

Exchange

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Reading Karl Barth in Indonesia: Retrospect and Prospect

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Abstract

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The paper explores the reception of Karl Barth's theology in Indonesia by engaging with select theologians who wrote introductions to his theology in the local language. It argues that Barth's theology can contribute fruitfully to local conversations only if more patience and understanding are reflected in the theological engagement. However, this is not yet the case, as exemplified in several select theologians, who are introduced and assessed in a retrospective evaluation of local reception. Despite some hopeful recent developments, more serious engagements need to be done before his theology could meaningfully interact with local questions and insights. In prospect, the paper suggests several theological loci that are potentially insightful for future conversations.

Keywords

Karl Barth – Indonesia – reception – theology – dialectics – theological method

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Introduction

In 2004, Alle Hoekema wrote, "Barth's time is yet to come in Indonesia."¹ With the inauguration of the Karl Barth Center of Jakarta Theological Seminary (KBC-JTS), this overdue engagement excites many in anticipation of the fruits of such a project.² Among Indonesian theologians, Barth is a familiar figure. His theology is object of admiration as well as aversion. Yet truly fruitful engagement is miniscule and escapes public notice.³ This essay is an initial exploration that attempts to chart several early engagements and suggests proposals for the way Barth's theology might fruitfully join the theological conversations in Indonesia.

The thesis of this paper is that Barth's theology is an exciting subject of conversation only when Indonesian theologians are willing to engage with the content and the theological rationale of his dogmatics. We need to explore beyond his theological method and his scattered remarks on religion, and engage the mature arguments of his theology with an appreciation for the architectonic structure of his thinking. This requires patience and understanding; but the reward will exceed initial expectation. Barth's theology is comparable to an old European Cathedral that requires trained eyes to appreciate its beauty. However, once one realizes its delicate magnificence, one can transpose it into

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- 1 A.G. Hoekema, "Barth and Asia: 'No Boring Theology,'" *Exchange* 33/2 (2004), 126.
- 2 KBC-JTS was inaugurated in 2017 to initiate a contextual engagement with Barth and to foster solid scholarship of Barth's theology. It has a particular interest in engaging with his dogmatic innovations, theology of religions, and other themes that are relevant for contextual conversations (e.g. political theology, Trinity, election). Also, KBC-JTS promotes critical understanding about common local misunderstandings and aims to make available reliable contextual interpretations by Indonesian theologians in engaging Barth's theological insights. With the rise of a new generation of young theologians, it seems the right time to begin a fresh conversation with Barth's theological insights. This article is a contribution toward this goal. ³
- 3 Two dissertations on Barth by Indonesian theologians are still unpublished: E.I.N. Timo, *The Eschatological Dimension in Karl Barth's Thinking and Speaking About the Future: The Role of the Trinitarian Dogma in Church Dogmatics* (Kampen: Drukkerij van den Berg, 2001); A.H. Lo, *Revelation and Religion in the Theology of Karl Barth and the Second Vatican Council* (Singapore: Trinity Theological College, 2010). One important exception is an article by E.G. Singgih, "Towards a Postcolonial Interpretation of Romans 13:1-7: Karl Barth, Robert Jewett and the Context of Reformation in Present-Day Indonesia," *The Asia Journal of Theology* 23/1 (2009), 111-122. Singgih's article is listed among introductory readings by the Center for Barth Studies, Princeton Theological Seminary. See <http://barth.ptsem.edu/karl-barth/introductory-resources> (accessed 23 February 2017).

a fresh way of doing theology.⁴ This, however, is not yet a description of Barth's readings among Indonesian theologians.

This article discussing Barth consists of three parts. First, it will sketch some constructs of Barth's theology by way of analyses of representative theologians. Second, based on these analyses, it notes the misconceptions Indonesian theologians must overcome in order to engage meaningfully and constructively. Finally, it suggests a few modest proposals that can be fruitful in reading Barth's theology in Indonesia. Among the suggestions we will also note hints from Barth's 1968 letter to South East Asian theologians.⁵

Retrospect: Portraits of Karl Barth

The earliest interactions between Indonesian theologians and Karl Barth's theology were from prominent historical figures such as T.B. Simatupang, Johannes Leimena and J.L.Ch. Abineno.⁶ Barth's name was widely known as a creative innovator among modern theologians. This perception of Barth's theology continues to attract contemporary Indonesian theologians. Marie-Claire Barth, daughter-in-law of Karl Barth, introduces him to Indonesian readers as one on the same stature as Augustine, Luther, and Calvin.⁷ Not all theologians, however, will accept this assessment. Barth's name incites different reactions and attitudes. His theology is loved and hated. More commonly, he is simply misunderstood. In what follows, we present select representations of Karl Barth's theology by Indonesian theologians.⁸ Our presentation discusses, firstly, groups that are sympathetic and, secondly, those who are critical towards

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4 Cf. G. Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 28.

5 K. Barth, "No Boring Theology! A Letter from Karl Barth," *South East Asia Journal of Theology*, 11 (Autumn 1969), 3-5.

6 T.B. Simatupang and J. Leimena played important political roles in Indonesia. Simatupang once held a position as the chief of staff of the Indonesian Army, and Leimena was prime minister for a period. Later on, Simatupang and Abineno represented Indonesia in the ecumenical movement through which they came into personal contact with Barth. Cf. C. Green and M. Barth, *Karl Barth. Teologi Kemerdekaan, Kumpulan Cuplikan Karya Karl Barth* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1997), ix. Cf. Hoekema, "Barth," 124.

