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## Karl Barth As a Postsecular Source

**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to present Karl Barth as one of the most important sources of the contemporary post-secular turn in the Christian theology and philosophy. The paper will be divided into four parts. (1) First, I will present Barth's polemics with liberal theology of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. There his critique of religion, Christianity and idolatry is to be discussed. (2) Secondly, I want to describe Barth's influence on Gabriel Vahanian. My goal is to find Barth's ideas in some of the death of God theology strands. In my view, due to the Barthian inspirations, Vahanian, contrary to most of his secular fellows, initiated a post-secular turn in the very beginning of the death of God secular theology. (3) The next point will be to delineate the interpretation of Barth's theology of revelation made by Graham Ward. In Ward's view there is “a fundamental affinity” between Barth and postmodern thinkers. (4) That will contribute to the general, post-secular thesis, i.e.: any language is of a theological nature. I will try to present and accompany that Ward's point.

**Keywords:** Barth, Vahanian, Ward, theology, postmodernism, discourse.

### Introduction

To say Karl Barth has been one of the most important sources of the post-secular theology does not mean he was a post-secular or a postmodern theologian himself. Although Barth's attitude towards contemporary theological ideas is merely a matter of a pure speculation, I dare to say his approach would be very critical. Even if there is a “fundamental affinity between Barth's awareness of the brokenness of language (...) and postmodernism's concern with the crisis of representation”<sup>1</sup>, in my opinion a post-secular theology employs a very different methodology than the giants of 20<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>1</sup> G. Ward, *Barth and Postmodernism*, “New Blackfriars”, 1993, vol. 74, no. 877 (December 1993), p. 55.

Protestant thought like Barth, Brunner or Bultmann did. For that reason my paper does not pretend to find a new, unorthodox interpretation of the writings of the Swiss theologian. Its task is modest, yet not less important. Having analyzed the issue from the religious studies bird's eye view, I want to demonstrate a strong Barth's influence on two important post-secular Christian thinkers, viz. Gabriel Vahanian and Graham Ward. Regardless of the fact that Barth was not a post-secular theologian, there would be no Vahanian's and Ward's theologies without his contribution.

## Barth Against Religion

It is often believed that the complex and complicated philosophical or theological systems used to be neatly summarized by a simple, earworm like, synthetic slogan. Barth's manifold theology was eagerly summed up by Barth's own "Jesus loves you!" uttered on his deathbed or a more academical "the theology of revelation"<sup>2</sup>. In this paper let me cling to a more belligerent and passionate: "religion is unbelief"<sup>3</sup>. By picking up the thread of religion's critique from a rich Barthian braid, I go hand in hand with Hans Vium Mikkelsen stressing the role of revelation in Barth's theology. A fierce assault launched at religion (and Christianity especially) in his early *Römerbrief* and then expanded in *Kirchliche Dogmatik* was motivated mainly by Barth's concern for revelation. For Barth's despair, it is religion that usually supersedes it in the Christian theology. In *Church Dogmatics*, when pointing critically at the liberal theologians and their Protestant tradition, Barth says: „It was and is a characteristic of its theological thinking (...) that in its great representatives and outstanding tendencies what is discerned and declared is not the religion of revelation but the revelation of religion"<sup>4</sup>.

In other words: there is a great danger of overlooking God's free self-manifesting in revelation. Christians, since the very dawn of practicing their religion, has succumbed to the temptation of objectifying revelation in the doctrine and the codes of religion. Thus, the former played but a role of the carrier of the latter. However, in Barth's view, it is religion that serves revelation, not the opposite way. If this condition is not satisfied, one falls prey to a great misunderstanding of the fundamental, theological notions. Barth says: „where we think that revelation can be compared or equated with religion, we have not understood it as revelation. (...) Revelation is understood only where we expect from it, and from it alone, the first and the last word about religion"<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> H. V. Mikkelsen, *Reconciled Humanity. Karl Barth in Dialogue*, Grand Rapids, Michigan / William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Cambridge U. K. 2010, p. 8, 21.

