

Doing classical theology in context

Gerrit Neven¹

Theological University Kampen
The Netherlands

Abstract

This article is about doing classical theology in context. The weight of my argument is that classical text of Karl Barth's theology is great intellectual text means: being addressed by this text in the context in which one lives. The basic keywords that constitute a rule for reading those texts are "equality", "event" and "re-contextualisation". The article contains two sections: The first section elaborates statements about the challenge of the event and the project of rereading classics by way of recontextualisation. The word "event" refers to true and innovating moments in history which one can share, or which one can betray. Classical texts always share in those liberative moments. The question then is in what sense do they present a challenge to the contemporary reader. The second section elaborates the position of man as central and all decisive for doing theology in context now. In this section, the author appeals for a renewal of the classical anthropology as an anthropology of hope. This anthropology contradicts postmodern concepts of otherness.

1. INTRODUCTION

The approach in this article is guided by the keywords equality, event and recontextualisation. With regard to the first, *equality* is the almost tacit foundation of the whole article. It is a critical concept, because it involves a break with structures of violence and exploitation. In the Christian tradition, the word is a reminder of the message that St Paul proclaimed in his letters to the Galatians and the Romans: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free; there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ" (Gal 3:28). Jesus Christ is proclaimed as the Resurrected One. As such, he stands for the quality of humanness. For Paul, Jesus Christ represents a

¹ Prof Dr Gerrit Neven is the Chair of the Department for Systematic Theology, Theological University Kampen, the Netherlands and research associate of Prof Dr Cornel du Toit, Research Institute for Theology and Religion at the University of South Africa (UNISA), Pretoria, South Africa.

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reconciled and united humanity. This love of Christ which has been witnessed by Paul is in itself indifferent in the face of all the differences between people in colour, gender, culture and so on. When I speak in this article about the classical theology of Karl Barth, I refer to the revolutionary quality of freedom which is the great motive for the production of his texts. It is understandable that this humanness (or radical equality) calls for a corresponding freedom in situations which are determined by inequality, slavery and structural discrimination. Reading Barth in context presents us with a great intellectual and moral challenge. As a reader one is inevitably confronted with the question of the sense in which our context and culture have been interrupted by acts of freedom, by manifestations of equality, which are indifferent to all possible cultural differences. In the second section of the article I will, in addition to Karl Barth, quote from Steve Biko, whose work is marked by the human power of an authentic and irresistible freedom.

The second keyword is *event*. This word refers to the fact that freedom and equality take place in the form of an often unexpected and surprising event. I make use of this word many times, making the point that the challenge of reading a classical text is not only intellectual but also moral or existential. The question is in how far the readers themselves are involved in a truthful relation to the event of freedom and equality in the situation they live in. One feels challenged by the question of whether one is prepared to act as a true witness of liberation and reconciliation.

The third keyword is *recontextualisation*. This word refers to the fact that the situation in which the rereading of a classical text takes place is completely different from the situation in which these texts were written. This means that this reading can only succeed if the text and its recontextualising readers feel addressed by the same truth, the truth of equality, justice and dignity.

The article consists of two sections: The *first* section elaborates on statements about the challenge of the event and the project of rereading classics by way of recontextualisation. The *second* section elaborates *the position of man* as central and all-decisive for doing theology in context now.

2. TWO PRELIMINARY STATEMENTS ABOUT DOING THEOLOGY IN CONTEXT

2.1 Challenge of an event

The phrase “moral and intellectual challenges” refers to events, to turning points in history. In my view, the history of mankind shows various turning points, because of a breakthrough of truth, of goodness and justice, of beauty

and love, of scientific and political consistency.² All these events have something in common: they are not reducible to a natural law. They appear in the way people represent those events; is the way people are related to this event practised in a true and consistent way. The events have the character of encounters because one feels oneself challenged by them. An ordinary human being discovers himself as a being that participates in an unthought-of and unexpected creative process. In this, he is on the road: he is subjected to change. Initially part of an anonymous situation, he discovers himself and manifests himself as a creative subject. Examples of this are, to give a list at random: the French Revolution (1792); the discovery of the proletariat in the tradition established by Marx (1843); the invention by Haydn of a new musical style after the exuberant baroque period in the middle of the eighteenth century; the true-life romance in the twelfth century between the brilliant theologian Abelard and his gifted pupil Héloïse. These are artistic, political and amorous events. But I also put on the list the encounter of Saul of Tarsus with the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus. These turning points or sea changes occur also in the history of religious praxis and religious experience.