7 Green and Barth, *Karl Barth*, ix.

8 The following exposition is selective, not only because of the paucity of available material, but also because the purpose we have in mind is not to offer a comprehensive report on Barth's reception in Indonesia but rather a sketch of a general understanding that provides a context for future engagement.

Barth's theology. They exemplify two distinct theological traditions. The main purpose is to sketch different responses that will hopefully generate further conversations in the reception of Barth's theology in Indonesia.⁹

Harun Hadiwijono

Harun Hadiwijono was one of the most important theologians in Indonesia. He taught for many years at Duta Wacana Theological Seminary¹⁰ and wrote a standard dogmatic textbook, which is widely used in many seminaries.¹¹ In 1985, Hadiwijono wrote a chapter that introduces Barth as the chief proponent of twentieth century Reformed theology.¹² According to Hadiwijono, Barth was a liberal student turned orthodox during his pastoral experience in Safenvil.¹³ Barth found that the historical-criticism method did not equip him to proclaim the Word of God. This challenged Barth to find a new way of doing theology. In Barth's *Römerbrief*, according to Hadiwijono, Barth developed a theology of crisis that employs a dialectical method to describe the Word of God.¹⁴ The foundation of Barth's thinking is the utter difference between God and humanity, which creates a crisis that requires God's revelation as the only means of knowing the Word of God. Barth also sets faith and religion in opposition. The former is a proper human response to God's revelation while the second is a futile human attempt to reach God. This approach to theology brought together Barth and a group of theologians (Gogarten, Brunner, Bultmann, *et al.*) to form a new theological movement, dialectical theology. However, this group fragmented and went in different directions, and eventually dissolved.

According to Hadiwijono, the definitive form of Barth's theology is *Church Dogmatics*. From this perspective Barth's method is deductive-descriptive, meaning Barth begins with theological axioms and provides expositions but no apology.¹⁵ The essence of Barth's theology is a Christology that explores Christ's existence from the point of view of eternity, i.e., in the immanent life of the Trinitarian God. There is an analogy between history and eternity, i.e., God's

9 The next project following this one is to explore Barth's reception in further detail, exploring unpublished dissertations and indirect references in dogmatics books, e.g. Timo's and Lo's dissertations.

10 The seminary is now the School of Divinity in Duta Wacana Christian University.

11 H. Hadiwijono, *Iman Kristen* (Jakarta Pusat: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2001). The 2001 edition is the 14th edition of the work. The first edition was printed in 1979.

12 H. Hadiwijono, *Teologi Reformatoris Abad Ke 20*, (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1985), 24-35.

13 Hadiwijono, *Teologi Reformatoris*, 24.

14 Hadiwijono, *Teologi Reformatoris*, 25-26.

15 Hadiwijono, *Teologi Reformatoris*, 30.

action in time is analogous to what already was in God's eternity.¹⁶ Hadiwijono proposes that Barth's theological method in *Church Dogmatics* changes from dialectics to analogy.¹⁷ Barth gave special emphasis to the humanity of God to give balance to his earlier theology of crisis. Previously, Barth was quite negative about humanity, but in the later period he was more positive. The crown of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, according to Hadiwijono, is the doctrine of predestination.¹⁸ In this doctrine, Jesus Christ is the electing God and the reprobate human in such a way that the possibility for human rejection by God is impossible. Although Barth sounds quasi-heretical, on Hadiwijono's reading, Barth does not propose a doctrine of *apokatastasis* (the doctrine that all will eventually be saved); rather, he emphasizes the universality of God's grace to all people regardless of whether they believe or not.

Hadiwijono's reading of Barth is commendable, as he grasps the basic overview of his theology, and provides important observations of his theological methods. He is a prime example of the common picture of Barth among the mainstream theological current in Indonesia. Although he provides an overall structure of Barth's theology, the exposition lacks meaningful engagement with specific content or themes. The picture is a romantic account of two major changes in Barth's theological development: from liberal to Reformed theologian, and from dialectical to analogical theologian.¹⁹ While the first is well established, the second is questionable. Barth continues to be both dialectic and analogical to the end of his theological career. More importantly, the interest in Barth is mostly methodological. Barth explores theological methods to find an alternative to the historical-critical method. Hadiwijono's description, however, is inaccurate since Barth continued to use historical criticism for the remainder of his career.²⁰ *Church Dogmatics* is a theological reflection

16 Hadiwijono, *Teologi Reformatoris*, 31.

17 Hadiwijono, *Teologi Reformatoris*, 32.

18 Hadiwijono, *Teologi Reformatoris*, 34.

19 This view is famously proposed by H.U. von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971). This view has been challenged by B.L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). In our view McCormack has successfully established the current standard picture of Barth's theological development, which began with the turn from liberal theology and the unfolding of the insights from the material content of Trinity and Christology, rather than experimental explorations of theology under the influence of philosophy.

20 For example, Barth's *Church Dogmatics* employs various tools of historical criticism so long as they help Barth to understand the Bible. Furthermore, Barth was a professor of New Testament exegesis during his time in Münster, and virtually gave lectures on

on the biblical text that benefits from academic research using historical criticism. It is an expanded exposition of the Bible in response to classic theological questions.

