

A Philosophical Audacity

Barth's Notion of Experience Between Neo-Kantianism and Nietzsche¹

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Abstract: This article addresses Barth's dialectical notion of experience in the 1920s. I argue that the theoretical problem raised by recent studies on Barth's notion of experience after his break with liberalism (i.e., the apparent inconsistency between Barth's move towards an increasingly neo-Kantian understanding of experience and his emphasis on the existential and psychological dimensions of experience) can be solved by the hypothesis of a Nietzschean influence on Barth's epistemology in the 1920s. I defend not only the historical plausibility but also the conceptual fecundity of such a hypothesis, which casts a new light on Barth's relation to philosophy and the notion of experience, and lays the basis for a consistent Barthian theology of experience.

Theology is not a discreet slice of knowledge you could simply add to one philosophy or other. It exists nowhere but *through* philosophy, and that is why Barth's theological innovation cannot manifest itself apart from philosophical innovation. Barth is not a philosopher, and he does not explicitly develop his concepts in a philosophical way. But Barth repeatedly claims we cannot grant theology an extraordinary status among human discourses. Indeed, his critique of natural theology *and* of negative natural theology implies that no theology can secure a place for itself among human sciences, not even a negative place: the singularity of theology cannot appear in a

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manifest disruption of usual rationality. Theology, considered as a human discourse, lives in the same rational element as any other human discourse and cannot claim for itself a particular use of reason. It grows inside the general framework of the philosophy of its time, and even when theologians struggle to avoid undue dependence on a particular philosophy, they have to engage with philosophical concepts – and not only biblical ones.

I would like here to focus on one philosophical operation in Karl Barth's work. The operation regards the creation of an original concept of experience. I will suggest a hypothesis concerning how Barth works out this concept from 1920 onwards by combining elements from heterogeneous origins (neo-Kantianism and Nietzscheism), which provided him with a notion of experience that is both intelligible and consistent with his theological project. This will help to clarify some aspects of Barth's later thought, especially the way that he conceives of the relation between his work and the positive sciences. It could also give a very concrete illustration of the way he engages with philosophy in the crucial years of the 1920s.

Why should we engage particularly with the concept of experience? It is certainly not a central concept in Barth's thought. Or, to be more specific, it is not a central concept in Barth's thought after his 1916 break with liberalism, but it definitely was in his works before this break, even though it probably indicated the locus of a problem more than a thoroughly and satisfactorily developed concept.² The very fact that the notion of experience disappeared as a major theological concept in his work after 1916 would provide a sufficient reason for exploring what remains of the notion during the so-called 'dialectical' period, and examining how its dismissal as a major theological concept entailed its partial reframing. But there is more: as brilliantly demonstrated by Clifford Anderson³, Karl Barth's theological development gains substantial clarity when understood against the background of the conflict between 'positivism' and 'critical idealism'.⁴ The concept of experience is indeed crucial to this conflict: one could even argue that the main difference between those two epistemological trends is the answer

² It is especially the case in the Geneva Conference (1911), 'La réapparition de la métaphysique dans la théologie', where Barth is striving to define religious experience as independent from the rational *a priori*, and yet not separated from the rational sphere. See Karl Barth, *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1909-1914*, ed. H. Helms, F.-W. Marquardt, H.-A. Drewes, H. Stoevesandt (Zürich: TVZ, 1993), p. 356.

³ Clifford Anderson, *The Crisis of Theological Science: A Contextual Study of the Development of Karl Barth's Concept of Theology as Science from 1901 to 1923*, Ph.D. Dissertation (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Theological Seminary, 2005).

⁴ Clifford Anderson, *The Crisis of Theological Science*, p. 10.

they give to the question whether there is or not a true 'given' in experience. Therefore, if Clifford Anderson, following a path opened by Bruce McCormack and his notion of 'critical realism',⁵ is right in asserting that Barth's move in the late 1910s is a move towards the complete removal of any remnant of positivism in his theology, which nevertheless does not lead Barth to become an orthodox neo-Kantian idealist,⁶ then the concept of experience cannot but stand in a crucial place in this move's machinery. This is probably one of the reasons for Bruce McCormack's frustration concerning Barth's treatment of religious experience:

Were this a critical essay on Barth's theology and not just on readings of Barth, this would be the appropriate place to say that Barth's theological epistemology stood in need of greater attention to the category of religious experience than he himself was able to provide.⁷

Indeed, if one can no longer rely on experience in a positivist way, but does not want to endorse the whole neo-Kantian idealist epistemology, and even if one plans to focus on the objective side of what is at stake (revelation), one should be compelled to provide at least a minimum account of how the object of revelation, conceived in a realist manner, is to be known *by the subject*, i.e. through a religious *experience*, which is still to be defined.

There are several reasons why Barth never provided such a detailed account. Most of them are context-related, and depend on polemics that Barth was involved in. He clearly did not want to draw too much attention to religious experience, which was so closely associated with what he had repudiated, on the one hand, and to his pietistic opponents, on the other hand.⁸ However, asserting that he just gave up on this notion is too glib. Even if we were to agree that he would never have provided a positive theological account of the notion of experience as related to the knowledge of revelation, we would not have freed him of the requirement to develop at least a minimum understanding of what experience is, and why it cannot have the theological relevance that some thought it had. I would be prompt to defend that he indeed provided the

⁵ Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

⁶ Clifford Anderson, *The Crisis of Theological Science*, p. 528

⁷ Bruce McCormack, 'Beyond Non-foundational and Post-modern Readings of Barth: Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology', in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 159.

⁸ Cf. Eberhardt Busch, *Karl Barth and the Pietists*, tr. D. W. Bloesh (Downer Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), p. 97.

beginnings of a positive theological account of the notion of religious experience in the early 1930s, but this is not my ambition here. I only want to focus on the negative part, namely, the concept of experience that Barth had to develop in the 1920s. Indeed, he built it primarily in order to dismiss the idea that theology could be grounded in experience, as his liberal opponents argued. But then, if Barth had also tried, during the 1920s and especially in the 1932 Prolegomena, to restore a positive place for religious experience in theology, as I claim he did, he could have done so only by building on this 'negative' concept of experience that he had worked out. Uncovering this negative or polemical concept is thus a necessary step in coming to understand what would be for Barth a more affirmative theological concept of experience. Engaging with the concept of experience in Barth's work during the 1920s has not only a historical relevance, but also a systematic one for those who would try to find out not only what Barth's theology was, but what it could be by trying to shed light on one of Barth's most obvious blind spots.

The Context: From Herrmann to Cohen

Wilhelm Herrmann's influence on Barth is well known and well documented.⁹ For the sake of the argument, I want to introduce briefly the specifics of Herrmann's notion of religious experience, and to set it within the context of Marburg neo-Kantianism through a comparison with Hermann Cohen's philosophical notion of experience in particular. The debate is quite simple, since it wholly rests on the question whether experience can be a genuine 'given'.

