

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Karl Barth on election and nationhood: Christological reflections from 1936

Shao Kai Tseng

Zhejiang University School of Philosophy, Hangzhou, China  
Email: [stseng@zju.edu.cn](mailto:stseng@zju.edu.cn)

## Abstract

This article probes into Karl Barth's theology of nationhood set forth in *Gottes Gnadenwahl*, a volume on the doctrine of election published in November 1936. I will attend to his use of Hegelian terms and concepts to demonstrate his refutation of secularist and immanentist reinterpretations of the Christian doctrines of election and providence under the Enlightenment principle of historical progress by modern German thinkers, most notably Hegel. As Barth sees it, Hegel was largely at fault for having provided theological and philosophical justifications for the rise of Germany's mystical nationalism in the name of German Christianity. Using Hegelian language, Barth insists against Hegel that election is God's predetermination of human existence *in Christo*. Rather than negating nationhood altogether, Barth's repudiation of nationalism is intended to stress that nationhood is an external basis of the communion of the elect, and that the election of the community is the internal basis of nationhood.

**Keywords:** Karl Barth; church and state; election; G. W. F. Hegel; nationalism; nationhood

This article probes into Karl Barth's theology of nationhood set forth in *Gottes Gnadenwahl*, a volume on the doctrine of election in the *Theologische Existenz heute* series published in November 1936.<sup>1</sup> It has been a matter of broad consensus among Barth scholars for over two decades that the theologian's christological reformulation of the doctrine of election in this work marks, in one way or another, the beginning of the christocentric phase of his theology.<sup>2</sup> Lesser known is the fact that well before his famous discussion of nationhood in *Church Dogmatics* III/4, §54 ('Freedom in Fellowship'), Barth had published a self-contained passage on the same topic in *Gottes Gnadenwahl*.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Karl Barth, *Gottes Gnadenwahl: Theologische Existenz heute* 47 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1936). I will quote from my own translation of the volume, currently undergoing rights-related procedures with the publisher and Barth's literary estate.

<sup>2</sup>The significance of *Gottes Gnadenwahl* as a milestone in Barth's development as a theologian was first brought to scholarly attention by Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), pp. 453–63.

<sup>3</sup>See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* [hereafter *CD*], 13 vols, ed. Thomas F. Torrance and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–75), III/4, pp. 285–323.

This passage is found in the questions and answers (*Fragebeantwortung*) appended to the main body of the volume, which consists of written lectures that Barth delivered in Hungary and Transylvania in September and October 1936.<sup>4</sup> Under the fourth topic, ‘the relationship between providence and predestination’, he devotes eight pages to addressing what appears to be the most frequently recurring question on his tour, ‘raised in Debrecen, Sárospatak, Cluj and Oradea: the gospel and nationhood? The gospel and nationalism?’<sup>5</sup>

To appreciate the weight that Barth attaches to this question, it serves well to recall that he was forced to leave Germany in the previous year for his refusal to conform to the ideologies and policies of the National Socialist Party. Barth shared the view, popular among German-speaking Christian intellectuals during the Second World War, that reinterpretations of the Christian doctrines of election and providence under the Enlightenment principle of historical progress by modern German thinkers, most notably Hegel, were largely at fault for having provided theological and philosophical justifications for the rise of Germany’s mystical nationalism in the name of German Christianity.<sup>6</sup>

As a Swiss theologian who drank deeply from the well of modern German thought and culture, Barth shared similar sentiments with many German theologians who witnessed the atrocities caused by the Nazi regime. He would heartily agree with, say, Jürgen Moltmann (born 1926) who, in a recent documentary, cautions his Chinese readers against ‘narrow-minded nationalism’: ‘I am not a German Christian, but a Christian in Germany.’<sup>7</sup>

Barth, too, was appalled by the notion of ‘Swiss Christianity’.<sup>8</sup> He was sharply wary of the idolatrous nature of civil religions (*Volksreligionen*). His repudiation of nationalism and civil religions in the late 1930s, however, did not amount to a negation of nationhood. He insisted that nationhood is integral to God’s determination of human existence *in Christo*. It is an indispensable part of our human experience, and just like everything else in God’s good yet fallen creation, nationhood must be sanctified. Nationhood survives and thrives only when its idolatrous status is mortified, making way for the universal lordship of Jesus Christ who reigns in and through the *una sancta ecclesia*.<sup>9</sup>

In this article, I will demonstrate that Barth’s christocentric reformulation of the doctrine of election in 1936 leads to a view of nationhood as *one* indispensable dimension of the external basis of the communion of the elect, and the election of the community as *the* internal basis of nationhood. In my conclusion, I will offer a discussion of his rather surprising suggestion of the vision of Christian countries by turning to his treatment of church–state relations in a work from roughly the same period, *Rechtfertigung und Recht* (1938).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Barth, *Gottes Gnadenwahl*, pp. 36–43.

<sup>5</sup>Barth, *Gottes Gnadenwahl*, p. 36.

<sup>6</sup>One famous example is the volume by Karl Löwith, written in Japan 1939 while in exile from Germany and published in Switzerland in 1941: *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Thought*, trans. David Green (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

<sup>7</sup>The documentary was directed and produced by Christian filmmakers Wang Xin and Pan Leilei under the guidance of Professor Moltmann’s former *Doktorsöhne*, Hong-Hsin Lin and Hong Liang. [https://v.youku.com/v\\_show/id\\_XNDIwNDY2OTAwNA==.html](https://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNDIwNDY2OTAwNA==.html); accessed 3 September 2021.

<sup>8</sup>Barth, *Gottes Gnadenwahl*, p. 40.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>Karl Barth, *Rechtfertigung und Recht, Christengemeinde und Bürgergemeinde, und Evangelium und Gesetz* (Zurich: TVZ, 1998).

