



# Lordless! Karl Barth, Politics, and the “Principalities and Powers”\*

*Autônomo! Karl Barth, Política, e os “Principaldades e Poderes”*

MARGIT ERNST-HABIB<sup>a</sup> 

## Resumo

Relendo e interpretando a narrativa de Karl Barth dos “poderes autônomos” (literalmente “poderes sem Senhor”; Dogmática Eclesiástica IV/4: Fragmentos de uma prelação/A vida cristã) para nossos tempos de crise, o artigo argumenta que, de fato, a oração conduz os fiéis para o engajamento concreto com o mundo e, como Barth o formula, para uma revolta contra a desordem do mundo. O poder subversivo da oração que surge da vida cristã como vida em oração é aqui entendido como guia da contemplação para a ação, introduzindo um novo realismo e estabelecendo uma conexão entre enunciados teológicos e análise política. A boa nova que este poder subversivo da oração traz à tona é a nova do Evangelho que nem a humanidade nem a criação estão abandonadas, mas que existe uma “outra possibilidade” dada por Deus que não precisa ser criada pela humanidade, mas que a humanidade pode apressar-se em encontrar por meio do trabalho do Espírito Santo.

**Palavras-chave:** Karl Barth. Poderes autônomos. Oração. Política.

---

\* This article was first published as Ernst (2021). It has been translated and abbreviated for this publication. I am grateful to the editors and TVZ for permitting this republication.

<sup>a</sup> Universidade de Duisburg-Essen, Alemanha. Doutora e Livre-Docente em Teologia. e-mail: ernsthabib@gmail.com

## ***Abstract***

*Re-reading and interpreting Karl Barth's narrative of the "Lordless Powers" (Church Dogmatics IV/4: Lecture Fragments/The Christian Life) for our contemporary times of crises, the article argues that prayer indeed leads the faithful towards active engagement with the world and, as Barth puts it, towards a revolt against the disorder of the world. The subversive power of prayer arising from the Christian life as a life in prayer is understood here as a guide from contemplation to action, introducing a new realism and establishing a connection between theological insights and political analysis. The good news this subversive power of prayer brings to light is the Gospel news that neither humanity nor creation are forsaken, but that there is "another possibility" given by God, which does not have to be created by humanity, but which humanity can hasten to meet through the work of the Holy Spirit.*

**Keywords:** Karl Barth. Lordless Powers. Prayer. Politics.

## **“Da hilft nur noch beten”, or: “All we can do is pray...”**

Climate change, civil wars, nationalism, racism, anti-Semitism, populism, xenophobia, sexism, millions of refugees worldwide, increase of poverty and exploitation globally and locally, extinction of species, proliferation of deadly viruses and diseases – every day and in all forms of media themes like these dominate the news. Live and in real time, we are provided with concrete consequences of events and catastrophes, of ominous systems and structure we hardly comprehend. This relentless stream of bad news leads to feelings of fatigues, resignation, or resistance; even politically active and engaged people despair when faced with these virtually overwhelming dynamics and powers, which cannot be tamed despite all of their commitment. The more we learn about causes and consequences of contemporary events, the more one thing seems to become more obvious: In all realms of life, powers and principalities seem to dominate, which might be controlled only with herculean efforts – if at all.

“All we can do is pray” – this deep sigh may not be the first reaction of many contemporaries, and yet, it conveys this feeling of hopelessness: there is nothing left for us to do except for asking a higher power to intervene. We

surrender. We surrender not only our optimism, our hope that contemporary crises might be reversible, but also our hope for divine intervention. “All we can do is pray” – indeed, this deep sigh may not be much more than an empty phrase for many today; trust in God as the addressee of prayer is virtually absent in many places. On the opposite, this sigh gains an almost cynical meaning in its reversal: “All we can do is pray!” then means, there is nothing we can do, there is nobody to help us, we are doomed.

“All we can do is pray!” – Perhaps this is what Karl Barth might respond to the state of the world today; it is what he said and wrote in response to those disastrous and deadly powers and principalities in their various manifestations of his time. Indeed, this sigh does represent Barth’s directive throughout the decades of his pastoral and theological ministry: All we can do is pray! Of course, this directive, so characteristic for Barth’s theological thinking and acting, does certainly not represent a form of pietistic quietism nor spiritual escape, but instead a centering of Christian life through a *theology of prayer*. According to Barth (1960, p. 284), the basic act of all life of faith as “obedience engendered in faith” is invocation of God, is prayer. To be even more precise, Barth defines prayer as *petitionary* prayer: “It is true that to pray is to ask, [...] The fact remains that decisively, centrally and essentially it [e.g. prayer] is petition, and that only as such is it also thanksgiving, repentance and worship” (BARTH, 1961, p. 94; 103). Christians thus live their Christian lives always and everywhere as those who call upon God, and all theology needs to be a theology of petitionary prayer, if it aims at nourishing and activating Christian life as well reflecting Christian praxis.

