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Canadian Journal of Theology

A QUARTERLY OF CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

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Barth on Talk about God

Contemporary analytic philosophy of religion tends to be focussed on a question which strikes at the very foundations of Christian theology: Is it possible to talk about God? Do words shift in meaning so much when applied to God that they cease to have meaning?

The question was directed at Christians by empiricist critics such as Antony Flew[1] and Ronald Hepburn[2] over a decade ago, and it evoked a variety of replies: the eschatological verificationism of John Hick,[3] the reduced-claim perspectivitism of Paul van Buren,[4] the religion-has-its-own-logic of D. Z. Phillips,[5] the qualified models and discernment-commitment of Ian Ramsey,[6] etc. But the problem of significant reference to God is not a merely external challenge, originating from Flew and Hepburn. Modern empiricism does give rise to it, but it was also a problem for Thomas Aquinas and for Karl Barth. The problem arises not only because of philosophical frameworks into which an intelligible notion of God is not easily introduced, but also because of a tension between two tendencies within the Christian theological tradition itself. On the one hand, the tradition includes numinous experience in which God seems wholly other, mystical experience in which God is ineffable, and passages of scripture which insist that God is beyond our human understanding. All these have led Christian thinkers to deny that our human words can apply to God at all, or to insist that they cannot apply unless there is a drastic change in meaning. On the other hand, Christians believe that God has, after all, revealed himself, either to all men or to some. At the very least, some of the language of scripture must be applicable to him. This has led Christian thinkers to insist that we *can* talk meaningfully about God. Thus the problem of significant reference to God arises within Christian theology as a problem of holding together both the negative and the positive tendencies in the tradition.

A confident solution to the problem, stressing the positive tendency, has

1. Cf. A. Flew, 'Theology and Falsification,' in Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, eds., *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1955).
2. Cf. R. W. Hepburn, *Christianity and Paradox* (London: Watts, 1958).
3. Cf. J. Hick, *Faith and Knowledge* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1957).
4. Cf. P. M. van Buren, *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (London: SCM Press, 1963).
5. Cf. D. Z. Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer* (London: Routledge, 1965); articles by Phillips, Malcolm, and Winch, in D. Z. Phillips, ed., *Religion and Understanding* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967). See also Stuart Brown, *Do Religious Claims Make Sense?* (London: SCM Press, 1969).
6. Cf. I. T. Ramsey, *Religious Language* (London: SCM Press, 1957).

been given by neo-Thomism,[7] with its doctrine of the analogy of being: words applied to God shift in their meaning in accordance with an intelligible analogy between human and divine being. A major alternative to this is provided by Karl Barth, who stresses negative elements. Although Barth's discussion of the problem is important, it has not been given much detailed study by the analytic philosophers who are concerned with the problem.[8] It seems to me that there are two reasons for this neglect. First, Barth's writings are so massive, difficult, complex, and interrelated that even a survey of him on one issue is an intimidating research project. This obviously would not be by itself a sufficient reason for neglecting Barth, if he seemed to be worth the effort. But to most analytic philosophers he does not. The second reason for neglect is that what he says concerning the problem, early in his *Church Dogmatics*, seems to these philosophers to be no answer at all because of its obscurity or incoherence.

Although I am intimidated by Barth's theological corpus and although I am not convinced by what I take to be his solution to the problem of significant reference to God, I think it is possible and useful to write an essay on 'Barth on talk about God.' I have three reasons for this. First, the task can be reduced to manageable proportions if we focus on Barth's consideration of the problem in section 27 (volume II, part 1) of his *Church Dogmatics*,[9] referring *Humanity of God*[10] or sections in volume III[11] where Barth may be revising occasionally to other sections in volumes I and II, but not considering *The* section 27. A reader of my essay will not be misled unless he takes it to be a reliable synoptic survey of Barth rather than a study of section 27. Secondly, section 27 deals with many ideas which are important within Christian thought but which are often ignored in philosophical writings on Christian language. Barth's version of these ideas is often so exaggerated as to be untenable, but

7. Cf. for example, James F. Anderson, *The Bond of Being* (St. Louis: B. Herder. 1949); *Reflections on the Analogy of Being* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967). A very different account of Aquinas is given by Victor Preller, *Divine Science and the Science of God* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967). Preller's position is similar to Barth's in many respects.

8. Ian Ramsey briefly examines Barth on the problem of significant reference to God and finds him incoherent: 'The truth is that Barth can never do with logical links between Christian theology and ordinary discourse; but neither can he do without them' ('Paradox in Religion,' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 33 [1959], 212). Frederick Ferré sketches and attacks the position of some Barthian theologians in *Language, Logic and God* (New York: Harper, 1961), pp. 78–93. John Macquarrie quickly outlines and criticizes Barth in *God-Talk* (London: SCM Press, 1967), pp. 41–9. Some followers of Wittgenstein (Phillips, Malcolm, and Brown; cf. note 5 above) are similar to Barth on issues such as the interpretation of the ontological argument and the autonomy of the Christian 'language-game'; but Barth's approach concerning the problem of significant reference to God, with its stress on the unintelligibility of God-talk to *believers*, is not endorsed even by them.

9. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957.

10. Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1963; cf. especially pp. 51–6.

11. For example, *Church Dogmatics*, III/2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), pp. 264–72.

this should not put us off. Thirdly, these ideas can be related in interesting ways to ideas in contemporary analytic philosophy, even though Barth himself was remote from this philosophy.