According to Cohen, there is ultimately no difference between what is 'given' and what is constructed in experience, and the 'given' is nothing but a technical term describing one of the several possible ways in which thought relates to its object: 'This word is to be understood as a technical term. Thus, one cannot get the wrong belief that the 'given' is to be understood in the popular sense'.¹⁰ Of course, if the 'given' is a moment in the conceptual generation of experience, it is no longer given in the sense of establishing a relation between thought and the outside world. Experience as the object of thought becomes something altogether constructed by the development and

⁹ See especially Simon Fisher, *Revelatory Positivism? Barth's Earliest Theology and the Marburg School* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 170-299; Bruce McCormack, *Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, pp. 68-77; Christophe Chalamet, *Dialectical Theologians: Wilhelm Herrmann, Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann* (Zürich: TVZ, 2005).

¹⁰ Hermann Cohen, *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung* (1918), Werke 1.1 (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1987), p. 243 ('Dieser Ausdruck ist als Terminus zu verstehen; alsdann wird man nicht in die Meinung verfallen können, dass das »gegeben« im populären Sinne zu verstehen sei'). The translation is mine.

combination of *a priori* thought structures. Therefore the given, understood as something presupposed for thought, becomes a mere 'illusion'.¹¹

Wilhelm Herrmann subscribes to this constructive epistemology insofar as experience in general is concerned, but he seeks to deny that *religious* experience is *a priori* generated by thought (i.e. human thought!). Therefore, religious experience is, according to him, an experience *sui generis* without any *a priori*, in which the absolute gives itself to the individual in a very intimate and singular way. This intimacy and singularity implies that religious experience is not generated as scientific experience (which is universal and impersonal) is. But as a consequence of this *sui generis* and individual nature, religious experience cannot be adequately grasped by rational (constructive) thought, and religion that builds on this experience cannot claim for itself the 'same sort of general validity as the thoughts of morality and science'.¹²

Barth's earliest theology is characterized by his reliance on an absolutely given religious experience as a ground for theology: 'To speak of a religious *a priori* is a *contradictio in adjecto*. An *a priori* can only be a form, a possibility of consciousness. Religion is the fulfillment, the actualization of such a form'.¹³ Even though this remark is directed against Troeltsch, it states exactly what is at stake in Barth's conception of religious experience, not only in 1911, but also in his later work. Religious experience has to be a given in an absolute sense, or it would be nothing but a human phenomenon that has no connection to God. This requirement will remain unchanged. But after 1916, Barth will believe less and less that the experience Herrmann attempted to save from the hold of constructive reason is in fact preserved and thus constitutes a true given. Why?

The answer is to be found primarily in the second edition of Barth's commentary on *Romans*. From an epistemological point of view, the first edition is a more precarious attempt to escape both from Herrmannian individualism and from Cohenian neo-Kantianism, leaning maybe towards Natorp's conception of religious experience.¹⁴ The result is a mixed appreciation of religious experience, which does not have the first place

¹¹ Hermann Cohen, *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, p. 791.

¹² Wilhelm Herrmann, *Schriften zur Grundlegung der Theologie*, 2 vol. (München: Kaiser Verlag, 1966-7), vol. 1, p. 344, cf. Simon Fisher, *Revelatory Positivism*, p. 159.

¹³ Karl Barth, 'La réapparition de la métaphysique dans la théologie', p. 355 ('C'est une *contradictio in adjecto* que de parler d'un *a priori* religieux. Un *a priori* ne saurait être qu'une forme, qu'une possibilité de la conscience. La religion en est la réalisation, l'actualisation'). The translation is mine.

¹⁴ The idea is suggested by Clifford Anderson, *The Crisis of Theological Science*, p. 336.

any more and is often criticized as an individualistic ground for theology, but which seems at the same time to keep a crucial role in Barth's theological epistemology via concepts such as 'intuition' or 'feeling'.¹⁵ It is only in *Romans II* that Barth thoroughly and finally removes any kind of religious experience *à la* Herrmann from his theological apparatus. What is crucial for us is that this new clarity has been obtained through a return to the Cohenian form of neo-Kantian epistemology. This return came about as a result of the influence of Barth's brother Heinrich, who made Barth aware of critical idealism's theological potential. The presence and evolution of neo-Kantian patterns in Barth's critique of psychologism from *Romans I* onwards have been thoroughly studied by Friedrich Lohman¹⁶ and Clifford Anderson. These patterns all converge in Barth's distinction between revelation and any kind of 'given': 'It is not a psychological, historical, cosmic or natural given, nor any of such kind of supreme order'.¹⁷ But we need to be very precise here: Barth does not mean that revelation is not actually given. He means instead that everything that we think as a given, however intimate and removed from any kind of science, is in fact not a given, but belongs instead to the usual realm of constructed experience: 'Therefore, what could be called an experience of grace, maybe in continuity with other religious experiences, remains, as such, on this side'.¹⁸ And why? Because of a Kantian and neo-Kantian principle, which is part of the very definition of experience in Cohen, who calls it the 'supreme principle': the principle of 'the unity of consciousness, as the unity of experience (*der Einheit der Bewusstseins, als der Einheit der Erfahrung*)'.¹⁹ According to Barth, this principle of the unity of consciousness, that is the transcendental unity of experience, is ultimately made known through religious experience. This is because religious experience is supposed to be altogether different from any other kind of experience. It is supposed to be the only truly given. Therefore, the discovery of its connection to the most dubious and earthly

¹⁵ That is why Clifford Anderson sees 'Traces of Positivism' in the first edition of *The Epistle to the Romans*. Cf. Clifford Anderson, *The Crisis of Theological Science*, pp. 333-50.

¹⁶ Friedrich Lohman, *Karl Barth und der Neukantianismus* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1995).

¹⁷ Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, zweite Fassung (1922) (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1940), p. 72 (*Es ist keine seelische, geschichtliche, kosmische, naturhafte Gegebenheit, auch nicht eine solche höchsten Ranges*). The translation is mine, but the English reader can use the translation by E. C. Hoskyns: *The Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 98.

¹⁸ Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, p. 222 ('*denn was als Gnadenerlebnis allenfalls in kontinuierlicher Fortsetzung anderer religiöser Erlebnisse namhaft gemacht werden könnte, das steht als solches noch diesseitig*'). The translation is mine. *The Epistle*, p. 240.

