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Liberal Theology in the Weimar Era

Schleiermacher and the Question of Religious Subjectivity in the *Methodenstreit* between Georg Wobermin and Karl Barth

The history of liberal theology has until quite recently been considered predominantly from the perspective of its critics, namely Karl Barth and his disciples.¹ The prevailing wisdom has maintained that the First World War signaled an abrupt end to the liberal theological program, ushering in a new era of Protestant theology. As George Rupp notes, «In part because of the influence of Barth's judgment, the voices of the condemned themselves have for several generations too seldom been heard in their own right.»² Historians of theology have generally considered the period as one of decay, both intellectually and ethically. Barthian dialectical theology was hailed as nothing short of a renaissance of Protestant theology, a return to the Word of God and with it a powerful critique of liberal accommodations of a militant and ethically bankrupt German bourgeois culture.³ Liberal theology was pronounced dead, slain on the fields of slaughter in France and Belgium.

But with historical distance and the waning of Barthian hegemony in Protestant theology has come a renewed interest in the liberal theology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Historians of theology are beginning to approach this period of Protestant thought with more objective, or at least irenic intentions, discarding what Michael Aune has called «the Barthian spectacles.»⁴ Where once historians of this period preferred to speak in terms

¹ Above all see K. Barth: Die protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert. Ihre Vorgeschichte und ihre Geschichte, Zürich 1960.

² G. Rupp: Culture-Protestantism. German Liberal Theology at the Turn of the Twentieth Century, Missoula MT 1977, 14.

³ This was a common judgment from the very beginning of dialectical theology. Friedrich Gogarten announced the shifting mood of German-speaking Protestant theology when he declared in 1920, «Today we are witnessing the demise of your [liberal theology's] world!» This is also the judgment of many recent historians of theology, such as Claude Welch, for whom 1914 marks the end of the nineteenth century, and with it liberal theology, and Heinz Zahrnt, who claims that the theology of the nineteenth century ended and that of the twentieth century began with Karl Barth, calling this moment both the «turning-point» and the «renewal» of theology. See F. Gogarten: Zwischen den Zeiten, ChW 34 (1920) 374–378; C. Welch: Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century, New Haven 1972–1985, vol. 1, 4; and H. Zahrnt: Die Sache mit Gott. Die protestantische Theologie im 20. Jahrhundert, München 1966, 13ff.

⁴ M. Aune: Discarding the Barthian Spectacles, Part I. Recent Scholarship on the History of Early 20th Century German Protestant Theology, Dialog 43 (2004) 223–232. Timothy Gorrige suggests that it was actually Barth's students and followers

of radical *discontinuity*, a new generation of historians is investigating the theology of the Weimar era for signs of *continuity* across the chasm of the First World War.⁵

Thanks in part to Matthias Wolfes's groundbreaking study of liberal theology after 1918, it is now possible to investigate the liberal theology of the interwar period as a legitimate theological movement rather than the last gasps of a dying era. It is now possible to hear these theologians on their own terms and in their own context. One of the theologians featured in Wolfes's work is the systematic theologian Georg Wobbermin.⁶ As Wobbermin was the most prolific of these interwar liberal theologians and the most widely discussed in his own time, his work presents many opportunities for study and for testing the theses of the continuity and productivity of liberal theology in the Weimar era. Wobbermin also presents significant challenges, particularly in terms of his support of the National Socialists beginning as early as 1930. For this reason, Wobbermin also represents the complexity of theological liberalism, which sometimes coexisted with positions that were anything but politically liberal.

Wobbermin is especially remembered for his attempt to construct a systematic theology on the basis of the psychology of religion.⁷ This concern led him to an engagement with Friedrich Schleiermacher and with the American

who were «vehemently opposed» to liberal theology more so than Barth himself. Gorringe acknowledges that Barth was indeed a vocal critic of theological liberalism, but he questions the image of Barth as a «sour *<neo-orthodox>* opponent of liberal theology» who had turned his back once and for all on his theological predecessors. T. Gorringe: Karl Barth and Liberal Theology, in: M. Chapman (ed.): *The Future of Liberal Theology*, Burlington VT 2002, 163–169 (163).

⁵ The most comprehensive of these recent studies is M. Wolfes: *Protestantische Theologie und moderne Welt. Studien zur Geschichte der liberalen Theologie nach 1918*, Berlin 1999. Other notable studies include M. Chapman: *Ernst Troeltsch and Liberal Theology. Religion and Cultural Synthesis in Wilhelmine Germany*, Oxford 2001; M. Chapman (ed.): *The Future of Liberal Theology*, Burlington, VT 2002; E. Lessing: *Geschichte der deutschsprachigen evangelischen Theologie von Albrecht Ritschl bis zur Gegenwart*, Göttingen 2000–2004; and a four-part series of articles by Michael Aune entitled: *Discarding the Barthian Spectacles: Part I. Recent Scholarship on the History of Early 20th Century German Protestant Theology*, *Dialog* 43 (2004) 223–232; *Part II. Rereading Theological Directions, 1910–1914*, *Dialog* 44 (2005) 56–68; *Part III. Rewriting the History of Protestant Theology in the 1920s*, *Dialog* 45 (2006) 389–405; and *Conclusion. Might We Be <Liberals> After All?* *Dialog* 46 (2007) 153–165.

⁶ For a brief biography of Wobbermin, see W.-U. Klünker: *Psychologische Analyse und theologische Wahrheit. Die religionspsychologische Methode Georg Wobbermins*, Göttingen 1985, 13–22.