For Barth the question concerning significant reference to God must be considered within the context of God's revelation in his word (Christ, scripture, church proclamation). He is not interested in 'religious' language (indeed, he thinks that religion ought to be abolished!)[12] but in a use of language by Christians. He poses the question in the following way: 'Where do we find the veracity in which we apply to God words which as such are inadequate to describe Him, as we all do at every point when we speak directly or indirectly about God? Does there exist a simple parity of content and meaning when we apply the same word to the creature on the one hand and to God's revelation and God on the other?'[13] Barth's answer is that there is no such simple parity of content and meaning. He rejects what Thomists call 'univocity.' But he also denies that there is a disparity of meaning, for if this were so, we could not know God. We do know God, for he has revealed himself to us. Barth thus also rejects, or seems to reject, what Thomists call 'equivocity.' So for Barth 'there remains only what is generally meant by analogy: similarity, partial correspondence and agreement.'[14] But what Barth means by 'analogy' is very different from Thomistic analogy. Earlier he has insisted that 'what we can represent to ourselves lies in the sphere of our own existence and of existence generally as distinct from God,'[15] so we have no analogy on the basis of which the being of God as Creator can be accessible to us. We may consider causes and extend a series into the infinite, but what we get is not an idea of the real God, the real Creator. Rather, it is a concoction of our own, which has no resemblance to him.

According to Barth, all human words as such are equally inapplicable to God. He is severely critical of those who deny this, who have a hierarchy of language-levels which are supposed to be successively more applicable to God.[16] At the bottom of the hierarchy are the obvious anthropomorphisms, such as God's 'arm,' 'mouth,' or 'pity.' Then come the moderately improper abstract perfection-terms, such as God's 'existence,' 'goodness,' or 'wisdom.' Finally there are the negative expressions which are supposedly proper to God: 'incomprehensible,' 'infinite,' etc. But for Barth *no* words, with their

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12. Cf. *Church Dogmatics*, I/2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), sect. 17.

13. *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, p. 224.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 225.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 76. This is very different from James R. Anderson (*Reflections on the Analogy of Being*, p. 66), who says that 'universally x "is to" its existence as Y "is to" *its* existence.' This analogy of proper proportionality applies for Anderson where the x is God. We know the existence (*esse*, being) of God as 'unparticipated' being and as 'sufficient ground' of being (Anderson, *The Bond of Being*, pp. 282, 289–90). That is, God's being is known to be that of uncaused cause of existence; hence we know that goodness or wisdom are realized in God in a way appropriate to the uncaused cause of existence.

16. Cf. *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, p. 222.

human meaning, apply to God unless God 'bestows' or 'gives' truth to them.[17] The negative expressions are not superior, not closer to the truth about God. Indeed, it is misleading to downgrade the anthropomorphisms, for this may lead people to think that talk about God's actions (his 'arm') or about his revelation (his 'mouth' and his 'pity') is inferior to abstractions and negations. For Barth, all human words are equally unreliable apart from God's grace in bestowing truth.[18] Theologians who propose a totally negative theology are not radical enough for Barth, for negative notions of God are still human notions, no closer than any others to the truth concerning God.[19] It is not that we have a series of successively less misleading descriptions of God when we move from 'arm' to 'good' to 'unlimited.' Barth makes a second-order comment on *all* descriptions of God: none of these putative descriptions apply to God by virtue of their human meaning. Indeed, Barth says that 'we do not really know what we are saying when we say "God," no matter whether we try to express it by this word or by any other word.'[20] Yet in some way, we *do* know, for Barth firmly rejects agnosticism. Indeed, he bases his claim concerning the inapplicability of all human language to God, not on Kantian or empiricist philosophical reflection concerning the limits of human thought, but on God's revelation to man. God reveals himself as hidden, as beyond human language. According to Barth it is not the case 'that by means of a clarification of the meaning and understanding of our words as such we can press forward to a provisional meaning and understanding of their use in relation to God.'[21] God permits and commands man to use human words which express human perceptions and concepts to designate God, but these as such, as man's own, 'are not only partly insufficient but wholly and utterly insufficient to designate God,' and man 'cannot take these instruments in hand without realising that they are quite impotent for this employment.'[22] Human words apply to God only by the grace of God, who bestows truth on them.

Barth's account is bewildering, especially the claim that God bestows truth on human words whose human meaning, as such, provides no basis for understanding their meaning when applied to God. We shall consider this point shortly, but first we should examine a passage[23] in which he discusses a question which also arises in Thomism: Do words which we rightly apply to God apply primarily and properly (i.e. literally) to him and secondarily and improperly (i.e. non-literally) to men? According to Aquinas,[24] any perfection in an effect must pre-exist in its cause in a superior way (unless the cause is of the same type). The word signifying the perfection applies primarily and more properly to the cause, and only derivatively and less properly to the effect; for

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 230, 231, 233; cf. pp. 197, 198.

18. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 222, 235.   19. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 193.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 189.   21. *Ibid.*, p. 230.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 235.   23. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 228–30.

24. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ıa, q. 13, aa. 2–3; 6; q. 4, aa. 2–3. Terence Phillip McKenna has shown the importance here of Aquinas' commentary on Ephesians 3:14f.; cf. 'The Logic of Religious Language' (doctoral thesis in philosophy, University of Toronto, 1967), p. 70.

