

Freeing the Disciplines: Barth and Rancière on Aesthetics

Michael Jimenez

Preview

Various philosophers and historians argue about historical periodization. The idea of describing human history in periods has its roots in the modern age. Modernity itself is one such periodization that we continue to dispute. Supposedly we are now living in a postmodern age or a post-postmodern age, and probably, in a not so distant future, we will be living in some other kind of post-“something” once again. What seems to be clear is that modernity and its concepts are still with us. The way we study human phenomena even today comes principally from the work of the Eighteenth Century. The story goes that the modern period is the time when human beings finally began to break the metaphorical oppressive chains of tradition and its basis in religious superstition; instead of a reliance on theology with its basis in revelation, the modern human being looks towards other disciplines like philosophy, science and political philosophy for guidance. If theology wants a place among the disciplines it must deal with matters of morality and excuse itself of attempting to answer questions that other academic disciplines are better trained to do.

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One of the most important thinkers of the Twentieth Century to challenge this narrative was the Swiss theologian Karl Barth. He gave one of the most memorable critiques of modern theology without simply falling backwards into premodern thought. In fact, one could say he struggled to remain in the tension of being both orthodox and modern.¹ There was a certain wonder that he brought back to the study of theology and as we shall see to the topics of art, history, and other disciplines. We should not put Barth in a box as a theologian who is only absorbed with matters of the Church; Barth is a “public intellectual.”² As a public intellectual he was often a dissenting voice when it came to both matters of the sacred and the secular.³ He was an important

¹ See Bruce L. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2008) for this discussion.

² See Rudy Koshar, “Where is Karl Barth in Modern European History?” *Modern Intellectual History* 5 (2008): 334 and 352, for this apt description.

³ See the work of Samuel Moyn, *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas between Revelation and Ethics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005). Moyn reveals that Barth’s theology was one of the sources for Levinas’ articulation of the Other. For a negative account of Barth’s political theology,

contemporary of Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt, two thinkers who continue to provoke controversy today on the sacred and secular split, yet unlike them, Barth is often relegated to the ecclesial ghetto. He came on the public scene with his declaration of the absolute difference between the divine and the human in his *Römerbrief*. However, to simply boil Barth's ideas down to the transcendent, wholly Other is to miss out on some interesting ideas about religious practices. By looking at some ignored ideas of his thought especially from the material from his historical lectures found in *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* we can learn of ways to confront the splits that formed the modern era. In his historical lectures, Barth is less a dogmatist than one would find in the *Church Dogmatics*.

This paper will compare and contrast Barth's understanding of modernity and its use of external and internal form with the contemporary French philosopher Jacques Rancière. Why Rancière? Because as a former student of the philosopher Louis Althusser, he broke away from his instructor's idea of the teacher's role in imparting knowledge onto those who do not know. Instead, through the study of archival information in the Nineteenth Century, Rancière developed a theory of equality that challenged any type of knowledge that is classified into strict norms. Rancière relates well with elements of Barth's thought because they both attempt to reform thought forms while avoiding the pitfalls of religious conservatism or radical deconstructionist philosophy. One could classify Rancière as part of a new breed of French thought that challenges much of what is considered popular postmodern philosophy. As much as Barth is a defender of the separation of theology as a discipline from philosophical presuppositions, we will see there are elements in Barth's theology that make it typical of interdisciplinary work we find in Rancière.

A Quick Aside on the Postmodern Barth

One reason for turning to the thought of Rancière is that there has been a trend set in Barthian secondary works to place Barth in dialogue with postmodern theorists like Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas—a move contested by some Barthians.⁴ Throughout the late Twentieth Century and early Twenty-First Century, around the time of the so-called return to the religious in the academy, a number of commentators placed Barth's work in conversation with postmodern themes like otherness, difference, and language games.

see Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007).

⁴ For example see most famously Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and idem, "Barth, Modernity and Postmodernity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 274-95. Major English speaking Barth interpreters have made it a mission to guard against any easy correlation between Barth and French postmodern thought. For example, see McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, 109-65.

Barth interpreters protested that a postmodern Barth is a wholly different Barth. Such protests should be considered against the words of Derrida himself. Derrida actually sees a connection between his thought and Barth's theology. Theologian Ted Jennings, in his book *Reading Derrida / Thinking Paul: On Justice*, notes that Derrida responds to a question about the American religious tradition and its relation to deconstruction by mentioning Barth's name as a person to look at in order to examine the deconstruction of this tradition.⁵ I quote Derrida at length to illustrate the context:

To talk about it seriously we would have to analyze a whole history of exegesis, of modern hermeneutics in German and European protestant thought, centering around Heidegger, Karl Barth, etc. But in general, to summarize very succinctly, the point would seem to be to liberate theology from what has been grafted on to it, to free it from its metaphysico-philosophical super ego, so as to uncover an authenticity of the "Gospel," of the evangelical message. And thus, from the perspective of faith, deconstruction can at least be a very useful technique when Aristotelianism or Thomism are to be criticized or, even from an institutional perspective, when what needs to be criticized is a whole theological institution which supposedly has covered over, dissimulated an authentic Christian message. And [the point would also seem to be] a real possibility for faith both at the margins and very close to Scripture, a faith lived in a venturesome, dangerous, free way. I know theologians who are doing this, and who applaud deconstruction, who need deconstruction, not against their faith but in service of their faith, against a certain theology, even against a certain academic, theological institution. There are conflicts within the sphere of American theology.⁶

The usefulness of deconstruction for theologians, according to Derrida, is in its critique of all forms of thought that take away from the message of the Gospel or at least in creating a space for an imaginative articulation of it. Derrida asserts that deconstruction is "not the mixture but the tension between memory, fidelity, the preservation of something that has been given to us, and, at the same time, heterogeneity, something absolutely new, and a break."⁷ Its goal is to disrupt unity and order and replace it with an emphasis on difference. This is an ethical move because, according to Derrida, any form of totality or order