## Current state of research

My reading of Barth's account of election and nationhood engages with two specific areas of research in contemporary studies, namely, 1) his theology of nationhood and 2) what has in recent scholarship come to be called his 'actualistic ontology'.

## Theology of nationhood

Carys Moseley's 2013 monograph is among the very few comprehensive works in the English language, if not the only one, on Barth's theology of nationhood.<sup>11</sup> She traces the development of Barth's view on this subject from the years preceding the First World War up to the 1950s, supporting her findings with solid biographical information and textual evidence. The work succeeds in demonstrating, *inter alia*, that Barth's mature theology of nationhood, in which the dignity of the nations is affirmed while nationalism is repudiated, is firmly grounded in his christocentric doctrine of election.

Barth made a distinction between nationhood and the state throughout his career ... By the time that his mature reflection on the subject was published in 1951, Barth had come to situate nationhood within the sphere of obedience to God. Nationhood is the product of human agency operating in relation to and under divine activity and moral guidance. More specifically nations relate to God as the electing God who has elected Israel and the Church.<sup>12</sup>

If there is any shortcoming in Moseley's account of Barth's theology of nationhood, it would be the dating of the first publication of his mature reflection. He already gave a full articulation of this view in 1936. In fact, *Gottes Gnadenwahl* is the only mature work of Barth that includes a self-contained passage directly addressing the topic of election and nationhood.

## Actualistic ontology

Barth's actualistic ontology is a topic that I have already treated extensively on a number of occasions.<sup>13</sup> In recent scholarship, the term 'actualistic ontology' has for the most part been associated with the view that 'the action of God in electing to be God for humanity in Jesus Christ is *not* the act of an already existing agent. Rather it is an act in the course of which God determines the very being of God.'<sup>14</sup> This interpretation draws heavily on the contention that 'there is for Barth "no state, no mode of being or existence above and prior to this eternal act of self-determination as substantialistic thinking would lead us to believe"'<sup>15</sup>

Against this view, I have previously argued that Barth critically adopted a distinctively Hegelian grammar to 1) reinvigorate the form and substance of the *credo ut intelligam* programme represented by Augustine and Anselm, and 2) correct what Barth saw

<sup>11</sup>See Carys Moseley, *Nations and Nationalism in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Oxford: OUP, 2013).

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>13</sup>Most succinctly: Shao Kai Tseng, 'Barth on Actualistic Ontology', in George Hunsinger and Keith Johnson (eds), *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020), pp. 739–51.

<sup>14</sup>Paul Nimmo, *Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Barth's Ethical Vision* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), p. 8.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.* Here Nimmo is citing Bruce McCormack, 'The Ontological Presuppositions of Barth's Doctrine of the Atonement', in Charles Hill and Frank James III (eds), *The Glory of the Atonement* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), p. 359.

as Hegel's mistake of subject-predicate reversal in ontological predications about God, a reversal that prioritises activity over essence.<sup>16</sup>

Barth's retaining of the originally substantialist language of essence (*Wesen*) and nature (*Natur*), I argued, is intended to safeguard theology from falling into Hegel's error of identifying essence or essentiality (*Wesentlichkeit*) with something consummate – something that is not yet determinate. Barth's distinction between *Wesen* (essential being) and *Sein* (existential being) serves to demonstrate how his actualistic ontology is tailored to a Hegelian grammar in order to overcome Hegel's idolatrous presuppositions. Especially noteworthy, as I pointed out, is Barth's critical adoption of Hegel's terminological association of *Sein* with *Schein* (appearance). Barth emphatically rejects what he takes to be the Hegelian view that God's 'being (*Sein*), speaking and acting' in history 'are only an appearance (*Schein*)' of God's consummate essence.<sup>17</sup> Against Hegel, Barth differentiates strictly 'between the divine' and the 'appearance of the divine' (*dem Schein-Göttlichen*), and he completely excludes the latter from his theology.<sup>18</sup>

This will be important for my exposition of Barth's doctrine of election and theology of nationhood. It was Hegel and the larger idealist tradition that gave rise to the basic contours of modern Germany's *Volksreligion*, a nationalistic mysticism that eventually came to justify the rise of the Third Reich as an immanent *Schein* of the divine.

Barth is at pains to emphasise in *Gottes Gnadenwahl* that Jesus Christ is himself the electing God, rather than a mere historical appearance of God in some Hegelian sense. This identification of Jesus Christ with the electing God – which Barth did not wait until 1942 to formulate – precludes the mystical view of nations as appearances of the divine.<sup>19</sup> Because Christ has come, as Barth puts it in 1938, all creaturely entities and historical phenomena that posit themselves as divine appearances must be regarded as 'the demonic'.<sup>20</sup>

### Keyword: *Bestimmung*

An originally Hegelian notion that pervades *Gottes Gnadenwahl* as well as Barth's earlier and later works is 'determination' (*Bestimmung*). This notion played a decisive role in the secularisation of the doctrines of election and providence in nineteenth-century German thought and culture. Barth's use of this originally Hegelian term is partly intended to refute the idolatrous views of sacred historical destiny that arose from the various receptions and (mis)interpretations of Hegel.

By 'determination', Hegel means the definition of a subject through a history of conflict and reconciliation with otherness. A thing is *determinate* (*bestimmt*) only in relation to an other in the dialectical process of sublation (*Aufhebung*, or the negation of an abstract moment of logic in a dialectical moment for the purpose of elevating the logical subject to the moment of the positively rational). Stephen Houlgate describes

<sup>16</sup>See Tseng, 'Barth on Actualistic Ontology', pp. 749–50.

