

Systematic Theology after Karl Barth in the French Speaking Area

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Nearly a century after its first publication, Barth's *Römerbrief* (1922) has just been re-published in the *Karl Barth Gesamtausgabe*¹. An opportunity is thus given to consider afresh the global achievement of Barth's long career that really began with this book. We have been asked to "picture a creative development, starting from Barth but also going beyond Barth, within our own context, whilst paying attention to the three areas of church, society, and the academy". These specifications make current challenges a priority. This shifts the emphasis from historical to present theology. This way of going about Barth's theology gives priority to the *object* Barth was aiming at, and this object (*Sache*) is thus approached in its historicity, that is to say in the evolving form this object has taken right up to the present. We have to match, above all, the present situation and ask: "How to address for today the fundamental issue that Barth's theology never ceased to take into account?" In this purpose, the question is: "how could Barth's theology inspire innovative solutions to current issues?" Then the following question is also to be asked: "What solutions have to be invented beyond the limits posed by Barth's theology, when the present situation makes it necessary?"

This paper proceeds from a particular perspective, that of the French speaking area, namely Belgium where I teach, but also France, Switzerland and finally Québec, with which the Louvain Faculty of theology shares a very close research network. Of course students from all around the world (Latin and Central America, Africa, Asia and Middle East) study there, but the cultural and academic milieu has a very characteristic profile with special features that determine the theological task. Secularization has taken a very rigid form. An anti-religious mentality has become widespread. The peculiarity of French "laïcité" is due to a unique historical background. In a slightly different way Belgium, Switzerland and Québec all experienced a spectacular withdrawal from religious membership in society and a loss of legitimacy for theological studies in the academy. The secular age takes various forms. During the last decades, the movement of secularization has been hastened by ecclesial conservatism that caused a rift between the Catholic Church and our societies, especially among the generation who is changing faster (people between 20 and 50). As Zygmunt Bauman puts it, ultimate concerns, the language and themes of which are transmitted by religious traditions, seem hardly relevant in the shifts of modernity. There is no time left to think about eternity when the present is so absorbing. Between post-modern societies and the catholic religious model, there is an increasing lack of mutual comprehension. The Church experiences a moment of withdrawal from its belief, resulting from a recent and poor vision of Tradition; such attitude is due to the fear of a world which the Church fails to understand; our societies, for their part, are experiencing a social evolution, whose unprecedented acceleration even the ecclesiastical authorities have even perceived².

¹ K. Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Zweite Fassung) 1922*, herausgegeben von C. van der Kooi und K. Tolstaja (Karl Barth-Gesamtausgabe, II. Akademische Werke), Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2010, 784 p.

² H. Rosa, *Beschleunigung. Die Veränderung der Zeitstrukturen in der Moderne*, Frankfurt am Main : Suhrkamp, 2005.

Let us consider the three areas, namely the Academy (1), Church (2) and society (3). The purpose is to bring up to date Barth's theological contribution in relationship with what is at stake in the academy where theology receives a *scientific* duty (1), in the Church, where theology has to take responsibility for a *critical* status (2) and finally, in society, where theology assumes a *public* status (3).

1. Scientific Status of Theology in the Academy

How theology has, nowadays, to understand its *scientific status* in the context of the Academy?

Following in Barth's footsteps means promoting theological rationality as a *specific* one amongst the other scientific rationalities. Faced with the credibility gap, the temptation for theology is to become something else like history of religion, sociology or philosophy of religion. There would result in a gain in prestige: the intellectual task would be justified by an agreed academic methodology, whether historical or psychological. Is liberal theology coming back in the guise of high academic standards? It seems so when we peruse Pierre Gisel's proposals for a decade. Gisel is a Protestant author that enjoys a great influence in the French-speaking world, even among Catholics³. According to him, theology has to focus on the theory of religion in the context of modernity in order to escape the narrow-mindedness of a particular confession or religion. It looks very much like a Troeltsch revival. Admittedly this proposal could well be seen as an opportunity in our particular context.

