

“God and the gods”: Faith and human-made idols in the theology of Karl Barth

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Abstract

The First Commandment played an important role in the theology of Karl Barth. His personal obedience to this commandment contributed to his realization that one cannot be comfortable with the Liberal theology of the early twentieth century and accept the theological thinking that supported National Socialism. The First Commandment opened his eyes to see the idols, worldviews, ideologies and evil of his lifetime. The First Commandment is always in the background of his theology that concentrates on God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. Only two of his lectures specifically concentrated on the First Commandment, only one of which was published. Barth, understood the First Commandment as an axiom of theology. It is self-evident; a cornerstone and critical guideline for any theology that is built upon the biblical message. The article argues that if this aspect of Barth’s theology received attention in the Nederduitsch Hervormde Church, we would most probably have been saved from the conflicts concerning the ideology of apartheid and the “people’s church”.

1. INTRODUCTION

Obedience to the First Commandment ought to be at the heart of every theology. Tragically, this is in many instances not the case. Karl Barth was one of the few theologians of recent decades who constantly reminded the church of the importance of this commandment for theology and church life. Barth (1986d) published only one lecture on this subject. For reasons unknown to us he did not publish his other lectures on the First Commandment. He then also made only a few remarks on the First

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Commandment as such in his *Church Dogmatics* (CD). The register of the *Church Dogmatics* shows that he made only a few references to this commandment in the nine thousand pages of this monumental work. In spite of the few direct references to this commandment, I believe that the First Commandment is one of the heart chambers of his theology. My theological father, Gerhard Sauter, taught us at Bonn that Barth's theology has two cornerstones, namely Christology and the First Commandment. He (1996:131) said: "... Karl Barth's dogmatics is a theology of the Second Article of the Creed, which can be faithfully stated only with the help of the First Commandment. The major points within Barth's theology ... rise out of this partnership of the First Commandment with the Second Article". This theological approach means that Barth's dogmatics has no "material principle" such as the doctrine of justification, or the kingdom of God, as proposed by many nineteenth-century theologians. He also was distasteful of "dogmatic schools". He did not slavishly follow other theologians and he himself did not want disciples or followers. He saw his task simply to train people to think theologically. Dogmatics was to Barth "gymnastics of theological thought" – thought about Christ and the First Commandment. He recognized no "situational exigencies" and no compromise with political rationales. He simply asked questions of faith. He protested against every explanation of the world, every worldview. He accepted the systematic nature of theology, but his own theology lacked a systematic principle similar to the dogmatics of Paul Tillich, for example. He did not work with a system. He wanted an open system. He wanted to start anew each time. The reason why one has to start all over again is the obedience to the First Commandment – the "theological axiom" of theology (Sauter 1996:125-130).

Hinrich Stoevesandt (1986:458), the director of the Karl Barth Archive in Basel, is also convinced that this theme: "God and the gods", as Barth himself has formulated it, is the vital lifeline (*Lebensnerv*) and "central formula" of his theology. He knew that Barth would not have agreed with such an interpretation, but remained convinced that the First Commandment is the golden thread in his theology.

Barth's theology did not fall from the sky. There were two major things that contributed to the development of his thinking, namely his opposition to Liberal theology and the two world wars in Europe. The reasons why Barth rejected Liberal theology, is not general knowledge (at least not in South Africa). It is therefore important that we refresh the minds, especially for a few readers in the south of Africa. From 1908, Barth studied for three semesters in Marburg (against his father's will). He spent most of his time listening to Wilhelm Herrmann. He (1969:19) later confessed Herrmann to be *the*

theological teacher of his student days. Herrmann, the master of “Liberal theology” taught that man could only be convinced by that which he himself has experienced. Therefore, religious individualism and historical relativism formed the cornerstones of this theology. In 1909 he entered the ministry, viewing himself to be in the theological school of Albrecht Ritschl, as shaped by Herrmann. As a pastor, he started working through Calvin’s *Institutes* and he read Johann Christoph Blumhardt and Fjodor Dostoyevsky. By the end of World War I, he was unsatisfied with his own theological position. He discovered as a pastor, that Liberal theology could not be of any help to those who had to preach the gospel day by day. He also knew that Liberal theology could not provide answers to the questions of the time. When ninety-three German intellectuals, among them some of his former teachers, publicly supported the war of Kaiser Wilhelm II in August 1914, Barth (1969:22) realized that he could no longer support Liberal theology, because he could not identify himself with its ethics. He also realized that he had to be critical about the cornerstones of Liberal theology. He therefore rejected the idea that theology depends upon human experience. He began to emphasize that theology can only depend upon the Bible as God’s self-revelation. He became more and more convinced that theology is about revelation, and not about religious experience or reason. Against this background he started with statements such as “the fundamental discontinuity between man and God”. In the meantime he worked on the first edition of his *Commentary on Romans* that was published in 1919. In this work he openly rejected the main elements of Liberal theology, namely religious experience, individualism, historical relativism and the voice of conscience. He recognized God as God. He accepted that we could know God only through his self-revelation (1969:24). In 1922, a totally reworked edition of the *Epistle to the Romans* was published. The insights of Luther, Calvin, Overbeck and Kierkegaard played a major role in the shaping of his thoughts. One of the phrases from this book, “there is a qualitative distinction between time and eternity” became world famous. In 1921 he became Honorary Professor of Reformed Theology at the University of Göttingen. In 1922 he and Thurneysen and Gogarten decided to start a new theological journal. There were many proposals for a title for this journal: “Dialectical Theology”, “Theology of Crisis”, “Theology of the Word of God” – all saying something about the new theology of Barth. In the end they decided on “Between the Times” (*Zwischen den Zeiten*). This journal would pave the way for a new theology that would break away from the liberal theological tradition – especially the legacy of Schleiermacher (Barth 1969:30).

