

**“NOTHINGNESS” REVISITED:
KARL BARTH’S DOCTRINE OF RADICAL
EVIL IN THE WAKE OF THE HOLOCAUST**

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Alongside the existence of God, the problem of evil - what is it?, from where does it come?, and why are we afflicted by it? - is arguably the most perplexing issue with which humankind is, and always has been, confronted. Long the exclusive preserve of philosophers and theologians, the question of evil nonetheless encounters us as a problem of universal dimensions, from which no one can be sheltered. Kierkegaard once recognised that “dark emotions hid[e] in every human life.” By “penetratingly concentrating on oneself, one first and foremost discovers the disposition to evil”.¹ Kierkegaard reminds us, therefore, that the problem of evil and the delimiting of life as its existential corollary, impact upon all, irrespective of race, gender and politics. And indeed, surely the events of 11 September 2001 have dispelled any lingering doubts as to the truth of that premise. So if, as a *question*, evil has been explored within the philosophical and theological academies, as a *problem* it has been encountered by all and sundry in the work-a-day world of everyday life.

The end of World War Two, and its revelations of the Jewish genocide, however, disclosed the profundity of radical evil with hitherto unparalleled force. There have, of course, been events in more recent history, as well as events much further back, which have taught a similar lesson. One could suggest, for example, Torquemada’s indiscriminate Inquisition in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the brutal suppression of the indigenous peoples in both Americas by European colonists, the ideological terror of Stalin’s rule, and the savagery of the Rwandan and Cambodian killing fields. It would be historical arbitrariness of the worst sort if these events were ignored, and most serious scholars of genocide studies now routinely include these

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, ed. & trans. H. V. & E. H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) 100.

horrors in the same broad spectrum that also includes the Holocaust. On the other hand it was, nonetheless, the *Shoah* that put the particular lesson of radical evil and its various manifestations squarely on the curriculum. As Dietrich Ritschl has said, Auschwitz stands as the “paradigm of evil and suffering in our time.”² Indeed, the very fact that the language of genocide has taken its place within historical, legal, philosophical and theological discourse is largely due to the Holocaust.³

Thus if theologians and ecclesiastics have traditionally taught the all-pervasiveness of sin on the human condition, it has been the Holocaust of the Jews which has given to that doctrine its most violent validation to date, and which has reinforced an understanding of the extent to which all of humanity is its potential victim and/or agent. As Christopher Browning and Daniel Jonah Goldhagen have shown, the systematic extermination of over six million humans, solely on account of their race, was perpetrated by “ordinary men”.⁴ There can be no hiding behind the myth that this was a crime committed by inhuman monsters. Rather, as Stanley Milgram’s experiments from 1961-62 showed, all people stand vulnerable to, and culpable for, evil. It is in the context of this extreme universality of evil which, during the Holocaust, transformed “ordinary men” into murderers, that one can understand why Hannah Arendt perceived this evil to be so commonplace that, the magnitude of its results notwithstanding, it was in itself paradoxically banal.

The *Shoah* has, in other words, simultaneously justified our perennial concern with the question of evil, and by its enormity placed a question-mark against all previous answers. The task of this paper is to determine whether, and to what extent, Karl Barth’s answer to the problem of evil, formulated in terms of *das Nichtige* (Nothingness) and only a few short years after the Holocaust, appropriated the lessons of that cataclysm and is thus better equipped to tackle both the question and the urgency with which it is now posed.

Barth is not, of course, the only one since 1945 to have explored the idea of radical evil. Nor is this the first time that Barth’s concept of *das Nichtige* has been submitted

² Dietrich Ritschl, *The Logic of Theology*, trans. J. Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1986) 38.

³ Interview with Jonathan Steinberg, *Limina* 3 (1997) 3-4.

⁴ Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the “Final Solution” in Poland* (New York: Aaron Asher Books, 1992); Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (London: Little, Brown & Co., 1996). It is worth noting that the controversy with which Goldhagen’s book has been surrounded has not primarily been because of his contention that much of the German populace was implicated in the Holocaust. Rather, it has been his suggestion that a psycho-social “eliminationist antisemitism” was the *sole cause* of the genocide that has provoked the backlash.

to critical scrutiny. Nicholas Wolterstorff, for example, has published a review of Barth's doctrine from the point of view of philosophical theology.⁵ Where Wolterstorff's article falls short, however, is in its complete lack of historical contextualisation, without which the concept of Nothingness is robbed of its potency. It is this deficiency in Wolterstorff's article that this paper wishes to correct. Similarly, R. Scott Rodin has also published on this topic, although for him, the *locus* of evil in the architecture of Barth's theology is to be found in Barth's Doctrine of God, rather than in his concept of *das Nichtige*. While this approach may uncover a richer picture of Barth's doctrine overall, it does not and cannot take into account the impact of the Holocaust on that doctrine, as the Doctrine of God - *Church Dogmatics* II - was completed before the end of the Second World War, and indeed even before the Holocaust itself got fully under way.⁶ Again, it is the interface of the theology and the history that is lacking, and which this paper seeks to pick up.

