Christianity as “True Religion” According to Karl Barth’s Theologia Religionum: An Intercultural Conversation with Selected Asian Christian Theologians¹

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Abstract

This article orchestrates an intercultural theological conversation between Karl Barth’s theology of religions and selected Asian Christian theologians. The latter rightly stress that Barth’s criticism of religions is mainly concerned with Christian religion, although it does allow for the recognition of “other true lights.” Yet, insufficient attention is paid to the fact that Barth considers Christianity in particular “the true religion.” In critical conversation with these Asian reflections, it becomes clear that we need to move beyond Barth because (1) his Christocentrism neglects God’s presence as Creator and Spirit in other religious traditions, (2) Barth’s actualism does not allow him to properly distinguish between the word of God in the Christian Scriptures and in the “other lights,” and (3) this actualism stands in the way of a full recognition of the historical nature of revelation and salvation in Christ.

Keywords

Karl Barth, Katsumi Takizawa, Asian theology, theology of religions, Trinity, actualism, historical revelation

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BARTH AND ASIA

In 1958 the Japanese, Buddhist-Christian philosopher Katsumi Takizawa (1909–1984) and his wife were baptized. Their baptism was the conclusion of a decennia-long quest, in which Katsumi's interaction with Karl Barth played a vital part. On the advice of his other teacher, Buddhist philosopher Kitaro Nishida (1870–1945), Takizawa went to Germany from 1933 to 1935 so he could study under Barth. When he later became a philosophy professor, he continued to correspond with Barth and to read his works with his students. In this correspondence it becomes clear that on one essential point Barth's views are difficult to combine with Takizawa's Asian religious sensitivity. How is it possible that the *Urfaktum Immanuel* ("primordial fact"), as Takizawa calls it, can only be found in Jesus of Nazareth? Is the same *Urfaktum* not found in Buddhism? In the end he chooses to be baptized based on his belief that he has personally met the *Urfaktum Immanuel* in Christ. However, he still believes people can find the same *Urfaktum* in other religions.²

Takizawa's story mirrors the difficulties that many Christian theologians in pluralistic contexts have with Barth's *theologia religionum*. Asian theologians, and theologians with strong ties to Asia, have often renounced Barth's theology of religions as irrelevant for Asia because of the general impression that he has a negative outlook on non-Christian religions. The Sri Lankan theologian D.T. Niles, who otherwise values many of Barth's theological insights, recalls his first meeting with Karl Barth in 1935:

In the course of the conversation he said, "Other religions are just unbelief." I remember replying with the question, "How many Hindus, Dr. Barth, have you met?" He answered, "No one." I said, "How then do you know that Hinduism is unbelief?" He said, "A priori." I simply shook my head and smiled.³

2 For the interaction between Takizawa and Barth, see: Katsumi Takizawa, Karl Barth, and Charlotte von Kirschbaum, *Karl Barth–Katsumi Takizawa: Briefwechsel 1934–1968 (einschliesslich des Briefwechsels Charlotte von Kirschbaum–Katsumi Takizawa)*, ed. Susanne Hennecke and Ab Venemans, *Forschungen zur systematischen und ökumenischen Theologie* 154 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015); for a comparable yet more elaborated reading of Barth's Christology, see Paul S. Chung, "Karl Barth and Inter-Religious Dialogue: An Attempt to Bring Karl Barth to Dialogue with Religious Pluralism," *Asia Journal of Theology* 15, no. 2 (2001): 232–246.

3 D.T. Niles, "Karl Barth—A Personal Memory," *South East Asia Journal of Theology* 11

Barth's theology of religions does itself present occasion for different interpretations. In many overviews of the theology of religions Barth is used as a standard example of the exclusivist position.⁴ Others, such as Paul Chung, David Thang Moe, and Pan-chiu Lai have rightly shown that the more negative depictions of Barth's theology of religions do not do justice to his theology. In fact, Barth's radical criticism is just as much about Christianity as it is about any other religion, and the so called *Lichterlehre*, his teaching about the "other lights," leaves room for God to speak outside the boundaries of the church.⁵