With this focus on petitionary prayer, it does not come as a surprise that Barth interprets his doctrine of Christian Life *by interpreting the Lord’s Prayer* (BARTH, 2017, §§ 76-78). Barth understands Christian ethics as “an attempt to portray Christian life under the command of God” (*ibid.*, p. 81) and the Lord’s Prayer as “a criterion by which to answer our question concerning the obedience required of Christians” (*ibid.*, p. 82). Barth writes

That Christians call upon God, that they do everything they do in this calling upon God, is what is expected of them as those who are obligated and committed to Jesus Christ. It is the command they must keep if their action is to be obedience. (*ibid.*)

Christian life, according to Barth, thus means living by invoking God – living in prayer, or rather: living the prayer. Already in 1918, Barth preached in Safenwil on Good Friday, turning traditional perspectives on their head and opening new horizons of understanding. Preaching on Hebrew 5, Barth contemplates the deep sigh we just discussed above:

Would it not be horrible to find oneself in a situation where the only recourse might be to pray, to trust in God? Well, we do say 'only' – and it is just this, that Jesus did want to pray only, to only trust in God, because he knew that everything else would be in fact dangerous and corruptive. (BARTH, 2004, p. 104, my translation)

“All we can do is pray!” describes for Barth, thus, *not* cynical resignation, not desperate surrender nor hopelessness, but the fundamental attitude of a Christian, who wants to trust God in everything, because every other attitude, aligned with someone or something else than God, proves to be dangerous and corruptive. For Barth, this sigh is the expression of an attitude that provides orientation throughout the whole life and is not only uttered in times of crises.

So far, so good. But also: so far, so boring, so unpolitical, so out of date, so vague – so dangerously passive maybe? Does trusting in God mean: we rest our folded hands in our laps, waiting patiently for something to happen in the crises and threats of our time, waiting for help to come? Does prayer not lead straight into a kind of pious escapism? That this passive attitude does not correspond with Barth's understanding of the Christian life in obedience is obvious for all who know only the first facts about Barth's theology and life. The opposite is true. One of the most cited 'apocryphal' statements of Barth illustrates this: Jan Milič Lochman, the Czech-Swiss theologian, remembers one of Barth's statements which became a foundation for Lochman's own theological way: “To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world” (LOCHMAN 1997, p. 197). Prayer, thus, is not „end in itself nor a withdrawal action” (ibid.), not the end of Christian life or action, but its starting point, center and *telos* (goal). Contemplating “politics and the principalities and powers” *and* Karl Barth's thoughts, we will have to

employ a hermeneutic of prayer, which is what this article aims to do with respect to Barth's understanding of the "Lordless Powers".

## **Begin with Prayer! The Connexion of Dogmatics and Ethics**

As has been mentioned above, for Barth all of Christian life is lived out in prayer and as prayer, invoking and trusting God. This in itself is already a gift of God's free grace and

the invocation of God by his children in which the spiritual life and also the witnessing ministry of Christians in the world have their basis, root, and norm, and which is the nerve of their whole Christian existence, is an integral part of the history of the covenant between God and men. [...] In his free grace he orders them to do what he has freed them to do, namely, to call upon him as Father. By God's free grace, what they do when they obey his command, their "Abba, Father" becomes the basic act of the Christian *ethos* (BARTH, 2017, p. 153-154).

Exactly the same is true for the political life of Christian individuals, congregations and churches, in the midst of the specific contemporary challenges and crises, locally as well as globally. Even political analyses and political action of Christians start with praying and as praying, according to Barth: In prayer and with prayer *God and only God* is invoked as the Lord; those who pray differentiate between God and idols, living out the First Commandment (cf. BARTH, 1957, p. 127). Prayer in itself becomes the one decisive political act; over against all worldly lords and over against all worldly powers and principalities, Christians profess loyalty to their Lord, and it is from this perspective that they analyze the situation of their time. The brokenness of our contemporary world over against the reign of God reveals itself while praying to the Father of the one Lord Jesus Christ; and it is exactly here that resistance and uprising against the brokenness and disorder of the world take their beginning. In order not to remain unspecific and vague, these theological deliberations must be translated into concrete reality; the biblical vision of the reign of God and the *shalom* in Jesus Christ need to be narrated and lived into particular political, social and also economic conditions. Indeed, not only into

contemporary conditions, but also *against* the major narratives of our times which define us on all levels of our lives.