<sup>17</sup>Barth, *CD II/1*, p. 496; trans. revised. Cf. Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* [hereafter *KD*], 12 part-volumes (Zurich: TVZ, 1980), II/1, p. 558.

<sup>18</sup>Barth, *CD II/1*, p. 409; *KD II/1*, p. 461.

<sup>19</sup>Pace Bruce McCormack and Matthias Gockel. See Bruce McCormack, 'Seek God Where He May Be Found: A Response to Edwin Van Driel', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60/1 (2007), p. 64; Matthias Gockel, *Barth and Schleiermacher on the Doctrine of Election* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), p. 167. Cf. Shao Kai Tseng, *Barth's Ontology of Sin and Grace: Variations on a Theme of Augustine* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 54–9.

<sup>20</sup>Barth, *CD II/1*, p. 409.

‘determination’ in relationalist terms as ‘the specific quality or character that something manifests or asserts in its relation to an other’.<sup>21</sup> Terje Sparby expresses a more historical nuance of Hegel’s notion of ‘determination’: it is ‘the uncovering of the essential nature of something’ through the dialectical process of history.<sup>22</sup>

Think of the proposition, ‘Confucius was a Chinese philosopher.’ In Confucius’ time, the *subject* that subsequently came to be China was not yet *determinate* as a nation. The Siege of Peking of 1900 by the International Legations led to a determination of China’s consciousness of herself as a nation in the same category as, say, Great Britain and Japan. But because the China of the early twentieth century and the ancient entity that was in the process of becoming China are the same *subject*, it is correct, by virtue of a *logic of mediation*, as Hegel would have it, to say that Confucius was a Chinese philosopher. The identification of Confucius as a Chinese philosopher hinges upon the historical determination of China as China – it is an *identity* determined from the twentieth century and *mediated* through a long historical process to the ancient sage.

### Election as divine determination of human existence

In the very first sentence at the beginning of *Gottes Gnadenwahl*, Barth uses Hegelian terminology to restate the classical Reformed view of ‘election’ as a function of ‘predestination’ (*Vorherbestimmung*).<sup>23</sup> Throughout the text, he capitalises on the Hegelian connotations of the etymologically Teutonic term *Vorherbestimmung* and uses it interchangeably with *Prädestination*. Barth explains in a subsequent paragraph in the same chapter: ‘God’s grace ... is not just a determination (*Bestimmung*), but rather a pre-determination (*Vorherbestimmung*), *prae-destinatio*, of our human existence.’<sup>24</sup>

To say that election is a *predetermination* of human existence is to deny the historicist view of an immanently consummate determination of humankind to which Hegel, according to the mainstream view among German-speaking thinkers of Barth’s generation, gave rise. The Jewish Christian philosopher Karl Löwith (1897–1973) is representative of this view when he describes Hegel’s understanding of historical ‘progress directed toward a final elaboration and consummation of the established principle of the whole course of history’ as largely a result of ‘reinterpreting’ through ‘Enlightenment’ categories ‘the theological tradition according to which’ history is determined by God’s purpose in election and providence.<sup>25</sup>

Barth, too, interprets Hegel as positing a ‘final identity’ between the human ‘Self’ that thinks and God as the object that is thought.<sup>26</sup> On this popular interpretation, Hegel is taken as asserting that human existence remains indeterminate until its consummate essentiality (*vollendete Wesentlichkeit*) is actualised. There is no *predetermination* of human existence. Human existence is determined by the absolute essentiality of spirit from a consummate future, in much the same way Confucius can be said to have been determined from the twentieth century to be a Chinese philosopher.

<sup>21</sup>Stephen Houlgate, *The Opening of Hegel’s Logic: From Being to Infinity* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2006), p. 348.

<sup>22</sup>Terje Sparby, *Hegel’s Conception of the Determinate Negation* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p. 200.

<sup>23</sup>Barth, *Gottes Gnadenwahl*, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>25</sup>Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), p. 60.

<sup>26</sup>Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Brian Cozens and John Bowden (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), p. 379.

Many Christian thinkers of Barth's generation sympathised with Löwith's outspoken rejection of what they took to be the Hegelian view of the 'possibility ... of imposing on history a reasoned order' and 'of drawing out the workings of God'.<sup>27</sup> This was in fact one reason why so many of them, Löwith included, embraced Barth's opposition to the anthropological grounding of theology, stated as early as the first edition of the monumental *Romans* commentary.<sup>28</sup>

Barth, however, was not satisfied with a mere rejection of anthropological religion as the 'summit of human possibility' distanced from God by an infinite qualitative difference.<sup>29</sup> As early as the first two editions of *Romans*, he had embarked on a quest for genuinely theological grounds on which he could speak of God's determination of human existence through election and providence. The ground-breaking insight in *Gottes Gnadenwahl* that allowed Barth to speak of a divine determination of human existence as *predetermination* is that election is first and foremost a self-determination of God's own being as being-for-us. He stresses against Hegel and German idealism that this divine self-determination is not an *essential* act of God. Barth later explains in *Church Dogmatics* II/2 that the God-human relationship determined in the act of election 'is a relation *ad extra*, undoubtedly; for both the man and the people represented in him [Christ] are creatures and not God'.<sup>30</sup>

This self-determination is grounded in and made possible by God's immutably determinate and thus unsublatable being-in-and-for-Godself qua Trinity. Because election is an eternal act of God that determines God's own mode of being *ad extra*, it is, with respect to the creature, a *predetermination* from eternity. More concretely, election is in the very first instance an *ad extra* determination of God's own mode of being through the incarnation. Barth states in *Gottes Gnadenwahl*: 'God began with himself and therefore ... from what is outside of us: it was by virtue of the decision and act of the eternal Son and Word that this man, conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary when He began to be human, began to be the Son and Word of God. This is election!'<sup>31</sup>

Note here that the identity between Jesus Christ and the 'eternal Son' qua electing God – the subject of the 'decision and act' of election – is not *immediate*. Barth describes the 'identity' between Jesus Christ and the electing God in the Hegelian language of *Bestimmung*.<sup>32</sup> The identity is, as the quotation above indicates, determined 'by virtue of the decision and act of the eternal Son'. The logic of mediation, so to speak, underlying this identity is analogous to the logic underlying the phrase, 'Confucius was a Chinese philosopher': it is a *mediated* identity.