It should be said, by way of qualification at this point, that the intention of this article is directed specifically at the ways in which Barth allowed - or did not allow - his historical context to inform his understanding of the problem of evil itself. It is not the intention to explore the myriad ways in which evil and the Holocaust have impacted upon Christian and Jewish theology in general throughout the past three decades. Renegotiation of traditional doctrines such as covenant, election and revelation are key to this broader topic and cannot, by virtue of their scope, be adequately covered here. However, the interested reader is encouraged to sift through works by, for example, Richard Rubenstein, Katharina von Kellenbach and Henry Knight.⁷

With this qualification in mind, we can now return to Barth. It is pertinent at the outset to remember that, far from advocating a transcendentalised theology, centred upon a "wholly other" God, that had only scant relevance to socio-political realities, Barth was a vocal opponent of the Hitler regime from the earliest days of Nazism. In 1935, Barth was deported from Germany to Switzerland for refusing to bow to what he regarded as the idolatrous demands of the Third Reich. For the next ten years, Barth championed the cause of the anti-Nazi resistance and, on the basis of his theology, actively involved himself in the efforts to rescue Jews. The nexus between

⁵ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Barth on Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 13,4 (1996) 584-608.

⁶ R. Scott Rodin, *Evil and Theodicy in the Theology of Karl Barth* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997). Barth's Doctrine of God, found in *Church Dogmatics* II, was written between the summer of 1939 and the winter of 1941-42, and published in March 1942.

⁷ For an excellent summary of where current discussion stands, see *Remembering for the Future 2000*, edited by John K. Roth & E. Maxwell (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001). Especially also: R. L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism* (Baltimore & London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1992).

theological presuppositions and political praxis which characterised his entire career was, in other words, perhaps most clearly articulated during the Nazi era.⁸ This being the case, it would hardly be surprising were we to find that the explication of evil, which Barth formulated between 1948-50 as part of his “Doctrine of Creation”,⁹ took into account the ghastly realities of Nazism and the Holocaust which were, at that time, still uppermost in Europe’s collective memory. Is this in fact the case?

There is no doubt that Barth’s doctrine of *das Nichtige*, as the non-willed reality on the margins of God’s creation and providence, represents one of the most remarkable attempts in theological history to comprehend the problem of evil. According to Barth’s Roman Catholic commentator, Hans Urs Von Balthasar, by framing this problem of evil in strictly theological terms, he has taken it “more seriously than [any] purely human experience or philosophical reflection [has ever done].”¹⁰ The chronological proximity to the Holocaust perhaps helps to explain why. With the most traumatic event in recent history—which, in a very real sense, embodied evil as never before—still only a few short years in the past, the development of a concept of radical evil that could meet this challenge was desperately needed as an at least partial attempt to understand what had happened, and why. Thus, if Polman rejects Barth’s doctrine as heretical on the grounds that it is unbiblical speculation,¹¹ it must be countered that the very magnitude of the Holocaust as an event that critiques the entire theological heritage of Christianity, required (and requires!) nothing less than speculative reasoning freed from the bonds of rigid orthodoxy. To this extent, if Barth’s doctrine is a product of *eisegesis* rather than *exegesis*, this could arguably be exactly the approach needed to formulate an understanding of evil that takes the Holocaust into serious account.¹² When we come to Barth’s explication itself, however,

⁸ See for example, Mark R. Lindsay, *Covenanted Solidarity: The Theological Basis of Karl Barth’s Opposition to Nazi Antisemitism and the Holocaust* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/3, edited by G. W. Bromiley & T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley & R. J. Ehrlich (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960).

¹⁰ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Ed. T. Oakes, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992; original: *Karl Barth: Darstellung und Deutung Seiner Theologie*, Köln: Jakob Hegner, 1951) 231.

¹¹ Andries D. R. Polman, *Barth*, trans. C. Freeman (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960) 66-67, in Vernon R. Mallow, *The Demonic: An Examination into the Theology of Edwin Lewis, Karl Barth, and Paul Tillich* (University Press of America, 1983) 96. See also John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 141-142.

¹² It is also, of course, important to recognise that, if Barth’s concept of evil appears speculative, this is a function of the concept itself. According to Barth, all theology is

we are confronted with more than just speculation. As Mallow says, the concept of Nothingness contains elements "which are so far removed from traditional theological thought patterns that they raise the question as to whether it is possible to enter... into [Barth's] thinking..." at all.¹³ Nevertheless, if we are to reach an answer to our question, this is what we must now attempt.

