



# Exploring the Intersection: Process Theology and Karl Barth's Theology

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## Abstract

A study of process theology from the perspective of Karl Barth's theology. This study aims to analyze process theology through the perspective of Karl Barth's theology. To find the meeting point and separation point of process theology with Barth's theology, a literature study is conducted to get answers to the questions: (i) What are the similarities between the thoughts of Barth and Whitehead? (ii) What distinguishes Barth's theology from Whitehead's theory among these similarities? (iii) How can process theology and Barth's theology benefit and challenge each other? The results of this literature study can: (i) Respond to both theologies based on God's Word, (ii) Understand the similarities and differences between Barth's and Whitehead's thoughts as well as their meeting and separation points. All of this must be accompanied by humility and a continuous search to understand His will.

**Keywords:** Process Theology, Karl Barth's Theology, Transcendent.

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## INTRODUCTION

Process Theology and Karl Barth's Theology are two very different approaches to understanding God and His relationship with the world.<sup>1,2</sup> Process Theology, developed by Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, views God as an entity dynamically involved in the processes of the world and history.<sup>3</sup> They propose a view of God that is

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<sup>1</sup> Roger E. Olson, *Theology of the 20th Century: A History of Christian Thought in the Twentieth Century* (denver seminary, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Philip L. Quinn Charles Taliaferro, Paul Draper, *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444320152>.

<sup>3</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality" and Essay and Cosmology, 1927-28* (New Work, n.d.).

neither static nor separate from the world, but rather in process along with His creation.<sup>4</sup> God in process theology is dynamically involved in the world, and even undergoes change. In contrast, Karl Barth's theology emphasizes that God is completely transcendent and can only be known through His revelation, particularly in Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup> Karl Barth, who is one of the leading figures in the Reformed theological tradition, emphasized that God is transcendent and absolute, and that the relationship between God and humans is established only through revelation that cannot be fully understood by human reason. Barth argued that knowledge of God comes entirely from God's revelation, and not from worldly processes. Knowledge of God can only be obtained through His Revelation given in Jesus Christ, and not through earthly experiences or processes. God is unchanging, and the world does not affect God. God is the source of all things, and the world cannot change the nature of God. God can only be known through absolute divine Revelation.<sup>6</sup>

This study aims to analyze the meeting points and the dividing points between these two theological views by conducting a literature study to be able to answer the questions: (i) What kinds of similarities appear between the thoughts of Barth and Whitehead? (ii) What distinguishes Barth's theology from Whitehead's theory among these similarities? (iii) How can process theology and Barth's theology benefit and challenge each other?

Karl Barth defined "natural theology" as any approach to dogmatics that makes claims about God based on explanations of divine revelation other than God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Barth's crisis theology makes natural theology impossible because there is no unity between God and humanity other than the unity that God establishes in and through the risen Christ, who at all times remains outside of created history. He believed that the only unity between God and humanity is the saving unity that God establishes in Christ and the Spirit; and because of the effects of sin, human beings lack the capacity to know God rightly without God's saving grace in Christ and the Spirit. In order for Barth's

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<sup>4</sup> John B. Cobb Jr. and David Ray Griffin., *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (paperback, 1976).

<sup>5</sup> Roger E. Olson, *Theology of the 20th Century: A History of Christian Thought in the Twentieth Century*" (Denver Seminary, n.d.).

<sup>6</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Study Edition: The Doctrine of Reconciliation IV*. (Princeton Theological Seminary, 1936).

claim regarding the analogy of faith and participation in Christ to succeed, he must presuppose the existence analogy between God and human beings already exists.<sup>7</sup>

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Responding to the Two Theologies Based on God's Word**

While there are significant differences, we can see that these two views are not entirely contradictory, but rather can be seen as complementary perspectives. Process theology provides a view of God living and in process with the world, while Barth's theology reminds us of God's greatness and glory that we cannot control or fully understand.<sup>8</sup> Based on God's word, we can accept both with a humble attitude, recognizing that we know God only within the limits of His given revelation. Scriptures that support the acceptance of both, Philippians 2:6-11, Christ as God's fully sovereign revelation and Romans 11:33-36, God's unsearchable wisdom and sovereignty, Genesis 1:31, God is active in creation and His world.<sup>9</sup>

### **Similarities between Barth and Whitehead's Thought**

While the theology of Karl Barth and Process Theology (Whitehead) are very different in many aspects, there are some apparent similarities between them in the way they understand God's relationship with the world and human existence in creation. Here are some similarities that can be found between the thoughts of Karl Barth and Alfred North Whitehead (Process Theology)<sup>10</sup>

### ***God's Involvement in the World***

Barth and Whitehead agree that God cannot be regarded as distant or uninvolved in the world. Although in different ways, both emphasize that God has a significant and active relationship with His created world. Whitehead, in his process theology, emphasizes that God is involved in the world through an ever-evolving process, allowing creation to develop and grow. Barth, while emphasizing God's transcendence, also

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<sup>7</sup> Keith L. Johnson, "Barth on Natural Theology." in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth: Barth in Dialogue*, (Wiley, 1990), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119156574.ch8>.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce G. Epperly, *Process Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Paperback, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> John B. Cobb Jr. and David Ray Griffin., *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Louisville: The Westminster Press, 1976). (Paperback, 1976).

