




RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mediating Feuerbach and Barth: Bonhoeffer's this-worldly theology

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Abstract

In this paper, I revisit a debate between Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Barth, known as the 'Barth–Feuerbach confrontation'. I begin by framing the contours of this dispute as it was initiated by Barth and carried forward by his interpreters, who have sought in vain to make Barth's and Feuerbach's positions commensurable. Having narrated the history of this ongoing scholarly discussion and clarified why it remains intractable, I turn to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose this-worldly conception of theology, I argue, provides resources for 'mediating' the insights of Feuerbach and Barth. By attending to Bonhoeffer's earliest engagements with Barth on the question of divine revelation, and by exploring his striking proximity to Feuerbach on the issue of this-worldliness, we can see how Bonhoeffer helps overcome not only the dichotomies that plague the Barth–Feuerbach confrontation but also those that pervade modern attempts to safeguard this-worldliness by dispensing with divine transcendence.

Keywords: Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Karl Barth; Ludwig Feuerbach; revelation; worldliness

Concern for *this* life, in distinction from the 'next' one, says Charles Taylor, has been a hallmark of the modern era from the beginning. Even in early modernity, when the highest or best life was still thought to involve loving and obeying God in the expectation of an eternal beatitude in his presence, a deep concern for life in this world existed alongside, and in service to, that ultimate end. In time, however, modernity came to be characterised more and more by a raging passion for this-worldliness – not alongside but *in opposition to* all perceived other-worldliness. For centuries, the 'immanent frame' has increasingly eclipsed transcendence, heaven has given way to history, such that now a purely self-sufficient humanism (i.e. a humanism that accepts no final goals beyond human or creaturely flourishing) has become a widely available option.¹

¹See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), pp. 1–22; Michael Rosen, *The Shadow of God: Kant, Hegel, and the Passage from Heaven to History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2022).

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In fact, if Martin Hägglund is correct, nearly everyone today (self-identified religious believers included) practices a *secular* faith that is implicit in all of our practical commitments and at bottom incompatible with religious forms of faith, which relate to finite life as a means to attain some transcendent end (be it heaven, nirvana or whatever).² The goal of Hägglund's book *This Life* is to make our secular faith explicit and to demonstrate its emancipatory potential. Only when we acknowledge that our lives are utterly fragile and mortal, and that no help is to be had from 'elsewhere' (either now or in the hereafter), will we find the necessary motivation for building social institutions that help us lead longer and better lives. In short, Hägglund thinks that for anything to really matter in this life, the afterlife must be abolished.³ It would appear, then, that modernity's rage for this-worldliness has come full circle.

Various Christian theologians have wrestled with this uniquely modern situation. In some respects, the divisions we see today within modern theology map onto different ways of making sense of, and responding to, this historical trend. Yet for certain theologians (among whom I would number myself), this ongoing quest to erase transcendence calls not simply for historical explanation, but for theological investigation. We suspect that this historical progression harbours within itself an irreducibly theological problematic. The pressing question for us is not, What effect has the eclipse of transcendence had upon theology? Rather, we venture to ask, What theological convictions or missteps made the eclipse of transcendence possible in the first place? In other words, the distinctly theological task consists in interrogating how and why theology's subject matter has, over the course of the modern period, let itself be bound – or, better, bound itself – to this quest for an all-consuming immanence. We cannot shake the suspicion that history is somewhat downstream from theology in this case: that certain theological decisions were made which had no small part to play in the death of God. We are therefore confronted with the question, Was the resolve to chip away at, and finally to demolish, the 'other world' an assault *against* theology or a development *of* it?

Many believe, and for good reason I think, that the two most incisive attempts to answer these weighty theological questions belong to Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Barth. In what is known as the 'Barth–Feuerbach confrontation', scholars have examined and compared Feuerbach's and Barth's ambitious attempts to scrutinise the theological underpinnings of this modern historical development. All signs seem to indicate that Feuerbach and Barth pronounce diametrically opposed verdicts upon the propriety of this historical progression: for Feuerbach, it was *fidelity* to the subject matter of theology that led us down this path; for Barth, it was *treason against* it. Yet, notwithstanding these contradictory narrations, many readers have tried to make Feuerbach's and Barth's positions, and in some cases even their methodologies, commensurable.

In this paper, I narrate why these attempts to reconcile Feuerbach and Barth have ended in failure. Having done so, I advocate for a turn to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who, I seek to show, provides us with resources for 'mediating' Feuerbach's and Barth's insights. Because Bonhoeffer, on my reading, deliberately defies the very binaries that structure the Barth–Feuerbach confrontation (specifically, the binaries between immanence and transcendence, this world and the other world, humanity and God) he manages to integrate Feuerbach's and Barth's insights into his distinct theological position

²See Martin Hägglund, *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2019).

³Ibid., pp. 42–4.

without falling prey to their excesses. By examining Bonhoeffer's theology in conversation with these two seminal figures, we are able to overcome the dichotomies that have plagued scholarly attempts to bring their disparate positions together. Additionally, I contend that Bonhoeffer's this-worldly theology sheds a different light on the above historical development. By maintaining that there can be no real Christian existence outside of the reality of the world and no real worldliness outside of the reality of Jesus Christ, Bonhoeffer contravenes the modern insistence that the only way to safeguard this-worldliness is by disposing of the other world.⁴

The Barth–Feuerbach confrontation

Readers have long understood that to juxtapose Feuerbach and Barth is not simply to contrast divergent thinkers who depart from one another on various theological minutiae, but rather to confront two mutually, and self-consciously, exclusive theological orientations. Manfred Vogel typifies this view when he writes:

The confrontation between Barth and Feuerbach is in essence the confrontation between the two basic alternatives that are open to theology – either start with man and end up with Feuerbach or turn to Barth and stay with God. A great deal, therefore, depends on the outcome of this confrontation, for, clearly, in the last analysis only one alternative can be tenable – either Barth or Feuerbach.⁵

To engage these two thinkers, in other words, is to be forced into an either/or wherein we must claim allegiance to one and despise the other – for no one can serve two masters. In order to do justice to this debate, then, and more importantly to consider how we might move it forward, it is imperative that we understand the central issues over which these two titans clashed.