I. Outline of a Doctrine

Barth begins by contending that, alongside the existence of God and His creation, there exists a "third factor" that can only be comprehended as an alien element at the margins of creation and providence. The malignant character of this alien factor is attested, immediately and without reservation, when Barth depicts it as "an entire sinister system" that exists only in the form of "opposition and resistance". Although *das Nichtige* is "unable to overwhelm and destroy [humankind]"—for reasons we shall shortly come to - "it constantly threatens and corrupts it."¹⁴ As John Hick has noted, Barth perceives evil in its full seriousness as "the object of unqualified fear and loathing" which "takes the forms of sin and pain, suffering and death."¹⁵

We have not yet, however, arrived at a definition of what this alien element is. Properly speaking, we cannot talk of Nothingness as something which "is". In strictly ontological terms, "[o]nly God and His creature really and properly are."¹⁶ This cannot be taken to imply that Nothingness does not exist. Indeed, Barth is singularly outspoken in his insistence that Nothingness has a terrifyingly real existence. Alan Davies is correct, therefore, to state that neo-orthodox theology, of which Barth was a founding member, "was named after the old orthodoxy... partly because it resurrected

piecemeal and fractured, in that it is an attempt to state the perfection of God through the fundamentally imperfect medium of human language. See Karl Barth, "The Word of God and the Task of the Ministry," in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. D. Horton (New York: Harper, 1957) 186; *Church Dogmatics* I/1. In trying to present the idea of evil however, the difficulty becomes more acute, because it is at this place above all that one encounters the abyss between God and humanity. Here especially, therefore, theology must speak "in broken thoughts and utterances". *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 294.

¹³ Mallow, *The Demonic*, 45.

¹⁴ *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 289-290.

¹⁵ Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 136, 138.

¹⁶ *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 349.

the hoary orthodox doctrine of original sin...¹⁷ So, irrespective of whatever faults Barth's doctrine may contain, "its author cannot be accused of taking too mild a view..."¹⁸

Nevertheless, Nothingness cannot be regarded as having an existence that merely parallels that of creation in an antithetical sense. Such an assumption would imply that Nothingness is simply that which is not. Barth, however, rejects this suggestion, because the "nots" of creation are essential to creation's perfection. "God is God and not the creature, but this does not mean that there is nothingness in God. On the contrary, this 'not' belongs to His perfection."¹⁹ Similarly for the creature, the fact that it is the creature and not God is intrinsic to its creaturely perfection. Within the realm of creation, there exists light and dark, land and water. There is, in other words, a negative side as well as a positive side. There is

not only a Yes but also a No; not only a height but also an abyss; not only clarity but also obscurity...; not only growth but also decay; not only opulence but also indigence; not merely beauty but also ashes; not only beginning but also end...²⁰

This shadow-side is, however, as much a part of the perfection of creation as the positive side. To equate it with Nothingness is no less than blasphemy.²¹

In what sense, therefore, can we speak of Nothingness as an existing reality? According to Barth, the ontic context of its existence is the divine activity of creation grounded in election. In *CD III/1*, §41, Barth posits the view that the work of creation is presupposed by God's decision of election. Thus, he regards "creation as the external basis of the covenant", and the "covenant as the internal basis of creation". Later on in this volume, he explains that "God the Creator did not say No, nor Yes and No, but Yes to what He created...Creation as such is not rejection, but election and acceptance."²² It is this understanding that informs Barth's concept of the existential

¹⁷ Alan Davies, "Evil and Existence: Karl Barth, Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr Revisited in the Light of the Shoah," in *Contemporary Christian Religious Responses to the Shoah*, Studies in the Shoah, vol. VI, edited by Steven L. Jacobs (University Press of America, 1993) 16.

¹⁸ Davies, "Evil and Existence," 18.

¹⁹ *Church Dogmatics III/3*, 349. See also Von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, 228.

²⁰ *Church Dogmatics III/3*, 295, 296-297.

²¹ *Church Dogmatics III/3*, 349. Barth thus directly refutes Leibniz who regards metaphysical evil as "simply the non-divinity of the creature..." Thus, it is not a positive evil, but merely a "deficiency or "privation" proper to the creature" (p.316).