One of the challenges in engaging a great theologian such as Barth, is the temptation to domesticate his theology for easy understanding, i.e., to presume one has understood him fully by unmasking the principles behind his theological method. Particularly lacking in Hadiwijono's exposition is Barth's mature understanding of revelation that provides a transition from the Christological concentration on the event of the Word of God, to the history of God in Jesus Christ. This change shifts Barth's emphasis from an abstract concept of the Word of God into a concrete history of revelation in Jesus Christ. The impact of this shift on Barth's theological method is left untouched. Another problem with Hadiwijono's picture is his comparison between analogy and dialectic. For Barth, the analogy of faith is not a replacement of dialectic. *The analogy itself is dialectical*.²¹ Barth was dialectical and analogical in his early theological career, and continued to be so into his later career. Barth's dialectic changes its emphasis from the dialectic of thinking (*Denkform*) into the inner dialectic of the truth (*Realdialektik*), but he never abandons dialectic for analogy. However, because of the introductory nature of Hadiwijono's writing, we can understand these shortcomings. As such, while the material content of Barth's theology is introduced, it remains unexplored and unevaluated. He admits Barth's theology brought fresh wind into the theological scene. However, Hadiwijono's hint is left to later generations to take on.

J.L.Ch. Abineno

Abineno is a great admirer of Karl Barth's theology. He planned to pen a detailed exposition of Barth's life and theology but was prevented from doing so, and produced only a popular book on Barth's life, work, and theology.²² Abineno's approach is a combination of biographical and theological interpretation. His

New Testament exegesis in Göttingen and Bonn. In this regard see his commentary on 1 Corinthians, originally published in 1924: K. Barth, *The Resurrection of the Dead*, trans. H.J. Stenning (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2003). In 1928, based on lectures in Göttingen (Summer 1924) and Münster (Winter 1926/1927), Barth published *Epistle to the Philippians*, trans. James W. Leitch (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002). And in 1933, also based on his lectures: *Witness to the Word, a Commentary on John 1*, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986). In these commentaries, there is an interesting development of Barth's growing confidence in employing historical criticism for his theological exposition.

21 McCormack, *Karl*, 16-20.

22 J.L.Ch. Abineno, *Karl Barth: Hidup, Pekerjaan Dan Theologianya* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1990), vi.

book consists mostly of historical details of Barth's theological and ecclesiastical career. In chapters 7 and 8, he provides a reading of *Church Dogmatics* and his interpretation of Barth's theological method. Our exposition will focus on these two chapters.

In Abineno's estimation, *Church Dogmatics* is comparable to Calvin's *Institutio* and Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*.²³ Abineno notes that, from a genetic point of view, *CD* 1/1 and 1/2 show a significant difference, and from 1/2 onward Barth discarded completely the remnant of philosophical influence from his early theology.²⁴ The reason for this change was Barth's study of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*, where he concluded that Christian theology is based on Jesus Christ as the Word of God proclaimed to human beings.²⁵ Unfortunately, Abineno does not provide further explanation of his interpretation or the source of his understanding. We can only guess that it could have come from Barth's remarks²⁶ or secondary literature he consulted.

Abineno notes that Barth wrote *Church Dogmatics* in an ecclesial context.²⁷ Barth's expositions are kerygmatic and the emphasis is on the grace of God in which theology holds together the absolute distinction between God and humanity, and its counterpart, the ultimate imminence between the two. In doing so, Barth situates theology within the life of the church and explores the implications for traditional doctrines.²⁸ Barth does not always conform his theology to the church's tradition but reinterprets and explores a fresh way to construct theology in conversation with church doctrines.²⁹ He perceives Jesus Christ as the central identity of the Word of God. Jesus Christ is God's action and revelation.³⁰ The humanity of God, Trinity, predestination, and creation all express the grace of God to human beings as the God who chooses eternally

23 Abineno, *Karl*, 55.

24 Abineno, *Karl*, 55.

25 Abineno, *Karl*, 56.

26 In 1939 Barth contributed an essay to *The Christian Century*, later published as K. Barth, *How I Changed My Mind* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1969). In this essay Barth mentioned that his book on Anselm is the point when he rid himself of the "remnants of philosophical.... foundation and exposition of Christian doctrine." Barth, *How*, 42-43. We can take Barth's report at face value, but a more critical analysis of the context shows that Barth might have had another purpose in doing this i.e. to distance himself from the Dialectical Theology Movement, as the movement moved in a different direction from his. Cf. McCormack, *Karl*, 434-441.

27 Abineno, *Karl*, 56.

28 Abineno, *Karl*, 58.

29 Abineno, *Karl*, 59.

30 Abineno, *Karl*, 61.

to be with humanity. Abineno expresses the love of God by quoting Angelus Silesius who wrote, "I know, that God without me will not live: if I do not exist, God will immediately die."³¹

The contour of Barth's theology, in Abineno's view, is dialectical; it shapes the relationship between the Word of God and human beings.³² Modernity understands that human beings cannot have knowledge of God, but humans talk about God and desire to know something about God.³³ Abineno argues that Barth holds both views, and in the dialectic, gives glory to God. Barth's dialectic is not an invention but follows previous theologians, e.g., Luther's *simul iustus et peccator*. It also reflects the dialectic of human life. As such, Barth's dialectic is not a theological game but an attempt to highlight the problem of theological language. According to Abineno, dialectic is not an inherent quality of the truth or of God's essence; but, because dialectic is the inner quality of human life, theology as a human endeavor, must express itself in a dialectical form.³⁴

The Indonesian theological community misses an important opportunity because Abineno does not engage in a critical conversation with Barth's theology. His modest purpose to introduce Barth as a theologian and church leader costs us a rare opportunity of conversation between two theologians from two different continents. His book serves as an introductory text for those who have an interest in Karl Barth. Barth is portrayed as a model theologian who combines creative innovation and critical faithfulness to the church tradition. However, the book lacks clear references to the source he cites, and Abineno is not always clear in relation to important concepts in Barth's theology. In several cases, we can detect instances of misreading in Abineno's exposition.³⁵

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31 Abineno, *Karl*, 63. Interestingly, in K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1 (London, New York: T&T Clark, 1957), 281-283, Barth's tone to Silesius's *Cherubinischer Wandersmann* is negative. Barth sees in Silesius's poem a concept of love that in fact contradicts the freedom of God's love. God's love does not depend on human existence but expresses the freedom of God in His decision to be God for human beings. In this case, Abineno's use of Silesius is a misreading.