example, the word 'healthy' applies primarily and more properly to Jones and only derivatively and less properly to the complexion which Jones' health causes. For Aquinas the perfection of a creaturely effect – for example, the goodness, wisdom, or fatherhood of men – pre-exists in God in a superior way as its cause. Hence the words 'good,' 'wise,' or 'father' apply to God primarily and properly and to men derivatively and less properly. But for Aquinas this is true only in terms of the reality signified, not in terms of the way of signifying. In terms of the way of signifying, that is, the way in which human beings understand the meanings, we first and properly apply the words to men and only derivatively and improperly to God. For Aquinas, the order of human knowing is from creature to Creator, even though the order of being is from Creator to creature. For Barth, however, the order of knowing and way of signifying must correspond to the order of being and reality signified. Any knowledge of God must start with the meaning which words have when applied to God by God. We may well wonder how it can start there, but Barth is convinced that it *must* start there. If the order of knowing does not correspond to the order of being we know not God but a God-substitute, an idol. We will try to find the source and norm for God's revelation, not from God but from within ourselves. This is Barth's underlying reason for holding that words which rightly apply to God apply primarily and properly to him and only secondarily and improperly to men. We shall consider this reason later in this essay. Here, however, we can examine another reason which Barth gives, one which resembles Aquinas' reason in that it has to do with God as Creator, though that is the sole resemblance. Aquinas claimed that a perfection in creatures must exist in their divine cause in a superior way, and he based his account of language concerning God on this metaphysical analogy. Barth says that words applied to God belong to God as his *property*, since the words (and the perceptions and concepts which they express) are his creation. Thus when God takes our words and uses them to refer to himself, he is using what 'already belongs originally and properly to Him.' Thus the words have not been 'alienated from their proper and original sense and usage.'[25] And when we apply these words to creatures, we do so in a secondary and improper (non-literal) way.

It seems to me that Barth is mistakenly treating words as if they were things alongside stars and trees and people. He is confusing two different ways in which words may be said to 'belong' to God: as *property* of God and as *descriptions* of God. Stars and trees and people may be God's property, but unlike words they cannot be descriptions of God; it makes no sense to speak of them as such. Does it make sense to speak of words as God's property? Whether or not it makes sense to speak of anyone 'owning' words is far from clear, but perhaps if someone invented a word or a language he could have some 'rights' over its use, and hence if all human language was pre-invented by God (or invented by man only because of divine inspiration), then all human language could be in some obscure sense his property. So let us assume

25. *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, p. 228.

that the notion of God 'owning' words is not nonsense. The crucial point is that the ownership of a word has nothing to do with its descriptive applicability. The descriptive meaning of a word may make it inapplicable to its owner, whether the owner be human or divine. Indeed, if ownership of a word were a sufficient condition for its applicability to the owner, then on Barth's line of argument *all* words would apply to God. Barth, however, insists that God *selects* particular words and sets aside others when he reveals to men the ways in which they must and may think about him.[26]

What are these words? Some of them, such as 'Father,' 'Creator,' and 'Lord,' occur in the scriptures.[27] Others are, as it were, *forced* upon Barth as he considers God's self-revelation.[28] These, however, are not usually first-order descriptive terms, but second-order theological commentaries on first-order terms. That is, it is not that Barth suggests that, for example, God is psychiatrist as well as healer or ombudsman as well as shepherd. Rather, for example, he rejects 'parity' and 'disparity' of meaning of words applied to God and man, and accepts a form of 'analogy.' And he claims that this second-order commentary is in some way derived from the divine revelation as such.

When Barth talks about God 'bestowing truth' on human words so that they can apply to him, he seems to have in mind mainly the first-order descriptive terms. And his talk about 'bestowing truth' is second-order commentary. Let us examine it more carefully. The first point to note is that the notion of truth-bestowal is based on a comparison between God's choice and use of *men* and God's choice and use of human *words*. For Barth, God's choice of, say John Smith, as his witness does not depend on any capacity, power, virtue, genius, or other alleged appropriateness of John Smith in contrast with other men. God adopts John Smith, appointing and empowering him to be his witness. Indeed, John Smith in himself is a sinner who is *not* an appropriate vehicle of divine revelation. That is true of *any* man. But God justifies him and sanctifies him and grants him the hidden power of Christ's resurrection life. John Smith cannot point to his sin, his inappropriateness, as an excuse for not being God's witness. In obedience to God's command, he must make the attempt, relying solely on God's authority and God's power. God's self-revelation has two prongs, so to speak: God reveals our human incapacity to do what God alone can do, and God reveals his gift to us of his capacity to do it. When confronted by God's revelation, Barth says that 'we cannot deny either the power of God, our impotence, or our power as the gracious gift of God.'[29] God commands and permits us to do what we recognize as impossible without him. This is so whether our human 'work' be to love, or to be righteous, or to bear witness to God, or to know God. According to Barth, 'Although the knowledge of God certainly does not come about without our work, it does not come about through our work, or as the fruit of our work.'[30] 'The assertion of

26. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 232f.   27. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 195.
28. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 226f.   29. *Ibid.*, p. 194.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

the hiddenness of God denotes our impotence'[31] which we realize because he reveals himself and enables us to know him. God reveals his hiddenness, *that is*, our incapacity to know him except by his capacity.

For Barth, God's action on men and his action on words are exactly parallel. Just as God 'adopts' men he 'adopts' words;[32] just as God 'justifies' men, he 'justifies' words;[33] just as God 'sanctifies' men, he 'sanctifies' words;[34] just as God 'empowers' men, he 'empowers' words.[35] Just as men are 'impotent,' so are words; they cannot apply to God unless God authorizes and empowers them to do so.[36] Just as no 'capacity' of a man provides the basis for a divine choice, so no capacity of a word does either.[37] And just as we would be mistaken if we thought that men of genius or virtue or religious sensitivity are more appropriate than other men as God's witnesses, so we would be mistaken if we thought that words which are less obviously anthropomorphic are more appropriate in talk about God. The word 'infinite' is no more inherently appropriate than the word 'righteous,' or the word 'righteous' than the word 'arm.'

