13
Contemporary Christian Thought RS23a (YDS 13-197)

These lectures are dated 'Tuesday October 24th' and 'Thursday November 16th', which places them in either 1972 or 1978. The former lecture, although it is little more than a set of headings, shows Frei's approaching his later analysis of Barth's as one who 'conceptually redescribes' Christian faith. The latter lecture is interesting primarily for its reflections on the nature of predication in talk about God. CPH 1972a.

Barth

(2) Focus on later Barth: (a) Distinctiveness of Biblical Christian concepts ('exclusivism' is what Lindbeck calls it) (b) yet universally intelligible – everybody in principle Christian! – Yet faith before understanding

(3) Back of that obviously three convictions

(a) Christian concepts distinctive – biblical. (Someone after class raised question of unity and Christological unity of Bible.)

(b) Revelation as an event absolutely crucial, and a *cognitive* event at that. Illumination or insight and analysis of meaning must coincide.

(c) But we cannot show how that's possible, i.e. *how* the two can coincide: Barth sticks to analysis of meaning as though faith, i.e. Revelation, had already taken place: Predestination

(d) You cannot show *possibility*, because it is explained from same ground as actual event (Holy Spirit). Barth *not* apologetic – no 'natural theology', no anthropological contact point for 'faith', no notion of faith (and therefore revelation) as universal pre- special revelation situation. Unlike H. Richard Niebuhr and Tillich!

(4) Doesn't that force him into giving up one side of his earlier position, i.e. doesn't it force him into authoritarian orthodoxy? You've got to believe a set of assertions about salvation, whether or not you've got or become a question? Barth's answer to that, after his 'turn', is that there is no universal logical pattern or explanation of how people become Christian (or non-Christian for that matter). To try to show how has been the trouble of modern theology. No, you don't believe except existentially. But all you can do is to suggest that the ground of existential turn (Holy Spirit) and the objective meaning of Christian concepts have one and the same source. How the two come together, how insight and conceptual analysis join not possible for theology, except as though already happened.

(5) Hence categories or concepts like 'revelation', 'faith', 'sin', 'man' have no non-Christian cognate for Barth, unlike Tillich, H. Richard Niebuhr. They are general *qua* Christian.[1] The two things undertaken jointly. The upshot of *both* analyses is that the Church is *going to be* and *should be* distinct from world – its exclusiveness serves the world well; indeed it may be the justification for the Church. (He recognizes the contradictory attitude – culturally relevant religion – disinterested obedience to, faith in, truth.)

(6) This was also the struggle of K. Barth, the person most clearly concerned with the integrity of Christian concepts and the distinctiveness of Christianity.

(a) 'Man must be overcome'

(b) But it's through the question-and-answer situation![2] The point is, is there a description of the cultural, human situation.[3]

(c) As ministers … [4]

(d) The *technical* expression for Barth's affirmation of orthodoxy (without its dogmatic/scholastic objectivity) is 'Word of God' in Bible and preaching: very Protestant indeed!

(e) Where does insight become *true*, not false *therapy*? Where is the invisible joint of human, questioning self-projection meeting divine answer? Where does human word (biblical, sermon) become divine Word? Where is the *analogy* of 'Word made flesh' by which we can believe that 'Word was made flesh'?

(f) Revelation – (i) divine word (ii) informative communication (iii) personal insight

(g) Schleiermacher – teacher of transcendence (givenness of divine with our inner constitution: 'Wholly other' is our native climate 'beyond our life in bodily nature and culture); Harnack much less of a worry because history or the path of culture isn't the path of the divine for Barth.[5]

(h) Faith = the paradox of *not* understanding, *not* knowing the union of transcendence and immanence

II. (1) How utterly different at first blush Tillich and H. Richard Niebuhr's theologizing.[6] But there may be things in common with Barth.

(a) The fear of reducing 'faith' to a dogmatic–intellectual assertion rather than a total stance of whole man. Barth shares this but they fear he's surrendered to the reduction.

(b) The priority of *cognitive* (though not informative knowledge) concepts as central Christian concepts even if (Hick's chief two distinctions) propositional view of revelation and faith rejected in favor of something eventful / existential / co-presence (grasp – insighted — being grasped: Analogy to I-Thou relation)

(2) (a) But beyond that – sharp differences about the basic Christian concepts. Though they are distinctive, they are grounded in or have contact with a general structure of analysis of human being.
(b) This analysis is also insight and does so *not* on the basis of a special scheme (psychoanalysis, existential phenomenology) but of appeal to common experience: We all know what it is to be ultimately concerned. Just take fact seriously and analyze implications and what it does not imply.[7]

Barth on 'God'

(1) God's *activity* and *effectiveness* the subject or object of theological description (= liberal view: God not in himself but in relation to us, i.e. as he affects us; descriptions of him = descriptions of relation to him=descriptions of ourselves as affected by him).