<sup>3</sup> K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, volume I, Part 2. *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh 1956, p. 300.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 284.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 296.

One needs to ask here about the reasons for that sharp distinction. There is an essential, vital discrepancy that remains at the base of the entire Barth's theology. In his early *The Epistle to the Romans* Barth expressed it in the following way: "The Being and Action of God are and remain wholly different from the being and action of men"<sup>6</sup>. If so, it goes without saying that religion must be a solely human expression of the unfathomable God's deeds and words. Its limitation makes it wholly inappropriate when facing the transcendent God. As Barth puts it into words in *Römerbrief*: „We are able to see that the last and the most inevitable human possibility – the possibility of religion – even in its most courageous, most powerful, most clearly defined, most »impossible variety«, is after all no more than a human possibility, and as such a limited possibility"<sup>7</sup>.

This point leads Barth to his controversial statement that the mundane history of the Church turns up to be decline and decadency. What is more, the history of the Church is ironically called by Barth "a secular history written under the title, »How the ring was lost«"<sup>8</sup>.

Now, having comprehended religion and its cult as purely secular phenomenons, Barth does not hesitate to deprive religion and the Church of any positive content. On the contrary, for Barth's dialectical theology "they are tokens and signs which must be understood negatively, and they are established only in so far as their independent significance diminishes and finally dies"<sup>9</sup>. Here the first assumption exploited later by the death of God theology is made. Any religious culture has no other ultimate goal as to disappear by giving way to the transcendent, voluntarily self-revelating God. In preaching the religion's doom of self-destruction Barth makes use of the Hegelian idiom. He says: "In fact our religion consists in the dissolution of religion"<sup>10</sup>. The original German term for this phrase is "die Aufhebung unsrer Religion"<sup>11</sup>. Religion is a transient phenomenon. Furthermore, its final annihilation is logically meshed into the God's providential thought. Another passage from Barth invigorating the death of God theologians could be: "All human possibilities, including the possibility of religion, have been offered and surrendered to God on Golgotha. (...) Golgotha is the end of law and the frontier of religion"<sup>12</sup>.

As suggested in the quotation above there is an important, secular factor in the theology of Karl Barth. His critique of religion gives an impression of a tacit agreement with the masters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century religion's critique. In *The Epistle to the Romans* Barth dares to compare religion to "a drug which has been extremely skilfully administered".

<sup>6</sup> K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Oxford University Press, London 1968, p. 111.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 230.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 74.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 130.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 110.

<sup>11</sup> K. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, Theologischer Verlag Zürich, Zürich 2015, p. 92.

<sup>12</sup> K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, op. cit., p. 233.

He believes that “instead of counteracting human illusions”, religion introduces “an alternative condition of pleasurable emotion”<sup>13</sup>. This point has been undoubtedly borrowed from the writings of godless Feuerbach and Marx raging against Christianity. Also in his later *Church Dogmatics* Barth goes on with tackling with religion in the mode of the 19<sup>th</sup> century atheism. The Switz theologian poses a rhetorical question, whether religion is not “the most intimate and intensive part of the technique, by which we try to come to terms with life”<sup>14</sup>. This means that there is no transcendent reference in religion beyond its secular scope, but just a worldly trying of assuaging the unbearable pain of human condition. Due to that “the gods only reflect images and guarantees of the needs and capacities of man, who in reality is lonely and driven back upon himself”<sup>15</sup>.

Nevertheless, Barth is not a secular theologian. His alliance with Marx and Feuerbach has its terminal point. Having considered the section above, one can easily guess where it is located. For Barth the borderline between him and the modern, secular atheists is the concern for revelation. The Switz theologian embarks on the hectic polemics with liberals defending their religion not in order to do away with religion, but to save revelation. But what is revelation then?