²² *Church Dogmatics III/1*, 333-331.

content and being of Nothingness. This does not mean that it is possible to explain the origin of evil in the world, as though it had an independently legitimate existence.²³ Rather, it is that which God did not elect to create but, rather, passed over. It is that "from which God separates Himself and in the face of which He...exerts His positive will."²⁴ Put in another way, it is the object of *permittere* - God's permission - rather than of *efficere*, which is God's direct production. In electing and, therefore, in subsequently creating what He elected, Nothingness was passed over by God, as that which He did not will and thus did not create. "God elects, and therefore rejects what he does not elect. God wills, and therefore opposes what he does not will. He says Yes, and therefore says No to that to which He has not said Yes."²⁵ It is on the basis of this non-willing that Nothingness exists. It exists, that is to say, as "what God did not, and does not and cannot will. It has the essence only of non-essence and only as such can it exist."²⁶ Precisely in this way, however, it does exist.

In this regard, we are faced squarely with the paradoxical situation whereby, as Mallow has correctly perceived, the only context in which Nothingness can exist is that of ontological impossibility.²⁷ God has neither willed nor created it, nor does it have any source of existence independent of God (for as Barth insists, God "is the basis and Lord of nothingness too"²⁸). Nevertheless, it exists. Certainly, it exists in its own *sui generis* form of malignancy and perversion, and as that of which "God is wholly and utterly not the Creator..."²⁹ As an objective reality that threatens the creature, however, its existence cannot be gainsaid.

In moving from generalities to specifics, Barth regards the great evil of Nothingness as being, in its most exact formulation, the enemy of divine grace. Once again, this is most readily perceived if we recall the *loci* of election and creation as the presuppositions for any discussion of *das Nichtige*. Because God's activity as Creator is founded on His decision to elect, this decisive activity, as His *opus proprium*, is the work of divine grace. But Nothingness exists as that which is non-willed and, therefore, rejected. Evil "is", in other words, only in its determination as that which is

²³ G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. H. R. Boer (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1956), 216.

²⁴ *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 351.

²⁵ *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 351.

²⁶ *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 352.

²⁷ Mallow, *The Demonic*, 46. Evil therefore has an "existence" which is "enigmatic, inexplicable, absurd." Berkouwer, *Triumph of Grace*, 216.

²⁸ *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 351.

²⁹ *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 352.

opposed to grace. As the reality which “God does not will [but] negates and rejects”, it exists only as “the object of His *opus alienum*.” As such, it is the “being that refuses and resists and therefore lacks His grace.”³⁰

Two corollaries follow. First, as that which resists and hence lacks grace, Nothingness is the truest embodiment of evil (with the caveat that, once again, we are confronted with an oxymoron; Nothingness is “true evil” only in the sense that it is the most authentic representation of falsehood).³¹ In spite of the ontic possibility in which Nothingness exists, we cannot argue that evil as such is rendered harmless. On the contrary, in its form of evil and death, Nothingness encounters humanity as “affliction and misery”, in face of which “the creature is already defeated and lost.” According to Barth, there can be no avoiding the fact that the evil of Nothingness is constantly poised at the frontier of creation, threatening it and making it its victim. We must not be guilty, Barth says, of “an easy, comfortable and dogmatic underestimation of its power in relation to us.”³² “The conquest of evil does *not* have that “matter-of-courseness” for man [*sic*] which it has for God.”³³ It therefore becomes clear why Barth so rigorously critiques Leibniz and Schleiermacher who, in Barth’s opinion, are guilty of precisely this underestimation. Leibniz’s definition of metaphysical evil as merely the imperfection of the creature represents, for Barth, a domestication of the adversary; because this imperfection is natural to the creature and thus belongs to its creaturely perfection, evil comes to be regarded simply as “a particular form of good...”³⁴ Similarly with Schleiermacher, evil is “correlative to good”. It exists in radical but not autonomous opposition to grace, in such a way that it is given “a legitimate standing” as the “counterpart and concomitant of grace.” Nothingness is, therefore, to be understood positively, and as that without which grace could not exist. To the extent that Schleiermacher understands it this way, as an indispensable counterpart to grace, it is not evil with which he is concerned.³⁵ In the face of these two views, the genuinely and dangerously evil character of Barth’s *das Nichtige* stands out in sharp relief.

The second corollary is that, as the enemy of divine grace, Nothingness is primarily an assault upon God, with humanity as only the secondary target. Again, this is in contrast to Schleiermacher’s doctrine, according to which the sovereignty of God

³⁰ *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 353.

³¹ *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 525.

³² *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 293-295, 352, 354, 358.

³³ Berkouwer, *Triumph of Grace*, 221.

³⁴ *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 318.