Breaking away from Liberal theology shaped one leg of Barth’s theology. The other leg was shaped by his involvement in the crisis of the German Protestant Church which had to do with the heresies of the “German

Christians”.¹ When Barth moved to Bonn in 1935, he found himself in a rather unacceptable situation where he had to start his lectures with a salutation to Hitler. He, of course, rejected to do this. By refusing to salute Hitler, he refused to take part in National Socialism. The main reason, according to him, why the whole of Europe misread the situation, was the lack of understanding of the First Commandment. Europe misunderstood the danger “... because it does not understand the First Commandment. Because it does not see that National Socialism means the conscious, radical, and systematic transgression of the First Commandment. Because it does not see that this transgression is sin against God, it drags the corruption of the nations in its wake” (Barth 1969:47). A closer examination of Barth’s understanding of the First Commandment should now be evident.

2. BARTH’S EXPOSITION OF THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

2.1 Barth’s views on the commandments

Before focussing on Barth’s exposition of the First Commandment, it is necessary to attend to his views on the biblical commandments in general. On March 9th, 1927 he (1986b:32-53) gave a lecture at a student-conference in Aarau on “Keeping the commandments” (*Das Halten der Gebote*). The views expressed in this lecture would later form the cornerstones of his understanding of God’s law. They would prove to be important arguments in the conflict against Lutheran theologians over the relationship between law and gospel (or rather, gospel and law as he would like to say). The later paragraphs in the *Church Dogmatics* on the commandments would keep to the foundations laid down in this lecture. The following enunciations of this lecture are important for an understanding of the importance of the First Commandment in his theology:

- According to Barth, ethics is the teaching of God’s command (*Gebot*). Ethics, however, must explain the commandments as part of the “gospel”. With “gospel” he means the act of liberation from Egypt. This act of liberation happened against the background of the covenant. This God of the covenant, this God of liberation, expects his people to live according to his commandment. From this perspective it is clear that ethics, the teaching of God’s commandments, forms part of the doctrine of God (Barth 1959a:564). Barth insisted that ethics should be

¹ I do not find it necessary to provide the reader with further historical information. The details are well documented. The work of Eberhard Busch (1978) provides us with almost all the information that we need.

part of dogmatics – part of the doctrine of God – part of the message of the God that elects, liberates and saves. The law or the commandments should therefore be seen as part of the covenant – the message of God's love for his people. It is simply the norm by which the elected person has to live (Barth 1959a:603-612).

- God's laws are not abstract, general human laws. They are laws for his chosen people. The Ten Commandments should therefore be viewed as norms and guidelines for life within the covenant. In this regard, we as Christians should also keep the commandments. We should notice, protect and cherish them (1986b:32). The law on its own has no validity. The law receives its truth and power through the gospel. Only from the perspective of the Gospel, God's love and election, can we discover the importance of his law (1986b:43). It was against this background that Barth insisted that the "Lutheran" formula of "law and gospel" should be changed to "gospel and law" (Barth 1968). Barth believed that this was the only way in which it could be prevented that political laws and ideologies be equated to the will of God.
- God's laws, as concrete laws, are also laws of faith (*Glaubensgebote*). To obey or disobey the laws is either an act of faith or of disbelief. God's law comes from his love, his grace, and his election. People, who disobey God's law, forget their own election – an act of disbelief (1986b:39, 42). Barth quoted this sentence: "Glaube! Glaube an den Herrn Jesum Christum! Glaube und halte alles andere fur Dreck! Denn *das*, *das* ist die Antwort auf die Frage: Was sollen wir denn tun? *Das*, *das* ist das Halten der Gebote!" (1986b:49). He said that this sentence is correct and incorrect at the same time. It is indeed about faith, but never only about faith. Keeping the commandments is also an act of faith. Faith, therefore, embraces the total grace of God that we find in the gospel and in the law (1986b:50).
- We should keep the commandments, because we are not God or gods or half-gods; we are humans, and humans need to live according to certain laws for their own protection (1986b:36).