⁵ See Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., *Reading Derrida / Thinking Paul: On Justice* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2006), 158. Jennings links Derrida's quote with the importance of Paul, the theme of his book that compares Derrida with Paul and justice, as a unifying factor for Barth, Heidegger, and Heidegger's disciple Rudolf Bultmann.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Deconstruction in America: An interview with Jacques Derrida," conducted by James Creech, Peggy Kamuf, and Jane Todd, *Critical Exchange* 17 (1985): 12.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, ed. John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 6. This book was a helpful introduction to Derrida's thought especially because it was in Derrida's own words (at a roundtable) and contains a commentary by one of Derrida's best interpreters.

ultimately leads to the exclusion of the other. Therefore, Kurt Anders Richardson sees an important link between Barth's and Derrida's overall project: "What is significant about a connection between Barth and deconstruction is the work that is done to free texts not from single meanings as much as from certain monolithic claims—sometimes even against the will of their authors or great interpreters."⁸ Here he gives a balanced opinion on the validity of a postmodern Barth when he suggests that "certainly Barth's early rejection of what was quintessentially modern, liberal theology, cannot help but be interpreted as postmodern in some basic sense."⁹

This paper is a continuation of the somewhat forgotten trend of a postmodern Barth but in a way that pays attention to contemporary, post-postmodern French theorists in general.¹⁰ In short, unlike the earlier postmodern Barth, I want to move the discussion from Derrida and deconstruction and more toward the work of French theorists like Gilles Deleuze, Rancière and François Laruelle. Some of the most exciting ideas coming out of the philosophy of religion are centered on the thought of these French thinkers and their attention to immanence and materialism.

What I am not proposing is some type of Barthian synthesis where I show Barth's ideas pioneering the methods and conclusions of the contemporary secular thinker and thus Christianizing them. I think even Barth would be against that sort of thing. In fact, I believe we are at a moment in history where Barth's theology can be chastened by more creative thinkers like Deleuze and Rancière especially as we think about more material practices. Continental philosophy in this post-Deleuzian time has moved past the discussions of the postmodern Other and language games and deals more with ideas and concepts that are not simply given in the natural world. Furthermore, living in both post-Holocaust and postcolonial times, the givenness of the Christian God is also something we must not take for granted. My goal is to position Barth in this contemporary discussion.

I do think Barth's work is important to continue to read and wrestle with because even though he is first and foremost a theologian his work displays a

⁸ Kurt Anders Richardson, *Reading Karl Barth: New Directions for North American Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2004), 32-3.

⁹ Richardson, *Reading Karl Barth*, 54.

¹⁰ One Barth interpreter following this trend is Gerrit Neven. His French philosopher of choice is Alain Badiou. See Gerrit Neven, "Doing Theology Without God? About the Reality of Faith in the 21st Century" *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 6, n. 3 (2005): 30-42. For his recent comparison of Barth and Badiou, see idem, "Theology After Karl Barth: An Outset From the Thought of Alain Badiou," in *Dogmatics After Barth: Facing Challenges in Church, Society and the Academy*, ed. Günter Thomas, Rinse H. Reeling Brouwer and Bruce McCormack (Leipzig: CreateSpace, 2012), 167-80. Also see Gerrit Neven, "The Time That Remains: Hans-Georg Geyer in the Intellectual Debate about a Central Question in the Twentieth Century," in *Theology as Conversation: The Significance of Dialogue in Historical and Contemporary Theology*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack and Kimlyn J. Bender (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2009), 79. Neven's goal in this essay is to show how Hans-Georg Geyer is faithful to a Barthian paradigm, and how he also matches up with the anti-humanistic thought of Badiou. Thus, in an indirect way, Neven relates Barth through Geyer with Badiou's philosophy.

wonderful array of examples from across the academic disciplines. He is arguably the most important twentieth-century theologian and has left his mark on intellectual history. If he merely parroted the Christian tradition, Barth would be better left unread today like his fellow theologian Emil Brunner. Barth's theology is a fruitful example of interdisciplinary work that is somewhat untapped because of the general perception that Barth is a conservative dogmatist.

I am well aware that at the present even the term "postmodern" is in question. But until a new definition for late twentieth-century, mostly-French, post-structuralist thought is created I will continue to use it in this paper.

After first examining Barth's commitment to hermeneutical openness, I will look at both Barth's and Rancière's analysis of the aesthetic turn at the end of the Eighteenth Century.

Barth on Heretical Openness

Before we jump into the matter of Barth's view of eighteenth-century form and aesthetics, it is important that we understand Barth's hermeneutics with regards to his historical lectures. Barth informs the reader that the past is very different from the present and even though we might think we have a good grasp of intentions of the past, we must still be cautious not to read what we want into a totally different context. He insists that there is a "peculiarity and otherness" to the past that must be respected.¹¹ Barth notes the importance of periodization and the historian's judgment in making a case for it.¹² He is showing a commitment to both a historical discontinuity and a freedom to interpret that still attempts to do justice to the original sources. Barth's idea of interpretive freedom is seen in the radical openness Barth expresses to the outsiders of Christian theology. Barth is not usually known for being charitable to theologies that go against his own Christian theology of revelation, yet in his historical lectures he expresses an attitude of openness towards the figures of the past.¹³

Taking a quick look at some of his comments in the *Church Dogmatics*, Barthian openness is comprehended in the freedom that the event of revelation penetrates in the very secularity of this world and not only some holy ecclesial sphere.¹⁴ One interpreter who appreciates this facet of Barth's reasoning is Jeffrey Stout. In his book *Democracy and Tradition* Stout notices that Barth was responding to the currents of his day with an articulation of the Gospel that worked toward fostering a democratic public space. Stout finds inspiration from one of Barth's most famous comments from the *Church Dogmatics*:

¹¹ Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background and History* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001), 15.

¹² *Ibid.*, 12.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

¹⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, trans. and ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956-75), 116 (hereafter cited as CD).

