

# **Theo-Politics? Conversing with Barth in Western and Asian Contexts**

An International Research Project (Markus Höfner, Bochum)

## **Application Account**

In the aftermath of 9/11, discussions of the relationship between religion and politics abound in the academy and public square. These discussions are fuelled by the growing awareness that processes of modernization lead to changes in the public status and the forms of religion – but not necessarily, as the old ‘secularization thesis’ has it, to religion’s decline and eventual disappearance. As such, late modern ‘post-secular’ societies must now reckon with religion as a long-term factor in human life (Cf. Casanova 1994; Berger 1999; Toft 2011). And one question that must surely be addressed is this: What relationship between religion and politics tempers the allure of fundamentalism (religious and political), while also allowing religion and politics to affect each other in positive ways? This question has been addressed in various ways in the last decade (Cf. Minkenberg 2002, 2003; Riesebrodt 2000; Habermas 2006; Bielefeld 1998; Odell-Scott 2004; Audi 1997). This research has focused especially on the role of religion in the interrelated processes of modernisation, democratisation, and globalisation (Cf. Norris 2004; Leggewie 2005; Martin 2011; Haynes 2010; Turner 2011). What has been typically absent, however, is a critical analysis of how the normative self-descriptions of *particular* religious communities can set the terms for discussion.

It is here that the proposed research project breaks new ground. This project endeavors to analyse how distinctly Christian thinking engages the political sphere, and it does so with an eye to comparing Christian views with observations from the fields of religious studies, political science, and sociology. The project concentrates on the tradition of Protestant theology – particularly with reference to Protestant theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) – and it will analyse and critically compare theological proposals for how religion and politics are and should be related from Western (Germany, USA) and Asian (Hong Kong, Taiwan) contexts.

The project focuses specifically on how to analyse the ways normative self-descriptions of Christian communities can adjust to processes of democratisation and how they define the role of religion in democratic, pluralistic societies where religion is not a ‘frame’ for the whole of society, but only one societal factor among others. The project thereby builds on the insight that ‘democracy’ cannot be fully explained by state neutrality, public reason, or democratic procedures, but rather has to be viewed as a complex and rich tradition to which religious voices have contributed in the past and can and should contribute in the present (Cf. Stout 2004). In order to analyse how a constructive relation of religion and

democracy can be profiled from a theological perspective, discussions in the project will cover three subquestions:

i) *First*, how do the normative self-descriptions of Christian communities *view* the society and political system in which they live? Is the world outside these communities seen as an indifferent ‘other’, an alien force, or as a field of responsibility, inviting constructive action from all members of society? How are democratic procedures judged from a theological perspective: are they acknowledged as a necessary evil under the conditions of human sinfulness or are they embraced as means to advance the human good? To what extent are democratic structures and human rights appreciated as a political expression of fundamental Christian values (such as the intrinsic worth of the individual person)? Do theological self-descriptions assess the status of Christian communities within democratic societies as influential or as powerless and are processes of modernisation and democratisation viewed as presenting a threat or an opportunity? How should such self-descriptions themselves be evaluated when critically compared to insights from sociology, political science, and religious studies?

ii) *Second*, analysis must turn to the ways theological thinking conceptualises and advocates for the political engagement of Christian individuals and communities. From this perspective, the project will investigate which forms of Christian political action different theologies promote, while also considering the political implications of religious communities themselves as social entities. Are different Christian theologies from these diverse contexts advocating an explicit and direct ‘political theology’ or are they laying an emphasis on the indirect political consequences of Christian communication and action? Are institutionalised churches, informal Christian associations or individual Christians viewed as primary bearers of Christian engagement in the political sphere? Is the primary goal of this engagement seen in influencing public discourse, in achieving certain law-making policies for the common good or in bringing about institutionalised privileges for the Christian community itself? Are theological self-descriptions advocating coalitions with other groups and organisations of civil society or is their intent to profile Christian communities as a ‘counter-culture’?

iii) *Third*, critical analysis and discussion in the project focuses on how Christian theology can configure a *constructive relation of religion and politics* which both tempers (religious and political) fundamentalism and avoids political indifference by Christian communities. Which theological topics and motives counter – in a useful and nonviolent way – religious and political attempts to assert hegemonic control and dominance? How do theologies positively adjust to the particular status of Christian communities in democratic societies or are there attempts to (re)gain the status of a comprehensive (and hegemonic) ‘frame’ for social life? Which forms can and should a religious *Aufklärung* take which

prevent religious traditions from being instrumentalised in political conflicts (cf. from a political science perspective Hasenclever, de Juan 2007)? In what ways can the Christian religious tradition be construed as a constructive resource for democratic societies, and more particularly for political discussion and debate?

