

Luther, Barth, and Movements of Theological Renewal (1918–1933)

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Karl Barth on Kant's "Biblical Theology" A Reading with Hermann Cohen

1 The Freedom for Evil

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) pondered questions of “biblical theology” in several of his writings in his later years, and indeed drafted such a “theology.” However, he was not motivated in this by any genuine theological interest. Here too he remained the philosopher and regarded biblical theology as something else, indeed something alien, different. Nonetheless, he approached and drafted this alien element employing philosophical means. What unites biblical theology and philosophy is Reason. For Kant, to deal with Reason was primarily and indivisibly a task of philosophy. But biblical theology is also shaped by Reason. What distinguishes it from philosophy is the role of the question of purity. Kant as a philosopher seeks out the critique of *pure* Reason in all spheres of systematic foundation: in knowledge, in ethics and aesthetics. He looks for a strictly general and necessary procedure that makes it possible for us to arrive at valid determinations. All kind of accidental being there, no matter how important it may appear at the moment, blurs philosophical purity. Purity is Kant’s basis for valid knowledge, proofs and above all the consciousness of precisely determined, unsurpassable limits of the human spirit. Yet he does not separate Reason from sensuality, inclinations, natural drives or historical experience. Central for him is the hierarchy: Kant wants to make sure that the principles of order derived from the critique of Reason are made a condition for every order in the sphere of sensuality, inclination, drives and the like, and to maintain that in this position. In no case must the opposite be allowed to occur. In knowing, desiring and in general any act of judgment, allowing the sense data, inclinations and historical situations to be the predominant shaping force, perverts the order of Reason and is therefore false.

Yet it would appear that biblical theology works differently. It accepts (we shall later see more precisely how) principles of order “based on the teachings of history and revelation,”¹ from personal witness, indeed grounded on feeling.

¹ Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* [1797/98], “Akademie-Ausgabe”: *Kants Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Reimer/De Gruyter, 1900ff., hereafter AA), VI 488. Page references from the AA are given in English standard translations. With some exceptions I will quote from: 1) *Critique of Pure Reason* [A 1781/B 1787], trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett,

Does this not contradict Reason? Not per se and in every respect, but its procedure can only be valid with restrictions. Consequently, Kant's most important work on biblical theology is titled *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (Rlg., A 1793/B 1794). Its object thus "is not *pure*; it is rather religion *applied* to a history handed down to us, and there is no place for it in an *ethics* that is pure practical philosophy."² Not without personal reservations, indeed a touch of irony, although nonetheless with scientific respect, Kant correspondingly discusses the "distinctive characteristic of the Theology Faculty" in his university-political tractate *The Conflict of the Faculties*.³ The first sentence in this section reads: "The biblical theologian proves the existence of God on the grounds that He spoke in the Bible."⁴ But proof in the strict sense belong in another faculty, namely the "Faculty of Philosophy." Thus, the biblical theologian, treating his certainty "as a matter of faith, he will therefore base it – even for the scholar – on a certain (indemonstrable and inexplicable) *feeling* of its divine character" ("Gefühl der Göttlichkeit derselben").⁵ Karl Barth is interested in particular in the first sentence. He quotes it twice in his chapter on Kant in his *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century. Its Background & History* from 1947 (PT),⁶ the second time printing it in bold as his crowning conclusion.⁷ The book derives from lectures he gave for the final time in the academic year 1932/33 in Bonn. His chapter on Kant is Barth's most extensive expression of his position on Kant's importance for modern theology.⁸ It is my point of departure.

1996); 2) *Critique of Practical Reason* [KpV 1788], trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002); 3) *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings* [Rlg A 1793/B 1794], trans. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998); 4) *The Metaphysics of Morals* [1797/98], trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996); 5) *The Conflict of the Faculties* [CFac 1798], trans. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Abaris, 1979).

2 Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, AA VI, 488.

3 Kant, *CFac*, 1798.

4 Kant, *CFac*, AA VII, 24.

5 Kant, *CFac*, AA VII, 23.

6 Engl. publ.: Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1976; German original: *Die protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert. Ihre Vorgeschichte und ihre Geschichte* [1947] (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1981). Page references hereafter from the German and the English editions (PT German/English). Cf. as a short introduction Dietrich Korsch, "Theologiegeschichte," in *Barth Handbuch*, ed. Michael Beintker (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 257–261, esp. 258–59.

7 Barth, *PT*, 277, 278/311, 312.

8 See Michael Beintker, "Grenzbewusstsein. Eine Erinnerung an Karl Barths Kant-Deutung [2004]," in idem *Krisis und Gnade. Gesammelte Studien zu Karl Barth*, ed. Stefan Holtmann and Peter Zoher (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 122–135, esp. 132ff.; Kenneth Oakes, *Karl Barth on Theology and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012), 140–149. Barth here goes far beyond the lectures on ethics 1928/29 in his theological appraisal of Kant (Barth,

Let me briefly summarize. Kant for Barth is the "awe-inspiring" thinker,⁹ in whose person "the eighteenth century saw, understood, and affirmed itself in its own limitations."¹⁰ In particular, the self-"affirmation" will become important for us. Kant enunciates this in a theological form with a modest, self-aware Enlightenment consciousness: "Should one now ask, Which period of the entire church history in our ken up to now is the best? I reply without hesitation: *The present.*"¹¹ But what actually prompted him, from his view of limitations, not only to recognize biblical theology but even to sketch an extensive outline of it? The initial spark was the problem of so-called "radical evil." Kant addressed that for the first time in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* in 1792 and then included the essay with a few additions one year later in his book *Die Religion innerhalb ... (Religion with the Boundaries ...)*. We will have to be satisfied with a compromised brief glance. I will mainly quote Kant's own words (in a standard translation), but consistently in the sense of Barth's expositions.¹²

It concerns ethics. Ethics is the teaching of *practical* Reason, i.e. not just how we "determine" what is reasonable (as in theoretical episteme), but how we "make it actual" by doing ("*wirklich machen*").¹³ So it has to do with action. But to act from a basis of Reason involves will, and will is different from a biological impulse. It springs from our *Self* and follows its own laws. But from this a problem arises. Because in actual doing we remain bound to nature. Our body with its emotions, including physics, biography, general contemporary history, in short: the givens of our respective situation, shape our action. What we in very concrete terms "make actual" by doing it is a kind of mixture. Neither in keeping with the law of will nor the laws of nature will it be able to be 'strictly general' and 'necessarily' reasonable. Two different orders of law collide here which, for the sake of purity, must be strictly distinguished one from the other. Consequently, here the pure science of Reason reaches its end. It can say what we in an ideal case *ought to do*, but never what we actually in fact do. Only where it is merely a matter of our personal intentions, the "maxims" of our desire, the pure science of Reason is on solid ground. Thus, Kant formulates for our Self a law of pure im-

Ethik, 2 Vols. [Zürich: Theol. Verlag, 1973/1978]). Central there is Kant's categorical imperative, Kant's "biblical theology" is not discussed.

