

An Unlikely Friendship

Balthasar's "Conversations" with Barth

Barth and Balthasar's friendship was unlikely, but theologically significant. The friendship was unlikely for several reasons. When they first met Karl Barth was already fifty-four years of age, a well-known theologian and a professor with an international reputation. Having been removed from his teaching post at the University of Bonn in 1935, he had resided in his birthplace, Basel, Switzerland, for five years, taking up a position at the University of Basel. From Basel he was politically active in the church struggles, writing, lecturing, and forming associations to challenge the church's accommodation to National Socialism. Balthasar was thirty-four, a Jesuit, and taking his first appointment as campus minister at the same university. He was much less visible than Barth, and much less engaged in the political struggles of the times. As a Jesuit it was difficult, even illegal, to do so in Switzerland. He was not disengaged. He even worked to find places for Jewish refugees. Both Barth and Balthasar recognized that resistance to National Socialism was a Christian obligation.

Barth was staunchly Reformed, Balthasar a devout Roman Catholic. Balthasar was known for encouraging, sometimes goading, Catholic laity to profess the evangelical counsels (poverty, celibacy, obedience) and for making converts from Protestantism to Roman Catholicism. Converting Barth had to be at least in the back of his mind when he arrived in Basel. Balthasar came to Basel from working with the Jesuit Erich Przywara in Munich. When Barth was teaching at the University of Münster, he had invited Przywara to his 1929 seminar. Three years later Przywara would publish the first volume of his *Analogia Entis*, setting forth the metaphysics of Christianity. During that same year Barth published his well-known introduction to the first volume of the *Church Dogmatics*, where he claimed that the *analogia entis* was the reason he could never become Roman Catholic.¹ Balthasar arrived in Basel

prepared to show Barth how he misunderstood this essential Catholic teaching. If this were the sole reason for not being Catholic then to show Barth his error would take away that singular reason. The discussion that ensued never found agreement on whether Barth understood the *analogia entis* or whether it contained the grave theological errors Barth attributed to it in the 1930s. After Vatican II, Balthasar expressed concern about its misuse, but he never relented on its importance for Catholic theology. Their debate has generated ongoing discussion for nearly a century now. Resolution is not forthcoming, which is unsurprising.² As we shall see, Catholics disagree among themselves whether Przywara was correct in his claim about the *analogia entis*. Devout Thomists still disagree on exactly what the *analogia entis* is. If Thomists themselves don't agree, surely Barth could be forgiven for misunderstanding a debate about which there is still great misunderstanding and controversy? The debate may have been misplaced altogether. Balthasar thought Barth misidentified the error Barth rightly sensed in modern Catholicism. It was not the *analogia entis*; Balthasar thought Barth tacitly affirmed it throughout his *Church Dogmatics* even if he failed to admit it as such. Instead, the error was a doctrine of pure nature.³

Balthasar would learn the hard way that the *analogia entis* was not the only reason Barth rejected Catholicism. At the 1948 World Council of Churches,

1. We have no evidence Barth read Przywara's *Analogia Entis*. According to Hans Anton-Drewes, Barth most likely gave it to a student to read and inform him about it, who was living with him at the time, Frederick Herzog. Keith Johnson has demonstrated, however, that Barth and his students read carefully through the first two sections of Przywara's *Religionsphilosophie* and discussed it, along with his teaching of the *analogia entis*, prior to Przywara's visit to his seminar. See Keith Johnson, *Karl Barth and the Analogia Entis* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 87–88.

2. Keith Johnson argues Barth did understand it and rejected it for essentially Reformed theological reasons. The *analogia entis* failed to acknowledge the sinfulness of human beings and argued to God from an analysis of human consciousness. It also failed to maintain that God always remains in control of God's revelation and never gives it over to human agency, including that of the church. See Johnson, *Karl Barth and the Analogia Entis*, 87–99, 119. Johnson assumes Przywara's interpretation of the *analogia entis* is accurate. As will be demonstrated below, many Thomists challenge this assumption and disagree over the kind of analogy the *analogia entis* is. John Betz argues Barth never understood Przywara's teaching. He writes that one of Barth's "first and oft-repeated criticism of the *analogia entis* has remarkably little to do with Przywara's actual doctrine—either in its early or its mature form." See "After Barth: A New Introduction to Erich Przywara's *Analogia Entis*" in *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God?*, ed. Thomas Joseph White, OP (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011) 72.

3. Although Johnson would disagree with Balthasar, he nonetheless seems to restate rather than refute Balthasar's central claim. In explaining Barth's later position on the *analogia entis*, he writes, "For Barth, the key question is not whether an *analogia entis* exists; the question is whether an *analogia entis* is understood in light of the particularity of God's grace in Jesus Christ." Johnson, *Karl Barth and the Analogia Entis*, 190.

