Conversations and Conflict:

Barth’s Nein to Emil Brunner

Introduction

Barth’s Theological Disruption of Conversation

The point I have been trying to make over the previous sessions is that there is a very real sense in which the fruit of Barth’s theological labours can be read through a theologically articulated sense of conversational practice. It has also been repeatedly made clear that such a thesis would encounter serious opposition among those who have commented on the nature of Barth’s theology. While it was published in 1977, Clark Pinnock’s article (‘Karl Barth and Christian Apologetics’) is a useful indicator of one form of critique.

Pinnock worries about the usefulness of Barth’s work for from the perspective of the task of the public articulation of the Christian rationale of the Christian witness to revelation. The problem here becomes one of rationally uncheckable claims to revelation, something that Bonhoeffer’s charge of "revelatory positivism" had earlier adverted to. According to Pinnock, a type of claim echoed by James Barr,

> The theologian and the atheist are engaged in a shouting match: one says, ‘Religion is man’s invention!’, the other ‘No, it’s not!’ Barth offers us no help in resolving the question of who is right.

This, then, is "one of the most vulnerable points in his whole theological system, and exposes his entire work to repudiation by all who are not yet convinced by the Christian claims". According to one such as Richard Roberts, Barth has "become the entextualised, but no longer context-bound mouth of ‘God’", and therein has provided theology with its own ghettoised ‘breathing-space’ in protected isolation from public scrutiny. Pinnock echoes this conclusion when accusing Barth of inflating "a subjectivist balloon" that cannot be distinguished from "fantasy and dream":

> there is no indication where it touches reality, and so it is impossible to distinguish true revelation from false.

Pinnock imagines ‘conversation’ (although it is not clear that this word is appropriate for depicting what Pinnock is hoping for) to begin at the end of the process of identifying what it is that constitutes Christian discipleship, or to be the means for – evangelism. Pinnock’s critical strategy, then, is less the suggestion that Barth needs to approach theology more ‘conversationally’, as the complaint that he makes the evangelistic practice of persuasion more difficult "in a pluralistic world with its competing truth claims" (but, of course, is a theological problem for Pinnock).

While Roberts’ critique of Barth is both more radical and sophisticated, there is an important reason for
giving consideration to Pinnock’s – it appears to be firmly rooted in the critical perspective on Barth developed by Emil Brunner, a thinker who because of his time spent in the USA (and also because of the similarity of much of his approach to theology to the philosophical theological approach in Bt. and N. America) was for a long time more influential in the English-speaking theological world than was Barth. It was largely this controversy that shaped a great deal of the English-speaking reception of Barth’s work, and that reception was frequently a negative one (and has largely remained so) as a result. John Webster rightly acknowledges that Barth’s rather savage piece

not only sealed the fate of the former dialectical theology group, but also provided evidence to generation of North American readers that Barth was at heart a polemicist (and a rude one at that) rather than a constructive church theologian. [Webster, 2000, 7]

The Event of Barth’s No!

In 1934 Brunner published a pamphlet entitled Natur und Gnade (Nature and Grace). It was theologically a rather uneventful piece, but it has particularly become famous for its place in provoking one of the most famous (and misunderstood) theological controversies in modern theology. Barth quickly published a response, simply entitled Nein! Antwort an Emil Brunner (No!) To observers this came as a bolt from the Barthian blue. Barth and Brunner had appeared to be theological allies, but the apparent ferocity of this attack and the complaints of Brunner about the manner of Barth’s treatment of him ossified an image of Barth as, in Brunner’s image, "a loyal soldier on sentry duty at night, who shoots every one who does not give him the password as he has been commanded, and who therefore from time to time also annihilates a good friend whose password he does not hear or misunderstands in his eagerness." [NT, 15f] This implies that Brunner, at least, considered himself to be theologically fighting on the same side as Barth, while Barth too quickly drew down the executioner’s blade on those who disagreed with him even in the slightest.

Brunner continues by claiming (1) that Barth missed him with his shots (he frequently announced that Barth had not understood him); (2) "but I cannot be angry at his desired attempt, as I am unable to find any ill-will in it." [NT, 16] This, of course, makes him sound like reasonable man, while the ferocity of Barth’s responding Nein! suggested the opposite about him.

Putting the Controversy Into Context

Discerning the Times: The Spirit of the Age

- 1926 – foundation of the Hitler Youth
- 1929 – Wall Street crash, world economic collapse
- 1930 – Nazis win 1/3 of seats in the Reichstag
- 1933 – Hitler becomes chancellor (Mar. 23rd), establishment of German church
- 1934 Hitler assumes full power (Aug.), Barmen confession

The Controversy as the Climax of Barth-Brunner’s Disputations

Not only do thoughts and their extextualisation often speak to the times in which they live, but they always speak from these times. The issue of the influence that the times had on the development of the controversy is an important one. James Barr, no ally of Barth’s on the issue, suggestively comments that

The factor that brought the question of natural theology into the centre seems to have been political. ... Reacting to its [viz., rising German Nazi movement’s] impact, he diagnosed the disastrous developments in Europe as the natural culmination of a long process of the history of ideas, especially
theological ones. Start along the line of natural theology, he thought, and sooner or later you will end up with something like the ‘German Christian’ (DC) movement. … And thus from the beginning he taunted Brunner with having given comfort to the DC and having had favourable reviews in the Nazi press. Brunner was playing into the hands of Hitler.