In this contribution I want to engage critically with these Barthian ideas: that religion is unbelief, and that Christianity is—or rather can become—the true religion. Of course, Barth himself was deeply embedded in his own historical and cultural context, which mainly consisted of the German-speaking societies, churches, and theologies in the first half of the twentieth century. He did not deeply engage with the questions of religious pluralism that are crucial for the worldwide church today, and with which Asian theologians have been engaging particularly intensely. As a European theologian, I also want to contribute to the ongoing intercultural theological conversation in order to explore the significance of Barth's theology for interreligious encounters today. I will argue that neither one-sided exclusivist interpretations of Barth, nor interpretations that seek to maximize the value that Barth accords to non-Christian religions, do justice to the unique structure of his theology. However, my argument does not merely concern the right interpretation of Barth's theology. Rather, I intend to advance the debate by arguing that in important respects Barth was put on the wrong track by his own cultural context. I will present

(1969): 10f; for an overview of Asian engagement with Barth, see Alle Hoekema, "Barth and Asia: 'No Boring Theology,'" *Exchange* 33, no. 2 (2004): 102-131.

4 See, for example, Paul J. Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 150-159; Paul F Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 23-26.

5 Pan-chiu Lai, "Barth's Theology of Religion and the Asian Context of Religious Pluralism," *Asia Journal of Theology* 15, no. 2 (October 2001): 247-267; Chung, "Karl Barth and Inter-Religious Dialogue"; Paul S. Chung, "Karl Barth's Theology of Reconciliation in Dialogue with a Theology of Religions," *Mission Studies* 25, no. 2 (2008): 211-228; David Thang Moe, "Karl Barth against Religion, Not Religions: Constructing His Dialectical Theology of Divine Revelation and Human Religion in Asia," *Asia Journal of Theology* 31, no. 1 (April 2017): 113-140.

reasons for holding on to Barth's central christological focus, but I will develop some aspects of his theological insights beyond him in light of the questions raised by religious pluralism in Asia, questions that Barth could not have been aware of in the same way that we are today. This allows me to continue posthumously the conversation between Takizawa and Barth.

THREE CRUCIAL STEPS

In the three subsections of Barth's famous paragraph 17 of the *Church Dogmatics* on religion, he lays out three steps that are still highly relevant eighty years later for developing a Christian theology of religions. In §17.1 he explains his methodological starting point. As Lai has argued and Barth himself was aware,⁶ Barth was a contextual theologian, deeply shaped by his roots in, and critical engagement with, nineteenth-century German theology.⁷ According to Barth, in order to arrive at a Christian understanding of religion we should avoid starting with a general concept of religion in order subsequently to show the value of the Christian religion. Although this approach was characteristic of nineteenth-century liberal theology, Barth argues that the order should be reversed: religion must be understood in light of the revelation in Christ. This methodological "particularism"⁸ is typical of Barth and is a consequence of the centrality of revelation in his theology: we can only know God through his gracious, free, and sovereign self-communication, and therefore all our thinking must originate in this self-communication.

This methodological particularism is still relevant today. In secular perspectives all religions tend to be treated as the same kind of phenomenon that should be assigned the same place in society. Preferably, this should not be in those domains in which secular thinkers and politicians want to have the highest authority.⁹ However, specific religions always see themselves as exceptions to such universal notions of "religion." Although terms such

6 Karl Barth, "No Boring Theology!: A Letter From Karl Barth," trans. William Rader, *South East Asia Journal of Theology* 11 (1969): 3-5.

7 Lai, "Barth's Theology of Religion and the Asian Context of Religious Pluralism": 257f.

8 George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York, NY; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 70-75.

9 Cf. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

as *dharma* (Hinduism) or *dīn* (Islam) may roughly translate as “religion,” their precise meaning differs in each tradition.¹⁰

When theologians such as John Hick try to create a theology of religion by transcending specific religions, they start with their own particular understanding of religion. Such perspectives on what religion is are often based on modern Western perspectives and values. Sometimes such a general understanding of human religiosity is rooted in particular religious traditions. This is the case with Stanley Samartha, whose theology of religions draws heavily on *Advaita Vedanta*.¹¹ Yet, Hick and Samartha do not sufficiently consider whether such a starting point can do justice to the particularity of the Christian faith.¹² A Christian theology of religions must be a *Christian* theology of religions that theologizes based on what Christ has shown us about the trinitarian God. Only from this starting point can we rightly speak about God’s relation to the world of religious pluralism and to other specific religious traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. This does not prohibit open and critical conversation between different religious traditions, but rather makes it possible by allowing different religionists to engage in the conversation starting from their own particular understanding of religion and religious diversity.