Barth argued, in good Swiss Protestant fashion, that no freedom-loving person could become Catholic. In 1954, much to the chagrin of Balthasar, he told a Protestant audience that no “decent person” could convert to Catholicism. All this occurred while Balthasar attempted to get Catholics to read Barth sympathetically. Barth did not make it easy. Nor was he ever consistent in his comments about Catholicism. He stated in 1924 that if Schleiermacher were right about Protestantism, the only option would be to become Catholic. Toward the end of his life, he told Balthasar that he could not convert but if he were born Catholic he would have remained such. Finding the thread that holds Barth’s statements for and against Catholicism together is impossible, which makes his preoccupation with Catholicism and his friendship with Balthasar all the more interesting. It proves Ralph Waldo Emerson correct: “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.” No such foolishness is to be found in the divines Barth and Balthasar.

There were other types of foolishness to be sure. Both had, to say the least, unconventional relationships with women. Balthasar lived in the Kaegi household after the conversion of Adrienne von Speyr in 1940 (Mrs. Kaegi) from Protestantism to Catholicism. Barth’s relationship with Charlotte von Kirschbaum and the stress it caused his own family is now well known and will not be repeated, nor excused, here. Such arrangements undoubtedly caused family tensions. The friendship between Barth and Balthasar often included Speyr and Kirschbaum. The four of them listened to Mozart, discussed theology, and vacationed together. Both Barth and Balthasar took advantage of patriarchal benefits. Yet, in admittedly strange ways, both also gave voice to women as theologians.⁴

Despite their differences that made for an unlikely friendship, they also had commonalities that made it theologically significant. Both loved Mozart, and even more importantly, Jesus Christ. That may seem too pious a way of putting it, but it best describes the common love that forged their friendship. Both had a painting of Grünewald’s crucifixion hanging over their desk; Balthasar’s was a gift from Barth. Both pursued theology from the heart of the Christian mystery, the incarnation. Both were attentive to the “form” theology should take, although they differed in expressing that form. Balthasar saw in Barth’s theology a beautiful “system,” albeit metaphysically deficient. Barth, however, found “systematic theology” to be “problematical.” It is a “pattern of thought

4. For important discussions on Balthasar and feminism see Karen Kilby, *Balthasar: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 123–47, and Tina Beattie, *The New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2006), 81–100.

constructed on the basis of a number of concepts chosen in accordance with the criteria of a particular philosophy and developed in accordance with a method appropriate to it.”⁵ He was neither preoccupied with such consistency nor with method. Instead, theology is “responsible to the living command of the Word of God—and to no other authority in heaven or on earth.” Because theology was responsible to the Word, it was not a “free science,” but one “bound to the sphere of the church.”⁶ Here is another important agreement. Both agreed on theology’s ecclesial location, although they differed most profoundly on what that meant because they differed on how to express Christ’s relationship to his church.

This first chapter tells why Barth and Balthasar’s friendship was unlikely and how, despite opposition, it came to be.

CONVERSATION(S) WITH KARL BARTH

Hans Urs von Balthasar first met Karl Barth on April 29, 1940, soon after Barth published *Church Dogmatics* 2.1, which Balthasar read, as he put it, “with great interest.” Its teaching on God’s perfections would remain central to Balthasar’s own work throughout his life. Balthasar had moved to Basel in December 1939. Once he arrived he wrote Barth seeking a face-to-face conversation, acknowledging he already had many “conversations” with him in his imagination. Some of those conversations were in print. Balthasar published a chapter on Barth in his 1937–39 three-volume work, *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele*; a 1938 review, “The Crisis of Protestant Theology”;⁷ and a 1939 essay that bore the same title as his 1948 lectures, “Karl Barth and Catholicism.”⁸ Before meeting him, Balthasar was already preoccupied with Barth.

Balthasar’s interest in Barth came through his teachers, first and foremost through the influence of Erich Przywara. They became acquainted during Balthasar’s two years studying philosophy in Pullach near Munich in the early 1930s. They were reacquainted the two years he worked with him for *Stimmen der Zeit* in Munich, 1937–1939. Balthasar went straight from his mentorship to Przywara in Munich to be the campus minister at the University of Basel.

5. Cited in Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 211.

6. Busch, *Karl Barth*, 211–12.

7. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Die Krisis der protestantischen Theologie,” *Stimmen der Zeit* 132 (1938): 200–1.

8. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Karl Barth und der Katholizismus,” *Theologie der Zeit* 3, no. 2 (1939): 126–32.

Balthasar had also studied with the French Jesuits from 1933 to 1937 in Lyons at Fourvière, the Jesuit seminary, which became known as a hotbed of *nouvelle théologie*, but Balthasar found nothing of it during his time there.⁹ These six years studying with the Jesuits and working for *Stimmen der Zeit* accounted for six of the ten years Balthasar lived outside Switzerland. He returned to his native country in December 1939 to become campus minister at Basel. He had been given the opportunity to be professor for ecumenical theology at the Gregoriana in Rome or campus minister in Basel.¹⁰ He chose the latter and would spend the rest of his life in Switzerland, most of it in Basel, except for a six year period, 1950–1956, when he left the Jesuits and was required to leave Basel.