Notice here several features of Barr’s observation:

(1) Barth’s geometric image (the issue being brought into the centre) suggests that the issues were already contentious (to be brought into the centre they must already have been on the periphery). Indeed in an accompanying footnote Barr makes it clear that "Barth’s polemic against natural theology was conditioned purely by political controversies." Rather, "these political circumstances acted as a catalyst for the theological disagreement which soon broke out." Here he is right. The study of John Hart emphasises that Barth had been suspicious of Brunner over a decade earlier. In fact, Hart argues, late in 1920 "a parting of the way seemed likely. But, after reading Romans II, Brunner appeared to adopt Barth’s radical dialectic." [Hart, 2001, 207]

(2) Barr appears to suggest, however, that Barth’s was an extreme reaction (this is Brunner’s point as well), and this was produced by the times. This can be subdivided into another point [to be treated below in (3)]. The implication I want to draw out here is has further implications for the extent of the claim that it is not impossible to argue that Barth is a conversational theologian: Barth responded to Brunner in an extreme way. There is little doubt that there is truth in this. But it worth complicating the picture of Brunner the reasonable/Barth the reactionary.

- Barth had kept his suspicions of Brunner out of public view.
- 1933 Barth’s Abscheid from the dialectical theology journal Zwischen den Zeiten [Gogarten and others were supporting the "monstrosity" of German Christianity], and setting himself against all of his theological colleagues.
- Brunner was stunned by this "great purge, in which the valuable periodical Zwischen den Zeiten was eliminated."
- Numerous of Brunner’s colleagues exhorted him to give Barth the polemical pasting he deserved.
- Brunner publishes Natur und Gnade with some deliberately cutting comments about Barth [e.g., NT, 54-58].

For decades afterward commentators routinely highlighted the fury of Barth’s response to Brunner without noting that, in its own way, Brunner’s statement was at least equally demeaning and judgmental. Though most observers overlooked the rather ugly implications of Brunner’s closing indictment, Barth took them to heart. He was enraged not only by Brunner’s position, but especially by the combination of sweet-talk and personal aggression in which it was packaged. … He lamented that Brunner had crossed his path so provocatively. … It was not enough for Brunner ‘to stab me in the back’ while making himself look righteous, he explained. What was worse was that Brunner had played for the applause of the German Christians and half-German Christians with arguments that portrayed Barth as a foolish-looking systematizer and Calvin as a paganizer. [Dorrien, 2000, 121f.]

(3) Barr’s feeling that Barth’s reaction was an extreme one produced by the times is why he progresses to a defence of the legitimacy of natural theology, and this he does so on grounds not unlike those of Brunner himself (scripture, especially Rom. 2; and the Protestant Reformers) Here he does not see what was theologically at stake for Barth. In other words, he cannot appreciate what it is that makes Barth suspicious of Brunner to the point of responding with the Nein!

It is instructive to cite Hart’s point about the near Barth-Brunner break late in 1920:
after reading *Romans II*, Brunner appeared to adopt Barth’s radical dialectic. However, … this was simply a temporary appropriation by Brunner – although up through *The Mediator* he could make very ‘Barthian’ statements, in fact Brunner had simply pasted Barthian dialectic onto his other fundamental commitments …. Since the radicalism of the Barthian dialectic did not lend itself to assimilation, as early as 1924-1925 (and certainly by 1929) Brunner began to slough it off, allowing his other commitments to come to the fore. [Hart, 2001, 207f.]

**Main Issues**

Much of the controversy turned on the notion of sense of Brunner’s use of the term ‘capacity’. Yet there was much more to the debate than mere theological semantics.

The main issues had to do with the relations between special and general revelation, grace and creation; also, the understanding of the *imago dei*; the interpretation of scripture; and the interpretation and place of the Reformers. Barth’s negative response to Brunner served less to provide a comprehensive description of Barth’s perspective than the narrower purpose of exploiting the contradictions in Brunner’s paper.

Brunner’s 6 thesis in *Natur und Gnade*, which theologically miss the point of Barth’s theology, and simplistically create internal tensions in his own theology:

- Brunner on *formal* and *material* aspects of the image of God – image not wholly corrupted = formal (rationality and responsibility that distinguish humanity from the beasts) aspect remains intact while the material is corrupted.
  
  Barth – formal image is theologically uninteresting – does not make any case for natural revelation.

- Brunner on general revelation – charged Barth with exalting revelation in Christ at the expense of revelation in nature, which for Brunner are not mutually contradictory. *Rom. 1&2*.
  
  Barth – Brunner wants his to have his cake and eat it – that the world is somehow as the *creation of God* and also that *sin makes one blind* to what is set visibly before us.