As a second step, in §17.2 Barth judges all human religion in light of Christ’s revelation to be *Unglaube* or “unbelief,” idolatry,¹³ and self-justification or justification by works.¹⁴ Human religions are a rejection of God’s gracious revelation and reconciliation offered in Jesus Christ.

10 Cf. Christoph Auffarth and Hubert Moher, “Religion,” ed. Kocku von Stuckrad, trans. Robert R Barr, *The Brill Dictionary of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Benno van den Toren, “Religion,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 736-737.

11 So Stanley J. Samartha, “The Cross and the Rainbow: Christ in a Multireligious Culture,” in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (London: SCM Press, 1988), 69-88.

12 For this criticism in more general terms, cf. Alvin Plantinga, “A Defense of Religious Exclusivism,” in *The Rationality of Belief & the Plurality of Faith: Essays in Honor of William P. Alston*, ed. Thomas D. Senior (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 191-215.

13 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2, The Doctrine of the Word of God*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 301-307; cf. Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik I/2, Die Lehre vom Wort Gottes* (Zollikon: Verlag der Evangelischen Buchhandlung, 1938), 328-335.

14 Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2*, 307-314; cf. Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik I/2*, 335-343.

Asian defenders of Barth's criticism on religion rightly point out that this criticism is just as much about Christianity, and perhaps even more so, as Christians have no excuse not to embrace God in Christ.¹⁵ Exclusivist visions of Christian faith are often put aside as arrogance: "What gives you the right to think you know better?" When looking at Christian faith as a religion there is indeed no reason for arrogance or even self-confidence, rather the opposite. Many Christian practices, and especially those in the secular West, pale in comparison to the decades-long efforts of Hindu ascetics looking for a spark of the divine, the commitment of Muslims to religious practices that shape their entire lives, or the concentration and patience with which Zen Buddhists seek to free themselves from everything that can hinder their experience of the true light. This reproach of undue arrogance is justified when aimed at the viewpoints Barth criticizes, which see Christianity as the pinnacle of human religion. However, if revelation is something we receive, arrogance should never occur. As the Sri Lankan theologian D.T. Niles says, from this perspective interreligious testimony is like one beggar telling the other beggars where they can find bread.

Recognizing that Barth's criticism is just as much about the Christian religion, we must also face the concrete implications of his criticism of religion as idolatry and as human resistance to God's conciliatory acts. Barth's critique is not merely about religion in a generic sense, but about specific religious phenomena as well. This becomes apparent when he speaks of "the Christian religion and all other religions"¹⁶ instead of using "religion" in the singular. It is also made clear in his isolated yet concrete discussion of the Jōdo Shinshū tradition in Buddhism.¹⁷ This is important because Christians in secular Europe can easily take on roles as defenders of religion and spirituality against secular critique. Christians from other parts of the world can help Western Christians to become more aware of

15 J.A. Di Noia, "Religion and the Religions," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge, UK; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 252; Lai, "Barth's Theology of Religion and the Asian Context of Religious Pluralism": 250f; Sven Ensminger, *Karl Barth's Theology as a Resource for a Christian Theology of Religions*, T & T Clark Studies in Systematic Theology 28 (New York, NY: London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2014), 216; Moe, "Karl Barth against Religion, Not Religions": 119.

16 Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2*, 248, cf. 327; cf. Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik I/2*, 309, cf. 358.

17 Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2*, 340-344; cf. Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik I/2*, 372-377.

the dark sides of religion. Religion does not necessarily bring us closer to God and does not always contribute to human flourishing.

In the third and final step, in §17.3, Barth considers the possibility of the existence of "true religion." Religion is not just "abolished," as it says in the old English translations of the German *Aufhebung*,¹⁸ but can also be "exalted."¹⁹ These are the two sides of the Hegelian use of the word *aufheben* implied in Barth's use. This elevation of religion is not due to an inherent quality of human religion, but rather happens despite what human religion is. According to Barth there can only be true religion in the same way that Christians speak about a "justified sinner." Christian religion only becomes true religion if and when God decides to speak through these religious words and practices. Therefore, the truth of religion comes from the outside. Here we encounter Barth's actualism, which is another distinctive characteristic of his way of thinking.²⁰ This has to do with his emphasis on the sovereignty and freedom of God. The church and people can never "own" God's knowledge, as that would give them power over it. Instead, believers and the church must continually receive that knowledge by God's revelation *in actu*, through God's revelatory action. That is why we cannot say that Scripture and the church's proclamation *are* God's Word, only that they *become* it time and time again. The same applies to the Christian faith as the true religion.