One of the instruments for this kind of critical as well as self-critical reflection Karl Barth has provided us with, is his doctrine, or rather his narrative of the *Lordless Powers*, and it is one that has been taken up by many theologians worldwide over the past sixty years. There is almost no other teaching of Barth that appears to be as immediately evident and plausible with respect to understanding contemporary challenges as well as inspiring dogmatic and ethical deliberations. We now turn to this narrative and its relevance for the political realm in which we find ourselves today, and in which we do not only have to move, but which we also have to shape – since we cannot simply remain passive and accept the disorder of our world with clasped hands.

## **“Your Kingdom Come!” – God’s Reconciliation and the Irreconcilability of the World**

### *The Interpretation of the Lord’s Prayer and the Ethics of Reconciliation*

The last part of Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*, based on his lectures in the years 1959 – 1961, discusses his understanding of an ethics of reconciliation: Christian life, which is obviously at the center of all theological ethics, can be understood and lived out only from the perspective of ultimate reconciliation that has already taken place in Jesus Christ. Christian life is not to be understood as a way towards reconciliation with God and fellow humans; it is, indeed, living out the reconciliation with God and humans, which is not guided by irreconcilability, but by the fact of the reconciliation which has already occurred.

In light of a reality which does not only defy this fact of reconciliation on all levels, but also actively resists it, Barth contemplates the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer as the center of his ethics of reconciliation. Of particular interest is Barth’s interpretation of the second petition, since it is here that Barth develops his understanding of the *Lordless Powers*. In § 77 of these

posthumously published fragments, Barth discussed the first petition “Hallowed be Your Name” under the title “Zeal for the Honor of God” and now moves on to discuss the second petition “Your Kingdom Come” in § 78 under the probably somewhat surprising heading of “The Struggle for Human Righteousness”. Barth interprets this petition for the coming of the reign of God as the foundation of all Christian ethics, which concerns itself with Christian commitment to and fight for human justice. Barth’s answer to the fundamental question of ethical deliberation “what are we called to do” is thus to be found in his robust instruction to pray “our father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come!”.

### *The Irreconcilable Contradiction: Divine Justice and Human Injustice*

What, then, are we doing when we pray “your kingdom come”? How do we understand the context, the reality in which we live and into which we ask the coming of the reign of God? Barth understands the context and reality of Christian life and of this petition primarily as the context of an irreconcilable contraction between the good creation of God and the reality of life. As the “Leitsatz” (opening sentences) for § 78, Barth had formulated in his typoscript:

Christians have been given the certainty that God has taken in hand and actualized order in his creation for the good of man and that he will finally manifest and enforce it in its perfection. They thus revolt against all the oppression and suppression of man by the lordship of lordless powers (BARTH, 2017, p. 379).

This is the one side of the contradiction: God’s order in his creation has already been *actualized* and humans are created and empowered to live together with God obediently. Living together with God obediently necessarily includes, and this is crucial for Barth’s argument, simultaneously a corresponding form of living together with other human beings:

The order from which it [the actual disorder] deviates is the form of an obedient life of people in fellowship with God which includes as such the corresponding form — the guarantee of human right, freedom, and peace — of a life of people in fellowship with one another (BARTH, 2017, p. 296).

The good order of God is, therefore, fellowship with God and one another; *divine* justice is basis and guarantee of *human* justice as well. Barth takes this thought even further when he claims that "God is the One he is, the God who is gracious to man as such, who affirms all men, and who in so doing works all things together for their good" (ibid.). All of humanity is affirmed by God and brought together for their good; human justice serves to ensure this living together of *all* with human rights, freedom, and peace. But human justice does not rest upon human understanding, human insight, and agreement, it is rightly understood, according to Barth, only from the perspective of divine justice. Yet this is not how we experience life most of the time: human rights, freedom, peace, and human justice are threatened all around the world, sometimes they do not even exist any longer. Iniquity ("Un-Recht"), lack of freedom ("Un-Freiheit"), lack of peace ("Un-Frieden") and injustice ("Un-Gerechtigkeit") determine and have determined the reality of a vast number of people at all times and threaten in our world today not only human lives, but also all of creation. Barth introduces the term *dis-order* ("Un-Ordnung") as a term describing the contradiction to the good order of obedient fellowship:

The *disorder*, which is the great plight under whose pressure people have to suffer, arises and consists — and this is the guilt of mankind as it is also his plight — in the *ignoring* and *transgressing* of this order. It arises and consists in the unrighteousness of the fall of people *from God* which as such ineluctably carries with it their fall *from one another*, the changing of their being with one another, which corresponds to their being with God, into a general being without and against one another (BARTH, 2017, p. 296).

