

Webster, John B. *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*. New York: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1995. 238 p. ISBN 0-521-04411-1.

I was introduced to Karl Barth's theology (1886-1968) by a display of posters about Barth's life in the E. H. Little Library of Davidson College in North Carolina in 1974. I had first heard Barth's name in an adult ed class on war and peace at Queen's College in Charlotte sometime about 1973-74. At Davidson, one of Barth's former students, Alexander McKelway, taught theology (unfortunately, I never had a course with him). As a philosophy major, I spent many hours studying natural theology (e.g., arguments for the existence of God). McKelway was an opponent of such theology (following his teacher, Barth). We spared one time at an event where I presented Pannenberg's arguments for the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. At the end of college to prepare for seminary, I read Colin Brown's *Karl Barth and the Christian Message* (London: Tyndale Pr., 1967), an overview source that distinguished Barth's theology from conservative evangelicalism.

I was no fan of Barth when I enrolled in Princeton Seminary in 1978. Fortunately my advisor became Daniel Migliore and I took his excellent course on Barth in the fall semester 1980 (I still have the syllabus and my notes). Migliore was an excellent lecturer who embedded Barth's theology in the early twentieth century world of the crisis of two world wars, the Great Depression, and the Cold War that followed. At the beginning of the course, he had us read *Karl Barth and Radical Politics* (2nd ed. Cascade Books, 2017), a collection of essays on Barth and socialism by various theologians translated and introduced by George Hunsinger. Thus my second introduction to Barth portrayed him as a forerunner of the liberation theologies that were popular among many seminarians at the time. I was also read Hans Frei's *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (Yale Univ. Pr., 1974) that helped me understand Barth's approach to the Bible.

When I ended up in graduate studies at Union Seminary in New York, Christopher Morse was teaching Barth's theology as a forerunner of the Theology of Hope that was popular in the early 1980s. Morse showed us how Barth was read in the 'New Yale Theology' (David Kelsey, George Lindbeck, Hans Frei et al.) that opposed the neo-Liberal theology emanating from the University of Chicago. My advisor at Union, Geoffrey Wainwright, was no fan of Barth, but he had worked out his own version of what might be called 'liturgical neo-orthodoxy' in his *Doxology* (Oxford Univ. Pr., 1980). When I moved with Wainwright to Duke University in 1983, Barth was widely read and discussed among the Methodist theologians like Thomas Langford. When Stanley Hauerwas joined the faculty, he presented himself as a "neo-Barthian." So all along the way in my college, seminary, and graduate schools, I was surrounded by teachers of Barth that came to his theology from both the Left (Migliore) and the Right (Wainwright).

I was privileged that Monmouth College gave me the opportunity to teach Barth to undergraduates in independent reading courses. When I arrived at McCormick Seminary in 1998, one of the first courses I proposed was entitled "Karl Barth without Apology," a course I taught at least once every other year. From 1998 – 2020, I was one

of the few theologians in the Association of Chicago Theological Schools (ACTS) that was teaching on Barth on a regular basis. Barth's ethics of gender, his aversion to apologetic theology and liberal theologies based on religious experience, and the sheer labor required of the reader of *Church Dogmatics* made him a hard sale to some students. Other students from more conservative theological backgrounds (including African American seminarians) were attracted to the central role of the Bible in his theology and the left-wing Barthianism that I learned from Migliore and Hunsinger.

I was at home in Barth's theology that I found reflected in The Confession of 1967, one of the constitutional documents of the Presbyterian Church (USA) I spent a semester studying with Edward Dowey in seminary. Barth cured me of the notion that only confessing Christians were included in God's work of reconciliation in Christ. For those raised in churches in the Reformed (or Calvinist) tradition where the doctrine of election or predestination was still a living option, Barth's reframing of election in the Person and Work of Christ opens the vistas of salvation to involve all of humankind. It relieves some conservative Christians of the anxiety that evangelism must be anxiously aimed at converting one's neighbors to Christ lest they suffer divine judgement and exclusion from eternal life. In fact, they are already included in Jesus' humanity that has been raised from the dead, creating new ways to be human.

But for much of my career I approached Barth via those who tried to reinterpret his theology to make it more palatable to late twentieth century concerns. Barth as a socialist or Barth as a champion of Protestant orthodoxy appeals to some. But in John Webster, I finally found a theologian more concerned with an unvarnished Barth, who let's Barth's theology speak on its own terms regardless how it may offend modern sensibilities.

I met Webster once at a meeting of the Narrative Theology Group during the American Academy of Religion when he was teaching in Toronto. Later he moved to Oxford and Aberdeen. When I met him in the 1980s or early 1990s, he still had dark hair and a mustache. He raised a question in the narrative group and his presence caused a bit of a stir among those who knew him. It is a tragedy that he died in his sixties before completing his own dogmatic theology.

Part of what I admire about Webster was his fidelity to reading Barth paying attention to both the scope and depth of his theology. In *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, he takes up Barth's final writings from the 1960s when he was working out a doctrine of the Christian life, and the ethical chapters to complete *Church Dogmatics IV/4* on the doctrine of reconciliation.