Answer: If God reveals self, then we know him only *within* the revelation and what he reveals, *but* he does not reveal self unless reveals *self*. Hence describe *him* in his activities. Describe neither (a) Him apart from his activities, 'in himself' = metaphysics, natural knowledge of God (b) Not him at all but only his relation to, action upon us.

(2) The subject of theological description is thus God as the absolutely distinctive subject of and in his activities or qualities or perfections. No matter what may *in fact* be the case, the logic (informal) of the notion of God is *not* that one tries to imagine love (e.g.), or transcendence = freedom (e.g.) as a concept in its own right, by itself, and then ask if there is a subject (*one* who loves, is free) to whom to attribute or of whom to predicate the quality. No! God not = love or power in the absolute degree (= Hitler's hypostatizing, mentally and existentially). Rather, (i) subject and predicate not accidentally related (substance back of attribute) so that they are in principle separate nor (ii) subject and predicate not merged so that subject disappears into predicate (Feuerbach) but subject is the unique way of holding together being and governing the attributes. This *the meaning* of 'God' for Barth. Is there a verifiable *reality* to correspond to it? (i) In any case, whether or not real, it is the irreducible meaning of the concept. 'Don't confuse the Good Lord, even if you think he's a dream, with our kind.' (ii) Proof of God = self-proof, i.e. the concept, the description *in this one case alone* entails the reality. 'Necessary existent'.

(3) God's being is an *event*, an occurrence, but more an event of a specific sort – an act (inference: 'person.' can of worms!) (not every event an act, though every act an event). In him Being and Activity not separate – but is it in us? (*Analogy* is what Barth allows). Hence if God's act = revelation, it is his very being to reveal himself (Hegel: God not God unless he is

revealed). But (i) is he not then subject to necessity of revealing, communicating self? (ii) isn't liberalism then better when it backs of from metaphysical description altogether and says, never mind what's true of God in himself, we know him only as related to us – e.g., void, enemy, companion, making no claim that the transition takes place in him rather than us – all we know is that *the relation* changes? Barth's answer: God's very Being to Act or to Reveal himself is not a matter of *necessary relations to creature* because it is in the first place confined or fulfilled rather than in need. He is in fact related within himself, to himself: God is *free* toward his creation because his being is, prior to and apart from his act upon those other than himself, already Being-in-Act, Being-in-*specific*-Act-or-Relation. From God's revelation *ad extra* one infers the ground of its possibility, the actuality of God's Relatedness to himself – Trinity.

(4) God's being is an event, a motion intrinsic to himself, i.e., a self-grounded or self-moved event, an act, a coherence of 'nature' and 'spirit' (Bodied and purposive activity) as a *specific unity* of the two: they are held together, they don't flow together – Again: 'person', but purely-self-moved Person, one whose specific actuality is identical with his enactment.

(5) It is his Being to be a specific act that is of a specific kind, viz. community – love.

(6) God's aseity – freedom, self-determinedness, freedom to be himself (in relation also, because in himself in relation first – Trinity) Freedom of God from all 'external determinations'.

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[1] Barth, *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-War Writings*, tr. E.M. Delacour and S. Godman; ed. R.G. Smith (London: SCM, 1954), pp.6, 7–10, also 210–11.

[2] Ibid, pp.190–203.

[3] In the margin, Frei added: '(1) Dialectic; (2) Understanding (pp.24, 29); – Transcendence between orthodoxy and scepticism – The integrity, the meaning of central Christian concepts = self-negation of human cultural content.)'

[4] Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (London: Hodder, 1928), p.185.

[5] Heinz Zahrnt, *The Question of God: Protestant Theology in the Twentieth Century*, tr. R.A. Wilson (London: Collins, 1969), p.18.

[6] See ibid, p.295; note the contrast with Barth on one side, Ogden, Kaufman, Gilkey – and Flew? – on the other.

[7] Paul Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1957), pp.32ff, 74ff. [Frei adds at this point, in the margin: 'Revelation = 1) cognitively grasped, therefore cognitive act; 2) An historical event or a truth indissolubly tried to an historical event; 3) A present-occurrence (in Nineteenth Century, not in Eighteenth when presence and self-consciousness not a problem. For Tillich and H. Richard Niebuhr a problem here to be solved. Not so for Barth: (a) the technical issue is covered by the Trinity; (b) it would be an anthropological grounding of theology, hence both

prejudicial and also relying on certain notions as if they were eternal (revelation = self-conscious notion of man, hence I-Thou or presence notion of revelation).']