³⁵ *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 332-333.

elevates Him above all violations.³⁶ For Barth, however, the conflict with Nothingness is primarily and properly God's own affair. Nothingness is the assault of the non-willed reality against the elected creation. As such, it represents an attack not only upon God's created covenantal partner but also and primarily upon God's decision to elect and, therefore, on God Himself. In *CD II/2*, Barth makes clear that, in pre-temporal eternity, God is an electing God. "[I]n the act of love which determines His whole being God elects." Moreover, the act of election "is not one moment with others in the prophetic and apostolic testimony", but, enclosed "within the testimony of God to Himself, it is the moment which is the substance and basis of all other moments in that testimony."³⁷ This being the case, the violation by Nothingness of the act and decision of election is as such a violation of God. This means that God, in faithfulness to His covenant, must take up the battle against Nothingness. He must be "the Adversary of the adversary",³⁸ otherwise He would not be true, either to His covenant partner or to Himself. As Barth puts it,

We have not to forget the covenant, mercy and faithfulness of God, nor should we overlook the fact that God did not will to be God for His own sake alone, but that as the Creator He also became the covenant Partner of His creature, entering into a relationship with it in which He wills to be directly and [primarily] involved in all that concerns it...[This] means that whatever concerns and affects the creature concerns and affects Himself, not indirectly but directly, not subsequently and incidentally but primarily and supremely. Why is this so? Because, having created the creature, He has pledged His faithfulness to it. The threat of nothingness to the creature's salvation is primarily and supremely an assault upon His own majesty.³⁹

Barth is not thereby implying that God Himself is essentially threatened and corrupted by Nothingness, as humanity is. The counterpart of humanity's vulnerability to the power of *das Nichtige*, which we have already seen, is that we must not overestimate its power in relation to God. Indeed, if its power should be rated "as high as possible in relation to ourselves", it must be rated "as low as possible in relation to God."⁴⁰ Nevertheless, God is not unmoved by radical evil. On behalf of His creation - which, in its encounter with Nothingness can only show itself to be the

³⁶ "As Schleiermacher sees it, God has no part in this matter...He merely sees to it that we become conscious of [evil]..." *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 329.

³⁷ *Church Dogmatics* II/2, 76, 91.

³⁸ *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 357.

³⁹ *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 356.

⁴⁰ *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 293, 295.

impotent victim of suffering - God opposes, confronts and victoriously crushes His graceless adversary. As may be expected from such a consistently Christocentric theologian, the locus of this triumph over evil is the incarnation or, more specifically, the cross and resurrection of Christ.

At this place, we must qualify our earlier comment that God is not threatened by Nothingness. In the incarnation, God Himself becomes a creature and thus takes upon Himself the creature's sin, guilt and misery. In "what befalls this man God pronounces His No to the bitter end." The entire fury of Nothingness - and of God's wrath directed towards it - falls upon Christ "in all its dreadful fulness..."⁴¹ Precisely, however, because this *man* is also *God*, "Nothingness could not master this victim." It had power over the creature. It could contradict and oppose it and break down its defences. It could make it its slave and instrument and therefore its victim. But it was impotent against the God who humbled Himself, and Himself became a creature, and thus exposed Himself to its power and resisted it.⁴²

By confronting and decisively triumphing over Nothingness in Jesus Christ, God has relegated it to the past. In the light of the cross and the empty tomb, "there is no sense in which it can be affirmed that nothingness has any objective existence..."⁴³ Barth rejects outright the suggestion that radical evil exists in the form of an eternal antithesis. On the contrary, he insists that it has no perpetuity. It is neither created by God, nor maintained in a covenantal relationship with Him. Thus, "we should not get involved in the logical dialectic that if God loves, elects and affirms eternally he must also hate and therefore reject and negate eternally. There is nothing to make God's activity on the left hand as necessary and perpetual as His activity on the right."⁴⁴ Nothingness has been brought to its end, no longer having even the transient and temporary existence it once had. On this note of "cosmic optimism",⁴⁵ Barth concludes his presentation of his doctrine.

II. An Evaluation

Now that Barth's concept of radical evil has been sketched in brief outline, how must it be evaluated? In particular, how does it stand up to the challenge thrown out against all orthodoxies by the Holocaust? As a piece of theology that revolutionises

⁴¹ *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 362.

⁴² *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 362. See also *Church Dogmatics* II/2, §35.

⁴³ *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 363.

⁴⁴ *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 360-361.