⁷ G. Wobbermin: *Systematische Theologie nach religionspsychologischer Methode*, Leipzig 1913–1925.

philosopher and psychologist of religion, William James.⁸ The religio-psychological method, particularly the «religio-psychological circle»⁹ [*religionspsychologischer Zirkel*] between subjective religious experience and objective historic facts «radiating outward» from the New Testament and throughout the history of the Christian tradition, rests on the foundation of a distinction between *Geschichte* and *Historie*, which Wobbermin developed as a response to Arthur Drews and in a series of *Auseinandersetzungen* with previous positions on the relationship between faith and history (e.g., Martin Kähler, Wilhelm Herrmann, and Wilhelm Bousser), all contained in a programmatic essay published in 1911.¹⁰ More general methodological questions compelled him to understand his work in the broader context of the Protestant tradition, leading him to a prolonged occupation with Luther, Kant, and Schleiermacher.¹¹

With the end of World War I and the rise of dialectical theology, Wobbermin became an ardent defender of his religio-psychological method (and, by extension, of liberal theology) against the younger generation, especially against Karl Barth. These two theologians, colleagues for a brief time at the

⁸ Wobbermin published the first translation of William James's study of the psychology of religion, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, as: *Die religiöse Erfahrung in ihrer Mannigfaltigkeit. Materialien und Studien zu einer Psychologie und Pathologie des religiösen Lebens*, Leipzig 1907.

⁹ Wobbermin defines the religio-psychological circle in the first volume of his systematic theology: «We want to attain the criteria of pure religiosity for the purposes of evaluating and norming our own individual religious life on the basis of historic facts. By means of these historic facts, namely the forms of expression of religious life in the history of humanity, we can understand and interpret in no other way than according to the requirement of our individual religious experience, of our individual religious consciousness.» [«*Wir wollen zur Beurteilung und Normierung des eigenen religiösen Lebens auf Grund der geschichtlichen Tatbestände die Kriterien reiner Religiosität gewinnen, und wir können doch diese geschichtlichen Tatbestände, nämlich die Ausdrucksformen des religiösen Lebens in der Geschichte der Menschheit, nicht anders als nach Maßgabe unserer eigenen religiösen Erfahrung, also unseres eigenen religiösen Bewußtseins, verstehen und auslegen.*»] G. Wobbermin: *Die religionspsychologische Methode in Religionswissenschaft und Theologie*, Leipzig 1913, 405f. Throughout his career, Wobbermin offers additional examples of the construction of the religio-psychological circle, including the religio-psychological circle between subjective religious experience and the historic portrait of Christ, between the individual Christian believer and the objective revelation of God in Scripture, and between the faith of the Christian and the Word of God. The constant element in each of these constructions of the religio-psychological circle is the interrelation of the subjective and the objective.

¹⁰ G. Wobbermin: *Geschichte und Historie in der Religionswissenschaft. Über die Notwendigkeit, in der Religionswissenschaft zwischen Geschichte und Historie strenger zu unterscheiden, als gewöhnlich geschieht*, Tübingen 1911.

¹¹ See G. Wobbermin: *Luther, Kant, Schleiermacher und die Aufgabe der heutigen Theologie*, ZThK N.F. 5 (1924) 104–120; and idem: *Gibt es eine Linie Luther-Schleiermacher?* ZThK N.F. 12 (1931) 250–260.

University of Göttingen, held public debates in the church newspapers and theological journals of Germany until Wobbermin's death. Standing close behind these debates is the specter of Schleiermacher, on whose work Wobbermin consciously built and who represents for Barth the fountainhead of a wrongheaded theological liberalism. Barth's criticisms of Schleiermacher are well-known; Wobbermin's attempts consciously to continue Schleiermacher's project are less so.

Wobbermin was occupied with Schleiermacher throughout his career, and he wrote more about Schleiermacher than about any other theologian.¹² He constructed his three-part systematic theology around what he calls Schleiermacher's religio-psychological approach, and in his post-war debates with the dialectical theologians he constantly returned to Schleiermacher for support. It would not be an exaggeration to call Wobbermin's theology «Schleiermacherian», primarily because he consistently appeals to Schleiermacher in support of his positions, but also because his theological method displays some striking similarities to Schleiermacher's method in the *Glaubenslehre*.¹³

The root of Barth's criticisms of Schleiermacher can likewise be traced to the *Glaubenslehre*, specifically to Schleiermacher's methodological turn to the subject, or what Wobbermin called Schleiermacher's «Copernican revolution of theological method».¹⁴ Barth is especially suspicious of Schleiermacher's

¹² See G. Wobbermin: Schleiermacher und Ritschl in ihrer Bedeutung für die heutige theologische Lage und Aufgabe, Tübingen 1927; idem: Schleiermachers Hermeneutik in ihrer Bedeutung für seine religionswissenschaftliche Arbeit, Berlin 1930; idem: Luther, Kant, Schleiermacher (note 11); idem: Ist Schleiermacher wirklich ausgeschöpft?, ChW 41 (1927) 99–104; idem: Zum Streit um Schleiermacher, ChW 41 (1927) 1145s.; idem: Schleiermacher in der Zeit seines Werdens, ChW 42 (1928) 848–850; idem: Der Streit um Schleiermacher in seiner Bedeutung f. die heutige Gesamtlage der ev. Theol., ZEvRU 39 (1928) 280–294; idem: Gibt es eine Linie Luther-Schleiermacher? (note 11); idem: The Doctrine of Grace in Evangelical German Theology from Schleiermacher Onwards, in: W.T. Whitley (ed.): The Doctrine of Grace, London 1932, 291–320; idem: Schleiermacher in der Theologie des englischen Sprachgebiets, CuW 8 (1932) 388s.; idem: Die anthropologischen Gedanken in der Theologie Luthers und Schleiermachers, NLA 2 (1933) 25s.; idem: Schleiermachers protestantische und vaterländische Sendung, Deutsches Christentum 3 (1938), no. 2; and idem: Art. «Schleiermacher», RGG² 5, Tübingen 1931, 170–179.