Speaking of God in the Academy seems almost impossible as such outside the Faculty of Theology. On the contrary, religions as phenomena can be seriously taken into account in a scientific discourse. I'd like to take two examples from the academic context of the Université catholique de Louvain. First example: the creation of a master's degree in religious sciences. It is an interdisciplinary initiative involving the Faculties of psychology, history, oriental studies, theology, philosophy and anthropology in order to introduce students to an academic approach to the knowledge of world religions. This development is a sign of a more general movement in progress that can also be observed in France, Switzerland, Québec and Belgium. The mixture among public opinion of a very deep ignorance of religion and at a same time a pervasive fear of religious fanaticism provoke various reactions and initiatives such as the creation of many Institutes of religious studies. In France, speaking about religion in the public space and in the media has been such a taboo for so long that it has become impossible for teachers to explain western history: how can you understand anything about medieval history if you completely ignore Christianity? How can you visit a Gothic cathedral if you are unable to identify the woman listening to the angel? The problem became more acute when teachers themselves couldn't say anything about all this. State authorities decided that the ignorance had come too far. Secularist ideology was producing collateral damage that should be tackled. Following the Debray report on «the teaching of religious phenomena in state schools» (L'enseignement du fait religieux dans l'école laïque, 2002), the French education minister founded, in the same year, the Institut européen des sciences des religions (IESR), where experts may, as a

³ P. Gisel, *La théologie face aux sciences religieuses* (Lieux théologiques 34), Genève : Labor et Fides, 1999 and also 'Tâche et fonction actuelles de la théologie : Déplacements et perspectives dans le contexte contemporain', in : *RTL* 35 (2004) 289-315.

priority, teach school teachers about religious realities in a secular and scientific way⁴. In the academy, authorities are now promoting such initiatives, but such demands also derive from public opinion. Here is another example: all theology professors are also teaching a course called « religious sciences » in all other Faculties. Every student of the université catholique de Louvain has to take this course in his program. Ethical issues, biblical lectures or reflections on the meaning of life can thus be put before them. For the professors it is a great challenge, but it is also a very productive experience to meet students of all kinds and to work with them on religious or theological language. Students as a whole have expressed their appreciation for being given such an opportunity to think about existential topics at the academic level.

Theology has no choice: it has to enter in close relationship with religions studies. But the conclusion that theology should become entirely a matter of religious studies shouldn't be drawn. The complex evolution of academic theology in Switzerland and Québec, with the growing weight granted to religious studies has to be the subject of careful reflection. Is this an unavoidable evolution for the future? At this point the contribution of Barth's theology can be legitimately appealed to.

For Barth, dogmatics is an insider discourse that comes from faith and evolves from the testimony of revelation. The distance from religious fact, usual in the religious sciences, is incompatible with such an inner point of view. Theology cannot be confused with theoretical models of factual or empirical data relating to religions. The theologian doesn't stay at the door-step: the confession of faith makes him to think things through. The logic pervading biblical and theological literature is to be discovered, analyzed and expressed rationally. For Barth, however, the epistemological challenge is better met in tackling one specific theological topic after another rather than in elaborating a comprehensive and systematic theory of theological rationality. According to him, such problems as status and method in theology cannot be solved while dealing with theology from the outside. That is also the reason why his solutions have to be read in thousands of pages in the *Church Dogmatics*.

“An academic approach means being objective. Objectivity in theology involves unconditional respect for the peculiarity of its favorite theme: man in his ultimate distress and hope, man in front of God”.⁵ The academic character of theology involves respect for ‘the way its object is coming to it’. When receiving the word of God as the history of his deeds transmitted by the sacred witnesses, what kind of truth theology has to tackle? This kind of truth emerges through a series of given facts that theology cannot create from nothing, but that theology has to accept as they come in the scriptural account. Theology always has to interpret afresh this original account according to that guide in reading called Christian tradition. Theological rationality begins thus with biblical hermeneutic⁶. Thanks to Barth's achievement, the relationship between exegesis and dogmatics has been renewed in a critical process that considers carefully the nature of Scripture and tries to understand the very meaning it carries for today. The beginning of Barth's theological revolution lies in the preference given to the doctrine of inspiration rather than to historical criticism⁷. The word of God, testified by the Scripture, has something to tell us beyond the first hearers. The way in which

⁴ See <http://www.iesr.ephe.sorbonne.fr/>

⁵ « Wissenschaftlichkeit bedeutet Sachlichkeit. Sachlichkeit in der Theologie ist der unbedingte Respekt vor der Einzigartigkeit des hier gewählten Themas : der Mensch in seiner letzten Not und Hoffnung, der Mensch vor Gott » ; K. Barth, *Der Römerbrief* (ref. 1), 706.