To Barth revelation is of a paradoxical nature. It is not a simple communicating of God's message. There is no clear transferring data from the God's transcendence to an imperfect perception of human being. Any disclosure of God must be at the same time a radical enclosure. As put into words by Avery Dulles: “[Barth] holds that every revealing is at the same time a concealing, for it discloses the absolute inscrutability of God”<sup>16</sup>. Even the figure of Christ, the clearest and most exposed point in the revelation story is tinged with this kind of opaqueness: „The revelation which is in Jesus (...) must be the most complete veiling of his incomprehensibility. In Jesus, God becomes veritably a secret: He is made known as the Unknown, speaking in eternal silence”<sup>17</sup>.

Another scholar, George Hunsinger makes here an acute comment: “God as revealed in Jesus Christ remains revealed in the midst of hiddenness and hidden in the midst of revelation”<sup>18</sup>. What is more, the genuine Jesus is particularly immune to any vulgar human penetration made with hands of religion. “He protects himself from every intimate companionship and from all the impertinence of religion”<sup>19</sup>.

However, the Christian doctrine has been built upon the picture of incarnated Jesus who lets one of his pupils penetrate with a finger his wound and thrust a hand

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 236.

<sup>14</sup> K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, op. cit., p. 309.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, p. 309.

<sup>16</sup> A. Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, Doubleday & Company, Inc, New York 1983, p. 86.

<sup>17</sup> K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, op. cit., p. 98.

<sup>18</sup> G. Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth. The Shape of His Theology*, Oxford University Press, New York – Oxford 1991, p. 81.

<sup>19</sup> K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, op. cit., p. 98.

into his side (J 20.27). For that reason the Barthian notion of the Word of God includes something what Mikkelsen points at with the term “ambiguity”<sup>20</sup>. In spite of the inscrutability of the revealed God, a human being comes in touch with Him. This happens always on a secular ground. Barth says: “The veil is thick. We do not have the Word of God otherwise than in the mystery of its secularity. (...) The speech of God is and remains the mystery of God supremely in its secularity”<sup>21</sup>. It means there is also a secular mediation in the doctrine of revelation preached by Barth.

To sum up: one of the central ideas of Barth's theology is unmasking religion as a great misconstruing of God's revelation. His extreme mistrust towards religion is reflected in a bold thesis: “No human demeanour [in German: *menschliche Gebärde*<sup>22</sup>] is more open to criticism, more doubtful, or more dangerous, than religious demeanour”<sup>23</sup>. Nevertheless, religion is an indispensable, human possibility which mankind cannot get rid of. In Barth's view it seems to remain a heavy burden of human existence. He says: “it must be borne as a yoke which cannot be removed”<sup>24</sup>. In fact, according to *Church Dogmatics*, a true religion (*die Wahre Religion*) is possible, but based exclusively on revelation. Only if it is God's religion, not the religion of man<sup>25</sup> can it be accepted by God. In *The Epistle to the Romans*, under the strong influence of Kierkegaard, Barth puts flesh on the bones of the true religion practiced by the Church of Jacob: “a religion adequate to revelation and congruent to the righteousness of God, a law of righteousness, is unattainable by men, except in the miracle of the absolute »Moment«. And Faith is miracle. Otherwise is not faith”<sup>26</sup>. One needs to remember constantly that “there is no such thing as mature and assured possession of faith: ... it is always a leap into the darkness of the unknown”<sup>27</sup>.

## Post-Secular Theology and Idolatry

The ideas of Barth reverberated strongly in different theological milieus. It is particularly fascinating to find them there, where their author would never recommend to look after. In 1957 in the U.S. a French theologian of an Armenian origin, Gabriel Vahanian published a provocative book titled *The Death of God*. Vahanian commences his essay with a challenging, but indeed very Barthian, idea: “just as death is loss of being, so religiosity is loss of faith in God”<sup>28</sup>. Then the idea is

<sup>20</sup> H. V. Mikkelsen, *Reconciled Humanity. Karl Barth in Dialogue*, op. cit., p. 56.