¹³ In the introduction to the second volume of his systematic theology, Wobbermin adopts the motto, «Back to Schleiermacher! and from Schleiermacher forward!» [«Zurück zu Schleiermacher! und von Schleiermacher aus vorwärts!»] G. Wobbermin: Das Wesen der Religion, Leipzig 1921, vi.

¹⁴ Wobbermin: Luther, Kant, Schleiermacher (note 11), 117. Barth also refers to Schleiermacher's method in the *Glaubenslehre* as his «Copernican revolution»: «This is the great Copernican revolution with which Schleiermacher has drawn the undoubtedly correct and unavoidable conclusions from the history of Protestant theology since the Reformation and with which he has made and still makes a school in spite of all the

description of the «givenness» of the feeling of absolute dependence, which is presupposed in the Christian self-consciousness. This presupposition of the feeling of absolute dependence and the definition of the «whence» of that feeling as God represents for Barth an irreversible move away from the objective foundation of faith toward a pure subjectivism. Barth traces one of the roots of this move to what he considers to be Schleiermacher's deficient doctrine of the Word:

«To anticipate, nothing remained of the belief that the Word or statement is as such the bearer, bringer, and proclaimer of truth, that there might be such a thing as the Word of God. Schleiermacher knows the concept of the *kerygma*, but naturally a *kerygma* that only *depicts* and does not *bring*, that only *states* or *expresses* and does not *declare*. Truth does not come in the spoken Word; it comes in speaking feeling.»¹⁵

attempts of the so-called positivists to kick against the pricks. So long and so far as we do not perceive this revolution as a fundamental mistake and fundamentally reverse it, so long as the opinion remains intact that with it (1) Schleiermacher has honored the true legacy of *Luther* in theology, and (2) he has given theology right of place on the soil of Kant's critical philosophy (of which Schleiermacher all his life spoke with sovereign *spite!*), so long as the title is felt at a first glance to be right and not wrong (and who among us feels otherwise?), Schleiermacher is in fact the master, with no less authority than *Melanchthon* and *Calvin* had in the 16th and 17th centuries.» [«Das ist die große, die kopernikanische Umkehrung, mit der Schleiermacher aus der Geschichte der protestantischen Theologie seit der Reformation das zweifellos richtige und unvermeidliche Fazit gezogen und mit der er trotz alles Wider-den-Stachel-Löckens der sogenannten Positiven bis auf diesen Tag Schule gemacht hat und noch macht. Solange und sofern diese Umkehrung nicht grundsätzlich als Irrtum durchschaut und grundsätzlich rückgängig gemacht wird, solange die Meinung ungebrochen besteht, damit eben habe Schleiermacher 1. das wahre Erbe Luthers in der Theologie zu Ehren gebracht, 2. der Theologie auf dem Boden der Kantschen kritischen Philosophie ihr Heimatrecht gegeben (einer Philosophie, von der Schleiermacher zeitlebens nur mit souveräner Verachtung geredet hat!), solange wir den Titel des Schleiermacherschen Buches immer noch auf den ersten Blick als richtig und nicht als unrichtig empfinden (und wem ginge es zunächst anders?), solange ist Schleiermacher tatsächlich der Meister, mit nicht weniger Autorität, als es für das 16. und 17. Jahrhundert Melanchthon und Calvin gewesen sind.»] K. Barth: Die Theologie Schleiermachers. Vorlesungen Göttingen Wintersemester 1923/24, in: D. Ritschl (ed.): Akademische Werke 1923/24 (GA II/11), Zürich 1978, 333 (emphasis in original). It is especially interesting that Barth draws the same conclusions as Wobbermin regarding Schleiermacher's synthesis of Luther's theological legacy and Kant's critical philosophy.

¹⁵ «Nichts ist übriggeblieben, um dies gleich vorwegzunehmen, davon, daß das Wort, die Aussage, der Satz etwa als solcher Träger, Bringer, Verkünder der Wahrheit sein, daß es etwa ein Wort Gottes geben könnte. Wohl kennt auch Schleiermacher den Begriff des Kerygmas, aber wohlverstanden keines Kerygmas, das bringt, sondern nur eines, das darstellt, keines, das ausspricht, sondern nur eines, das aussagt oder gar bloß ausdrückt. Die Wahrheit kommt nicht in dem geredeten Wort, sie bleibt im redenden Gefühl.» Barth: Theologie Schleiermachers (note 14), 210 (emphasis in original).

For Schleiermacher, and for Wobbermin, proclamation as testimony is possible only on the basis of one's personal experience of redemption. The Christian gives testimony concerning religious experience in the hopes of eliciting that same experience in others. To put it in Wobbermin's terms, others must be drawn into the religio-psychological circle between religious experience and the objective revelation of God in order to have a similar experience of conversion. This is one of the primary purposes of the church as the community of fellowship with the Redeemer, and this is also one of the primary purposes of the ministry of the Word. For Wobbermin, the Word is God's revelation directed toward the entire existence of the human being, and it is accessible only by faith.¹⁶ Schleiermacher's and Wobbermin's doctrines of revelation and Scripture presuppose a relationship between the subjective experience of the Christian and the objective reality of the divine revelation. As Schleiermacher puts it, «Faith in Christ cannot be grounded in the importance of Holy Scripture; rather, [faith] must already be presupposed in order to grant a particular importance to Holy Scripture.»¹⁷

Barth is most emphatically critical of Schleiermacher's understanding of God as the «whence» of the feeling of absolute dependence. For Barth, a definition of God that is somehow dependent on the subjective experience of God – the feeling of absolute dependence – shifts the focus of theological work from the divine to the human and represents an abandonment of theology for anthropology. Barth's puzzlement at this most fundamental position of Schleiermacher's is expressed in the second of five two-part questions in his epilogue to the 1968 edition of the *Schleiermacher-Auswahl*:

«In Schleiermacher's theology or philosophy, do persons feel, think, and speak (1) in relationship to an indispensable Other, in accordance with an *object* that is superior to their own being, feeling, perceiving, willing, and acting, an object toward which adoration, gratitude, repentance, and supplication are concretely possible and even imperative? Were that the case, then I would prick up my ears and be joyfully prepared to hear further things about this Other, in the hopes of finding myself fundamentally at one with Schleiermacher. ...