Feuerbach provoked this debate, of course, when he asserted that theology was the apotheosis of humanity as such: 'I show that the true sense of Theology is Anthropology, that there is no distinction between the predicates of the divine and human nature, and, consequently, no distinction between the divine and human subject'.⁶ He tried to substantiate this claim in *The Essence of Christianity* by reinterpreting every Christian doctrine according to an anthropological hermeneutic that 'criticizes the dogma and reduces it to its natural elements, immanent in man'.⁷ On Feuerbach's reading, all theological concepts are strictly human ideas that reveal nothing more than our basic fears and longings – in short, aspects of human nature – which the religious consciousness projects onto an illusory being called God. Feuerbach's intention was thus to lead religious consciousness to an enlightened awareness of the essentially anthropological meaning of its God-talk. 'Atheism', he tried to show, 'is the secret of religion itself'.⁸

⁴See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West and Douglas W. Stott, vol. 6 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* [hereafter *DBWE*] (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), p. 61.

⁵Manfred H. Vogel, 'The Barth–Feuerbach Confrontation', *Harvard Theological Review* 59/1 (1966), p. 30.

⁶Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), p. xxxvii.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. xxxvi.

Barth was perhaps the first theologian to take Feuerbach's claims seriously: the first, in fact, to discern the frontal assault that Feuerbach had levelled against the entire theological guild – an attack, Barth urged, for which theologians were entirely unprepared. That Barth heard this provocation, when few others did, would be formative for his reading of the history of modern theology and the development of his theological method. John Glasse summarises: 'As [Barth] reads him, Feuerbach is the man whose query does nothing less than locate the Achilles heel of modern theology'.⁹ This Achilles heel concerned, in Barth's words, 'whether and in what measure religion, revelation and the relation to God can be interpreted as a predicate of man'.¹⁰ Barth thus urged that Feuerbach must be taken seriously as an opportunity for theology to clarify its subject matter.

On Glasse's influential reading, Barth's response to Feuerbach can be broken down into two major phases, each with its own *modus operandi*. During the first phase, which reached its definitive expression in the 1920s, Barth was centrally concerned with the question, 'Is it really possible to identify the nature of God with the nature of man?'¹¹ To substantiate his negative answer, Barth underscored two marks of our humanity that had become palpable in the wake of the First World War: namely, our depravity and mortality. Barth's 'negative anthropology', as Glasse calls it, is noteworthy because it 'had the merit of disputing Feuerbach before a court of appeal that was acknowledged by them both'.¹² Barth used Feuerbach's alleged anthropological realism against him by trying to show that a consistent anthropological realist, when confronted with the unassailable presence of evil and death endemic in human nature, cannot justifiably conflate the divine with the human. In this way, Barth sought to refute Feuerbach by appealing to anthropological considerations that were available to anyone.

In its second phase, which culminated in the 1950s, Barth's response to Feuerbach was methodologically different: rather than point to the human condition, he instead tried to circumvent Feuerbach's anthropological reductionism by appealing solely to the manifest radiance of divine revelation itself:

There is no need to establish or justify [revelation's] radiance from some other point. Indeed, all attempts to do this are forbidden. Grace itself, and the light of grace, are the election and work of the divine freedom whose action is established and justified in itself alone, but in itself unshakably.¹³

In this later period, then, Barth came to realise that the only appropriate response to Feuerbach is simply to let God vindicate himself by means of his own self-witness. No external criteria are needed for this task; in fact, all apologetic stratagems are simply out of the question.

Glasse and Vogel differ in their evaluations of the efficacy of Barth's mature response to Feuerbach: is it a valid response or a refusal to give one? Yet both agree that the respective systems of justification invoked by Feuerbach and the late Barth are ultimately, though lamentably, incommensurable. By appealing directly to divine revelation,

⁹John Glasse, 'Barth on Feuerbach', *Harvard Theological Review* 57/2 (1964), p. 72.

¹⁰Karl Barth, *Theology and Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 227.

¹¹Glasse, 'Barth on Feuerbach', p. 77.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹³Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* [hereafter CD], 13 vols., ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–1975), IV/3, pp. 1, 82.

the mature Barth has broken with Feuerbach at the methodological root and thereby gained, in Vogel's words, 'safety at the price of isolation and disengagement'.¹⁴ Though impressed by this argumentative strategy, Glasse and Vogel are rather ambivalent about its power to convince. More to the point, they are eager to see someone else pull off, in the spirit of Barth's earlier work, another confrontation between Barth and Feuerbach on the latter's terms.

'Apologetic' Barthianism?

Some five decades have passed since Glasse and Vogel published their essays, and to my knowledge no one has attempted to heed their call for a renewed engagement with Feuerbach via Barth – until quite recently. Richard Paul Cumming has revived the question of whether it is possible, using Barth, to answer Feuerbach according to principles which the latter could endorse. Cumming argues that it is, in fact, possible to rework Barth's basic position qua dogmatic theologian into an externally coherent form, such that we can use it to respond to Feuerbach on his own terms. To support his thesis, Cumming makes two noteworthy moves: one using Feuerbach, the other Barth.