God may speak to us through Russian Communism, a flute concerto, a blossoming shrub, or a dead dog. We shall do well to listen to Him if he really does so. . . . God may speak to us through a pagan or an atheist, and thus give us to understand that the boundary between the Church and the secular world can still take at any time a different course from that which we think we discern.¹⁵

In other words, Barth is saying that the idea of a pure secularism is as much a fable as the myth of a pure, uncontaminated sacred Church. The boundary line between the secular and the sacred is not a solid line but a soft, bracketed, fuzzy line. One must be open to both the secular and sacred realms because revelations about God or us may come from both. Therefore, Stout declares, “Barth was not content with mere refusal of the secular. He committed himself to a definite program of progressive politics consistent with orthodox Christian doctrine.”¹⁶ Therefore, Barth remained faithful to his famous words in his *Römerbrief* about reading the Bible along with the newspapers.¹⁷

Moving away from Stout’s use of Barth, we will notice the interaction between Barth’s understanding of the mystery of revelation and the different concepts that it interacts with. First, consider that Barth points out that God may speak through a blossoming shrub. Here he follows a particular trend of theology to point to the creative tendencies within nature to show evidence of God’s handiwork. However, he quickly juxtaposes a dead dog, which is not usually a prime example for the Christian apologist to display God’s glory. Still, within the body of the dead dog there are still the forces of life in the degenerating elements of decay as it returns to dust. Empirically this decomposing body is very ugly yet creative organic forces are at work. Again, the flute concerto may be evidence of an early nod to Mozart and the beauty that human beings are capable of creating, yet, what is even more remarkable is that in the early 1930s Barth is saying that God may speak via the ideology of Russian communism. The take away of all these, somewhat weird, examples is that they feature both material and immaterial examples of the way God reveals God’s self.

Following the famous quote of where God’s revelation may be found is the fact that Barth reveals that the atheist and the pagan are voices that the Christian tradition must pay notice to because God’s revelation may be flowing from them. More important than the Barthian idea of God’s Otherness is the proposition that God has the freedom to reveal God’s self in any fashion God desires. Barth’s stress on God’s freedom was his way to guard against the Christian apologist’s utilization of natural theology to make transparent God’s work in reality. Even though Barth would probably disagree with my terminology here, I claim that Barth’s view is best described as continually esoteric.

¹⁵ Ibid, 55.

¹⁶ Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 108.

¹⁷ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (New York: Oxford Press, 1968), 425.

Probably the most famous articulation of Barthian openness to the secular is found in *Church Dogmatics* IV/3. Here is found Barth's discussion of Christ as the Light of the lights. This idea is then unpacked in the way God's revelation is not limited to churches and Scripture but that there are also secular parables of the kingdom (or the lesser lights) outside ecclesial walls.¹⁸ It is here that he asserts that "true words" may be found in the "darkest places."¹⁹ This is an element of the Barthian corpus that interpreters have a field day with. In short, because Barth does not give any concrete, material examples of secular parables the discussion of this material tends to be highly speculative. However, I want to now turn back to Barth's historical lectures because it is there that an underappreciated discussion of Barth's view of the historical can be examined.

At the start of his historical lectures Barth makes his position of an open reading clear when he points out that "history is made up of living [people] whose work is handed over defenseless to our understanding and appreciation upon their death."²⁰ In other words, the texts of the past are at the reader's mercy. The textual voices of the dead are a specter that should be listened to on their own merit. Because the historical actors have no chance to defend themselves in relation to their readers, Barth challenges those in the present to handle them with care. This is sound advice considering Barth and his own readers would eventually end up in the same defenseless position once they passed from the scene. Another phenomenon, just as dangerous, is when an author passes from the scene and her immediate followers create an aura of holiness around anything she may have written, so that any detractors are seen as ignorant or just plain mean. A hagiographical tradition can develop quickly around a famous thinker, even those that spent a lifetime positing the freedom of creative thought. In short, Barth wants to caution against using history for one's own agenda by declaring, instead, his message of openness:

To hear someone else always means to suspend one's own concern, to be open to the concern of the other. Care will always be taken that this openness is not too wide. But the demand directed toward us, that we must know and not evade, here or elsewhere, by qualifying it and weakening it, is for openness.²¹

This is an important message because the theologies of the present are often more concerned about making points or defending their own positions than really being open to a different interpretation. There is a tension for the reader of a past work in trying to be faithful to the voice of the author as an Other but also to gauge the condition of reading this work in the present in the first place.

Barth radically declares that even those considered heretical by the Christian tradition overall should be read with the same charity. Again, we might

¹⁸ Barth, CD IV/3, 97.

¹⁹ Ibid, 119.

²⁰ Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 8.

²¹ Ibid, 10.

expect Barth to be the type of theologian who rails against those that differ from his theological perspective. However, he instead insists that responsible interpretation includes listening to the voices of those in the past deemed off limits. He writes:

Our responsibility is not only to God, to ourselves, to the [people] of today, to the living theologians, but to them. There is no past in the Church, so there is no past in theology. “In [God] they all live.” Only the heretic, indeed only the arch-heretic, the one who is totally lost even for God’s invisible Church, could really belong to the past and have nothing more to say to us. And we are in no position to identify such arch-heresy. Not even among the avowed *pagans*, much less among the *Jews* or suspect, even *very suspect Christians*. All heretics are relatively heretical, so even those who have been branded heretics at one time or another and condemned for their avowed folly and wickedness must be allowed their say in theology.²²

Let us pause to consider Barth’s words. The Christian tradition is notorious for such events as the Inquisition or the Witch Trials where heretics were violently put to death. These torturous acts were often put on public display in order to impress on the audience that heresy is not tolerated. In fact, the religious wars between European Protestants and Catholics are one of the main reasons that toleration was sought after publicly during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment era. Therefore, Barth’s attempt to relativize the identity of the heretic is a major move that challenges the Christian tradition. For someone so well known for his Christocentric theology, it is surprising to see this move of openness around the same time he was formulating the idea of *analogia fidei*. It is surprising because Barth’s analogy of faith is seen as a move toward a dogmatic position regarding the Christian faith, yet this articulation along with his openness toward the heretic may be seen as Barth’s indifference toward an apologetic or reactionary defense of the Christian tradition.