To ensure a broad array of assessments of the relationship between religion and politics, this project involves scholars from both Western (Germany, USA) and Asian (Hong Kong, Taiwan) contexts. The different shape of society and politics and the different public status of Christian religious communities in Germany, the USA, Hong Kong, and Taiwan will further help clarify theological options and provide an opportunity to test proposals from diverse contexts. While society in Germany is fairly ‘secularised’ with regard to individual religious convictions (especially in the former East Germany), membership in the Protestant and Roman-Catholic churches still remains at about 60 % of the population and the churches enjoy close and institutionalised relations to the state (Vgl. Pollack 2003, Kaufmann 1989). In the United States, by contrast, state and religion are clearly separated on an institutional level, while civil society itself – in comparison to Germany – is highly religious, and the pluralism of various denominations and religions is much more pronounced (Cf. McLeod 2003 and in contrast Davie 2002; cf. also Hecló 2007, 2009; Jelen 2006). Furthermore, the threat of Christian fundamentalism is more visible here than in the other contexts considered (Cf. Giroux 2005; Campbell 2012). In the transitional societies of Hong Kong and Taiwan respectively, Christianity is a small but influential minority, which has been very active in supporting democratic policies (Cf. Rubinstein 2006, Chen 2006, Klöter 2009). While the major churches in Germany currently face difficult processes of decline in terms of membership and financial resources, Christian communities in Hong Kong and Taiwan are expanding and gaining influence as their societies change rapidly (Cf. Lo 2011).

In bringing together analyses of Christian theological thinking and observations from sociology and political science from these diverse contexts, the proposed research project will profile significant parallels and differences in the stance Christian communities take toward democratic societies and the processes of democratisation. This will not only help to pinpoint strengths and weaknesses in the different theological proposals, but also provide clues to how global trends (religious and political) are reflected differently in different regions of the world.

Still more specifically, this project will invite the theologians in the project to engage in a critical conversation with the thought of Karl Barth (1886-1968). The common reference to Karl Barth – which may be more direct or indirect, and more affirmative or more critical –

will allow contributors to pinpoint parallels and differences in perspectives in a novel and intriguing way. The project does not aspire to be an exercise in ‘Barth scholasticism’. Rather, it draws on Barth’s theology as a resource for critical discussion; it also treats Barth’s theology as a generative backdrop for constructive theological proposals. Karl Barth’s theology commends itself as a common reference point for the theological contributions to the project for several reasons:

*i) First*, Barth’s theological thinking covers all important theological themes in a highly complex synthesis (Cf. Barth, 1932ff.) and is supportive of democratic structures (Cf. Barth 1946; Haddorff 2010). As a Swiss citizen, Karl Barth was not only speaking in favour of democracy already in the 1920s at a time when many German theologians resented the Weimar Republic (Cf. Anzinger 1995; Jones 2010), he also played a vital role in the theological protest against the Nazi regime in Germany (Cf. Pangritz 1997). At the same time, however, some interpreters accuse him of denouncing the liberal tradition of individual freedom and unduly disrespecting the autonomy of the political sphere over against theological rationalities (Cf. Honecker 1974; Rendtorff 1975; Graf 1986, 1988; Couenhoven 2002). Barth’s theology is thus not only a highly suitable resource for constructive theological proposals, but critical interpretations of his theology can also help to profile theological alternatives when the theologians in the project engage in critical discussions.

*ii) Second*, the theology of Karl Barth has been widely received in all the contexts considered in the project; interpretations of his thought thus constitute a common backdrop for the context-specific theological proposals discussed. In Germany, Barth’s theology had an immense impact on theological thinking especially after World War II. At present, however, orthodox ‘Barthianism’ seems to be in decline and other positions from the theological tradition – such as Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) – are accorded increased attention (Cf. Birkner 1996; Renz 1987; Rendtorff 1991). Given this development, the debates in political ethics between Barthians upholding the concept of a ‘Kingship of Christ’ and Lutherans adhering to a ‘Theory of Two Regimes’ (Cf. Pawlas 1990) and the discussions among ‘leftist’ and ‘conservative’ Barthians about the political import of his theology (Cf. Marquardt 1972; Jüngel 1982) have lost a lot of their acrimony. Against this backdrop, the chances are good that scholars can engage critically with Barth’s political theology again and use his thought as a resource for creative theological thinking beyond ‘Barth scholasticism’ (Cf. as an example Welker 2012). The same holds true for the theological climate in the US. Barth has been used in the US as a model for a widely conservative narrative theology within the so-called Yale School (Cf. Frei 1993; Lindbeck 2002), while others have found in his political thought a paradigm for Christian pacifism (Cf. Yoder 1984, 2003; Hauerwas 1989). In both cases, Barth’s theology has been accentuated to