You will find changes like the ones mentioned above in almost every culture. The most incisive changes I know from my own experience are the revolutionary movements in the nineteen-sixties. I can mention the following events: the renewal called *aggiornamento* that was introduced by Pope John XXIII in 1962, and the world conference on Church and Society organised by the World Council of Churches in 1966. Moving to South Africa, we see the formation of the University Christian Movement (UCM) in 1967 and of the South African Student Organisation (SASO)³ in 1969. All those occurrences of the recent past had a concrete face: men and women presented themselves and emphasised that they were part of an event. Here I use the word “event” to be comparable in some ways with the scriptural meaning of the word “creation”: out of nothing. It was as if a society had grown old. It seemed that the social patterns and the intellectual and economic distribution of human resources had no potential to renew themselves. It seemed as if leading

² I want to make mention here of two paradigmatic stories about the breakthrough of knowledge and also of the risks and failures connected with it. In Plato’s parable of the Cave, a prisoner escapes from prison, and outside the cave he receives a notion of truth and goodness; the prisoner who seems to be free now cannot be return to his fellow prisoners; but, in prison, the knowledge cannot flourish. The other story is the parable of the Sower. Jesus is the Sower. He proclaims the truth as a free man! That makes all the difference between Plato and Scripture. And the people who are addressed by this parable are destined to be free!

³ The University Christian Movement, UCM, was formed in 1967. The South Africa Student’s Organisation (SASO) was inaugurated in July 1969 at Turfloop.

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intellectual circles were, unconsciously, looking forward to something new. It was as if the time was ripe for it. In Europe, something new was happening: consider for example the revolutionary movements in 1968. From Paris to Mexico City, from Tokyo to Amsterdam – in 1968 the whole world was turned upside down. In those years, the proletariat of all countries was not seen as the agent, but instead it was the youth and university students. The smell of revolution was in the air then. I could learn from this that when times are changing, at first the world of the routine and the normal processes of communication are interrupted. This situation is like a void. But this void is anything but dead or sterile. One can speak about the void of the situation. This situation can be compared with the atmosphere of a creative silence, in which one can be nourished by the surprise of the unexpected. The void is like a silence before the whirlwind, out of which new and previously unthought-of things come to the fore. In these tides of change, it was as if our eyes were opened to what is just and true.

Here one can make use of the theological notion of *creatio ex nihilo*, creation out of nothingness. The first word, “creation”, gives a name to the creative moment of being as it points to the occurrence of a new state of things. The other words, “out of nothingness”, point to the fact that true turning points are never the result of the power play of dominant groups, who try to realise themselves at the expense of others. An example of this power play is the National Socialist Movement in Germany. “Creation out of nothingness” can be a useful means of distinguishing between false and true. Another example of a will to power out of fullness instead out of nothingness can be found in the strategy of fundamentalist Islam.

In South African black theology one finds an important use of *creatio ex nihilo* in Takatso A Mofokeng, *The crucified among the cross-bearers* (1983). In this study, the Black Consciousness Movement is seen not as a desperate renewal of an old position but as a creation out of the Holy Spirit. Black people didn’t possess anything but their black skin. The discovery of being human in the full sense was experienced as a great shock; and the new consciousness could be described as a *creatio ex nihilo*.

Another significant event in South Africa is without doubt the Belhar Confession,⁴ which has been seen as a new breakthrough (Jonker 1986) of the truth of the gospel coming up out of the grass roots of Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa and in which the “children” took the lead.

⁴The Dutch Reformed Mission Church formally adopted the Belhar Confession in 1986. It is now one of the standards of unity of the new Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa (see the cautious deliberations about Belhar in Willie Jonker [1998], *Zelfs die kerk kan verander*).

So, my first preliminary point is that when we speak about moral and intellectual challenges which pertain to goodness and dignity, we always have to cope with the challenges of an event, in which we can share or that we can betray!⁵ Those events never come alone. Often you will see a whole spectrum of events in which truth is breaking through: in politics, in culture, in personal relationships, in knowledge and in education.

I prefer to speak about moral and intellectual challenges. The question is, how are we to be morally and intellectually faithful to those events that brought such important transformations in so many domains of society. In this context mention should also be made of the TRC (the Truth and Reconciliation Committee), because the TRC was generally regarded as a crucial component of the transition to full and free democracy in South Africa, and as a pathway to dignity.