The timing of Barth’s words in the early 1930s could not be more important. Here Barth includes openness to the Jewish tradition at the same time the Nazis were rising to power. Moreover, the inclusion of suspect Christians and pagans to the list illustrate that Barth is serious in advising his mostly Christian readers to pay attention to the voice of the outsider. He does raise the point that someone considered an arch-heretic may indeed be forgotten in the past, which would imply that this person is left out of the unifying element of God’s sovereignty over history, yet Barth never names such a figure. This is why he adds that one “cannot anticipate which of our fellow-workers from the past are welcome in our own work and which are not.”²³ As the biblical analogy goes, it is not up to the reader to separate the sheep and the goats. On the other hand,

²² Ibid, 3. The highlights in this passage are mine.

²³ Ibid.

before we praise Barth too much, Alberto Toscano, in his book *Fanaticism*, presents a stark example of Barth's ridiculous view of Islam; it seems that Barthian openness does not extend to Muslims.²⁴

The further context of Barth's statement is that he is writing about the Enlightenment era. This first chapter opens up his discussion of the Eighteenth Century and then moves forward to discussions about such figures as Lessing, Kant, Hegel, Feuerbach, and Strauss, to name a few. For much of the modern theological tradition, the modern turn is seen as the time when theology lost its public prominence. Theological movements today like Radical Orthodoxy make it their mission to combat modern thought head-on. Barth himself is famous since his *Römerbrief* for being extremely critical of modern theology. However, Barth, unlike Radical Orthodoxy, never tried to exorcise modernity completely. Instead he understood modern theology as an attempt to hear God's voice in its own way. As much as he may have disagreed with the conclusions from modern theologians, Barth still saw them within the Christian tradition. Barth was aware of the danger of positing a position of purity. He writes that he would fail his own standards if he narrated a Church history that showed that things that supposedly went wrong with the past were all of a sudden fixed with himself and his so-called dialectical theology.²⁵

Both Christian theologians and historians of the Eighteenth Century (both secular and religious) tend to read their own agendas into the past. For example, Radical Orthodoxy will blame a change in the view of ontology from Scotus/Ockham in the late medieval period for leading to the secularism of modern thought. Barth, rather pointedly, lays out his own judgment on self-serving messiah-historians: "It is all too obvious that the figures of the past are to be explained to us only as positive or negative forerunners of the messiah of the time, however modestly he may be hiding his own appearance, his own knowledge (in this case his own *Dogmatics*) under the ample garb of the 'historian.'"²⁶ Here he asserts the way theologians especially turn toward the past to illustrate how theology went awry or how it is now back on track with a present school of thought. This is a self-serving history that presents a neat genealogy of why things went bad for human beings because of their wrong views of God. Thus he proclaims: "History is not a paint-box at the disposal of anyone who thinks he knows something and has a need to make his knowledge more impressive by an appropriate account of history."²⁷

Perhaps Benjamin Lazier is correct, in that many saw Barth as a gnostic heretic; so, perhaps Barth's openness is a sign of empathy for those in the

²⁴ Alberto Toscano, *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea* (New York: Verso, 2010), 207. See Glenn A. Chestnutt, *Challenging the Stereotype: The Theology of Karl Barth as a Resource for Inter - religious Encounter in a European Context* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010) for an example of a Barthian interpretation trying to correct Barth's own deficiencies.

²⁵ Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 8.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 6.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 8.

tradition of the similar accusation of heresy.²⁸ When Barth burst on the scene with his critique of liberal modern theology the backlash was extreme. This was soon followed by infighting among the so-called crisis theologians Brunner, Bultmann, and Gogarten. Moreover, he was always considered suspicious both among the orthodox of the Reformed and by American evangelicals. Barth, for the most part, swam against the stream his whole life. We miss how controversial at times Barth could appear to some because his theology is generally considered rather orthodox in our day.

Thus when we look at Barth's account of the Eighteenth Century we should determine whether or not he is sufficiently open to hear the voice of the Other. Does he fall into the trap of becoming a messiah-historian? As we have seen with this quick view of Barth's openness, we have seen him posit that God's revelation may be found in a dead dog and also in the voice of the atheist, pagan and heretic. In short, there is a potential multiplicity of places and voices where God may be found, and even though Barth failed to really give adequate examples of these types, he at the very least articulated an idea that has the potential of producing creative theological expressions. We shall see that when Barth turns to the aesthetics of the Eighteenth Century one of the problems he sees with it is that the actors during the Enlightenment era were not sufficiently self-critical with regards to their project. The use of form becomes too controlling for Barth because it tries to rationalize the movements of human creativity and of God's revelation. For Barth, revelation is unforeseeable.

Barth on Eighteenth-Century Form and Aesthetics

The topic of form is important for Barth because it illustrates the political, scientific, and aesthetic understanding of modern humanity. It also outlines the way that modern humanity tried to organize and control the aspects of the natural. In fact, the Eighteenth Century was a time where nature and reason were used to determine what was useful about theology and what was not. Barth calls the Eighteenth Century the time of absolutism and not the Enlightenment era because he sees that both secular and religious forces were working in tandem. Barth's position is that for all the claims of the humanist trends in the Eighteenth Century the Christian religion was the fuel that drove the creative and reactive forces of the era. Barth writes: "In the midst of the great controversies by which the century moved, all along the line it had at least to keep in mind its open or latent controversy with Christianity, which took place under a variety of forms and gave the struggles of the time their real passion."²⁹

Barth's perspective, which was formed in the mid 1920s to the beginning of the 1930s, is backed up by current scholarship on the Eighteenth Century. Current scholarship, in short, notes that the progressive reading of the

²⁸ Benjamin Lazier, *God Interrupted: Heresy and the European Imagination Between the World Wars* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008), 32. Here Lazier is quoting from the work of the Jewish thinker Hans Jonas.