In this book, Webster locates the doctrine of reconciliation within the wider scope of Barth's theology and focuses on the "moral ontology" of the *Dogmatics*. "Moral ontology" is a concept that Webster borrows from Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self*. It refers to the ethos or moral universe within which morality and ethics develop and addresses where values like 'goodness' and 'justice' come from and who are the agents who engage in moral acts. A "moral ontology" describes the sense of the world, society, and

the self in which moral acts and deliberation are carried out, what we assume without thinking about it when we behave morally (or immorally).

Webster's insight in this book is that if one attends to Barth's moral ontology in the doctrine of reconciliation, one can overcome one of the primary objections to Barth's theology, that he concludes reconciliation between God and humanity ten thousand feet above our heads in an idealized account of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. *Church Dogmatics IV/1* is one of the finest examples of Barth's theology where he seems to absorb the whole drama of human history into the dealings of God with Jesus and his contemporaries in the first century C.E. What Webster caught site of was that although God in Barth is active in all things, God is not the sole actor. God's activity in reconciling humanity in Christ opens a moral space for human action to correspond to God's gracious agency. God calls, evokes, models, and empowers humans to become reconciling agents in our own contexts, by overcoming our alienation through sin with God, neighbors, and self and setting us free to become disciples of Jesus.

One key move is the way Barth reconceived human freedom considering the freedom of God to be for us in Christ. Traditionally for much of Christian theology, east and west, our freedom was conceived as our capacity of free will, our cognitive power through moral imagination to stand equipoised between different moral choices, deliberate through reason, and make the right choice. Or not, if our reason were overpowered by passion or self-interest. Barth rejected this "Herculean" image of freedom as if the freedom to sin or alienate our lives from God and others were included in the very concept of freedom itself.

For Barth, freedom is defined by God's activity to be *for* others in Christ, especially for others like us who are alienated from God. In *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, he even enlists the story of the Prodigal Son to portray Jesus' Road to the cross as a journey away from God and into identification with sinners, culminating in Jesus' cry of dereliction on the cross and reconciliation with God in the resurrection. With this definition of freedom (free to be for others in positive regard for them), what Christ creates in his life, death, and resurrection are new paths to freedom that liberate us from our inordinate self-concern (that can even infect the quest for salvation and spirituality).

Thus by calling attention to the way Barth folds ethics into his dogmatics, Webster argues that Barth doesn't replace our agency with God's acts but frees our agency to love the neighbor in a world made new by God's indwelling presence in Christ and the Spirit. In the community of the Christian church, we are baptized into lives of discipleship and called to be God's witnesses and agents of reconciliation amid all that divides humankind and alienates us from nature and neighbor.

It is interesting that along the way, Webster rarely mentions forgiveness as an explicit topic under the theme of reconciliation. He does show how Barth's concept of reconciliation does more than substitute Jesus' sinless humanity for our fallen condition as sinners. In Christ, we are given new ways of being human that may correspond to God's way of being in community and friendship with us through Christ.

How God exactly conducts these miracles of mercy remain mysterious to us this side of the coming of the rule of God and Christ's return. God's activity is neither presented as a natural evolution traced in human development or a supernatural miracle in the sense of violating the laws of nature. Rather, God's acts in Christ open a realm of human freedom where we may act in new ways and discover ourselves in new ways leading to a new sense of self as one reconciled to God and in community with neighbors and nature in Christ.

One of Webster's analogies for Barth's moral ontology is to compare him to the metaphysicians of the 1700s that give their readers reasons for who God is, what we and the world are, and how we should conduct ourselves in such a cosmos. The accent is on the realism of Barth's account of the contents of Christian theology and on his reticence to provide neutral apologetic proofs to the skeptic for God's existence and attributes. Barth was confident that the Holy Spirit could address anyone through various means (Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*, the Russian revolution, or a dead dog by the side of the road) to reveal the reality of God in Jesus Christ. The pathways to the knowledge of God may be as diverse as the variety of humankind. For Barth, the best apologetics is a good systematic theology that lays out the biblical and Christian meaning of what is proclaimed from pulpits, in the Bible, and other forms of communication. That approach won't satisfy everyone, but it does testify to the sheer overwhelming drama and compelling vision of God one finds in the best Christian writers. Barth's way of doing theology is also a good preparation for dialogue with other religions and the natural sciences in the sense of establishing the non-negotiables that Christians bring to the table. Dialogue with others gives us new insights into the depth and richness of the Christian message that exceeds our conventional Christian assumptions about the faith. Preparation via reading Barth may also make us better dialogue partners in that we don't have to assume that everything in other religions (least of all in Christianity) and even in the natural sciences is in order as products of human activity. Our alienation from God and creation may even impact our best attempts at explaining the world. Barth's theology can guide us to look for human alienation or the effects of sin in the very heart of our modern (or late modern) sensibilities. It can also give us reason to hope for human reconciliation and resources for moral and spiritual renewal that may be thin in other theologies more concerned to bring Christianity up to date with the constant changes in our knowledge of the world and the cultures and religions that structure our social lives.