⁹ Barth, *PT*, 239/269.

¹⁰ Barth, *PT*, 237/266.

¹¹ Kant, *Rlg.* B, 197, AA VI, 131; cf. Barth, *PT*, 239, 261/268, 293. Karl Barth quotes Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries [...]* according to the second printing (B, 1794).

¹² Barth, *PT*, 260 ff./292 ff.

¹³ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* B, X.

perative obligation, the “categorical imperative.” It underpins and grounds our autonomy.

But once more: when we act, even with the best will, we remain inevitably bound to inclinations, moods, situations. Which means: it is never certain that we actually subject ourselves to the categorical imperative. It is precisely a careful self-critical attitude that proves that the ultimate bases of our concrete will and action can never be known. Here we are unrecognizable, and in positive terms that means: we are free, both in regard to the good and to the bad. That is decisive: freedom for Kant is *not* identical with autonomy. It lies deeper. Freedom is how we deal with the *possible* autonomy open to us. We can of course know, and the pure science of Reason proves this: our Self *has* a law of its own. And we have no choice but to wish to preserve this source of Reason of our own. But it is precisely here where Reason itself becomes a pitfall for us. Because when we really take the ethical will seriously, then we can note that autonomy never functions mechanically – that would be a direct contradiction. Our will is always also acting “for autonomy” or “against autonomy.” As Kant says: “even what pleases [us to do or not to do something], lies within the subject’s reason” (“selbst das Belieben [wird] in der Vernunft des Subjekts angetroffen”).¹⁴ If in reality we have to admit that we inevitably are dependent on laws that are not those of autonomy, the necessary conclusion is: we have freely decided *against* autonomy. We have put ourselves in a position subject to the heteronomy of factors determined by nature. But that decision was freely made. We thus apportion to ourselves our own rootedness in nature itself as something freely chosen. This means to say: we have betrayed the moral law, and we constantly do that again and again.

A strange demonism in our being as humans becomes visible here. Kant calls it the “indwelling of the evil principle” – Barth finds the expression striking.¹⁵ It is “radical evil.”¹⁶ “Radical” thus does not mean “especially drastic” but rather, from lat. *radix*, “rooted” in our being as humans.¹⁷ And once again it is a matter of hierarchy. Malevolence is the impure “inclination” to make “the driving forces [of our rootedness in nature, i.e.:] self-love and its inclinations the conditioning ground of our adherence to the moral law”¹⁸ – instead, on the contrary, to make the moral law the conditioning ground of our self-love and its inclinations. And because here our own Reason becomes for us a pitfall and we are

¹⁴ Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, AA VI, 213.

¹⁵ cf. Barth, *PT*, 262/294.

¹⁶ Kant, *Rlg.* B, 3, AA VI, 19.

¹⁷ Kant, *Rlg.* B, 27, AA VI, 32.

¹⁸ Kant, *Rlg.* B, 35, AA VI, 36.

unable to recognize the reasons for this freely chosen "perversion" of Reason into evil, all that remains for us is to accept it as a fact.

Despite this, Kant is not a pessimist. As Karl Barth says: Kant "affirms" the limitations of our Reason, also *this* limitation! Because he relies on that: it is precisely the borderline knowledge or insight that proves what is nonetheless valid. Man as rational being remains determined by the pure ethical law. His essence is: he is supposed to determine and obligate his will to do good. And because he is free to follow this obligation (naturally just as free to follow evil), he must also actually *be able to do* what he is supposed to do. Kant repeats that for several times especially in the treatise on religion. However, the science of *pure* Reason does not go any further. It cannot positively provide the *hope* that we not only *can* reverse the perverted hierarchy of our motives for action, but that we really will also do it. It can only make the hope "*negatively palpable*" ("*negativ fühlbar*") through that consciousness of being able to, as Heinrich Assel has subtly explicated.¹⁹ That is the reason why Kant drafted a second research work on foundations. This second science, a science of hope of reversal, of turnabout so to speak, seeks, strangely enough, supernatural, transcendent effective forces. And now testimonies from the factual, individual and collective history of humankind become as such sources for basic concepts. We are talking here about grace, divine justification, providence and the church, as the draft design of a community corresponding to this order of reversal. These basic concepts are the subject of "biblical theology."

2 Hermann Cohen

Is this still the Kant whom we are familiar with? Or are these symptoms of old age in a philosopher who is losing control over his concepts? Karl Barth affirms the former: it is still the critical Kant, no weaker. But as Barth says, we need an independent "total survey" (*Gesamtanschauung*)²⁰ in order to see how this philosopher could become capable of attracting to himself "what is on the other side," juxtaposed to his core endeavor. I will not expatiate here on the multitude of details. I will look solely at the manner in which Barth constructs his "total survey." A brief detour is helpful in that regard. I am referring to his Marburg teacher Hermann Cohen.

¹⁹ Heinrich Assel, *Geheimnis und Sakrament. Die Theologie des göttlichen Namens bei Kant, Cohen und Rosenzweig* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2001), 99.

²⁰ Barth, *PT*, 264/296.