Having settled in Basel, Balthasar took the publication of Barth's *Church Dogmatics* 2.1 as an opportunity to send a letter requesting a meeting with Barth. Balthasar opened his letter with these words: "With great interest I have read your earlier work and also the new volume of your *Dogmatics*." He immediately challenged Barth's interpretation of Catholicism; Barth's argument with the *analogia entis* is "not satisfying in every respect" because it really hasn't confronted the "ultimate Catholic position."¹¹ So begins a conversation, a disagreement and a friendship that lasts until Barth's death.

Shortly after their first meeting, Balthasar sent Barth a lengthy ten-page letter. He wrote, "I have for many years envisioned a conversation with you, because the 'conversations' [*Gespräche*] which I have already held with you are numerous."¹² Balthasar placed *Gespräche* in quotations for a reason. Now that he resided in Basel, the virtual conversations he already had with Barth could become the personal conversations he desired. The first book he wrote on Barth, which was never published in its original form, was entitled, *Analogie: Ein Gespräch mit Karl Barth (Analogy: A Conversation with Karl Barth)*. Writing a book on Barth must have been on his mind prior to this personal encounter since he was able to complete it so quickly. Balthasar's "conversations" with Karl Barth would shape his work and undoubtedly influence Barth's as well.

9. See Peter Henrici, SJ, "Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Sketch of His Life," in *Hans Urs von Balthasar: His Life and Work*, ed. David Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), 12.

10. See Urban Fink, "Ihr stets im Herrn ergebener Hans Balthasar: Hans Urs von Balthasar and der Basler Bischof Franziskus Streng," in *Hans Urs von Balthasar—ein grosser Churer Diözesan*, ed. Peter Henrici (Fribourg: Academic, 2006), 96.

11. Manfred Lochbrunner, *Hans Urs von Balthasar und seine Theologenkollegen: Sechs Beziehungsgeschichten* (Würzburg: Echter, 2009), 267.

12. *Ibid.*, 269.

Barth's work may very well have saved Balthasar's theological vocation. Perhaps that puts it too strongly, but Balthasar's dissatisfaction with the "sawdust Thomism" fed him during his Jesuit formation is too well known to retrace here.¹³ Barth provided him with a more dramatic, biblical, and patristic theological "form" than the "School" theology he received during his Jesuit formation. Barth invited Balthasar to attend his seminar on the Council of Trent in 1941 and the *Protokolle* demonstrate that he was a regular contributor to the discussion.¹⁴ Manfred Lochbrunner suggests this seminar "placed in the shadows the poor Scholastic theology of his neoscholastic formation."¹⁵ Balthasar searched for something that captured the glory of Christian revelation better than that form, and one important place he found it was Barth's theology. The other was of course his Jesuit friend and mentor, Erich Przywara.¹⁶ The fact that Barth and Przywara opposed each other constituted the aporia Balthasar's life and work sought to resolve.

Beginning in 1946, Balthasar also became increasingly convinced he could not pursue his theological vocation within the Jesuit order as well as he could through the secular, lay institute he established in Basel. That community still exists. This also puts it much too strongly, but Balthasar bequeathed to us a religious community within the Catholic Church that received his work whereas Barth bequeathed an argument, especially as to how best to interpret him, that primarily has its home in the university. By that I mean Balthasar's work continues to exist, in part, in the hands of people who gather together and pray, the *Johannesgemeinschaft* (the Johannine community). He was more interested in forming lay institutes than in contributing to academic life. Barth clearly inspired people to form Christian community as well. His work with the Confessing Church offered something similar to Balthasar's community, but it fell apart. Barth's Reformed theology lacked a home within an institutional structure that could receive and preserve his work in the same way the *Johannesgemeinschaft* preserves Balthasar's. Nonetheless, Barth's work had an undeniable influence on Protestant and Catholic institutional structures, not least of all because of Balthasar's preoccupation. He constantly pushed Barth on such questions, encouraged him to go with him to Rome and personally presented his book on Barth to Pius XII. Barth's last lecture, delivered in tandem

13. See Edward T. Oakes, SJ, *Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (London: Continuum, 1997).

14. *Protokolle* are the students' notes that record the conversation. Each week a different student is assigned to record the seminar. Their discussion will be examined in chapter 6.