2.2 Doing classical theology in context aims at a recontextualisation

By recontextualisation I do not mean the explication or even actualisation of theological positions of the past. Of course we incessantly record our history by means of oral tradition and written texts. We cannot but listen carefully to what our fathers and brothers and sisters tell. We call this listening simply interpretation, and the discipline in which we make rules for those activities we call hermeneutics. But in some cases, our predecessors are so important that interpretation does not suffice. As far as Karl Barth is concerned, it is my conviction that a real encounter with the event of truth in the theology of Karl Barth cannot limit itself to correct interpretations and respectful questions. Barth was a vehement and militant thinker, as almost all great thinkers are. I think you can only be faithful to him if you are prepared to cope with him in the form of an intensive and critical dialogue, in which the practice of truth is at stake again and again. And, to mention him again, Takatso Mofokeng opened this dialogue very well. He brought the texts of Barth's theology into a black South African context. And here Mofokeng made a connection between the event of truth in Barth's theology (the resurrection of Jesus Christ) and the movement led by black people in South Africa who started a new liberative praxis. Mofokeng represents in his book the start of a new way of reading classical theology. In the process of this reading, the classical theology means an intellectual and moral challenge for the reader. The question is: how are we, being addressed by the event of Jesus Christ, going to respond? The process of reading can result in a radical change of perspectives. Reading Barth from the praxis of liberation can lead to the question of whether his texts

⁵ A betrayal would be: filling the damage of being oppressed for such a long time by particularistic forms of black consciousness.

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have the potential to represent the liberative events they are referring to. Put otherwise: to what extent is classical theology itself prepared to articulate a new praxis? Is this theology open enough to be decomposed and used piecemeal in another culture and within different social and practical horizons? This is exactly what the task of recontextualising classical theology demands.

In the recent past Karl Barth has been studied very intensively. This activity has resulted in an endless stream of publications. In all those studies, reading Karl Barth meant the same as interpreting Barth. In South Africa we had for example a volume of important Barth studies edited by Charles Villa-Vicencio: *On reading Karl Barth in South Africa*. This book contains mainly interpretations. Now and then the reader will find remarks and suggestions about what Karl Barth would have said at the time of writing (Villa-Vicencio 1988:153ff).⁶ But reading, listening, making suggestions and so on are not the same as recontextualisation (see Jonker 1988:29-40).⁷

Recontextualisation means that in order to read and reread theologians and other writers of the past, you must have a solid knowledge of the situation you live in; of the way truth and justice are practised or have been betrayed (see Badiou 2001). I think this is not only so in Europe, but in South Africa also. One problem we share is that we – not only in theology but in other disciplines too – increasingly live under the spell of restoration: of a politics ruled by the fortunes and vicissitudes of a capitalistic world order. In this context ethics, or the quest for living well, tends to be swayed by the political issues of the day. By fortune! My questions are:

- Firstly, as far as the true events of recent history are concerned, it seems to be very difficult to remain faithful to them. How to stay in line with what has happened then? This question is a challenge for every person who desires to be loyal to a true event. In my opinion this challenge could be felt very strongly in South Africa now. What does it mean to be faithful to the proclamation of equality, freedom and dignity in the South African Constitution? If one speaks about humanness and human dignity in this phase of history, the notion of the real equality of

⁶ The emphasis here is on Barth, and only indirectly on the South African situation. Karl Barth functions as a mirror, as a paradigm. With the help of this paradigm, confessing documents (the Kairos document, the Belhar Confession) could be measured, legitimated or even slightly criticised.

⁷ See also the marvellous article of Willie Jonker (1988), Some remarks on the interpretation of Karl Barth. This article is a very beautiful example of interpretation, and ... of the limits of interpretation!

all people is a first order question, a challenge for all members of society.

- Secondly: in what sense are traditions (including personal lifestyle, art/poetry, education/science, political strategy/public leadership) an available source of all people's education?
- Thirdly: is our notion of God strong enough and are the theological skills we use sufficient to allow us to participate in the projects for a true emancipation of the oppressed and exploited?

It is against the background of these three questions that the second section below will speak about the following issues:

Firstly: the definition of man in classical and modern anthropology. The point is that basic notions of quality, freedom and dignity are often so formalised that they cannot refer anymore to real events in history.

Secondly: the otherness of God. The point is that if this otherness only refers to an infinite distance, or to a place beyond the horizon, the moment of dialogue (or encounter) will never take place.