¹⁹ Hermann Cohen, *Kants Theorie*, p. 527.

experiences displays the solidarity of experience as a whole. If even religious experience is not a true given, then there is no given at all:

What about his other possibilities, if this is his last, his deepest and his sharpest possibility? What if precisely the highest human righteousness is a sin? Now clearly the judgment falls on it, and on his other possibilities. In the light of this last thing, that he can do, appears all that is before, that he actually does. With the last link, the whole chain shows itself as a succession of impossibilities.²⁰

And because of this fundamental unity of experience, such a thing as a truly given experience is altogether impossible. In other words, human experience is necessarily humanly constructed, and therefore Herrmann's theological apparatus is a dead end.

The conundrum: a Neo-Kantian Account for Individual Experience?

Actually, things are not as simple as they seem to be. To be sure, the progressive move towards neo-Kantianism after 1916 is irrefutable. We should also not deny Clifford Anderson's assertion that neo-Kantian influence on Barth's concept of experience remains and increases during the 1920s, until at least 1932, when it provides Barth with an elegant way to give experience a place in his theology without returning to positivism: the transcendental argument.²¹ But this move towards neo-Kantianism is far from being sufficient to explain the development of the notion of experience in Barth's work during those years. Moreover, if we are to understand this development entirely through this scheme, we might find ourselves facing unsolvable problems.

Clifford Anderson's contention, according to which Barth has gotten closer and closer to Cohen's manner of dealing with the concept of experience, rests on what he reads as a kind of transcendental argument for the necessity of religious experience in *Church Dogmatics I/1*. This reading certainly helps us understand to some extent what goes on in *Church Dogmatics I* with the concept of experience, but it is also misleading. Anderson's point seems to be that Barth deduces (in a transcendental manner, i.e. as its condition of possibility) the existence of a truly valid religious experience from the

²⁰ Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, p. 226 ('*Wie steht es mit seinen übrigen Möglichkeiten, wenn das ihre letzte, ihre tiefste, ihre Spitze ist? Wenn gerade die höchste Menschengerechtigkeit – Frevel ist? Nun bricht offenbar das Gericht herein, auch über seine übrigen Möglichkeiten. Im Licht dieses Letzten, was er tun kann, erscheint auch all das Vorletzte, was er tut. Mit dem Endglied zeigt sich die ganze Kette als eine Reihe von Unmöglichkeiten.*'). The translation is mine. *The Epistle*, p. 244.

²¹ Clifford Anderson, 'A Theology of Experience? Karl Barth and the Transcendental Argument', in *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism*, B. McCormack & C. Anderson, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), Kindle edition loc 1035 to 1258.

Faktum of proclamation. In this configuration, Barth's 'proclamation' would be the equivalent of Cohen's 'experience', whereas Barth's 'experience' would stand for Cohen's 'conditions of possibility'. But in what sense would this *a priori* necessary religious experience be an experience? This is unclear, just as it is unclear to what extent the *Faktum* whose conditions of possibility we should deduce could itself be distinguished from an experience (since it occupies there the exact same place as experience in Cohen's system). At the end of the day, we may have two unexplained concepts of experience instead of one, as well as a conflict between them. I think this reveals a more fundamental problem in the reading of Barth's notion of experience through the unique neo-Kantian prism. This problem, which Clifford Anderson is perfectly aware of, comes from Barth's reluctance about accepting one of the more distinctive attributes of Cohen's notion of experience:

Barth incorporated elements of the Marburg neo-Kantians' concept of experience. Here the record is mixed. On the one hand, Barth moved progressively away from interpreting religious experience as a sort of admixture between the subjective act of experience and the object of experience. ... On the other hand, Barth never fully embraced Hermann Cohen's identification of experience with science. If he had, he might simply and easily have asserted that Christian religious experience is identical with the proclamation of the church and thus have written off the question of its subjective appropriation as a non-theological, psychological matter.²²

Barth, then, did not do what he should have done once he had endorsed the neo-Kantians' notion of experience. Clifford Anderson is perfectly right in saying that, when Cohen talks about experience, he means only the transcendently generated object of science, and even of the mathematical science of nature (at least during a first moment).²³ Cohen explicitly and repeatedly distinguishes the experience that he is considering from the individual and psychological consciousness. He does that notably because such a consciousness belongs to anybody, including the 'savages and the children', and when it comes to the 'relation of mind to things, the classical witnesses are not savages and children, but those who make science'.²⁴

²² Clifford Anderson, 'A Theology of Experience?', loc 1252-7.

²³ Cf. Hermann Cohen, *Kants Theorie*, pp. 84-5, 281, 647.

²⁴ Hermann Cohen, *Kants Theorie*, p. 62: 'Dass für das Verhalten des Geistes zu den Dingen nicht die Wilden und die Kinder die klassischen Zeugen seien, sondern die Erzeuger der Wissenschaft, das ist ihm [Locke] eine gänzlich verschlossene Einsicht'.

The interesting point is that this distinction in Cohen is precisely the one that made possible Wilhelm Herrmann's dualism. Indeed, Herrmann took advantage of Cohen's dismissal of individual experience to claim that even if there is no given anywhere in *scientific* experience, revelation as a private and individual experience is the locus of a real givenness – but is then not an object of science in the way that nature is.²⁵ It is also the young Barth's strategy.

But now, when it comes to the more mature Barth, the Barth of *Romans II* onwards, we have to face a contradiction. On one side, when one is asked whether the notion of experience Barth is talking about is Herrmann's or Cohen's, i.e., whether experience is understood as an individual and concrete event (*Erlebnis*), or as an impersonal object of science (*Erfahrung*), one cannot help but answering that Barth stands on Herrmann's side rather than on Cohen's. We see this, for instance, when Barth talks about the experience of grace (*Gnadenerlebnis*) in *Romans II*,²⁶ or when he describes the 'religious experience or consciousness of the Christian [*christlich-religiösen Erlebnisses oder Bewußtseins*]' in *Church Dogmatics I/1*.²⁷ But on the other side, when one is asked whether Barth's *way of dealing* with the notion of experience is closer to Herrmann or Cohen, one has to answer that Barth, in *Romans II*, is likely to consider experience as something necessarily constructed, and so tends to be closer to Cohen. We see evidence for this in the title under which Barth discusses experience in *Church Dogmatics*: 'Das Wort Gottes und die Erfahrung'.

The whole puzzle is perfectly summarized in this gap between the title and the content of the section in which Barth discusses the experience of the Word of God. Barth is talking about *Erlebnis*, but he talks about *Erlebnis* as Cohen talks about *Erfahrung*. Barth unites *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* in such a way that any *Erlebnis* could be understood as a neo-Kantian *Erfahrung*. Except that for neo-Kantians, such a treatment of *Erlebnis* does not make any sense. They simply do not engage with *Erlebnis*, but only with what *Erfahrung*, the experience as the object of science, can retain from it. This is, according to them, experience is generated by general rules of reason that do not depend on singular instances of experience, and thus do not explain those instances in their qualitative

²⁵ Wilhelm Herrmann, *Schriften*, vol. 2, p. 322, cf. Simon Fisher, *Revelatory Positivism*, p. 145.