⁴⁵ Davies, "Evil and Existence," 20.

previous formulations of evil, it is perhaps not surprising that it has drawn significant criticism. Chief among the problems which scholars have raised is that of Barth's apparently confused ontology. Mallow finds it difficult to understand how Nothingness which, as that which God negates and therefore has no proper being, can nevertheless "exist".⁴⁶ Hick raises a similar point when he queries why God, in the positive act of creation had, *in logical necessity*, also to create the "third factor" of Nothingness. Why can we not conceive of a God who is able to create a good universe "that is not accompanied by the threatening shadow of rejected evil?" Why must God choose good and reject evil, as though these realities were existences "which already [stood] in some way before Him...?"⁴⁷ The whole perplexing statement of the issue is simply "a product of Barth's own fertile and imaginative mind."⁴⁸

It is in the context of historical applicability, however, that Barth's notion of *das Nichtige* is most vulnerable to legitimate criticism. Within his excursus on Heidegger and Sartre, it is true that Barth locates their respective formulations of evil in the cataclysmic impact of two world wars. "Heidegger's philosophy is to be found in the First World War in retrospect", whereas Sartre's emerged from the Second.⁴⁹ More precisely, Barth seems to believe that, unlike the Enlightenment-optimism which framed the thoughts of Leibniz and Schleiermacher, the wars which Heidegger and Sartre experienced compelled them to take the reality and evil of Nothingness with the utmost seriousness. "Their thought and expression are determined in and by the considerable though not total upheaval of Western thought and expression occasioned by two world wars."⁵⁰ There is, in other words, an acceptance that history as such can be influential if not determinative in the construction of intellectual discourse. All other criticisms notwithstanding, Barth does at least recognise that traditional paradigms of thought have not and cannot remain unaffected by such traumatic events as the European wars of the early twentieth century and the Nazi era.

On the other hand, Barth nowhere in his thesis on evil mentions the Holocaust. He does argue that no one is capable of "thinking and speaking as a modern man [*sic*]", or of being understood by contemporaries, if "the shock experienced and attested by Heidegger and Sartre" does not form part of one's thought-world. His meaning seems to be that, in the "shock experienced and attested" by the modern

⁴⁶ Mallow, *The Demonic*, 97.

⁴⁷ Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 142-143, 192-193.

⁴⁸ Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 149.

⁴⁹ *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 339.

⁵⁰ *Church Dogmatics* III/3, p.345.

world - which, in this context, can only refer to the recent world war - "we men [*sic*] have encountered nothingness" in a profundity previously unknown.⁵¹ This may well be an oblique reference to the *Shoah*. If it is, however, the reference is undeniably oblique. Curiously, therefore, Barth seems willing to mention the Second World War in a general sense within the overall context of Nothingness, but not the Holocaust, which was the even more archetypal embodiment of evil.

This hesitation cannot be due either to a lack of knowledge or to a position of denial, as throughout the war Barth was well aware of the Jewish genocide and was actively involved in protesting against it.⁵² Davies supplies a more sympathetic reason to account for Barth's silence. "No one," he says, "wrote anything much about the *Shoah* before 1950; it was too soon, and the realization too difficult to grasp."⁵³ The chronology of survivor testimony confirms Davies' claim. As Wiesel has said,

It took me ten years to write... [*Night*]. It was not a coincidence; it was deliberate. I took a vow of silence in 1945, to the effect that I would wait ten years to be sure that what I would say would be true... In the early days, those who were there did not [speak of it]... because they were afraid that no one would believe them.⁵⁴

In other words, that Barth did not mention the Holocaust in his immediate post-war writings cannot be attributed to either indifference or, worse, Antisemitism. We may regret that the only possible reference to the Holocaust in his discussion of evil is, at best, thickly veiled. But, given the proximity of the composition of *CD III/3* to the Holocaust, this obliqueness is understandable.

More problematic is the "triumph of grace" over evil with which Barth concludes his discussion. According to Barth, the resurrection of Jesus compels us to affirm that Nothingness has been decisively conquered and consigned to the past. "It is only an echo, a shadow of what it was but is no longer, of what it could do but can do

⁵¹ *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 345.

⁵² See for example, Eberhard Busch, *Unter dem Bogen des einen Bundes. Karl Barth und die Juden, 1933-1945*, (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1996); Lindsay, *Covenanted Solidarity*.

⁵³ Davies, "Evil and Existence," 21.

⁵⁴ Elie Wiesel, "Talking and Writing and Keeping Silent," in *The German Church Struggle and the Holocaust*, edited by Franklin H. Littell & Hubert G. Locke (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974) 274-275.

no longer."⁵⁵ Certainly, it still retains a semblance - even a "dangerous semblance" - of that which it once was. Barth does not rush headlong into an ultimate eschatological conclusion fully realised in the present. That is, Nothingness still has "standing and significance to the extent that the final revelation of its destruction has not yet taken place..."⁵⁶ We still live *zwischen den Zeiten* of the resurrection and the parousia, in which evil can still deceive us that its power remains unabated. In this deception, however, Nothingness perpetrates its ultimate falsehood, for its previous power and existence are precisely those things that have been destroyed by the redemptive work of Christ. As Von Balthasar has put it, "[Barth] does not take evil any more tragically than God does."⁵⁷