When I first studied Barth it seemed to me that here he was making a simple mistake. He seemed not to notice that what corresponds to men in his comparison is not words, but sounds or written tokens which are used as words, without themselves being words. If the meaning or use which a sound or token has in human language outside the context of revelation is utterly irrelevant, then what God chooses would surely not be a word at all. This choice seemed to me to be very different from the divine choice of a man, where God chooses a man regardless of any of the man's capacities, yet still chooses a man, not an organism. It seemed to me that what is wrong with Barth is that although God's selection of men can be sensibly thought to have no basis in the capacities of the men, God's selection of words regardless of their capacities makes no sense. Now, however, it seems to me that in Barth there are three interrelated mistakes. First, if God's selection of John rather than Joe has nothing to do with any capacity whatsoever of John (and not merely has nothing to do with such-and-such a capacity which distinguishes John from other *men*) then why not choose a dog or a vegetable? Similarly, why not choose a sound or written token rather than a word? Secondly, if we ask what God *does* to the man or the word, and in neither case is there any continuity at all between an existing capacity (e.g., the man's love or the meaning of the word 'love') and what God brings about, then the change might as well be wrought in a dog or a sound as in a man or a word. Thirdly – and this is the most important error – what it makes sense to say that God does to a man differs in some basic respects from what it makes sense to say that God does to a word. Whereas it makes sense to talk about God empowering or enabling John to *love* God and other men, it does not make *similar*

31. *Ibid.*, p. 194.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 223.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 213.
34. *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, pp. 52–4.
35. *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, p. 212.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 212, 235.
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 194.

sense to talk about God empowering or enabling the *word* 'love' to describe or refer to God.

Perhaps, however, there is an intelligible kind of empowering, which combines man and word. Perhaps God empowers *John* to describe God correctly or to refer to God truly when John uses the word 'love.' This, it would seem, is part of what Barth is saying. Let us consider his account.

First of all, let us set aside such words as 'love' or 'wise,' which involve special difficulties, for later consideration. Let us consider two expressions which deserve separate and initial treatment: 'the Lord' and 'Lord.' The expression 'the Lord' is a proper name, an equivalent for the Hebrew proper name 'Yahweh.' The word 'Lord' is what I call an 'institutional-relation' term. Both differ from what I shall label 'descriptive terms,' such as 'love' or 'wise' or 'living.'

Let us consider proper names first. If I have the authority to name a ship or a baby or myself, I can take any word, x, completely disregard any descriptive meaning which it has, and say 'I hereby name this x.' For example, if I name myself 'Sterling Wise,' the descriptive meaning of the words 'sterling' and 'wise' is irrelevant to the propriety of this use as a proper name. I need be neither sterling in character nor wise in understanding. No similarity between me and the objects or people which are described as 'sterling' or 'wise' is required for the use of the words as a proper name. All that is required is my authority to name myself. If I have such an authority, men must use these words if they wish to refer to me correctly. Similarly, if God selects a word to be used as his proper name, the *meaning* of the word is irrelevant to his choice, and what he *does* to the word neither depends on its meaning nor changes its meaning. Why not call God 'the One'? Not because he is many rather than one, but presumably because God has not so named himself. It is a matter of authority. As Barth says, 'When we call God by name, we must keep to the name which he gives Himself.'[38]

If *all* the words which are correctly or truly predicated of God were proper names of God, functioning only as proper names, then there would be a relatively clear sense in which God 'bestows truth' on the words which he selects to apply to himself. There are elements in Barth's presentation which lead me to wonder whether such an account may not be implicit in his thought. He is trying to explain how we men can *refer* to God while using words whose human meanings make them inapplicable to God.[39] If no attempt is made to *describe* God, but only to *refer* to him by means of the proper names authorized by him, then we can do what we do only by his authority, yet we *can* do it. Barth talks a great deal about words used to 'denote' God or to 'refer' to God, and very little about words used to 'describe' God. Moreover, he also frequently talks about both men and words 'pointing' to God. Pointing is a way of referring which is in many respects similar to the use of proper names. One of Barth's favourite biblical witnesses is John the Baptist,

38 *Ibid.*, p. 59.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 230.

with the pointing finger. (Concerning this James Barr has somewhere said, 'The finger of John the Baptist is in need of a rest!') Moreover, some passages in Barth seem to indicate that he has a theory of *meaning* in which the meaning of a word is that to which it *refers*, the object or thing or reality which it stands for; so all words function as proper names. This theory has been rightly attacked by philosophers such as Gilbert Ryle, who dubbed it the ' "Fido"-Fido fallacy.'[40]

It seems clear, however, that a proper-name account of religious language is inadequate as an exegesis of Barth, though it may arise from one strand in his thought. Barth does talk about our use of words to *describe* God, not merely to refer to God.[41] And when Barth talks about 'names,' and about God 'naming' himself, he does not seem to be restricting himself to the use of words as proper names.

Whether or not a proper-name account is implicit and operative in Barth's thought, such an account is clearly inadequate as an over-all account of how words can be applied to God. I do not see how the reference of any of the proper names can be fixed and understood if *no* description of God can be given. Each proper name might have a different unknown referent. In the statement 'God is the Lord (Yahweh),' what is meant by the word 'God'? If it, too, is a proper name, having no descriptive connotations at all, then to what is the proper name 'the Lord' – and any other proper name – ascribed? And who is this 'God' who allegedly does the self-naming on the basis of which we correctly ascribe the name?

I have been insisting that a proper name does not apply by virtue of its descriptive meaning, if it has any. Nevertheless, as John Searle has noted, 'To use a proper name referringly is to *presuppose* the truth of certain uniquely referring *descriptive* statements,' although 'it is not ordinarily to assert these statements or even to indicate which exactly are presupposed.'[42] Hence to say 'Aristotle never existed' is to claim that a sufficient number of these presupposed descriptive statements – presupposed by referring uses of the proper name 'Aristotle' – are false.[43] Similarly if 'the Lord' is a proper name, its use presupposes the truth of some uniquely-referring descriptive statements. The authority of someone who has performed an act of naming is not enough. Thus if the statement 'The Lord is wise' is true, and the expression 'the Lord' is used as a proper name, then the truth of the statement depends on three things:

A whether the expression 'the Lord' is a proper name for what is being referred to;

40. Cf. Gilbert Ryle, 'The Theory of Meaning,' in C. A. Mace, ed., *British Philosophy in the Mid-Century* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1957).