²⁶ Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, p. 212 ; *The Epistle*, p. 230.

²⁷ Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik I/1* (Zürich: TVZ, 1980), p. 209; *Church Dogmatics I/1*, tr. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), p. 218.

singularity (that can only be the task of a descriptive psychology). Hence the perplexity: how can Barth do what he does?

Clifford Anderson gave a provisory answer: Barth actually cannot, and the reasons that he attempts to do so are biographical and not philosophical. He desires to challenge the pietists' accusation that he gives up on personal religious experience. This means, ultimately, that Barth does not *really* integrate those two aspects. He only seems to do so, but in fact he is just placing two incompatible elements side by side. I do not want to admit this answer as the only possible one. That would mean admitting irrationality in Barth's thought, which would go against the methodological claim I have made at the beginning. Sticking to this methodological claim, I would rather ask: how is this apparent contradiction possible? How can Barth think a transcendently constructed experience without identifying it as the object of science?

Nietzsche and the multi-interpretability (*vieldeutiger Charakter*) of experience

We assumed that the critique of the given in Barth was inherited from Cohen. And it is, for its greatest part. However, Marburg neo-Kantians are not the only philosophers who repudiated the notion of a given, and not even the only philosophers who did so *and* were actually known by Barth when he redrafted his commentary on *Romans*. Among the other philosophers whom Barth knew, Friedrich Nietzsche is the most significant. Nietzsche is much quoted in *Romans II*, both explicitly and implicitly (and more than any of the neo-Kantians). That is why I think it is worth examining Nietzsche's critique of the given before asking in what sense it can be useful for understanding Barth's concept of experience.

Nietzsche's critique of the given is based on the idea of interpretation, and on what Patrick Wötling calls the fundamental metaphor of Nietzsche's philosophy, the philologist metaphor.²⁸ This metaphor means that the philosopher's task is to consider what appears in experience as a text to be interpreted. But just as the philologist – or possibly the exegete – might be the one who establishes the text itself, so that the frontier between interpretation and text ultimately blurs, experience never gives itself apart from a particular interpretation of it. That does not necessarily mean that there is no given at all, but rather that the idea of a given can only be understood as an

²⁸ For a detailed account, cf. Patrick Wötling, *Nietzsche et le problème de l'interprétation* (Paris: PUF, 1999), especially I, 1.

interpretation as well, and that therefore no given could possibly be *abstracted* from its interpretation:

Against the positivism which halts at phenomena – ‘There are only facts’ – I would say: no, facts are just what there aren’t, there are only interpretations. We cannot determine any fact ‘in itself’: perhaps it’s nonsensical to want to do such a thing.²⁹

Two things must be noted: just like the neo-Kantian critique of positivism, Nietzsche’s critique is oriented toward the idea of a given. However, and as the remaining part of the fragment declares, Nietzsche does not think that the given is generated by the subject’s thought – this would make of the transcendental subject a fact of a higher order. What does this substitution of facts with interpretations mean, from an epistemological point of view? Whereas the fact, once established, is unique and immutable, an interpretation is *de jure* challengeable as a weak interpretation. There is no interpretation without a potential conflict of interpretations, and thus the possibility of ‘*infinite interpretations*’.³⁰ This idea relies on Nietzsche’s hypothesis of reality as ‘will to power’:³¹ interpretation is the way a certain form of life understands the world and others in order to develop itself, so that life is ultimately this conflict of interpretations itself. That does not mean that any interpretation is possible or viable: there are better interpretations than others, because there are forms of life that are more powerful than others. But it does mean that if experience is actually not given, but constructed through a process of interpretation, this process is always a singular one, involving singular interpretations struggling against each others (each related to a singular form of life), and not at all the work of a universal and abstract subject (the neo-Kantian subject of science). The ‘rich ambiguity [*vieldeutiger Charakter*]’ of experience³² thus concerns experience as it occurs to the individual, the singular being. Therefore, it has an existential and psychological dimension;³³ it definitely points at the *Erlebnis* and not

²⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings From the Late Notebooks*, ed. R. Brittner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 7 [60], p. 139 (‘*Gegen den Positivismus, welcher bei dem Phänomen stehen bleibt »es giebt nur Tatsachen«, würde ich sagen: nein, gerade Tatsachen giebt es nicht, nur Interpretationen. Wir können kein Faktum »an sich« feststellen: vielleicht ist es ein Unsinn, so etwas zu wollen*’).

³⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, tr. W. Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), V, §374, p. 336.

³¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, tr. W. Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966), §36.

³² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, V, §373, p. 335.

³³ This is made perfectly clear by Nietzsche in the aphorism devoted to the ‘personal providence’, in which he defines what he considers to be the highest point of our ‘practical and theoretical skill in interpreting and arranging events’ (*The Gay science*, IV, §277).

only at the *Erfahrung*. Therefore, we are, in a way, presented with what could become a concept of experience as both constructed (through a process of interpretation) and singular. An efficient weapon to aim at Herrmann's concept of religious experience!

Barth's neo-Kantian/Nietzschean concept of experience

Let me now clarify my point: I am not claiming that Barth endorsed the whole Nietzschean epistemology, and the 'will to power' hypothesis it entails and/or presupposes. But I think we have reasons to believe that the notion of experience he starts using from *Romans II* onwards is indebted to Nietzsche's critique of positivism via his dismissal of the sharp contrast between facts and interpretations. My contention is that acknowledging this fact is a way to solve the puzzle raised by Clifford Anderson.

Before going further, I would like to clarify the status of the hypothesis I am proposing. The outwardly odd suggestion of a neo-Kantian *and* Nietzschean influence in the Barthian concept of experience during the 1920s can be understood either historically or conceptually. It is a conceptual plausibility that I want to claim for my hypothesis. By this I mean that the hypothesis developed not as a result of a well-documented connection between Barth's work and Nietzsche's, but rather because the hypothesis provides a suitable conceptual resolution to the problem raised by the structure and provenance of Barth's concept of experience in the 1920s.

However, even though my point is not primarily historical, it is not historically unlikely. Nietzsche's significance for Barth has long been acknowledged. We see a provocative instance of this in Edgar Salin's 1962 'Laudatio für Karl Barth', in which Barth's theological undertaking is described as a 'Nietzschean-anti-Nietzschean' attempt to save Christianity³⁴. More recently, and with much more historical accuracy, Niklaus Peter attempted to assess precisely the presence of Nietzschean elements in the young Barth's work.³⁵ He established that Barth had actually read Nietzsche between writing the first two editions of his commentary on *Romans*, and thus demonstrated that Barth's knowledge of Nietzsche was not only mediated by Franz Overbeck. This allowed him to state that Barth's engagement with Nietzsche had taken place after his break with liberalism, and thus had not played any direct role in Barth's major theological move. Niklaus Peter also showed how Barth used the second *Untimely meditation's* critique of

³⁴ Edgar Salin, 'Laudatio für Karl Barth', *Zeitschrift für neuere theologieggeschichte*, (1994/2), pp. 305-312.

