

Editorial Foreword

A Model of “Creating by Returning to the Original”: Rethinking Karl Barth’s Theology in a Chinese Context

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This special issue, “Mit dem Anfang anfangen (creating by returning to the original),” celebrates the 100th anniversary of two publications by the Swiss Christian theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968). The first is the first edition of *The Epistle to the Romans* (*Der Römerbrief, 1919*).^① The second is Barth’s speech given in September 1919, “The Christian in Society” (*Der Christ in der Gesellschaft*)^②. At the time of writing his first monograph, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Barth was still an unknown young pastor, who had not yet obtained his Th.D. degree and who had been serving in the countryside for ten years. The speech “The Christian in Society,” delivered by Barth at the Religious Socialist Conference in the Tambach town of Thüringen, Germany, when he was then an alternate deputy of the Swiss Religious Socialist Movement, brought attention to Barth’s Commentary on *The Epistle to the Romans* (1919) and propelled Barth to the status of a leading theologian and thinker in Germany and beyond. Two years later (1921), Barth was invited to become Chair Professor of Reformed Theology in Georg-August-Universität in Göttingen, Germany.

The name Karl Barth is not unfamiliar in the Chinese context, following

^① Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Erste Fassung) 1919*, hrsg. von Hermann Schmidt, Karl Barth Gesamtausgabe 16 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1985).

^② Karl Barth, “Der Christ in der Gesellschaft,” in Jürgen Moltmann (Hrsg.), *Anfänge der dialektischen Theologie*, Teil I: Karl Barth, Heinrich Barth, Emil Brunner, 2. Auflage (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1966), 2-37.

the work of scholars such as T. C. Chao^①, LIU Xiaofeng^②, CHIN Ken Pa^③, or ZHANG Xu^④. However, compared with his contemporaries Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jürgen Moltmann or Wolfhart Pannenberg, research into Barth's theological thought in Chinese academia has been relatively shallow, and needs broadening and deepening. Chinese versions of Barth's theological works, for example, tend to depend on English translations, or have been done by non-theologian scholars. This situation doesn't accord with Barth's influence and importance in the history of Christian theology. If we compare studies of Barthian theology in China with those of Japan and South Korea, there is a lot of catching up to be done. Take Japan as an example. Japan has relatively a very small Christian population, and its traditional culture is very strong. However, most of Barth's works, including more than ten volumes of *The Collected Sermons of Karl Barth*, have been translated into Japanese.

It is well known that Karl Barth came from the Reformed tradition in German-speaking Switzerland. His influence is not limited to the German-speaking Christian world, but spread all over the Christian world, including the Netherlands, Scotland, South Africa, USA, etc. Barth has been called "the church father of the 20th century" and considered the most significant

^① T. C. Chao, "Ba Te de zong jiao si xiang (Karl Barth's Religious Thought)," in *Collected Works of T. C. Chao*, vol. II (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2004), 1-37. T. C. Chao is one of the most outstanding theologians in the history of Chinese Christian thought. This article, which was published as a pamphlet in 1939, was the first work to introduce Barthian theological thought into Chinese academia.

^② LIU Xiaofeng, "Shangdi jiu shi Shangdi (God is God)," in *Zou xiang shi zi jia shang de zhen* (Shanghai: Shanghai SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1995), 42-75. Liu's article, which was originally published in the magazine *Du Shu*, remains a good work for understanding and explaining Barthian theological thought. This article pays special attention to the relationship between dialectical thought and the problem of modernity in *The Epistle to the Romans* (Second Edition).

^③ CHIN Ken Pa, *Shangdi, guan xi yu yan shuo* (God, Relation & Discourse: Critical Theology and the Critique of Theology) (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2009).

^④ ZHANG Xu, *Ka er ba te shen xue yan jiu* (Study on Karl Barth's Theology) (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press, 2005); *Shangdi si le, shen xue he wei* (What Can Theology Do if God is Dead? Fundamental Issues in 20th Century Christian Theology) (Beijing: Renmin University of China Press, 2010).

theologian of the last century, who revolutionized and shaped the history of theological thought in the 20th century and profoundly influenced the life and faith of numerous Christians. Some have claimed Barth as the most important Christian theologian since Thomas Aquinas (e.g. Pope Pius XII). Outside theological circles, Martin Heidegger, Barth’s contemporary and one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th Century, was influenced by Barth’s thinking in his early years. These two thinkers are of parallel importance in their respective fields. Heidegger, who called himself a Christian theologian in his early years, appreciated Barth’s second *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (*Der Römerbrief*, 1921), ^① and considered Barth’s Hegel-interpretation the best theological work he had ever read.^②