²⁹ Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 70.

secularization narrative is not historical. In fact, the Eighteenth Century showcases a time period where religious concerns were hotly debated. We will now take a quick glance at a couple of the more scholarly works to see the crux of the argument.

One of the most important Enlightenment historians is Jonathan Israel, who has written three large studies approximately over three thousand pages detailing the differences between two major strands of the Enlightenment narrative. He declares that the Enlightenment was “the most important and profound intellectual, social, and cultural transformation of the Western world since the Middle Ages and the most formative in shaping modernity.”³⁰ He argues for a dualistic interpretation based on social practices and ideas.³¹ This dualistic interpretation is based on two close groups arguing over the nature of the whole Enlightenment phenomenon. Israel defines these two groups as moderate and radical Enlightenment. The moderate view sought a “balanced compromise between reason and tradition” and includes thinkers like Locke, Hume and many of the French *philosophes* like Voltaire.³² Israel juxtaposes them with the radical and “largely clandestine movement” with a basis in Spinoza’s one-substance metaphysics that did away with any reliance on theological tradition.³³ The radical Enlightenment included philosophers like Spinoza, Bayle, Diderot, and D’Holbach; in most cases, these thinkers were targeted as troublesome by both secular and religious authorities rather than receiving the backing from eighteenth-century royalty like some of the French *philosophes* of the moderate Enlightenment. Making this distinction, Israel claims that “religious Enlightenment” is part of the moderate, mainstream Enlightenment but it was an extreme case to see “reform-minded” religious thinkers to be part of the radical group.³⁴ It must be noted that in actuality there are three movements in the Eighteenth Century for Israel: moderate, radical, and counter. Because of the compromising nature of the moderate Enlightenment, he asserts that its reforms were a failure and lost to counter and anti-*philosophes* programs, whereas the radical views were pursued with more vigor as time progressed.

Another important book is *The Religious Enlightenment* by David Sorkin, which is a detailed study of religious thinkers. His work differs from Israel because of his attention to religious thinkers, which includes Protestants, Catholics, and Jews of the Eighteenth Century. He claims: “Contrary to the secular narrative, the Enlightenment was not only compatible with religious belief but conducive to it.”³⁵ Sorkin’s work expands the Enlightenment to include theologians and the issues revolving around theology, which would cross

³⁰ Jonathan I. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750-1790* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

³² *Ibid.*, 11.

³³ *Ibid.*, 10-11, and 15.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁵ David Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 3.

confessional and national boundaries.³⁶ In fact, he argues that the norm in the public was the religious Enlightenment and not the radical one; in short, the French Enlightenment is the anomaly. His aim is to present the Enlightenment in its context by focusing on relatively orthodox figures considered part of the Enlightenment in their time and not simply those considered important in future generations; many of these latter figures followed the trail set by thinkers like John Locke who argued for the reasonableness of Christianity especially in the realm of natural religion. Still the main idea to glean from Sorkin's work is the degree of openness he shows for multiple forms of Enlightenment and thus the way he challenges the reading of a unitary secular Enlightenment. For Sorkin, "the Enlightenment origins of modern culture were neither secular nor religious but a complex amalgam."³⁷

Returning to Barth's account, we find that Barth posits a complex amalgam but one that falls under the absolutist umbrella. In other words, he declares that absolutism carried over into the realm of theology like it did with all academic disciplines.³⁸ Barth considers that the classic approach is to regard the Eighteenth Century as "the century of religious Enlightenment," yet he notes the battle between the orthodox and heterodox over Christianity has to be seen in its "wider historical context."³⁹ He thinks that the term absolutism is more comprehensive of the time period because the absolutism of theology had both a rational form and a Pietist form. Here Barth goes against the interpretation of Ernst Troeltsch who saw Pietism as a "retrogressive movement" attempting to return to the spirit of the Reformation; Barth will instead argue that "the origins and culminations of both Pietism and the Enlightenment lie close together."⁴⁰ In addition, and again *contra* Troeltsch, Barth will see the neologists as part of the general trend of the Eighteenth Century.⁴¹ Thus Barth sees the Enlightenment and Pietism as part of the general mood of the Eighteenth Century. For example, to point out the mistake of sweeping generalizations carried in the definition of the Enlightenment, Barth points out that "Count Zinzendorf read and treasured his Pierre Bayle, but this obviously did not in the least hinder him from singing and spreading the praise of the Lamb."⁴² This quote illustrates that elements of the religious, moderate, and radical element overlapped with each other. This overlap often happened when discussing religious issues. It would be safe to say that Pietists, rationalists, and neologists are all handled by Barth as religious enlighteners to some degree.

Moreover, groups like the Freemasons, Rosicrucian's and some individual thinkers sought after the mysterious, the spiritual and the non-rational against the stream but still did it in a way that matched a certain mood of the

³⁶ Ibid, 5.

³⁷ Ibid, 21.

³⁸ Barth, *Protestant Theology*, 67-68.

³⁹ Ibid, 86.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 70-1.

⁴¹ Ibid, 149.

⁴² Ibid, 21.

Eighteenth Century.⁴³ In fact, traditions of Pietism that boasted a more spiritual concentration also utilized the rational arguments of the day.⁴⁴ Therefore, to bracket categories as secular or sacred does violence to the complexity of the Enlightenment era. The Enlightenment era major thinkers may have thought of themselves as looking at their time period in an objective way that put limits to human knowledge about the non-rational and the spiritual. However, there were both public and subterranean movements going against the advocacy of post-Cartesian rationality. There were orthodox, Pietist, rational, moderate, radical, skeptical, spiritualist, and atheist trends in the Eighteenth Century, which a unitary view of the Enlightenment does not do justice to.