It is correct, by virtue of God's *ad extra* self-determination, to say that Jesus Christ is the subject of election. Strictly speaking, however, 'the subject of predestination is recognised as the triune God in His revelation in Jesus Christ'.<sup>33</sup> As Sigurd Baark aptly puts it, the doctrine of the aseity of the triune God is for Barth an expression of 'God's unsublatable subjectivity, which is revealed in Jesus Christ' to be 'identical with God's

<sup>27</sup>Löwith, *Meaning in History*, p. v.

<sup>28</sup>See Karl Löwith, *My Life in Germany Before and After 1933* (London: Athlone, 1994), p. 26.

<sup>29</sup>Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans: 1922 Edition*, trans. Edwyn Hoskyns (Oxford: OUP, 1933), p. 252.

<sup>30</sup>Barth, *CD* II/2, p. 7.

<sup>31</sup>Barth, *Gottes Gnadenwahl*, p. 15.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 44.

essence as the one who loves in freedom'.<sup>34</sup> Barth's understanding of God's self-determination to be God-for-us without ceasing to be God-in-and-for-Godself allows him to speak of a predetermination of human existence *in Christo* while avoiding what he saw as the Hegelian error of reducing God's absolute being and purpose to the rational concept of an immanent consummation of history.<sup>35</sup>

Barth's identification of election with the incarnation means that election as the *Vorherbestimmung* of human existence is not just a matter of one-way traffic. As an ontological determination of human existence, it is not a divine exercise of '*decretum absolutum* abstracted from Christ', but rather a concrete determination in and by Jesus Christ who is himself the God self-determined to be *pro nobis*.<sup>36</sup>

In *Church Dogmatics* III/2, Barth describes this two-way traffic in terms of the covenant and speaks of 'Man in His Determination as God's Covenant-Partner' in §45, where he stresses an 'inner necessity with which Jesus is at one and the same time for God and for man'.<sup>37</sup> In *Church Dogmatics* III/3, §50, Barth states that 'in the incarnation', God as our covenant-partner 'exposed Himself to nothingness even as His enemy and assailant. He did so in order to repel it and defeat it'.<sup>38</sup> This means that the determination of our creaturely nature is one in which sin and nothingness are assumed in order to be defeated.

This narrative of the determination of human nature is already spelled out under the rubric of election and reprobation in *Gottes Gnadenwahl*. 'It is in all seriousness that God made himself one with sinful and mortal man in Christ, and took upon himself the sin and death of this man ... He has to be truly laden with humanity's total sin and burdened with humanity's total death'.<sup>39</sup> Just as Christ died in order to conquer death, reprobation must be understood as God's No that serves the purpose of the divine Yes. Election, then, must be understood as the total negation of sin through the 'sublation' of 'reprobation'.<sup>40</sup> Thus, 'even on the cross, Jesus Christ is the Elect of God'.<sup>41</sup> The determination of Christ as the elect is the essentiality that determined the whole sublatory process of double predestination.

Human nature, on this view, is the determination of human existence through Christ's triumph over sin. As such it is, in its present state of fallenness, a nature still under the sway of the ontologically impossible reality of nothingness.

## Nationhood and the determination of human existence

### *Election and nationhood*

On the basis of this view of election as God's ontological predetermination of human existence, Barth proceeds to formulate a christocentric theology of nationhood in the

<sup>34</sup>Sigurd Baark, *The Affirmations of Reason: On Karl Barth's Speculative Theology* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 255–6.

<sup>35</sup>For Barth's take on Hegel's philosophy of ultimate divine-human identity, see Barth, *Protestant Theology*, pp. 370–407. I acknowledge that interpretations of Hegel diverge on this point. See Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: CUP, 1979); in a similar vein is Michael Rosen, *Hegel's Dialectic and its Criticism* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982).

<sup>36</sup>Barth, *Gottes Gnadenwahl*, p. 44.

<sup>37</sup>Barth, *CD* III/2, pp. 218–19.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 311.

<sup>39</sup>Barth, *Gottes Gnadenwahl*, p. 16.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 21.

appendix to *Gottes Gnadenwahl*. He states that ‘national identity pertains to the general realm that we call human nature’, qualifying that ‘this dimension of human nature’ is by no means ‘the deepest and most central’.<sup>42</sup>

Barth’s newly developed christocentrism, as we saw, dictates that human nature must be understood as God’s predetermination of human existence through Christ’s assumption of human flesh. This is also the case with nationhood as one dimension of human nature. ‘In the Bible, human nature is called flesh – *sarx*. Nationhood, along with all other determinations of human nature, belongs to this flesh.’<sup>43</sup>

In view of Barth’s christological formulation of election as the sublation of reprobation, this identification of nationhood as a dimension of human flesh carries two implications. First, ‘Scripture identifies *sarx* as the condition of man, who is a sinner before God in his radical essence, and who in his totality has thus fallen into death and God’s judgment. Nationhood belongs to this sinful man who has fallen into death.’<sup>44</sup> Second, the central biblical predication, ‘the Word became flesh’ (John 1:14), means that ‘in the work of reconciliation, God did not consider our human nature too lowly to make it His own ... In view of revelation, therefore, nationhood and culture become human greatness, as they have been taken on by God in their waywardness and sinfulness.’<sup>45</sup>

Now, the quintessential Christian proclamation, ‘God became human’, means that ‘we no longer need to look at our human essence *in abstracto* ... , but rather we may gaze upon it by faith in Jesus Christ’s human nature and thus see our ethnic essence as God’s gift by grace, accepted and assumed in His condescension’.<sup>46</sup> National identity as a dimension of human nature is, on this view, determined by the election of all in Jesus Christ, manifested in his death and resurrection.