Barth never thought of himself as a theological and religious revolutionary, nor as a church father of the modern church, nor as a philosopher working at or beyond the border of church and world. He thought of himself as a witness to faith in his obedience to Jesus Christ in each concrete situation. He called his entire life a “theological existence”. During this theological existence, he believed that he was called to be a preacher and teacher of the church, who was to witness to God’s revelation in Jesus Christ within and outside of the church. For Barth, God’s revelation in Jesus Christ is the subject matter of theology (*die theologische Sache*), witnessed to by the Bible and preached by the church. Barth consciously inherited the spirit of John the Baptist (John 3:30: “he must rise, I must fall”), and tried to focus on and point towards this subject matter through his entire life of theological thinking and acting.

By dint of Barth’s insistence upon the subject matter of theology, he can be seen as a great model of “creating by returning to the original (*mit dem Anfang anfangen*).” Barth endeavors to “return to the original,” that is, he wants to return to the origin of the biblical faith, namely God and his revelation in Jesus Christ, so that he may inherit and promote

^① Karl Löwith, *Mein Leben in Deutschland vor und nach 1933. Ein Bericht*, 2. Auflage (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1990), 25, 29.

^② Personal conversation with Prof. Bruce McCormack, Director of the Center for Barth Studies at Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, USA.

the spirit of the Reformation in a radical way, deconstructing all types of intermediary which attempt to stand between God and human beings (such as prophecy, apostleship, the sacred tradition, the church, the Bible, human consciousness, human conscience, individual faith experience, etc). Through this radical deconstruction, Barth “formally points to” the theological subject matter, parallel to Heidegger’s critique and reconstruction of metaphysics in the field of philosophy. And yet Barth does not forget to be theologically creative. Compared with other contemporary and modern theologians, Barth is the one with most potential to guide and shape the future of theological thinking. Barth has indeed shaped theological thought in the 20th century and deeply influenced many significant theologians, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Hans Küng, Eberhard Jüngel, and Thomas Torrance. Barth has also inspired future possibilities of new theological thinking, because his theology is neither limited to the persistence of the past (as in Paul Tillich, or Wolfhart Panenberg), nor mired in the present (as in Rudolf Bultmann), but points towards the future. This inclination towards the future in Barth’s theology anticipates the [self-]coming of the kingdom of God, and can be found also in the theology of hope by Jürgen Moltmann and Robert Jenson.

As a model of “creating by returning to the original”, Barth is significant for Chinese thinking today. In any given historical situation, thinkers need to recognize their own concrete situation, and retrieve and point to the subject matter of their thought, without interference from any other factors; otherwise, their thinking is liable to fall into a certain Babylonian captivity. For Chinese Christian theological thinking, Barth’s significance lies not only in his critique of modernity, historicism and nihilism, and his related critiques of technology, the market and capital, but also in his constructive move focusing on the subject matter of theology. With Barth’s theology as a reference point or guide, Christian thinking might be able to enter into the depths of Chinese thought and culture. New possibilities of “creating by returning to the original” might be explored in the concrete Chinese context, especially with reference to the historical dilemma of “no great change encountered in 3000 years” in China.

If Chinese Christian thinking wants to open up and embrace such new possibilities, there are various fundamental problems which must first be

confronted. For example, the relation between Christianity and China, or the tension between Christianity in China and Chinese Christianity. Barth's theology might be a valuable aid in answering this question. According to Barth, theological thinking should always constantly return to the theological subject matter, namely, God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Only Jesus Christ is the Word of God. This is the root and key of Christian thinking. No matter where we are or who we are, Christian thinking should always come back to this root and key (“returning to the original”). Meanwhile, Jesus Christ is the Word of God, which speaks to people everywhere, and people everywhere respond to this Word of God in their concrete location and situation (“creating”). Thus, according to Barth's theology, the brief answer to the question of the relationship between China and Christianity is: “Christianity in China” should first insistently return and point to Jesus Christ and his revealed Christianity. Only then is there any possibility of its becoming “Chinese Christianity”. Especially given the entanglements between the history of Christian mission and the history of modern capitalist and imperialist expansion, Chinese Christian thinking should constantly reflect on and criticize its own practice, and constantly “return to the original,” to the theological subject matter revealed in Jesus Christ. At the same time, Chinese Christian thinking needs to get rid of any arrogation of other factors upon the only root and key, Jesus Christ. In the light of the grace of Jesus Christ, Chinese Christian thinking can be constantly “creating”. Only in this way can Christianity in the Chinese context not only be “Christianity in China”, but also “Chinese Christianity”. These mutual actions between returning and creating, between “Christianity in China” and “Chinese Christianity”, may form a necessary mode of thinking for Sino-Christian theological thought.