<sup>21</sup> K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, op. cit., p. 165.

<sup>22</sup> K. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, op. cit., p. 122.

<sup>23</sup> K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, op. cit., p. 136.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 258.

<sup>25</sup> K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, op. cit., p. 325n.

<sup>26</sup> K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, op. cit., p. 366.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 98.

<sup>28</sup> G. Vahanian, *The Death of God. The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era*, George Braziller, New York 1957.

fleshed out: "God's death is not accidental. It belongs wholly to, and is grounded in, man's natural inclination to religiosity"<sup>29</sup>. The Biblical deicide of Jesus Christ has been theologically linked to practicing worldly religion. For, as crucifying Christ is killing the essence of life in the world, so having religion is demeaning God's revelation. The book echoed in the postwar American theology and triggered a massive debate that eventually gave birth to the movement called "the death of God theology". This new theological strand resulted in a secular making of theology. It was simultaneously accompanied and influenced by the secularization story told by the 1960's sociology. Among the Vahanian's followers one could number Thomas Jonathan Jackson Altizer, William Hamilton, Harvey Cox, Paul Van Buren or a Jewish thinker Richard Lowell Rubenstein. Moreover Dietrich Bonhoeffer was often pointed at as an original theological source prior to Vahanian's book. However, Vahanian was deeply disappointed with the course the discussion took in the early 1960's. The bone of contention was a secular paradigm. Here the issue of post-secularity emerges. As William P. Franke wrote on Gabriel Vahanian in his *A Philosophy of the Unsayable* "by being interested not so much in the autonomy of a secular universe as in its breaking open to the radically Other, thereby reversing the secular paradigm of an autonomous order of immanence (...) secular theology recognizes itself – astonishingly – as postsecular". The point is that Vahanian opted not for a secular thought, but rather for the wholly other God. His disapproval of religion was not an approval of the secular. He called his secular fellows "Christosophes" and declared: "the new Christosophy not only surrenders to the secularism of our time; it views this secularism as the remedy instead of the sickness"<sup>30</sup>. The radical Christian atheists made a gross mistake by investing too much in their secular perspective. "If it is not religion that saves, one can scarcely avoid realizing that it is not secularism either"<sup>31</sup>.

Due to Vahanian the most important idea of Christian theology is the Calvinist and then Barthian principle of diastasis. Thus, the greatest danger for any Christian theologian is idolatry. Consequently, the debate on the religious-secular separation and the religion-atheism relationships, that took place in the 1960's American theology, in fact played a minor role. Vahanian says: „The demarcation line is not between the sacred and the profane or between the religious and the secular (...) or between theism and atheism. (...) The line is drawn between God and the idol, between the creator and the creature. It is drawn between iconoclasm and idolatry"<sup>32</sup>.

There is no doubt that the Barthian struggle for God's revelation stands behind that elaboration on idolatry. What is then the figure of God's death and its philosophical legacy employed by Vahanian for? He wants "to recognize that godlessness is today a valid alternative to faith in God precisely because it denies not

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<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> G. Vahanian, *No Other God*, George Braziller, New York 1966, p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, p. 6.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem, p. 9.

only God but any other kind of universal hypothesis – including itself<sup>33</sup>. The Nietzschean idea of *Gott ist tot* does not give rise to a secular ideology, but rather ushers us into a completely new era, i.e. the time of the ultimate implosion of any universal truth. There is no „metaphysical principle“, no „ultimate foundation“ (to quote Gianni Vattimo's words with whom Vahanian agreed)<sup>34</sup>. Vahanian was fully aware of and made use of it in the very heart of the radically secular death of God theology.