CHRISTIAN FAITH AND OTHER TRUE LIGHTS

The fact that human religion can rise above itself perhaps provides hope for other religions as well as for Christian religion. Asian theologians such as Chung and Moe²¹ link Barth's vision on true religion to his *Lichterlehre* or "doctrine of lights," which was written two decades later (1959) in *Church Dogmatics* IV/3. It is here that Barth writes about the possibility of seeing "the light of life" (Christ) in other true words spoken *extra muros ecclesiae*,

18 Moe, "Karl Barth against Religion, Not Religions": 116.

19 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 326; cf. Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* I/2, 357.

20 Cf. Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 30-32, 67-70.

21 Chung, "Karl Barth and Inter-Religious Dialogue"; Chung, "Karl Barth's Theology of Reconciliation in Dialogue with a Theology of Religions"; Moe, "Karl Barth against Religion, Not Religions."

even when Christ is not confessed.²² In line with the aforementioned authors, we do not need to see this as a radical break from his earlier theology. These words outside the church can be true in the same way that religion can be true: they become true because God uses these words as his own, rather than because of any intrinsic value they have. Therefore, they can only be true *in actu*, as a momentary event, when God freely speaks his revelatory words through these human words. These words are only “the voice of certain *individual* events and elements in world history.”²³

This implies that this *Lichterlehre* cannot be used to show that God can *just as well* reveal God’s self in other religious traditions. God can do so, but these words are different in character from divine speech within the Christian Scriptures and Christian proclamation. According to Barth, true words outside the church that are “parables of the kingdom”²⁴ are another type of true words alongside the proclamation of the church and the words of Scripture. He says that these three types of light form three concentric circles around the light of Christ.²⁵ Just as the proclamation of the church has to be tested by Scripture which testifies of Christ, the profane similitudes of God’s kingdom must be tested by Scripture, the church dogmas, and their fruit.²⁶ Furthermore, according to Barth the words of Scripture have a different character from the true words outside the church. In other places he also emphasizes how the words of Scripture must *become* God’s Word every time—the Word happens. However, in comparison to true words outside the church, it becomes clear that the word of God in the Christian Scriptures has a different kind of continuity. While words outside the church are fragmented and happen momentarily, the words of Scripture are a constant companion of the church:

22 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/3, The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 109-135; cf. Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik IV/3, Die Lehre von der Versöhnung, Part 3, 1st half-vol.* (Zollikon, Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1959), 122-153.

23 Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/3*, 131; cf. Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik IV/3*, 148 (“individual” is emphasized in the German original, but not in the English translation); cf. Ensminger, *Karl Barth’s Theology as a Resource for a Christian Theology of Religions*, 218.

24 Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/3*, 117; cf. Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik IV/3*, 130.

25 Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/3*, 109; cf. Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik IV/3*, 122.

26 Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/3*, 125-130; cf. Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik IV/3*, 141-146.

Even though they [the words *extra muros ecclesiae*] are uttered as products of the omnipotent prophecy of Jesus Christ, and are to be claimed and respected as true words, they *lack* the unity and compactness and therefore the *constancy* and *universality* of His self-revelation as it takes place and is to be sought in Holy Scripture.²⁷

This parallels what Barth says in §17.3, not merely that “true religion” can exist, but explicitly that “the Christian religion is the true religion,”²⁸ Christianity has a unique place among all religious traditions because, and in so far as, this is the place where Christ is confessed as the one and only Word of God and the true light that enlightens every human being.

Of course, this can present a massive obstacle for interreligious conversation; how much of an obstacle it presents will depend on the conversation partners. In dialogue with Islam, the reference to a decisive divine revelation will be shared and the dialogue will need to focus on the nature and locus of this revelation. For Asian religious traditions such as Advaita Vedanta Hinduism and Theravada Buddhism, no historic text, person, or event can adequately express the ineffable transcendent mystery, and in these contexts the unique quality that Christians ascribe to Christ and the Christian canon of Scripture is hard to accept. Christian theologians from South Asia, such as Stanley Samartha and R.S. Sugirthharaja, argue that interreligious dialogue in the context of Asian religious pluralism demands that Christians give up the decisive meaning of Christ for everyone.²⁹

If the Christian faith were no more than a human religion or a human linguistic construct, it would indeed be arrogant to say that this particular religion can claim a unique Archimedean point from which all human religion can be assessed. Thus, Barth’s realism is key to his theology: “The decisive thing for the existence of the Church and the children of God and for the truth of their religion [...], is the fact that by the grace of

27 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, 131; Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* IV/3, 148 (emphasis in the German original, but not in the English translation).