⁶ H. Kirschstein, *Der souveräne Gott und die heilige Schrift. Einführung in die Biblische Hermeneutik Karl Barths*, Aachen: Shaker, 1998.

⁷ K. Barth, *Der Römerbrief* (ref. 1), 3.

Scripture expresses its meaning has to be taken into account. Understanding this narrative supposes going to the trouble of unpacking it as a whole and replacing it in a comprehensive account that has an inner coherence, stemming from the center: Jesus Christ, Crucified and Risen.

At this point, conclusions can be drawn about theological rationality based on the procedures that have just been described. In this theological exegesis, the quest for meaning takes into account the narrative dimension of Scripture. Unfolding the sense of God's Word is possible whilst unfolding the story of revelation as a given and significant account. Such biblical hermeneutics gives credit to the "facticity" of a particular story. It all begins with what that can be recognized as a fact (*Faktum*)⁸, which is the divine covenant, from which God's will and grace may be grasped. At the beginning, there is neither any philosophical category nor any abstract principle; there is neither anthropological presupposition nor epistemological axiom. There is only God's historical coming to human beings in its otherness and objective reality. That history may be interpreted through signs, words and deeds that are determined and which cannot receive any basis outside themselves. Theology is dealing with the account of an event (*der Bericht über ein Geschehen*)⁹. "What actually happened in Jesus Christ"¹⁰ is the point of departure. The necessity of that story is not of a theoretical kind (*prinzipiell notwendig*)¹¹, the logic at work in the fact (*Faktum*) taken into consideration has to be deduced from what actually (*faktisch*) happened because this particular story proceeds from God's sovereign freedom. We can define this way of doing theology as a hermeneutics of facticity –a process relying on the facticity of faith and revelation¹².

At the same time, this conception of doing theology can be described as a hermeneutic of historicity. The object of theology is "God himself in the history of his deeds"¹³, that is to say the story in which God becomes man in order that man could return to him. To know Jesus Christ's identity is possible by way of returning to the story of his personal existence¹⁴. Theology must then follow the movement of a living story¹⁵. This hermeneutic of historicity endows theology with a narrative character, because it relies on the understanding of a structured plot¹⁶.

At the end of the hermeneutical process, theology has to ask afresh the question of truth. The aim of application (*Anwendung*) and appropriation (*Aneignung*) makes possible to say, with the words of Hans-Georg Gadamer, that Barth contributes to the "recovery of the fundamental hermeneutical

⁸ K. Barth, KD IV/1, 41.

⁹ K. Barth, KD I/1, 297.

¹⁰ « *was in Jesus Christus tatsächlich geschehen ist* » (KD IV/1, 39); « *was in Jesus Christus in der Zeit nach dem Willen Gottes geschehen ist* » (KD IV/1, 46).

¹¹ K. Barth, KD IV/1, 234.

¹² B. Bourguine, 'Barth et l'herméneutique de la facticité', in : E. Gaziaux (ed.), *Philosophie et théologie. Festschrift Emilio Brito (BETL 206)*, Leuven: Peeters, 2007, 301-319.

¹³ K. Barth, *Einführung in die evangelische Theologie*, Zürich: EVZ Verlag, 1962, 13.

¹⁴ K. Barth, KD IV/3, 205. The story of Jesus is a drama, see KD IV/3, 192 & 196. In KD IV, Hans-Wilhelm Pietz sees a "dramatic form of thought" (*dramatische Denkform*) ; see H.-W. Pietz, *Das Drama des Bundes: die dramatische Denkform in Karl Barths Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1990, 76-88.

¹⁵ See K. Barth, KD IV/2, 118.

¹⁶ K. Barth, KD IV/1, 245 and KD IV/3, 974. See B. Bourguine, 'La théo-logique de Karl Barth comprise comme une herméneutique de l'historicité' in : *RTL* 34 (2003) 281-305.

problem”¹⁷. According to Barth’s theological practice, understanding is going in the right direction if it takes the very same path its object once followed. “The hermeneutical task becomes of itself a questioning of things and is always in part so defined. This places hermeneutical work on a firm basis”¹⁸. Even if Barth was reluctant to make explicit hermeneutical reflection, it is difficult not to describe his practice with the very notions Gadamer uses in his philosophical hermeneutics. One can rightly be impressed by the hermeneutical accuracy of such a way of approaching the understanding process. It is not completely a surprise. Indeed, *Römerbrief* begins with a reflection about what it means to understand and to explain.¹⁹

According to Webster, Barth’s theology may be described as a theology of retrieval²⁰. We can indeed identify a set of formal judgments in common with the works of E. Jüngel, R. Jenson, R. Williams or T. Torrance. For them all, the source of theology, namely God’s revelation through Jesus Christ, is its norm. External criteria do not have the final say in judgements on Christian doctrine and the current way of thinking is often kept at a reasonable distance. We have to observe the rich fecundity of such an approach. The particular doctrinal results of Karl Barth’s work are spectacular, taking into account the renewal of the doctrine of Trinity, Christology or creation to give some examples.