3. THE POSITION: HUMAN BEING(S)

In this second section, I present seven considerations. They all turn around a decisive basic mistake in the modern anthropological concept of modern ethical theories, and in those theories themselves. In the theories, man – the animal gifted with intellect – doesn't know what or who he is. If anything, the following is evident: man is surrounded by evil, and history tells us that he can perfectly identify in what this evil consists! So, he makes rational rules in order to reduce his vulnerability and to keep the enemy outside. But this makes the search for human dignity – a humanity concrete and true – a desperate thing. If my definitions are determined by what is not good, how am I to find my way to what is good?

With the help of the philosopher Alain Badiou, a philosopher of hope and an opponent of pragmatic and relativistic conceptions⁸ I want to stress the goodness of creation, as it is found in the classical theological notion of creation in the cultural heritage of Europe (e g, the work of Karl Barth) and in African culture (e g, the work of Steve Biko) as well.

⁸ For a theological evaluation of Badiou, see Gerrit Neven (2005), *Doing theology without God?*

3.1 The problematic position of humankind in modernity

To start with, a central and all-decisive issue in a real eventful theology is the position attributed to man. The concept of man in modern theory, including (theological) ethics, is very controversial. I cannot deal with the history of this concept here. I will limit myself to one observation. In my eyes, the following transition has taken place. In the last century, a rather classical idea of being human has been succeeded by a modern one. One observes this not only in anthropology in general; the transition from classic to modern appears also in theology. We will take a short look at both concepts. I start with the classical notion (the *animal rationale*):

3.1.1 The classical concept

This concept says: a man is not only a specific animal. He is not reducible to his physical or biological components. He is not reducible to a bundle of blind motives. He is more. He surpasses his material conditions. He has the capacity to find the road that leads to a goodness in which he is destined to share. This option is a strong one, because it is characteristic of a human being to have a *real* knowledge of possibilities that have not thus far been conceptualised. He has charisma for this. He has the capacity to find, again and again, a singular and practical solution for the challenges he has to cope with. He finds his way in an infinite multiplicity of situations. A human being is not cut off from goodness; and when he discovers it, he is true; he is on the right track. Goodness itself is not a complicated thing. Goodness, as the food a man lives of, consists only in some real thoughts. So: he is well acquainted with love. He admires poetics; he increases in his knowledge; and he has a sense for political strategies. Of course, this man is also fragile and vulnerable. He is also mortal and he knows he is. He is also a predator, one who makes victims, and he knows that he does. And yet: man is more: he is not only mortal, or fragile, or a hunter, et cetera. That is an amazing thing. Human beings transcend themselves infinitely. The theologian Karl Barth would say: being human is an impossible possibility. This possibility of being human is a very strong one. In view of this strength, all causes of war and conflict are nonexistent; they are not real, but the product of illusory desires. Confronted with this option all cultural differences and relativities fade away as if they are of no interest. People live differently, they eat differently, they wear different clothes, they smell different, and their sexual behaviour is different: but in view of this singular possibility to be good, all those colours and smells fade away in the air.

Classic anthropology states that being human is a unique, singular project. Man carries – perhaps without knowing it – a truth. This truth says that

it will be possible for him to realise something good. I think that this anthropology is solid, and demands as a supplement a good, well founded theology.

3.1.2 The concept of humankind in modern ethics

The view of man in modern ethics is in flagrant contrast to this. Here we find a concept of man in which man, as a singular subject who is destined to do well, is lost. One doesn't start with that amazing power of being good; on the contrary, one starts with the thesis that man has the rational capacity to discern evil, not goodness. The reason for this is that man has all the necessary experience of evil. So, human beings can be summarised in one word: they have the power of discernment. He has to power to identify what evil is! In these distinctions, he proceeds very formally. Being human is to be a legislator, to make and to watch the rules against evil, against crimes, and against whatever might result in a crime. In ethics, he presents himself as a passionate defender of human rights. These rights are: the right to non-evil: the right not to be offended or mistreated with respect to one's life (the horrors of murder and execution), one's body (the horrors of torture, cruelty and famine), or one's cultural identity (the humiliation of women, of minorities etc). The supposition here is that the man is a sacrifice, or is in danger of becoming one. But he cannot really cope with this danger. That is the reason why man reacts so pathetically to it, and why he is always prepared to intervene.

