

# Karl Barth on the Possibility and Limits of Knowing God

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## Introduction

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Karl Barth delivered a series of lectures in 1946 that were subsequently edited into the book *Dogmatics in Outline* (Barth 1949). This essay summarises the first four lectures, with particular emphasis on Barth's understanding of how we can know anything about God. Barth's approach is then contrasted to those of natural theology and apophatic theology.

## Précis

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In this series of lectures, Barth uses the Apostles' Creed as the launching pad for reflections on the nature of dogmatics. Dogmatics, he claims, is a science<sup>1</sup> that stands "exactly halfway between exegesis and practical theology" (Barth 1949, 12). In other words, dogmatics provides the theoretical framework for the transition from what we understand our Scriptures to be saying and how we subsequently act. Although the *object* being studied by this "science" is not explicitly stated in this text, it appears to be not God, but dogma, which Barth describes as the content of the Church's proclamation to the extent that it reproduces the Word of God (Barth 1949, 13). The *subject* of dogmatics, that is, the agent undertaking the task, is the Christian Church (Barth 1949, 12). Consequently, dogmatics to Barth is the Church studying what the Church proclaims about God. This task is an on-going investigation, liable to error and open to reassessment in the light of both the Holy Scriptures and, to a lesser extent, the Church's own historical Confessions.

With the scene set, Barth then examines the relationships between faith, belief, reason, knowledge and truth. He observes that the Apostles' Creed commences with a claim about belief, the importance of which is twofold. Firstly, it highlights the subjective fact of belief as a universal human experience. Secondly, the introductory phrase is not "I believe that ..." followed by a list of propositional claims, but "I believe in ..." followed by descriptions of a Trinitarian God. This belief "in" points to a meeting between us and the object of our belief, a meeting that is a gift from God. This gift is freely given and sets us free to believe, which means to trust in a God who, in distinction from all other authorities, will remain faithful.

Moving to the source of our belief, Barth proposes that "God is to be known only through God Himself<sup>2</sup>" (Barth 1949, 18) rather than from anything within us. God is the only trustworthy authority and God has spoken His Word to humanity, once for all, through Jesus. Without that revelation, God would remain hidden and at best we would know only the shadow of "something like a supreme being, an absolute nature, the idea of an utterly free power, of a being towering over everything" (Barth 1949, 23).

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<sup>1</sup> I can't resist the urge to question Barth's opening claim that "Dogmatics is a science" (Barth 1949, 9). His non-standard definition of science is "an attempt at comprehension and exposition, at investigation and instruction, which is related to a definite object and sphere of activity." (Barth 1949, 9) Under that rubric, a review of a movie is science, as is reading tea leaves, and car maintenance. It is a laughable definition that is at odds with the rich literature on philosophy of science, and at odds with his own later claim (p. 20) that we believe "in spite of" rather than "because of" external justification.

<sup>2</sup> I retain Barth's usage of capitalised male pronouns throughout this essay, with apologies. God is diminished by this assumption of masculinity and all of us suffer from the implication of the primacy of the masculine over the feminine.

“The Creed of Christian faith rests upon knowledge” (Barth 1949, 22) and is not disconnected from or contrary to reason. Faith is not simply a dim sensation but grounded in facts, such as the event in space and time of Jesus’ resurrection. Faith illuminates reason and provides life-directing wisdom beyond mere knowledge. Our knowledge, however, even that revealed by God, is “relative”: it cannot be absolute because it is “imprisoned within the limits of the creaturely” (Barth 1949, 24). Though not absolute, the truth about Jesus Christ is nevertheless universal and the source of all truth.

Claiming that all faith and knowledge are instigated by God does not deny human agency. On the contrary, Christian faith requires a decision, and results in community, obedience and public proclamation. Our responsibility to let the light of God’s glory shine involves proclamation in the language of the church, translating that proclamation into the language of the world, and living our faith with appropriate attitudes and actions.