Is it enough? Is systematic theology confined to the boundaries between reason and revelation so that it becomes exclusively a reflection on revelation?²¹ In the academic context, this position cannot be held. How can theology justify its rationality if we consider that its very task is exclusively to explain God’s Word? It is necessary to go beyond Barth’s position in the academic context. Theology has to give an exact account upon its rationality: how theological knowledge can be validated? What kind of truth is theology about? How can this theological knowledge be related to other kinds of scientific knowledge? In the case of the doctrine of creation, theology cannot escape the current debates. “Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?”²², as Michael Ruse rightly put it. Reflection on citizenship cannot be avoided. Theology has to encounter other languages and rationalities to assume its own task whilst giving other disciplines the reason why it can appeal for respect and collaboration. Theology pretends to be the reason of faith, thus it cannot be a timeless reason but a contemporary rationale. An accurate definition of its rationality and serious dialogue with other forms of rationality are then part of the theological task. Is not the truth of “revisionism”, as described by Ian S. Markham in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, a legitimate and necessary one?²³ Tillich and Tracy did take into account the request of contemporary rationality and culture to open theological reason up to other rationalities. This way of approaching theological duty seems to be the best antidote to fundamentalism.

¹⁷ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Second Revised Edition, translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, London, Continuum, 2004, p. 305 sq. See also the dialogue between Barth’s theology and Ricoeur’s hermeneutics in B. Bourguin, *L’herméneutique théologique de Karl Barth. Exégèse et dogmatique dans le quatrième volume de la Kirchliche Dogmatik (BETL 171)*, Leuven: Peeters, 2003, 74-85.

¹⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (ref. 17), 271.

¹⁹ K. Barth, *Der Römerbrief* (ref. 1), 14 : « ... was nennt man denn ‘Verstehen’ und ‘Erklären’ ... ».

²⁰ See J. Webster, ‘Theologies of Retrieval’ in: *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. by J. Webster, K. Tanner, I. Torrance, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 583-599.

²¹ KD I/1, 27.

²² M. Ruse, *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian? The Relationship between Science and Religion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

²³ I. S. Markham, ‘Revisionism’, in: *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (ref. 20), p. 600-616.

Conversely Barth's way of doing theology is perhaps the only way to prevent theology from totally disappearing.

Two names could rightly epitomize the tasks that had to be assumed here, namely Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) and Jean Ladrière (1921-2007)²⁴. The first argues that human sciences have a specific model of truth that cannot be reduced to the only model of truth and to the methodology of natural sciences. Since Descartes, science has dictated its own conditions for recognizing something as true in a way that identifies truth with a specific methodology. « Pour bien conduire sa raison et chercher la vérité dans les sciences » is the subtitle of *Discourse on the Method* (1637). But what must we think if this cold scientific and technical reason leads humanity to industrial warfare and mass destruction? The twentieth century called for an enlarged conception of reason and truth. Husserl, Horkheimer, Adorno and many other thinkers spoke in favor of a renewed vision of science or rationality that could be closely related to human existence and to human welfare. Theoretical reason has to engage again with the goals of practical reason. With Gadamer, hermeneutical philosophy offers to human sciences a comprehensive reflection on special features of truth relevant to historical understanding²⁵. Theology among human sciences can then pretend to a modest but authentic rationality. The second, a Belgian philosopher of science, brought out in his thought the relationship between faith and reason, philosophy and theology, and did so in the context of the modern project of western rationality. Theology has to understand itself from its own comprehension – he agrees with Barth up to this point. But Ladrière also thinks also that theology has to reflect on the autonomy of science, of politics and on religious freedom. As a philosopher of science, he could offer an epistemological model of interrelation between different spheres of human activity in Western societies. This model enables theology to relate to the political order, to the present state of scientific knowledge and to the pluralistic world of religions. The impact on the way of doing theology cannot be underestimated.