Cumming's first move is to revisit Feuerbach's critique of religion by going back to Feuerbach's earlier work, *Thoughts on Death and Immortality*.¹⁵ In that book, Feuerbach argues that the modern belief in personal immortality is a product of Protestant Christianity's elevation of the individual to the status of an absolute. 'Does not everything seem to turn only on their deliverance and reconciliation, on their salvation and immortality? God is only on the periphery of their religion; individuals themselves are its focal point'.¹⁶ God is, in effect, a mere tool in the hands of self-absorption, and belief in personal immortality is nothing more, Feuerbach charges, than promethean egoism. Coincident with Protestantism's excessive individualism is a total devaluation of present inter-subjective existence along with all of its limitations and struggles:

What a heavenly enjoyment that must be, to be freed from the burden of earth... and to soar like an airy little snow cloud over the stifling rational sphere of earthly existence! What rapture... to have behind one, as if it was a joke, the sour life of history and reason, and now to pacify oneself world without end!¹⁷

Such caustic remarks underscore Feuerbach's vexation regarding what he takes to be Protestantism's most pernicious themes: (1) the absolutisation of the individual (at the expense of the social) and (2) the preoccupation with heavenly life (at the

¹⁴Vogel, 'The Barth–Feuerbach Confrontation', p. 49.

¹⁵Richard Paul Cumming, 'Revelation as Apologetic Category: A Reconsideration of Karl Barth's Engagement with Ludwig Feuerbach's Critique of Religion', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68/1 (2015), p. 45. Cumming asserts that previous scholarship (Barth's included) has neglected this significant work and in so doing overlooked its deep significance for understanding Feuerbach's *magnum opus*. Cumming was led to this conclusion, in part, by the suggestions of James Massey, who claimed that reconsidering the Barth–Feuerbach encounter through the prism of Feuerbach's 'earlier work could significantly enhance an assessment of Feuerbach's criticism of religion... [and] Barth's rejection of him'. See James A. Massey, 'Feuerbach and Religious Individualism', *Journal of Religion* 56/4 (1976), pp. 368–9.

¹⁶Ludwig Feuerbach, *Thoughts on Death and Immortality from the Papers of a Thinker, along with an Appendix of Theological-Satirical Epigrams, Edited by One of his Friends*, trans. James A. Massey (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 18–9.

¹⁷Ibid.

expense of terrestrial life). *Thoughts on Death* is, simply put, a plea for recognition of the inexhaustible quality of our embodied, inter-subjective and transient life on earth – the only life, Feuerbach urges, that we have. Cumming's first thesis is that precisely *this* Feuerbach – Feuerbach as critic of Protestant individualism and life-denying religion – provides fertile ground for another encounter with Barth qua dogmatic theologian.

Cumming's second move, this time using Barth, is to show that Barth's theology is positioned to assimilate the impetus of Feuerbach's early work insofar as Barth 'align[s] himself with the Feuerbachian critique of the Protestant notion of the infinitude of the individual, by insisting upon the value of finite existence and upon its status as a God-given gift'.¹⁸ Barth is thus able to play the part of the 'apologetic theologian' by using Feuerbach's insights in support of his own distinct conclusions.¹⁹ As Cumming explains, 'Barth is aware of the same tendency within Protestantism of which Feuerbach despairs, which came to focus exclusively on individual justification, and in his discussion of humanity as fellow-humanity, Barth unequivocally rejects the individualistic viewpoint as a point of departure for theological anthropology'.²⁰ Like Feuerbach, Barth sees in religion a promethean desire for infinitude – from which stem all 'pagan dreams of a good time after death'.²¹ Yet Barth is also able to say that Christianity, unlike religion, takes seriously our limited time as the God-given condition of our participation in the divine covenant.²² As Cumming puts it, 'God has created human beings to exist as limited subjects. The limitation which God confers upon humanity is not negative but determinative, giving human beings the capacity to lead the relational existence for which they are constituted'.²³

Cumming's substantive conclusion is that Barth is able to internalise Feuerbach's criticisms of Protestantism by taking them up into his own positive theological anthropology. By counterposing the religious desire for infinitude against the proper orientation of the Christian faith, Cumming asserts, Barth is able to say that 'what Feuerbach has identified and justifiably condemned is not authentic Christianity, but rather its diametric opposite'.²⁴ On Cumming's reading, then, Barth's position affords an 'external coherence' such that Barth is able to immunise himself against Feuerbach's polemics even as he appropriates the thrust of Feuerbach's critique for his own theological ends.

Cumming has here managed to eke out an unsuspected *rencontre* between Feuerbach and the late Barth. Yet I suspect that its results will prove to be rather inconsequential, for, in my estimate, Cumming has failed to traverse the methodological divide that separates Feuerbach and the mature Barth. While Cumming has perhaps shown that Barth's mature theology is able to internalise Feuerbach's critique of Protestant individualism, this *at best* indicates that their positions coincide on a number of points, not that they converge in any strong sense. It does not follow from Cumming's

¹⁸Cumming, 'Revelation as Apologetic Category', pp. 57–8.

¹⁹Barth, as we have seen, did not choose to take this apologetic route in his late work. In fact, he rejected it in principle. Cumming insists, nevertheless, that 'whether this was ever [Barth's] intention is beside the point: [my argument] is intended to explore how Barth's work can be understood to function apologetically'. See *ibid.*, p. 53.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 56.

²¹Barth, *CD* III/2, p. 625.

²²*Ibid.*, pp. 565–6.

²³Cumming, 'Revelation as Apologetic Category', p. 57.

²⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 58–9.

argument that Barth and Feuerbach are logically accountable to one another or able to persuade the other to alter his basic position when it comes to the central disagreement between them: whether divine revelation is actually a religious projection. Neither disputant is capable of providing an externally coherent reason to convince the other to change his mind. Cumming's 'apologetic' Barthianism is *still* Barthianism, still unable (even if not unwilling) to disabuse Feuerbach of his projection hypothesis on the basis of reasons the latter would find legible. To be sure, the apologetic Barth is able to *assert* that there is a revelation outside of religious projection, and Feuerbach for his part could even entertain the possibility that this assertion is true. Nevertheless, Barth is still unable to *demonstrate* such an assertion in a way that Feuerbach would find convincing. Feuerbach could simply retort that even 'apologetic' Barthianism is still a religious projection – religion's last, and most dubious, attempt to convince itself that it is not religion. I thus remain unconvinced that external coherence has been achieved or that Barth's mature theology is capable of being put to apologetic purposes. Barth's and Feuerbach's respective positions continue to be locked into their own internally consistent, and incommensurable, standpoints.

I therefore contend that the Barth–Feuerbach confrontation, which has all but exhausted itself, will remain intractable unless we find a way beyond the dichotomies that have structured this theological controversy. We must, in short, find a way to *mediate* between Barth and Feuerbach. As I am using the term, 'mediation' involves intervening between two people in a dispute in order to connect their concerns indirectly through another person. The goal of mediation, in this case, will be to integrate Barth's and Feuerbach's theological insights in such a way that the spirit of both their positions is recognisably taken up into a distinct theological formulation.

In what follows, then, I argue that Dietrich Bonhoeffer's this-worldly theology provides us with what we need to accomplish such a novel mediation. My argument proceeds in two parts: first, I examine Bonhoeffer's critical relation to Barth on the question of divine revelation, particularly Bonhoeffer's early critique of Barth's divine actualism. I show that while Bonhoeffer is heavily indebted to Barth's theology of revelation, he nevertheless develops a distinct account of revelation that is more attentive to history and human sociality and, consequently, more amenable to Feuerbach's basic concerns. Second, I bring select passages from Bonhoeffer's late writings into conversation with Feuerbach and uncover the startling resonances between them. I seek to demonstrate that even as Bonhoeffer shares with Feuerbach an unwavering commitment to this-worldliness and a deep suspicion of other-worldliness, his reasons for doing so are distinctly theological and, for that reason, more amenable to Barth's central concerns. My chief aim, in short, will be to show that Bonhoeffer is, to an astonishing extent, something of a Feuerbachian *and* a Barthian at once. To the extent that I show this to be the case, I help us move beyond the impasses of the Barth–Feuerbach confrontation and towards something more constructive.

Mediating Barth and Feuerbach: Bonhoeffer's this-worldly theology

Bonhoeffer vis-à-vis Barth: revelation in the form of Christ existing as community

In this first section, we must come to see how Bonhoeffer, while undoubtedly a close theological ally to Barth, manages to improve upon Barth's account of divine revelation in ways that make him more of a Feuerbachian than Barth was able to be. I contend that

this becomes strikingly visible when we examine Bonhoeffer's subtle critique of Barth's divine actualism, coupled with Bonhoeffer's deeply historical and social account of divine revelation in the form of 'Christ existing as community'.

Barth's theology is concerned above all with the question, How does God reveal himself? His answer, as is well known, emphasises what he calls the 'act-character of God's reality'.²⁵ By emphasising 'act', Barth underscores revelation's transcendent origin in the free decision of God. Revelation comes to humans in the form of the 'event of grace', which God dispenses freely and unconditionally, moment by moment. As Barth explains,

Because what encounters sinners is grace, God's givenness to us and to the world – God's givenness in his revelation – cannot be understood as though it were somehow accessible to a set of precise conceptual formulations as such... It cannot be understood as though God's reality were accessible apart from God himself as the performer of his work – which is the Word that comes to us.²⁶

Barth thus conceives of revelation as a divine Word which is spoken by God alone, and which starts and stops according to God's sovereign decision. 'For grace is the event in which God comes to us in his Word, an event over which God has sole control, and which is *strictly momentary*'.²⁷

Barth is evidently worried about divine revelation becoming a predicate of some given reality – be it history, nature or consciousness. Were this to happen, the transcendent origin of revelation would be compromised, and God would become a mere predicate of some reality other than himself. To prevent this from happening, Barth stresses revelation's act-characteristics in order to ensure 'a critical understanding of revelation's givenness'.²⁸ Barth, in short, makes it impossible to confuse God with any particular being, since revelation happens only when God freely and temporarily makes use of finite objects (such as scripture and preaching) to reveal himself through them *indirectly*. Just as the actor is always distinct from the prop that the actor uses, so God is likewise always infinitely qualitatively distinct from the finite beings that God uses to reveal himself.²⁹

On the one hand, Bonhoeffer thinks that Barth is rightly wary of the temptation to collapse God's revelation into a finite being – be it a doctrine, psychic experience or religious institution.³⁰ And yet, Bonhoeffer is also concerned that Barth's strong divine actualism amounts to an overcompensation inasmuch as Barth ends up overemphasising act-concepts to the exclusion of all being-concepts. While such a move may protect Barth against one iteration of the idolatry problem (i.e. the temptation to identify God with humanity or a creature), it nevertheless exposes him to what we might call the

²⁵Karl Barth, 'The Way of Theology', in *Karl Barth: Essays and Comments* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publishers, 1986), p. 40.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid. (emphasis added).

²⁸Ibid., p. 46.

²⁹For a helpful account of the epistemological implications of Barth's account of 'indirect revelation', see Bruce L. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), pp. 109–12.