<sup>10</sup> Karl Barth, *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

recognized that God relates to the world through His revelation, which is primarily embodied in Jesus Christ. God does not merely "observe" the world but actively communicates and interacts through the revelation given to humanity.<sup>11</sup>

Both recognize that the relationship between God and the world is dynamic and not static. This means that God interacts with the world in a living and continuous way. Whitehead sees God as a "Thinker" who directs the world's processes towards betterment, whereas Barth emphasizes that God communicates through dynamic revelation, especially in the incarnation of Christ. Both, in different ways, emphasize that God is not outside the world, but is actively involved in the process of history and the life of humanity.<sup>12</sup>

### ***The Concept of Man's Inability to Fully Understand God***

Barth and Whitehead both recognized the limitations of human understanding of God. In Barth's theology, this lies in the belief that humans cannot know God directly except through His revelation (particularly in Jesus Christ). Whitehead also sees God as something that is not fully comprehensible to humans. He described God as an entity that transcends humanity's ability to fully understand Him, although we can come to know God through the experience of the world and the processes that exist within it. Both emphasized that human understanding of God cannot be based solely on ratios or worldly experience, but must be recognized as limited and dependent on greater divine revelation or experience.<sup>13</sup>

### **God as the Source and Goal of All Processes**

Whitehead saw God as the source and ultimate goal of the world process. God not only initiates the process of creation but also directs it towards a specific goal. The world, according to Whitehead, is an evolving process towards goodness, guided by God. Barth, while emphasizing God's transcendence, also views God as the source of all things, and the world as moving towards the fulfillment of His plan. In this regard, Barth emphasized

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<sup>11</sup> Karl Barth, *A Theological Introduction* (London: John Webster, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Mark Sultana, "Imagination in Philosophy and Theology," 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Javier Monserrat and Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, "Alfred N. Whitehead on Process Philosophy and Theology Cosmos and Kenosis of Divinity" 64 (n.d.): 815-45.

that God is the center of all earthly activity and salvation history, which will find its goal in the completion of salvation through Christ.<sup>14</sup>

### **Understanding of Kindness and Directed Existence**

In Whitehead's process theology, the world is considered to be constantly evolving towards "goodness" or perfection. Although the world is full of change and a free process, God acts as a leader who directs it towards a better goal. In Barth's theology, despite more emphasis on God's absoluteness and transcendence, God is still seen as sovereign in history and His plan of salvation. God not only created the world but also preserves and directs it towards His perfect completion in Christ. Both thoughts recognize that there is a greater and better purpose in motion in this world, and God plays an active role in leading the world towards goodness and completion.<sup>15</sup>

### **The difference between Barth and Whitehead's theology.**

#### ***Views on God's Transcendence***

Barth emphasized God's absolute transcendence. God is completely separate and distinct from His creation. For Barth, God cannot be understood or controlled by the world or humans. God can only be known through His given revelation, especially in Jesus Christ. In Barth's view, although God is involved with the world, His involvement does not diminish His transcendent absoluteness and glory. In contrast, Whitehead views God as not only transcendent but also immanent in the world. For Whitehead, God is not separate from the world, but proceeds together with the world, interacting with His creation in a dynamic and changing way. God, in Whitehead's view, is an entity actively involved in the processes of the world and bound up with the history and development of the world. In this sense, God is not only separate from and independent of the world, but is also involved in the development of His creation.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* Published online: September 2, 2009 Published in print: September 27, 2007 ).

<sup>15</sup> javier Monserrat. "Alfred N. Whitehead on Process Philosophy and Theology." *Cosmos and Kenosis of Divinity* 64 (n.d.): 815-45.

<sup>16</sup> John B. Cobb Jr. and David Ray Griffin: *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (paperback, 1976).