2. Critical Status of Theology in Church

Here there is no need to go beyond Barth. It is not easy to be as critical as Barth towards the Church. Of course times have changed; nevertheless Barth's theology may well inspire Catholic dogmaticians to address the current issues. Three of them can be briefly tackled here: freedom, identity and ecumenism.

²⁴ B. Bourguine, 'La rationalité théologique selon Jean Ladrière (1921-2007)' in : G. Zelis (ed.), *Les intellectuels catholiques en Belgique francophone aux 19^e et 20^e siècles*, Louvain-la-Neuve : Presses universitaires de Louvain (UCL), 2009, 339-354. See also J. Ladrière, *Bibliographie de Jean Ladrière* (Bibliothèque philosophique de Louvain 66), Louvain-la-Neuve/Louvain-Paris-Dudley (MA) : Éditions de l'Institut Supérieur de Philosophie/Peeters, 2005 and also B. Feltz, M. Ghins (ed.), *Les défis de la rationalité. Actes du colloque organisé par l'institut supérieur de philosophie (UCL) à l'occasion des 80 ans de Jean Ladrière* (Bibliothèque philosophique de Louvain 63), Louvain-la-Neuve/Louvain-Paris-Dudley (MA) : Éditions de l'Institut Supérieur de Philosophie/Peeters, 2005.

²⁵ Voir B. Bourguine, *L'herméneutique théologique de Karl Barth* (ref. 17), p. 421-443. Gadamer praised Barth's pervasive hermeneutical reflection.

Freedom. As Catholics, we have a problem related to a lack of freedom – freedom of thinking, freedom of research, freedom of speech²⁶. In Roman Catholicism, we have not yet finished with modernism. Church authorities still show a great deal of mistrust towards theological research and theologians in general. Recent official Roman documents on the theological task make such suspicions explicit. These documents attempt to confine strictly theological research to agreed-upon themes and language. How can theologians perform their critical function in the Church if the authorities tell them what they may and may not say and where they may and may not research? Even worse is the way in which the Church authorities try to discredit theologians. “Give a dog a bad name and hang him”. Most catholic theologians are far from being revolutionary. Nor are the 143 German-speaking theologians, who published a memorandum called “Church 2011: a necessary departure” in February the 3th 2011 in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. In the francophone area, we do not have the academic staff that German-speaking countries still enjoy. Theological teachers in France are much more dependent on ecclesiastical authorities and needs. Is it then still possible to be faithful both to the Christian confession of faith and, at the same time, consistent with intellectual requirements? May Theology be at the same time genuinely Christian and authentically academic under such circumstances?²⁷ Does theology has to confine itself to an assertion of confessional features? Does its hermeneutics have to become regional and communautarian? That is the point.

Barth’s vision of theology may be inspiring. For him, theology is a science tied to God’s Word and the theologian fulfils his office right in the context of the Church community as its natural context. The theologian is dependent on the Word of God in two different ways. From a positive and material point of view, he has to account for the content and coherence of the Gospel; from a critical and formal point of view, he has to remind the Church of the very norm of Christian discourse, namely a right understanding of the Gospel. Here, the theologian should emphasize the distance between God’s word and ecclesial teaching. Barth rightly stressed that distinction while arguing for the eschatological character of dogma²⁸. He also rightly stressed the relational character of dogma (*Beziehungsbegriff*),²⁹ which aims at the truth but cannot be identified with truth. The dogmatic task consists in evaluating the extent of the agreement between dogma and truth. Will the Christian Churches understand what is at stake and will they act consistently?

Identity. This is the second issue. Difficulty in asserting one’s identity raises much broader issues than the current pathologies relating to religious identity, namely fundamentalism and fanaticism³⁰. It has cultural, social, political and philosophical aspects. It concerns individuals and groups as well as institutions. In a working hypothesis, we can assume that the tough and possibly painful search for identity has much to do with uncertainty about meaning. It is worth remembering that Nietzsche was the first thinker, in 1875, to express as such the problem of the “sense of life” (*Sinn*

²⁶ See B. Bourguine, ‘Pour un exercice libre et public de la raison théologique’ in : *RTL* 40 (2009) 531-555.

²⁷ C. Theobald, ‘Le caractère confessant de la théologie lui ôte-t-il toute pertinence scientifique ?’, in : F. Bousquet et al. (ed.), *La responsabilité des théologiens*. FS Joseph Doré, Paris : Cerf, 2002, 663-683.