³⁵ Niklaus Peter, 'Karl Barth als Leser und Interpret Nietzsches', *Zeitschrift für neuere theologieggeschichte*, (1994/2), pp. 251-264.

scientific history as one among many weapons in his own theological struggle, a weapon that suited his previous engagement with scientific history in *Romans I* especially well. According to him, Barth thus borrowed conceptual distinctions from Nietzsche and transferred them to his own theological ground without endorsing the philosophy of life and cultural critique that determined them in the first place³⁶.

This focus on the critique of scientific history signals that Niklaus Peter considers Overbeck, and his famous distinction between *Geschichte* and *Urgeschichte*, as the key link between Nietzsche and Barth, even though he also gives evidence of Barth's independent reading of Nietzsche.³⁷ There is no doubt that Overbeck, and the distinction between *Geschichte* and *Urgeschichte* in particular, did play a decisive role in Barth's thought around 1920, and in Barth's reading of Nietzsche during the summer of 1920. But I believe that this explicit legacy is part of a less explicit but probably just as significant one, a legacy that works on a broader epistemological level: Nietzsche's critique of truth as objective, which includes the critique of the notion of fact.

At this point, one could object that those two critiques, the critique of history as a science and the critique of truth, are not one and the same in Nietzsche's thought. The critique of history as a science in the second of the *Untimely Meditations* (1874-5) is at least six years earlier than the critique of truth in *The Gay Science* (1882), and in *Beyond Good and Evil* and the *Genealogy of Morals* (1886-7). Moreover, Barth himself makes a sharp distinction between Nietzsche's earlier writings and the later ones, stating explicitly that he prefers the former. As a matter of fact, it is true that Nietzsche's 1874 critique of history can be understood apart from any radical critique of the notions of truth and facts. But it is also noteworthy that Overbeck, through whose work Barth probably first read about the critique of history, does not distinguish those two, arguing, for instance, in what became the introduction of *Christentum und Kultur*, that there is no consistent attitude towards historiography except skepticism³⁸. It is therefore perfectly possible, and indeed likely, that Barth associated Nietzsche's later critical epistemology with this critique of history. But what about the distinction between Nietzsche's earlier and later works that Barth himself makes in one of his letters?

³⁶ Niklaus Peter, 'Karl Barth als Leser und Interpret Nietzsches', p. 260.

³⁷ It is worth noting here that this emphasis is fully compatible with a neo-Kantian interpretation of *Romans II*, since this particular distinction between *Geschichte* and *Urgeschichte* is itself entirely compatible with Barth's use of the neo-Kantian notion of *Ursprung*.

³⁸ Franz Overbeck, *Christentum und Kultur*, C. A. Bernoulli, ed. (Basel: Benno & Schwabe, 1919), p. 11

I spent the whole last week reading Nietzsche's early works. They are a lot better than the late works. There are many good things in the *Birth of Tragedy*. *Beyond Good and Evil*, from his late period, appeared to me to have much that is excellent, but also rigid and already ossified. It is likely that he wanted something that one should not ever want. Overbeck was more insightful. But he was yet a good fighter, and we must honor him sometimes.³⁹

Actually this letter is too allusive to be really informative. But, at the very least, it confirms that Barth actually read, and partly liked, *Beyond Good and Evil*, which opens by questioning truth as a *value* (and a value, for Nietzsche, is an interpretation suited to some organic purposes), and in which Nietzsche's epistemology is well displayed. It also confirms the significant role that Overbeck played in mediating Nietzsche's thought to Barth. But it is quite difficult to separate what Barth liked from what he found 'ossified' in Nietzsche's later works. And what follows in the letter and the reference to Overbeck indicate that what Barth disliked was more related to Nietzsche's attitude towards religion and culture.

Thus, we have no compelling historical reason to think that Barth did not subscribe, at least in part, to Nietzsche's later epistemology from *Romans II* onwards. But we have an explanation for the implicit character of this influence, and for Barth's more explicit repudiation of Nietzsche's main ontological claims: Barth does not talk much about epistemological matters. That, of course, does not mean that he has no consistent epistemology, but rather that he is not interested in developing one for its own sake. That is probably why, in his view, his most noteworthy engagement with Nietzsche is on material matters, on which he disagrees with him, and not on epistemological ones, on which he mostly agrees.

And as a matter of fact, one can trace in *Romans II* a critique of truth akin to Nietzsche's. It is a good first example of how Nietzsche's arguments are reframed in Barth's theological context. The claim in *Romans II* that truth is absolutely unbearable seems like an appropriation of Nietzsche's idea that truth is a contradictory notion,⁴⁰

³⁹ Cf. Karl Barth to Eduard Thurneysen, 14 juni 1920, in *Barth - Thurneysen Briefwechsel 1913-1921*, ed. E. Thurneysen (Zürich, TVZ, 1973), p. 398 ('Ich war die ganze letzte Woche an Nietzsche's Anfängen, die wohl besser waren als das Spätere. In der Geburt der Tragödie ist viel Gutes. Jenseits von Gut und Böse aus seiner letzten Zeit sah mich bei viel Trefflichem doch etwas starr und schon verholzt an. Wahrscheinlich wollte auch er etwas, was man eben nicht wollen sollte. Overbeck war einsichtiger. Aber ein guter Kämpfer, den wir gelegentlich zu Ehren ziehen müssen, war er doch'). The translation is mine.

⁴⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in *On Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, ed. W. Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1989), III-27, p. 161: 'All great things bring about their own

and that there is no knowledge but one which is perspectively oriented. Barth subscribes to the idea that there can be no truth, i.e., no pure objectivity, for us, since any access to this objectivity immediately implies its subjectivization. But, for Barth, this idea does not imply the mere negation of truth, but only its negation *for us*. Barth speaks of this negation as the ‘unbearableness’ (*Unerträglichkeit*). It is precisely Nietzsche who is invoked at this point as a witness to this unbearableness.⁴¹

Concerning the notion of experience more specifically, the reference to Nietzsche is useful in helping us to locate a constructive notion of experience in *Romans II*, and not only the ‘vacuum left by the gospel’s destruction of any experiential awareness of God’.⁴² To be sure, it is entirely true that *Romans II* lacks any thorough theory of religious experience and its function in theological knowledge. Yet this does not mean that nothing can be said positively about some conceptual features of the notion as Barth uses it in this book, in order to deny it any theological value.⁴³ One of those features is the essential ambiguity of any experience.⁴⁴ Of course, this ambiguity depends on the basic unity of experience, which we discussed earlier, a unity that encompasses every kind of experience, and not only of the objects of science. This unity entails an identity of the basic constituents of experience, such that there can be no qualitative difference inside experience, but only the graduated variations, ‘for example between religious emotion and the need for sleep’.⁴⁵ Religious experience is thus never finally remote from any other kind of experience, including kinds of experience that would bring religious experience into discredit *as religious experience*. Thus, there will always be doubt as to whether what we identify as a specifically religious experience, the experience of grace, of the ‘will of God in man [*Willens Gottes in Menschen*], is not something else. And there will always be doubt as to whether the existence of the will of God in human beings is as certain as, for instance, the ‘will of the libido [*Willen der Libido*]’ in human beings.⁴⁶

destruction through an act of self-overcoming [*Alle grossen Dinge gehen durch sich selbst zu Grunde, durch einen Akt der Selbstaufhebung*].