Or, for Schleiermacher, do persons feel, think, and speak (2) in and from a sovereign consciousness of their own being together, and indeed essentially *being one*, with everything that might possibly come into question as something or even someone different from them? If that were the case, then the door between him and me would indeed be latched, and substantial communication would then be impossible.»¹⁸

¹⁶ G. Wobbermin: Richtlinien evangelischer Theologie zur Überwindung der gegenwärtigen Krisis, Göttingen 1929, 105.

¹⁷ «Das Ansehen der Heiligen Schrift kann nicht den Glauben an Christum begründen, vielmehr muß dieser schon vorausgesetzt werden, um der Heiligen Schrift ein besonderes Ansehen einzuräumen.» F. Schleiermacher: Der christliche Glaube, Berlin 1999, § 128, 2.284.

While Barth's final questions to Schleiermacher remain unanswered, there is no such hesitation in his condemnation of Wobbermin, in whose theology Barth perceives the manifestation of the worst tendencies of Schleiermacher.

¹⁸ «*Fühlt, denkt und redet der Mensch in Schleiermachers Theologie bzw. Philosophie (1) im Verhältnis zu einem unaufhebbaren Anderen, in Entsprechung zu einem seinem eigenen Sein, Fühlen, Erkennen, Wollen und Tun überlegenen Gegenstand, demgegenüber Anbettung, Dank, Buße, Bitte konkret möglich, ja geboten sind? Wäre dem so, so würde ich aufhorchen und freudig bereit sein, mir Weiteres über dieses Andere erzählen zu lassen – in der Hoffnung, mich mit Schleiermacher im Grunde einig zu finden. ... Oder fühlt, denkt und redet der Mensch bei Schleiermacher (2) in und aus einem souveränen Bewußtsein seines eigenen Zugleichseins, ja Einsseins mit allem, was als Gegenstand, als ein von ihm verschiedenes Anderes oder gar als ein Anderer in Frage kommen könnte? Wäre dem so, dann wäre die Türe zwischen ihm und mir doch ins Schloß gefallen, sachliche Kommunikation wäre dann unmöglich.*» K. Barth: Nachwort, in: H. Bolli (ed.): Schleiermacher-Auswahl. Mit einem Nachwort von Karl Barth, Gütersloh 1980, 308 (emphasis in original). In his study of the early Barth's liberal roots and the development of his «critically realistic» dialectical theology, Bruce McCormack has shown that Barth's earliest theological writings are steeped in the liberal outlook of his teacher Wilhelm Herrmann, including an emphasis on personal religious experience and a subjective appropriation of the objective reality of God and God's revelation in Christ. See B. McCormack: Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology. Its Genesis and Development, 1909–1936, New York 1995, 31–125. Three essays are especially significant for understanding Barth's early liberalism. The first two essays are part of a brief debate concerning the fitness of «modern» pastors for mission work that played out in the *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche: Moderne Theologie und Reichsgottesarbeit*, ZThK 19 (1909) 317–321, and: Antwort an D. Achelis und P. Drews, ZThK 19 (1909) 479–486. The third essay is a reflection on E. Troeltsch: *Die Bedeutung der Geschichtlichkeit Jesu für den Glauben*, Tübingen 1911: K. Barth: *Der christliche Glaube und die Geschichte*, SThZ 29 (1912) 1–18.49–72. Barth's affinity for liberal theology was shattered in 1914 when so many of his former teachers supported the German war effort. McCormack suggests that these events led Barth to the conclusion that the theology of experience too easily became a «*Kriegstheologie*» that sought God's blessings on Germany's invasion of Belgium. He cites a letter from Barth to Wilhelm Herrmann in which Barth challenges his former teacher to defend his theological support of the war: «Especially with you, Herr Professor (and through you with the great masters – Luther, Kant, and Schleiermacher), we learned to acknowledge «experience» as the constitutive principle of knowing and doing in the domain of religion. In your school it became clear to us what it means to «experience» God in Jesus. Now, however, in answer to our doubts, an «experience» which is completely new to us is held out to us by German Christians, an allegedly religious war «experience»; i.e. the fact that German Christians «experience» their war as a holy war is supposed to bring us to silence, if not demand reverence from us. Where do you stand in relation to this argument and to the war theology which lies behind it?» Karl Barth to Wilhelm Herrmann, November 4, 1914, cited in McCormack: Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology, 113. It is significant, then, that Barth remained vehemently critical of theological subjectivism and appeals to personal religious experience wherever he found them, particularly in the work of Wobbermin.

And while Schleiermacher's theology remains in some sense redeemable in Barth's estimation, Wobbermin's is beyond redemption.¹⁹ Barth is rarely as consistently critical as he is in his rejection of Wobbermin's positions, and those criticisms generally fall into two related categories: Wobbermin's appeals to Luther and Melanchthon in support of his doctrine of faith, and his appeals to Schleiermacher in support of the religio-psychological method. Both of these categories are related specifically in terms of Wobbermin's intention to find support in the Protestant tradition for his high estimation of subjective religious experience as an aid for theological work.²⁰

For Barth, Wobbermin represents the dangers of a theology that prizes subjective religious experience as a methodological point of departure. As he notes in his letter to Herrmann, Barth believes that it was the subjectivism of much liberal theology in the nineteenth century that made theological accommodation of a corrupt culture possible and enabled those theologians to support the Kaiser's prosecution of the First World War, therefore making liberal theology complicit in all its horrors. As Wobbermin was the most prolific and widely read liberal theologian in the post-war period,²¹ he typifies for Barth the dangers of theological subjectivism in the Weimar era and stands as an opponent to be defeated.

