

UNIVERSITATEA DIN BUCUREȘTI

The Importance of Karl Barth's Theology for a Theological
Reflection on the Relationship Between Church and
Society

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1. Summary

The present research proposal is made towards meeting the requirements for habilitation in the area of theology according to the regulations existing in Romania. The academic activity of the author is focused on the following areas: dogmatic theology, history of Christian theology, moral theology, practical theology, political theology, social theology and confessional theological identity. The area of interest and research is an interdisciplinary one and is motivated by a desire to understand better the interaction between theology and other academic disciplines. It is also based on an interest to observe and evaluate various aspects of modern society from a theological perspective. An important dimension of this type of research is the personal involvement of the author in the various projects which are used for theological reflection.

As an inspiration for the theological thinking I have used the perspective offered by the Swiss theologian Karl Barth as well as the impact his thinking had on the reflection of various other theologians, mainly Protestant and Baptist but not only. Such an engagement of theology with real life is an urgent need for the church in our modern society. I have also appealed to the thinking of the Baptist theologian, Paul Fiddes from the University of Oxford and to other theologians interested in reflecting theologically on modern culture and society.

Of particular interest to the author is gaining a better understanding of the impact that communities of believers have on other people and groups who are socially marginalized due to various causes such as poverty, ethnicity or race. This analysis tries to develop along the suggested ideas of a new interdisciplinary methodology called ecclesiology and ethnography. Exploration from an ethnographic perspective makes it possible for theologians to engage in a comparison between stated beliefs of religious practitioners and their practices.

One of the specific subjects for theological reflection comes from a charitable initiative started by the author in the Ferentari district of Bucharest. While being the pastor of a local Baptist church, a social project was started by the community of believers who wanted to address issues of poverty, health and illiteracy among the local population and especially among those belonging to the Roma ethnic group. The initiative was called Project Ruth and was subsequently taken over by

Fundația Providența which was set up to provide oversight and raise the necessary funding. Currently the initiative has a school with 220 students (the Ruth School which is accredited for grades 0-8) and in a number of other additional programs developed by the foundation to help the general situation. The foundation, the school and the church are trying in this way to meet the needs of the community to which they belong.

To support the interdisciplinary efforts mentioned above a research center was set up in 2013 with the name: Faith and Culture. The center was started as an initiative of Facultatea de Teologie Baptista in the University of Bucharest in cooperation with Fundația Providența and other organizations. Its main research directions are related to an international network called Ecclesiology and Ethnography. In order to be able to better pursue these areas of interest research is done through cooperation between several higher education institutions and charities from Romania and abroad such as: Baptist Theological Institute in Bucharest, Providence Foundation, Regent's Park College, Oxford University, TCMI International US Evangelical Theological Faculty in Leuven, Belgium, University of Chisinau and Share Gratia IBTS-C in Amsterdam.

Other interdisciplinary preoccupations include developing a theological reflection on ethical practices in the context of late modern thought. For the Christian perspective, the relativism characteristic of modern societies represents a challenge to the way it understands values and society. Trying to develop an appropriate language about the subjects engaged will hopefully lead to a more realistic perspective of the problems of modernity and to finding the best way for Christian theology to engage with contemporary topics of interest. Some of this engagement comes from personal experience as Vice-President of the Ethics Commission of the Baptist World Alliance in the years 2005-2010.

For a better understanding of values are formed in modern society there is a need for an exploration of the relationships between faith and various areas of social life such as politics and culture. From the perspective of a tradition of Christian thought that adopts the principle of separation of church and state, understanding how the political process takes place in relation to Christian beliefs is particularly important for understanding the impact that religion and faith can have on people and on the

communities that they belong to. Due to this principle Baptists argued the need to guarantee religious freedom as essential for any democratic society. Religious freedom is not seen by Baptists from a political perspective but as grounded in the understanding of man as a creature of God which made him His image and likeness

This reflection is complemented by a more specific exploration of the main directions of development of theology and Baptist identity of our country. Studying the development of the Baptist communities of faith in Romania is of interest to understand the specific aspects of the identity of a significant community of Baptists in Europe. In over 150 years of existence in Romania and over 400 years of existence in the world, Baptists have brought specific contributions to countries in which they live but were at the same time influenced by interaction with other church traditions.