32 Abineno, *Karl*, 71.

33 Abineno, *Karl*, 71.

34 Abineno, *Karl*, 74. Abineno mentions about the change of tone in Barth's dialectics but does not provide further explanation of this observation.

35 See n. 27. Abineno suggests that between *CD* I/1 and I/2, Barth changed his mind in relation to Philosophy. From Barth's own biographical explanation, this change took place between the publications of *Christian Dogmatics* and *Church Dogmatics*. See K. Barth, *How I Changed My Mind*, 42-44. Even in this regard, Barth's explanation is not always reliable. Barth has a tendency to overstate his change on the occasion of publishing a new book e.g. in his preface to *Römerbrief*, 2nd edition, see *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans.

While Abineno mentions Barth's important reflection on Christology, election, Trinity, and creation, these themes remain thinly explored. One wonders, after reading Abineno's exposition, in what way Barth's theology is truly unique. The only exception is Abineno's explanation of dialectic that introduces the basic concept of Barth's dialectical approach. Even in this regard, the meaning of dialectic lacks clear distinction between a dialectic of the thinking and of the subject matter. In the end, Abineno's book has not yet exemplified a serious and careful reading of *Church Dogmatics*, and may contribute only little to further engagement with Barth's theology.

Yakub B. Susabda

In turning to the next theologian, we enter into a conversation with Indonesian theologians who are less sympathetic to Barth's theology.³⁶ Yakub Susabda was the president of Indonesia Reformed Theological Seminary where he currently lectures on Systematic Theology, Practical Theology and Counseling. In 1990, he wrote a book on Modern Theology in which one chapter discusses Karl Barth's theology from a Reformed point of view.³⁷ Although the chapter is rife with historical inaccuracies,³⁸ nevertheless it provides a theological engagement with Barth that represents one direction in the current conversation of the Indonesian theological community.

After a short note on Barth's biography, Susabda begins his discussion with a bold claim that Barth's version of "neo-orthodoxy" is the most dangerous form of theological thinking.³⁹ Barth uses words from Reformed theology, but their meanings are very different. This makes Barth's theology deceptive and defective. Susabda's reading looks firstly at Barth's mature lectures in *Evangelical*

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E.C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 2-3. In this case, his remarks on the publication of *Church Dogmatics* and the discontinuity with *Christian Dogmatics* cannot be taken at face value. See *CD* I/1, xix-xxv. Cf. McCormack, *Karl*, 441-48.

36 Yakub Susabda was graduated from Jakarta Theological Seminary in 1971.

37 Y.B. Susabda, *Teologi Modern I* (Jakarta: LRII, 1993), 79-114.

38 E.g. Friedrich Barth was fired from his job on 1832 because of being drunk, 24 years before his birth in 1856, Susabda, *Teologi*, 79. Barth studied with William Hermann in Berlin, not in Marburg, Susabda, *Teologi*, 79. Barth wrote *Römerbrief* in 1916, while the first edition was published 1919 (although historically the copy was available on December 1918). Barth had two sons, while in reality Barth had four sons, Susabda, *Teologi*, 80. These are interesting inaccuracies since in 1976 a standard account of Barth's life and works had been published in English, i.e. E. Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976).

39 Susabda, *Teologi*, 81.

Theology.⁴⁰ He warns against the adjective 'evangelical', in that it can give a false impression.⁴¹ Barth's theology is not evangelical at all, or if it is, its substance is defective. Barth, rather, advocates a form of "catholic ecumenical continuity and unity."⁴² Furthermore, Barth is dangerous because he teaches a form of religious pluralism in which God is present in every belief and worldview,⁴³ i.e., God's presence is substantial in the beliefs of major world religions,⁴⁴ so that the uniqueness of Christian theology becomes very thin. Its truth relies on the work of the Holy Spirit. Theology does not find truth in a theological system nor doctrinal formulation. If it is unique at all, it is simply because it is different from other religions in degree but not in kind.⁴⁵ Susabda particularly worries about Barth's presentation of God's freedom which results in the loss of any meaning for theological propositions. In Barth's theology, God's historical action in Jesus Christ cannot guarantee the truth of theology. As such, the Bible is not a trustworthy assurance of Christian truth, not to mention Christian salvation.⁴⁶

Susabda argues that Barth's theology is shaped mostly by his experiences. In his (mis)reading of Barth's theological development, he conflates Eberhard Jüngel's exposition of the early/liberal and the dialectical Barth into his construction of Barth's theology.⁴⁷ This creates an odd picture of Barth who believes in two contradictory convictions, i.e., the God who embraces social realities and the God who negates human history. Susabda argues that Barth refuses the historical foundation of the Word of God,⁴⁸ but simultaneously, relies on his experiences and social situations. In his estimation, for Barth, the Bible is not the Word of God, at least not in a meaningful sense.⁴⁹ The Bible

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40 K. Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963).