15. Lochbrunner, *Hans Urs von Balthasar und seine Theologenkollegen*, 284.

16. See Henrici, "A Sketch of His Life," 13.

with Balthasar in 1968, discussed the “structures” that make possible “church renewal.” If Barth’s theology is to be something more than scholastic wrangling about how best to interpret him, it may be because of the questions Balthasar put to him. In this sense, Balthasar saved Karl Barth; he gave his work a much-needed ecclesial form outside of the academic setting to which it was and always will be alien, but upon which it often depends for its viability.¹⁷

If Barth ‘saved’ Balthasar’s theological vocation, Balthasar sought to return the favor, not only interpreting his theology to Catholics and finding a place for it within a Catholic ecclesial home, but also seeking to find a place there for Karl Barth himself. There can be little doubt that converting Karl Barth to Catholicism was part of Balthasar’s mission in Basel. He sought to do this theoretically, showing Barth the errors in his interpretation of Catholicism, and how it accomplished what he himself desired. He also attempted it personally. The relationship between them was not one-sided, as if Balthasar thought Catholic theology had the answers and Barth only needed correction. Barth had something to say to Catholics and Balthasar did not shy away from suggesting as much even when he suffered for it. Engaging Barth as he did during the forties was risky for a Catholic theologian. During this time the Roman Catholic Church was fearful of modernism, and despite how Barth might have been interpreted in Protestant circles, in Catholic ones, he was viewed as modernist. Balthasar strove to convince them otherwise.

SUFFERING CATHOLICISM

In his preoccupation with Karl Barth, Balthasar initiated an ecumenical conversation he thought needed to occur without in any way diminishing Catholic truth. Barth had something to contribute to the recognition of the latter that too many Catholics overlooked. Balthasar thought Catholics misunderstood Barth, and Barth misunderstood the heart of Catholicism. One part of his vocation was to remedy the misunderstanding on both sides.

In 1942, Balthasar followed up a conversation with Barth by an innocent, yet theologically loaded, suggestion that Barth read the theology of Oskar

17. Both Barth and Balthasar were unusual academics. Balthasar had no desire to be a university theologian and turned down such posts when they were offered. He wanted to reunite what had been lost—holiness and a theological vocation—and did so within the secular community he and others formed. Barth began as a Reformed pastor and was literally called out of the pastorate to take a university post, for which by his own account he was ill prepared. Nonetheless I find Georg Pfeleiderer’s argument persuasive that Barth’s work assumed an “elite vanguard,” and especially an academic one, for its viability. See Pfeleiderer, *Karl Barths praktische Theologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 135–40, 260, 389, 393–99, 449.

Bauhofer in order to understand Catholicism better. Barth, however, was already more familiar with Bauhofer's work than Balthasar could have known. He had a very public disagreement in 1932 with his former colleague Georg Wobbermin over the conversions to Catholicism of Oskar Bauhofer and Erik Peterson. In published editorials against Wobbermin Barth outlined why he took Catholicism seriously, how he sought to offer a Protestant alternative, and why this required rejecting Wobbermin's appeal to Schleiermacher. The exchange with Wobbermin provides an illuminating structure for Barth's engagement with Catholicism.

Balthasar entered into a conversation with Barth about Catholicism that Barth had not only already engaged but about which he had already adopted firm commitments. Early in his theological work, Barth chose, in his words, to "suffer" Catholicism. It was a worthy adversary. But if Barth suffered Catholicism, Balthasar returned the favor. Balthasar persisted, in his words, in a "preoccupation with Barth," for which he too suffered. Balthasar was convinced, perhaps to the end, that if Barth understood Catholicism properly he would see it presupposed and completed what Barth sought to accomplish with his turn to dogmatics. Barth's misunderstanding, Balthasar acknowledged, was not always his fault; much of modern Catholic theology was exactly what Barth critiqued it for being. Balthasar constantly presented Catholic theology to Barth that he thought would assuage his qualms. If he truly understood Pryzwara, or would read Bauhofer, Barth would find the "heart" of Catholicism, and with it the "presupposition for the single most interesting confrontation between" Protestants and Catholics: the *solī Deo Gloria* (the glory of God alone) of Calvin versus the *omnia ad majorem Dei gloriam* (all things to the greater glory of God) of Ignatius Loyola. These two theologians, who had actually been classmates for a brief time, represented for Balthasar the decisive difference.

Balthasar acknowledged that Calvin's *solī Deo Gloria* was itself "Catholic." Glory was to be given to God *alone*, and "glory," of course, formed the heart of Balthasar's theology. Calvin, like Protestantism, pointed in the right direction, but it was incomplete and even theologically detrimental if it was not supplemented by Loyola's *omnia ad*—"everything to." For this reason Balthasar wrote, "The *solī* is catholic, but the exclusion and suspicion of the *omina ad* is not."¹⁸ Balthasar's own dogmatics began where Barth and Calvin did—glory belonged to God alone revealed in the Person of Christ. Everything radiated out from this center, but in so radiating everything was directed to it—*omnia*

18. Letter from Balthasar to Karl Barth, Aug. 12, 1942, in Lochbrunner, *Hans Urs von Balthasar und seine Theologenkollegen*, 289.

ad— and this he thought Barth neglected because he had an inadequate account of nature.