In the wake of the *Shoah*, however, Barth's argument sounds hollow. "How, after Auschwitz, can anyone seriously believe that nothingness has lost its dominion...? Does not history refute Barth?"⁵⁸ In Berkouwer's opinion, even the testimony of the New Testament is against Barth at this point. In fact, Berkouwer argues that, by so diminishing the objective danger of evil and the demonic in the world, Barth has re-introduced the programme of *Entmythologisierung* (de-mythologisation) that was so much a part of the nineteenth century theological outlook from which he wished to escape.⁵⁹ We have noticed in respect of Heidegger and Sartre that Barth seems willing to regard the calamity of two world wars as a unity of events that fractures traditional patterns of thought. What he does not seem prepared to do, however, is acknowledge with Emil Fackenheim that the Holocaust as such renders all *Denkformen* irreparably ruptured.⁶⁰ According to Fackenheim, the Holocaust "forc[es] us to assent to a way of philosophical thought that, immersed in history, is fully exposed to it."⁶¹ This noetic approach is exactly what Barth wishes to avoid, in order to guard against the danger (as he sees it) of general revelation. During the years of Nazi rule and the forcible *Gleichschaltung* to which the German Churches and their theologies were exposed, Barth unswervingly argued against the acceptance of general revelation. It

⁵⁵ *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 367.

⁵⁶ *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 367.

⁵⁷ Von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, 231.

⁵⁸ Davies, "Evil and Existence," 20.

⁵⁹ Berkouwer, *Triumph of Grace*, 237, 374-378.

⁶⁰ "But perhaps *no* thought can exist in the same space as the Holocaust; perhaps *all* thought, to assure its own survival, must be elsewhere." Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought* (New York: Schocken Books, 1989) 191.

⁶¹ Fackenheim, *To Mend the World*, 200.

was this theological error which led, in his eyes, to the perception of Hitler and the NSDAP as the new revelations of God. While this rejection of general revelation was a critically important stance to take in the years of the *Kirchenkampf*, it did nevertheless forbid Barth from recognising the Holocaust as being theologically determinative. Hence, the *Shoah* is unable to impact upon Barth's theology, even his doctrine of evil. Theological discourse is only legitimately constructed if it is done solely through the lens of Christocentric revelation. With this as his paradigmatic frame, Barth thus remains insistent that, since the cross and resurrection of Christ, Nothingness exists merely as a shadow of its former self. In a post-Holocaust world, it is this historical isolationism, not the ambiguous ontology, that represents the greatest weakness of Barth's doctrine.

III. A Way Forward?

These by no means minor deficiencies notwithstanding, is there nevertheless a potential utility ingredient to Barth's concept of *das Nichtige* that can help in our understanding of the Holocaust? Davies believes so, for he notes that "much of what [Barth] did write on the power of nothingness remains pertinent to any serious discussion of the nature of evil...[and] is also pertinent to the *Shoah* itself."⁶² The final section of this paper, therefore, will consider briefly some areas of the doctrine where this utility may be found.

First, whenever we consider the Holocaust, we are confronted by the perpetrators and the victims. The Holocaust incorporates - or produces - both. But so too does Nothingness. Barth insists that the threat of *das Nichtige*, which stands at the frontier of creation ready, as it were, to pounce, is a universal threat to every creature, and one that makes of us both "victim" and "agent". Since the first days after creation, "all the subsequent history of the relationship between God and His creature is marked by the fact that man is the sinner who has submitted and fallen a victim to chaos."⁶³ Barth is thus in substantial agreement with Fackenheim who says that, whereas in "more innocuous periods of the modern West" philosophers directed their attention to "man's malleability for good", our post-Holocaust world forces us "to consider man's malleability for evil..."⁶⁴ While we must avoid the "trite, cowardly, and escapist weakening of the distinction between those who *might* have done it...and those who *in fact did it*", Fackenheim nevertheless insists that "whatever

⁶² Davies, "Evil and Existence," 21.

⁶³ *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 352.

⁶⁴ Fackenheim, *To Mend the World*, 233.

else [the perpetrators of the Holocaust] may be, [they are] human beings like ourselves."⁶⁵ As far as the agency of radical evil is concerned, therefore, Barth and Fackenheim agree that no one can claim invulnerability to the threat of submitting to the power of Nothingness, and thus of becoming its instrument.

But the universality of Nothingness likewise includes the victims. We have already seen that Barth's schema posits the total inability of humanity to contend effectively with the power of evil. Against it, we are already lost and defeated, victims of the suffering, misery and death which are inevitably imposed upon us by our loss in the one-sided battle. In this sense, Barth's concept recalls the persecuted Jews under Nazi dominion. Their very status as Jews rendered them victims, universally vulnerable to the death camps. Just as Barth's *das Nichtige* posits an inevitable and, from the creaturely side undefeatable, threat to the universe of creation, the logic of Nazi Antisemitism permitted no refuge for the Jews.