So much for the second concept. The first concept is very radical: it can lead to an anthropology of hope. The second concept is liberal, and more pragmatic. Very often, this concept wears attractive clothes; preaches tolerance; even admires differences. This concept contains the command to respect differences – to some extent!

It will not be easy to synthesise the classical and the modern view. They contradict each others too strongly. I think they are alternatives, in that one has to choose one of them. A third possibility is lacking. It is either – or. Either one conceives of man as a (potential) victim, and therefore accepts that he has the innate mentality to be a (potential) victim; or, one says farewell to this position and places one's bet on the impossible possibility of a practice that starts with the inherent dignity of man.

3.2 Two prominent voices have been raised against the modern concept: Those of Karl Barth and Steve Biko

Let me, as a counter-voice to the defensive theory, quote two sources. The first one is the dogmatics and ethics of Karl Barth and the second can be found in the work by Steve Biko, *I write what I like* (2005) (Woods 1991:40-

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47). In my view, the texts of both Barth and Steve Biko are classic. They come from very different cultural contexts, but they share some basic ideas which can play a decisive role in doing theology (and, I think, philosophy) in context. A dialogue with someone like Steve Biko is indispensable if one wants to read Karl Barth in a South African context. In this second section of my article, I want to read Barth in the light of Steve Biko and the other way around, the texts of Steve Biko in the light of Karl Barth. At the basis of their thinking we can identify something that they have in common. In both authors we find a basic anthropology of hope. I gave a short characteristic of this anthropology in the first section of this article. Below I will make use of the French philosopher Alain Badiou, who wrote a fundamental book about the anthropological notions of equality and freedom in the letters of Paul. I will show that this approach of Badiou's can be useful for a common reading of Barth and Biko in a post-colonial capitalistic situation

From Barth's anthropology I give one decisive quote (*CD* III.2, 178f): Barth says that a human being is immortal because he is an image of hope. As a man, he is a companion of Jesus by election. He is a friend of Jesus who himself has been elected to be the first-born among many brethren. Here, I quote some lines in which one finds the clue to his thinking about humanness, from *CD* III.2 "Real man". Answering the question of what it means to be a man, we hear that to be a man is to be under the sign of the deliverance, which comes to the created being from Jesus. To be a man is to be able to look up for the sake of Jesus, and for his sake not to have to fear destruction. To be a man is to be held in the divine mercy, and to adhere to the divine righteousness, for his sake. Man is a being who is kept and keeps for the sake of Jesus, for as he is guarded it is incumbent on him to guard. As he has himself been helped, he is commissioned to be a helper; and as he is in the light of revelation, he necessarily becomes in some way a light. This is the history of human existence (Barth, *CD* III.2: 162).

Here Barth is saying that to be human means to be addressed by the love and the justice of God as it has manifested itself in the life and death of Jesus Christ. In Barth's presentation, this humanness is not an abstract notion, because the "real man" refers always to an eventful, concrete history. The real man (as summarised in the event of Jesus Christ) inherently is the man who is addressed by a promise which is not familiar to his own understanding and bad historical experiences. Barth starts his ethics (in *CD* III.4) with this concept of humanity. It is the starting point for a new ethics, in which the destructive self-centredness of the modern subject is left behind.

Next, I will consider chapter 8 of Steve Biko's *I write what I like*. A basic value of African culture is mobilised here against the bad experiences of

Western colonialism. It is surprising that there is no trace of resentment. The weakness which leads to anger and aggression is replaced by a strong consciousness of the strength of black culture. Biko speaks in terms of “we”. But he does not speak in an exclusivist sense. He doesn’t show any contempt for the other outside. Of course, Biko speaks in a militant way. This attitude however is certainly not directed against a white or a western culture in itself, but is only directed against the exploitative and cruel forms of this culture. I quote:

One of the most fundamental aspects of our culture is the importance we attach to Man. Ours has always been a Man-centred society. Westerners have in many occasions been surprised at the capacity we have for talking to each other – not for sake of arriving at a particular conclusion but merely to enjoy the communication for its own sake. Intimacy is a term not exclusive for particular friends but applying to a whole group of people who find themselves together either through work or through residential requirements.