That Balthasar encouraged Barth to read Oskar Bauhofer has more than a bit of irony. Neither Balthasar nor Barth mentioned in their 1942 exchange that Barth already had an unfortunate encounter over Bauhofer. A decade earlier, Georg Wobbermin, Barth's former colleague from his Göttingen days (1921–1925), accused him, and dialectical theology, of being responsible for Oskar Bauhofer and Erik Peterson's conversions to Catholicism. On May 31, 1932 Wobbermin published an editorial, "A New Case: Peterson" ("Ein neuer Fall: Peterson"), that compared the significance of Bauhofer and Peterson's conversions to that of John Henry Newman. Wobbermin argued against those who claimed that Peterson and Bauhofer's conversions "illuminated the situation of the time" like Newman's did his. Their conversions did illumine something about the present state of theology, he suggested, but what they illumined was the baleful influence of Karl Barth. He offered three reasons for such a judgment. First, Bauhofer and Peterson acted on the "assumption" of Barth's "dialectical theology." Second, both lacked a proper understanding of the Reformed doctrine of faith, which was "a heartfelt confidence in the grace and goodness of God, revealed and experienced through the Word" that then takes precedence over and arranges "dogmatic formulations." Third, this gave rise to an "unevangelical version and evaluation [of faith] in the Catholic-Scholastic sense" with its "claim of an infallible papist church."¹⁹ Wobbermin reminded his readers he had warned Barth and others about this a year earlier in 1931.²⁰ He acknowledged he had evaluated somewhat positively Bauhofer's earlier 1930 work, *Das Metareligiöse, eine kritische Religionsphilosophie*. Much in it was positive, but it already pointed in a dogmatic Catholic direction, and explicitly drew on dialectical theology. Karl Barth laid the seeds for Bauhofer's un-Reformed appreciation of dogma and therefore his conversion. Now with the conversions of Bauhofer and Peterson, Wobbermin found his warning justified.

Barth, who was now teaching at Bonn, replied on May 31, 1932 with an editorial refuting Wobbermin. Wobbermin's accusation and "construction" were so thoroughly untrue Barth wrote, "Its origin I do not know how to

19. Karl Barth, *Offene Briefe 1909–1935*, ed. Diether Koch, vol. 5 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Zürich: Theologischer Zurich, 2001), 214.

20. Wobbermin, "Das Wort Gottes und der evangelische Glaube," in *Vom Worte Gottes: Bericht über den dritten Theologentag in Breslau vom 5. bis 8. Oktober 1930*, ed. Ernst Lohmeyer (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1931), 46–65. This conference seems to have been in response to Peterson's "Was ist theologie?" See Barth *Offene Briefe 1909–1935*, 214.

explain under the presupposition of good will on your side.”²¹ Barth reminded Wobbermin what Peterson wrote against him in his 1925 essay, “Was ist Theologie?” Far from acting on the assumption of dialectical theology, Peterson rejected it. His rejection led him to Rome, not his affirmation. Likewise Barth now publicly told Wobbermin something he could not have known. Barth was asked to recommend Bauhofer’s 1930 book, but he wrote, “I very wisely declined.”²² Barth gave no credence to Wobbermin’s accusations. He bore no responsibility for their conversions.

Wobbermin did not back down. He recalled a “long conversation” they had while colleagues at Göttingen after Peterson published his famous essay. They agreed it “was to be taken seriously and not something to be hushed up,” but for diametrically opposed reasons. Barth supposedly “praised it” for the way it established the problem of dogma and called for a “theological objectivism.” Wobbermin agreed it must be taken seriously, but for a very different reason. He lamented it. It wrongly set up the problem and the solution. He also lamented Barth’s own “hardening” of Christian doctrines and facile rejection of Schleiermacher. Wobbermin accused Barth of sharing this rejection with Peterson and Bauhofer, and found in the rejection of Schleiermacher the true loss of Protestantism. Schleiermacher developed it as was needed; Barth was leading Protestants away from Schleiermacher and therefore back to Rome. Those were the options. Barth argued that same year, in his introduction to the first volume of the *Church Dogmatics*, that they were not options at all, but two sides of the same coin. Barth’s quip about the *analogia entis* as the antichrist, and its similarity to Schleiermacher’s theology, cannot be understood separate from his public encounter with Wobbermin.

Barth questioned Wobbermin’s recollection of a conversation they had seven years earlier and repeated the phrase, “there is no proof,” in the face of Wobbermin’s accusation. Barth then wrote something, which reveals important theological themes and preoccupations in his work that unfold from 1932 on. This quote shows how he “suffered” Catholicism, the firm commitments he developed in his response to it, and what the structure would be by which he engaged it. Barth wrote:

I want to say to you, and concerning this I become acerbic, I don’t take matters of Catholicism as a joke. I take it as an incredibly strong and deep conversation partner; to be the only real conversation partner Protestant theology can take seriously. I hold idealism,

21. Karl Barth *Offene Briefe 1909–1935*, 216.

22. *Ibid.*

anthroposophy, folk religion and the death of God movement [*Gottlosenbewegung*] for children in comparison to this opponent. I am seriously affected [*leide*] about this, [especially] that Protestant theology is here blind; that it does not recognize to what intellectual and spiritual insignificance it has descended on the line, which you Herr Colleague, hold as salvific, [and] how little it has grown internally today to Catholicism. My entire work asks the desperate question (yes: to our long and completely desperate methods used in these two hundred years) about a Protestant theology, which would oppose Catholicism, which I hold as great heresy—as *theology* and as a worthy *Protestant* theology.²³