The majority of Barth's criticisms of Wobbermin are found in the first volume of his *Kirchliche Dogmatik*. There Barth takes issue with Wobbermin's appeal to Luther's exposition of the First Commandment in the Large Catechism, specifically as Wobbermin interprets Luther's definition of God and faith to indicate a correlative relationship between faith and God. Wobbermin consistently appeals to this passage of the Large Catechism as evidence that his religio-psychological method has a firm foundation in Luther's thought. He suggests that the objective (God) and the subjective (the human act of faith) constitute the twin *Gegenpole* between which genuine faith always stands, and that these two *Gegenpole* always stand in a correlative relation to one another.²² Barth criticizes Wobbermin's appeal to Luther, specifi-

¹⁹ The animosity between Barth and Wobbermin extended beyond the professional and into the personal realm. Matthias Wolfes notes that when Barth left the University of Göttingen in 1925, Wobbermin (who had been on the faculty since 1922) bought his house on the Nikolausberger Weg. The transaction was fraught with complications, and Barth and Wobbermin exchanged a series of letters with one another and with the university administration to resolve the issue. See Wolfes: Protestantische Theologie (note 5), 298, n. 127.

²⁰ Wobbermin appeals to Luther, Kant, and Schleiermacher and their respective «Copernican revolutions» of religious thought (Luther), epistemology (Kant), and theological method (Schleiermacher) in support of his religio-psychological approach to dogmatics. See Wobbermin: Luther, Kant, Schleiermacher (note 11).

²¹ Wolfes's bibliography includes a full ten pages of secondary literature on Wobbermin, almost all of it published during Wobbermin's lifetime.

cially as Wobbermin does so to find support for his suggestion that faith and God are somehow correlative *Gegenpole*:

«There is really no point in building one's understanding of Luther or one's whole theology on this popular preamble. Neither in the Large Catechism nor elsewhere did Luther himself teach the God thus defined, but only the true God of true faith, and in the question of this God he never referred to faith as such or its immanent correctness nor did he ever raise it to the dignity of a «counterpole» or partner of the Word of God. ... The terms *circular* or *reciprocal* or *correlative relation* are at least very imprecise descriptions of what Luther meant to say and did say in this matter.»²³

Wobbermin's use of the term «correlative» is, according to Barth, a misunderstanding of Luther's intention,²⁴ as well as a dangerous move toward making the existence of God and the authority of God's Word dependent on faith. Wobbermin himself never makes such a move in an ontological sense, and he warns against understanding it in this way: «This is clearly not interdependence in an ontological sense, not that the *existence* of God depends on human faith – it is interdependence *only for us*: God gives himself to us in his revelation to be grasped only through the mediation of faith – and accordingly we approach God only on the way of faith.»²⁵ Faith and God are interde-

²² See G. Wobbermin: Die Frage nach Gott in Luthers großem Katechismus, in: A. Titius, F. Niebergall, G. Wobbermin (eds.): FS J. Kaftan, Tübingen 1920, 418–435, and idem: Wie gehören für Luther Gott und Glaube zuhauf? ZThK N.F. 9 (1928) 51–60.

²³ «*Es hat nun wirklich keinen Sinn, auf diese volkstümliche Präambel sein Lutherverständnis oder gar seine ganze Theologie aufzubauen. Luther selbst hat weder im Großen Katechismus noch sonst den so definierten ‹Gott›, sondern eben den rechten Gott des rechten Glaubens gelehrt und bei der Frage nach diesem Gott hat er nie und nimmer auf den Glauben als solchen oder auf dessen immanente Rechttheit verwiesen und ihn zur Würde seines ‹Gegenpols› oder Partners des Wortes Gottes erhoben. ... Die Bezeichnungen Zirkelverhältnis, Wechselverhältnis, Korrelativverhältnis usw. sind mindestens keine sehr präzisen Umschreibungen für das, was Luther in dieser Sache sagen wollte und gesagt hat.*» K. Barth: Die Kirchliche Dogmatik I/1, Zollikon-Zürich 1947, 245f. (emphasis in original).

²⁴ Barth accuses Wobbermin of misquoting Luther in his discussions of the correlative relationship between God and faith: «The other [saying of Luther's] is in the Lectures on Romans and, as every reader of Wobbermin knows, it runs: *fides et promissio sunt relativa* (Wobbermin persistently writes *correlativa* for this...)» [«*Das andere steht in der Römerbriefvorlesung und lautet, jedem Leser Wobbermins ebenfalls wohlvertraut: fides et promissio sunt relativa (statt relativa schreibt Wobbermin beharrlich correlativa ...)*»]; Barth: Kirchliche Dogmatik I/1 (note 23), 244. Barth is correct in this instance. Luther's own words are, «*Quia fides et promissio sunt relativa.*» M. Luther: Diui Pauli apostoli ad Romanos Epistola, WA 56, 45. The English translation in the American Edition of Luther's Works, however, translates *relativa* as «*interrelated*», a meaning closer to Wobbermin's. See M. Luther: Lectures on Romans. Glosses and Scholia, Luther's Works, American Edition 25, 39.

pendent only for the believing subject. Or, as Wobbermin puts it, «the *understanding* of the object of faith, the *fides quae creditur* (thus of God and his revelation in Jesus Christ) is not possible without consideration of the *fides qua creditur*, of the personal conviction and experience of faith.»²⁶