A further corollary of this universal victimisation is that, if the Holocaust was an event *sui generis*, it cannot be naively assumed that it will remain a unique actualisation of evil. In other words, the universality of the threat of Nothingness implies that such an event could happen again. Indeed, the constant possibility of *das Nichtige* once more making humanity its agent and its victim warns against an overly optimistic incantation of "Never again".

The second way in which Barth's doctrine illuminates the Holocaust is in the equation of Nothingness with the adversary of grace. As we have seen, it is the fact that Nothingness resists, rejects and lacks grace that identifies it as pure evil. "The grace of God is the basis and norm of all being, the source and criterion of all good. Measured by this standard, as the negation of God's grace, nothingness is intrinsically evil."⁶⁶ What relevance does this have to the Holocaust? Barth himself answers this question if we turn to one of his pre-war manifestos. In the aftermath of *Kristallnacht*, Barth declared to the Church that it must reject Nazism on the basis that "Nazism lives and has its being in Antisemitism", which is itself the "rejection of the grace of God."⁶⁷ In other words, the essence of Nazism is Antisemitism, and the essence of Antisemitism - as the ideological presupposition of the Holocaust - is a rejection of divine grace, that is, Nothingness. By working backwards from *CD III/3* to Barth's reaction to *Kristallnacht*, therefore, we can suggest not only that Barth himself was aware of the extreme evil embodied in the Nazi agenda, but that according to Barth's

⁶⁵ Fackenheim, *To Mend the World*, 235.

⁶⁶ *Church Dogmatics III/3*, 354.

⁶⁷ Karl Barth, "Die Kirche und die politische Frage von Heute", in Karl Barth, *Eine Schweizer Stimme, 1938-1945* (Zurich: Ev. Verlag, 1945) 90.

own theological grammar, Antisemitism and the Holocaust stand as clear examples of the ubiquity of Nothingness.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, our consideration of Karl Barth's perception of radical evil leads us to believe that, in spite of its unwarranted assertion of the eclipsing of evil by the cross and resurrection - an assertion which, in the shadow of the Holocaust cannot stand in the unqualified form in which Barth puts it - there are, nonetheless, significant lessons that can be gleaned from the revolutionary reformulation of this old doctrine. First, Barth is uncompromising in his insistence on the reality and ever-present threat of evil, even if his explication of it is ontologically ambiguous. By this, he stands apart from his optimistic predecessors such as Leibniz and Schleiermacher. Moreover, his position is one that subsequent liberal theologians who, in a post-Holocaust world, have even less excuse for their programme of demythologisation, would do well to heed. Berkouwer may be right that Barth has unwittingly re-introduced this project into his theology. However, it is clear that this was not so much his intention, but rather an unwanted corollary of his insistence on championing the over-arching triumph of Christ.

Second, the universality of Nothingness, from the perspectives of both agent and victim, simultaneously recalls the Holocaust and warns us against the naïve assumption that it will never and can never happen again. Indeed, we need only to glance, for example, at Bosnia and even now the West Bank, to see how possible such an outbreak of Nothingness still is.

Finally, we are given an insight into Nazism itself. As an antisemitic rejection of grace it was, fundamentally and intrinsically, a representation of Nothingness, of total and radical evil. And yet it was also totally *human*. Social histories record that, by and large, Nazism was greeted with enthusiasm by large sections of the German populace. It is true that, in free elections, Hitler's NSDAP never gained more than one-third of all votes cast. Nevertheless, resistance to the regime was never more than piecemeal and, when it did occur, was almost invariably directed against specific policies and not against the regime as such. As Francis Nicosia has said, there is little doubt that between 1933-1945, "the great majority of Germans did succumb...to the propaganda of the Nazi regime, and acquiesced in the state's exercise of total control over every aspect of individual lives."⁶⁸ Similarly, Barth's account of evil acknowledges

⁶⁸ *Germans Against Nazism. Essays in Honour of Peter Hoffmann*, edited by Francis R. Nicosia & Lawrence D. Stokes (New York: Berg, 1990) 3.

the inevitable surrender of humanity to the temptations and power of Nothingness. Perhaps, therefore, the final lesson to be learnt is that, regardless of its origins, evil manifests itself in our human world and that, more often than not, it receives a warm welcome. Thus, even if Barth's ultimate word about the defeat of Nothingness is true, perhaps we would do better to pay closer attention to the *penultimate* word - that the dangerous semblance of its power still remains - so that, with the Holocaust as our forewarning, we may at least be forearmed against its repetition.

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