This deviation, then, from the divine good order is the "*disorder* which both inwardly and outwardly controls and penetrates and poisons and disrupts all human relations and interconnections" (ibid.): It is the guilt of humankind as it is their plight; the fall from God implies the fall from one another and the being without and being against one another. Without God and against the divine order, the world lives in irreconcilability, this is the guilt of humanity and from this guilt the plight arises, under which humanity suffers. It is this human injustice, this "plight that plagues and disrupts and devastates humanity (Ibid., p. 299), which is the adversary of God's good and salvific order, this



“denaturalizing of the humanity and fellow humanity” (ibid.) rooted in human beings’ *fall* and *alienation* from God. Conscious of this disorder, “Christians pray to God that he will cause his righteousness to appear and dwell on a new earth under a new heaven” (ibid., p. 287). They clasp their hands for this petitionary prayer, which is simultaneously a confession of guilt, while *at the same time* they

they act in accordance with their prayer as people who are responsible for the rule of human righteousness, that is, for the preservation and renewal, the deepening and extending, of the divinely ordained human safeguards of human rights, human freedom, and human peace on earth (ibid.)

Christians act in accordance with their petition, which is why Lochman remembers Barth saying that to clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the *disorder of the world*. With the act of prayer, with the invocation of God as Lord, with the performance of the First Commandment, Christians perceive and understand this worldly disorder in greater detail. Prayer becomes an instrument for social, political, and economic analyses. How so? We will follow Barth’s argument step by step.

## **The Lordless Powers and the Realm of Politics**

Even though Barth formulates his narrative in a rather abstract manner up to this point, he dares to give a number of examples for those lordless powers, their nature and their doings – in particular within the realm of politics. Barth proceeds on the assumption, that the lordless powers had been obvious for the New Testament’s authors and readers, but that they are also obvious for his own contemporaries. Yet he still deems it necessary to give a short account of their nature and doings, in order to comprehend the human situation of captivity more clearly. Barth describes four of those lordless powers, which are connected to central areas of life, and which therefore possess major potency: He begins with one of the most dominant lordless powers, which (1) manifests itself in all kinds of *political absolutisms*. (2) The second power, which is explicitly called so in New Testament writings, is *Mammon*; and (3) the third one is called *ideologies*. (4) With the fourth of his lordless powers, Barth turns

from intellectual forces towards what might be called *chthonic forces* [forces pertaining to the earth], those forces that affect worldly and bodily aspects. Although the themes of engineering, fashion, sports, amusements, and traffic, which Barth discusses here, are indeed also connected to the realm of politics, this fourth lordless power cannot be discussed within the limited space of this article.

### *Lordless Human Beings and the Lordless Powers*

Yet before a first word about the lordless powers can be said, Barth reminds us that it is *human beings* who begin to think, act, and exist in a *lordless manner* (cf. BARTH, 2017, p. 299). We *act as if* we did not belong to God, as if God was not our Lord and God, as if we were not bound to God and our fellow humans, as if we were our own lords, as if we were god-less and lord-less. Barth calls it the "dreadful 'as if'" (ibid., p. 300), because even though it is not true, this "as if" does produce disastrous consequences for humanity (and all of creation). The god- and lordless human, alienated from God and fellow humans, now might imagine himself to have replaced God, to be Lord and Master or her own life, might pretend to be sovereign, autonomous and responsible, and yet all of that is only *myth and illusion* (ibid.). This turns our post-Enlightenment self-concept on its head: that we are free, that we are able to act sovereignly and autonomously is part of the fundamental presuppositions of our modern self-understanding. Barth does not only deny those human abilities, even adds another dimension: The more we consider ourselves to be free, the more we actually cease living as "a free lord and master" (ibid.). What has happened? Lordless human beings, or rather: humans who understand themselves as lordless and act accordingly, use in this alienation from God their abilities and capacities, but those abilities and capacities now "become spirits with a life and activity of their own, lordless indwelling forces" (ibid.). "[Hu]man's own abilities" (ibid., p. 301) turn into abilities, which can no longer be controlled by humans – impressively described in Goethe's poem "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" quoted here by Barth (ibid.).