41. Cf. *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, pp. 227, 231.

42. J. Searle, 'Proper Names,' *Mind*, 67 (1958), 171 (my italics).

43. Cf. *ibid.*, 173. The articles by Ryle and Searle are also available in Charles E. Caton, ed., *Philosophy and Ordinary Language* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963).

B whether a sufficient number of the descriptive statements presupposed con-
cerning the referent of 'the Lord' are true;

C whether the descriptive expression 'wise' is correctly applied to this referent.[44]
A proper-name theory cannot by itself provide a satisfactory account of all
language applied to God, though it may apply to some of the language, and
it may represent one element in Barth's account, in which God authoritatively
names himself.

We have seen that one way in which we may interpret Barth's talk about
God bestowing truth on a human word is in terms of naming: God takes the
word and applies it to himself as a proper name, thereby authorizing us to do
likewise. Let us now consider another way in which a word may be made
applicable to its utterer by authority, independently of his characteristics. If
I say, 'I am your Lord,' and I have authority to say this, the word 'lord'
applies to me. The word is an institutional-relation term. In contrast with such
a case, if I say 'I am *wise*,' no amount of authority can make the word 'wise'
applicable to me unless I am in fact 'wise.' Similarly, if I say to a strange
orphan, 'You can call me "father," ' I am permitting him to apply the word to
me. Without this authorization, he would not be in a position to address me as
'father' or to consider himself to be my son. But if I say, 'I am your father –
that is, your biological progenitor,' no amount of authority can make the word
father applicable to me in this sense, unless I am in fact his father. In short, I
can establish *institutional* relations between myself and others, in so far as I
have the authority to do so, by means of various 'performative' utterances.[45]
If I were an absolute monarch, with supreme authority, I could be lord, foster-
father, judge, owner, husband (of women), and so on, by merely *saying* that
I am; I could make you my servant, or my adopted son, and I could acquit
you, by *decree*. But I could not be wise, or a biological father, or brave like a
lion, or loving, or righteous, merely by *saying* so.

Thus if we ask whether or not a word 'applies' to something, we should
first of all ask whether it is being used as a proper name, or an institutional-
relation term, or a description. For example, the word 'father' might conceiv-
ably be a proper name (we do have 'Sonny' as a proper name); and it is also
used as an institutional-relation term and as a description. If the word is being
used descriptively, no amount of authority can make it applicable unless the
thing or person has the characteristics which the word connotes. (Note that
I am using the words 'descriptive' and 'descriptively' in a narrow and technical
use. Obviously an institutional-relation term such as 'lord 'or 'foster-father' is
used to *describe* people, in the ordinary sense of the word 'describe.')

Let us consider institutional-relation terms in talk about God, where the
terms apply *because God says so*.[46] If an autocratic emperor decrees, 'I am

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44. Condition c may be part of condition B, so that the statement is crypto-analytic,
like 'Aristotle was a philosopher.'

45. Concerning 'performative' utterances, cf. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with
Words* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962); Donald Evans, *The Logic of Self
Involvement* (London: SCM Press, 1963).

46. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 66–8, 147–50, and *passim*.

sole judge in all civil disputes,' he makes the words 'sole judge in all civil dis-
putes' apply to himself. Similarly, if God decrees, 'I am the Lord and you are
my servants,' he makes himself the Lord and us his servants. And similarly,
Christians believe that we have God's authority for presuming to address God
as 'Father.' We are placed in a position to acknowledge God as our Friend
because he first authoritatively acknowledges us as his friends. In short, Chris-
tians apply certain institutional-relation terms to God because God – as Barth
would say – commands us and permits us to do this. But just as the autocratic
emperor in the folk tale could not make it true that he was wearing fine
clothes simply by decreeing this, so even God himself cannot by mere decree
make the words 'wise,' 'just,' or 'patient' apply to himself, or the words 'arm'
and 'mouth.'

Usually Barth invokes divine authority or power in such a way that God
does something to human words to *make* them apply to himself; God 'be-
stows' truth. But it is possible, though (as we shall see) inappropriate, to in-
terpret Barth in a different way: God gives us the authority to believe that
certain words have meanings which correspond better to himself than other
words do. Since men cannot have a *direct* experience of God which would
provide a criterion for choosing words to apply to God, God selects particular
words and tells men (through his prophets and Jesus Christ) that these words
apply. It is not that God *makes* these words apply, for they *do* apply. It is not
that God's authority alone can make these words apply; rather, it is that God
alone is in a position to know God, and to inform men as to *which* human
words do provide approximate descriptions of himself. This may be implicit
in Barth's argument when he rejects mysticism[47] and when he insists that
without revelation our choice of words to apply to God must be completely
arbitrary.[48] But in so far as Barth *denies* that God's selection of words depends
on the appropriateness of some words in contrast with others, he cannot con-
sistently maintain such a theory.

In any case, the *institutional-relation* account does not fit in with all that
Barth says about human language. It does suggest one way in which God may
'bestow truth' on some human words, for example, 'lord.' By applying them to
himself, he makes it true that God is our Lord. But according to Barth, a
provisional understanding of the meaning of *any* words as applied to creatures
does not provide a provisional basis for understanding their meaning when
applied to God. No idea that we can have of 'lord' or 'lordship' will ever lead
us to the idea of God's lordship, even though we extend it infinitely. The ideas
which we can have do not point us to God but to a 'merely possible lordship
set in the sphere of our choosing.'[49] So an institutional-relation term such as
'Lord' is no better off than an ostensibly descriptive term such as 'Creator.'