²⁸ K. Barth, KD I/1, 284. See in K. Barth, *Die Christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, t. 1, *Die Lehre vom Worte Gottes. Prolegomena zur christlichen Dogmatik*. 1927 (GA II), éd. G. Sauter, Zürich, 1982 (= CD), 162; see G. Sauter, *Dogma – ein eschatologischer Begriff*, in *Parrhesia : Karl Barth zum achtzigsten Geburtstag am 10. Mai 1966*, Zürich, 1966, 173-191.

²⁹ K. Barth, KD I/1, 283. See in CD, 161sq. and M. Beintker, *Die Dialektik in der “dialektischen Theologie” Karl Barths : Studien zur Entwicklung der Barthschen Theologie und zur Vorgeschichte der “Kirchlichen Dogmatik”*, München, 1987, 161-164.

³⁰ B. Bourguine, ‘La promesse d’être soi’ in : *RTL* 42 (2011) 3-34.

des Lebens)³¹. Who am I? This question is increasingly hard to address in the ‘liquid modernity’ (Z. Bauman), where the meaning of life is far from obvious. In this context, the question about Christian identity may become problematic as well: “what does it mean to be a Christian?” The need to know about my identity may lead to a reliance on old-fashioned solutions. Present francophone theology could well take as a model Barth’s assertion of Christian intelligence of faith which is based on a critical and creative reception of the Christian tradition. Solutions have to rely on newly established foundations and not on a repetition of old habits or discourses. This way of doing theology goes back *anew* to the original narrative and visits *afresh* the great moments of theological tradition. In this way, it is possible to share with St Paul his view of Christian identity – Christ transforming one’s life into a new creation. The depth of this conception makes him free towards his religious, ethnical, social and sexual belongings. Barth gave such an example in throwing open the doors of the biblical and ecclesial domains in order to hear what the Spirit, which blows where it wills, is saying to the community. The Christian community does not only have the possibility of receiving such words as truths coming from outside; it must receive them³².

Ecumenism. Following in Barth’s footsteps also means promoting theological reflection which is set free from all denominational prejudice. Christian theology has to be carried out as an ecumenical project. As Amy Marga recalled recently in her nice study of the Karl Barth’s relationship to Roman Catholicism in the 1920s³³, Barth put himself ‘on the line’ while considering catholic theology as a vital trend in Christianity and as an intellectual challenge to Protestantism. E. Hirsch, R. Seeberg, P. Althaus publicly reproved him for this attitude. For Barth, the risk in taking such attitude was not only intellectual but personal and professional. In the French speaking countries where scholars are relatively few, overcoming denominational boundaries is a vital need. But ecumenism is first of all a matter of scientific integrity. In some academic places an exclusive denominational theology is developing from very valuable inheritances, such as the thought of Thomas Aquinas, to take an example from the catholic sphere. Such particular theological traditions may be unfolded in unpacking their real potential, but they cannot ask for an exclusively privileged position. If they do so, it is at the expense of creativity and balance in the Christian teaching. Unfortunately, modern theologies do not lack such examples. In Catholic theology, Thomistic orthodoxy leads to anachronistic positions. Here Barth and CNN do agree: “Go beyond borders”. Not only for the sake of giving space to a variety of opinions or even for the sake of getting a broader view of theological field, but to challenge fundamental presuppositions. In contemporary catholic thought, Barth found a theological objectivity at a time when protestant thought lacked the central ‘*Sache*’ of Dogmatics.

3. Public Status of Theology in Society

Following in Barth’s footsteps means promoting theological rationality as a specific rationality among the other modern ones. Here the relationship with the political order has to be tackled. As we already argued, this articulation is to be approached not only from a theological perspective but also

³¹ J. Grondin, *Du sens de la vie : essai philosophique*, Montréal : Bellarmin, 2003, 19.

³² K. Barth, KD IV/3, 128-153. For an examination of the “secular words outside the Church” (*Church Dogmatics*, §69.2), see G. A. Chesnut, *Challenging the Stereotype. The Theology of Karl Barth as a Resource for Inter-religious Encounter in a European Context* (Religion and Discourse, vol. 48), Oxford: Peter Lang, 90-111.