Briefly something on Cohen's biography. Along with Franz Rosenzweig, Hermann Cohen was *the* authoritative German-Jewish thinker of the 20th century. He was born July 4, 1842 in the small town of Coswig in the Duchy Anhalt-Bernburg and died on April 4, 1918 in Berlin, shortly before the end of WW I. His father was a teacher in the Jewish school and prayer leader (*chazan*) in the Jewish Community. Hermann Cohen grew up in the synagogue world of prayer. He began studying at the age of 15 at the later famous rabbinical seminary Fraenckel'sche Stiftung in Breslau. But he discontinued that training and instead switched to study philosophy. He made a name for himself from the early 1870s by publishing several books on Immanuel Kant. In 1876, the Prussian King and German Emperor appointed him Full Professor of Philosophy in Marburg, the first Jew to achieve such an honor. Between 1902 and 1912 he presented three parts of a system of philosophy: *Logic of Pure Knowledge* (*Logik der reinen Erkenntnis*, LrE A 1902/B 1914), *Ethics of Pure Will* (*Ethik des reinen Willens*, ErW A 1904/B 1907) and *Aesthetics of Pure Feeling* (*Ästhetik des reinen Gefühls*, ÄrG I/II 1912). Important sidesteps later on were his two books *The Concept of Religion within the System of Philosophy* (*Der Begriff der Religion im System der Philosophie*, BR 1915) and the *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism* (RoR; *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums*, RV A 1919/B 1929), published after his death. When in mid-1917 he had completed the manuscript of *Religion of Reason*, he wanted to return to his philosophical system and write a fourth part: "The Unity of Cultural Consciousness in Psychology" ("Die Einheit des Kulturbewußtseins in der Psychologie").²¹ Another possible title – if we are looking at Cohen's course announcements in Marburg – could have been: "Psychology as an Encyclopedia of Philosophy" ("Psychologie als Enzyklopädie der Philosophie"). He had already given a lecture series using that title.²² But before he could write the book he passed away.

Karl Barth attended one of these lecture courses on psychology in Marburg in the Winter Semester 1908/09, and of the five works by Cohen stored in the Karl Barth Archive in Basle, he studied two in particular with special attention: *Ethics of Pure Will* (ErW, 1st ed. 1904) and *The Concept of Religion within the System of Philosophy* (BR, 1915).²³ This had great significance for Barth's theological interpretation of Kant. I wish to advance two theses:

²¹ Cohen, *Logik der reinen Erkenntnis* [21914], *Werke*, (Hildesheim: Olms, 1977 ff.), vol. 6, 609, 611, where Cohen is reflecting on the "title of the new Psychology."

²² Winter Sem. 1905/06; Winter Sem. 1908/09 and Summer Sem. 1916; see Cohen, "Appendix" in *Briefe an August Stadler* (Basel: Schwabe, 2015), 143–157.

²³ *The Ethics of Pure Will* contains the notation: "Geneva June 1910"; *The Concept of Religion* [...] has the notation (another handwriting): "Gift from his mother-in-law Hoffmann, Christmas

- 1) Where *pure* Reason is concerned (esp. in regard to Kant's *Critique of the Practical Reason*), Karl Barth was directly influenced by Hermann Cohen's *Ethics of Pure Will* (*ErW* A 1904).
- 2) By contrast, where *religious* Reason or "biblical theology" is central, Barth's thinking moves in striking similarity to Cohen's later religious thought, which he knew through his book *The Concept of Religion within the System of Philosophy* (*BR* 1915) and, as we may assume, through the lecture course mentioned.

However, caution is necessary: in his book *Protestant Theology of the 19th century*, nowhere does Barth quote Cohen. Nonetheless, I think the first thesis can be strictly proven by terminological evidence. However, the second thesis, for me the more important one, is based solely on Karl Barth's fundamental decision in favor of a "total survey" of Kant more generally, and on emphases in content in its exposition. In both cases, I will limit myself to only a few details.

3 Barth's Reinterpretation of Kant's Postulate of God

For my first thesis, I will choose as example Kant's Postulate of God in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (*KpV*). I do not ask here whether this postulate is valid but only examine how Barth presents it.

According to Kant, "the existence of God, as a postulate of pure practical Reason"²⁴ is a necessary consequence flowing from the categorical imperative.

1917." – Also by Cohen: *Religion und Sittlichkeit* (1907, notation: "Marburg Winter Sem. 1908/09"); *Die Bedeutung des Judentums für den religiösen Fortschritt der Menschheit* (1910); *Kommentar zu Immanuel Kants Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1917). Significant remarks and marginal notes can be found esp. in the *Ethics* (until p. 441) and in *The Concept of Religion*. – There are several smaller works also by Paul Natorp, and his *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der Humanität* (1908, notation: "Winter Sem. 1908/09"). The latter contains numerous remarks and marginal notes, esp. in chap. 4 (with reflections on "feeling"), as well as toward the end (pp. 99–126, chap. "Der Transzendenzensanspruch [...]"). Then Barth thoroughly studied Natorp's short *Philosophische Propädeutik [...] in Leitsätzen* (1905). In both texts by Natorp, the spontaneous impression one has is that a student still learning was working on the texts here, not the independent thinker. I am grateful to the director of the archive, Dr. Peter Zocher, for his detailed consultation (Feb. 2017). – My citations of Cohen are translated from: *Werke* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1977 ff.); his opus postumum is quoted from: *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, transl. Simon Kaplan (New York: Fr. Ungar, 1972 [hereafter *RoR*]).

24 Kant, *KpV*, AA V, 124.

Because we need, in order to orient our will in factual terms to this imperative, the subjective “certainty” of, as Barth summarizes, an “ultimate unity of nature and freedom, of that which is with that which must be, and thus of duty and desire.”²⁵ I will leave open whether each single one of these concepts exactly corresponds to the Kantian usage. More important is that Barth thinks that the concept “postulate” is “not a very happy choice linguistically”; better would be the expression “*Pre-Supposition*” (*Voraus-Setzung*).²⁶ In German language the writing of this word with a hyphen makes clear that what Barth means by this is more than just a logical linkage. He speaks evidently of a “setting,” a “positioning,” but in the sense of something “pre-,” prior to: the idea of God becomes the setting or postulation of a ground lying prior to the moral law. That is thus not only a hypothesis in the purely formal sense of “if the moral law is valid, then it requires the idea of God.” Rather it is an onto-logical hypothesis in the sense of Plato: God is then an idea which first and foremost bestows validity on the moral law. That is why Barth designates Kant’s Postulate of God a “presupposition of the truth of the idea of *God*.”²⁷

Now Kant developed his own idea in order to justify the concept of the postulate. According to that, a postulate in ethics is specifically *not* such a pre-supposition, i.e. a concept that at the core is theoretical. In contrast with mathematical-theoretical postulates, for example, the “certainty” of the *practical* postulates (inter alia of the existence of God) is “not apodictic, i.e., a necessity cognized in regard to the object, but is, rather, an assumption necessary, with regard to the subject, for complying with practical reason’s objective but practical laws.”²⁸ And only in this subjective sense of a necessary certainty does Kant also speak here once of “presupposition.” Nonetheless, he prefers expressly the concept “postulate” and concludes by noting: “I could not find a better expression for this subjective but nonetheless unconditioned necessity.”²⁹

In regard to his two other concepts employed with reference to God, namely “truth” and “idea,” “truth” fails to appear in Kant’s discussion of the Postulate of God, nor does the concept “idea,” at least not literally. In particular countering the assumption that Kant meant here after all the “*idea* of God” is that he postulates the “*existence* of God.” An “idea” can never have “existence,” even if it conceptualized as an “individual thing,” i.e. when it is thought as an

25 Barth, *PT*, 246/277.

26 Barth, *PT*, 246/277.

27 Barth, *PT*, 246/277.

28 Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, AA V, 11.