41 On the other hand, "Evangelische" should be translated as Protestant rather than evangelical, which in German is "evangelikal". Susabda's comment shows that the ambivalent meaning of *Evangelische* in the English translation is not noted.

42 Susabda, *Teologi*, 84.

43 Susabda, *Teologi*, 82.

44 Susabda, *Teologi*, 83.

45 Susabda, *Teologi*, 83.

46 Susabda, *Teologi*, 87-88. Susabda's criticism at this point is driven by a concern of the implications of Barth's theology for soteriology.

47 Susabda, *Teologi*, 89. Cf. E. Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, trans. G.E. Paul (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 28-33.

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48 Susabda, *Teologi*, 89-90. Apparently, Susabda does not connect Barth's critical attitude toward natural theology to his interpretation of Barth's theology.

49 Susabda, *Teologi*, 92.

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only contains the Word of God, i.e., human witnesses of God's revelation. It is not inspired, and its authenticity depends on the personal experience of its readers.⁵⁰ The freedom of God in revelation implies that the Bible cannot guarantee any truth claim.⁵¹ For him, Barth advocates a form of mysticism in which God's revelation is a subjective event in the human's encounter with God.⁵²

The picture of Barth as a "neo-orthodox" theologian, who re-interprets orthodox doctrines to mean something else, is quite common among evangelicals in Indonesia. Apparently, Barth's actualism is not clearly understood enough, not to mention the reasons for Barth constructing such an approach in relation to Kantian challenges to modern theology.⁵³ Barth is a subjectivist who pneumatologically constructs Christian doctrines but in ways that undermine Reformed convictions. Susabda's interpretation, however, lacks basic understanding of Barth's theology, not to mention Barth's theological ontology, i.e., being-in-becoming, and the way doctrines inform ontology in Barth's later theology. Thus, Susabda's exposition lacks any meaningful conversation with Barth's doctrine of Scripture. Susabda, and those who follow his interpretation, engage with a strawman version of Barth's theology, which is misplaced and misinformed, because it lacks real conversation but offers many accusations. Barth is labeled a liberal, dialectical, orthodox, subjectivist and Roman Catholic, but in a pejorative sense of these words. Barth may agree with these labels, but in ways that articulate the best of the adjectives. Susabda's main intention is to warn evangelical readers of the danger of Barth's theology and to reaffirm the truth of the Reformed tradition, but in so doing, he fails to recognize an important conversation partner and missed the opportunity for a creative exchange with one of the most insightful twentieth-century Reformed theologians.⁵⁴ The only plea that we can give to this kind of reading is this: read Barth again, and read his theology with an evangelical charity. Although not

50 Susabda, *Teologi*, 95.

51 Susabda, *Teologi*, 99.

52 Susabda, *Teologi*, 100.

53 Two important books that may help in this regard are Hunsinger, *How*, 3-23; McCormack, *Karl*, 337-46. But see also K.J. Vanhoozer, "A Person of the Book? Barth on Biblical Authority and Interpretation," in *Karl Barth and Evangelical Theology: Convergences and Divergences*, ed. S.W. Chung (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2006), 26-59.

54 Among evangelical theologians who genuinely engage Barth with differing conclusions see, e.g., G.C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956); B.L. Ramm, *After Fundamentalism. The Future of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983); D.G. Bloesch, *The Evangelical Renaissance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973). See also the collection of articles in D. Gibson, *Engaging with Barth: Contemporary Evangelical Critiques* (London: T&T Clark, 2009); B.L. McCormack

all his theology concurs with the evangelical tradition, he has much to offer in the re-interpretation of the Reformed faith under the conditions of modernity.

Stephen Tong

Regarding Stephen Tong, we must first mention that he has not written anything substantial on Karl Barth's theology.⁵⁵ Stephen Tong, however, is a prominent figure among evangelical theologians and preachers in Indonesia. He holds an honorary doctorate from Westminster Theological Seminary, and as more important to our discussion, his view of various theological issues, and in our case Karl Barth, continues to play a significant role among evangelicals in Indonesia. In 1985, he introduced the translation of Harvie M. Conn's *Contemporary World Theology*, as reading material for his lectures in an evangelical seminary.⁵⁶ The book reached not only theological students but also popular readers, and still contributes to shape a public perception of Barth's theology among evangelicals. In the introduction, he mentions that the book is his reference of choice to explain clearly and accurately various contemporary theologies to seminary students, including Barth's theology (discussed in two chapters).⁵⁷ In his view, Barth understands that revelation is the key to know God.⁵⁸ Barth's theology, however, is under the influence of Kierkegaard and fails to provide a proper defense of theology against modern philosophy.⁵⁹ As such, the attempt to return to the Bible was not complete, and since Barth, the development of modern theology continues to go further away from true biblical authority.⁶⁰

Since Tong only endorsed and did not write the book, we will only provide a short summary of Conn's criticisms. In chapters 2 and 3, Conn follows Van Til's evaluation in viewing Barth's theology as a form of new modernism that follows the concept of liberal naturalism and rejects the inerrancy of the Bible.⁶¹

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and C.B. Anderson (eds.), *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

55 Most literature under his name are transcripts of his lectures and preaching.

56 H.M. Conn, *Teologia Kontemporer; Prakata: Stephen Tong* (Malang: Seminari Alkitab Asia Tenggara, 1988).

57 Conn, *Teologia*, 6.

58 Conn, *Teologia*, 6.

59 Conn, *Teologia*, 6.

60 Conn, *Teologia*, 6.

61 Conn, *Teologia*, 28. "Naturalistic liberal" is a very loaded concept, and I wonder whether it helps constructively, or rather misleads its readers to judge Barth before reaching an adequate understanding.