This exchange reveals key elements in Barth's theology and its relationship to Catholicism. The first is the role "dialectic" plays. On the one hand, Wobbermin unjustifiably associated Peterson and Bauhofer with Barth's dialectic. Peterson railed against it, arguing despite Barth's own affirmations, it "cannot give God the glory" because it provides no "concrete knowledge" nor "concrete authority" nor "concrete obedience."²⁴ But Wobbermin should be excused for misunderstanding the situation. As Barbara Nichtweiß demonstrates, early on Peterson was considered a "dialectical theologian," and while he rejected Barth's version of dialectic, he never abandoned a different version, which is necessarily the case for every theologian who employs analogy under the influence of Thomas Aquinas as Peterson did. Analogy and dialectic are not opposed; rather, dialectic is a moment in analogy that must be affirmed and then surpassed. It forms the very structure of the "objections" and "on the contrary" that then seek resolution in the "I answer that" of the Thomistic method. It is especially central to the affirmation of attributes to God that are then negated (*remotio*), only to be reaffirmed by the way of eminence.

Dialectic was not alien to Peterson's own work, but he found various reasons to critique Barth's dialectic. Not only did it avoid concrete obedience, but it was a species of "Greek mythology" and indebted to "Father Kant."²⁵ Nonetheless, Peterson also recognized dialectic's inevitability. He acknowledged Thomas Aquinas was a "dialectical thinker," and that such an approach was necessary because of his "enhyposstatic understanding of Christology."²⁶ Likewise, it must be remembered that Balthasar never rejected

23. Ibid.

24. Peterson, "Was ist Theologie?," in *Theologische Traktate* (Munich: Kosel, 1950), 18.

25. See Barbara Nichtweiß, *Erik Peterson: Neue Sicht auf Leben und Werk* (Herder: Freiburg im Breisgau, 1992), 586, 591.

dialectic completely. In an essay published in 1944 that came from the first edition of the Barth book, Balthasar acknowledged a place for dialectic in theology (as he also did in his 1951 Barth book), but he rejected it when it was understood as a “contradiction”; then it was nothing but a failed “demonic attempt” at analogy.²⁷ If he occasionally stated that Barth abandoned dialectic, he overstated his case. What he wrote elsewhere is more nuanced. Barth abandoned dialectic as the sole method, and as the kind of method that dominated his *Romans* phase. But Balthasar, like Peterson, never rejected dialectic. It has a place in theology within analogy, never as its replacement. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss Balthasar’s interpretation and the place it has for dialectic.²⁸

A second important theme in Barth’s response to Wobbermin is the question of the ecclesial location of “theology.” Wobbermin admonished him for failing to be a follower of Schleiermacher. Here Barth was guilty as charged. In his 1928 essay, “Roman Catholicism: A Question to the Protestant Church,”

26. The doctrine of the enhypostaton teaches that in the incarnation the Person of Christ does not have a human “hypostasis,” but exists as a Person in the divine hypostasis, uniting humanity and divinity into one without either ceasing to be distinctly human or divine; humanity is not divinity nor vice versa, but Christ’s two natures exist in one Person who is the acting subject. See Barbara Nichtweiß, *Erik Peterson*, 657. The “outline” for Peterson’s lectures on Thomas Aquinas in 1923–1924, which Barth attended, was based on the claim, as Peterson put it, “Thomas weiß genau, daß alle theologischen Begriffe in einem dialektischen Zusammenhang miteinander stehen. . . . Der Glaube lebt nicht aus dem logisch Ausgeschlossenen, sondern in der dialektischen Spannung der Begriffe.” The importance of this should not be missed. Barth attended Peterson’s lectures and became acquainted through them with a more patristic Christology. Amy Marga recognizes this in her *Karl Barth’s Dialogue with Catholicism in Göttingen and Munster: Its Significance for His Doctrine of God*, *Beiträge zur Historischen Theologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010). She acknowledges that this qualifies Bruce McCormack’s thesis that Barth learned the anhypostatic–enhypostatic distinction primarily from Heppel. Instead, she writes, “He clearly had some previous exposure to this Christological pattern through Peterson’s lectures,” which were on Aquinas (32).

27. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Analogie und Dialektik: Zur Klärung der theologischen Prinzipienlehre Karl Barths,” *Divus Thomas* 22 (1944): 173.