³⁰Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr., trans. H. Martin Rumscheidt, *DBWE 2* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 105.

continuity problem (i.e. it becomes unclear how revelation is mediated through history and human sociality in a continuous way).³¹ God's relationship to humanity in the event of revelation becomes strictly momentary and discontinuous – 'with all the instability', Barth says, 'of a deed being done right now'.³² In Bonhoeffer's estimate, Barth's reticence about employing being-concepts betrays his deep ambivalence about letting revelation get too close to human beings.³³

Bonhoeffer tries to rectify Barth's mistake by rethinking divine freedom. For him, God's freedom is manifested precisely in God's *binding himself* to human beings, not in remaining distant from them.³⁴ God has freely made himself 'graspable' or 'haveable' to human beings, not in discontinuous acts, but in 'the being of the community of persons that is constituted and formed by the person of Christ'.³⁵ God wills that 'all God's revelation, both in Christ and in the church, be concealed under the form of historical life... Thus revelation happens in the community of faith'.³⁶ To access God's revelation, one must seek God in 'Christ existing as church-community'. God has freely conditioned himself, both historically and socially, to be present in this concrete form: 'it is a *Christian insight*', he says, 'that God uses the social nature of human beings in order to act among them in every respect. God acts in history; thus God's claim is mediated for us, essentially and primarily, by other people, and is bound to sociality'.³⁷ The emphasis, for Bonhoeffer, is thus not upon God's transcendent non-giveness (as it was for Barth) but upon God's immanent givenness.

I submit that Bonhoeffer's alternative conception of divine revelation is more attentive to history and human sociality, and is in this respect more this-worldly, than Barth's actualistic account. Bonhoeffer helps us see that revelation, while certainly a transcendent gift, is not so transcendent that it is unable to bind itself to human beings in their worldly being. 'Christ existing as community' names God's sovereign decision to make himself personally present to us, not in momentary divine acts, but in our communal way of life – through our works of love, supplicatory prayers and practices of confession and forgiveness.³⁸ In fact, Bonhoeffer ties the person of Christ so closely to the church-community that he is even willing to speak of the members of the church-

³¹Bonhoeffer summarises the problem with Barth's 'formal' view of divine freedom in the following way: 'God is free inasmuch as God is bound to nothing, not even the "existing," "historical" Word. The Word as truly God's is free. God can give or withhold the divine self according to absolute favor, remaining in either case free. Never is God at the disposal of human beings; it is God's glory that, in relation to everything given and conditional, God remains utterly free, unconditioned'. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 83. Bonhoeffer quotes from Karl Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf. Die Lehre vom Worte Gottes. Prolegomena zur christlichen Dogmatik* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1927), p. 295.

³³As Michael DeJonge puts it, 'Bonhoeffer takes Barth's various discontinuities as evidence of something amiss. Even if Barth successfully protects God's transcendence, he does not ground theoretically the continuous or historical aspects of the Christian life. Barth does not adequately reflect the faithful continuity of God's self-giving'. See Michael P. DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer's Theological Formation: Berlin, Barth, and Protestant Theology* (New York: OUP, 2012), p. 57.

³⁴Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, pp. 90–1.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 113.

³⁶Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens, *DBWE 1* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), p. 126.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 55.

³⁸Bonhoeffer names these three as three forms of 'being-for-each-other' that are empirically practiced within the church community. See *ibid.*, pp. 184–92.

community as ‘the present Christ himself.’³⁹ ‘Our actions’, he says, ‘are the actions of members of the body of Christ, that is, they possess the power of the love of Christ, through which each may and ought to become a Christ to the other’.⁴⁰ The *actually existing* church-community, in short, is the heartbeat of Bonhoeffer’s doctrine of revelation.

This distinctly historical and communal account of divine revelation, I argue, mediates Barth’s theological concerns with Feuerbach’s attentiveness to human sociality and temporality. Without collapsing revelation into a mere social construct or anthropological projection, Bonhoeffer daringly weds divine revelation to our historical and social being within the church-community. Bonhoeffer’s clear indebtedness to Barth’s theology ‘from above’ does not prevent him from seeing revelation ‘from below’, that is, from the vantage-point of fleshly human beings who by God’s grace ‘become a Christ’ to one another. While Cumming has shown that Barth’s critique of religion issues in a positive evaluation of our limited time on earth, my reading shows that Barth’s actualistic conception of revelation did not, on Bonhoeffer’s analysis, sufficiently account for the profound this-worldliness of Christianity with the forcefulness and radicality indicative of God’s self-giving.⁴¹

³⁹Ibid., p. 190.

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 182–3.

