Barth has written that the crucial event leading to his rejection of "nineteenth-century theology" was the unqualified support expressed in a proclamation issued by a group of German intellectuals in August 1914 for the war policies of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Barth noted that the signatories included most of his former theological instructors. The proclamation was consistent with liberalism's identification of Christianity with German bourgeois culture. In reality, it was more of a surrender than an identification. <16> Liberalism had identified itself with a culture which had been responsible for the most pointlessly destructive war in all of human history. The historical experience of the war discredited both bourgeois culture and the Protestant liberalism which identified itself with it.

Barth understood clearly that a new beginning had to be made in theology. His impact as a theological leader dates from the publication of the second edition of his great commentary, The Epistle to the Romans in 1921. Barth attacked the "subjectivism" of the liberal Protestant theology of his time, which he saw as an attempt to fit Christian revelation into the mold of conceptions of human origin. From 1921 on, his fundamental concern was to prevent theology from becoming an ideology, that is, to prevent that which Barth regarded as the Word of God from being regarded as a product of human culture.

15 See Fritz Fischer: War of Illusions: German Policies from 1911 to 1914 (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), pp. 1-43.

16 Karl Barth, The Humanity of God, trans. Thomas Weiser and John Newton Thomas (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960), p. 14.

Among the dangers Barth saw in Protestant Liberalism were the following:

(a) It mistakenly identified fallible, human values with the Word of God, thus destroying Revelation as the spiritual Archimedean point of Christianity. According to Barth, revelation is God's self-manifestation. As such it owes absolutely nothing to human initiatives.

(b) There is the danger that the Church will merely reflect the present social and cultural situation, losing its power of criticism and its prophetic function.

(c) In accordance with historic Protestant teaching, Barth insisted that God alone is the source of salvation and that the attempt to identify any human Weltanschauung with God's word constitutes a rejection of the teaching that justification is by grace alone.

According to Barth, both human will and reason have been vitiated by the Fall so that it is absolutely impossible for men to discover the truth about God by their own efforts. Only if and when God manifests himself can there be revelation. In this period of his career Barth completely rejected natural theology and insisted upon the radical transcendence of God. In contrast to liberalism, which tended to offer non-miraculous, naturalistic explanations of such events as the Resurrection, Barth held that the interpretation of the Bible should not avoid those elements which are regarded as "scandals" by modern thought. Thus, Barth declares of the Resurrection:

The Resurrection is the revelation: the disclosing of Jesus as the Christ, the appearing of God, and the apprehending of God in Jesus. <17>

Similarly, Barth follows Kierkegaard in asserting the incompatibility of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation with unaided reason:

The Gospel requires-faith. Only for those who believe it is the power of God unto salvation. It can therefore be neither directly communicated nor directly apprehended. '...If Christ be very God, He must be unknown, for to be known directly is the characteristic mark of an idol' (Kierkegaard). So new, so unheard of, so unexpected in this world is this power of God unto salvation, that it can

appear among us, be received and understood by us, only as contradiction. <18>

It should, however, be stressed that Barth was no fundamentalist insisting on the literal inerrancy of every single word of Scripture. He held that the Bible contained the witness to the Word of God but that the Bible itself was not to be identified with that Word.

Barth was not interested in attempting to "prove" the existence of God. He held that the Bible witnesses to God's acts; it does not prove his existence. Thus, true theology is wholly dependent upon revelation. As such, theology is rational inquiry into God's self-revelation insofar as man is capable of such an inquiry. And, for Barth, God reveals himself to man only in and through Christ. Hence, theology has one and only one task, to declare that God has become man as the Word of God.