³³ A. Marga, *Karl Barth’s Dialogue with Catholicism in Göttingen und Münster. Its Significance for His Doctrine of God* (*Beiträge zur historischen Theologie*, 149). Tübingen : Mohr Siebeck, 2010. See the review in *Revue Théologique de Louvain* 41 (2010) 563-573.

taking also into account the specificity of political order which cannot be approached in the same way that religious or ethical realms are approached. On a practical level, it is difficult to do better than Barth; on a theoretical level, it seems necessary to go beyond Barth in order to think afresh Christian membership and democratic citizenship in a way that establishes a dialogue between the two different rationalities³⁴. Politics and religion are the two main ‘existentials’ of social life. It is not possible to give a theological account purely on the basis of revelation alone. Political realities and logic have to be analyzed in themselves. This is a presupposition for a balanced theological position. To understand what is going on on a theological-political level, it seems necessary to distinguish between these two fundamental dimensions but not in a way that separates them. This way of proceeding is analogous to the relationship between faith and science. By way of illustration, a theologian cannot make up his mind on the Theory of Intelligent Design without first taking into consideration the scientific point of view.

Following in Barth’s footsteps means speaking *as a theologian* on matters that concern society. An expert in religious matters does not speak from the same standpoint. What is the difference? The latter is speaking from a so-called objective point of view, claiming an axiological neutrality to describe facts and to prescribe right behaviour; the former is telling a story as an insider, as member of a community of faith. The theologian assumes a religious identity, from which he is thinking and speaking whilst the religious expert does not do so. The theologian, who is also a child of his time, can therefore give expression and rationality to what is frequently misunderstood from outside of the religious community. Theology has to dispel the social anxiety generated by “laïcité”, a mixture of secularity and secularism. This is a pedagogical task to make clear that religious membership, far from harming active and fair citizenship may promote community involvement.

Following in Barth’s footsteps means *defending the right* to speak as a theologian on community matters. Religion is marginalized in a secular society that suspects religious people of having a hidden agenda. The fear is that Christians or Muslims will always prefer their religious faith to their civic citizenship. In the decision-making process, Christians cannot accept exclusion on the assumption that only arguments, based on reasonable public relevance may be proposed. The evolution of Jürgen Habermas’ thought on this is highly significant. Religion may have a positive and even decisive function in strengthening the sense of social solidarity as well as the sense of human dignity. “My interest in matters of faith and knowledge is due to the desire to mobilize modern reason against defeatism”³⁵. Charles Taylor already argued that the ethical requirements of modern societies were endangered by the difficulty our fellow citizens have in rooting these ideals in spiritual experience or religious tradition³⁶.

Barth’s theological life provided numerous examples of such a commitment. A recent volume of the *Gesamtausgabe* gives a new illustration, which fits our host country, the Netherlands. In letter 56, written by Barth to Visser’t Hooft on the 7. October 1939, the tone is clear, even harsh. Barth asks his friend at the head of World Council of Churches to make a public statement in order to condemn the Nazi regime unambiguously in the name of the Gospel. Visser’t Hooft later on regretted having

³⁴B. Bourguine, T. Eggensperger, P.-Y. Materne, *Theologische Vernunft-Politische Vernunft. Raison théologique et raison politique*, Münster : Lit Verlag, 2010. See for Barth : ‘The Christian Community and the Civil Community’, in *Community, State and Church*, Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, Double Day & Company, 1960, 149-189.

³⁵ J. Habermas, *Entre naturalisme et religion. Les défis de la démocratie*, trad. C. Bouchindhomme, A. Dupeyrix, Paris : Gallimard, 2008, 145 (See *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion. Philosophische Aufsätze*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 2005).

³⁶ C. Taylor, *Sources of the self*, Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1989.

remained silent, especially after the Nazis committed atrocities during their invasion of the Netherlands. Barth was asking with prophetic strength: Why have a mouth and keep quiet? When the very existence of Europe is at stake, Christians have to listen to the Spirit and not to political or diplomatic agendas.³⁷

When theology is at the same time faithful to the Gospel and consistent with its public responsibility, it can again influence History.

³⁷*Brief 56* Barth to Visser't Hooft in K. Barth-W.A. Visser't Hooft, *Briefwechsel 1930-1968*, einschliesslich des Briefwechsels von H. Visser't Hooft mit K. Barth und C. von Kirschbaum. Herausgegeben von T. Herwig. Karl Barth Gesamtausgabe. V. Briefe, Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2006, 100-111.