- Brunner – Barth exalts ‘saving grace’ at the expense of God’s creating and preserving grace (for Brunner the former and latter graces are distinguishable).
  
  Barth – there are not 2 different kinds of grace but only one = saving grace in Jesus Christ made known in the gospel.

- Brunner – ordinances of creation (marriage) and ordinances of preservation (state), both of which provide a basis for natural theology.
  
  Barth – the forms of these ordinances are not clear and certain.

- Barth’s miscomprehension over the nature of the distinctive capacity that Brunner was actually attributing to human beings.

  - *Wortmächtigkeit* (‘capacity for words’) – Barth took this to mean *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* (‘capacity for revelation’)

- Brunner protested later that *Offenbarungsmächtigkeit* was a misleading rendering of his argument – carried connotations of *active* control.

Yet Barth’s critical point is theologically sound:
Again in his reply Barth launches a swashbuckling attack on Brunner’s self-contradictions. But like Brunner’s point, it really retraces the old ground covered under the first thesis. To be of any use at all in the construction of a natural theology Brunner has to show what, in fact, he admits cannot be shown: that the *formal* aspect of the image of God carries in it a prior knowledge of God. Otherwise the point is irrelevant to the establishment of natural theology. [Brown, 1967, 85]

- Brunner – in Barth regenerating grace replaces/abolishes our former natures. Instead, grace perfects nature, according to Brunner. Re-emphasis on formal/material distinction – conversion changes something that is already there.

Barth – the main biblical passages in question focus not on either the abolition or reparation of nature but upon the *miracle* performed on humanity by grace in making her a new creature.

As we look at the two contestants side by side, there can be little doubt as to who really won the day. Brunner was, as ever, lucid and persuasive. But when subjected to rigorous scrutiny his case evaporated. This was not least due to his own vagueness of purpose. Nowhere in his essay did he really outline the sort of natural theology he envisaged. It fell between two stools. It wanted to retain the Reformed emphasis on salvation by grace and faith alone, and also say that man could know something about God by nature. For real knowledge of God is the work of God’s grace. Barth did not seriously entertain the idea of a knowledge of God which was not a saving knowledge. Brunner failed to make out a case for a natural theology that could stand up by itself. On his own premises he hankered after but could not establish a natural theology in any valid sense of the term. Consequently, Barth had little difficulty in shooting him down simply by exploiting the ambiguities of his position. But what Brunner did show, even if it was not his chief aim, was that no theology can afford to neglect the theology of nature. And this was here Barth was inclined to overstate his case. [Brown, 86f.]

**Conclusion**

On the one hand, the Barth-Brunner controversy is a very unfortunate moment in modern theology. In 1934 Barth expressed his disappointment that it was Brunner who had crossed his path, in the church’s darkest moment of apostasy, as an exponent of paganising natural theology [NT, 69]. Yet, on the other, it is very important and revealing. It is a clash over what theology is, what material commitments it has, how it is done. Brunner represents a modern engagement with the theology of the Protestant Reformers. Barth more radically called into question the whole process of modern theologising, tearing down its epistemologically dominated edifice and seeking to renew commitment to the enterprise of theology in a way that did not succumb to the compromising pressures of modern theology. It is little wonder, then, that in an intellectual environment that frequently articulates a developed sense of suspicion over the theories and ideologies of modernity that it is Barth, and not Brunner, who is being read as a theologian who still speaks powerfully. There is no place for the theologian to ‘stand’ in her thinking since the ‘object’ of theology is the active Subject, the sovereignly free God; theology has no exterior supports or guarantees, and requires no justification. In a highly suggestive series of observations, John Hart claims that

Barth’s use of tradition was dogmatic, thus his primary conversation was within the Church. … Although Brunner spent more time in conversation with non-Christian (or Neo-Protestant) philosophers, he engaged them to defeat them, not to learn from them. In contrast, at times Barth really listened and learned from modern philosophy (e.g., Overbeck, Feuerbach). This points to a hidden reason why Barth rejected Brunner’s eristics: Barth thought that Brunner neither understood nor was able to refute difficult philosophical questions. [Hart, 2001, 212]

Hart continues, Brunner’s eristic theology

is focused on proclamation’s destination rather than on its subject matter. It is concerned with bringing people to the moment of decision, rather than drawing Church proclamation closer to doctrinal truth. It is a missionary task focused on the unique secularity of modern people as opposed to a Church task of the constant, ever-renewed reflection of the Church. [Hart, 2001, 213]
Nevertheless, the question of the nature of that power in Barth’s rhetoric has not dissipated for many others. In that sense the Barth-Brunner controversy continues to provide a significant sign of (and insight into) the theological culture we inhabit in the West today.

**Works Cited**


**Questions**

1. How important is the political context to understanding this controversy?

2. What did Barth and Brunner have theologically in common?

3. What did Brunner feel was at stake in the controversy?

4. What did Barth feel was at stake in the controversy?

5. Was Brunner guilty of advocating a natural theology ‘by the back door’?

6. Was Barth guilty of denying the theological importance of creation?