In order to present Barth's various thought-endeavors in terms of “creating by returning to the original” and their explosive and powerful possibilities for future thought, this special issue offers six papers and a book review on Barth's theology. Our intention is that these papers may trigger further attention and research into Barth's theological thought among Chinese academics. In this way Christian thinking represented by Barth's thought might not only be “in China”, but also “Chinese”, and promote the further development and integration of Chinese and Sino-

Christian thought.

Prof. LAI Pan-chiu specializes in the study of Paul Tillich, comparative religions and inter-religious dialogue. His paper, “Neither Yes Nor No: A Mahayana Buddhist Interpretation of Barth’s Discourses on Universal Salvation,” develops his understanding of Barth’s theology, especially its standpoint on universal salvation. Prof. LAI elaborates on some Mahayanan characteristics in Barth’s theology and discusses the differences between Barth’s theology and Mahayana Buddhism, as a prelude to a critique of Barth’s anthropocentric tendencies. For Barth scholarship in China, further comparative study between Christian theology (include Barth’s theology) and Mahayana Buddhism and other Chinese traditions offers an important path forward. Prof. LAI’s contributions represent a remarkable achievement in this aspect.

LI Jin and MA Li’s essay “On the Rationality and Warrant of the Word of God: Supplementary Views from Reformed Epistemology on Barth’s Biblical Exegesis” begins with Barth’s doctrine of revelation and of Holy Scripture, and aims to provide via a Reformed epistemology a convincing defence of Barth’s thinking on the Bible, biblical hermeneutics, and his critique of historical criticism. This paper offers a helpful attempt at combining Barth’s theology in the continental speculative tradition with a Reformed epistemology from the Anglo-American analytical tradition, in order to enrich our understanding of the vitality and innovation of Barth’s theological thought.

Christology is crucial yet difficult for understanding and interpreting Barth’s theology. ZHANG Shaobo’s paper, “Union in Christ: Rethinking Barth’s Christology,” takes Volume One and Volume Four of *Church Dogmatics* as the basis for investigating Barth’s Christological discussion on *unio hypostatica* and *communicatio idiomatum*. This paper explores similarities between Barth’s theology and Orthodox theology (especially regarding deification), such as a common emphasis on Christ’s humanity. The attempt to bridge eastern and western Christian thought presents a helpful model for interaction and development between Sino-Christian thought and traditional Chinese traditional thought.

For Barth, confession of Jesus Christ is fundamental, and requisite, to theology. His identification with and participation in the Religious Socialist

Movement is not a theological decision based on principles, but a practical political decision. LI Zhixiong offers a slightly different position in his paper “A Preliminary Study of Socialist Thought in Barth’s Early Theology.” He inherits the views of the Berlin school (such as Friedrich Wilhelm Marquardt) and emphasizes the close relationship between Barth’s theology and socialist thought. Li concentrates on the exploration of socialist thinking in Barth’s early theology, summarizing the essence of Barth’s early socialist thought in the term “gospel socialism in practice”: “Socialism is an effective path for pursuing the gospel; praxis is practical action to realize a gospel socialism.”

It is widely believed that Peter Peng, an American teaching at Qilu Theological Seminary, wrote the earliest work introducing Barth’s theology to China in 1936. In 1939, T. C. Chao, a theologian in the School of Religious Studies at Yenching University, wrote a long article on Barth published as a monograph entitled *Barth’s Religious Thought*.^① Both statements need to be partially revised in the light of Prof. YANG Junjie’s paper, based on detailed historical textual investigation. In “Before T. C. Chao: A Contribution to Barth’s Early Reception in China,” Prof. YANG notes that Peter Peng had already written an article on Barth in 1933, while he claims that CHEN Zhenghui was the first to translate a sermon of Barth in 1936. This latter discovery represents the latest progress in the study of the reception of Barth in China.