Nature and reason are generally the textbook ideas that often summarize the nature of the Enlightenment. In many ways these two terms became the standard on which to judge traditional accounts of religion. Barth defines nature for the eighteenth-century person as “the embodiment of what was at the disposal of himself, his spirit, his understanding, his will and feeling, what was left to him to shape, what could be reached by his will for form,” and he defines reason as “the embodiment of his capacity, his superiority over matter, his ability to comprehend it and appropriate it for himself.”⁴⁵ The absolutist human thus shapes nature with her reason in ways that one could label as both secular and religious. This is an important point to remember because it does not excuse either the Christian tradition or the secular tradition from being a part of this definition, as some apologists from both camps tend to do. One would think that this definition is actually freeing for modern humanity, but Barth will contend much in the language of a postmodern thinker that there is a set of problems in the way the Eighteenth Century dealt with these two terms.

Barth notes that the absolutist desire for form could be seen in the Eighteenth Century in both an external and internal way.⁴⁶ He declares how modern human beings approached the world like an empty canvas; for them nature was to be “felt and enjoyed aesthetically” while simultaneously finding ways to “exploit it for gain” because it was to be seen as a “humanized nature” groomed by human hands.⁴⁷ Barth contends:

This material he confronts as he who has all the knowledge: knowledge of the form, the intrinsically right, fitting, worthy, beautiful form for which all the things provided are clearly intended to be the material, for which they are obviously crying out, and into which, as is plain, they must be brought with all the speed, artistry, and energy man has at his command.⁴⁸

⁴³ Ibid, 21-22, 50 and 108-109.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 97.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 91.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 40-65.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 41.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Barth makes his case by actually examining such topics as architecture, fashion, history, education, community life, art, literature, music, and public and private virtue. For example, with regards to architecture Barth writes:

Every material must be transposed (hence the particular fondness that arose at this time for plaster, so obedient to the forming hand!) according to the imaginative though lucid and logical form, which man felt he ought to impose upon space. This form was that of the perception which he held significant and valuable enough to justify its projection into the materials, regardless of everything in them contrary to its own nature.⁴⁹

In the portraits of eighteenth-century people we see how personal fashion and taste show a will to form. “[One thing] they were certainly not trying to say was that like the lilies of the field we should not care for our attire.”⁵⁰

The working idea for modern humanity was harmony whether it was transforming nature into a garden or park or transforming humans into virtuous citizens. Virtue was to be cultivated in the innermost depths and realized externally in the everyday morality of the community by means of a public education or rationalist sermons. For example, when Barth writes about music and art, he describes it as “art as skill, as proficiency of the most exacting rules” or an “invention continually inventing a new necessity.”⁵¹ In short, the most famous composers and artists of this period were attempting to define and enact the most general laws of their discipline. At the center of the will to form was a rational, conscious mandate that affected all manner of living.

Barth makes a critical statement on what he thinks guided the transformation of modern Christianity: “It is primarily the concern of the bourgeoisie, that does not want to be without Christianity, that finds the old Christianity too crude, and therefore wants to knock all the corners off it to make it accessible, i.e., fit for society.”⁵² In short, the idea of form is used to create conditions for determining a proper use for Christian theology. Here Barth is setting up his famous argument against modern theology in that, instead of waiting upon God’s revelation, modern humanity turned toward its own reason and its own experience of the divine to articulate a new view of theology. When it came to the proper form desired for theology, Barth claims its aim was the so-called improvement of life. Again, he describes both its internal and external workings:

Now form means morality in the most comprehensive sense of the concept, ranging from the almost unconscious inward work of

⁴⁹ Ibid, 42.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 43.

⁵¹ Ibid, 56. Barth’s discussion of music focuses on both the baroque and classical periods and figures like Bach, Haydn, and Mozart, who was his personal favorite.

⁵² Ibid, 93. Also see page 86 where Barth declares: “Christianity means moralistic, bourgeois Christianity, or it does not mean Christianity at all.”

“conversion,” by its nature to be interpreted as a work of the Holy Spirit, to the decision, to be wrung from the avaricious peasant with every argument of natural and revealed religion, to have a fire engine installed, a matter whose secular character was there for all to see. Form means the dignified and therefore divinely willed . . . happier pattern that real life, human life in towns and villages, must achieve, outwardly and inwardly, inwardly and outwardly. Form is the opposite to the wilderness of the seventeenth century from which people had emerged and to which they did not want to return.⁵³

Here Barth raises the point that both the rationalist and Pietist thinkers of Christianity were simply adjusting to the absolutist desire for form in all areas of life; there is no clear resistance to the absolutist form from the Christian tradition. It was almost natural that theology would be thus shaped in this fashion as well. However, perhaps the question to focus on is: did the wilderness of the seventeenth century actually get formed in the Eighteenth Century in a way that brought real happiness to people? Barth unfortunately does not deal at length with those that the will to form cannot shape into a so-called proper form. He is clear that most of these workings are generated and geared toward the bourgeoisie, but he does not really give a voice to those that did not fit into these bourgeois standards. In short, Barth is not Michel Foucault looking at those outsiders that did not fit the standard during the modern turn. Barth's tone does note that he does not see the attention toward improving human life through form as liberating. Moreover, for all his love of Mozart and the classical tradition, Barth thinks the overall project of the Eighteenth Century was not as creative as it liked to believe.

One element that should not be overlooked is Barth's critique of eighteenth-century colonialism as being tied with the absolutist idea of form. For all of Barth's concentration of the bourgeois changes in form, Barth notes that these practices took place concurrently with the birth of European colonialism. Barth does not hold back punches in noting that it was the European that had claimed the world, including other humans, for his own. He writes: “Moral scruples, let alone Christian ones, were so little in evidence that it was even possible to say without contradiction of the flourishing town of Liverpool that it was built on the skull of Negroes.”⁵⁴ Barth notes the horrible duplicity of modern Europeans speaking about things like liberty and equality while making a profit on the slave trade. However, the language he uses in this passage is to note that the material that shaped the architecture of the modern city of the Enlightenment were black bodies. In addition, Barth points out the contradictions of eighteenth-century ideas of liberty and actual practice when he writes that “piety was practiced at home, reason was criticized, truth made into poetry and poetry into truth, while abroad slaves were being hunted and sold. The absolute man can

⁵³ Ibid, 85.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 24.

really do both.”⁵⁵ Therefore, Barth, as a critic of the eighteenth-century natural law tradition, sees the problems with claims for universal rights and the way they were not responsibly given toward the non-European. Poetry was fashioned and formed by the imaginations of enlightened Europeans while slaves were being hunted like animals. This is unfortunately just about the only time in his historical lectures where Barth gives this type of social-political polemic. Barth pays more attention to the given cultural and intellectual traditions than to the question of the silence of the voiceless.

