CHAPTER 25

From German ‘Cultural Protestantism’ to Anglo-American ‘Civil Religion’

25.1 Cultural Protestantism as a Religious Ideology of Bourgeois Modernisation

‘Cultural Protestantism’ has asserted itself as the term for the ideological link between bourgeois class interests and Protestant ‘values’, both within the literature on the history of theology and in that of the social sciences. Its first documented use dates to about 1904; the term originally functioned as an orthodox exonym for a modernist current within theology, whose exponents preferred to refer to themselves as ‘new Protestants’ or ‘liberal theologians’. The term did not become a positive endonym until the 1920s.¹

The term was popularised mainly by Karl Barth, who used it to refer not to a certain current within theology, but to the type of theology that prevailed throughout the nineteenth century, a theology that Barth broke with during the First World War and in opposition to which he developed his ‘dialectical theology’. The decisive reason for this break was the fact that in August 1914, ‘more or less all’ of Barth’s theological teachers publicly endorsed the military policy of Wilhelm II. ‘Grown mad over their ethos, I became aware that I would no longer be able to adhere to their ethic and dogmatism, their Bible exegesis or their account of history either, that the theology of the 19th century would henceforth be a theology without a future to me’, Barth reports retrospectively in a 1957 lecture.² He uses ‘cultural Protestantism’ as an ideology-critical term, which refers to those who surrender the sacred word of God to the dominant ‘culture’. Like the reformers of the sixteenth century, Barth enacts the break with the dominant theology in the form of an ‘orthodoxy’ that condemns the synthesis of ‘Christianity’ and ‘culture’ as an instance of sinful human hubris and from the standpoint of a diastatic separation between ‘gospel’ and ‘culture’, ‘faith’ and ‘religion’.

The theological critique of ideology was so incisive that theologians and historians of theology are still working hard today to eliminate its effects. The pattern followed by these efforts can be illustrated with reference to

¹ See Graf 1984, pp. 265, 226; see also Graf 1990, pp. 232ff.
² Barth 1960, pp. 574–5.
F.W. Graf, who discusses cultural Protestantism with an eye to discovering in it traditions suitable to the articulation of a theologically justified acceptance of the German Federal Republic’s parliamentary democracy, which is of course itself a cultural Protestant approach.\(^3\) To this end, he proceeds, without further ado, to attribute Barth’s ‘dialectical theology’ to the general critique of culture articulated by antiliberal intellectuals, which allows him to associate it with the conservative revolution and, by way of it, with the ‘German Christians’ (i.e. the most radical fascist faction in the Protestant Church).\(^4\) He is aided in this not only by the ambiguity of the concept of liberalism, but also by that of the German adjective ‘bürgerlich’, which allows him to attribute to dialectical theology an ‘aggressive critique of bürgerliche Kultur’ while simultaneously suggesting that the National Socialist movement, which stepped forward to reorganise the bourgeois camp, was characterised by a ‘basic anti-bourgeois stance’.\(^5\) Under the pretence of engaging in a long overdue historical differentiation of Barth’s critique, Graf engages in a church-historical revisionism that stands the historical antagonisms of the struggle over the church on their head. In reality, the ‘German Christians’ were quite capable, to the extent that they came to represent the interests of the state, of situating themselves within the tradition of cultural Protestantism, of which one of their leading theologians, Emanuel Hirsch, claimed that it amounted to ‘tracing back’ everything worldly to its religious foundation.\(^6\) By contrast, Barth’s theology became, under German fascism, the backbone of the Confessing Church’s efforts at self-defence.\(^7\) In Hübinger’s most recent study of the relationship between cultural Protestantism and politics, the displacement of the theological critique of ideology is completed: the extensive index of names does not include that of Karl Barth, which appears only in the bibliography.\(^8\)

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3 Namely, by means of the reception of ‘those undogmatic patterns in the theological interpretation of politics that were developed, in their classical form, by cultural Protestant academic politicians such as Rade, Baumgarten, Troeltsch and Mulert’ (Graf 1990, p. 239).


6 Hirsch 1954, p. 156. See also Hirsch’s ‘reader’, published in 1938, on the modern ‘Reconfiguration of Christian Thought’, a sourcebook for students of theology in the National Socialist state that included cultural Protestant religio-philosophical texts by the likes of Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Schleiermacher and Baur, but none by Rousseau or the liberals Rade and Troeltsch, who were considered ‘left wing’.