Because God’s eternal election is actualised here and now in the form of the community of God’s chosen people on earth, Barth is emphatic on the ontological priority of the church over the nations. The church, and not the earthly nation, ‘is the first actual community in which we live’, for ‘we are first predestined, and only then are we by God’s providence created’.<sup>47</sup> The providential gift of nationhood serves the purpose of communion in the body of Christ.

Put another way, nationhood is *an* external basis of the communion of the elect, and the election of the community is *the* internal basis of nationhood. ‘National consciousness is necessary in the Christian Church in this particular order or subordination ... National consciousness can only be the consciousness of sinners whose sins are forgiven. Knowing this, we must acknowledge ... the primacy of baptism over birth. If this is acknowledged, then national consciousness may live.’<sup>48</sup>

### *Civil religions as tyrannical idolatry*

The ontological priority of the community of the elect over earthly nations means for Barth that all forms of civil religion (*Volksreligionen*), which identify the nation as the community of the elect, are inevitably idolatrous. Speaking of his native land, he stresses

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.



that 'there is no such thing as Swiss totality of life (*Lebenstotalität*), no Swiss religion, no Swiss Christianity'.<sup>49</sup>

Barth's association of the notion of *Volksreligion* with the term *Lebenstotalität* is especially noteworthy. This term is closely associated with idealism and the phenomenological tradition in German philosophy. It was well in use in broader German culture by the second half of the eighteenth century, as evident in the proto-romantic *Sturm und Drang* movement. Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) made the notion of *Lebenstotalität* central to the disciplines of historical studies and hermeneutics, including literary criticism. Broadly defined, the term designates the totality of social life as an expression of the collective consciousness of a society. *Lebenstotalität* as such is usually understood as deterministic in the sense that it is inescapable for individual members of society. Hegelian philosophy is largely responsible for enhancing the deterministic dimension of the notion of *Lebestotalität*. According to Hegel, collective human consciousness is determined by the consummate essentiality of *Volksreligionen* in the form of *Lebenstotalitäten*.

The god of civil religions who reigns through *Lebenstotalitäten*, argues Barth, is not the 'Father of Christ', but rather a 'god of the people (*Volksgott*)'.<sup>50</sup> This is 'a god of philosophical abstraction', be it that of absolute idealism, left-Hegelian materialism, religious naturalism, secular naturalism, religious historicism, secular historicism or what not.<sup>51</sup> The *Volksgott* is a god of historical determinism, a tyrant that imposes *Lebestotalitäten* on its worshippers to strip away the freedoms of human individuals for the sake of some collective destiny in history.

### Election and freedom

Barth is emphatic that the biblical doctrine of election is not determinism. Election does not deprive human beings of freedom, but rather activates it. 'Man in his free decision is the object of divine pre-decision: how should he be discharged from this decision through God's pre-decision, and how could he not be irresistibly challenged and compelled thereby to make a totally determinate (*bestimmt*) decision?'<sup>52</sup>

Barth's use of Hegelian vocabulary here is again noteworthy. Recall that in Hegel's terminology, a thing becomes *determinate* only through a dialectical process of *sublation*. When Barth uses this Hegelian grammar to describe human freedom in terms of a 'determinate decision', he has in mind an act of the human will that re-enacts the sublatory process of reprobation and election in Jesus Christ. Barth speaks of this ongoing re-enactment of double predestination *in nobis* as an 'analogy' (*Gleichnis*) and 'repetition' (*Wiederholung*) of what already took place *extra nos*: 'He [the free human being] will choose faith, and his decision as such will become an analogy of the divine pre-decision and a repetition of the decree in Jesus Christ, through whom he has passed from God's left hand over to the right, from death to life, from fear to hope.'<sup>53</sup>

Precisely because 'God's will and God's sovereignty as such do not negate man in his freedom and responsibility', but rather ground and activate this freedom and responsibility, Barth stresses that both 'indeterminism and determinism are erroneous

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., pp. 31–2.

ways'.<sup>54</sup> The doctrine of predestination 'repudiates determinism just as it repudiates indeterminism'.<sup>55</sup>

Here Barth is likely alluding to Kant's treatment of the debate between 'determinism' and indeterministic 'freedom' in early-modern rationalism.<sup>56</sup> As Kant sees it, this futile metaphysical debate within the realm of theoretical reason necessarily results in an irresolvable antinomy between the deterministic view that 'everything in the world happens solely in accordance with the laws of nature' and the indeterministic notion of 'a lawless faculty of freedom'.<sup>57</sup> The theoretical 'question of transcendental freedom', per Kant, 'concerns merely speculative knowledge' that can be 'set aside if we are concerned with what is practical', even though 'the abolition of transcendental freedom would also eliminate all practical freedom'.<sup>58</sup> Knowledge of practical freedom is attainable through moral experience, which reveals that genuine freedom is neither deterministic nor indeterministic.