Since the emergence of the death of God theology Vahanian's thought has evolved and the post-secular concept born amidst the secular thinkers has been carried over into the post-secular time. In the last 20 years Vahanian has dealt with the issue of the religion-secular relationships. He worked under the constant influence of Barth and, due to it, with a post-secular outcome. Continually Vahanian stressed “it is not religion that binds us to one another. (...) It is God”<sup>35</sup>. The Barthian mistrust towards religion is not lesser than in the beginning of his theological way. For that reason Vahanian says: “Jesus is indeed forsaken so long as we go on clinging (...) to the sacrificial apparatus of religion”. The ultimate goal of the apparatus is “to be voided once and for all”. What constitutes the Barthian principle of Vahanian's theology is its pugnacity towards idols. They always aim at dethroning the Christian God. Vahanian emphasizes that any human idol is extremely dangerous for the Christians. “Atheism (...) was never a threat to “God”. Idolatry, yes. Because the idol, far from being no God, both is and is not God”<sup>36</sup>. A pure atheism could be praised for its absolute transcendence and an utmost un-wordliness. Paradoxically, there is a clear parallel between pure theism and pure atheism. Idolatry, however, makes attempts to corrupt God's otherness, to draw God into the flawed realm of immanence and temporality.

In the last 20 years the reciprocal religion-secular correlation has been depicted by Vahanian with more details than in the 1960's. The American theologian adumbrates the picture of the interconnectedness of the two. Vahanian says: “Ordered to one another, the religious and the secular limit themselves. They are self-limiting insofar as each consists, not in secluding itself from or being secluded by the other, but in making room for the other”<sup>37</sup>.

This means they remain reciprocally dependent on each other. Each of them is necessary for the opposite part to create and comprehend its identity. Vahanian explores the Barthian motif of criticizing religion in order to sublimate it and introduce God's revelation. In his *Praise the Secular* he goes on: “Rather than eviscerating religion, the secular has played a major role in prodding religion into overcoming itself”. Moreover, the old Weberian secular paradigm has been negated: “Instead of the

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> G. Vattimo, *After Christianity*, Columbia University Press, New York 2002, p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> G. Vahanian, *Praise the Secular*, 2008, p. 44.

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem, p. 2.

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem, p. 17.

religious showing the way to the secular, the secular is now what is showing the way to religion”<sup>38</sup>. Due to the secular thought an internal logic of religion's evolution was to direct religion to its secular end. Thus, religion was meant to bridge a secular gap. Yet, Vahanian is an antipode to that. What is crucial here, is the fact that the way “shown by the secular to religion” is not a way back to a premodern religion. It is rather opening up a fundamentally new panorama, where decisive point is faith and its language of theology. These could be found both in the religious and the secular frame. Therefore Vahanian, though writing originally in English, illustrates the reciprocal entanglement of the secular and religion with a crafty French wordplay: “Faith is not an enclosure sheltered from the age or from the world. It is not celebrated in a church choir or a chancel (*chœur*) but at the heart (*cœur*) of the world, through its very secularity”<sup>39</sup>. That could be easily synchronized with the Barthian idea of having the Word of God not “otherwise than in the mystery of its secularity”<sup>40</sup>.

The last but not least, the late works of Vahanian pay much attention to the issue of theological language. Nowadays theology undoubtedly influences the idiom of *humaniora*. After the bitter but right Nietzschean diagnosis, after the collapse of Christian culture – as Vahanian says - “What remains is a theology of language, the cutting edge for discourse reduced neither to the religious nor to the secular”. Then he presses the point and adds: “Indeed, faith is what religion and the secular have in common, regardless of the respective metamorphoses they undergo”<sup>41</sup>. The importance of the linguistic influence upon a post-secular discourse needs to be discussed. Again, a strong Barthian inspiration is to be found.

### Ward on Barth's Postmodernity

In the sections above I have presented Barth's idea of the critique of religion. Furthermore, I made it a central point in his complex theology. The elaboration on secular-antiseccular dialectics was employed to pair Barth's theology with postmodern thinkers venturing on their fight with idolatry. However, meanwhile another aspect of Barth's theology has been introduced. It is an importance of language and discourse that makes Barth attractive to post-secular philosophers and theologians. Let me shed some more light on that issue by presenting some of Graham Ward's commentaries on Barth' theology of the Word of God.