29 Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, AA V, 11.

“ideal.”³⁰ Ideas in Kant's thought not only do not contain any “creative power” (“like the Platonic ones”); rather, even in pure theory, their effect is exclusively “practical,” i.e. as guidelines (regulative principles) for research.³¹ But pure guidelines have no “existence.”

Now let us turn to Hermann Cohen. In his *Ethics of Pure Will*, he oriented himself in many points to Kant, including the fact that God in the book becomes at all a topic. Yet what came of it was a totally different sketch. God for Cohen is, *first of all*, indispensable for the foundation of pure will itself. For that reason, God is actually a “Pre-Supposition,” i.e. a hypothesis in a “Platonic-creative” sense, as Kant states. As such a hypothesis, God is, *second*, a necessary “idea” for the basis of an ethics. And this idea of God in turn corresponds, *third*, directly to the “fundamental law of truth” formulated several chapters earlier. Central here is the “connection and harmony between the theoretical and the ethical problem,”³² because “in logic alone there was no truth. But also in ethics alone there can be no truth.”³³ Thus, a special “fundamental law of truth” is needed in order to link knowledge of nature and ethics. And the idea of God is the final keystone of this linkage, because it secures “for the eternity of the [moral] ideal the analogous eternity of nature.”³⁴

All that is not Kantian. Rather, Cohen rejected Kant's doctrine of postulates, mainly because in his eyes its mere subjective meaning as “certainty” was insufficient. Therefore in his *Ethics* he is *not* concerned with an “existence of God” (as Kant is). But he is explicitly concerned 1) about the “idea of God” and 2) about “truth.” From this we can deduce: Karl Barth's reading of the purported Kantian Postulate of God – namely “pre-supposition of the truth of the idea of God” – fits consistently in with the thinking of Cohen, however not at all when it comes to Kant. Barth here read his teacher Cohen into Kant. There is also other evidence from 1910 on that he was influenced by Cohen's ethical doctrine of God (1910 was the year in which he acquired a copy of *Ethics of Pure Will*). I need but mention his book on *Romans* (2nd ed. 1922). There he quotes in connection with Romans 1:19 (Barth: “Der Gottesgedanke ist ihnen bekannt”; “the concept of God is known to them”) from Cohen's chapter “The Idea of God” in *Ethics of Pure Will*. He is impressed by Cohen's exposition on the “despairing humility” and the “self-ironization of reason” in Plato, who states in his *Politics* that no foundation can be given for the idea of the good, i.e. for what Cohen

³⁰ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 568/B 596.

³¹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 569/B 597.

³² Kant, *ErW A*, 85.

³³ Kant, *ErW A*, 85.

³⁴ Kant, *ErW A*, 416.

calls the “Absolute.” For that reason, this highest idea can only be grasped by a “self-ironization” lying within Reason itself. It is a waiving of the laying of a foundation in order to be able to see the deepest of all foundations itself.³⁵ Incidentally, Barth reads Cohen’s *Ethics*, as the marginal notes show, generally strongly oriented to the aspects of religion, faith, etc. It is interesting that all marks of reading in the book cease on page 441. There are no notes in the following doctrine of virtue, drafted by Cohen as an “application” of his laying of foundations.³⁶

35 Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief* [II 1922] (Zürich: Theol. Verlag, 1984), 21 (already alluding in this direction: “Der Glaube an den persönlichen Gott [1913],” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1909–1914*, K. B. Gesamtausgabe, vol. III, [Zürich: Theol. Verlag, 1993] 529f.). – See Cohen, *Ethik des reinen Willens* [1st ed.!] (Berlin: Cassirer, 1904), 406 on Plato’s *Politeia* 509b-510b; cf. Johann Friedrich Lohmann, *Karl Barth und der Neukantianismus* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1995) 312. – It would probably prove fruitful to analyse the often discussed difference between Barth’s *Römerbrief I* and *II* concerning Paul’s letter 1:19 in particular with regard to Cohen’s “self-ironization” (without immediately bringing up his concept of “origin”!). Potential points of departure: Michael Beintker’s discussion of the “unintuitable” (“Das Unanschauliche,” in *Die Dialektik in der ‘dialektischen Theologie’ Karl Barths* [Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1987], 89–96, 225); along with Bruce McCormack’s formulation: “If the unintuitable God is truly to be known, God must make Godself intuitable. [...] But God must do so in such a way that the unintuitability proper to God is not set aside” (*Orthodox and modern. Studies in the theology of Karl Barth* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2008], 28). – Cf. also D. Paul la Montagne, *Barth and Rationality* (Eugene: Cascade Book, 2012), esp. 89–103, 160–166; Georg Pfeleiderer, “Werk, Liberale Phase,” in *Barth Handbuch*, 184–189, esp. 187.