(Biko 1978:41f)⁹

We believe in the inherent goodness of man. We enjoy man for himself. We regard our living together not as an unfortunate mishap warranting endless competition among us but as the deliberate act of God to make us a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life. Hence in all we do we place Man first and hence all our action is usually joint community oriented action rather than the individualism which is the hallmark of the capitalist approach ... This does surely not mean that suffering should be avoided

(Biko 1978:41f)

To return to Karl Barth, in his exegesis of Genesis and also in the paragraphs about destructiveness (radical evil), priority is given to the inherent goodness of creation. In this regard, special attention should be paid to the paragraph about *nothingness* (to be found in *CD* III.3 §50). After World War II, Germans felt the attraction of demonising themselves because of their lack of resistance or weak resistance to evil under the Nazi regime. Barth warns that this attitude can make one blind to the goodness of man; it can lead us to see even illness and death as products of sin.

⁹ In these notions I recognise one of the most fundamental aspects in the anthropology of Karl Barth: being gladly together. See Karl Barth (*CD* III.2, 278): “Man is human in the fact that he is with his fellow-man gladly.” “But”, according to Barth, in Christianity there is an inveterate and tenacious tendency to ignore or not accept this; not to know or not to want to know, this reality of humanity” (*ibid*).

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Karl Barth and Steve Biko are comparable because they do not start with an abstract theory of man who has to protect his rights against evil, but with a concrete policy of friendship which should lead, personally and economically, to forms of co-humanity. The big danger here is the isolation that is caused by fear, and that leads to forms of blind protection against the strange, dark world outside. Both authors start with a decisive event: a *political* event (choice for socialism, Black Consciousness); an *artistic* event (in Barth's texts one hears the joyful music of Mozart; in Biko's texts one hears African music); a *personal* event, which is practised in a policy of friendship (being gladly together); and last but not least a *scientific* event, because of their concept of knowledge as a joyful science. In all those eventful manifestations of goodness one meets a multiplicity of truths, in which a human being does not function like an animal that needs to be protected from evil, but like a subject, who is himself or herself intrinsically a part of a process in which truth is practised.

I think that both the African philosopher and the European theologian were full of passion for a truly emancipatory, man-centred (in Biko's terms) society. In that sense, they were real Utopianists.¹⁰ Their philosophy is a philosophy of hope. As far as Steve Biko is concerned, his *I write what I like* is a rich source for anthropology without fear, a concretised freedom till the end. The last chapter of *I write what I like* is called "On death". In my view, this short text is a great document of hope, which was realised under extreme conditions.

3.3 About the practical sense of the formula: "In Christ"

Neither of these counter-voices are alien to the New Testament. On the contrary, the texts of both Barth and Biko offer an exegesis of biblical insights that are extremely relevant for today. Here, I point to the formula: "In Christ": These words do not express an abstract idea. It is the formula of a subjective praxis in which man is not an object, but a real subject who rejoices with the truth (I Cor 13:6). One can say that this formula is the summary of the subjective praxis of faith, love and hope in which the love of Christ is a universal love. It is love alone which bears the force of salvation. For that reason this love is completely indifferent in the face of all differences. This love is the essential equality of all relations: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female (Gl 3:28). "Glory, honour, and peace for every one that does good, first for the Jew and then for the Gentile. For God does not show favouritism" (Rm 2:5-11). In Paul's day, this love was like a *creatio ex nihilo*, a resurrection from a law which produces death. Paul proclaims the

¹⁰ Special attention must be given to the notion of the real, the meaning that consists in love, in biblical terms: the fulfilment of the law.

resurrection from a law which brings people under the spell of a world in which differences between people do not lead to freedom but to greed and exploitation. The kernel of his message is, again and again, that being grasped by the love of God does not lead to any form of particularism: the result of particularism is bondage to one's own identity and exclusion of all others. The love is singular, addressed to every human being, and as such, love is a universal thing. In sum: by the subjective event of love, any form of exclusivism and discrimination is excluded.