28. Any nuanced discussion of the place of dialectic in twentieth-century theology should take into account that proponents of the so-called *nouvelle théologie*, saw dialectic contributing to the scholasticism they found arid and lifeless. See Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. 1: *The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998) 61–63. De Lubac traces a shift, albeit not an opposition, in the interpretation of Scripture to the “dialectic” that emerged with the “new questions” that were being asked by the dialecticians in the eleventh century which worked against the more allegorical model of Augustinianism. What is this dialectical model? According to those of a more Augustinian persuasion, the dialecticians “presumed to submit the mysteries of God himself or his action in the world to the laws which rule the nature of things.” Ironically, de Lubac finds the Scholastic method of dialectic accomplishing precisely what Barth saw in the *analogia entis*.

Barth explained in a footnote why he felt more “at home” in Catholicism than in the Reformed tradition. He wrote,

If I today became convinced that the interpretation of the Reformation on the line taken by Schleiermacher-Ritschl-Troeltsch (or even by Seeberg or Holl) was correct; that Luther and Calvin really intended such an outcome of their labours; I could not indeed become a Catholic tomorrow, but I should have to withdraw from the evangelical Church. And if I were forced to make a choice between the two evils, I should, in fact, prefer the Catholic.²⁹

That of course is not high praise for Catholicism, but it is even less so for modern Protestantism. It helps us understand his opposition to Wobbermin.

Barth found Wobbermin’s Protestantism incapable of challenging Catholicism in *theological* terms. He envisioned a robust Protestant theology that would be as grounded upon the solid truth of dogma as Catholicism, but he meant something different by “dogma” than did Peterson and the Roman Catholics. Wobbermin failed to take that into account. If Balthasar’s presentation of Barth’s work has any validity, it is in his insight that Barth’s later work fulfilled something always present from his earlier *Romans* phase but inadequately expressed: Christian theology takes its form from its christological dogmas. Balthasar interprets Barth’s turn in his latter work as, in the words of Lochbrunner, a “slight turn,” which Balthasar described as “from the vision of humanity to the vision of Christ, from dialectic to sacrament, from a unity of opposition to a veiling of revelation.” He referred to it as a “consistent path” because the latter was only the “becoming explicit of the presuppositions ignored in the initial form.”³⁰ For Balthasar, Barth presented Christian theology in its true “ratio,” in the true “form and tone of revelation.” Balthasar rightly understood the important dogmatic implications entailed in Barth’s doctrine of God, which we will take up in chapter 4. But the “ratio” Barth recognized also had implications for Christian ethics, which was what mattered most in the

29. “Roman Catholicism: A Question to the Protestant Church,” in *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings: 1920–28*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 314n1. This was also a lecture delivered in Bremen Mar. 9, in Osnabrück Mar. 15, and the Lower Rhine Pastor’s Conference in Düsseldorf, Apr. 10, 1928. Barth made a similar claim in his lectures on Schleiermacher in 1923–1924. Karl Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 259.

30. Lochbrunner, *Hans Urs von Balthasar und seine Theologenkollegen*, 264

convoluted nature–grace debates. For Barth “dogma is ethics.” It may be Barth’s most significant insight. It will be taken up in chapter 5.

A third theme in Barth’s response to Wobbermin is how he suffers Catholicism. Catholicism haunted Barth both practically and theoretically. He sought a Protestant theology able to address the formidable developments of Catholicism, both since Schleiermacher as well as those that occurred toward the end of his life at Vatican II. Catholics were capable of cleaning house in a way Protestants were not. They had become self-satisfied, content to repeat shibboleths from Father Schleiermacher, which is why Barth must become “acerbic” with Wobbermin. Barth wanted a Protestant theology as robust as what he saw taking place in Catholicism.

CENSORING BALTHASAR’S BARTH BOOK: CATHOLIC OPPOSITION

Balthasar provides no evidence that he knew of Barth’s exchange with Wobbermin or his accusation that Barth was responsible for the Catholic conversions of Bauhofer and Peterson. Barth’s engagement with Catholicism already caused him to be suspect by Protestants like Wobbermin. Balthasar’s preoccupation with Barth also provoked suspicion. When he sat in on Barth’s 1941 spring semester course on the Council of Trent, Barth told his students, “The enemy is listening in.” Referring to Balthasar, he also stated, “He hears many critiques but still offers no actual, impressive resistance. Perhaps he read too much in my *Dogmatics*. (He tows especially 2/1 in his briefcase around like a cat her youth).”³¹ The expression, “the enemy is listening in,” was a well-known Swiss public advertisement reminding Swiss citizens in the midst of World War II that spies could be anywhere and they had to be careful with what they said.³² But it was not only Protestants who were suspicious of Balthasar; Catholic theologians also found his preoccupation with Barth problematic.

Soon after Barth’s 1941 seminar on Trent, Balthasar completed his monograph on Barth’s work and presented it to him. It was never published in the form first presented. Few people have read it, perhaps no one still living.³³ No one yet has compared it to the 1951 book and identified similarities and differences. We know he showed it to Karl Rahner and Dominikus Thallhammer.³⁴ It was also sent to his Jesuit provincial, Gutzwiller, and then

31. *Ibid.*, 279.