36 For reconstructing Barth’s relation to Marburg, it is important to note that he appears to only have been familiar with the first edition of Cohen’s *Ethics of Pure Will* (1904). Wilhelm Herrmann had commented on this book (“Hermann Cohens Ethik [1907],” in *Schriften zur Grundlegung der Theologie*, vol. 2, ed. Peter Fischer-Appelt [Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1967], 88–117. See McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology. Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1995], 56–61; Kenneth Oakes, *Karl Barth on Theology and Philosophy* [Oxford Univ. Press, 2012], 55–58). Cohen, for his part, re-responded to Herrmann’s comments by means of several supplements in the second edition of his *Ethics* (1907). Barth (based on the sources available to me) apparently did not know that or did not take it seriously. He instead refers to Herrmann’s later publication: “Die Auffassung der Religion in Cohens und Natorps Ethik [1909],” in *Schriften zur Grundlegung*, vol. 2, 206–232, perhaps also indirectly in his sketch “Ideen und Einfälle zur Religionsphilosophie [1910],” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1909–1914* (Zürich: Theol. Verlag, 1993), 126–138. He also stresses the “canonical” significance of Cohen’s *Ethics* (cf. Barth’s letter from 3 July 1910, fn. by the editor, *ibid.* 126). Cf. Oakes, 36f.; in greater detail see Lohmann, *Karl Barth und der Neukantianismus*, 208. – By the way, it should not be overlooked that Barth, despite his high opinion of thinking *individuals*, clearly distanced himself from the general phenomenon “Neo-Kantianism,” see *PT*, 343, 364 (German)/384, 407 (English).

4 Particularity of Religious Reason

Now let us turn to the second thesis on the similarity between Barth's description of Kant's "biblical theology" and Cohen's religious thought. Here, as noted, more important than terminological correspondences are thematic weightings. I will limit myself to two aspects. First, regarding the attachment of biblical theology to the pure science of Reason in general.

Kant's doctrine of radical evil was since its inception the target of many attacks. Barth reacts in a pleasantly humorous manner: To call this doctrine of radical evil "a 'foreign body' in the Kantian teaching is a possibility so obvious in interpreting his work, and one which has been presented so often, that simply for this reason one is unwilling to concur in it. It would perhaps *not* be a foreign body at all if it were part of a total survey given from the Kantian point of view, a survey which we must say Kant neglected to give, both to his own time and to us, and which, considering his position, he was bound to refrain from giving."³⁷ Such a total survey, Barth comments, would also unavoidably have embraced "the horizon of the neighbouring fields [adjoining pure Reason] upon its borders, and not merely regarding these as marking its limits."³⁸ Then Kant would have been able not only to summarize biblical theology as the Other over against the pure science of Reason, he would also have had to expand and fill it out in a positive way. However, that was not a possibility at hand for the man in which the 18th century "saw, understood and affirmed" itself in its limitations.

Yet it is worth noting that a limitation gives contour to what it limits, both internally and to the outside.³⁹ A border, a limit both negates and determines at one and the same time. That is why Kant speaks of grace, miracle, the mysteries of the call to faith in a quite specific way. Such things thus remain "*Parerga* [accessories, H.W.] of religion within the limits of pure reason; *they do not belong within it yet are adjacent to it*. Reason, in the awareness of its incapacity to satisfy its moral requirements, expands itself to extravagant ideas, which could supply this need, without, however, appropriating them as its own extended possession [!]. Reason does not deny the possibility or reality of the objects of these ideas; it is just that it cannot include them in its maxims for thought and action."⁴⁰ This expansion of reason should be philosophically rejected. By con-

³⁷ Kant, *PT*, 264/296.

³⁸ Kant, *PT*, 264/296.

³⁹ See Beintker: "Grenzbewusstsein," 130–132.

⁴⁰ Kant, *Rlg. B*, 63, fn., AA VI, 52; cf. the quotation in Barth, *PT*, 268f./301.

trast, in terms of biblical theology, it evinces – one almost might say: it reveals “positively palpable”⁴¹ “mysteries of the highest wisdom.”⁴² Because, as Kant stated in a concluding “general note” to his *Religion within the Boundaries of Reason alone*, the “impossibility” of such mysteries “cannot be proven either, since freedom itself [...] remains just as incomprehensible to us according to its possibility as the Supernatural we might want to assume as surrogate for the independent yet deficient determination of freedom.”⁴³ Consequently, Reason “calculates” “with a faith [...] we might call *reflective*.”⁴⁴ For Karl Barth, Kant’s mention of the “Parerga” is a “methodically very illuminating expression.”⁴⁵ And in this fundamental recognition of Kant’s reaching out to a biblical theology I see the analogy to Hermann Cohen’s determination of *Religion within the System of Philosophy*.

As mentioned, Barth read Cohen’s book of this title carefully. It develops what Cohen calls the “particularity” or “special feature” (*Eigenart*) of religion. As in Kant, as Cohen says, religion must not impair the “autonomy” (*Selbständigkeit*) of the principal philosophical questions regarding pure knowledge, pure will and a pure feeling. Cohen’s “*Eigenart*” makes of religion a “secondary order” (*Nebenordnung*), a *parergon* or accessory to philosophy. This “secondary order,” he states in *The Concept of Religion*, “must function to *attach [angliedern]* the peculiarity to the autonomous elements, attaching it *to all three elements*. None must be excluded if the particular feature of religion is to be brought to full clarity and unambiguity.”⁴⁶ But Cohen goes further than Kant. He sees religion not only as something not-impossible but as a positive confession. All spheres of philosophical purity are run through a second time with the faith in God. The special mode of reason with which that occurs is that of a “correlation between man and God.”⁴⁷ That will never be a “possession” of pure reason, too, but rather, as Kant had said, an “expansion” of Reason. But this expansion

41 Assel, *Geheimnis und Sakrament*, 147f.

42 Kant, *Rlg. B*, 261, AA VI, 171; Barth, *PT*, 267/300.

43 Kant, *Rlg. B*, 297, AA VI, 191).

44 Kant, *Rlg. B*, 63, Anm., AA VI, 52. See Hans Martin Dober, *Reflektierender Glaube. Die Vernunft der Religion in klassischen Positionen* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2011), 33–48, here 35; on Kant and Cohen see several articles in Dober and Matthias Morgenstern, eds., *Religion aus den Quellen der Vernunft. Hermann Cohen und das evangelische Christentum* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), esp. Jörg Dierken (131–146), Assel (162–175), Dober (207–222).