Turning for a moment towards our own present times and the political spheres we live in, we may notice that this feeling of being at the mercy of diffuse powers and principalities corresponds with a general feeling of our times: In all spheres of life, we notice how human gifts and abilities seem to develop autonomously, following a logic without concerns for humanity, even turning against humanity or at least the majority of humanity. Whether we look at economic systems on a global level, bringing prosperity and security only to a minority, or at technical and industrial developments, bringing enormous progress on some levels yet threaten to destroy creation, or at political movements promising identity and respect yet feed on disdain and contempt of other groups – everywhere we recognize even today which almost demonic force those human capabilities are able to attain. *The Spirits that I summoned...* (Goethe, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*).

Back to Barth and his understanding of the lordless powers, those spirits who broke away from their lords and masters, because those had broken away from their true Lord and Master. Humans have “emancipated” themselves from God, living as if God were no longer their God, as if they were their own lord and master – and the same is true, then, for all human capacities and abilities. They, too, exist in the manner of “as if”: They break away from humans, taking up the character of “entities with some kind of existence and dominion of their own”, even though they possess only a “pseudo-objective reality and efficacy” (ibid., p. 301). They remain, just like alienated humanity, subordinated to the lordship of God, they do not become deities or irreversible fate. Those lordless powers, those capacities formerly subordinated to humanity, now turn into some form of entity, and yet they cannot be conclusively recognized or named. They are no deities with a concrete shape or form but take up a multitude of transitory forms in different times and different contexts.

How are we supposed to speak about those transitory forms? According to Barth, they possess an undisputable reality, and are simultaneously only pseudo-real, they are known and at the same time unknown, they cannot be seized or grasped, and yet they control us. Trying to describe them, all we can do is to “speak of them only in consciously *mythological* terms” (ibid., p. 367). The worldview of the New Testament comes much closer to this kind of

understanding than ours, since we no longer assume a magical worldview, and thus might actually overlook the all too real potency of the lordless powers, therefore remaining in their captivity. Post-enlightenment humanity finds itself dominated by powers and principalities, lordless powers and principalities, often without even recognizing this captivity at all. This is the dire reality the lordless powers possess: their powerful efficacy ("Wirk-Mächtigkeit") with which they hold us captive.

And it is in this reality of captivity by the lordless powers that Christians pray: Your kingdom come! And with this prayer, everything is turned on its head again. With this prayer, with invoking God the Lord, in obedience to the One God, a twofold consequence occurs: the praying community realizes the efficacy of those lordless powers, yet only *negatively* from the perspective of their negation and limitation. The New Testament is not at all interested in those powers and principalities *per se*, despite its own magical view of the world, but only in their "gracious unmasking, overcoming, and ultimate abolition of these absolutisms that rule us *per nefas* [through wrong]" (ibid., p. 307). In prayer, humans long for God's liberation out of this captivity; they long for the Reign of God, which will bring the consummate liberation that has already happened in Christ, and which already limits the efficacy of the lordless powers. But even though the demystification of these powers has already happened in Christ, the Christian community as well as the whole world depends on the demystification of the lordless powers over and over again. That they do possess only a pseudo-existence, is, indeed, part of the Good News.

With other words: Believing in Jesus Christ does *not* lead to belief in those lordless powers, but towards a "resolute unbelief in their reality and efficacy" (ibid., p. 306). Praying for the coming of the Reign of God, Christians turn to the true Lord and God and acknowledge the reality and efficacy of the lordless powers – yet they do not believe in them. This is the liberating message, the Good News; not an evasive answer, but one, which trust more in the Reign of God than in all other powers and principalities, including one's own. Praying for the coming of the Reign of God is not resigned surrender and escapism, but *expression of Christian Joy*, hoping and trusting in God the

Reconciler and God's Reign of Peace and Justice – God, the Lord, is Lord also over all lordless powers.

### *The First of the Lordless Powers: Political Absolutism*

We open our deliberations with the forms of political absolutism, which, according to Barth, constitute the one lordless power to which the term Reign of God represents the “superior authority opposing them” (BARTH, 2017, p. 307). Barth does not assume that government and state would constitute a problem of human existence *per se*, since he does judge the state to be a “salutary divine order”. And yet: all politics display the demonism at work every time when power breaks loose from law, when power and authority are cherished for their own sake, when they are misused to oppress others and not to protect and build them up. With Barth's own words:

Law or right is no longer the order which helps man, which safeguards his life, which gives him freedom and peace. It is the establishment and strengthening of the power which is seized and exercised by some in the subjugation of others (BARTH, 2017, p. 308).