profile the identity of the Christian community within a democratic society, often with an antimodern impulse. Further, this antimodern agenda has been profiled by so-called neo-orthodoxy (Cf. Milbank 1990). Recently, however, Barth is increasingly used as a starting point for creative theological proposals and varied political ethics ranging from liberal-conservative to socialist or liberationist approaches (Cf. McCormack 2008, Hunsinger 2000, Tanner 1992, Thiemann 1996). In Hong Kong and Taiwan, the reception of Barth's theology has not been as intense as in the other contexts, but is nevertheless visible. The critical conversation of Asian theologians with Barth already began during his lifetime (Cf. Hoekema 2004) and has continued as those theologians have addressed the specific challenges of their respective contexts (Cf. as an example Lai 2001). In Hong Kong, an important challenge has been the relation of Christianity to the Chinese tradition of Confucianism and, since 1997, the political and cultural status of Hong Kong democracy within the People's Republic of China, including postcolonial perspectives and discussions with the so-called cultural Christians in mainland China (Cf. Kaung 1983; Chan 1998). In Taiwan, Barth's theology has been employed to articulate and strengthen Christian support for the ongoing process of democratisation and in theological struggles to express the interests of the indigenous and often marginalised people of Taiwan (Cf. for Hong Kong and Taiwan theologies Kim 2008, Pieris 2004). The common reference to Barth's theology in the theological contributions to this project will thus help to see parallels and differences more clearly in the various theological proposals and enable scholars to understand and learn from the context-specific proposals of others.

*iii) Third*, reference to Barth's theological thinking will point to important differences in how the relation of religion and politics is configured theologically. One observation is that Barth himself treats the institutional form of Christian communities as secondary while his theological writings were effective through their presence in theological and extra-theological discourses. This leads to the question of what different theological proposals envisage as the primary 'interface' between religion and politics: institutional forms (as in a Weberian perspective) or the presence of theological arguments and texts in public discourse (as in Foucault-inspired 'discourse analysis')? Another insight to be gained from Barth's theological work is that theological assessments of politics can be articulated in a rich variety of media and discursive forms – Barth himself expressed his views in official church declarations such as the 'Theological Declaration of Barmen' (1934), in academic theological writing, and in open letters to various discussion partners. Thus the question arises which media and discursive forms are employed in the different theological proposals to be analysed in the project.

For these reasons, the reference to the theological thought of Karl Barth – whether

more affirming or more critical – provides a common ground for the theological contributions to the project, which will facilitate the analysis of different theological proposals from diverse contexts and help to profile their distinct character.

In order to ensure an in-depth analysis and to enable rich and critical discussions, three symposia at Bochum University will be held 6-9 June 2013, February 2014, and September 2014. A group of approximately fifteen younger theological scholars from Germany, the US, and Hong Kong and Taiwan will attend each meeting and develop their individual contributions in the process. Over half of these scholars have already confirmed their participation in the project; the rest will be selected based on an open ‘Call for Papers’ for doctoral students and Post-docs. Senior experts in theology, religious studies, political sciences and sociology, also drawn from Western and Asian contexts, will be invited to attend one of the meetings and to engage in discussions with the younger scholars and other senior experts. In an innovative way, the project thus combines a concentration on one discipline (theology) in the group of younger scholars – necessary for in-depth analysis across different contexts – with interdisciplinary impulses from the senior experts. All contributions will be published open access and in a conference volume.

In the critical analysis of theological conceptions of the relationship between religion and politics and with the help of insights from religious studies, political science, and sociology, the overall goal of the proposed project is to contribute to a constructive account of the relationship of religion and politics that avoids both the hegemonic tendencies of religious fundamentalism and religious communities’ eschewal of political concerns and responsibilities. The project breaks new ground in respect to previous analyses of religion and politics and brings theological discussions of Karl Barth’s theology to a new, interdisciplinary and international, stage. In its innovative research design, the project thus promises new and important insights into the relationship of religion and politics that will not only be highly relevant for inner-theological discourse; they will also provide an important impetus for general discussions of religion and politics in the academy and the public square.

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