### ***Understanding God's Power and Sovereignty***

For Barth, God is absolutely sovereign. God's power is not dependent on the world or world processes. God has complete control over history, and everything in this creation moves according to His perfect plan and purpose. Thus, even though the world is in process and constantly evolving, God remains in full control of history and the salvation of mankind. Whereas in process theology, God is seen more as a guide and source of potential in a free world. God has a role in directing the process, but creation and the world have the freedom to act and develop. The world and creation are free to determine their own path, and God influences but does not force the outcome. In this sense, Whitehead regards God more as a guiding leader than as an entity in absolute control of the world.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Concept of Freedom of Creation***

Barth considered that man and the world do not have true freedom without limits. The freedom that exists in this world is always within limitations and in relation to the will of God. God's will is what determines history, and the world cannot function without submitting to His absolute sovereignty. As such, human freedom is always within the scope and purpose set by God. Whitehead, on the other hand, emphasized that creation has true freedom to evolve. The world and everything in it moves through a creative process, in which God gives impetus and possibility, but creation also has the freedom to interact with God and determine its own path. Freedom in Process Theology is more open-ended, as creation plays an active role in determining the direction of the historical process and the development of the world.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Views on Revelation***

Barth taught that God can only be known through His revelation, especially in Christ. Revelation is the only way for humans to know God authentically. In Barth's view, God reveals Himself completely and finally in Christ, and knowledge of God is only possible through this revelation, not through human experience or rational reflection

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<sup>17</sup> John Goldingay, "Old Testament Theology: Israel's Gospel," *Paperback - Englist 1* (2024).

<sup>18</sup> David Ray Griffin, *NWhitehead's Radically Different Postmodern Philosophy An Argument for Its Contemporary Relevance Subjects: Philosophy Series: SUNY Series in Philosophy* (Paperback- English, 2008).

alone. Whereas Whitehead, while accepting that God communicates with creation, does not emphasize revelation centered on a single event or figure such as Christ in the way Barth does. Revelation for Whitehead is more dynamic and processual, with God interacting with the world throughout history, encouraging and directing creation towards a better purpose. For Whitehead, revelation is not something that comes only once in a single figure or event, but rather a process that takes place over time, where the world and God continue to interact with each other.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Views on Salvation and the End of the World***

Barth saw salvation as a final goal determined by God. The entire world and the history of mankind are moving toward the final, absolute salvation that comes through the work of Christ. This salvation is a completely transcendent work of God, and the world will be completed in full accordance with the purpose set by God. Whereas Whitehead, while believing in a good end for the world, does not emphasize salvation as a final end that is fully determined or accepted in an absolute way. For Whitehead, the world is constantly progressing towards good, but perfection or absolute completion is not something that is necessarily achieved. The world moves towards the best possible outcome, but the development of the world is a process that cannot be fully predicted.<sup>1920</sup>

### **Process Theology and Barth Theology Benefit and Challenge Each Other**

Process Theology and Karl Barth's Theology have significant differences, but they can also be mutually beneficial and challenging if viewed constructively. Differences in views of God's transcendence and immanence, as well as understandings of human freedom and God's relationship to the world, offer opportunities to enrich our understanding of God and the world. Here are some ways in which these two theologies can benefit and challenge each other:<sup>19</sup>

### ***Benefit Each Other***

Process theology encourages more active engagement. In the world of Process Theology, it sees God as deeply involved in the world, not just as a distant ruler who rules

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<sup>19</sup> Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics Study Edition: The Doctrine of Reconciliation IV. (Princeton Theological Seminary, 1936).

<sup>20</sup> Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics Study Edition: The Doctrine of Reconciliation IV. (Princeton Theological Seminary, 1936).

from above, but as a leader who actively participates in the development of this world. God not only creates the world but is involved in the process of the ever-evolving world. Barth's theology, often criticized for its heavy emphasis on the transcendence and absoluteness of God, could be expanded by paying more attention to how God is actively at work in the history of this world.<sup>21</sup> By challenging an overly transcendent understanding, process theology could inspire Barthians to pay more attention to how God is at work in the everyday lives of his people. Barth's theology challenges an overly "human-centered" understanding. Process Theology focuses on the freedom of creation and the dynamic relationship between God and the world, but this can sometimes lead to a more humanistic understanding or an over-reliance on human experience. Barth's theology can provide a balance by emphasizing that although the world is moving towards goodness, God's actions and will are primary and determine the course of salvation.

Barth reminds us that God's revelation is what shapes our understanding of the world and should not depend entirely on worldly experience or human freedom, which can risk being misleading if overemphasized. Barth's theology deepens the understanding of God's sovereignty. Barth's theology clearly emphasizes God's absolute sovereignty and is not limited by the world. This is important to remind us that even though the world processes and changes, God still has absolute control over history and creation. Process theology, while emphasizing the freedom of creation, can enrich our understanding of how God's sovereignty remains relevant in a free and evolving world. God, while not imposing His will, remains sovereign and directs the world towards His purposes.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Challenging Each Other***

Process theology challenges the enclosure and transcendence of God in Barth's theology, Barth strongly emphasized God's absolute transcendence. For Barth, God is completely outside of creation and can only be known through His revelation, particularly

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<sup>21</sup> and Kenneth Keathley Daniel L. Akin, Bruce Riley Ashford, *A Theology for the Church, Revised Edition*, 2014.