How then are we to understand Barth's account? A proper-name account is
inadequate. An institutional-relation account deals only with *some* of the terms
applied to God, and it disregards Barth's denial that *any* terms have a human
meaning which provides even a provisional understanding of their meaning

47. Cf. *Church Dogmatics*, ɪɪ/1, pp. 11, 17–20.
48. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 232.   49. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

when applied to God. Nor is Barth saying that some words with their ordinary meaning or an analogous meaning *do* apply to God descriptively, though we can not know *which* words apart from revelation.

One sentence provides two basic clues: 'The prayer that has to be made here (in the context of seeking true knowledge of God) is that God will *set Himself as our object* and *ourselves as knowers of Him*.'[50] God bestows truth on human words by *giving himself to our words* as their object[51] and by *enabling us to understand* what they now refer to. God supplies himself as the *referent*, and God enables the man of faith to *correspond* to God so as to apprehend God.

Let us first consider Barth's talk about God giving our words truth by giving himself to be their object, enabling us to refer to him, to denote him. Barth seems to be saying that God does this by somehow placing himself where we point. This is an interesting notion. Let us consider a fanciful parallel. Let us suppose that John Smith has magical powers so that whenever he wants to he can materialize himself in a particular place. Joe Brown trusts John Smith to be 'there' when Joe Brown refers to him – not always, for Joe cannot *control* John, but usually when Joe speaks 'in faith.' So, when Joe says, 'the man in the next room is tall,' John is there. Joe's work of referring, in using the expression 'The man in the next room,' is successful. When James White uses the expression, however, *he* is *un*successful; for John Smith does not oblige. In the Barthian case, presumably, God's placing himself 'there' as a referent is God in some sense making himself *present* to the speaker, who refers to him in faith.

Although the comparison may seem to be irreverent, it is not meant to be. Indeed, outside a strict Barthianism, it has much to commend it. One need not be a Barthian to hold that in so far as knowledge of God involves at its heart a personal encounter with God, an awareness of his presence, it is not within human control, but depends on a trustful response to God's initiative. Thus when God is not 'present' to a man, the man may try to talk about him, but he is not, so to speak, 'there' for the man to refer to. Barth rightly insists that God has the initiative in any personal encounter with him. But Barth wrongly moves from this to reject any provisional understanding of talk concerning God. This is a mistake. We do have some provisional understanding of what we mean when we talk about God even in his absence. In my fanciful example, the expression 'the man in the next room' has a *meaning* whether or not it can at the moment be used as a *referring* expression. And we can understand this meaning whether or not there is at the moment a man in the next room. But for Barth an expression such as 'Creator and Lord' would *not* have a meaning, already understood by us, that *fits* God. For Barth, we do not understand the meaning when we use it to refer to God; but sometimes, when we so use it, God *comes*. Nevertheless the expression 'Creator and Lord' does not then help us in any way to *identify* the presence as a presence of *God*. The expression might just as well have been 'abracadabra.' For whatever we say

50. *Ibid.*, p. 22 (my italics).   51. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 230, 233.

is, in itself, 'entirely wrong'! I quote Barth: 'When we are obedient ... we have the promise that God Himself will acknowledge our obedience ... and this means that He will confer upon our viewing, conceiving and speaking His own veracity. The obedience to the grace of God in which man acknowledges that he is entirely wrong, thus acknowledging that God is entirely right, is the obedience which has this promise.'[52]

Let us try a slightly different model in interpreting Barth's talk about God setting himself as our object and giving himself to our words as their object. Perhaps a very peculiar ostensive definition will help. John Smith tells Joe Brown that he is going to show him something entirely new, called an 'arm.' He explains that the existing word 'arm,' with its meaning, provides no clue at all as to what an 'arm,' in *his* sense, is. He then produces a physical object, points at it, and says, 'That's an arm.' Since Joe already has some idea as to how various material-object words are used, he may understand this osten-sive definition fairly well, so as to be able to go on using the expression 'arm' in its new sense, correctly applying it to some objects and not to others. Simi-larly, Barth may be saying that God defines himself ostensively, by revealing himself sometimes when certain human words are used, for example, 'the arm of the Lord.' As in the earlier example, the ordinary meaning of 'arm' pro-vides no clue to its new meaning. In both cases, a new word such as 'carm' might just as well have been used.

If Barth has some such line of thought in mind, we should note the prob-lems which arise. One is that Wittgenstein[53] was surely right in his criticism of Augustine: ostensive definitions presuppose that one already understands to some extent how language functions in the kind of context where the definition is used. If, as Barth insists, God is utterly different from everything else, it is difficult to see how an ostensive definition could work. A second, and more important, problem is that the account would leave us with two utterly sepa-rate languages, God's language and our language, with only the sounds or tokens in common. Barth's position, however, seems to be that God does something to our human language in his act of revelation so that 'looking back from God's revelation'[54] words which in revelation have their primary and proper meaning as applied to God do also apply, though secondarily and im-properly (that is, non-literally), to men.

It seems to me that the applicability of the same word to man and to God can make sense only if there is some continuity of meaning where a word is first applied to men and then to God, though the latter meaning could be, for a Christian, the standard-setter, the normative, paradigmatic meaning. Such a new, paradigmatic meaning often arises for Christians in the case of some of the words which Barth considers:[55] not 'arm' or 'mouth,' but 'love,'

52. *Ibid.*, p. 213.
53. Cf. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), part I, especially 1–32.
54. *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, p. 229.
55. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 229f.