⁴¹ Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, p. 339; *The Epistle*, p. 353.

⁴² Clifford Anderson, ‘A Theology of Experience?’, loc 1160.

⁴³ But it would also be wrong to see only a repudiation of religious experience as such in *Romans II*. Barth already plainly acknowledges its necessity. See for instance Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, p. 212: ‘*So gewiß auch Gnade nicht ohne Gnadenerlebnis, nicht ohne um dieses Erlebnis sich kristallisierende Religion, Moral, Kirchlichkeit und Dogmatik ist.*’

⁴⁴ David Tracy (*The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* [New York: Crossroad, 1981]) strongly links ambiguity to Barth’s theology, but does not refer specifically to the notion of experience.

⁴⁵ Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, p. 217 ; *The Epistle*, p. 235.

⁴⁶ Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, p. 194 ; *The Epistle*, p. 213.

Barth gives the formula for this doubt that can be extended to any kind of religious experience:

Is there any visible 'iniquity' which it is quite impossible to interpret as 'sanctification'? And is there any 'sanctification' which it is impossible to interpret as 'iniquity'?⁴⁷

The important word here is '*gedeutet*' (*deuten*, to interpret): it implies that any singular religious experience appears to be doubtful. It can be interpreted one way or the other: as an experience of grace, whose determining cause is God, or as a purely human experience, i.e. psychologically, historically or biologically determined:⁴⁸

Who will free us from the irresistible impression that all those things are intimately linked to each other? Who will free us from the suspicion, amounting almost to a certainty, that my own history and the history of humanity could be more faithfully and more truly written from the standpoint of the stomach, etc., rather than the head and the heads? What is the greatest genius if, with all his brilliance, he comes to the world the way we know he does, and leaves it in the same way, and 'lives' in the same way, as we know we all do? What is the history of the world, if Christianity, the crusades and the Reform can be better or at the very least more likely explained from the standpoint of historical materialism than from any other standpoint? What does remain from Blumhard in Möttlingen, if his beginnings are to be interpreted from a psychiatric standpoint, and the rest from a psychological standpoint? And who could and would dare to prevent such an interpretation?⁴⁹

This last quotation is very significant. It shows how the facts-as-interpretations epistemology plays a crucial role in Barth's departure from any kind of theological positivism. It also allows him to distance himself from Blumhardt, who is otherwise so

⁴⁷ Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, p. 208 ('Gibt es eine anschauliche »Gesetzlosigkeit«, die etwa ganz unmöglich als »Heiligung«, und gibt es eine anschauliche »Heiligung«, die etwa ganz unmöglich als »Gesetzlosigkeit« gedeutet werden könnte?'). Translation modified from *The Epistle*, p. 225-6.

⁴⁸ And for a direct reference to Nietzsche in relation to religious experience, see Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, p. 220: 'und fühlen wir uns letztlich von dem Netz des Menschlichen, allzu Menschlichen [Emphasis mine], das uns gerade als religiös Menschliches am Erstickendsten bedrückt und würgt, – gelöst.'

⁴⁹ Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, p. 295-6 ('Wer befreit uns von dem unwiderstehlichen Eindruck, wie sehr das alles ineinander verfilzt ist, wer von dem fast an Gewißheit grenzenden Verdacht, es möchte meine Geschichte und die Geschichte des Menschengeschlechts letztlich aufrichtiger und getreuer vom Standpunkt des Magens u. s. f. als vom Standpunkt des Kopfes und der Köpfe aus zu schreiben sein? Was ist der größte Genius, wenn er samt seiner Genialität so zur Welt kommt und so von ihr Abschied nimmt und in der Mitte so in ihr »lebt«, wie wir es von uns allen wissen? Was ist die Weltgeschichte, wenn Urchristentum, Kreuzzüge und Reformation historisch-materialistisch besser, jedenfalls plausibler erklärt werden können als irgendwie sonst? Was bleibt von Blumhardt in Möttlingen übrig, wenn der Anfang psychiatrisch und das übrige psychologisch gedeutet wird – und wer könnte und dürfte solcher Deutung etwa wehren?'). The translation is mine. *The Epistle*, p. 311.

important to him, but who is disturbing for his theological epistemology because his charisma was based on a history of extraordinary personal experiences. But it also confirms that the experience we are talking about, the experience as indistinguishable from its multiple possible interpretations, is not only, for Barth, an object of science (that would be '*die Geschichte des Menschengeschlechts*'), but also '*meine Geschichte*', my personal lived history, Blumhardt's personal history and probably Jesus' history.

How much is Barth's notion of experience in *Romans II* and in the 1920s a Nietzschean one? We should try to be as precise as possible, even though Barth's own attitude towards his philosophical sources and commitments often makes precision difficult.

First, one could ask: why do I assume that there is no difference between facts and interpretation in Barth's understanding of the notion of experience, even though other models are at hand that can help us understand the multiple interpretability of experience without blurring the distinction between facts and interpretation? Bruce McCormack argues that Barth's epistemology is Kantian, in that it acknowledges the thought-generated structure of experience without preventing revelation to be a true given. He contends that the relation of this given in revelation to the thought-generated structures of experience could be understood in the same way that we understand the relation between the matter of experience and its form in Kant. Revelation would then be an absolute fact, but graspable only through the human categories of thoughts through which we build our experience. It is this difference between the matter and its form that gives rise to the intrinsic multi-interpretability of experience, but this does not in the least entail a blurring of the distinction between the fact and its interpretations.

Two things should be said here. First, it is precisely my point that the concept of interpretation leaves no room for a matter that would be irreducible to a thought-form, because interpretation is a thought-form that aims at the singular and not only at the universal or the general, as Kantian thought-forms do. Interpretations can be narratives (maybe even inner narratives) that grasp the whole of life, even what is absolutely singular or irrational in it. The question is then: even if there were such an irreducible matter, an absolute fact, it would itself be caught up in the process of interpretation – it would never give itself as a fact. Why then should one maintain its irreducibility?