Barth's theology of revelation is very subjective,⁶² and its dialectic destroys the truth of the Gospel.⁶³ Since God is portrayed as "the absolutely wholly other", there is no direct knowledge of God, and in that regard there is no true knowledge of God except in the form of paradoxical propositions.⁶⁴ Furthermore, since Barth divides history into *Historie* and *Geschichte*, and places the resurrection of Jesus in the sphere of *Geschichte*, he undermines the historical root of Christianity.⁶⁵ Conn laments the fact that Barth's theological errors have influenced many theologians to repeat the same mistakes by following the direction of the Enlightenment project and its anthropocentric thinking.⁶⁶ Further criticisms of Barth include his dependence on existentialism, his redefinitions of various traditional doctrines to suit existential meanings, his rejection of general revelation, his affirmation of God's passibility and his soteriological innovation as a form of incipient universalism.⁶⁷ The criticisms listed are not difficult to find in discussions on Barth's theology among Indonesian theologians. In fact, it permeates a public understanding of Karl Barth's theology.

Reading this small book incites a similar feeling to Susabda's representation. There are plenty of misunderstandings in such short expositions. Unfortunately, for Barth's reception in Indonesia, this (mis)representation only discourages further theological students from reading Barth's texts. The book provides little understanding of Barth's theological development, particularly the gradual changes that took place between *Römerbrief* and *Church Dogmatics* I and II, and further developments from *Church Dogmatics* II to IV. To make matters worse, Tong and Conn are second-hand readers who reduce further Barth's theology from Van Til's misrepresentation. For Reformed students this book is something that one needs to overcome to begin a meaningful understanding of Barth's theology. It is high time for evangelical scholars in Indonesia to write a proper introduction to Barth's theology. This will fill a great hole in evangelical theological scholarship in Indonesia.

62 Conn, *Teologia*, 28.

63 Conn, *Teologia*, 29.

64 Conn, *Teologia*, 29.

65 Conn, *Teologia*, 29.

66 Conn, *Teologia*, 30.

67 Conn, *Teologia*, 36-38.

Evaluation

From previous expositions, readings of Barth's theology in Indonesia are marked by various degrees of misunderstanding. To have a meaningful conversation with Barth we need to read and re-read his theology before aligning our horizon to his. Among the directions that need reconsideration is the assessment that Barth's primary contribution lies in his theological method. While Barth has much to say on this, the preoccupation with his method may eclipse the most impressive and creative aspect of his theology, namely the material exposition of dogmatic content. In our view, Barth's theological method is secondary to material theological explorations. His theological method has a quality of flexibility that is adaptive to the subject matter of his dogmatics such that the formulation of method should not allure us to think his *ad hoc* remarks are taken from an established theological method. His material dogmatics, on the other hand, read traditional doctrines in ways that are exceptionally profound and invites our response as we ask the same questions in our particular context. We contend that this is where his most important contribution lies.

Second, Indonesian theologians need to clarify misconceptions about his dialectical theology. For many readers in Indonesia, Barth's dialectic only has a single meaning, i.e., a theological method that places a theological statement (thesis) side by side with its opposite (antithesis) without resolving into a higher synthesis (in distinction to Hegel's dialectic). But Barth has various forms of dialectic that need careful attention.⁶⁸ We can differentiate, at least, between dialectical method (*Denkform*), i.e., noetic, and the dialectical quality of theology's subject matter (*Realdialektik*), i.e., ontic. We must also differentiate his *Realdialektik* in various writings, i.e., the dialectic between eschatological revelation and the historical life of Jesus, and the dialectic between eschatological humanity and historical humanity, both of which are shaped by the dialectic of time and eternity.⁶⁹ Furthermore, Barth also mentions the dialectic of life in which human existence has two sides that exist side by side (e.g., joy and

68 Barth's dialectics is explored in detail in M. Beintker, *Die Dialektik in Der "Dialektischen Theologie" Karl Barths: Studien Zur Entwicklung Der Barthschen Theologie Und Zur Vorgeschichte Der "Kirchlichen Dogmatik"* (München: C. Kaiser, 1987), 256-79. Cf. McCormack, *Karl*, 10-12. In this regard we can differentiate four kind of dialectics in Barth's theology i.e. dialectics as a form of thinking, dialectics of subject matter in relation to the historical and eschatological reality of Jesus Christ, dialectics between historical and eschatological humanity, and dialectics of human existential experience.

69 See further explanation in Beintker, *Dialektik*, 31-40; McCormack, *Karl*, 11.

sadness, happiness and suffering).⁷⁰ As such, dialectic can be a slippery term if one thinks that Barth's dialectic is solely *Denkform* (form-of-thinking) without an adequate understanding of Barth's innovative use of the concept.

Third, Indonesian theologians need clarification on Barth's theology of the Word. The concentration on the Word of God as an actual event in Barth's earlier theology may eclipse his later account on the history of revelation in Jesus Christ. The discontinuity between the Bible and the event of the Word of God is emphasised so strongly that the continuity between the Bible and God's revelation is hidden from sight. This misconception stems from the common (mis)reading that stops at CD I, and in some cases CD II. The real elaboration of this relationship finds its exposition in CD IV, in Barth's reformulation of Christology from the point of view of the doctrine of reconciliation. For Barth, the Bible is the Word of God, and at the same time becomes the Word of God in the event of revelation. This double concept is bound by the faithfulness and love of God, who decides to be with humanity in the election of Jesus Christ. The history of Jesus Christ, which has its origin in eternity, assures the communicative presence of God in and through the Bible. This theological construct offers an insightful point of reference for churches in Indonesia that attempt to find a new way of formulating the meaning of Scripture and the role of preaching in the life of their community.