About the anthropological significance of Paul, much can be learnt from the French philosopher, Alain Badiou (2003).¹¹ Badiou convincingly shows what Paul's strategy was. It was to start with acceptance of the differences – for example, between man and wife. He accepted these as a matter of fact: he did not see them as an evil, but he did not overemphasise them. In his eyes, the difference of man and wife in matters of religious behaviour is certainly not an expression of a natural or cosmological law. On the contrary: because the love of Christ is indifferent in relation to all differences, Paul could counter his readers with a strategy in which the given asymmetry of relations (the woman inferior to the man, the gentiles to the Jews etc) could be cancelled out by the proclamation of a fundamental symmetry. This reversal or subversion is part of a discourse in which Paul attacks all the hierarchal relations he was confronted with. Badiou says that the strategy of Paul is like a strategy of “subsequent symmetrisation”. I will cite one example from Badiou's discussion of I Corinthians 7:4.¹² “Initially, he will concede what no one at the time is willing to call in question, the husband's authority over his wife.” Whence the formulation, “The wife's body does not belong to her alone but also to her husband” (1 Cor 7:4). Horror! Yes, but in order to remind us that truths are universal, although sometimes they need to be made explicit by being slipped into an otherwise inegalitarian maxim, Paul neutralises it somewhat by his subsequent mention of its reversibility. For the text continues, and this continuation should always be cited: “In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone but also to his wife” (I Cor 7:4).

3.4 “Otherness” in (post)modern thinking

In modern religious and ethical thinking, much attention is given to the notion of otherness. There are reasons for this. With the help of this otherness (or difference) concept, one wants to organise a resistance against the stranglehold of identity thinking, in terms of which all differences are

¹¹ Badiou labels himself as an atheistic philosopher. Notwithstanding this atheism he has fine feeling for biblical, or indeed Pauline monotheism. In this monotheism God is not longer seen as the absolute other.

¹² “For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does.”

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reduced to one universal principle: Man = Man; God = God. (By the way, capitalist logic is following these identitary rules too). So, postmodern thinking has very good reasons for emphasising this difference or otherness. But – and now I shall play Devil’s advocate for a moment – who gives me any proof that this postmodern project makes us really free of the deep drive in us to make the other only a duplicate of myself? The other seems to be a mirror, whether of self-love or of self-hate. I am all but free of the identifying logic, in which otherness is chained by my own often unorganised and chaotic desires! I think we have no idea how far the renunciation of ourselves must go in order to get rid of those self-bound projections! I think that here, too, we are under the influence of a negative starting point. In view of this problem, a theologian could say: yes, as far as man is concerned, you are dead right! When facing the other he will never be free for real love, he will never find a way to be really generous, and so on. One could answer, yes, but in theology, it is God who commands us to have respect for the other. God is fully different from man, and he himself is the guarantee that his own command will be fulfilled. He is not a projection, because he is infinitely different from men; he cannot be the result of any projection because he is unknowable et cetera. But the Devil’s answer is: Right: but what sense does it make to speak of such a God, who we don’t really know. So, I think that the notion of otherness is a good medicine – perhaps a placebo – against the never-ending violence of human thinking. But the problem of this theological position is its lack of evidence. We have not any testimony that this respect of otherness results in a true knowledge of the other. That is the reason I feel uneasy with an ethics of the other. For example, what does “respect for the other” mean when one is at war against an enemy, when one is brutally left by a man for someone else, when one must judge the works of a mediocre artist, when science is faced with obscurantist sects, et cetera? Very often it is the “respect for others” that is injurious, that is evil, especially when it is resistance against others, or even hatred of others, that drives a subjectively just action.

3.5 About the real otherness of God

It seems also that the notion of the otherness of God is a necessary condition for respect: firstly in our relations with God, and secondly in our relations with our fellow man, who is a creature of God in his image and likeness. But the question is: is the notion of otherness a sufficient notion? Is this otherness the necessary supposition for a fundamental relationship? I have my doubts. I have a serious problem with this approach because the starting point is wrong. I opt for another starting point. The point is that a real, respectful encounter/experience of the other is not based on any vague enigmatic otherness, but is based on an initial immortal love. In this way, bad images of

the other are overcome. If there is fear (fear is a real thing), then this fear will be transformed in a never-ending love for a God who loved us first (1 Jn 4:10). So the crucial thing is not the total otherness of God, as modern philosophers say. The point is the love of God, and whether this love is a universal gift; whether it is really the source of a never-ending passion for truth and goodness; the point is also whether it is a gift by which humans are dignified. This love of God then is always the same: it is a motive for a real encounter, in which the differences do not matter.¹³

The otherness of God (and of the neighbour) is an important issue in the theology of Karl Barth. But, in his work, the notion of otherness is based on the encounter with the other. Following Barth, we can only speak about God and man in terms of a related otherness, which is a necessary condition for the quality of any relation.

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¹³ The "ethics of the other" then does not cast any new light on the field of humanity, but merely asserts that differences should be respected, which easily deflates into the rhetorical tolerance of liberal democracies by which capitalists continue in their exploitation with much protest but little action.