Power does no longer protect the law and the right, power is no longer confined and determined by them; the state does no longer serve humans, but humans serve the state. It is not difficult to find examples for this lordless power in our contemporary time around the globe. Barth saw the danger of fascism and national socialism in his time, yet he warned against *all* inhuman ideas of *empire*<sup>1</sup>, be they monarchial, democratic, nationalistic, or socialistic ideas of empire – they are all inhuman, because in them the turn from the power of law and right into the law and right of power does not only lurk beneath the surface but has been actualized.

*Empire*: It does not come as a surprise, that Barth's theological concept from the 1960s becomes compatible for contemporary theological

---

<sup>1</sup> BARTH, 2017, p. 308: “The demonism of politics consists in the idea of ‘empire,’ which is always inhuman as such.”

deliberations with the concept of empire as a hermeneutical category from a postcolonial perspective. Barth’s narrative of the lordless powers and the inhuman idea of empire provides a starting point for a “theological reading of coloniality” as David Field points out:

The dominant European narratives obscure the realities endured by the colonial victims whose exploitation provided the material base of European modernity. Barth’s theology of the lordless powers opens the way for an alternative narrative which exposes this exploitation and provides a key component in the development of a theological decoloniality (FIELD, 2019, p. 51).

The discussion of the second lordless power, *Mammon*, will continue with this analysis of empire.

### *The Second Lordless Power: Mammon*

The second lordless power named by Barth, given the specific, yet somewhat mythological name *Mammon* by the New Testament, has also not lost any of its actuality for our time, and it even may be even more potent and efficacious in these times of globalized capitalism and neo-colonialism. We are dealing here with material resources, possessions, and wealth – meant to guarantee and ensure livelihood of humans, not more than means to an end. Yet, once again, these resources of humans, alienated from God and God’s beneficial command, reversed into their demonic opposite: resources/wealth do no longer serve their lords, human beings, but human have to serve them. On this side of the Reign of God, “we people are not free [literally: not liberated] in relation to Mammon”, Barth (2017, p. 312) writes. It is even a great thing “if there are those who *pray* for liberation from it and at least make some honest efforts to move in this direction” (ibid., emphasis added). The second petition of the Lord’s Prayer, then, turns into a petition for liberation from the dominion of Mammon, from its autonomies and claims to power of human beings, societies, even whole states. Financial and debt crises as well as reaction of governments and economical entities to them have made those autonomies and independencies blatantly obvious – autonomies and independencies which are hardly understandable or controllable any longer

and which do not only complicate human lives worldwide, but actually threaten them in a very concrete way. Sixty years ago, Barth wrote (and his word have not lost any of their timeliness):

Money is a flexible but powerful instrument which, supposedly handled by man, in reality follows its own law. In a thousand ways it can establish some opinions and even convictions and suppress others. It can also create brutal facts. It can cause the market to rise and then to fall again. It can arrest this crisis and cause another. It can serve peace yet pursue cold war even in the midst of peace. It can make ready for a bloody war and finally bring it about. It can bring provisional paradise here and the corresponding provisional hell there. It does not have to do all these things, but it can. It can and does: not money as such, but the money that man thinks he possesses, although in truth it possesses him, and it does so because he wants to have it without God and thus creates a vacuum in which this intrinsically harmless but useful fiction becomes an absolutist demon, and man himself can only be its football and slave (BARTH, 2017, p. 313-314).

To be clear: money is not inherently evil – but money, turning from a means to an end, enslaves human being, keeps them in a captivity which is difficult to be recognized and even more difficult to be confessed. The thoughts of Barth just quoted end with a comment by Barth, which takes one's breath away when projected unto our contemporary political and economic situation, and it appears to be almost prophetic:

Mammon, then, is no reality, and yet it is one — and what a reality! not to mention what happens when Mammon meets and joins and comes to terms with that other demon [...] political absolutism (ibid., p. 314).