Moral experience, according to Kant's later works, 'leads inescapably to religion, through which it expands to the idea of a powerful moral legislator, outside the human being'.<sup>59</sup> Practical knowledge of God as supreme moral legislator *extra nos* gives rise to a view of freedom that is neither determined by nature nor free from nature. Positive freedom, according to Kant, is *autonomy*, that is, the voluntary, non-coerced conformity of a person's maxims and actions to the divinely legislated law of morality in opposition to one's 'radically' evil 'propensity'.<sup>60</sup>

Barth adopts the formal patterns of Kant's formulation of positive freedom and fleshes it out christologically. As election in Christ 'proclaims God's freedom and lordship, it removes itself from that which places the concept of necessity at the top of its system and proclaims this concept as the world-principle as far away as from that which attributes the same primacy to the concept of freedom'.<sup>61</sup> In opposition to the indeterministic understanding of freedom as lawlessness of the will, as well as the deterministic view that divine ordinances negate human freedom, Barth insists that genuine human freedom is freedom delimited by divine election. 'There can be no question that predestination delimits the responsibility and freedom of man'.<sup>62</sup>

The truly free human being is the human being under the reign of grace. 'We cannot even entertain the idea that we have any freedom other than that which is identical with the reign of grace'.<sup>63</sup> This is not a general concept of grace, but rather God's particular grace for us in Jesus Christ. We are free only in conforming to Christ who, 'as the Elect of God', embraced God's gracious election as he 'said Yes to ... reprobation by faith' at Golgotha.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>56</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), A445/B473–A449/B477.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., A445/B473; A449/B477.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., A803/B831; A534/B562.

<sup>59</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2009), p. 4.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., pp. 32, 56–7.

<sup>61</sup>Barth, *Gottes Gnadenwahl*, p. 11.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

Only when we respond in the freedom of faith and obedience as such to God's double predetermination of our human existence do we *actually* become elect in the present tense. On one hand, Christ's accomplished work at Golgotha has already freed us from the threat of reprobation. On the other hand, 'our election in Jesus Christ takes place through the Holy Spirit' who creates 'faith in us by a miracle in which we no longer understand ourselves'.<sup>65</sup> This faith is borne in us by the 'witness of His [Christ's] Holy Spirit', but because it is wrought *in nobis*, it is our 'own faith insofar as it is obedience, the sinner's obedience'.<sup>66</sup>

### *Freedom in fellowship: The church and the nation*

Barth's actualistic affirmation of individual human agency and freedom stands in sharp contrast to a predominant view of freedom to which Hegel gave rise. Whereas Barth defines freedom in terms of the Holy Spirit's actualisation of faith *in nobis*, Hegel defines freedom as 'self-actualisation (*Selbstverwirklichung*): 'freedom is precisely ... to be at home with oneself in one's other, to be dependent upon oneself, to be the determining factor for oneself'.<sup>67</sup> The sublation of individuality through confrontation and reconciliation with otherness (*Anderssein*) is required for the determinacy of such freedom. Hegel dismisses the expression, 'to think for oneself' as a 'pleonasm', in view of the obvious fact that 'nobody can think for someone else'.<sup>68</sup> The freedom to think for oneself is merely the freedom 'of a subjectively non-determinate being-with-itself (*Beisichsein*)'.<sup>69</sup> Determinate freedom – the absolute freedom of being-in-and-for-itself – entails relinquishing one's 'subjective particularity' and individual volition in a 'determining' process of reconciliation.<sup>70</sup>

The absolute freedom that Hegel envisions is a mediation between what he famously calls 'subjective' and 'objective' freedoms. His notion of subjective freedom is akin to Kant's understanding of the negative aspect of freedom as non-coercion of the will. The more difficult concept of objective freedom has been variously interpreted in line with Rousseau's notion of the general will, with communitarianism, or even with Marxism.<sup>71</sup> More often than not, Hegel is taken to be suggesting that individual freedoms must be negated in the process of reconciliation in order to make way for absolute freedom.

The freedom of the absolute, according to Hegel himself, is concretely realised by the establishment of the modern state.<sup>72</sup> The highest duty of the modern state is rational cultivation (*Bildung*) of its citizens.<sup>73</sup> This cultivation requires policies that impose censorship on various freedoms, such as the freedom of the press.<sup>74</sup> Hegel's association of

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>67</sup>G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline, Part 1: Logic*, ed. and trans. Klaus Brinkmann and Daniel Dahlstrom (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), p. 60.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>71</sup>There are different interpretations of Hegel's notion of objective freedom. For a Marxist interpretation, see Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2012), pp. 149, 205–11.

<sup>72</sup>G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen Wood, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), pp. 273–4.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., pp. 356–8.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p. 356.

right (*Recht*: also 'justice' and 'law') and freedom with the establishment of the modern state was popular among German thinkers up to the two World Wars. The patriotic lyrics of August Heinrich Hoffmann (1798–1874), later adopted as Germany's national anthem, also makes the political 'unity' (*Einigkeit*) of the German *Vaterland* the pretext of 'right and freedom' (*Recht und Freiheit*).

The elevation of the modern nation-state to the status of a priestly mediator or even divine giver of right and freedom, according to the mainstream view among German-speaking thinkers of Barth's generation, was largely a result of Hegel's secularisation of the Christian doctrine of providence.<sup>75</sup> For Hegel and modern German nationalists after him, idealist or not, the unification of the German nation as a state was necessary for the realisation of absolute freedom in human society.

Regardless of whether Hegel himself would have approved of the Third Reich, his theory of freedom does strongly suggest that subjective particularity must be negated in the determination of absolute freedom. This is not to say that Hegel's theory of freedom cannot be reinterpreted or modified in such a way that it continues to inform contemporary societies where various freedoms of the human individual are held to be sacrosanct.<sup>76</sup> Yet, as far as Hegel's *Rezeptionsgeschichte* in Germany up to the 1930s is concerned, there is no question that his philosophy gave rise to a view of Germany's national consciousness as determined by the German *Geist* that inevitably dissolves the consciousness of the individual in the name of absolute freedom.