'patience,' 'father' (in the sense of 'loving provider' rather than merely 'progenitor') and 'person.'[56] Christian understanding of what human love, patience, fatherhood, and personality *should* be is in terms of a paradigmatic divine love, patience, fatherhood, and personality. The meaning of the words when applied to God is 'primary' and 'proper' in the sense that it provides the paradigm; but the meaning when applied to men prior to acknowledging the paradigmatic meaning does provide what Barth says it cannot provide, namely a 'provisional understanding.' If this were not so, we could not understand the paradigmatic meaning, the meaning when applied to God. Consider the case of 'person.' Barth says: 'Man is not a person, but he becomes one on the basis that he is loved by God and can love God in return. Man finds what a person is when he finds it in the person of God and his own being as a person in the gift of fellowship afforded him by God in person ... To be a person means really and fundamentally to be what God is ... capable of achieving fellowship in Himself and without need of this other.'[57] Barth's talk about the person of God is only intelligible if we can start provisionally from some initial understanding of what it is to be a human person and then revise this understanding in relation to a Christian paradigmatic meaning for 'person,' as applied to God. Barth holds that if we concede a provisional meaning we fall into idolatry; but his fear of idolatry moves him to fall into unintelligibility in his second-order commentary on language concerning God. Certainly Christians ought to fear idolatry, but I do not see why a concession concerning provisional meaning must lead to idolatry. Barth holds that the provisional meaning, the meaning when applied to men, will work as the paradigm, as a rival and overriding 'source and norm of the revelation of God within ourselves';[58] men will be judging God. This may happen, but it need not.

Indeed, Barth's second-order commentary on language concerning God seems to me to be radically incoherent. Although he rejects disparity of meaning, complete equivocity, he is committed to disparity of meaning because for him the meaning of a word applied to God must come entirely from God. When Barth speaks of 'paradox' in the following summary passage, he is setting forth a sheer contradiction: 'The (to us) inexplicable paradox of the nature of God is the fact that He is primarily and properly all that our terms seek to mean, and yet of themselves cannot mean, that He has revealed Himself to us in His original and proper being, thus remaining incomprehensible to us even in His revelation, yet allowing and commanding us to put our concepts into the service of knowledge of Him, blessing our obedience, being truly known by us within our limits.'[59]

But let us follow up one final clue in Barth. His prayer had two parts: 'that God will set Himself as our object and *ourselves as knowers of Him.*'[60] Let us consider the second part. According to Barth, God enables the man of faith to apprehend him, to acknowledge him. Christian faith is God's gift to man,

56. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 283–7.   57. *Ibid.*, pp. 284f.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 196.   59. *Ibid.*, p. 287.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

by which a man is enabled to do what he cannot do by his own capacities: he is enabled to know God. This knowledge is an *acknowledgment*, an active attitude which corresponds to God's action of self-revelation.[61] This correspondence is what Barth calls the 'analogy of faith.'[62] There can be no knowledge of God where the attitude of man is one of disinterested spectator. Faith or acknowledgment involves gratitude, trust, and obedience which correspond to God's gifts, promises, and commands in his revelation.[63]

Does this mean that we can have a provisional understanding of talk about God by examining talk about the human acknowledgment which is correlated to talk about God's gifts, promises, and commands? Can we consider the human gratitude, trust, and obedience which is believed to be appropriate as a response to God's revelation, and from this gain some understanding of that to which it is a response, namely God's giving, promising, and commanding? Can we, for example, come to think of God as the being who is such that unconditional gratitude, trust, and obedience are appropriate towards him? Can we understand the transcendence or ultimacy of God indirectly, by reference to the unconditional, ultimate responses which are believed to be appropriate towards him, responses which we call 'worship'? Does the word 'God,' indeed, *mean* 'the being worthy of worship'?

Barth's answer to all these questions is 'No.' He has two reasons for this. First, he holds that the only appropriate acknowledgment of God is the one rendered by Jesus Christ. Secondly, he holds that the acknowledgment by Jesus Christ, and the inferior, participatory acknowledgment by a Christian, are both hidden – in the same way that God is hidden, for they are the work of God.

Most Christians would agree to something like Barth's first point, if we consider it in isolation from the rest of Barth's thought. For Christians the words and deeds of Jesus Christ provide the paradigm acknowledgment of God, to which other people can only approximate. Barth's second point is what raises all the problems which we have already considered in the essay, though in a new context. Barth's account of the appropriate human acknowledgement is, he says, in the form of a postulate directed by the nature of the word of God. Assuming that one understands God's self-revelation, what is the appropriate response? Such is the direction which Barth claims for his own exposition: from God's act to man's response, not vice versa. His account is not in the form of an analysis of faith as a state of human consciousness (gratitude, trust, and obedience) from which, indirectly, we gain some initial understanding of the God to whom faith is the response. He has denied that any *experienceable* acknowledgment of the word of God is even approximately an adequate counterpart; it cannot even remotely resemble a real acknowledg-

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61. Concerning 'acknowledgment,' cf. *Church Dogmatics*, I/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936), pp. 226–50; and Evans, *Logic of Self-Involvement*, pp. 41–3.

62. *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, pp. 272–5.

63. For a discussion of this correspondence in relation to Austin's 'performatives' cf. Evans, *Logic of Self-Involvement*, pp. 76–8, 158–60.

ment of God's word.[64] Suppose that three religious men make and experience roughly the same act of acknowledgment in response to what each claims to be God's word, God's self-revelation. According to Barth their experience cannot enable them to judge which man, if any, is actually responding to God's word. If there is a real acknowledgment of God's word, it is hidden, for it is the work of God, not man.