45 Barth, *PT*, 268/301. See Oakes, *Karl Barth on Theology and Philosophy*, 140.

46 Cohen, *BR*, 110f.

47 Cohen, *BR*, 110. Not to be mixed up with Paul Tillich’s “correlation” between utterances of faith and human existential situations, see Michael Moxter, “Barth und Tillich,” in *Barth Handbuch*, 106–111, here: 110.

shows a positive revelation, a continuous "giving [of the Torah]," as Cohen translates the Hebrew *matan tora*.⁴⁸

For my examination here of Barth, it is important that this "secondary order" is considered precisely where Cohen speaks about the fourth great topic of philosophy: "psychology as an encyclopedia of philosophy." As mentioned, he did not write the book that would deal with this. But in the systematic-philosophical books available to us, he alludes to something, most detailed in exposition in *The Concept of Religion*. Chapter Five is titled: "The Relation of Religion to Psychology."⁴⁹ And it is specifically this relation that Cohen thinks would be instructive, because: "It is precisely the problem of religion in total consciousness that might at least make vividly clear, without a precise exposition, the distinction and synopsis of the events in consciousness, as psychology must demand."⁵⁰ What Kant no longer succeeded in developing, indeed what in Barth's view he was unable to achieve, namely a description of his own "total survey," Cohen seeks to attain in the psychology of a "total consciousness" that includes and encompasses religion. Barth was thus able to feel fully confirmed in his intention to venture a Kantian 'total survey.'

For this reason, it is very significant that in Winter Semester 1908/09 he attended Cohen's lectures on an encyclopedic psychology. In Karl Barth's student's record of courses attended at Marburg University, it is the only course in philosophy; it bears Cohen's own confirmation of Barth's registration and completion, along with a notation about the necessary sum paid for the course.⁵¹

Unfortunately, to date we have no knowledge of any extant lecture notes by Barth or any other students who attended the lectures. That is striking in Barth's case. The impressive series of his other lecture notes housed in Karl Barth's home in Basle, in part very meticulous in their execution, even suggests that in the case of Cohen, he intentionally did not take copious notes.⁵² However, we can proceed from the assumption that Cohen's personality also had a powerful impact on Barth, as it did on every other person who reported their impressions of Cohen. Barth himself wrote: "The fact that once there was an almost priest-like serious philosophy [...], in Marburg that was made impressively clear to us

48 Cohen, "Einheit und Einzigkeit Gottes III: Offenbarung [1918]," in *Werke*, 17, 640.

49 Cohen, *BR*, 108–140.

50 Cohen, *BR*, 108.

51 Cf. Barth's "Anmeldungs-Buch" Marburg, Karl Barth Archive, Basel. See picture.

52 The archivist Dr. Zocher does not think there is any serious reason to assume the loss of a previous extant set of lecture notes.

8		Winter		Semester 1908/09		9	
Vorlesungen. NB. Der Titel ist vollständig und so einzutragen, wie ihn der Lehrer angezeigt hat!	Lehrer	Betrag		Beschneidung des Lehrers über die geschlossene Anmeldung	Cas des Lehrers über die geschlossene Anmeldung	Beschneidung des Lehrers über die geschlossene Anmeldung	Besondere Bemerkungen
		Boonor	Praktikant- Geld				
Spezialstud. Arbeitg. des Prof. Dr. Seminar	Prof. Dr. Kerzmann	gebühren			1/3	1/3	
Arbeitsstud. d. Med. Seminar	Prof. Dr. Zürcher				1/3	1/3	
Analyse des Khanawangel.	Prof. Dr. Kerzmann				1/3	1/3	
Schülermacher u. Arbeitg.	Dr. Stephan				1/3	1/3	
Arbeitsstudium u. Qualitätskunde zu demselben Thema	Dr. Stephan				1/3	1/3	
Psychologie als Grundfach der Pädagogik	Prof. Dr. Cohen				1/3	1/3	
					1/3	1/3	

Fig. 1: Barth's "Anmeldungs-Buch" (by courtesy of the Karl Barth Archives, Basel).

[...] in the person of Cohen and Natorp."⁵³ Given Cohen's power of rhetorical expression, often commented on, it was not necessary to take notes in order to take away a lasting impression.

Here too I will limit myself to but a few points. Initially a methodical detail: in the "new psychology," Cohen writes already in his *Logic of Pure Knowledge* (in an addition to the 2nd ed. 1914), "unity would replace *purity*."⁵⁴ Reference is to the "unity of the consciousness of culture as a foundation."⁵⁵ However, as Cohen himself noted, that entailed a certain "danger."⁵⁶ Because the three previous parts of the philosophical system bore in their title the term "purity" and not "unity" as a methodological guiding concept: pure knowledge, pure will, pure feeling. The transition to "unity" thus appears as a rupture. Cohen does note that the new unity is also a key methodological "guiding concept," and thus "a major sense of purity in unity would be preserved."⁵⁷ But it is precisely the guiding principle that changes. Purity, previously the encompassing whole, is now only a part. Psychology encompasses more than what the philosopher of logical, ethical or aesthetic purity presents and describes. It endeavors to find the "systematic-genetic development of all manifestations of consciousness."⁵⁸ And this "all" has to be taken seriously, because Cohen means actually all phenomena of consciousness "in the light and the dark, in maturity and in the bud, in the complexion and in the elements."⁵⁹

This unavoidably means chaos, and Cohen realizes that. But he writes: "If however the goal for this total chaos is development from the focal point of the system, then unity must be the goal."⁶⁰ This idea of the goal becomes predominant. The previous parts of the system had their point of departure in already ordered facts (science and art). By contrast, a chaos shows no "given primal ground of consciousness" whatsoever. "Fiction supplants the desired fact."⁶¹ But "fiction" here means: 'target design' of a "genetic development."⁶²

53 Karl Barth, "Die dogmatische Prinzipienlehre bei Wilhelm Herrmann [1925]," in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1922–1925* (Zürich: Theol. Verlag, 1990), 545–603, here 585; see Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barths Lebenslauf. Nach seinen Briefen und autobiografischen Texten* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2005), 56.

54 Cohen, *LrE B*, 611.

55 Cohen, *LrE B*, 610.

56 Cohen, *LrE B*, 611.

57 Cohen, *LrE B*, 611.

58 Cohen, *LrE B*, 611.

59 Cohen, *LrE B*, 611.

60 Cohen, *LrE B*, 611.

61 Cohen, *LrE B*, 611.

62 Cohen, *LrE B*, 612.

Cohen's fourth systematic part was thus to be a set of instructions leading to a goal, as he says, a "hodgepodge [i. e. a path-leading] encyclopedia."⁶³ That is what he calls his psychology in his *Aesthetics of Pure Feeling* (1912). He drafted this work around 1909, and thus precisely at the time when Karl Barth was attending his lectures. Barth experienced directly what we can only surmise from hints: before his eyes a total survey in vital discourse grounded on a soil marked by Kantian elements. Without denying the limitations and without any mixing of objective content, Cohen included in a positive manner the religious "particularity" within the parts of the philosophical system. Psychology is generally such an attachment or inclusion of particularity despite methodological dangers, a moving on and beyond into an open system of human communal consciousness based on Reason.