When Barth proclaims that our freedom is actualised in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit, he is issuing a resounding No to what was in his time popularly taken as the originally Hegelian view of freedom. National consciousness is not God – it is neither immediately nor consummately divine – and it has no authority to determine the existence of the human individual. Genuine freedom, per Barth, is not spirit's self-realisation in human consciousness, but rather the ongoing re-enactments of God's gracious election, which already took place *extra nos*, by the Holy Spirit *in nobis*.

The freedom imparted to human beings as such cannot be absolute freedom (that is, the freedom of a subject's being-in-and-for-itself). Genuine human freedom is freedom that corresponds to God's *promieity*, the secondary freedom (*Church Dogmatics* II/1) of God *pro me* in Jesus Christ, and as such it can only be determined as freedom *for God* (and, thereby, *for* our fellow creatures, *Church Dogmatics* III/4). Human freedom cannot be freedom in-and-for-ourselves. Absolute freedom, the 'freedom' of God's 'primary absoluteness', pertains to God alone in God's triune *aseity*, that is, God-in-and-for-Godself, to which no human activity can directly correspond.<sup>77</sup>

Yet because Jesus Christ as the ectype (*Nachbild*) of the triune God in the pattern of an *analogia relationis* (*Church Dogmatics* III/2) is himself the subject, object and act of election, the love and freedom actualised *in nobis* by his grace through the Holy Spirit is indirectly and mediately an 'analogy' and 'repetition' of God's love and freedom in-and-for-Godself.<sup>78</sup> Within the triune God-in-and-for-Godself is an endless communion of the subject, object and act of love in freedom, and there is no need of reconciliation of God to Godself. As creatures, however, human beings must be reconciled to God and to fellow creatures in a communion of diverse alterities. Only in this

<sup>75</sup>So Löwith, *Meaning in History*, p. 60.

<sup>76</sup>This possibility is powerfully demonstrated in the first chapter of Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*.

<sup>77</sup>Barth, *CD* II/1, p. 317.

<sup>78</sup>Barth, *Gottes Gnadenwahl*, pp. 31–2. See Barth, *CD* III/2, p. 220.

communion will subjective and objective freedoms be genuinely reconciled, such that both unity and diversity will thrive at the same time.

Barth is emphatic that no nation (or any earthly entity for that matter) is divinely chosen for the purpose of imparting the freedom given to us in Jesus Christ: 'Scripture only knows of the fellowship of the Church chosen from all peoples.'<sup>79</sup> This proclamation carries social implications diametrically opposed to the nationalisms that had pervaded Europe since the nineteenth century. 'The fact that one belongs to this or that nation' and thus one's 'self-evident solidarity with' one's 'countrymen', Barth urges, is not determined 'by history or by ... ethnic blood', but rather by God's gracious election and calling.<sup>80</sup>

Barth insists that the only divinely appointed means of grace through which the Holy Spirit calls us into freedom *in* Christ, which is originally the very freedom of Jesus Christ himself as God's elect, are the 'Christian Church ..., one holy baptism, and one proclamation of the divine Word'.<sup>81</sup>

In the Christian Church, we see beyond all national boundaries the communion of the Word, communion in grace. She is the first actual community in which we live ... [W]e were first baptised even before we were born, first in the Church and then in the ... nation, first brothers and sisters to all who belong and want to belong in the *communio sanctorum*, and then in the communion of our people.<sup>82</sup>

What this entails is that the church in every nation should stand in 'solidarity' with her 'countrymen, a solidarity that is at once critical'.<sup>83</sup> The church is entrusted with the responsibility of 'making God's will recognisable' in the national 'edifice of error and conceit'.<sup>84</sup>

This is not to say that the Christian should despise her own nation or ethnic culture. The church must understand the nation as an external basis of her existence on earth. Through proclamation of 'Jesus Christ to [her] people, and along with Him the forgiveness of sins and hope of eternal life', the church 'will seek out the best things in [her] people. In all circumstances the Church should refrain from being sceptical. She should be trustful and have the courage to take herself seriously – with ruthless seriousness – on their behalf, and then she shall serve her people.'<sup>85</sup> That is, the church, by priestly repentance on behalf of and proclamation of the gospel to her nation through preaching of the Word and administration of the sacraments, shall impart to her people the love and freedom given to humankind through God's gracious election in Jesus Christ.

### Conclusion: Barth's vision of a Christian country

This essay has demonstrated the implications of Barth's christocentric reorientation of the doctrine of election in 1936 for his theology of nationhood. By way of conclusion, and in light of the foregoing discussions, I will offer a brief account of his vision of a

<sup>79</sup>Barth, *Gottes Gnadenwahl*, p. 36.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 37–8.

<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>83</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>84</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 42–3.

Christian country. I begin here with his own personal example of ‘critical solidarity’ with his ‘countrymen’.

Barth is well known for his staunch opposition to German nationalism during both World Wars. It does not require a Barth scholar to show that he deemed all forms of nationalism idolatrous. Yet, his specific criticisms of Swiss nationalism are seldom discussed even among experts on his thought. One striking lacuna in Moseley’s otherwise informative account of Barth’s political affirmations and criticisms of Swiss neutrality during the Second World War is her neglect of Barth’s theological exposition of neutrality as a sinful aspect of Switzerland’s national consciousness.<sup>86</sup> This exposition is at once concrete and personal in *Gottes Gnadenwahl*.