As we have seen Barth’s openness stems from his understanding of both the freedom of God and the freedom of humanity. He contests the eighteenth-century aesthetics because of the controlling aspect of its absolutist idea of form, which stifled true creativity. Harkening toward the postmodern turn, Barth is left unsatisfied with the way eighteenth-century aesthetics generalized its work. In fact, Barth is close to calling the general mood as exploiting the resources from nature via self-confident human reason. We will turn to the work of Rancière to probe this question in a deeper way.

Rancière on the Disciplines

The French philosopher Alain Badiou describes Rancière in the following way: “Rancière takes delight in occupying unrecognized spaces between history and philosophy, between philosophy and politics, and between documentary and fiction.”⁵⁶ This is a good description in that it helps us understand what Rancière tries to do when he attempts to illustrate the connection between aesthetics and politics and how he blurs the lines between academic disciplines. He does this by articulating three regimes of art: the ethical, the representative and the aesthetic. What is important for this paper is the distinction between the representative and the aesthetic. Rancière believes these regimes have historical presence, yet not in a historically progressive manner; in some ways these regimes still co-exist today. In short, these regimes serve the purpose of viewing and articulating the artistic changes that have occurred throughout history. The representative regime tries to establish what is considered proper in society especially in the way it produces form over matter by organizing what one can say, do, make, and judge.⁵⁷ The representative is an all encompassing regime that delineates what is sensible and gives itself the responsibility of faithfully imitating the things in the world.

Rancière asserts that the aesthetic regime of art, which took shape in the late Eighteenth Century, challenges the representative regime. He declares: “The aesthetic regime of the arts is the regime that strictly identifies art in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter,

⁵⁵ Ibid, 24-25.

⁵⁶ Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker (New York: Verso, 2005), 108.

⁵⁷ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2006), 22. For a good introduction to Rancière see Joseph J. Tanke, “Why Rancière Now?” in *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 44 (2010): 1-17.

and genres.”⁵⁸ The openness to artistic practices especially to the things considered common has, for Rancière, political implications. The aesthetic and the political link up to the extent that they are used to reexamine the distribution of the sensible. He writes: “Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.”⁵⁹ In short, politics happens when the defined lines of what is considered normal is disputed; art can help open up the possibilities of this change. Badiou observes that what Rancière “discovers is a discourse plotted and held in the aftermath of an event, a sort of social flash of lightning, a brief and local invention, both prior to and coextensive with domination and its burdens.”⁶⁰

The way Rancière articulates the disagreement of what is considered sensible as a disruptive event in the order of things through aesthetics fits well with Barth’s theory of the subject produced by the event. As we have seen Barth was also suspicious on how the modern idea of form was used to create divisions. In this sense, then, Barth’s idea of absolutism as all-encompassing over different genres and forms of society matches what Rancière says about the representative regime in its canonization of what is regarded as proper. However, Rancière’s thought is aimed at a political reformation especially geared toward the outcast— a place that Barth’s thought really does not go. Rancière’s theory highlights the mood of the discontent of those outside of the norm; equality is the presupposition that guides his thought. If equality is the presupposition, then that means the hierarchies in things like art and politics are in constant need of reform. Therefore, Rancière promotes an equality that “destroys all of the hierarchies of representation” because the aesthetic establishes the ambivalence of things.⁶¹ Badiou is then correct in stating that Rancière’s guiding theme is “that anyone, regardless of experience, can exert mastery without being in a position of mastery provided that anyone in question is willing to be unbound.”⁶²

An example of what Rancière is trying to accomplish can be seen in the way that he contests the delineation or proper form of disciplines. Here he relates how philosophy usually relates to other disciplines:

Classically, philosophy has been considered a sort of super-discipline which reflects on the methods of the human and social sciences, or which provides them with their foundation. Thus a hierarchical order is established in the universe of discourse. Of course these sciences can object to this status, treat it as an illusion and pose itself as the true knowledge of philosophical illusion. This is another hierarchy, another way of putting discourses in their place. But there is a third way of proceeding, which seizes the moment in which the philosophical

⁵⁸Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 23.

⁵⁹Ibid, 13.

⁶⁰Badiou, *Metapolitics*, 108.

⁶¹Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 14.

⁶²Badiou, *Metapolitics*, 110.

pretension to found the order of discourse is reversed, becoming the declaration, in the egalitarian language of the narrative, of the arbitrary nature of this order.⁶³

Rancière's point is to show that the allotted roles of the disciplines are really a fiction: one must simply think through a problem and use whatever tools are necessary to come to some type of conclusion. In other words, the walls that separate disciplines need to be invaded for the sake of free thought. Rancière challenges the hierarchy of the disciplines because it betrays the principle of equality. These structures ultimately produce those that are in the know and those that are not. Again, Rancière's principle of equality judges harshly any thought form that posits an enlightened one to guide the rest of the masses.

Rancière's attempt to blur the boundaries between disciplines also raises the issue of the relation of theology to other disciplines. On the one hand, one can see how his method could match Barth's in criticizing the strict and proper roles forced upon theology in the Eighteenth Century. On the other hand, his principle of equality would challenge any so-called Barthian interpretation that judged the theology of modernity too harshly. In one sense, this was what Barth's goal was in addressing his historical lectures toward his over-zealous students.⁶⁴ One must also consider that much of the criticism of thinkers throughout the Eighteenth Century was aimed at the traditional hierarchies of the Church and the state; the problem is that they would soon replace these traditional forms with a hierarchy and a normality of their own.