Something additional is part of that: Cohen's concern for the "naive consciousness of the human being."⁶⁴ To be sure, naïveté is for him not a value per se. The goal is to educate that inchoate consciousness, moving toward a philosophical consciousness. But fully valid remains the fact "that the unscholarly, uneducated individual, the person in a sense devoid of any culture, nonetheless has longing for a God. Religion consists in the desire for God. It consists in the yearning for a being outside of man, but for man."⁶⁵ Nonetheless, caution is advised: "Outside of man, but for man" does not mean that God appears somewhere 'in the image of Man' or might be thought of as such. The "correlation between man and God" is the opposite of anthropomorphism and myth. "Religion only emerges with the one and only God, with God without a likeness and image."⁶⁶ And as a result of this "uniqueness of God [...], the popular consciousness" – and reading Cohen, we must add: the *Jewish* popular consciousness – was unambiguously clear about "the incomparability of the content and treasure of religion over against all allurements of the culture."⁶⁷ To be sure, "popular consciousness" has no place in a logic of purity. Yet by contrast, dealing with the "giving" of the Torah, that consciousness has a participating voice in its way, even in the laying of the foundations. That can be shown in multifaceted ways looking at Cohen's conceptions of creation, holiness, freedom of the will for good or evil, liturgy, the community, reconciliation, Messianism, the resurrection and religious virtues. This leads to my second example concerning the analogy between Barth and Cohen: the church.

⁶³ Cohen, *ÄrG* II, 432.

⁶⁴ Cohen, *BR*, 137.

⁶⁵ Cohen, *BR*, 138.

⁶⁶ Cohen, *BR*, 138.

⁶⁷ Cohen, *BR*, 138.

5 Church and Jewish Community

According to Kant the church is an "ethical common entity," a "people of God under ethical laws."⁶⁸ To "create" such a people can "only be expected by God himself."⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the human being remains morally responsible. In ecclesiastical matters, man must "act in such a manner as if everything depends on himself, and only under this condition he may hope that higher wisdom will grant completion and success to his well-meaning efforts."⁷⁰ For that reason, Kant writes, "God himself is in the last instance the author of the *constitution* as founder, whereas human beings are nonetheless as members and free citizens of this realm in all instances the authors of its *organization*."⁷¹

What exactly does 'as if everything depends on man himself' mean? The church – Barth is detailed here in his discussion – is also for Kant the place of common prayer, baptism, communion. Seen from the perspective of the problem of radical evil, all these are "means of grace" for a real hope for genuine change and turnaround. But Kant suffices with designating their success as a "mystery of satisfaction."⁷² He avoids any confession of having experienced their effect. He sticks to stipulating that the "required goodness," i.e. turning back from evil, for a person on the soil of Reason "must stem from a human being himself [...]. Therefore, no one can stand in for another by virtue of the superabundance of his own good conduct and his merit; and if we must *assume* any such thing, this can be only for moral purposes, since for ratiocination it is an unfathomable mystery."⁷³

In Cohen, the place of the church is taken by the Jewish Community. It is the place where despite the free will to do bad (Hebrew: *shegaga*) with its unrecognizable reasons, justified hope for a turnaround nonetheless sprouts. Cohen, likewise only late in life, formulates the problem of a free decision contra pure practical reason: "How [in the face of the historical experience of humankind] can the assumption of a mediating will that can choose bad and good come about? How can free will mean the free will to commit sin?"⁷⁴ And he refers to the same biblical verse, Genesis 8:21, which Kant (indirectly) also alluded to:

68 Kant, *Rlg.* B, 137, AA VI, 98.

69 Kant, *Rlg.* B, 141, AA VI, 100.

70 Kant, *Rlg.* B, 141, AA VI, 101.

71 Kant, *Rlg.* B, 227, AA VI, 152; English translation, 152.

72 Kant, *Rlg.* B, 216, AA VI, 143; English translation, 144.

73 Kant, *Rlg.* B, 216 f., AA VI, 143. See Assel, *Geheimnis und Sakrament*, esp. 167–192.

74 Cohen, *RV B*, 212; cf. *RoR*, 181.

“The *yezer* of man’s heart is evil from his youth.”⁷⁵ He intentionally uses the Hebrew word *yezer* in order to avoid the common translation of “instinct, drive [of the heart].” He wants (like Kant) to repel any biologicistic interpretation. In support he mentions the second verse, from Genesis 6:5, *kol yezer machshavot libo rak ra’ kol ha-yom*; “every formation” (here the translation of *yezer*) “of the thoughts of his heart was only evil the whole day.” And he interprets this “formation of the heart” together with the medieval commentator Abraham Ibn Esra (12th cent.) as a “product, which is imitated after it.”⁷⁶ An ‘imitating production’ is only superficially an inborn drive. In truth the *yezer* of the evil is an errant free will.

All that fits quite well with Kant – and with Karl Barth’s discussion. But from here on the paths separate, those of Kant and Cohen but those of Barth and Cohen as well. Cohen formulates his doctrine regarding the Community as a practical liturgy of the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. The few paragraphs where he sketches this in his book *The Concept of Religion* (p. 64), even without a precise exposition, were noticeably marked in Barth’s personal copy, and vertically in the margin he wrote the word “synagogue!”

The reason is clear. According to Cohen, the Jewish religious service has its core in a “standing before God.” A person’s reconciliation with being endangered by one’s own freedom occurs in a likewise free, public confession of sins, uttered in fixed liturgical formulae. The individual ‘relinquishes himself,’ merging totally into the we-form of the Community: in the confession of the “sin we have sinned” (*‘al chet’ she-chata’nu*). His longing for reconciliation is completely absorbed within the linguistic figure of the Community. But in Cohen’s eyes, the linguistic form of longing is lyrical, and the longing, when uttered lyrically, experiences its own satisfaction, its being reconciled. Thus the Community praying in Hebrew realizes simultaneously a confession of sins committed and reconciliation. Only the human being speaks here, everywhere. God speaks nowhere. “God,” as stated in *The Concept of Religion*, “who is not participating in this work,” – printed with emphasis! – “is conceived as a symbol, an emblem that brings about liberation from sin.”⁷⁷ God never intervenes in this economy. Cohen bears witness to the faith of reason that brings forth a power that can drive and shape reconciliation. That is a ‘reason out of the sources of Judaism’: “The mediator [more precisely: the messenger] between God and Man is reason” (*ha-mal’ach ben ’adam u-ben ’elohav hu’ sichlo*), thus Cohen quotes Ibn Esra once

⁷⁵ Cohen, *RV*, B 212; *RoR* 181; see Kant, *Rlg.* B, 7, 13; AA VI, 22, 25.

