

Analysis of Barth's General Heading: 'The Revelation of God as the Sublimation of Religion'

I have taught in British and American universities for all of my working life. I have been successively, a professor of philosophy, a professor of the history of religion, and a professor of theology.¹ So it was inevitable that sooner or later I would have to read the works of Karl Barth. With that history behind me, it is perhaps not surprising that I found what he wrote about religion to be shocking, distressing, and deeply alien. I think he has been a bad influence on much modern theology, and that his views are in conflict with all that I had learned about religion and about Christianity during my long career.

Barth would not have been surprised by this, since I am just the sort of person he persistently attacked as 'faithless', 'demonic', and 'wilfully arbitrary' (these words are taken from *Church Dogmatics*, volume I, part 2, para. 17, on religion). I understand that he is writing Christian theology, not philosophy or comparative religion. But in this long section he is writing a Christian theology of religion, and the fact that he mentions Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism shows that he means to talk about a Christian view of many world religions. My intention is to analyse his text in detail, and show why

¹ I was a professor for the longest time at King's College, London University, where I was Professor of the Philosophy of Religion and Head of the Department of Religious Studies, and at Christ Church, Oxford University, where I was the Regius Professor of Divinity.

I was distressed and shocked by it. I will also show how there can be a very different Christian theology of religion, and that a more liberal Christian view, which he set out to oppose in its German forms, has much to recommend it.

In a much later work, delivered as a lecture to a meeting of Swiss Reformed ministers in 1956, he spoke of a ‘change of direction in the thinking of evangelical theology’.² This change, he said, was not in opposition to his earlier work, which entails that in an important sense what he wrote in the early section of the *Dogmatics* remains in force. He also remarked that he had indulged in some ‘exaggerations of which we were guilty in 1920’, thereby admitting that he had then expressed himself in an overdramatic and sometimes even offensive way. More seriously, he said that he should have paid more attention to the humanity of God.³ For the Incarnation gives humanity a distinction and value that must be preserved and celebrated. He continued to insist that God held all humans and all religions to be sinful and faithless, and that man is not good. But he held that in Christ God had elected and even sanctified humanity, so that humans can become God’s partners. There is thus a greater possibility of considering and supporting human talents and culture than he might earlier have done. Overall then, this change of emphasis is not a radical change of view about religion, but is primarily concerned with regarding humans not just as monsters, but as those who are called into partnership with God. This is what he had always thought, though it was largely hidden by the polemical tone of his earlier writings.

Nevertheless, Barth’s views did develop in some respects, and in ways which are capable of further development, and it is only fair to take note of this. However, this is primarily a critique of what Barth thought and wrote about religion at one time, and left intact

² Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, trans. John Newton Thomas and Thomas Wieser (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1960 [1956]), p. 37.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

in the *Church Dogmatics*. It is a critique, because I disagree almost entirely with what Barth said, and I will explain why this is. My critique is meant to give detailed attention to one topic that Barth treated early in his career, but not even to aim at assessing Barth's thought overall. Despite my profound disagreement, I have found Barth's work stimulating and helpful in formulating my own views on the topic. And I think it is important to have a detailed critique of at least one part of Barth's work, which deals with a topic within my own area of expertise.

He gives the general title of this section as 'The Revelation of God as the Sublimation of Religion'. This sounds like a neat and harmless phrase, which has a ring of profundity about it. Unfortunately, each of its three terms turns out to have a meaning which is surprising and provocative.

Barth's Idea of Sublimation

I will consider first the very unusual concept of 'sublimation'. This is a translation of the German *Aufhebung*, which was most clearly used by the philosopher Hegel to speak of the process of two apparently contradictory terms (for instance, 'being' and 'nothing') being cancelled and yet fulfilled in a 'higher' resolution (in this case, 'becoming'). It can also be used in reference to the alleged historical process in which an emphasis on one form of organisation led to a balancing emphasis on its opposite, and this in turn led to a higher synthesis (not Hegel's word) which at the same time cancelled both and yet preserved them in a higher form.

Hegel explains his use of the word as follows:

At this point we should remember the double meaning of the German expression *aufheben*. On the one hand, we understand it to mean 'clear away' or 'cancel', and in that sense we say that a law or regulation is cancelled (*aufgehoben*). But the word also means 'to

preserve', and we say in this sense that something is well taken care of (*wohl aufgehoben*). This ambiguity in linguistic usage, through which the same word has a negative and a positive meaning, cannot be regarded as an accident nor yet as a reason to reproach language as if it was a source of confusion. We ought rather to recognise here the speculative spirit of our language, which transcends the 'either-or' of mere understanding.⁴

Examples in religion might be the way in which Jesus, in the sermon on the mount, at the same time could be said to have cancelled and yet fulfilled the inner meaning of the Torah. He cancelled it by saying, 'You have heard ... but I say to you.' He fulfilled it by using it to refer not just to outward acts like murder, but to inner attitudes like anger or hatred.⁵ He could also be said to have cancelled the idea of the Messiah, traditionally interpreted as the idea of a political liberator of Israel. This is perhaps why he told Peter not to tell people that he was the Messiah, though he apparently accepted Peter's attribution of the term to him.⁶ For in another way he fulfilled the idea of Messiah, or Christ, by showing that he was a universal liberator of all humans from sin.

The Hegelian term used to be translated into English as 'sublation', a term which I myself have used, but it does not seem to have caught on. I intend to refer to the English translation by Garrett Green of this section of the *Church Dogmatics*, because I think this is the clearest English translation of the German text.⁷ I shall throughout use Green's English translations of German terms. Green uses the term 'sublimation', and I do not object to this, even though,

⁴ See G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Logic* (1830), trans. T. F. Geraets, H. S. Harris, and W. A. Suchting (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), annotation to para. 87, p. 154. This can also be found on the website hegel.net.

⁵ Matthew 5, 21–4.

⁶ Mark 8, 27–30.

⁷ Karl Barth, *On Religion* (para. 17 of the *Church Dogmatics*, volume I, part 2), trans. Garrett Green (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); in-text references to page numbers are to this reissued edition.

as the Oxford English Dictionary confirms, the English word most often refers to various processes in chemistry or printing (so does 'sublation', of course). I will put in brackets in my text the page numbers of the passages I quote or refer to in the Bloomsbury edition translation. It is clearly a contentious and difficult concept in English, and Barth uses it in an unusual way in German. I shall hold that the sense in which Barth uses it is not helpful for an understanding of religion, and virtually eliminates the double meaning of cancellation and fulfilment which lies at the root of the word.

I find it odd that Barth should take this philosophical term from German Idealist thought to state his attitude to religion, when a large part of his argument is that theologians should not appeal to philosophy to justify their expositions of Christian faith. That, however, is just what he is doing in the very title of his writing on Christian attitudes to religion.

I do not suppose that Barth intends to use the idea of 'sublimation' in either a philosophical or a historical sense. Anyone who says that something 'cancels yet fulfils' religion needs to spell out just what is cancelled and what is fulfilled. In the Biblical cases I have referred to, what is cancelled is a purely external, behavioural interpretation of the Torah ('Do not kill'), and what is fulfilled (the 'full extent and meaning') is a reference to the inner thoughts of hatred that may occur. In my second example, what is cancelled is a political interpretation of Messiah (the victory of Israel), and what is fulfilled is the promise of liberation from sin for all.