## Discussion

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To the extent that this text presents Barth’s view on epistemology, the key elements can be summarised as follows:

1. Humans can know nothing of God by their own power or endeavours.
2. What can be known of God is limited to what God chooses to reveal.
3. God has chosen to self-reveal through Jesus.

In this text at least, Barth’s approach is devoid of any explicit interaction with philosophical work on epistemology<sup>3</sup>. As a consequence, the question of what ultimately warrants belief is never addressed and Barth’s implied epistemology appears circular. Although he claims that the only source of knowledge of God is revelation from God, it is Barth’s own experience and reason that enables him to formulate such a view. His is not a view that God has universally revealed to all, nor that can be established *a priori*. Rather than being an “approach from above,” is this not simply Barth’s personal “approach from below” (Veldsman 2007)?<sup>4</sup>

Barth’s position stands in contrast to numerous other possibilities, from which array I would like to focus on just two: the view from natural theology, which would claim that much more can be known about God from experience than Barth admits, and the view from apophatic theology, which claims that less can be known of God than Barth permits.

### Natural theology

As noted above, Barth claims that our experience and reasoning about creation cannot lead to us to any knowledge of the creator. At most we can gain a vague sense of some greater Other, but God is so “wholly other” that nothing in the world can inform us about God’s nature. Barth claims that the inference of deity from nature “has nothing to do with God” but is merely an artefact of “man’s contrivance” (Barth 1949, 23).

John Calvin holds a more traditional view on what we can learn from nature, asserting that there is a natural instinct to believe in God (Calvin 1536, I.iii.1) and that from observations such as astronomy and the structure of the human body we can deduce God’s power, eternity and

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<sup>3</sup> In the fifth lecture Barth does discuss the idea of proving God’s existence. Even on that ontological question, however, his view of the philosophical tradition is dismissive. Barth quite rightly points out that the Bible offers no proof at all of God’s existence but “speaks of God simply as One who needs no proof” (Barth 1949, 38). Apart from an implication that what the Bible says can be trusted, however, this skirts the foundational epistemological question.

<sup>4</sup> To be clear, the final sentence comes from Daniel Veldsman, but the rest of that paragraph is my own observation.

goodness (Calvin 1536, I.v). Such a view seems more in line with Paul, who claims that at least some of God's qualities – "his eternal power and divine nature" – are evident to all in the observable creation (Romans 1:20).

In a commentary on Romans 1:20, however, Barth espouses a different interpretation of what Paul claims is made visible through creation. Creation highlights to us our own limitations and the essential gap between what can be observed and what lies beyond. "What is clearly seen to be indisputable reality is the invisibility of God" (Barth 1968, 46). Consequently, what natural theology reveals to us is the inadequacy of natural theology. It may be in the light of this that Thomas Torrance can interpret Barth's primary concern being not so much a rejection of the content of natural theology but a rejection of the possibility that knowledge of God could occur independent from God's direct agency (Torrance 2007).

In my view that concern is misguided, for one can assert that God is the ultimate source of all knowledge without requiring that knowledge comes *directly* from God. Barth claims that God is not known to us "because of our seeking and finding, feeling and thinking, but again and again only through Himself" (Barth 1949, 37). But suppose God created humans with a desire to seek, with faculties of perception and reason, and also provided experiences of the created world, all precisely in order to reveal God's self through our comprehension of those experiences. This human involvement has to be present anyway, even within Barth's approach, otherwise the witness of the prophets and apostles to the Word of God would be impossible to either portray or decipher. Within such a framework, humans can seek and find God at the same time as affirming that the seeking and finding, though partially mediated by what is observed in creation, are ultimately dependent on God.

### **Apophatic theology**

Apophatic, or negative, theology seeks to describe what God is not, rather than what God is. The apophatic tradition in Christianity dates back at least to the second century CE and is often associated with mysticism (Stang 2013), but also finds a home in non-mystical post-modernist theology (Carlson 2003).