In many of his papers and books Ward is used to highlight the clear proximity between the Weimar culture and our postmodern era. Having based at Steph Toulmin<sup>42</sup>.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem, p. xi.

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, p. 52.

<sup>40</sup> K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, op. cit., p. 165.

<sup>41</sup> G. Vahanian, *Praise the Secular*, op. cit., p. 37.

<sup>42</sup> S. Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, IL 1990.



Ward presents the Weimar culture as “protopostmodern”<sup>43</sup>. What is more, Ward, similarly to Vahanian, gives much of his criticism to the secular idea developed by the death of God theology in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. He says that before the postmodern exhilaration came: “The death of God had brought about the prospect of the reification and commodification (theologically termed idolatry), not only of all objects, but of all values (moral, aesthetic, and spiritual)”<sup>44</sup>.

It is worth mentioning that Ward, when using a theological idiom, calls the plagues of the late modernity and its depraved version of capitalism (i.e. reification, commodification) an idolatry. There is no coincidence here. One can easily line him up with Barth and Vahanian, as it comes to the theological attitude towards idolatry. However, Ward takes a step further than the 20<sup>th</sup> century Barthians did. He appreciates Barth's critique of religion, but is quite sure that his main influence on the post-secular thought must be tracked down somewhere else. The origins of the implosion of the secular paradigm are to be found within secularity itself. Ward makes it clear when he says: “A thing is exploded when an external force is required to detonate and facilitate the explosion (...) But the radical immanence of secularism (which rejects an exteriority) cannot be exploded. Theologically, certain figures in Weimar Germany who propounded dialectical theology (...) were trying to explode the secular, and religion as implicated within secularity”<sup>45</sup>.

It was certainly Barth who took the radically antithetical strand in his polemics with modern, liberal theology. By stressing his antimodern view he wanted to explode the secular culture (and religion as a natural consequence of it) from outside. Ward gives a picturesque comparison in his paper. The issue of *The Epistle to the Romans* was like “pitching of the hand-grenade into a playground full of diehard liberals”<sup>46</sup>. However, due to the point made in the matter of explosion/implosion nature, Ward says: “the implosion of a system (...) comes about through internal processes, forces or principles which no longer regulate the immanent order”<sup>47</sup>. It was not an external critique of modern secularity that made it topple. It was indeed a very modern concept that developed by Barth resulted in a complete disaster of the modern, secular culture. It was Barth's theology of language and discourse.

To present Barth's theology of language with its “fundamental affinity” with postmodernism one needs first to outline postmodernism itself. Ward points out there is an expanding pluralism of explanations and expressions in the postmodern panorama. This brings to the fore the question of language and its explanatory value: “Language makes our worlds. We too are made by language. (...) If some seem to have a greater explanatory value than others then that is because knowledge-claims

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<sup>43</sup> G. Ward, *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, op. cit., p. xiv.

<sup>44</sup> Ibidem, p. xiv.

<sup>45</sup> Ibidem, p. xvi.

<sup>46</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>47</sup> Ibidem.

are integrally related to power structures. (...) all knowledge is an expression of the will-to-power. All theory involves ideology"<sup>48</sup>.

The conclusion above does not necessarily entail the final annihilation of theology, but, paradoxically, its revival. Suddenly, one discovers: there, where the objective, scientific truth has been abolished, it is only but theology left. And even more: there theology is everything that may remain. Ward says: "[postmodern thinkers] propose that the narratives by which our experience of the world is made meaningful - narratives of historical progress, of the metaphysical correspondence of beings with Being, of the autonomy and integrity of the self, of the universalism of reason, of scientific, sociological and psychological explanation - are all forms of theodicy"<sup>49</sup>.