Nevertheless, there are signs of hope, both from the mainstream and the evangelical traditions, in their readings of Barth. In 2001, Ebenhaizer I.N. Timo produced a dissertation in Kampen University entitled, *The Eschatological Dimension in Karl Barth's Thinking and Speaking about the Future: the Role of the Trinitarian Dogma in Church Dogmatics*. In this work Timo performs a perceptive interpretation of *Church Dogmatics* and argues that Trinity is the central motif in Barth's material and formal theological explication.⁷¹ Some of the insights from the study have been included in his recent publications, and his unique interpretation of Barth's Trinitarian theology as God's triple self-repetition is introduced in the local publication.⁷² From the evangelical camp, a doctoral dissertation by Andreas Himawan Lo, *Revelation and Religion in the Theology of Karl Barth and the Second Vatican Council*, was submitted to Trinity Theological College, Singapore in 2010. Lo's study is particularly insightful in

70 McCormack, *Karl*, 11.

71 Timo, *Eschatological*, 387.

72 Inter alia, E.I.N. Timo, *Allah yang Mengulang Dirinya Tiga Kali* (Salatiga: Satya Wacana University Press, 2013); and also his earlier work E.I.N. Timo, *Aku Memahami yang Aku Imani* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2009).

his attempt to move beyond Barth to engage religious pluralism in Indonesia.⁷³ Lo explores the way in which a reformed theology can be more affirmative to the truth in other religions. Unfortunately these doctoral dissertations are not yet available in Indonesia, and have not reached public attention. The only exception is E. Gerrit Singgih's article, "Towards a Postcolonial Interpretation of Romans 13:1-7: Karl Barth, Robert Jewett and the Context of Reformation in Present-Day Indonesia," published in *The Asia Journal of Theology* in 2009. In this article Singgih discusses the insights of Barth's dialectical interpretation of Romans 13:1-7 in the context of Indonesia's politics. All these works are signs of hope that the reading of Barth in Indonesia may at last result in a fruitful theological engagement. However more work needs to be done in clearing the space for a discussion that is truly critical and contextual in the local context.⁷⁴

Conclusion: Prospect

As the conclusion, we offer several proposals for ways of fruitful engagement that can be carried out in an Indonesian context. The pride of place must be reserved for Barth's dogmatic material content. We contend that Barth's explorations of the doctrines of Trinity, Christology, and election are among the best entry points for a constructive conversation in theology. There is, however, a need to tread cautiously. In the Indonesian context, with the challenges of poverty, injustice, religious intolerance, and political corruption, there is a temptation to cut short the route and look for the immediate relevance of his theology. But to proceed with a meaningful conversation requires a long route. The usual (or lazy) way of citing Barth's comments has the weakness of flattening out his theology and results in a superficial reflection. It has the characteristic of what Gadamer calls a premature fusion of horizons.⁷⁵ A recent article

73 Lo, *Revelation*, 2.

74 To date, to our knowledge, at least one Catholic theologian has also engaged Barth's theology in his discussion of modern Trinitarian theology, see N.S. Dister, *Teologi Sistemika-I* (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Kanisius, 2004), 164-171. Dister lists Karl Barth among those who propose *monopersonal* approach to Trinity in contrast to *tripersonal* approach.

75 In this regard, the study of Barth in Indonesia requires some good guides. Ideally, Indonesian theologians must write to fill such a need. I believe the best introduction for the Indonesian community must be written by Indonesian. However, to fill the vacuum some good introductions can serve in the meantime. Among the best that are available are: G. Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); E. Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976); J. Webster, *Barth* (London: Continuum, 2000);

by Glenn A. Chesnutt provides a constructive example of such patient fusion in which he employs Barth's exploration of covenant theology in Christian-Jewish relationship, and applies the principles to Christian-Islam dialogue.⁷⁶ Such an approach appreciates the complexity of the problem and the insights of Barth's theology.

Second, Barth can be a conversational partner in engaging religion and religious pluralism, particularly in a dialogue with Islam in Indonesia. There are at least two entry points to this path. Firstly, we propose that there are insights from his early exposition in *CD* 1/2 § 17 on the Sublimation (*Aufhebung*) of Religion. The German word "*Aufhebung*" has been mistranslated as abolition which creates a false impression that Barth places religion and revelation in an unqualified opposition.⁷⁷ The original German carries the notion of *sublimation* (to make sublime) which is more helpful in clarifying Barth's dialectics of negation and affirmation between revelation and religion. This word can be translated into the Indonesian word "sublimasi", which means in Bahasa (Indonesian language), "a change into something better." In this regard, religion is not abolished but sublimated in its encounter with God's revelation. Secondly, Barth's Christological concentration of election and reprobation can be an entry point in a theological conversation with Islam. Barth's theology of election contends that the decision of God to be the God for humanity absorbs God's rejection of sinful humanity in the reprobation of Jesus Christ. This form of mild "*apokatastasis*" can be a point of conversation with a version

14

E. Jüngel, *God's Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. John Webster (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001); McCormack, *Karl*.