⁴¹Bonhoeffer’s concerns about the discontinuity of revelation from this-worldly processes is, as we have seen, a defining feature of his engagement with Barth. But are such concerns applicable to the later Barth, who as early as 1938 found it necessary ‘to utter an express warning against certain passages and contexts in my commentary on Romans, where play was made and even work occasionally done with the idea of a revelation permanently transcending time, merely bounding time and determining it from without... Readers of it today will not fail to appreciate that in it Jn 1:14 does not have justice done to it’ (Barth, *CD I/2*, p. 50). By 1956, Barth realised the danger in the various expressions he used to emphasise the *deity* of God, such as the ‘wholly other’ breaking in upon us ‘perpendicularly from above’ and the ‘infinite qualitative distinction’ between God and man (see Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. 42). In an attempt to revise his earlier position – not in order to change it, but to restate it in a better way – the mature Barth came to see that God’s deity, rightly understood, *includes* his humanity and thus that in Jesus Christ there is no isolation of God from man or of man from God. ‘Who God is and what He is in His deity He proves and reveals not in a vacuum as a divine being-for-Himself, but precisely and authentically in the fact that He exists, speaks, and acts as the *partner* of man, though of course as the absolutely superior partner. He who does *that* is the living God. And the freedom in which He does *that* is His deity’ (Barth, *Humanity of God*, p. 45). In view of the development of Barth’s thinking on this issue, we may draw two conclusions: first, that Bonhoeffer’s criticisms of the early Barth were forceful enough to motivate him to rethink his basic position regarding both the atemporality of divine revelation and the unalloyed alterity of God; and second, that Barth’s mature viewpoint – which Bonhoeffer, of course, never knew – goes at least some distance in addressing Bonhoeffer’s concerns. Exactly how far the later Barth succeeds in answering Bonhoeffer is, of course, open for debate. I venture the following conjecture. To the extent that the later Barth understands God’s freedom to consist not in God’s willing to be without and against man but rather *with* and *for* man in Jesus Christ, his view more or less coincides with Bonhoeffer’s conception of God’s ‘substantive’ (as opposed to ‘formal’) freedom (see Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, pp. 84–5, 90–1). Moreover, to the extent that the later Barth thinks of the deity and humanity of God not in stark opposition to one another but rather ‘in the fullness of their togetherness’ in Jesus Christ, he overcomes the dichotomies that characterised his earlier theology and attracted the criticisms of Bonhoeffer in the first place (see Barth, *Humanity of God*, p. 47). Nevertheless, inasmuch as the later Barth still maintains a strongly actualistic understanding of divine revelation even when it comes to the ecclesial community, and inasmuch as Barth’s *christological* statement about the humanity of God in Jesus Christ does not translate into an *ecclesiological* statement about the church-community being – not merely becoming, but *being* – ‘the present Christ himself’, the later Barth still did not go as far as Bonhoeffer in articulating the manner in which God’s freedom has woven itself into, and even identified itself with, this personlike community of faith. Is Barth, who says

Bonhoeffer's critical remarks vis-à-vis Barth allow us to see the advantages of Bonhoeffer's theological position in the context of the Barth–Feuerbach confrontation. *Contra* Barth, Bonhoeffer ventured to speak boldly about the closeness of God to humanity in Jesus Christ without fearing that he would fall into the hands of Feuerbach's anthropological reductionism. Bonhoeffer relishes the attempt to outdo the materialist Feuerbach by seeing the church-community as the present Christ himself: 'Even... Feuerbach', he says elsewhere in a discussion of humanity's earth-boundedness, 'could not use stronger language than is used here'.⁴² What we discover in Bonhoeffer's account of divine revelation, in short, is a kind of Barthian-inspired theology that is far more congenial to Feuerbach than Barth was able, or even willing, to be.

Bonhoeffer vis-à-vis Feuerbach: a better worldliness

We must now examine Bonhoeffer's proximity to Feuerbach on the issue of this-worldliness. I would like to defend the rather unconventional claim that Bonhoeffer, particularly in his late writings, embodies to an extraordinary degree a Feuerbachian spirit of worldliness, and that he does so for profoundly *theological* reasons.⁴³ In a host of ways, I contend, Bonhoeffer's reflections manage to integrate Feuerbach's insights into his theological vision, without thereby giving up his Barthian commitment to divine transcendence.

As a foray into this set of issues, we might start by examining Bonhoeffer's critique of 'redemption' religions. According to Bonhoeffer, religions of redemption seek to rescue individual souls from out of the earth and transplant them into another world. 'The redemption myths', he says, 'look for eternity outside of history beyond death'.⁴⁴ When Christianity is regarded as a redemption myth, the doctrine of resurrection becomes a way to escape death and life's hardships. Bonhoeffer strongly objects to this way of characterising Christianity. He does so not only because we live in a

he is 'always fond of doing a bit of "Hegeling"' (albeit eclectically), willing to go so far as to declare that the church is (to use Bonhoeffer's modification of the Hegelian concept) not merely a 'Christocratic brotherhood', but even more, 'Christ existing as community' (*Christus als Gemeinde existierend*)? See Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 387; Barth, *Humanity of God*, p. 65. That is the question that Bonhoeffer might put to even the later Barth. It is a question, in short, about how to coordinate God's promise with his alterity when it comes to the 'secondary objectivity' of divine revelation in Jesus Christ: How close is the connection between Christ and the church-community?

⁴²Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Douglass Stephen Bax, *DBWE* 3 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), p. 76.

⁴³This is a highly contested issue in Bonhoeffer scholarship. Ernst Feil claims, for instance, that although 'Bonhoeffer was – indirectly – familiar with Feuerbach through his knowledge of Barth' ('Bonhoeffer war – indirekt – mit Feuerbach durch seine Barthkenntnis vertraut'), there is nevertheless 'no indication of a more intensive preoccupation with Feuerbach' in Bonhoeffer's thought ('kein Hinweis auf eine intensivere Beschäftigung mit Feuerbach'). See Ernst Feil, *Die Theologie Dietrich Bonhoeffers* (Munich: Kaiser, 1971), p. 375, n. 78 (n.b., this passage is not included in the English translation of Feil's book). By contrast, Andre Dumas asserts that while 'on the face of it, Bonhoeffer seems to be responding to Nietzsche' in his prison letters, 'Bonhoeffer is responding even more to Feuerbach'. See Andre Dumas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian of Reality*, trans. Robert McAfee Brown (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), p. 294. For a similar reading, see also Henry Mottu, 'Feuerbach and Bonhoeffer: Criticism of Religion and the Last Period of Bonhoeffer's Thought', *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* (Fall 1969), pp. 1–18.

⁴⁴Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Victoria J. Barnett (ed.), trans. Isobel Best, Lisa E. Dahill, Reinhard Krauss, et al. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015), p. 447.