The current reception of Barth’s theology in China is varied. Some enthusiastically praise Barth’s theology as a great historical model for emulation. Others criticize Barth’s theology as modernistic or liberal in its departure from orthodoxy, or even label him heretical, citing numerous points in his theology that need correction. The latter attitude, prevalent among Chinese evangelicals, is strongly influenced by the interpretation and critique of Barth’s theology among American Evangelicals. In order to present a diverse cross-section of views on Barth’s theology, we have invited a survey article from the influential American Evangelical scholar Dr. G. Wright Doyle, “Karl Barth: Comments from Evangelicals.” Dr. Doyle’s overview, brimming with rich background knowledge and resources for further study of Barth

^① ZHANG Xu, *Ka er ba te Shen Xue Yan Jiu* (A Study of Karl Barth’s Theology), 321.

in a Chinese context, introduces an American evangelical interpretation and perspective. This paper reflects an interesting phenomenon: that perhaps because of differences in philosophical tradition and language usage, or differences in denominational standpoint and reading perspective, the American evangelical interpretation and critique of Barth is in many ways not a sympathetic one. Such viewpoints need to be carefully and cautiously evaluated in conjunction with both the works of Barth himself and specialized research scholarship.

Recent international scholarship on Barth has not only focused on the major representative works from his mature period, but also extended the research scope to other works, including his earliest writings. In the last part of this issue, Prof. HONG Liang has been invited to introduce his dissertation “Life Before the Last Things, The Reception of Dostoyevsky in the Early Works of Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen (1915-1923),” submitted to the Faculty of Protestant Theology at the University of Tübingen. With its textual-genetic reconstruction method, based on specific primary texts, this widely celebrated dissertation describes the generation, variation and development of Barth’s theological thought across various topic areas. While there have been other dissertations focusing similarly on Dostoyevsky, Hong’s dissertation represents an outstanding contribution, especially in its scholarship on Barth’s early works.

Barthian scholarship is still very important in Chinese theological circles today, as seen in various commemorative conferences and publications across the greater China area. In April 1999, an 80th anniversary commemorative meeting, “Hong Kong Theological Symposium: Reflections on Barth’s Theology,” was convened by the Hong Kong Theological Fellowship and the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Hong Kong, and its conference papers collated into an anthology.^① In 2006, an international symposium on “Christ and the World: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Sino-Christian Theology” was held by Chung Yuen University in Taiwan, and two of the participating scholars, OU Lijen and Andres S. K. Tang, proposed publishing a commemorative anthology for the 40th anniversary of Barth’s death,

^① Andres S. K. Tang, LAI Pan-chiu, eds., *Barth and Sino-Theology* (Hong Kong: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, 2000; 2008). Mainland scholar LIU Xiaofeng participated.

which came out in 2008.^① The authors in these two anthologies were mainly Barthian scholars from Hong Kong and Taiwan, with a few Mainland participants. Unlike those volumes, most of the contributors in this current special issue come from Mainland China, representing a historical event for Barth scholarship in China and the world. In May 2019, the School of Philosophy at Beijing Normal University will host the first “Barth Forum” in China, and invite scholars to rethink Barth’s theology in today’s context in China. Our editorial office will participate in co-organizing this forum, before and after which Prof. Günter Thomas, a leading Barth scholar in German academia and a chair professor at Bochum University, will give a series of lectures at Renmin University of China and Beijing Normal University. In addition, the Guest Editor of this issue, Associate Prof. Thomas Xutong QU, has been invited to guest-edit a special issue of the *Brill Yearbook of Chinese Theology* in 2019 on Karl Barth and Sino-Christian Theology.

This special issue in memory of Karl Barth also celebrates the 20th anniversary of publication of *The Journal for the Study of Christian culture*. Since 1999, *The Journal* has been dedicated to multi-layered dialogue between Chinese and Western ideas and cultures, and to understanding the self through the reflection of the other. The many readings of Barth’s works serve as a good example of this. In line with its original ethos, *The Journal* will continue to work together with talent from far and wide among our circles of friends and partners.

^① OU Lijen, Andres S. K. Tang, eds., *Barth and Sino-Theology II: Essays to Commemorate for the 40th Anniversary of his Death* (Hong Kong: Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, 2008). ZHANG Xu and ZHANG Xuefu participated as mainland scholars.

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