It should be obvious that for Barth, Christian teaching is not a religious teaching among other religious teachings. As God's teaching about himself, Christianity is not, as are the world's religions, a human religious teaching. Such a view of Christianity constitutes a thorough-going rejection of liberal Protestantism's many attempts to achieve a synthesis of Christianity and modern bourgeois culture. Barth held that religion is not the soul of culture but the crisis, the doom of culture. In contrast to Ritschl who sought to reconcile bourgeois culture and Liberal Protestantism, Barth's theology announces the demise of bourgeois culture. Referring to the religion of the 39th Psalm, Luther, Kierkegaard and Paul, Barth asserts:

Religion is aware that it is in no wise the crown and fulfilment of true humanity; it knows itself rather to be a questionable, disturbing, dangerous thing...Religion confronts every human competence, every concrete happening in this world, as a thing incomprehensible, which cannot be tolerated or accepted. Religion, so far from being the place where the healthy harmony of human life is lauded, is instead the place where it appears diseased, discordant, and disrupted...Conflict and distress, sin and death, the devil and hell, make up the reality of religion. <19>

Nor is it accidental that it was the experience of World War I that led to Barth's rejection of the Liberal synthesis of religion and culture. The experience of that war, with its mass production of mass human slaughter and its origins

18 Barth, Romans, p. 38.

19 Barth, Romans, p. 259.

in the dilemmas of bourgeois civilization, was the earthquake that shook 20th century religion to its foundations. Barth refused to identify Christianity as the highest expression of human culture. For Barth there was an infinite qualitative distance between the Word of God and the highest in human culture. By the beginning of World War I it was obvious to Barth that in the German cultural sphere such an identification was tantamount to identifying Christ with the imperialism of the wartime Kaiserreich. Between 1933 and 1945, German clergymen and theologians were again faced with the problem of the extent to which they were prepared to accept a synthesis of religion and the dominant National Socialist culture, a far more malignant and demonic force than that of the Kaiserreich. The majority of German religious leaders, both Protestant and Catholic had little difficulty in embracing National Socialism, many with great enthusiasm. Barth refused any compromise with National Socialism. Refusing on religious grounds to pledge unconditional allegiance to Adolf Hitler, as was required of all German professors, Barth left Germany in 1935 and returned to his native Switzerland. Because of his Christian faith, Barth was never deceived about the night side of the secular culture of his era. <20>

Without the Archimedean point of transcendent, divinely-legitimated religious values, such as can be found in both non-liberal Judaism and Christianity, one is left with values which are wholly immanent in the secular world. In the political sphere, power becomes the dominant value; in the economic sphere wealth divorced from moral values comes to dominate. Value-free instrumental rationality becomes the dominant mode of conducting the business of life. Barth had a spiritual archimdean point, faith in the sovereignty of the self-revealing God, which enabled him to take his stand against the Third Reich. Had he identified his faith with German culture, he would in all likelihood have supported National Socialism as did many of his theological peers.

Max Weber, whose career ended as Barth's began, was as convinced as was Barth that the liberal attempt at a synthesis of religion and bourgeois culture was doomed. In his essay "Politics as a Vocation," Weber contrasted the worldly "ethic of responsibility" with the religiously legitimated "ethic of ultimate ends." Weber pointed out that no practitioner of the worldly ethic could ignore the fact that "in numerous instances the attainment of 'good' ends is bound to the fact that one must be willing to pay the price of using morally dubious means or at least dangerous ones- and facing the possibility or even the probability of evil

20 See Robert E. Willis, The Ethics of Karl Barth (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971) pp. 406-414.

ramifications." <21> Earlier in his career, Weber had advanced his celebrated thesis that the modern, bourgeois-capitalist world was an unintended consequence of the rise of ascetic Protestantism in the West. <22> While rooted in religion, bourgeois capitalism constituted the most thorough-going rationalization of the economy and society humanity had ever known. As such, it was both rationalizing and desacralizing. Concerning the market economy under capitalism, Weber observed:

The market community as such is the most impersonal relationship of practical life into which human beings can enter with one another...Where the market is allowed to follow its own tendencies, its participants do not look towards the persons of each other but only towards the commodity; there are no obligations of brotherliness or reverence, and none of the spontaneous human relations that are sustained by personal unions. They would all just obstruct the free development of the market relationship...
<23>

Perhaps nowhere did Weber express his pessimism concerning the future of the bourgeois society with which Protestant liberalism identified as in his concluding reflections in The Protestant Ethics:

The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into every day life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt. In Baxter's view the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the "saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment." But fate

21 Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 120.

22 Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1958).

23 Max Weber, Economy and Society, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), Vol. 2, p. 236.

decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage...

