

Abstract

It is often claimed that Karl Barth inaugurated a paradigm shift in twentieth-century theology and that his critique of religion was a central part of his critique of Protestant liberalism more broadly. Yet, when Barth's critique of religion is mentioned in the secondary literature, it is almost always only with reference to §17 of the *Church Dogmatics*, a text published in the late 1930s, over two decades after Barth's break with liberalism. The actual development of Barth's critique and the texts in which that critique was developed are therefore rarely considered in detail. The dissertation aims to fill this gap in the current literature by offering a detailed study of Barth's understanding of the category of religion both before and after his break with liberalism up to the time of the *Church Dogmatics*.

The main research question of the dissertation is: How should we understand the critique of religion in the theology of the early Karl Barth? In answering this question, the dissertation aims to show that the questions and problems Barth discusses in his early theology are surprisingly similar to questions and problems that are still discussed today. During the last three decades, a number of contemporary historians, anthropologists, and cultural critics have argued that 'religion' is a quite recent category which first emerged in Western Europe in the seventeenth century and was further developed and extended to the rest of the world in the context of colonialism. They usually also argue that the category of religion was formed, not simply as a product of a specifically Western European cultural logic, but also in the more specific context of Protestant Christian theology.

In relation to these discussions, the dissertation aims to show that the critique of religion in Barth's early writings can serve as an important resource for thinking through some of the theological implications of the ongoing critical discussions about the origin, use, and limits of the category of religion. It therefore operates with a secondary research question, which is: What is the theological relevance of the early Barth's critique of religion in light of the ongoing critical discussions about the origin, use, and limits of the category of religion?

The dissertation argues that Barth's critique of religion is a critique of the idea that 'religion' designates a unique, independent, and hence irreducible area of life that should be understood on its own terms. This is often referred to as the 'differentiation' of religion in modernity. The idea that 'religion' designates a unique and set-apart area of life was in late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century liberal theology referred to as the independence of religion (*die Selbständigkeit der Religion*). Today it is more common to refer to the same idea as the discourse on *sui generis* religion. The dissertation argues that this is a way of thinking about

religion that was formed in the wake of the emergence of scientific materialism and the crisis of historicism in the mid to late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries among the followers of Albrecht Ritschl. These theological discussions were important for the early Barth and have had a great, but often unacknowledged, impact on later scholars of religion. One of the main arguments of the dissertation is that what is today often referred to as the discourse on *sui generis* religion can be traced back to the theological debates of Barth's student years, and it is against *this* that he would later turn in his critique of religion at the beginning of the First World War.

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. The first chapter is the introduction. The second chapter gives a genealogical account of the history of the concept of religion. This serves as a broad historical framework for the ensuing study of Barth and as an introduction to the ongoing critical discussions about the origin, use, and limits of the category of religion. Chapter three picks up where chapter two left off, discussing Barth's earliest writings before his break with liberalism in light of the liberal Protestant discourse on religion of his early student years. Chapter four considers the actual development of Barth's critique of religion during his time as a pastor in Safenwil. Chapter five considers Barth's writings on religion during his time as a professor at Göttingen and Münster.

Barth's engagement with the idea of the independence of religion is the main concern that runs like a common thread through all of these chapters. Barth focuses on the dualisms of religion; on how religion has come to be associated in modernity with only one side of a number of binary concepts such as soul-body, spirit-nature, feeling-reason, private-public, idealism-materialism, transcendence-immanence – and the secular life with the other side. The final chapter develops this further in relation to current theological debates. It argues that Barth helps us see that calls to bring religion into contact with the rest of life or to dissolve the distinction between the religious and the secular are inherently ambiguous from the perspective of Christian theology. It argues that this is not sufficiently considered in current discussions about the origin, use, and limits of the category of religion. In response to the dissolution of the religious-secular dichotomy, it is important that theologians are not left with the choice of either recovering a pre-modern order in which everything is somehow 'religious' or accepting a form of secular reason in which everything is reducible to different relations of power and as such irreducibly 'secular'. Instead, Christian theologians should be engaged in a twofold task, seeking to critically interrogate their own history's role in the invention of 'religion' while also thinking carefully about what the category safeguards.