But it must also be said that the blurring of the distinction between facts and interpretations, and the dismissal of the Kantian epistemology, does not mean giving up

Bruce McCormack's concern for a *realistic* account of revelation. It only entails that this realistic account (thinking revelation as a given, as something originating outside the human subject) has to be thought otherwise than against a Kantian background, namely, with a concept of experience in which the given not only would not appear as an object in an organized experience, but would not appear as an object *at all* – and would nevertheless be a given (or a fact, insofar as it is distinguished from anything appearing as an object).⁵⁰ It would mean thinking a non-objectivist realism. What would such a concept of experience look like? This is not the place to answer this question, but maybe it is precisely what Barth is aiming at in his account of the Word of God and experience in CD I/1. The point is that accepting the blurring of distinction between facts and interpretations does not mean abandoning critical realism. It may oblige this realism to take a radical turn by pushing the 'critical' side as far as possible, but, in my view, that would not compromise the 'realistic' side. It would certainly give this realism a more anxious sound since it would indicate a problem rather than a solution, but would it not be the sound of reality itself?

But Barth's Nietzscheanism can be questioned further, because it is true that he does not use a purely Nietzschean concept of experience. This is true, first, because the question of experience as such is not a very Nietzschean question. Indeed, I doubt that we can find a developed account in Nietzsche on this question, apart from his critique of the positivistic notion of fact. But an even more obvious reason why Barth's notion of experience is not an altogether Nietzschean is that it lacks the ontological background of Nietzsche's critique of the given: the hypothesis of the 'will to power'. Yet, as I already argued, the repudiation of this hypothesis (at least as the only available hypothesis) would somewhat confirm the validity of the epistemological thesis of experience's '*vieldeutiger Charakter*', and then paradoxically of Nietzsche's epistemology. To Barth, Nietzsche's theory of facts as interpretations is a way to improve the neo-Kantian account of experience in order to make it reach not only the general experience of science, but also the singular experience of the individual consciousness. This does not entail that Nietzsche's theories become for Barth the only valuable theories. It would rather be precisely the opposite: Nietzsche's idea of interpretation allows Barth to modify the neo-Kantian framework of an experience generated by scientific discourses

⁵⁰ The question of a given that does not show itself is a central concern for Jean-Luc Marion's contemporary phenomenology.

in such a way that not only scientific discourse in a narrow sense can be part of the generation process, but also other kinds of interpretive discourses. Experience is not generated only by universal and mathematically graspable dynamic structures of thought, indifferent to any singularity, but also by narratives in conflict that can grasp even personal consciousness and then leave absolutely no room for any kind of givenness, including the absolutely singular and rationally ungraspable religious experience advocated by Wilhelm Herrmann and the very young Barth. Only against this background of the multi-interpretability of experience can one fully understand why Barth is so critical, in his first answer to Harnack, of the 'theology of feeling', which he supposes is leading straight to the 'psychology of the unconscious', or why he sometimes refers to 'libido' as an efficient way to explain human behavior, and more broadly how, as Clifford Anderson rightly puts it, 'scientific denial of God constitutes [according to Barth] a backhanded witness to the transcendence of God'.⁵¹ The acknowledgement of the explanatory power of libido or of the numerous scientific denials of God does not imply any ontological commitment to these explanations, but it is a witness to the intrinsic multi-interpretability of experience, and to the theological necessity of going beyond the positivistic understanding of religious experience, even when understood in its most subjective and unscientific fashion, as in Herrmann's work. If this is the case, then it is true to say that Nietzsche's legacy in Barth is a Nietzschean-anti-Nietzschean one, in the particular sense that it pits Nietzsche's epistemology against Nietzsche's ontology (insofar as such a word is relevant for Nietzsche's thought).

But even once we establish the sense in which there is no difference between facts and interpretation in Barth's notion of experience, and once we understand that Barth's epistemological Nietzscheanism was turned against Nietzsche's ontology, one thing remains obscure: the precise relation between Nietzscheism and neo-Kantianism in this notion of experience. Barth never departed from Kantian and neo-Kantian terminology, even when, in the late 1920s, he also incorporated some existentialist elements. Hence, there is no doubt that when he adopted some parts of Nietzsche's epistemology, he did so against a neo-Kantian background. That is to say: he understood the idea of a multi-interpretability of experience as a new way to understand the structure of the transcendental subject.

⁵¹ Clifford Anderson, *The Crisis of Theological Science*, p. 415

But the problem is that Nietzsche's epistemology of interpretation is not only directed against the notion of fact, but also against the notion of a transcendental subject that would constitute experience. Indeed, such a notion would reintroduce some kind of given of a higher order, and this is why Nietzsche explicitly objects to the idea that the interpretability of experience would entail its subjectivity: 'Everything is subjective', you say : but that itself is an *interpretation*, for the 'subject' is not something given but a fiction added on, tucked behind'.⁵²

The subject herself is constituted through interpretations in conflict, but is not the condition for interpretation. However, this does not mean that experience is not transcendently constituted: thought keeps its priority over the given, and there is still no experience but what is constituted through thought. One has to distinguish the subjectivity of experience from its transcendental constitution. The replacement of the transcendental subject by interpretations in conflict does not imply that the given is not generated by thought, but only that it is not generated by *subjective* thought. Or, in other words, what gives transcendental unity to experience is not a formal principle of unity (the unity of the subject of science), but rather the multi-interpretability itself. The ambiguity of experience is what constitutes experience as such, and in this sense it is its transcendental condition, so that there is no unity of experience other than its possible infinite diversity.

This move is crucial: it means that, while Barth is still indebted to the transcendental type of thinking, he nevertheless gives up the Kantian notion of a transcendental *subject* as a means of understanding the one who experiences revelation. One can remark that the saved human being in *Romans II* is distinct from the empirical human being just as the transcendental subject is distinct from the empirical subject in Kant's doctrine. But this assertion has only a negative value: it tells us that the transcendental subject and the saved human being are both different from the subject of the everyday experience, but it tells us neither *how* they are different, nor whether they differ from each other. And Barth does not give any insight about these questions in

⁵² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings From the Late Notebooks*, 7 [60] ('»Es ist alles subjektiv« sagt ihr: aber schon das ist Auslegung, das »Subjekt« ist nichts Gegebenes, sondern etwas Hinzu-Erdichtetes, Dahinter-Gestecktes.')