⁷⁶ Cohen, *RV* B, 212; *RoR*, 181. Ibn Esra reads the word *yezer* as *toldah*, ‘result,’ ‘consequence’: *hi’ ha-toldah ha-nozrah lo* (Commentary on Gen 8:21).

⁷⁷ Cohen, *BR*, 64.

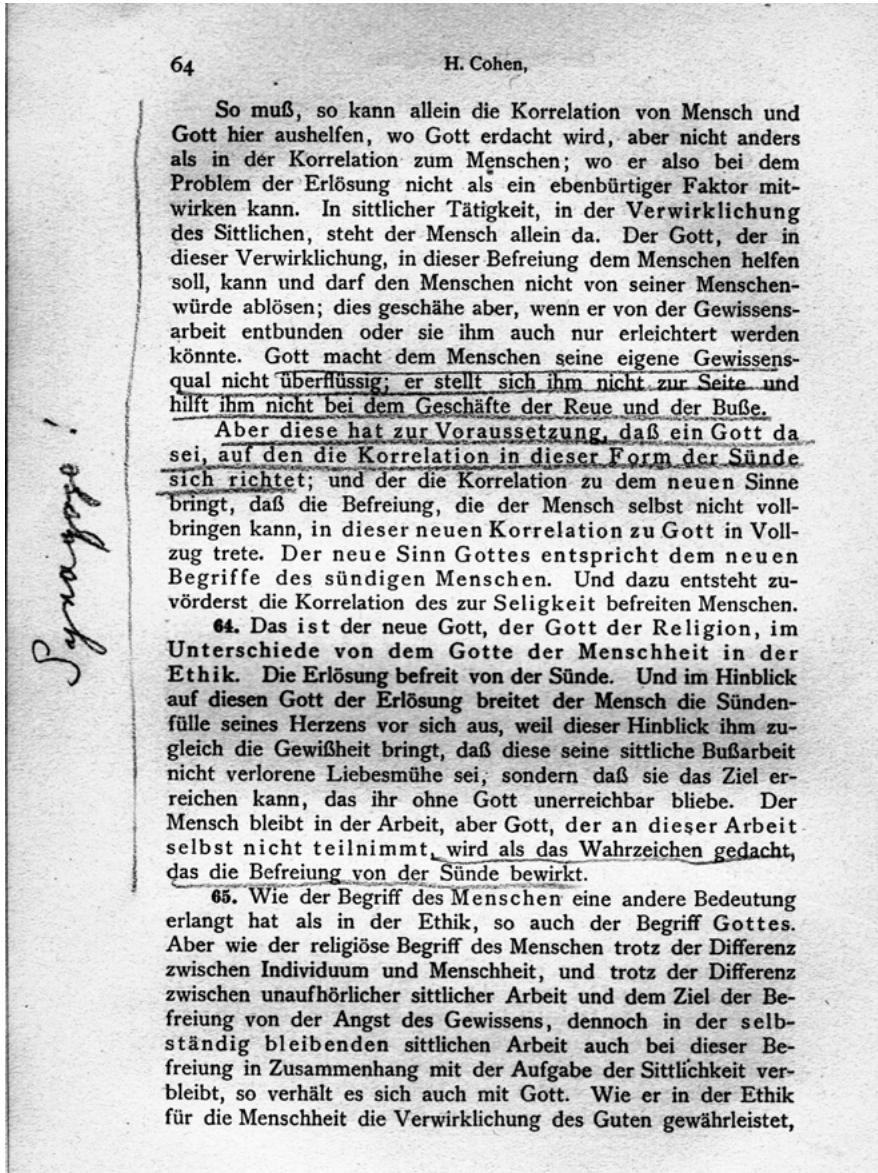


Fig. 2: From Karl Barth's copy of Cohen's "Begriff der Religion..." (by courtesy of the Karl Barth Archives, Basel).

again.⁷⁸ To make a historical event or a person the grounding for trust in God is excluded. That is why Barth wrote in the margin “synagogue!”⁷⁹

Faith in Jesus Christ marks the barrier between Karl Barth and his Jewish teacher. But Barth also remains clearly separated from Kant. As great as his veneration was for the man in whom “the 18th century saw, understood, and affirmed itself in its own limitations,” in content, Kant could never be more than a provocation, the highly emphatic call to a fundamentally different path of Christian self-reflection. Methodologically, however, he remained the model for a critical scientific attitude, one that knew its limitations but also was able to play with them; thus, the model for what Barth – in his very different pathway to the sources – in his *Romans II* (1922) had called a “critical theology.”⁸⁰

translated from the German by William Templer

78 See Ibn Esra’s introduction to the commentary on Genesis (reprinted in trad. Jewish Bible editions, *mikra’oth gedoloth*); quoted in Cohen, “Liebe und Gerechtigkeit in den Begriffen Gott und Mensch [1900],” in *Jüdische Schriften* (Berlin: Schwetschke, 1924), vol. III, 65; “Deutschtum und Judentum [1915/16],” in *Werke* 16, 480; see also: Cohen, *Reflexionen und Notizen, Werke*, Suppl. 1, 59; Myriam Bienenstock, “‘Von Angesicht zu Angesicht’, d.h. ‘ohne einen Mittler’,” in Dober/Morgenstern, *Religion aus den Quellen der Vernunft*, esp. 57–62.

79 Cohen’s negation of Divine intervention was also met with contradiction by several Jewish thinkers, e.g., Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber and Leo Strauß.

80 Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief* (2^{1922/1984}), “Preface to the 2nd ed.,” XIII. Along similar lines, see Michael Beintker, “Grenzbewusstsein,” esp. 128–132; Bent Flemming Nielsen, “Theologie als kritische Wissenschaft,” in: *Barth Handbuch*, 410–416.

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