Wobbermin, consciously aligning himself with Luther and Melanchthon, insists that «*fiducia* forms the proper essential element of evangelical faith.»²⁷ Faith as trust emphasizes the subjective character of faith and signifies an existential decision that must never be regarded as completed.²⁸ The religio-psychological circle is an active process rather than a static structure, and faith must always find its relation to its object in every new situation. The relation between faith and its object is always understood from the side of the believing subject, a move Schleiermacher had already made. Barth, however, criticizes Wobbermin's similar move as completely antithetical to the intentions of the Reformers:

«It should now be quite comprehensible that the interpretation of faith as *fiducia*, trust, or confidence as we find it in the Reformers and the whole of the old Protestant theology ... has nothing whatever to do with a displacement of the reality of faith from its object to the believing subject. ... Certainly faith is first faith when it is *fiducia*, and *notitia* and *assensus* alone would still not be faith, but only that *opinio historica* that the godless can have too. But how can faith be *fiducia* without being, precisely as *fiducia*, also *notitia* and *assensus*, *fiducia promissionis*, trust in the mercy of God that encounters us as *misericordia promissa*, i.e., in the objectivity of the Word, which has form and even a form of words, and therefore also has a form of knowledge, of holding something to be true, in the faith which receives it?»²⁹

²⁵ «Die Wechselbeziehung freilich nicht im ontologischen Sinne, nicht so, daß die Existenz Gottes vom Glauben der Menschen abhinge. Wohl aber die Wechselbeziehung für uns: Gott gibt sich uns in seiner Offenbarung nur zu fassen durch Vermittlung des Glaubens – und demgemäß kommen wir an Gott nur heran auf dem Wege des Glaubens.» Wobbermin: Richtlinien (note 16), 21f. (emphasis mine).

²⁶ «Das Verständnis des Glaubensgegenstandes, der *fides quae creditur* (also Gottes und seiner Offenbarung in Jesus Christus) ist nicht möglich ohne Berücksichtigung der *fides qua creditur*, der eigenpersönlichen Glaubensüberzeugung und Glaubenserfahrung.» Wobbermin: Richtlinien (note 16), 22.

²⁷ «Die *fiducia* bildet den eigentlichen Wesenskern des evangelischen Glaubens.» G. Wobbermin: Wort Gottes und evangelischer Glaube, Göttingen 1931, 11.

²⁸ Barth is quite critical of Wobbermin's use of existential thinking in his later work, claiming it is «not without humor.» He accuses Wobbermin of merely following the most recent theological fad, made even more insincere by Wobbermin's apparent lack of interest in Kierkegaard, to whose work Barth traces the theological existentialism of the 1920s. See Barth: Kirchliche Dogmatik I/1 (note 23), 18. Wobbermin does acknowledge Kierkegaard's influence on existential thought, but he prefers to base his existential thinking on Schleiermacher, a preference he explains in some detail in Wort Gottes (note 27), 20ff.

²⁹ «Von hier aus sollte nun weiter verständlich sein, daß die Interpretation des Glaubens als *fiducia*, Vertrauen, Zuversicht, wie wir sie bei den Reformatoren und dann in der ganzen

Barth further suggests that any subordination of *assensus* or *notitia* to *fiducia* would have been rejected by Melanchthon in particular, who would have insisted instead that all three elements of faith must be subordinated equally to their object.³⁰ For Wobbermin, faith that is not understood as *fiducia* threatens to become the mere *fides historica* against which Melanchthon warned in Article XX (*De bonis operibus*) of the Augsburg Confession, rather than *fides iustificans* or the «trust of the heart» that Luther describes in the Large Catechism.³¹ For Wobbermin, faith must be understood primarily in terms of obedience, decision, and experience. These existential categories preclude the primacy of the cognitive elements of faith (*notitia* and *assensus*) and instead point to the primacy of *fiducia*.³² Furthermore, for Wobbermin the primacy of *fiducia* requires an interrelation of the subjective and objective that is not necessarily required in definitions of faith that emphasize the cognitive elements of *notitia* and *assensus*.

The debate concerning Wobbermin's appeals to Luther and Melanchthon serves only as prologue to the primary debate between Wobbermin and Barth concerning Schleiermacher. Many of Wobbermin's essays and articles on Schleiermacher written in the 1920s and 30s are directed against Barth and the dialectical theologians, specifically their criticism of Schleiermacher and what they perceived to be the subjective tendencies (if not blatant subjectivism) of liberal theology.³³ In 1928, Wobbermin declared the debate on religious subjectivity (and ultimately on Schleiermacher) to be a «controversy» [*Streit*],³⁴ and one year later he suggested that this controversy had developed into a

altprotestantischen Theologie finden ... mit einer Verschiebung der Wirklichkeit des Glaubens aus dem Gegenstand des Glaubens in das glaubende Subjekt nichts zu tun hat. ... Gewiß ist der Glaube erst Glaube, indem er fiducia ist und wären notitia und assensus für sich noch gar nicht Glauben, sondern eben jene opinio historica, die auch der Gottlose haben kann. Aber wie sollte er fiducia sein, ohne zugleich und gerade als fiducia auch notitia und assensus zu sein, fiducia promissionis, Vertrauen auf die Barmherzigkeit Gottes, die uns als misericordia promissa, d.h. in der Gegenseitlichkeit des Wortes begegnet, die Gestalt und zwar Wortgestalt hat und darum in dem sie annehmenden Glauben auch Erkenntnisgestalt, die Gestalt des Fürwahrhaltens?» Barth: Kirchliche Dogmatik I/1 (note 23), 246f.

³⁰ Barth: Kirchliche Dogmatik I/1 (note 23), 247.

³¹ M. Luther: Der große Katechismus, BSLK, 560. Here Luther also suggests that faith and God belong «at home» with one another [*gehören zuhause*], a formulation of great significance for Wobbermin's argument for the interrelation of the objective and subjective elements of faith.

³² Wobbermin: Wort Gottes (note 27), 12f.