28 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, 326; cf. Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* I/2, 357.

29 Stanley J. Samartha, “The Cross and the Rainbow: Christ in a Multireligious Culture,” in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (London: SCM Press, 1988), 69–88; R. S. Sugirtharajah, “Inter-Faith Hermeneutics: An Example and Some Implications,” *Mission Studies* 7, no. 1 (Jan. 1990): 9–10.

God they live by His grace.”³⁰ True faith and true religion are not human constructs, but are a response to God’s prior act and word.³¹ This is the decisive issue in his excursus on Jōdo Shinshū (“true sect of the pure land”) in Buddhism.³² Here he points out that this movement has a high awareness of the need for grace and that this resembles the Christian, and specifically the Protestant, view of grace. In this context, he argues that the truth of the Christian faith results not from it being a religion of grace but because it is based on the name of Jesus Christ. It testifies of the truth of God in Christ, and the fact that it is a religion of grace is merely a derivative of that, a sign or “symptom.”³³ Failings of the church and flaws and even lies in the proclamation of the church taint the Christian religion:

But there can be no alteration in the objective content, that they are what they are, and therefore bearers of the true religion, only in Him, in the name of Jesus Christ, i.e., in the revelation and reconciliation achieved in Jesus Christ.³⁴

It is only because of this relationship with Christ that the Christian faith is able to distinguish itself from other religions.³⁵ Once we realize that nothing about the Christian community itself sets her apart from other religions, then we can say that Christianity is the true religion without falling into unforgivable pride. However, in true Barthian fashion, he argues that it is precisely because this faith is based on a God who speaks, reconciles, and elects through Christ, that we can, are allowed to, and even should say that Christianity is the true religion. Thus, the unique place of this religious community and tradition is not based on any particular quality of her own but is, rather, a consequence of her divine election for the world as a whole

30 Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2*, 345; cf. Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik I/2*, 378.

31 Benno van den Toren, *Christian Apologetics as Cross-Cultural Dialogue* (London; New York, NY: T. & T. Clark, 2011), 78-80.

32 Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2*, 340-344; cf. Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik I/2*, 372-377.

33 Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2*, 343; cf. Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik IV/3*, 377.

34 Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2*, 346; cf. Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik I/2*, 379.

35 “...the presence and reality of the grace of God, which, of course, differentiates our religion, the Christian, from all others as the true religion.” Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2*, 327; cf. Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik I/2*, 358.

and for the world of religions in which she gets to proclaim the name of Christ as the one and only name.³⁶

BEYOND BARTH

I consider Barth's basic starting point for his theology of religion in the self-revelation of God to be fundamentally sound. This starting point is a consequence of the grateful recognition that God made Godself known in the history of Israel, in Christ, and in the gift of the Spirit. Although of course this recognition is contested in a religiously pluralist world, it can be shared humbly yet confidently, and it can be critically discussed in interreligious dialogue. Barth's starting point also implies that human religion cannot simply be affirmed. Instead, religion as a human phenomenon needs to be critically assessed to determine whether such religious expressions are not idolatrous creations shaped by limited human perspectives and ideological biases. This may sound harsh and overly critical, but a fair consideration of the vast array of phenomena labelled as religious will show that not all of these can be considered equal contributions to human flourishing. In practice, all theologies of religion employ some type of criteria to judge human religion. Barth also invites us to the joyful recognition that, despite human failure, true religion and even *a* true religion exists. All these aspects stand or fall with the recognition that God has truly let Godself be known in Christ. Otherwise, the particularity of this starting point is arbitrary, the judgment of human religion is unmerciful, and the proclamation of the Christian faith as the true religion is arrogant.

Yet, we must recognize that Barth was dealing with completely different challenges from those we are facing today in our globalizing context: how do we as Christians live in a multireligious world? More specifically: how can and should these decisive Barthian insights be developed in a critical, intercultural, theological conversation with Asian theologians? I propose three ways forward.