No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of ideas and ideals, or, if, neither, mechanical petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might truly be said: "Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved." (Italics added) <24>

As understood by Weber, there was more than a little irony in bourgeois capitalism's combination of Protestant origins and contemporary functional godlessness. Admittedly, most Protestants of Weber's period continued to profess religious beliefs. Nevertheless, whenever under capitalism the demands of the marketplace conflicted with those of religion, especially in large-scale transactions, the market prevailed. It is in that sense that bourgeois civilization can be characterized as functionally godless. <25> As both Weber and Barth understood, each in his own way, liberal Protestantism's identification with bourgeois civilization was highly problematic if not spiritually suicidal.

Although, as we have seen, Weber speculated that a way out of the "iron cage" might be found through the emergence of "entirely new prophets," his basic stand was one of pessimism. He was under no illusion that socialism offered an improvement over capitalism. By contrast, Barth did see a way out for the believer, if not for bourgeois civilization. Like Weber, Barth rejected Enlightenment optimism which held that autonomous, self-sufficient man, guided by reason, could create a felicitous human community, a Kantian kingdom of ends if not a Christian Kingdom of God. Barth saw as clearly as did Weber that without an objective, transcendent frame of reference in terms of which human projects could be judged, reason and science would almost inevitably become the servants of power. Weber saw no currently available cultural value to prevent such an outcome. For Barth, Christ as the Word of God was the required objective standard.

It is generally recognized today that Barth's understanding of God changed considerably over the years. In his Epistle to the Romans Barth stressed the radical

24 Weber, Protestant Ethic, pp. 181-182.

25 On the functional godlessness of modern civilization, see Richard L. Rubenstein, The Age of Triage (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), pp. 1-33.

incommensurability of the Word of God and the Word of man. He stressed the radical transcendence of God, rejecting any hint of divine immanence. God, he asserted was ganz anders, wholly other. Barth held that Christianity was not a religion like other world religions which expressed human wisdom and aspiration, each in accordance with the culture out of which it had arisen. According to Barth, Christianity's fundamental content comes entirely from God's side. Far from being a religion among religions, Christianity is uniquely God's self-revelation to mankind.

In his Church Dogmatics, the magisterial, multi-volumed work of his mature years, Barth continued to affirm Christianity as God's self-revelation, but he now came to stress the humanity of God rather than his absolute transcendence. Far from being wholly other, God reveals himself to man in the Person of Jesus Christ:

Whoever says 'revelation', says 'The Word become Flesh'. <26>

Thomas Altizer has suggested that Barth's renunciation of his earlier position may have been due to his realization that insistence on the dichotomy between the Word of God and the word of man must end in the negation of all human expressions of the meaning of faith "including the creedal and dogmatic statements of the historic Church..." <27> By insisting on the radical incommensurability of the divine and the human, Barth unintentionally invited the rejection of God as functionally irrelevant. And, functional irrelevance can easily lead to radical unbelief. Some link had to be affirmed between God and man. For Barth the Incarnate Christ was that link. Nevertheless, affirmation of the humanity of God in Christ did not really restore the credibility of the creedal and dogmatic assertions of the Church, for, as Kenneth Hamilton has observed, in Barth, both early and late, it is always God who condescends to commune with man, that is, our knowledge of God always comes from God's side and is always an act of self-revelation <28> Barth's faith in God as revealing himself in Christ is thus the presupposition of his entire theological system. While Barth's theology may help Christians to deepen their understanding of what is involved intellectually and spiritually in their inherited faith and the culture it has engendered, Barth's Christological presuppositions take as

26 Karl Barth, Die Kirchliche Dogmatic, Vol. I/1 (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag A.G. Zollikon, 1940), p. 122.

27 Thomas J. J. Altizer, "Theology and the Death of God" in Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton, Radical Theology and the Death of God (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), p. 105.

28 Kenneth Hamilton, God is Dead: The Anatomy of a Slogan (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans, 1966), p. 46.

axiomatic that which non-Christians find most questionable in Christian belief. Non-Christians can legitimately inquire of Barth, "What evidence can you offer for your assertion that the Christian understanding of God is in reality God's self-revelation?" Traditionally, both Judaism and Christianity have answered questions of that sort by offering as evidence the biblical traditions which purportedly bore witness to God's revelation to Moses and Jesus role as the crucified and resurrected Christ respectively as real and indubitable events in history. As noted above, such evidence retained its credibility as long as the biblical accounts were regarded as accurate historical accounts of what actually took place. That is why to this day Fundamentalists, both Jewish and Christian, insist upon the literal, historical truth of the accounts in Scripture. Fundamentalists respect the elementary requirement that assertions about reality be based upon credible evidence. Those trained in the scientific, historical study of religion question the evidence set forth by the Fundamentalists, but there is no gainsaying the fact that the Fundamentalists attempt to offer what they regard as credible evidence.