Examples of an apophatic approach can be found in this text by Barth, such as "God is not only unprovable and unsearchable, but also inconceivable" (Barth 1949, 38). For Barth, however, negative theology is only a starting point to be later superseded by positive claims for God derived from revelation. Even his use of "inconceivable" is later over-written by a conception of God made available through revelation: Barth does not actually think that God is inconceivable, just that God cannot be conceived of through human means. He uses "apophatic lite" rather than acceding to the full force of complete negation. It is merely a tactic to clear away false assertions about God in order to make space for other assertions.<sup>5</sup>

To place ourselves as subject and God as object is impossible, since God is not an object to be studied. While Barth seems to start with that stance, he nevertheless can assert that God is an instigator who can tell us things (p. 16), a giver (p. 17), faithful (p. 19), the Father (lecture 6), manifest to us in Jesus (p. 18) and the only trustworthy authority (p. 19). For Barth, these attributes and others can be known through what God self-reveals.

In contrast, a consistent apophatic stance must refuse all such assertions. Even after revelation, all that can be said about God is at best metaphorical. As C. S. Lewis notes "He must constantly work

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<sup>5</sup> Something like this conclusion is reached by Paul Brazier in his review of Barth's *First Commentary on Romans* (Brazier 2004).

as the iconoclast. Every idea of Him we form, He must in mercy shatter” (Lewis 1974, 84)<sup>6</sup>. From this stance it is not enough to approach epistemology with humility and simply to receive what knowledge God chooses to give us. The apophatic stance calls us to subvert the attribution of *any* property or quality to God.

In my view, such an extreme apophatic stance is difficult to maintain, largely because it is self-defeating. Even the proposition that God cannot be given any attribution is itself an attribution that would need to be subverted. But aside from such logical paradoxes, *pace* John Caputo and Peter Rollins, it is very hard to see how such a position can be properly “Christian”. For it seems to me that a claim that God is Christ-like is essential to Christianity<sup>7</sup>. This is a much different claim than Christ being God-like, and implies that God is personal (e.g. that God can act, will and relate). In this I side with Barth, affirming that we can derive positive knowledge of God through God’s self-revelation in the person of Jesus.

## Conclusion

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In the first four lectures recorded in *Dogmatics in Outline*, Karl Barth draws on the first phrase of the Apostles’ Creed to discuss the Church’s task of proclamation. In doing so, he lays out an epistemological framework in which what can be known of God is completely determined by what God chooses to reveal. For Barth, there can be no other source of knowledge about God apart from God, and that through the revelation of Jesus.

I have described why advocates of natural theology would think that Barth overly constrains what can be known of God outside the revelation through Jesus. On the other hand, advocates of apophatic theology would think that Barth does not constrain that knowledge enough.

It seems ludicrous to critique so accomplished a thinker as Barth, but for what it is worth, I find the model presented in this text unconvincing. While I do not side with the extreme apophatic view that nothing can be said of God, I find Barth’s insistence that divine revelation leaves no place for human agency both unnecessary and impossible to maintain. It is unnecessary because God can still be acknowledged as the ultimate source of knowledge even if the means God uses to impart knowledge includes human reason and human experience of the created world. It is impossible to maintain because embedded in Barth’s epistemology is an unstated reliance on both human experience (the experience of the witnesses of Jesus’ life who later wrote it down, as well as the experience of all who have read the Scriptures or heard them preached) and human reason (at the very least the linguistic competence to read and interpret the revelation recorded in Scripture).

As an alternative to Barth’s revelational epistemology, I would suggest a relational epistemology in which knowledge of God arises through a constant interplay between the free actions of God and the free actions of humans, whom God made free for that very purpose.

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<sup>6</sup> Even Lewis, of course, only takes this stance as a starting point. The vast majority of Lewis’ non-fictional works argue cataphatically. On the other hand, if you esteem *Till We Have Faces* like Geoff does, then the apophatic may be the high point of Lewis’ contribution.

<sup>7</sup> See for instance John 1:18, 14:9, Colossians 1:15, Hebrews 1:3, and a more in-depth analysis in John V. Taylor’s *The Christlike God* (Taylor 1992).

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