Firstly, Barth's christological insights will have to be developed in a broader trinitarian framework in order to avoid the justified reproach of

36 Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI; Geneva: W.B. Eerdmans; WCC Publications, 1989), 80-88.

“christomonism.”³⁷ Barth is considered one of the initiators of the revival of trinitarian thinking in twentieth-century theology. Yet, the christological concentration of his theology, though understandable in his particular context, has resulted in a trinitarian deficit. According to Barth, we can never say anything about the Creator that has not already been said in Christ, and Barth’s theology of the Holy Spirit is in many respects a mere repetition of his Christology in other words. However, even when God acts in a unique and decisive way in Christ, and we recognize the unity within the Trinity, we still need to speak about the particular ways God relates to creation and humanity as Father and Holy Spirit.³⁸ The way in which God as Creator acts and reveals Godself cannot be reduced to the history of God in Christ. Similarly, the Spirit always works in view of the accomplishment of creation in Christ but works in particular ways that are proper to the Spirit and also beyond the confines of the church. This understanding creates new possibilities for interreligious encounters because it invites Christians to be open to aspects of the Creator’s presence and work that others have seen. Trinitarian theology also invites Christians to be open to the Spirit’s work in other religious communities that relate differently to the same salvation history which will eventually lead to the unification of the whole of creation together under Christ (Eph 1:10).³⁹

Barth’s difficulty in recognizing the hand of the Creator in creation and the work of the Spirit in salvation history had to do with his actualism. This is a second area in which we need to move beyond Barth. He continually criticized and denied each form of knowledge about God that would give human beings *Verfügung*, or control over God, because this would compromise God’s freedom and sovereignty.⁴⁰ This is why for Barth

37 Cf. Paul Knitter, “Christomonism in Karl Barth’s Evaluation of the Non-Christian Religions,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 13, no. 1 (1971): 99-121.

38 For example, David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

39 Cf. Benno van den Toren, “The Relationship between Christ and the Spirit in a Christian Theology of Religions,” *Missiology* 40, no. 3 (July 2012): 263-280.

40 For example, Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/1, The Doctrine of God*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 21ff, 69ff; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/2, The Doctrine of God*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 523; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/4, The Doctrine of Creation*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975),

Scripture cannot be God's Word; instead, it rather becomes the Word of God. This is also why God cannot be seen in creation, because that would allow us to be in charge of that knowledge. It also explains why God's speaking through other words in the world of religion can only happen as an event in a point of time, and why it can only be received *in actu*, because otherwise we could make such knowledge our possession and master it. However, is it indeed the case that knowledge we receive is thus within our control? When I consider the example of my spouse, I do not think so. I can indeed know her, but only as a gift I receive. The moment I try to control her, I create more distance instead of becoming closer to her. It is only possible to know someone personally if we abandon our need for control. In this respect, personal knowledge of other people is different from knowledge of nonhuman creation. Even more so than with fellow human beings, knowledge of God can only be received when we submit to God and grow in our ability to make space for God. According to Sarah Coakley, the false presupposition that knowing God will enable us to control God has led to a widely shared idea that we cannot have knowledge of God. Against this, she posits the possibility of knowing God by giving up all desire for control, and she invites her readers to a theological asceticism in which growth in knowledge goes hand in hand with growth in obedience.⁴¹

If God can only speak *in actu* and leaves no traces in either creation or history, then God's speaking through Scripture or in the church cannot be different from God's speaking in "other true words *extra muros ecclesiae*." Barth does not draw this conclusion and rightly so, but he does distinguish God's words outside the church, which are always momentary events, from God's speaking through Scripture, in which there is a certain continuity because of the presence of the testimony to Christ. This is in line with Barth calling Christianity true religion. Yet, Christianity then needs to be the true religion in a stronger sense than in his own idea in which

10–11; Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, 847; cf. Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* II/1, *Die Lehre von Gott*, 1st half-vol. (Zollikon: Verlag der Evangelischen Buchhandlung, 1940), 21ff, 74ff; Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* II/2, *Die Lehre von Gott*, 1st half-vol. (Zollikon: Verlag der Evangelischen Buchhandlung, 1940), 580; Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* III/4, *Die Lehre von Gott* (Zollikon: Verlag der Evangelischen Buchhandlung, 1940), 10; Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* IV/3, 971.

41 Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay "on the Trinity"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 289.