76 G.A. Chestnutt, "Karl Barth and Islam," *Modern Theology* 28/2 (2012), 278-302. In 1997, a translation of Barth's select writings from K. Barth and C. Green (eds.), *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), was published in the Indonesian language, with a short introduction by Marie-Claire Barth. The collection contains a selection of Barth's basic theological corpus, including some excerpts from the *Church Dogmatics*. Among the texts are Barth's mature lecture "The Humanity of God" (1956), *Anselm: Fides Quarens Intellectum* (1931), "The Barmen Declaration" (1934), and "Christian Community and the Civil Community" (1946). The collection is intended to contribute to ecumenical conversation in Indonesia with a hope that local theologians may benefited from the text in the process of construing a contextual theology. The collection should provide ample materials to begin an engagement with Barth's thinking, but as we argue in this paper, this is not yet the case.

11

77 In this regard see a new translation of *CD* 1/2 §17 by G. Green in K. Barth, *On Religion: The Revelation of God as the Sublimation of Religion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), vii-ix.

of Islamic tradition on the final judgment which anticipates the cessation of divine punishment.⁷⁸

Third, the contribution of Barth's theological rationale. This can serve as a reparative logic to the way Indonesian theologians are doing theology. The main point of this proposal is Barth's application of Chalcedonian logic to theological thinking. We can see this in the formal construct of dialectical method. But more important is its reparative significance for theological logics rather than its methodological insights. In short, Barth's dialectics employs two distinct ideas as a pair rather than opposites, and relates the two in a way that maintains their distinction-in-relation. In this logic, for example, we see the pair of God and human in Christology as two aspects that should not be opposed, and yet, in its distinction is "unconfused, unchangeable, indivisible, inseparable," but united in the person of Jesus Christ. In contrast to the errant logics of heresy, it does not insist on the opposition between God and human, and between nature and grace, but rather offers a reparative reasoning that maintains distinction-in-relation.⁷⁹ We submit that we can observe the creative way the theological logics are employed in Barth's *Church Dogmatics* and retrieve its theological insights for our contextual explorations.

Fourth, Barth's thinking on church and society is another important resource for theological engagement. The Barmen Confession is still a potent document that shows how a political propaganda can contain "theological" claims that intrinsically oppose the fundamental reality of the Church as the creation of the Word of God.⁸⁰ We can also construct a local political theology by engaging his earlier lectures, e.g. "The Christian in Society" (1919), and his letters, such as the Letter to Joseph L. Hromádka,⁸¹ in which political-social crisis was responded to in a combination of courage and depth of theological statement. This is also an important area where his theology can be explored in the present political situation of Indonesia.

78 On Barth's view, see, e.g., CD II/2, 295, IV/3, 477-478. On Islamic view see, e.g., J.I. Smith and Y.Y. Haddad (eds.), *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 142-144; R.W. Gwynne, "Hell and Hellfire," in *Encyclopedia of Qur'an*, vol. 2, ed. Jane D. McAuliffe (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2002), 414-419.

79 Cf. N. Adams, *The Eclipse of Grace Divine and Human Action in Hegel* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), chapters 1 and 2.

80 G. Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 60.

81 The letter is reprinted in K. Barth, "Fürchtet Euch nicht!" in *Der Götze wackelt. Zeitkritische Aufsätze, Reden und Briefe von 1930 bis 1960*, ed. Karl Kupisch (Berlin: Käthe Vogt, 1961), 157-157. See also K. Barth, *A Letter to Great Britain from Switzerland* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004).

Fifth, Indonesian theologians need to reconsider the fact that Barth is a passionate reader of Scripture. There is a growing discussion on this in Barth scholarship, but it is relatively unexplored in Indonesia.⁸² In this regard, we need to remember that Barth was once a professor of New Testament Exegesis in Münster, and informally a lecturer of New Testament exegesis in Göttingen, Bonn and Basel. More importantly, *Church Dogmatics* is an expanded theological reflection on various parts of the Bible. Barth's theological exegesis is a growing theme and can be engaged in as a constructive contribution for theological interpretation in Indonesia.

It is congenial to conclude this article with Barth's greeting to South East Asia theologians. Barth encourages us to engage with his theology in order to be contextual and ecumenical. In his greeting to South East Asian theologians Barth mentions these two principles. Barth says that we have to do theology, "in our own words and thoughts, concepts and ways".⁸³ With or without his theology, theologians must be open, free, and brave to engage the burning questions of the day, and he adds, "in the freedom which is given and allowed to us" and in accordance to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.⁸⁴ Second, it must be ecumenical, in the sense that although Indonesian theologians explore their own ways and with their own insights, theology discusses the same subject matter that is also in the Old and New Testament, in a conversation with brothers and sisters, including Roman Catholic theologians. We submit that these two concerns, contextual and yet ecumenical, and ecumenical and yet contextual, are the best ways to engage his theology, and the way theology can be simultaneously conversant and authentic. We submit that this way of doing theology is thrilling and exciting, as Barth said in his greetings, "No boring theology!"

82 But see Singgih, "Towards". Barth's contribution to theological interpretation has spurred many conversations. In 2015, the Princeton Annual Conference on Barth took the theme, Karl Barth and the Gospels: Interpreting Gospel Text. In the same year, the University of St Andrews held a day conference on Barth and Exegesis. See also, inter alia, G. Hunsinger, *Thy Word Is Truth. Barth on Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012); D. Wood, *Barth's Theology of Interpretation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); F. Watson, "Barth's *Philippians* as Theological Exegesis," in *Epistle to the Philippians*, ed. K. Barth (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002); R.E. Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001).

83 Barth, "No," 5.

84 Barth, "No," 5.

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