‘world come of age’, in which people are less and less concerned about such other-worldly questions, but also because this way of understanding Christianity is fundamentally unbiblical. ‘Does the question of saving one’s soul even come up in the Old Testament? Isn’t God’s righteousness and kingdom on earth the center of everything?... What matters is not the beyond but this world’.⁴⁵ In a passage reminiscent of Feuerbach’s *Thoughts on Death*, Bonhoeffer polemicalises against forms of Christianity that condition people to relate to God in an other-worldly way:

Otherworldliness affords a splendid environment in which to live. When life begins to be difficult and oppressive, one leaps boldly into the air and soars, relieved and worry free, in the so-called eternal realm. One leapfrogs over the present, scorns the Earth; one is better than it; indeed, next to the temporal defeats, one has eternal victories that are so easily achieved.⁴⁶

Religious escapism and disloyalty to the earth were the great enemies against which Bonhoeffer did battle. These suggestive remarks underscore his proximity to Feuerbach on the issue of this-worldliness.

And yet, Bonhoeffer shows himself, in contrast to Feuerbach, to be a careful *theological* explicator of the meaning of this-worldliness. Crucially, he differs from Feuerbach by grounding worldliness not in an anthropocentric way, but in a christological way. The form of worldliness to which Christians are called is not ‘the shallow and banal this-worldliness of the enlightened, the bustling, the comfortable, or the lascivious, but the profound this-worldliness that shows discipline and includes the ever-present knowledge of death and resurrection’.⁴⁷ Like Christ, Christians ‘have to drink the cup of earthly life to the last drop, and only when they do this is the Crucified and Risen One with them, and they are crucified and resurrected with Christ’.⁴⁸ Feuerbach felt he had to dispense with the category of divine transcendence altogether in order to emphasise the significance of worldly life: ‘the negation of the next world has as its consequence the affirmation of this world’.⁴⁹ Bonhoeffer, by contrast, strongly objects to all thinking in terms of ‘two realms’ that bump up against or compete with each other. Thinking in terms of realms inevitably leads to our ‘wanting Christ without the world or the world without Christ – and in both cases we deceive ourselves’.⁵⁰ Yet it is a mistake to conceive of ‘worldly-Christian’, ‘profane-sacred’ or ‘natural-supernatural’ as static opposites that must be played off each other. For Bonhoeffer, there are not two realms, but only the one realm of the Christ-reality, in which are united the reality of God and the reality of the world. Therefore, ‘It is a denial of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ to wish to be “Christian” without being “worldly”, or [to] wish to be worldly without seeing and recognizing the world in Christ’.⁵¹

For Bonhoeffer, then, true worldliness is defined by God’s becoming human in Jesus Christ, not by any abstract notion of the human species or by an ‘atheistic philosophy of

⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 372–3.

⁴⁶Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Berlin: 1922–1923*, ed. Larry L. Rasmussen, trans. Isabel Best and David Higgins, *DBWE 12* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), p. 286.

⁴⁷Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 485.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 448.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 283.

⁵⁰Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 58.

⁵¹Ibid.

finitude' (as it was for Feuerbach).⁵² Precisely because God became human in Jesus Christ, we too are free to be human: worldliness is made possible, and defined, by Christ. 'The world has no reality of its own independent of God's revelation in Christ... It belongs to the real concept of the worldly that it is at all times seen in the movement of the world's having been accepted and becoming accepted by God in Christ'.⁵³ Therefore, there is no such thing as a Christian existence that is outside the reality of the world; nor can there be a genuine worldliness that is outside the reality of Christ.⁵⁴ In short, Bonhoeffer thinks we secure a proper understanding of worldliness not in spite of but *only by means of* God's transcendent activity in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In making this move, he urges that 'Christianity must be used polemically today against the worldly in the name of a better worldliness'.⁵⁵ Crucially, this better worldliness consists in belonging to Christ and standing completely in the world *simultaneously* – something that Feuerbach thought impossible, but which is for Bonhoeffer the very substance of faith.⁵⁶

In sum, by conceiving of divine transcendence as that which weds itself to the world in Christ, Bonhoeffer allows us to integrate Feuerbachian worldliness with a Barthian-inspired theology 'from above'. Divine revelation overcomes every dualism between God and humanity, between the 'other world' and this world, and thereby disabuses us of a divided consciousness: 'From now on we cannot speak rightly of either God or the world without speaking of Jesus Christ'.⁵⁷ Precisely because our belonging completely to Christ means belonging completely to the world, and *vice versa*, Christians are no longer people of 'eternal conflict'.⁵⁸ We are free, as it were, to be Feuerbachians and Barthians at the same time.

Conclusion

I have brought Bonhoeffer's theology into dialogue with the Feuerbach–Barth confrontation and argued that it allows us to creatively mediate Feuerbach's and Barth's theological outlooks by appropriating those aspects of their theologies that are useful while avoiding their extremes. For Bonhoeffer, Feuerbach's theology is inadequate not because it is worldly. His emphatic worldliness is precisely what theology must learn from him. Feuerbach fails, instead, because he wrongly quarantines worldliness from the transcendent and gracious love of God that binds itself to the world in Jesus Christ. Conversely, Barth's theology is insufficient not because it emphasises the transcendent origin of revelation. Again, Barth's emphasis on divine transcendence is precisely his greatest insight for theology. Barth's failure is that he wrongly conceives of transcendence as the discontinuous activity of God instead of as a concrete, historical reality in the personal church-community that is founded by Jesus Christ.

There is good reason, therefore, to question the dichotomous thinking of Glasse and Vogel: namely, that one must choose Feuerbach and end up with man or turn to Barth

⁵²While Bonhoeffer originally levels this criticism at Heidegger, I think he would say the same thing about Feuerbach. See Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, p. 72.

⁵³Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, pp. 58–9 (emphasis added).

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁵⁶'One learns to have faith by living in the full this-worldliness of life'. See Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 486.