Christianity in this respect resembles the notion of a “justified sinner.”⁴² Otherwise we could think of this justification as mere forensic reality *extra nos*, with no influence on the actual reality of the sinner and Christian religion. However, Barth believes that the Scriptures and the witness of the church have a certain value that sets them apart from other religious phenomena. There is a certain continuity in them being a witness to Christ. In this sense, Christianity is not just true religion in the same way that we speak of a “justified sinner.” Barth also speaks of the *sanctification* of the church as a reason for it being the true religion.⁴³ This is not merely forensic but changes the reality of the church as a human religious community. John Webster helpfully uses the same terminology when he calls Scripture “sanctified”: Scripture is human made, but at the same time it is set apart because God has chosen to speak through these words.⁴⁴

In interreligious dialogue, Christians are not merely waiting for God’s momentary words which may occur in their own words as well as in the words of other religious communities. We can point to the unique presence and unique conciliatory acts of Christ to which Scripture gives reliable testimony. This reliable testimony is not only confirmed by God’s speech *in actu* through these words but is also an inherent characteristic of these texts. Interreligious conversation is not merely a testimony of how and where we met God, in which God’s actual speaking through these human words decides which of the different and sometimes opposing testimonies is true. Christians can point with confidence to the testimony in the Christian Scripture. They can point to the traces of this testimony that remain visible in history and in the community of the Church despite all the human brokenness and distortion.

If God also allows Godself to be known as Creator and Spirit, and not only in the history of Jesus of Nazareth, then we can also be open to the possibility that God has shown Godself to other religious communities. This could be done in ways that have left traces of God’s presence beyond the possibility of waiting for God’s incidental word, which can only be heard in the moment. These possibilities are not the anthropological

42 Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2*, 325; cf. Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik I/2*, 356.

43 Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2*, 326; cf. Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik I/2*, 357.

44 John B. Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

foundation of revelation so feared by Barth. Rather, they are the joyful recognition that in the light of Christ we can also recognize other lights.⁴⁵

This move beyond Barth means, thirdly and finally, that we take God's salvific work in history, in view of the salvation of humanity and creation, more seriously than Barth was able to because of his actualism. This may also shed new light on Takizawa's unsolved problem regarding the unique meaning of Christ. Is Christ merely a sign of a supra-historical *Urfaktum* that can be exchanged for other signs, or is his historical presence itself decisive? According to Barth it is decisive that God in Christ took on a concrete historical human nature. Yet, in order to ensure that human beings did not gain control over that revelation, for Barth God's speaking through Scripture always remained a momentary act, and even the resurrection as an eschatological act was untraceable in history and was thus beyond history. Barth is therefore susceptible to the critique that his understanding of revelation and salvation is, in the end, gnostic, because in his view salvation is about an alternative reality rather than about the concrete history of humanity and creation. Antonie Vos rightly said that even though the resurrection of Christ was an eschatological event, it was still the beginning of the *eschaton* right in the middle of history. The empty grave shows this: the historical body of this human being has been resurrected to the life of the *eschaton*. It was here that created reality started sharing in salvation.⁴⁶

The Sri-Lankan theologian Vinoth Ramachandra points out that Asian religions, especially forms of Hinduism and Buddhism, have strong similarities with Gnosticism. Salvation is about escaping the material world rather than about its renewal. Human beings are seen as ahistorical souls for whom historical relations have no essential meaning in determining who they are. According to Ramachandra, the Christian faith is fundamentally different in this trait from many Asian religions. This is because the Scriptures see humans as historical and social beings through and through. If God truly wanted to reach us, then it is consistent with how God created humanity that God entered history in person, and that salvation became a historical reality by Christ overcoming evil and death through his life and resurrection. The message about this salvation also entered history

45 Cf. van den Toren, *Christian Apologetics as Cross-Cultural Dialogue*, 192f.

46 Antonie Vos, *Het is de Heer! de opstanding voorstelbaar* (Kampen: Kok, 1990), 293.

and was carried forward by a community that, despite its flaws, embodied the message and passed it on.⁴⁷ We have seen that, and have also realized that Barth cannot fully accept this because of his actualism. Could it be that Ramachandra, who lives in a Buddhist culture just as Takizawa before him, understands the pervasive power of this gnostic understanding of salvation so well that he is better placed to show the likes of Takizawa the uniqueness and necessity of the historical Christ?

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47 Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Recovery of Mission: Beyond the Pluralist Paradigm* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1997), 224-264.