Theodicy needs to be understood here as an apology of a particular point of view taken by its advocate. It is a non-objectifiable, non-modern way of reasoning. Due to Ward, postmodernism makes a brutal assault on the objective truth culture. Its gist is to say "No" (in a way, God in Barth's *Epistle to the Romans* does it too) to any ultimately positive meaning. Nevertheless, postmodernism is not "a great denial". It "places all claims to truth and reality in a paradoxical suspension. All things stand under the crisis of the question. Question is the very crux of postmodern method"<sup>50</sup>. This undoubtedly corresponds to the Barthian aversion to the theological final answers. Question and crisis are to essential terms for Barth's theology accounting world before God. Ward keeps on presenting the Barthian nature of postmodernism and says: "In fact, postmodernism has to be read both positively and negatively. It has to move between two antithetical readings of a situation, without prioritizing one or the other. It is the double-faced characteristic of this procedure which profoundly relates postmodernism to Barth's own theological method"<sup>51</sup>.

The double-faced nature of postmodernism was anticipated by Barthian Christology. The dialectics of hiddenness and revelation is an early counterpart of the postmodern antithetical of the positive and negative. The common question discussed both by Barth and by postmodern thinkers is: "how can there be knowledge of what is wholly other?"<sup>52</sup>. If reality has been disintegrated into parallel, radically different "theodicies", the point is: how is it possible to reason on the wholly other, who is not of my talk, not of my way of reasoning. Having accepted that, one could say that: "one of the axioms of postmodern thinking, then, is the crisis of representation"<sup>53</sup>. There is no longer a simple structure of transferring world's content into somebody's other mind through a representation. And it is precisely Barth who exploited that great modern question before postmodernism came. For that reason Ward is prone to say that the

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<sup>48</sup> G. Ward, *Barth and Postmodernism*, op. cit., p. 551.

<sup>49</sup> Ibidem, p. 555.

<sup>50</sup> Ibidem, p. 552.

<sup>51</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>52</sup> Ibidem, p. 553.

<sup>53</sup> Ibidem, p. 551.

Swith theologian did not explode modernity from outside, but made it implode from within. "Barth's work is an expression of the modernist dilemma, a dilemma closely associated with the crisis of representation – a crisis dominating postmodern thought"<sup>54</sup>. To Ward the "fundamental affinity" between Barth and postmodernism is their attitude towards the problem of language and discourse. Ward's thought reaches its peak when he says: "And here lies the crux, I believe, of the affinity between Barth and postmodernism. Heidegger's legacy to Emmanuel Lévinas, Jacques Derrida, Philip Lacoue-Labarthe, Julia Kristeva and others is his reflection upon that which lies outside the immanence of language and yet constitutes it; difference itself as it inheres to discourse. And this is precisely Barth's problematic of the Word in the words upon which the Church Dogmatics is built"<sup>55</sup>.

### What Language? What Discourse?

Now, having arrived at this point, there is no other choice as to ask what language and what discourse appear in the works of Barth. In one of his books on Barth Ward is quoting a rich passage of *Church Dogmatics* with a smart comment: "we are presented here, *in nuce*, with Barth's doctrine of *analogia fidei*"<sup>56</sup>: "Our words are not our own property [*Eigentum*], but His (...) We use our words improperly [*uneigentlich*] and pictorially – as we can now say, looking back from God's revelation – when we apply them to God they are not alienated from their original object and therefore from their truth, but, on the contrary, restored to it (...) Now it certainly does not lie in our proper to return our words to their proper use (...) In His revelation God controls His property" (*Church Dogmatics* II.I, pp. 229-230/259-260<sup>57</sup>).