32. I am indebted to Hans–Anton Drewes for this information in a conversation at the Karl Barth Archiv, Apr. 21, 2011.

33. Only one copy of it remains and it can be found in the Balthasar archives in Basel. Once it is open to the public, it will be important for someone to go through this manuscript and compare it to the 1951 book.

on to at least four censors, including Mario von Galli, Franz Lakner, Johannes Umberg and Dominikus Thallhammer.³⁵ They were neoscholastics, and for that reason suspicious of Karl Barth and Balthasar's preoccupation with him. None of them consented to its publication without significant revisions. Lochbrunner notes that the objections fell into two classes.³⁶ First were the theological objections; the primary and consistent one was that Balthasar did not uphold Vatican I's teaching of the twofold order of knowledge, where both faith and natural reason provided knowledge of God. Galli expressed concern that the book would be seen as an "enemy of scholastic theology." Lakner found his interpretation of nature and grace to be "incompatible" with Catholic teaching, and deficient in its understanding of natural morality. It lacked the clarity of Catholic theology because it used Barth's terminology. It was also guilty of "traditionalism," a position that claimed knowledge of God was only available to faith. Traditionalism had already been rejected in Catholic theology. For Lakner, Balthasar's work was "too influenced" by Barth, especially the latter's "voluntarism" and "personalism." Umberg cites the antimodernist oath that stated God's existence can be demonstrated "by the light of natural reason," and accuses the book of failing to uphold natural reason. He wrote, "The author must present clearly and unambiguously the consistent teaching of the ecclesial teaching office concerning the power of knowledge from human reason." The book was guilty of modernism. Dominikus Thallhammer also expressed concerns about Balthasar's understanding of natural knowledge of God and natural morality.³⁷ There is some irony in the censoring of Balthasar's book on Barth for this first concern. In his 1932 preface to the first volume of the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth had allied the teaching of Vatican I with Schleiermacher's theology. For Barth, both the *Vaticanum* (Vatican I) and a Protestant theology running "from Schleiermacher by way of Ritschl to Herrmann" contributed to a "secular misery" from which he sought liberation. Balthasar's Barth book challenged this claim. Barth was right about Schleiermacher, but wrong about Catholicism.³⁸ He defended Vatican I against Barth's accusations. Roman censors were unconvinced. Balthasar had

34. Lochbrunner, *Hans Urs von Balthasar und seine Theologenkollegen*, 410

35. *Ibid.*, 413.

36. *Ibid.*, 413.

37. *Ibid.*, 444–47.

38. As will be shown in chapter 6, Balthasar feared Barth might be correct about developments in Catholicism after Vatican II. His fear was that Catholics had unwittingly embraced Schleiermacher's theology.

not adequately defended Catholic teaching. They remained suspicious of Barth and of any rapprochement between him and Catholicism.

The second concern was the precarious position of Catholicism, and especially the Jesuits, in Switzerland. Was this the appropriate time for an engagement and argument with a Protestant theologian who was himself controversial among Protestants? Balthasar's provincial, Gutzwiller, supported his work, but feared after publication it would be placed on the Index. For this reason he counseled him to publish a few chapters as essays in order to get his work before the public. At first Balthasar refused because the work was a "unity," but eventually he agreed, publishing two of three planned essays in the Dominican journal in Fribourg, *Divus Thomas*, in the 1940s.³⁹

As Lochbrunner notes, given the difficulties it caused Balthasar, a lesser person would have given up working on Barth altogether. It is also remarkable that Balthasar expresses little of this when he finally publishes the Barth book in 1951. The only evidence of the difficulties is a veiled reference on page ten that the English version mistranslates. Balthasar wrote, "The author has meditated upon his theme for almost twenty years."⁴⁰ In other words, the book is not new but bears the mark of two decades of reflection and debate with Catholics and Protestants. Balthasar alludes to this history, but does not state it explicitly.⁴¹ It is a sign of Balthasar's obedience. He was clearly frustrated at the censor's reviews and thought they misunderstood what he and Barth were doing, but he did not publicly challenge them. He revised the work over the next decade until an appropriate time was present for it to be published. Rather than diminishing his interest in Barth's theology, the time taken to publish it only increased his desire to engage Barth and Protestantism. During the year 1950, when he left the Jesuits, it became increasingly important to him not only to engage Barth, but also Protestantism.

39. Lochbrunner, *Hans Urs von Balthasar und seine Theologenkollegen*, 422.

40. Fr. Oakes's excellent English translation misleads us here such that the difficulty of the Barth book is even more hidden from English readers. He translates, "Der Verfasser hat sein Thema seit bald 20 Jahren meditiert" as "The author of this book has mediated on this theme since the early 1920s." Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Edward T. Oakes, SJ (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992), xviii.

41. I would not have recognized the significance of this statement if Lochbrunner had not pointed it out. See Lochbrunner, *Hans Urs von Balthasar und seine Theologenkollegen*, 408 where he states that given how Balthasar put this one reference to the difficulty he had in publishing the book, it is not surprising that readers don't ask "why" the "great manuscript" had not been published earlier.