<sup>22</sup> John B. Cobb Jr. David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (paperback English, 1976).

in Christ. This could lead to a more static and limited understanding of God's relationship with the world.

Process Theology challenges this view by emphasizing that God should be seen more as an immanent entity involved in the processes of the world. God, according to Whitehead, is an integral part of any creative process and relates to the world in a more dynamic way. Process Theology encourages Barthians to reconsider the limits of God's absolute transcendence.

Barth's theology challenges the excess of human freedom in process theology. Process theology gives creation and humanity enormous freedom to act in the process of the world. The world is regarded as a space for creation to grow and develop towards goodness.

Barth's theology can challenge process theology by warning that human freedom and the world remain under God's control. The freedom of creation cannot be viewed without recognition of God's sovereignty. Barth's theology reminds us that human freedom must still be recognized in the context of God's greater will and purpose, not as absolute freedom apart from God.

Process Theology challenges the view of Christ as the only way of Revelation in Barth Theology. Barth's theology focuses heavily on Christ as the only complete revelation of God, where salvation comes through the work of Christ. This can make Barth's view too exclusive if not explained in more depth.

Process Theology encourages the recognition that God not only works in Christ, but also works in the whole of creation through broader historical processes. Although Whitehead did not emphasize Christ specifically, his more inclusive view of revelation could have enriched the Barthian understanding of how God communicates with the world in diverse ways.<sup>23</sup>

### **Constructive Synergy**

The combination of process theology and Barth's theology can provide a fuller insight into the relationship between God and the world. Process theology can expand Barthian understanding by adding a processual and interactive dimension to earthly life,

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<sup>23</sup> Alfred North Whiteheads, *Process and Reality*, 1920.

while Barth's theology enriches process theology by emphasizing God's sovereignty and clear revelation in Christ.

Process theology could place a stronger emphasis on God's dynamic relationship with the world and humanity's active role in creation. Barth's theology, with its emphasis on revelation in Christ and salvation through a transcendent God, could challenge the potential for over-humanization in Process Theology. If the two are viewed together, they can counterbalance each other, providing a more balanced perspective between transcendence and immanence, sovereignty and freedom, and revelation and process.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Meeting Point***

Both theologies recognize that God is transcendent. In Process Theology, God is seen as supreme, though active in the processes of the world. In Barth's theology, God is completely transcendent and independent of the world, who can only be known through His revelation (Isaiah 55:8-9) and (Romans 11:33-36). Both theologies recognize the importance of revelation to know God. Process Theology argues that God reveals Himself through the evolving world, while Barth Theology emphasizes that ultimate revelation comes through Jesus Christ.(Hebrews 1:1-2) and (John 1:18). Both also recognize that God is involved with the world, albeit in different ways. Process Theology emphasizes a dynamic relationship, while Barth emphasizes that God is separate from the world but still directs history through His revelation (Genesis 1:31) and (Romans 8:22-23).<sup>25</sup>

### ***Split Point***

Process Theology portrays God as involved in the world and in process with His creation. In contrast, Barth's theology asserts that God is completely transcendent and separate from the world He created. (Isaiah 55:8-9, Romans 11:33-36) and (Genesis 1:31, Romans 8:22-23.) In Process Theology, God is not fully sovereign in the sense that the world is free to develop, which has led to some criticism of the concept of God's dominion. On the other hand, Barth's theology affirms that God is absolutely sovereign and independent of the world (Colossians 1:16-17).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Colin E Gunton, "The One, the Many and the God of Christian Faith.," *The Journal of Theological Studies*, n.d.

<sup>25</sup> Colin E Gunton, "The One, the Many and the God of Christian Faith.," *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 1990; Bruce G. Epperly, *Process Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Paperback, 2011).

## CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that despite the profound differences between Process Theology and Karl Barth's Theology, both have in common the understanding that God is transcendent and cannot be fully understood by humans. The common ground of both theologies lies in the recognition of God's revelation and God's relationship with the world, albeit understood in different ways. Therefore, we can accept these two theologies as complementary views, with the recognition that our understanding of God is limited and always dependent on His revelation. God's Word supports this view, reminding us to be humble in understanding the mysteries of God that are beyond human capacity.

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