³³ In some cases, these tendencies developed into a pure subjectivism, and Wobbermin suggests that moving beyond such subjectivism constitutes the primary task of evangelical theology in the 1930s. See Wobbermin: Gibt es eine Linie Luther-Schleiermacher? (note 11), 250.

³⁴ See Wobbermin: Der Streit um Schleiermacher (note 12).

«crisis» [*Krisis*] that threatened the very foundations of contemporary Protestant theology.³⁵

This controversy, focused as it was on the theological legacy of Schleiermacher, was ultimately a controversy about the principal questions and basic problems of modern theology in general. It was a controversy between the dialectical theology of Barth, Brunner, and Gogarten on the one hand and the religio-psychological theology of Wobbermin and his students on the other.³⁶ Both schools take their name from their methods, and Wobbermin suggests that the entire debate finally has to do with the competing methodological points of departure of these two schools rather than with Schleiermacher himself.³⁷

The essential point of conflict between these two schools, in Wobbermin's estimation, is their respective attitudes toward the *fides qua creditur*. Dialectical theology wants to disregard the subjective, personal experience of faith as a methodological point of departure, while religio-psychological theology wants to take it as a basic methodological principle. Based in large part on his interpretation of Luther and Schleiermacher (and, to a lesser extent, Kant), Wobbermin insists that the fundamental methodological position of Protestant theology must take into account both the objective and subjective *Genenpole* of faith (the *fides quae creditur* and the *fides qua creditur*).³⁸ This relati-

³⁵ See Wobbermin: *Richtlinien* (note 16).

³⁶ For some examples of Wobbermin's students' religio-psychological work, see F.W. Schmidt, R. Winkler, W. Meyer (eds.): *Luther, Kant, Schleiermacher in ihrer Bedeutung für den Protestantismus*, FS G. Wobbermin, Berlin 1939.

³⁷ Wobbermin: *Der Streit um Schleiermacher* (note 12), 281f.

³⁸ Wobbermin insists that it is his own religio-psychological theology that continues what he calls the «Luther-Schleiermacher line», particularly the commitment to maintaining the interrelationship of the *fides qua creditur* and the *fides quae creditur*: «To summarize, the fundamental theological direction of Schleiermacher's thought tends toward a religio-psychological existential theology that seeks to make the correlative relationship between the *fides quae creditur* and the *fides qua creditur* the methodologically decisive authority. ... But *insofar and inasmuch as* Schleiermacher represents that intention, he returns to Luther's basic Reformation position and attempts to make this the basis of theological and dogmatic work. In this sense one can speak of a «Luther-Schleiermacher» line. It is the line of religio-psychological existential theology.» [«Zusammenfassend ist also zu sagen, daß die theologisch grundlegende Gedankenführung Schleiermachers auf eine religionspsychologisch-existentielle Theologie tendiert, die das Korrelativerhältnis von *fides quae creditur* und *fides qua creditur* zur methodisch entscheidenden Instanz zu machen sucht. ... Aber sofern und soweit Schleiermacher jene Intention vertritt, kehrt er zu der reformatorischen Grundposition Luthers zurück und versucht, diese zur Basis der theologisch-dogmatischen Arbeit zu machen. In diesem Sinne ist von einer Linie «Luther-Schleiermacher» zu reden. Es ist die Linie religionspsychologisch-existentieller Theologie.»] Wobbermin: *Gibt es eine Linie Luther-Schleiermacher?* (note 11), 257f. (emphasis in original).

on between the objective and subjective poles must be taken into account because religious faith is essentially a *relationship* between the believer and God. The fact that the objective pole (God) is not directly accessible to human knowledge requires the use of the religio-psychological circle between the subjective experience of faith and the historic objectification of religious conviction, primarily available in Scripture as the historic revelation of God culminating in Jesus Christ and as the testimony of the early church's faith in Christ.³⁹

Scripture and religious experience are not to be considered co-equal sources for theological reflection; Scripture is superior and prior to religious experience because God speaks in and through Scripture and thereby awakens the personal experience of faith.⁴⁰ Therefore for Wobbermin Scripture is the sole source for Christian doctrine in the Protestant tradition. Personal religious experience serves as an indispensable methodological aid [*Hilfsmittel*] for understanding the divine revelation in Scripture, as it is finally only through the *fides qua creditur* that the *fides quae creditur* is appropriated and understood. Dialectical theology's rejection of this indispensable interrelation of the objective and subjective elements in favor of the objective element alone leads, in Wobbermin's opinion, to what he calls a theology of false alternatives:

«Barth's dialectical theology proceeds from a false alternative and consequently leads in many cases to false alternatives. It is thus most accurately characterized as a theology of false alternatives. This is already based in its initial approach, for this first, fundamental approach, which is decisive for all further work, rests on a false alternative inasmuch as it rips the *fides quae creditur* apart from the *fides qua creditur* in the false opinion that only in this way can the majesty of God (the *fides quae creditur*) be adequately emphasized.⁴¹

³⁹ Wobbermin: Wort Gottes (note 27), 16. While the historic objectification of religious conviction is primarily available in Scripture, Wobbermin suggests that it is also present throughout the history of Christianity, particularly as the historic portrait of Christ continues to «radiate outward» [*entgegenleuchten*] from the New Testament and into the present day. See Wobbermin: Geschichte und Historie (note 10), and G. Wobbermin: Psychologie und Erkenntniskritik der religiösen Erfahrung, in: M. Frischeisen-Köhler (ed.): Weltanschauung, Philosophie und Religion in Darstellungen von Wilhelm Dilthey und Anderen, Berlin 1911, 342–363 (349).

⁴⁰ Wobbermin: Der Streit um Schleiermacher (note 12), 282.