Two main plots of my paper find their accord here. First of all, Barth says that human words are *improper* and making theology with the word of man must irrevocably bring about idolatry. "Our viewing as such is certainly capable of receiving images of the divine [*Götterbilder*]. And our conceiving as much is certainly capable of creating idolatrous pictures [*Götzenbilder*]" (*Church Dogmatics*, II.I, p. 182<sup>58</sup>) Secondly, the words, we try to build theology of, in fact have their owner. They are God's property. In the hands of God they become the Word of God. They are *appropriate* then. This means that the discourse must remain in a strenuous act of coinciding the opposite *foci*. Although it is operated in its immanency, and at the disposal of a particular ideology/narrative ("theodicy" called by Ward), its full legitimacy comes from outside of it, from the wholly Other. For that reason Ward says that "no synthesis

<sup>54</sup> G. Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993, p. 8.

<sup>55</sup> G. Ward, *Barth and Postmodernism*, op. cit., p. 554.

<sup>56</sup> G. Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology*, op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, 23.

is possible between these two activities, the one anthropological and the other theological<sup>59</sup>. The theology of revelation made by Barth is subjected to an endless dialectics of the human and the God's realm. A clear conclusion is to be drawn: "the latter [God] reveals the former [man] to be an idol, or, in terms of linguistics, the endless play of signifiers"<sup>60</sup>.

Having this in mind, Ward draws some further conclusions pertaining both to Barth and the postmodern thought: „Language is *both* divine (God-given, God-referring) and socially construed (by human beings in association and agreement with each other, but now separated from God). But this suggests that the bridge between God and human beings is language, for the words *qua* words remain shared, even though what is understood by them differs radically. Language is a potential *tertium quid* only actualized by revelation"<sup>61</sup>.

Revelation, however, is not a clear, objective knowledge, but, due to its opaqueness, it must be found a dialectical hiding-disclosing process. In Ward's opinion, this Barthian idea locates the Swith theologian in the same boat as post-modern thinkers: „Where the logic of explanation falters there emerges a logic of the movement of Barth's theological discourse itself. And this ... proceeds along lines very similar to Derrida's *différance*, for Derrida too is placing „the chain of discursive knowledge in relation to an unknowledge which is not a moment of knowledge"<sup>62</sup>.

Viewing Karl Barth in line with Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Lévinas, Jacques Derrida or Julia Kristeva is not Ward's final conclusion. It is preliminaries to his own truly original approach. Wards says: "I suggest that language is always and ineradicably theological"<sup>63</sup>. Now, we are in the core of any post-secular thesis. The theological idiom is to be applied to philosophy *in extenso*. For Ward, Barth plays here a crucial role. A genuily innovatory theology of the dialectical comprehension of revelation made by Barth contributes to postmodern philosophical statements concerning language and discourse.

Barth's theological discourse is understood as a rhetorical strategy presenting both the need to do and the impossibility of doing theology. This is exactly the form, method and content of Derrida's philosophical discourse, which presents the inability and the inescapable burden of doing philosophy. For both thinkers, the central problematic is the ineradicable otherness which haunts discourse and yet the impossibility of transcending metaphoricity<sup>64</sup>.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibidem, p. 16.

<sup>60</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>61</sup> Ibidem, p. 30.

<sup>62</sup> Ibidem, p. 243.

<sup>63</sup> Ibidem, p. 9.

<sup>64</sup> Ibidem, p. 247.

## Conclusions

Barth could be, then, seen as an important source for a manifold postmodern Christian theology. Furthermore, in Ward's interpretation, Barth's elaboration on the dialectics of revelation invigorates not only theological, but also philosophical debate. It is possible to discern a direct impact of Barth's theological reasoning on a post-secular approach towards language and discourse. In its radical form the Barthian legacy is to be understood that any language hovers always over theology. The conclusion concerning Barth's theology of language has been, nevertheless, derived from his uncompromised protest against idolatry. The critique of religion makes ground for the dialectical conception of revelation. The critical suspension of God's revelation and hiddenness has, however, been rooted in Barth's firm dedication to faith and revelation. Where there is no idol, God speaks and concurrently keeps silent. There one strives to combine the same and the other. There each utterance is of a theological nature.

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