Romans. He will try to do so only in 1932, in the paragraph devoted explicitly to the notion of experience, and will never return to the subject thereafter.⁵³

We can then assert with fair confidence that there is no internal contradiction in Barth's integration of some parts of Nietzsche's epistemology into his concept of experience. And it was indeed very useful to him, because he found in the Nietzschean concept of the multiple interpretability of experience an epistemological element that fits very well his own theological position, which is centered on the divine incognito in Christ, or what Bruce McCormack calls the dialectic of veiling and unveiling. The fit between this Nietzschean notion and Barth's own position is such that Barth did not depart from this way of thinking throughout the 1920s and until 1932 -- and this in part because he did not depart from the dialectic of veiling and unveiling. And in 1932, this Nietzschean epistemology of experience underlies his chief argument against what he calls 'indirect cartesianism', i.e. Wobbermin's claim that even though theology cannot be grounded in a universal human experience, it can be grounded in the experience of some given men who have received it as a gift from God. Basically, Barth's answer to this claim is to question our ability to make sure that any of our experiences are religious, and not something else:

Can this acknowledgment of God's Word be differentiated even from the phenomenon of what are called "other religions" with any clear distinctiveness or individuality? To the degree that it has its reality in this human acknowledgment, does not Christianity undeniably belong to the sphere of general religious history in which there are no doubts hills and valleys but no heaven? ... If we cling to what we can affirm and investigate as the human acknowledgment of God's Word, to what can be experienced in Christian experience, where shall we find there the criterion by which to distinguish this experience from others, the authentic from the inauthentic? What is there here to stop us interpreting everything in terms of the religious, the cultural, the human generally, or finally indeed the biological?⁵⁴

⁵³ This turn away from understanding the subject of the experience of revelation as a transcendental subject should be compared with Barth's later turn away from the transcendental scheme for understanding the relation between the second person of the Trinity and his incarnation. Cf. Bruce McCormack, 'Karl Barth's Historicized Christology. Just How 'Chalcedonian' is it?', in *Orthodox and Modern*, pp. 201-233.

⁵⁴ Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik I/1*, p. 228 ('Sollte sich diese Anerkennung des Wortes Gottes in eindeutiger Charakteristik und Eigenart auch nur von dem Phänomen der sogenannten »anderen Religionen« abheben? Gehört das Christentum, sofern es in solcher menschlichen Anerkennung seine Wirklichkeit hat, nicht unleugbar dem Feld der allgemeinen Religionsgeschichte an, auf dem es zwar Hügel

Here again, what Barth puts into question is our ability to understand experience as something lying beyond our interpretations of it,⁵⁵ which is definitely a Nietzschean idea.

Conclusion: a Theology of Interpretation?

I could summarize in other words: Wilhelm Herrmann's conception of a purely individual religious experience was a way to secure religion as a true communication with a genuinely exterior given, and theology as a true knowledge (of a very singular kind) of this given, despite Cohen's constructive understanding of knowledge in general. Barth departed from liberalism because he became suspicious of any human attempt to provide such a security for theology. He discovered a contradiction in any attempt to circumscribe what is outside the limits of the humanly constructed *from inside these limits*, i.e., in any attempt by the one who receives a gift to anticipate it, without suppressing it as a gift. He realized that the best way to reveal the need for true security is to show the weakness of all our false securities, and that only showing how the circle of human experience is closed on itself can make clear that it is in fact a circle. Barth had to forge a concept of experience that shut every escape door from the usual and purely human form of experience. The Kantian and neo-Kantian concept allowed him to stress the relativity of all theoretical knowledge, but he needed something more to assault the last bastion resisting his contention that any experience can always be seen as purely natural, a weapon specially built for use against Wilhelm Herrmann. He thus forged the idea of an experience constituted not by universal rules of thought, which could only grasp the object of science, but rather by its interpretations. I claimed that this idea constitutes a Nietzschean element in Barth's thinking, or that at least the best way to understand and formulate it is to do so in reference to Nietzsche's critique of positivism. In other words, Barth integrated a Nietzschean element into the neo-Kantian's concept of experience in order to strengthen this concept and to close the door through which Herrmann pretended to escape its consequences.

und Täler, aber keinen Himmel gibt? [...] Wenn wir uns an das halten, was wir als menschliche Anerkennung des Wortes Gottes feststellen und erforschen können, an das Erfahrbare in der christlichen Erfahrung – wo haben wir da das Kriterium um diese Erfahrung von anderen, das Echte an ihr vom Unechten zu scheiden? Wo sind da die Grenzen der Möglichkeit, alles umzudeuten ins allgemein Religiöse, ins Kulturelle, ins Humane überhaupt und schließlich wohl auch noch ins Biologische?); The Church Dogmatics I/1, p. 217.

⁵⁵ We have here in summary form the notion that CD §17 will develop, namely, that Christianity as a historical phenomenon is *a priori* indistinguishable from other forms of religion.

I think we have in this integration a perfect example of how Barth deals theologically with philosophical concepts. One could object that it is a very precarious construction, and so subtly hidden in Barth's work that it would need much more elaboration in order to reach the level of a true philosophical conception. A skeptic pursuing this objection would probably be right; yet, at the same time, one cannot help admiring Barth's conceptual audacity. From a philosophical point of view, it would probably be fair to say that he deformed Nietzsche by understanding his notion of interpretation as a transcendental constituent of experience, and Cohen by striving to interpret his notion of the *a priori* on a psychological level and not only an epistemological one. But it was the only way for him to formulate philosophically the theological problem he had to deal with, the problem of the given and of the necessary impossibility of any manifestation of a given as such. It is neither a purely Nietzschean nor a Cohenian problem, but it is likely that Barth could formulate it only by using elements from both Nietzsche's and Cohen's philosophies.

From a theological point of view, the task of understanding how, on the basis of this particular understanding of experience, Barth could come in 1932 to give a positive account of religious experience (i.e., of a truly given) remains. But we know now how he could *not* understand it in any positivist way, as a purely individual experience that no discourse could grasp and that would then be secured from any constructivism. By using Nietzsche's concept of experience and coupling it with Marxism, psychoanalysis and biology, he showed that any experience, even the more personal, is part of an interpretation. Any account of a given would then have to take its impossibility – or rather the necessity of its openness to interpretive challenge – as a starting point. This would probably entail seeking the meaning of religious experience in the risk of interpretation itself. In other words, this would mean raising the question that Barth confessed in the preface to *Romans II* that he had raised as far as he was able: the question of the meaning of *erklären* and *verstehen*. Several attempts have been made to understand Barth's doctrine as a 'theology of interpretation'.⁵⁶ Usually, those attempts have focused on the concept of interpretation as a biblical hermeneutics. But I would contend that the significance of biblical hermeneutics for theology can be better

⁵⁶ See for instance Benoît Bourguine, *L'herméneutique théologique de Karl Barth. Exégèse et dogmatique dans le quatrième volume de la Kirchliche Dogmatik* (Leuven: University Press, 2003); Donald Wood, *Barth's Theology of Interpretation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

understood against the background of a study of the broader epistemological concept of interpretation that I have attempted to analyze.

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