Theology is an open discipline; it cannot be used to control other seats of knowledge as the so-called queen of the sciences. Those days are long gone. Also gone is the idea that theology should be subservient to other disciplines like science, history, or philosophy, or irrelevant to the issues of the contemporary world; this flawed understanding of theology has its origins in the Eighteenth Century. Barth's reading of theology and history as event, and his critical openness toward texts, challenges these readings. His contempt for natural theology was a way to resist reading God off the given—a move often deployed to predetermine what can and cannot be said about both God and humanity. In fact, Barth spent a lifetime trying to make the point that theology is a happy discipline, giving freedom to the other disciplines.⁶⁵ In one sense, he was trying to escape from the defined lines of the period of absolutism by positing the free, happy exercise of theology.

⁶³ Rancière, "Thinking between disciplines: an aesthetics of knowledge," trans. Jon Roffe, *Parrhesia* 1 (2006): 10. Also see Sudeep Dasgupta, "Art is Going Elsewhere and Politics has to Catch it. An Interview with Jacques Rancière," *Krisis* 1 (2008): 70-75.

⁶⁴ Barth would later caution this same harsh reading of modern theology in his essay titled "Evangelical Theology in the 19th Century," in Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, trans. Thomas Weiser (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 37-68.

⁶⁵ See Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, trans. Foley Grover (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1964), 12 and 15 for an example of Barth's comments on the theological discipline and its place as a happy science.

Conclusion

What does Barth's exploration of the Eighteenth Century teach us today? As we have seen Barth was a careful student of history even though he was not a professional historian. In some ways, Barth embodied Rancière's method in that, as primarily a theologian, he blurred traditional lines of distinction by writing about history, music, culture, and other disciplines. As a former student of the great liberal theologians of the early Twentieth Century, Barth challenged their theology in a surprising way. Much of this challenge came from his reading of the Bible in a new way and from thinkers like Nietzsche, Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard, who presented their own critiques of society and theology. Barth's critique of liberal theology was such a monumental event in the history of theology that he was soon after made a professor of theology in Germany. Totally unprepared for his new teaching job, Barth spent hours teaching himself about the Christian tradition. It seems like his appreciation for the past was developed in this time of in-depth study.

Barth had a much more nuanced view of the Eighteenth Century and the rise of modernity than he is given credit for. His main concern was with theology and how it related to this period of history and its affects on subsequent generations. Barth's dialectic of yes and no toward this period is what he defines as absolutism. On the one hand, he says no to the way the rational human being is the final determiner for matters in life to the point that it makes it difficult for people to come into contact with the event of revelation. On the other hand, he says yes to the rise of secularism in that it allows revelation to be free from forms outside Christian churches that would restrict it. One can especially see Barth's radical openness in his discussion of the heretic.

Ever since the rise of the so-called secular, various figures from within and from without have debated its usefulness. Barth seemed to appreciate the space of freedom that it opened up for the Christian tradition in that it allowed various thinkers to criticize the secular space and at the same time the sacred space. Therefore, Barth would be against any movement that denied the secular turn in modernity to a past that did not appreciate the secular / sacred split. In other words, there is no going back. Do we really ever want to? There is humility in being open to the creative work of both the divine and the human and the way that this creativity is continually unforeseen. As Barth once stated, with regards to aesthetics: "Those who, in principle or out of indolence, want to evade the anticipatory creativity of aesthetics are certainly not good. Finally, in the proper sense, to be unaesthetic is to be immoral and disobedient."⁶⁶

Instead of standing in righteous judgment over this period of eighteenth-century absolutism and its major players, Barth advocates openness toward the concerns of this time; as we have seen, it was generally an openness that was lacking in the Eighteenth Century. However, Barth's understanding of history allows him to have a critical openness to all aspects of the past because he reads

⁶⁶Karl Barth, *Ethics*, ed. Dietrich Braun (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), 510.

history as a living testimony that can produce a dynamic, constructive reaction in the reader. There is a sense here that matches up with his idea of the event of revelation. Nonetheless, a cursory reading of Barth's work will reveal that he was often not as open as he recommended others to be.

Barth's reading of history as event and his analysis of form is a good method that opens up the possibilities for the thinkers of today in what some have called a postmodern era. Barth was a pioneer in theological thinking in that he asked how theology could speak to all segments of life. He is like a postmodern thinker in his discussion of form and the way it was determined through what was considered rational and natural. However, even though he pointed out the way form was used by both secular and religious thinkers, he did not analyze the way form could stifle life for those on the outside. There is little discussion of the social-political repercussions of the Enlightenment era quest for form. This might be somewhat of a shock considering Barth's socialist roots. Again, he may have displayed the ability to point out the injustice of eighteenth-century slavery but he says very little about it overall. In short, Barth stopped at the level of analysis without finding practices that gave a voice to the discontent of society. By reforming and challenging the forms that shape society, one can perhaps open up avenues for the discontent to confront society.

Barth's thought is a good way to have conversations with contemporary thinkers who look for ways to give a voice to the discontent or to at least challenge the structures and forms that govern society especially in academic disciplines in which the discussion revolves around religious practices. One can already see this challenge in the post-modern and post-colonial return of the religious in the academy during the late Twentieth Century. We can utilize the philosophy of Rancière to take Barth's study of form to another level. Starting with the presupposition of equality, Rancière uses aesthetics to confront any forms that try to control what is sensible and instead to find avenues of the possible; the way for the possible to find a voice is to tackle the position of those enlightened ones that would occupy the place to speak for us. In short, it is to challenge the binary models that are often used to generalize the makeup of society like the one that separates those that are considered the enlightened versus the masses. Barth's study of the Eighteenth Century serves as a context for examining how this binary logic developed, and his main criticism of the Christian tradition here is that it never gave a consistent voice of disagreement. It is the task for current and future thinkers to face up to the binary logic of forms that try to control thought today.