⁵⁷Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 54.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 62.

and stay with God – as if these are the only alternatives. On Bonhoeffer’s account, this is a false opposition since it is precisely by belonging completely to Christ that we at the same time attain true worldliness. Cumming’s ‘apologetic’ brand of Barthianism is also suspect because, as we saw, it remains locked within the very polarities that have made the Barth–Feuerbach confrontation insurmountable. Bonhoeffer’s theological framework, by contrast, integrates Barth’s focus on divine transcendence and Feuerbach’s worldliness by making these two orientations equally fundamental to his theological position. Rather than traverse the methodological divide that separates the late Barth from Feuerbach, as Cumming has tried to do, Bonhoeffer invites us to see that the methodological divide has already been overcome: the reality of God and the reality of the world are united in Jesus Christ. That we find ourselves stuck on one or the other side of an insurmountable divide, and that we desperately though unsuccessfully try to cross it, reveals our basic failure to apprehend the original unity of God and humanity, ‘above’ and ‘below’, in Jesus Christ. Bonhoeffer’s greatest insight for the Barth–Feuerbach confrontation is to think past such a divide by pointing to the place where it has already been surmounted. He thereby mediates both theological outlooks and achieves a novel understanding of the profound this-worldliness of Christianity and of God’s transcendent activity in the midst of the world.

Finally, we are now in a better position to see how Bonhoeffer sheds a different light on modernity’s burning rage for this-worldliness, and on Hägglund’s more recent formulation of this rage in particular. Representing modernity’s critique of other-worldliness in its most explicit articulation, Hägglund maintains that religious forms of faith are incapable of caring about finite life as an end in itself. For Hägglund, religious faith necessarily instrumentalises our lives by making them into a vehicle for serving God, attaining salvation in the afterlife, etc. Religion ultimately extinguishes the care and urgency that animate our lives by encouraging detachment from the risk of loss and consoling us with promises of a better life in the hereafter. Therefore, on the basis of his heartfelt devotion to our fragile lives in this world, Hägglund finds it necessary to safeguard this life against the corrosive motivations of religious faith: ‘I *do not want* my life to be eternal. An eternal life is not only unattainable but also undesirable, since it would eliminate the care and passion that animate my life’.⁵⁹

I suspect that Bonhoeffer is a kindred spirit to Hägglund, though he secures worldliness by other means. As we have seen, Bonhoeffer, like Hägglund, denounces ‘redemption’ myths that serve only to rescue us from this life’s hardships, anxieties and sorrows by pacifying us with assurances of a better life beyond. Yet this critique of redemption myths leads Bonhoeffer not to an outright rejection of divine transcendence, but to a careful redefinition of it. Jesus Christ, far from instrumentalising this life, reverses the logic of instrumentality by placing himself wholly at the world’s disposal. In Jesus Christ, the transcendent has come into this world not to instrumentalise it but to serve it: ‘What is beyond this world is meant, in the gospel, to be there *for* this world’.⁶⁰ Jesus Christ calls his disciples not to detachment from the world, but to service on its behalf. For this reason, ‘Our relationship to God is a new life in “being there for others”, through participation in the being of Jesus. The transcendent is not the infinite, unattainable tasks, but the neighbor within reach in any given situation. God in human form!’⁶¹ Far from numbing us to the pains of this life, Christian faith consists in staying

⁵⁹Hägglund, *This Life*, p. 4.

⁶⁰Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, pp. 372–3.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, p. 501.

‘awake with Christ in Gethsemane’ and sharing ‘in God’s suffering in the life of this world’.⁶²

Staying awake with Christ means, concretely, preserving the world for the sake of Christ’s ultimate coming by freeing slaves, breaking bread with the hungry, sheltering the homeless, defending those who suffer injustice, befriending the lonely, supporting the undisciplined, etc.⁶³ In each of these ways, Christians prepare the way of the Lord. Such preparation is not, for Bonhoeffer, merely ‘a matter of creating certain desired conducive conditions, such as creating a program of social reform’. Rather, at stake is nothing less than making way for the ultimate: ‘the coming of Christ’.⁶⁴ How things fair in the penultimate world are thus of *ultimate* concern. In Bonhoeffer’s theology, the ‘ultimate’ and the ‘penultimate’ – the ‘other’ world and this one – are intimately bound together and each retain their seriousness. Christian life is ‘always life in the penultimate, waiting for the ultimate’.⁶⁵ Thus if Christian faith leads to the kind of religious escapism that Hägglund rightly decries, it is a result of a fundamental confusion about Jesus Christ, who entered this life; suffered, died and rose again for it; and is coming again for its sake. Jesus Christ, in short, belongs wholly to the world; to evade solidarity with him in this life is to deny him.

Hägglund’s mistake is not, therefore, his rage for worldliness; on Bonhoeffer’s view, the gospel of Jesus Christ shares this rage. Hägglund goes wrong, instead, by trapping himself within a ‘halfhearted pseudo-worldliness’ that ‘lacks the freedom and courage to let the world be what it really is before God, namely, a world that in its godlessness is reconciled with God’.⁶⁶ Put simply, Hägglund fails to see that the secular faith he defends and the otherworldliness he inveighs are simply ‘two sides of the same coin’ – attempts to have the world without Christ or Christ without the world.⁶⁷ Defying the binaries that have structured the Barth–Feuerbach confrontation, and that continue to govern the modern urge to abolish transcendence (leading up to and including Hägglund), Bonhoeffer insists that a life of genuine worldliness is only possible through the proclamation of the crucified and risen Christ.

⁶²Ibid., p. 486.

⁶³Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 163.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 164.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 168.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 401.

⁶⁷Bonhoeffer, *Berlin: 1922–1923*, p. 288.