⁴¹ «Barths dialektische Theologie geht demgegenüber von einer falschen Alternative aus und führt infolgedessen auch weiterhin vielfach zu falschen Alternativen. Sie ist gerade so am treffendsten zu charakterisieren: als Theologie der falschen Alternativen. Das ist schon in ihrem ersten Ansatz begründet. Denn bereits dieser erste, grundlegende und für alles weitere entscheidende Ansatz beruht auf einer falschen Alternative, sofern er *fides quae creditur* und *fides qua creditur* auseinander reißt, in der falschen Meinung, nur so sei das Majestätsrecht Gottes (die *fides quae creditur*) zur vollen Geltung zu bringen.» Wobbermin: Der Streit um Schleiermacher (note 12), 283 (emphasis in original).

These «false alternatives» are not unique to dialectical theology. Wobbermin traces their roots to Albrecht Ritschl and even to Schleiermacher himself. Wobbermin believes that these false alternatives can be avoided by further dividing the objective pole (God) into a transcendental side (God *in se*) and an immanent side (God's revelation in history). Schleiermacher and Ritschl both intended to base their methodological points of departure on the relationship between the objective and subjective poles, but both failed adequately to carry out their intentions. Wobbermin suggests that Schleiermacher sometimes overemphasized the subjective pole, which in some of his followers became a pure subjectivism or «psychologism» [*Psychologismus*].⁴² Ritschl, on the other hand, overemphasized the immanent side of the objective pole – the revelation of God in history – which in many of his followers became a pure objectivism or «historicism» [*Historismus*].⁴³ Dialectical theology takes the objective side alone as its methodological point of departure, sacrificing the subjective pole altogether, which results in what Wobbermin calls a «false objectivism.» Religio-psychological theology, on the other hand, seeks its point of departure in the interrelation of the objective and the subjective poles «in such a way that the relationship to the transcendental side [of the objective pole] is found through the immanent side.» In this way it seeks to overcome both a pure objectivism or historicism and a pure subjectivism or psychologism, as well as the false objectivism of dialectical theology.⁴⁴

The key to this middle way sought by Wobbermin is found in Schleiermacher's definition of doctrines and dogmatics. Doctrines are accounts of the Christian religious affections brought to speech, and dogmatic statements are propositions of faith [*Glaubenssätze*]. These propositions bring the convictions of faith to speech and, according to Wobbermin, have the character of convictions of faith themselves. Any other statement, be it purely historical, rational, or speculative, has no place in Protestant dogmatics. For this reason, Schleiermacher defined his dogmatics as a *Glaubenslehre* and called it simply, «The Christian Faith presented as a coherent whole according to the basic principles of the Evangelical Church.»

Wobbermin suggests that Schleiermacher's definition of doctrines and dogmatics remains true to the Reformation doctrine of faith, while Barth rejects Schleiermacher's method as pure subjectivism and as such incompatible with the theological legacy of the Reformers. Wobbermin contends that this judgment is based on a misunderstanding of Schleiermacher's definition of Christian religious affections. He suggests that Barth understands «affection»

⁴² Wobbermin mentions two representatives of the Erlangen school – Johann Christian Konrad von Hofmann and Franz Hermann Reinhold Frank – as examples of this type of pure subjectivism.

⁴³ Ernst Troeltsch serves as Wobbermin's example of this type of thinking.

⁴⁴ Wobbermin: *Der Streit um Schleiermacher* (note 12), 284.

as a merely subjective condition distinct from convictions of faith. Schleiermacher, according to Wobbermin, understood the religious affections to be convictions of faith rather than something distinct from them. Convictions of faith have an objective content, namely God and God's revelation. In this relationship between the conviction of faith and its objective content, Wobbermin detects the corresponding relationship between the *fides qua creditur* and the *fides quae creditur*.⁴⁵

Thus the *Methodenstreit* between Barth and Wobbermin transcends the particular questions of each theologian's own method and, despite Wobbermin's claim to the contrary, also includes the greater question of their respective interpretations of Schleiermacher. Wobbermin contends that Schleiermacher cannot simply be abandoned or relegated to the history of Protestant thought as though he could be of no value for addressing the problems of contemporary theology. He considers Schleiermacher to be a valuable ally against the objectivizing tendencies of dialectical theology and a rich resource for contemporary theology, and he consciously constructs his religio-psychological method on the foundation of Schleiermacher's method in the *Glaubenslehre*. Nevertheless, the subsequent history of twentieth-century theology bears witness to the triumph of dialectical theology's renewed emphasis on objectivity over Wobbermin's appeals for an interrelation of objectivity and subjectivity. However, given the decline of Barthian hegemony and the renewed interest in the liberal theology that survived and indeed flourished beyond its supposed *Aufbruch* coincident with the end of the First World War, contemporary historians of theology interested in this period of Protestant thought may find that what was initially assumed to be a dead end and a new beginning in the history of theology was, in fact, a fork in the theological road.

Abstract

Recent historical studies of liberal theology in the Weimar era have called into question the popular thesis of liberal theology's sudden demise and disappearance coincident with the First World War and the publication of Karl Barth's *Römerbrief*. Historians of this period of theology are rediscovering a vibrant liberal theology active well into the 1920s and even into the 1930s. One of these liberal theologians, Georg Wobbermin, was particularly active in this period, and his work serves as an example of a constructive liberal theology pursued in the midst of dialectical theology's rise to prominence on the German-speaking theological scene. Wobbermin's debates with Barth on theological method, specifically on religious subjectivity, and on the heritage of Luther and Schleiermacher in early twentieth-century theology serve as a case study for testing the theses of the continuity and productivity of liberal theology beyond its supposed demise in 1918. Wobbermin's constructive

⁴⁵ Wobbermin: *Der Streit um Schleiermacher* (note 12), 286f.

work on the religio-psychological method and his conscious efforts to continue the «Copernican revolutions» of Luther, Kant, and Schleiermacher suggest a more complex picture of German-speaking Protestant theology in the Weimar era than most histories of this period have presented.

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