Personal involvement in the leadership of various national and international Baptists bodies and participating in various working groups and committees of global Baptist bodies led to an interest in understanding better what challenges and opportunities Baptists have in the modern global context. This reflection is developed particularly in partnership with the Research Center for Historical Studies of the Baptist Theological Baptist Theological Institute in Bucharest.

As a professor at the University of Bucharest and the dean of Baptist Theology Faculty I the opportunity to contribute in various ways to the evaluation of competencies for teaching theology (for example in the program DOCIS-ACPART) and as a member of the theology section of CNADTCU.

2. Academic research contributions and research interests

Although the work of Karl Barth is not as well known to readers of theology in the Romanian language, its impact is extremely important as his thinking anticipates in many ways modernity and late modernity. As one of the most important theologians of the twentieth century Karl Barth impact is well beyond his own Reformed tradition. His interaction with Orthodox theology in Romania was not extensive although Dumitru Stăniloae was a conversant with his theology and even engaged with him in his theological work. Barth critically and creatively

interacts with all theological traditions offering a contribution that reflects his deep held faith in God who is revealed through Christ. My interest in his theology comes from my studies with Professor Paul Fiddes at Regent's Park College, Oxford University and from my doctoral work with Professor Juhasz Tomas of the Protestant Institute in Cluj.

The relevance of Barth's theology comes from the questions he asks especially about contemporary Christianity when he remarks that the church often fails to avoid the temptation to try to remain the dominant factor in various spheres such as: the social, the political, the cultural and moral. Thus theology may find itself in danger of turning ideology, losing prophetic voice and revolutionary because it abandons the connection with Christ in favor of the connection with the world. This is especially a danger in the context of Romania, a country where society tries to recover its moral values after years of communist atheism.

a. God's true Word and its relationship with other words

The first research direction of interest is the exploration of the contemporary cultural context described as late modernity. One of the characteristics of this period is that truth seems to be invested with less authority than in the modern period. Barth considers that we cannot talk about God as the object of human knowledge but rather as the one who makes himself known of his own initiative. Therefore, knowing God is not in the sphere of the possibilities of human discoveries but it is something God makes possible through grace. Besides engaging with late modern thinking Barth challenges also some elements that are part of the perspective of classical theology.

b. God's true Word and its implication in defining Christian ethics

The problem of ethics and morality is another theme of interest for modern society and for communities of faith. It also represents a possible place of dialogue between church, culture since morality remains important for any type of society. One of the important questions from the perspective of Christian theology is if it is possible to develop a Christian ethic discourse from the perspective of late modernity. Therefore, it is important to explore the relationship between the relationship between God's true light and other lights, between the unique Word spoken by God and other words. Hopefully by engaging in this the theologian can

find secular parables of the truth in the realm of morality. Although Karl Barth was not able to finish his reflection on ethics his theological reflection points towards several directions along which ethical reflection can develop.

c. God's true Word and the issue of politics

The third direction of interest for research is to explore the relationship between politics and theology. This represents a significant interest in Barth's theology and is reflected in his attitude towards national socialism in Germany, materialist capitalism in the West and communism in Soviet Russia. Barth is willing to recognize the existence of the civil community as something ordained (*ordinatio, instituere*), but at the same time as an authority that should act according to God's will. At the same time the Kingdom of God should not be found, according to Barth in any human type of political ideology or state.

d. Practical theology and ethnography

The fourth research direction is determined by Project Ruth, the charitable effort described above. The question of what can a local church do for the community in which they exist has to be answered together with the question about why people who belong to a Christian congregation would behave differently than fellow citizens towards marginalized groups. The second question is particularly relevant when the marginalized include people who sometimes are perceived as a threat. By qualitative research the theologian tries to understand how faith becomes a motivational factor in the social context of a community.

e. Centrul de cercetare - Cultură și credință

The fifth research direction is defined by the formation of a research center in 2013. The Centre for Faith and Culture tries to reflect on the relationship between faith and culture with the purpose of contributing to the common good. This is done in cooperation with other academic institutions and organizations that work for the public interest. The center encourages such activities as analysis, reflection, social research, cultural mediation and reconciliation.