I will tell myself that as a Swiss and in solidarity with my countrymen, I stand under God’s prosecution and judgment. The sin of the Swiss could be uniquely visible in Swiss neutrality. For four hundred years, the Swiss have actually been only guests and spectators in world history. They rejoice in their freedom and wisdom in view of other nations; they are by nature political Pharisees who thank God for not being like the others. The Swiss sits in his little house and looks through his little window, and is pleased when others come and marvel at his beautiful and free Switzerland. Perhaps he would also be delighted to initiate good and helpful actions. He adopts German and French children during the war. He becomes the benefactor of mankind to everyone else. He knows of and loves no extreme problems, and thus no extreme political parties. Swiss politics feeds on compromises. The Swiss is a bourgeois person, and peace and security are his top priorities ... In her national consciousness, God’s judgment that looms over the world becomes clear to us.<sup>87</sup>

Barth proceeds on the next page to a criticism of Swiss nationalism:

God does not play favourites with His children. And my people do not have the right to possess some private access to heaven that allows them to behave arrogantly in history as if they were exceptional. This possibility – it would probably be what one might call nationalism – of a *religio Helvetica* ... died in baptism. If this were not the case, then Switzerland would become a pagan country again, even if she has a Christian Church in her midst. ‘Let thy most beautiful star shine here upon my earthly fatherland’ (Gottfried Keller) – this is paganism, even if it is a call upon God!<sup>88</sup>

What is especially intriguing here is Barth’s insinuation of a view of Switzerland as a Christian country. The question is, on Barth’s view, what is it that makes a country non-pagan and therefore Christian? Obviously, as Barth suggests in the quotation above, even a country like Switzerland, which, in the capacity of a state, recognises official churches of the country (*Landeskirchen*), can be pagan as well.

While such a country can also be a Christian one, Barth completely rules out the possibility of Christendom as a theologically justifiable form of a Christian country.

<sup>86</sup>Moseley, *Nations and Nationalism*, pp. 145, 162.

<sup>87</sup>Barth, *Gottes Gnadenwahl*, p. 39.

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 40. Here Barth is paraphrasing the final line from Keller’s poem, *An das Vaterland*: ‘Beten will ich dann zu Gott dem Herrn: “Lasse strahlen deinen schönsten Stern/ Nieder auf mein irdisch Vaterland.”’

In a work from roughly the same period, *Rechtfertigung und Recht* (*Justification and Right* – as in the ‘philosophy of right’) of 1938, Barth urges that the state must not be ‘deified’ in the sense of being treated as the ‘heavenly Jerusalem’.<sup>89</sup> The misidentification of Christian countries with Christendom can only be blasphemous. ‘Legitimation’ of Jesus’s claim to universal lordship ‘could not and can never be Pilate’s business. In the question of truth, the state is neutral.’<sup>90</sup> The universal priesthood of the believers and the proclamation of the gospel of justification by faith pertain solely to the sphere of the church.

The state, just as the nation, however, is a determination of human existence *in Christo*. ‘The state as such’ is ontologically determined as an ‘angelic power’ that ‘belongs originally and finally to Jesus Christ’, albeit in a way different than the church.<sup>91</sup> Anticipating his own notion of the ‘ontological impossibility’ of nothingness discussed at length in *Church Dogmatics* III/1 and III/3, Barth states that both ‘deification’ and ‘demonisation’ (in the sense of becoming a persecutor of the church) of the state are ‘impossible’.<sup>92</sup> They are ‘impossible’ not in the sense that they cannot become present realities. It is a point of fact that these impossible possibilities are repeatedly actualised in what Hegel might call the contingent irrationalities of history. Rather, they are impossible in the sense that they contradict the very essence of the state ontologically determined in Christ.

The essence of the state is determined in Christ in such a way that ‘from its own origin and in its concrete encounter with Christ and his church, it could indeed also – without itself becoming the church somehow ... – administer justice and protect the law, and then thereby – voluntarily or involuntarily, very directly and yet substantially – open up a secure avenue (*freie, gesicherte Bahn geben*) for the message of justification by faith’.<sup>93</sup> A country is therefore genuinely Christian if and only if her actual mode of existence in the dimensions of statehood and nationhood conform to her ontological determinations in Christ. In this sense, and only in this sense, does Barth permit the talk of Christian countries. A Christian country, on this view, is not one that fashions herself as God’s kingdom on earth, a ‘city upon the hill’, as it were. It is not a country in which baptism is required of all citizens, or one in which non-trinitarian doctrines are criminalised. It is not a country that proclaims the truth of the gospel in the capacity of the state, but rather one that refrains from dictating the truth of God, while giving to the church sufficient freedoms and protections to allow her to proclaim the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ through preaching of the Word and administration of the sacraments.

This is indeed how the Barth of 1936 describes Switzerland as a non-pagan and thus Christian country: ‘there is in Switzerland also a Christian Church ... There is also a remission of sins for Switzerland. Jesus Christ also died for us. We may allow ourselves to say that, and that is the best thing about being Swiss ... Even the Swiss can be baptised.’<sup>94</sup>

The nations are for Barth *one* dimension of the external basis of the election of the ecclesial community, and the *communio sanctorum* is *the* internal basis of nationhood.

<sup>89</sup>Barth, *Rechtfertigung und Recht*, p. 24; trans. mine.

<sup>90</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>91</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>92</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>93</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>94</sup>Barth, *Gottes Gnadenwahl*, p. 39.

In that sense, ‘true ... national consciousness can actually be nothing other than the consciousness of the baptised Christian in [the nation]’.<sup>95</sup> Only through the very consciousness of the baptised sinner in the *una sancta ecclesia* will God’s gracious election be manifested in and to the nations. God’s kingdom on earth is not manifested through Christendom, but rather through genuinely Christian countries in which the church is separated from statehood and nationhood in such a way that the two sides serve one another as mutual bases, the one internal and the other external. ‘Then the following shall come true: “Seek first God’s kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be given to you.” That is how the future of our people may be fashioned: “all these things shall be given to you.”’<sup>96</sup>

---

<sup>95</sup>Ibid.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., p. 43.