It is to be feared that this is happening right now or has already happened in a number of countries: power – law – money, all of that is no longer separate and the conglomerate rules the reality of human lives all around the world. And it is not by coincidence that presidents and other politicians are elected who obviously and sometimes even shame-lessly intertwine their own financial interest with their ambitions for power, propagating ideologies which are taken up by those who vote for them with enthusiasm. Who would have thought that less than one hundred years after the catastrophe of fascism, nationalist populism

commingled with capitalist interests would find fervent adherents in many parts of our world?

### *The Third Lordless Power: Ideologies*

The last group of lordless powers we now turn does possess particular relevance for the political realm, namely those intellectual constructs we call "ideologies". Here again, a "wonderful ability" of humans is corrupted, namely the ability, to understand the whole world with concepts, elevating those concepts to knowledge and putting this knowledge into the service for thinking and acting. But this ability of a *free spirit* turns into a lordless power through the alienation of human from God, in that everything provisional and relative vanishes from those human ideas, and they are raised to the level of quasi-divine statements and propositions: hypotheses become theses, ideals turn into idols (cf. BARTH, 2017, p. 315). There now exist only basic principles and systems, ideas turn into ideologies claiming loyalty and do not allow for any kind of (self-)criticism. Ideas, then, become mighty intellectual powers, determining human history, characterized linguistically by the ending "ism" (socialism, capitalism, conservatism, pietism, christocentrism, and many more). Barth states

In every field "ism" shows that one view, one concept, one figure in the field of human life, one possibility of human outlook and action, has assumed the role of regulator and dictator in relation to all the rest, and that round this principle a system has developed in face of which man is more or less on the point of losing his freedom or has already lost it. Wherever we find "ism" there lurks an ideology, and it is as well to be on guard if it is not already too late (BARTH, 2017, p. 316-317).

The appearance of slogans as well as catchwords is, according to Barth, another indicator for the presence of this lordless power in the form of ideologies – a presence, we have come to know only too well in all forms of media over the past decades. Slogans and catchwords are not interested in reflection and discussion, on the opposite, those are meant to be prevented, and for this, they do not need to represent great intellectual concepts. It is exactly in their smallness and pettiness that they have taken on such power that they may be able to unsettle or even destroy societal systems. Looking at



comments in social media on subjects such as migration, rightwing extremism, racism, anti-Semitism, islamophobia, or sexism, it becomes obvious which kind of autonomous potency, especially around all forms of conspiracy narratives, has emerged. Ideologies put into appealing slogans and catchwords, consumer-friendly and media-savvy, equipped with a claim on ultimate validity, confirming your own self-worth by denying the worth of “others”, exercise a kind of power, which seems to be multiplied infinitely in our digital age, permeating all areas of life. Fake news, social bots, armies of so-called trolls, all of that serves the one goal to not only put ideologies into circulation, but to increase their relevance and influence in order to determine politics, societies, and even history. It specifically applies to social media,

that in specific times and places in both individual and social life ideologies can rise up like monstrous bubbles in all their changing colors and have their fascinating effect on the minds of humans, not as omnipotent intellectual forces but as very potent ones that do not merely accompany human history but to some extent make it (BARTH, 2017, p. 316).

## **Revolt against Disorder – The Subversive Power of Prayer and the Reign of God**

Lordless powers bring human existence as well as human history “both as a whole and in detail into disorder” (BARTH, 2017, p. 326, following quotations *ibid.*), caused by human alienation from God. Those powers promise “to give liberation, strength, ease, simplification, and enrichment”, yet they do not mean good by human beings; they are indeed in-humane and hostile towards humanity. And now sinful, suffering humans in community with other sinful, suffering humans and in solidarity with those suffering under sin, clasp their hands in prayer and pray: “Your Kingdom come!”, knowing that in Christ the Reign of God has already come, knowing that those lordless powers do only possess an “as-if-reality”, but knowing that they have been confined by Christ, and that Christ will overcome them in completion. Knowing also, that in and through this prayer “Your Kingdom come!” they are called to something: to revolting against this disorder of the world, which reveals itself in the profound injustice that shapes our own lives as well as the life of the community. We are

“people of disorder”, separated and alienated from God and our neighbor, and our prayer to God, our invocation of God continues into and is actualized in our actions, thinking and life. This prayer is not closed by *amen* but is carried on “with hearts and hands and voices”.

The revolt against disorder arises out of this *subversive power of prayer*, which turns everything on its head, which leads us from contemplation to action, and which claims us for the purposes of God.

*Subversive power of prayer* means that praying is subversive particularly in subverting our belief in those lordless powers, in those enticing figments of human abilities and capabilities, into “resolute unbelief”.

