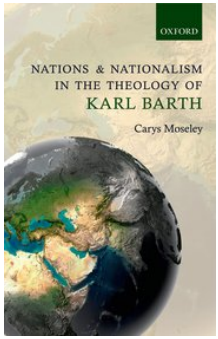
Nations and Nationalism in the Theology of Karl Barth, by Carys Moseley



Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013 | vii + 219 pages | ISBN: 978-0-199-66892-2 (hardcover) £69.00

Beginning with the bold claim that nationhood and nationalism lie at the heart of Karl Barth's theology, Carys Mosely seeks to correct what she perceives to be a lamentable neglect of Barth's political thought among a particular strand of Barth's interpreters who have focused on "pure" dogmatics and who have "seriously downplayed" his political interest. Moseley contends that "the development of major theological topics in his work such as pneumatology, ecclesiology, and the state cannot be understood properly without fully taking into account the depth and even the obsessiveness of Barth's theological opposition to nationalism" (13). Attention to the political character of Barth's theology was spearheaded, not without controversy, by Friedrich Wilhelm Marquardt in his *Habilitation* thesis written at the University of Berlin in 1972. Marquardt's work, Moseley contends, has "forced theologians to recognize that Barth was very much a political and practical theologian even when conducting exegetical, historical, and dogmatic theology" (13).

On the basis of this recognition, Moseley traces the development of Barth's life-long opposition to the dogma that every nation must have its own state and that the nation is both the highest good and the source of ethics. The latter idea stems, of course, from the political thought of G. W. F. Hegel. Moseley explains that Barth's suspicion of nationalism is evident even in his student years during which he expressed unease about both the tendency toward nationalism and the anti-Semitism that he detected in German liberal theology. That early unease proved to be well-founded as the tumultuous years of the first half of the twentieth century unfolded. The danger of nationalism, in Barth's view, was that the nation itself, and its perceived interests, becomes the ultimate source for what passes as theology and ethics. This elevation of the nation is simply idolatrous.

While nationalism is, in Barth's view, seriously problematic, the idea of nationhood and the entity of the nation itself is not. Nations have their legitimate place, according to Barth, as cultural entities established by human

action under the grace and the judgement of God. Against both Friedrich Gogarten and Paul Althaus, Barth insisted that nations are not founded on the orders of creation and of nature. Nor are they founded upon any pneumatological ground. He resists an essentialist ontological view of nationhood. Nations are human constructions. They may become instruments of God's purposes, but they have no absolute rights over other nations and they cannot be the ultimate source of ethical norms.

A nation is a people-group often bound together by common language. The four linguistic people-groups that make up the Swiss confederation serve as a paradigm of nationhood for Barth. He regarded the co-existence of four nations within a single state as "a secular parable of the kingdom of God, analogous to the Christian church in its embrace of diverse nations and their languages" (1). The promotion of reconciliation and peaceful co-existence between peoples and nations, along with the neutrality of the Swiss confederation, were essential elements of Barth's regard for Switzerland as a parable of the Kingdom. Nationalism, by contrast, under which it is supposed that every nation must have its own state, was regarded by Barth as a principal cause of war.

The biblical basis claimed by Barth for this conception of nationhood was Acts 2, which tells of the coming together at Pentecost of nations living within the Roman state. While the Spirit creates unity and mutual understanding across the diverse people-groups, "the coming of the Spirit," Moseley explains, "does not authorise the extinction of national differences, symbolized as they are and perhaps to an extent constituted by linguistic and cultural differences; rather they are affirmed as morally neutral, and even cautiously accepted as vehicles of the proclamation of the Word of God" (200). A further important feature of Barth's exposition of Acts 2 is the challenge it mounts to the legacy of F. C. Baur in German biblical exegesis and Baur's denial of the historicity of the early chapters of Acts. Crucially for Barth, that denial led to the downplaying of the Jewish origins of the church.

The coming together of nations in Acts 2, along with the example of the Swiss confederation, provided support for Barth's distinction between the nation and the state, legitimised nationhood as a cultural entity, provided evidence of nations playing a part in the working out of God's purposes, and undergirded his insistence that the state has a responsibility to promote reconciliation between peoples. This responsibility became a crucial element of Barth's critique of the rising tide of anti-Semitism that he saw in Germany. Every state should recognise and uphold the existence of sev-

eral nations within its borders. While welcoming and approving this insight in Barth, Moseley nevertheless criticises Barth for what she perceives to be some failings in his campaign against German anti-Semitism. She laments, for instance, the absence of any reference to Israel or to the Jewish people in the Barmen Declaration, although she acknowledges that Barth sought "to make good this deficiency from the late 1930s onwards" (123). Moseley is critical too of Barth's remaining in "a denomination which had become hopelessly compromised with Nazi ideology which was both anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist" (131). It would have been helpful at this point to have received some explanation from Moseley about why she assumes that leaving the denomination would have been the better option, rather than attempting, as Barth did, to fight the evil from within. While lamenting at several points Barth's "failure" to be forthright enough in his opposition to anti-Semitism, Moseley nevertheless commends the doctrinal work Barth does in showing the extent to which any desire for Israel's ruin is a denial of the covenant relationality with Israel established through Christ and brought to fulfilment in the incarnation. Anti-Semitism involves, quite clearly for Barth, a denial of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In drawing attention to these themes in Barth's work, in identifying the consistent elements in his conception of nationhood as it was developed through his career, and in showing the degree to which his political concerns were integral to his dogmatic work, Moseley has opened new vistas into the vast landscape of Barth's theology. She has also brought to light fresh conceptual resources for thinking through the competing claims of nations in the contemporary world. To be sure, a theological conception of nationhood such as Barth offers will not win universal assent; nor will the evils of nationalism be easily defeated. But Barth's account of nationhood does provide a basis to challenge idolatrous regard for one's own nation wherever it may be found, most especially among those who claim allegiance to the gospel of Jesus Christ on which Barth's claims are based.

Murray A. Rae
University of Otago