The same cannot be said of either Barth or those Christian thinkers who accept the scientific study of their basic text, the Bible. In Barth's case, history is treated with an ambiguity which, to an outsider, appears to obscure more than it clarifies. For example, the most decisive event in Christ's history is his Resurrection. Absent the Resurrection Jesus is but a mortal Jewish teacher whose life is tragically cut off before his time; it is the Resurrection that makes manifest his role as Christ the Redeemer. Yet Barth rejects the literal, historical character of the Resurrection. He insists that Resurrection "is not a 'historical event which may be placed side with other events. Rather it is the 'non-historical' happening, by which all other events are bounded." <29> Undoubtedly, such statements make sense within the circle of belief. The non-believer is, however, likely to observe that his request for evidence has not been met and that he has been asked to accept at face value assertions about reality which have yet to be verified. Thus, Barth does not really escape the problems arising from his original assertion of the radical otherness of God. Barth's magisterial work is rightly entitled Church Dogmatics. Barth gives non-believers no credible evidence for his assertions about God and Christ even while faulting them for their lack of faith. Barth's whole effort can be likened to an Anselmian, fides quaerens intellectum, faith seeking understanding. In defense of Barth one might object that Christianity never claimed that its truths could be validated by empirical evidence. It always insisted that faith was a divine gift with which God

29 Barth, Epistle to the Romans, p. 203.

instilled in the believer the capacity to receive the 'Truth.'" Undoubtedly, many Christians will rest content with a view of faith as God's self-revelation made credible to the believer by an act of divine grace. Quite obviously, such a view will not offer the non-Christian a credible intellectual or spiritual basis for becoming a Christian.

Moreover, non-Christians have become far more significant culturally and politically than they were when Barth was at the apex of his career. Barth wrote his major works during the last days of the ascendancy of Euro-Christian civilization. The cultural self-confidence of Euro-Christians such as Barth undoubtedly helped to bolster the credibility of their view of Christian faith as a divinely bestowed gift, even when they did not identify Christianity with European civilization. With the rise of non-Christian Asia, Barth's dogmatic interpretation of Christianity is likely to prove as problematic to the non-believer in Christendom as to non-Christians, since Christian faith is no longer culturally reinforced by the world's dominant culture. Protestant liberalism was born when Friedrich Schleiermacher attempted to render Christianity credible to religion's "cultured despisers." <30> As noted, Barth insisted that Schleiermacher had conceded far too much to culture in his defense of religion. Nevertheless, it is doubtful that Barth has had much to say to that same audience. If Christian faith depends in the final analysis on God's grace, the non-believer is likely to ignore the possibility of turning to that faith until grace is bestowed upon him.

As we have seen, Barth attempted to escape the worst dilemmas of the "iron cage" of modern western civilization by asserting the reality of a Christian spiritual archimedian, namely God's self-revelation in Christ. Believing in that archimedian point Barth was able to refuse to go along with some of the most destructive aspects of the culture of modernity. Unfortunately, the closer one looks at Barth's archimedian point, the less certain does one become that it constitutes a reliable defense against the ills of modernity. While Barth's thought may strengthen the resolve of those who possess a faith similar to his, it has little, if anything, to say to the kind of people responsible for maintaining the "iron cage." They are hardly likely to rest content with Barth's assurances of the truth of the Christian view of God. One is forced sadly to conclude that religion's grandest attempt to escape the "iron cage" in the twentieth century cannot be thought of as having succeeded. Absent a more convincing teacher than Barth, we are left in the spiritually precarious situation of seeing religion as

30 Friedrich Schleiermacher, On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers (New York: Harper Torch Books, 1958).

wholly immersed within the texture of human culture, the very predicament Barth labored so valiantly to overcome.