The *subversive power of prayer* introduces a new form of realism, establishing a connection between theological insights and political analysis in order to cultivate Christian life that lives out of reconciliation and that lives reconciliation. It introduces a form of realism, that does not only address our misery and our pain as consequences of the lordless powers, but also the misery and pain of those whose life and survival is threatened by the lordless powers to an even greater extent. It does bring a realism which also lets us realize and confess, where and how some of us do live at expense of others, profiting from those lordless powers, where revolting against disorder includes becoming aware of our own involvement and having our naiveté relating to systemic and other injustices being challenged by the subversive power of prayer.

*Subversive power of prayer* also means that praying and hoping for the Reign of God do not lead to any form of escapism, but rather into action, that it includes an ethical instruction, in emphasizing that resignation cannot be the ultimate and exclusive response to our contemporary crises. Instead, the revolt against disorder and the lordless powers evolves out of the promise of God, and is a revolt not against other humans, but for humanity.

In the thought, speech, and action demanded of Christians, the issue is not just that of rejecting what they see to be a bad possibility but that of rising up and revolting against its actualization: a revolt that has positive meaning and inner necessity because another possibility stands with such splendor before the eyes of the rebels that they cannot refrain from affirming and grasping it and entering into battle for

its actualization. [...] In word and deed, they say No here because they may and will say Yes there (BARTH, 2017, p. 289-290).

*Subversive of power* also means that despite all concerns and even despair, there is also joy about the fact that those lordless powers will not have the last word, that their efficiency is limited by God, that they are only “as-if-realities”.

What would we be, what would happen to the world, what would it have become long ago, if the river of the unrighteousness that triumphs in the lordship of the lordless forces had not come up against an unshakable dam? But such a dam does resist it. Over against the kingdom of human disorder stands the kingdom of the divine order (BARTH, 2017, p. 327).

The *subversive power of prayer* is the power of the Gospel, the good news and glad tidings of joy. The good news does not consist in ignoring and leaving behind all problems, crises and injustices of the world, but also not being responsible for solutions of all problems and combatting all power and principalities by ourselves. The good news is the gospel of “another possibility”, which is not only put before our eyes, but which we can hasten to meet through the work of the Holy Spirit.

That this subversive power does not describe a form of automatism is obvious, and also that prayer is no cure or remedy for all contemporary evils. And yet, looking at newspapers and social media we may exclaim, hopefully and joyfully despite everything: All we can do is pray!

## Referências

BARTH, K. *Church Dogmatics III/3*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960. (First published in German in 1950)

BARTH, K. *Church Dogmatics III/4*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961. (First published in German in 1951)

BARTH, K. Das erste Gebot als theologisches Axiom. In: *Theologische Fragen und Antworten*. Gesammelte Vorträge III. TVZ: Zürich, 1957. p. 127–143.

BARTH, K. Predigt 418, Safenwil, den 29. März (Karfreitag): Hebräer 5,5-9. In: *Predigten 1918*. Karl Barth GA I/37. Zürich: TVZ, 2002. p. 96–105.

BARTH, K. *The Christian Life*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017. (First published in German in 1974 (posthumously) as Church Dogmatics IV/4)

BARTH, K. *The Doctrine of Reconciliation: the Subject-Matter and Problems of the Doctrine of of Reco - Continuum Impacts*. Storbritannien: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2004.

ERNST-HABIB, M. "Herrenlos! Karl Barth und die ‚Mächte und Gewalten‘ im Raum des Politischen". In: EBERHARDT, K. O.; HOFHEINZ, M. (orgs.). *Römerbrief und Tageszeitung*. Herausforderungen der Theologie Karl Barths für die Gegenwart. Zürich: TVZ, 2021. p. 24-79.

FIELD, D. Christen Gemeinde, Bürgergemeinden, Migranten, Aktiengesellschaften, Finanzmärkte... Towards a decolonial reconfiguration of Karl Barth's theological politics for contemporary Europe. *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, Stellenbosch, v. 5, n. 1, p. 49-70, 2019.

LOCHMAN, J. M. Rechenschaft über einen theologischen Weg. In: DAHLING-SANDER, C. et al. (eds.). *Herausgeforderte Kirche. Anstöße – Wege – Perspektiven*. Eberhard Busch zum 60. Geburtstag. Wuppertal: Foedus, 1997. p. 189-200.

RECEIVED: 3/24/2022  
APPROVED: 4/16/2022

RECEBIDO: 24/03/2022  
APROVADO: 16/04/2022