In *The Logic of Self-Involvement*,[65] I analyzed human acknowledgments of other persons and of God in terms of 'self-involving' language, that is, language in which a speaker commits himself to action or implies or expresses attitudes for or against what he is talking about. Self-involving language, which includes expressions of gratitude, trust, and obedience, was distinguished from 'flat,' neutral language in which a speaker commits himself only verbally and implies only belief. Barth would agree, I think, that any language about God must be self-involving. But for Barth, human acknowledgments and human self-involving language could not as such provide even a provisional understanding of Christian talk concerning God. Barth's analogy of faith is a hidden correspondence between God as Object and God as Subject at work in man, between a hidden divine self-revelation and a hidden divine response.[66] Even the faith-response of Jesus Christ corresponds to God *qua* hidden act of God, not *qua* public act of the man Jesus, expressed in self-involving language of gratitude, trust, and obedience. Presumably for Barth any human self-involving language is language of worship of the true God only in that God empowers it to be such. But once again, if human language with its human meanings provides no initial basis for understanding talk about God, Barth is committed to a doctrine of complete disparity, sheer equivocity. Yet if God has revealed himself, Barth is committed to a rejection of equivocity.

It is rash to make a general criticism of Barth's theology in the early *Church Dogmatics*, but I shall venture one. It seems to me that what is at the root of Barth's difficulties concerning language is a defective concept of divine grace. Barth makes grace, like creation, a work *ex nihilo*. He does not allow any initial basis or provisional contribution or pre-existing capacity in human beings as such. Some Barthian theologians have said that his great theological insight was to apply a Reformation soteriology to Christian epistemology. But this seems to me to have been his great mistake. Indeed, Barth's soteriology is self-contradictory: human capacities as such provide nothing towards salvation, yet in salvation man becomes truly man. The contradiction is even more evident in Barth's epistemology. If human words as such provide nothing towards knowledge of God, this implies sheer equivocity between their meaning as applied to men and their meaning as applied to God; yet Barth rejects equivocity, for God has made knowledge of God possible, using human words.

Although Barth's main thesis concerning Christian talk about God is self-contradictory, his account should not be dismissed. Barth presents his version

64. Cf. *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, p. 252.
65. See note 45, above.
66. Cf. *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, pp. 272–81; II/1, p. 49.

of many ideas which are important and which tend to be ignored by philosophers who analyze religious language. As a conclusion to this essay, I shall briefly outline some of these ideas – in my own version, not Barth's.

1 God is in some ways incomprehensible, and talk about God is in some ways unintelligible, not only to Kantian or empiricist critics of Christian claims, but to Christians. Christian tradition includes second-order theological commentary on first-order Christian language concerning God, so as to render the problem of significant reference to God in some ways insoluble. Reference to God can not be adequate, clear, and obvious; it must be inadequate, opaque, and mysterious. Though God is not 'wholly other,' he does transcend our human understanding. In numinous and mystical experience and in the language of scripture God has revealed himself as *other*. Yet he has *revealed* himself. There is an inescapable tension here, between the unintelligibility and the intelligibility of God. An account of Christian language concerning God should try to do justice to both sides in the tension without falling into sheer contradiction.

2 According to Christians, it is possible to refer significantly to God because God reveals himself to men. From this conviction two things follow. First, knowledge of God is subject to God's initiative and control in revealing himself; God is not to be discovered, as it were, against his will. Secondly, God is in some ways comprehensible and talk about God is in some ways intelligible, but not in any and every human context. A context of divine revelation is required. Theologians differ, of course, concerning the nature and extent of 'general' revelation as distinct from the 'special' revelation in Christ.

3 When words such as 'love,' 'patience,' or 'fatherhood' are applied to God there is for Christians a shift to a new, paradigmatic meaning. To a very great extent, understanding the new meaning and accepting the new meaning go together.[67] Although the previous meaning does provide a provisional basis for understanding, in some respects it may be rejected. It cannot be in all respects rejected, for this would be complete equivocity.

4 Christian language concerning God is self-involving. God reveals himself in actions which have a 'performative' meaning – promises, gifts, commands – to which the appropriate linguistic response is not an expression of neutral assent but an expression of trustful hope, joyful gratitude, or willing obedience. God is thought of as talking performatively to man, and the linguistic response is 'correlative' performative talk to God.[68] Although any talk *to* God presupposes the intelligibility of talk *about* God, the meaning of this talk about God ought not to be considered in abstraction from the talk to God. The notion of correlative performatives is important in any exploration of the problem of significant reference to God as this problem arises for Christians. The notion may, of course, be unimportant or even

67. For an interesting discussion of how acceptance and understanding may go together, see Stuart Brown, *Do Religious Claims Make Sense?*
68. See note 63, above.

irrelevant if the problem arises in a non-Christian context, for example, when philosophers consider an idea of God which arises solely from a cosmological or teleological argument.

5 For Christians, some words apply to God because God says so. It is true that Christians differ concerning the nature and extent of the basis for believing that God has indeed 'said so.' But the notion of divine linguistic authority concerning proper names for God and institutional relations with God should be considered in any thorough investigation of the problem of significant reference to God.

6 For Christians, the meaning of talk about God is subject to the Christian conviction that in Jesus Christ God was at work in a paradigmatic way and that Jesus Christ rendered the paradigmatic faith-response to God. In any analogy of being, that is, analogy between human activity or being and divine activity or being, the decisive clue is the loving activity of Jesus Christ in relation to other men. And in any analogy of faith, where some human attitudes and commitments correspond to divine activity as appropriate response, the decisive clue is the attitudes and commitments of Jesus Christ, his faith-response to God. Theologians differ concerning the importance of ordinary human love for people and ordinary human trust in one's total environment as clues. Some theologians claim that God reveals a great deal in these. But even such a claim, with which I agree, is justified by reference to Jesus Christ as paradigm, for the claim is that other men in some ways and to some extent resemble Jesus Christ. For Christians, Jesus Christ is decisive in analogy of being and analogy of faith. In practice, of course, what Christians understand to be the love and faith of Jesus Christ depends a great deal on what they already, as men among men, understand human love and faith to be. Christians do not have an isolable touchstone, whether a Jesus of history or a Christ of Christian tradition allegedly separate from human culture. But the fundamental point is that for Christians the problem of significant reference to God is closely linked with problems of Christology.