In *Church Dogmatics II, 2* (the doctrine of God) of 1942, he repeated the arguments of his lecture of 1927. However, he also added some new viewpoints to the argument. In short, this is what he wrote: Ethics is for Barth the teaching of God's command. It explains the law, but then as part of the gospel. God's law is therefore the norm by which the elected person must live.

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God’s law is part of God’s will. Man knows God’s will only through Christ (not through historical events like political successes). Thus, ethics forms part of the doctrine of God. By making ethics part of the doctrine of the loving God, the law must be seen as part of his love for mankind. The law is therefore the good law, the law that ensures human freedom (Barth 1959a:603-612). God files a claim on our lives through his law. This claim is never a burden, rather the opportunity to experience freedom within the boundaries of his will (1959a:612-628). The content of this claim (*Anspruch*) is obedience to his commandments in the Old Testament and the New Testament. In other words: It expects “discipleship”. The law is therefore a gift to Israel as well as the church. It is not a general guideline for moral life. It is the guideline for a life of gratitude of the elected and liberated people of the covenant (1959a:628-648).

Many laws in life confront man. He can easily keep these laws as God’s laws. It is the task of Christian ethics to distinguish between God’s laws and the laws of society. The criterion, that should be applied in this exercise, concerns freedom. The Christian ethicist can use this criterion without any fear, because God’s law ensures freedom, whilst other laws create fear and imprisonment. This was just another reason why Barth referred to God’s law as the “form of the gospel”. God’s law brings freedom and joy. The believer is never a slave of alien gods and tyrants. It saves us from capriciousness (*Willkür*) that is a cornerstone of slavery of one’s own lusts and wishes, and consequently of self-destruction (1959a:648-701). In the light of this, Barth concentrates on God’s law as God’s “decision for us” (1959a:701-818). With joy we should acknowledge the fact that He and not the gods decides for us. He decides in his goodness for us. The good decision is that he gave us his law (1959a:791-818).

According to Barth, the law is also God’s judgement. Should we reject his law, we would reject his election, and would therefore have to bear the consequences of our decision. By rejecting his law, we reject his love, and that would bring God’s wrath over us (1959a:819-875).

2.2 The First Commandment

Friedrich Graf gives us, in his article, “The idol staggers” (*Der Götze wackelt*), ample information on Barth’s theological thinking prior to 1933. During these early years of his theological life, he developed an uneasiness with the civilian left-liberalism (*das bürgerliche Linksliberalismus*). As early as 1914, he theologially attacked the mainstream of cultural politics in Prussia. He identified the cultural-political life in the heart of Europe as “practical godlessness”. According to him God was manoeuvred out of society by the

cultural and political dreams of that time. He believed he had the calling to attack the “liberalism” of those years. According to him the civil-capitalistic social structure of Prussia rested upon an “ideal of that culture”. He saw in this “ideal” a worldview, and thus according to him, an ideology – and an ideology was an idol to him. In the first edition (1919) of his *Commentary on Romans* (1985:243), he described the values of liberal society as sinful. He explained liberal freedom as “Lordliness under the dominance of sin”. The individualism, self-deification and a lack of communion in the liberal world were to him nothing less than sin. He could find no other word than “sin” to describe that war of all against all, the culture of subjectivism, relativism, randomness (*Beliebigkeit*), absolute coincidence and absolute fancy-free lifestyle. He saw in “Liberalism” the production machine of idols. Because this worldview encouraged the emancipation from God, it produced a polytheistic society with all its gods or idols (Graf 1986:428-429). Barth’s involvement in “Socialism” was his protest against the pluralism and relativism of the early twentieth century society. He believed that “Socialism” could bring more harmony, solidarity, communalism, and cohesion to European society (Graf 1986:429). Barth’s involvement in the German church-struggle was, to him, more than a struggle against National Socialism in the church. It was also a struggle against the whole world of modern man, including “Liberalism” as the foundation of modern society. He said this himself on the 13th April 1937 (cf Graf 1986:435 footnote 62 for the references).

In March 1933, Barth (1986b) gave a lecture in Denmark called *The First Commandment as theological axiom*. This lecture paved the way for his resistance against the ideologies of his day. Before we come to his critique against the idols and ideologies, let us first take cognizance of his arguments about the importance of the First Commandment:

- To Barth, the First Commandment is one of the axioms of Christian theology. To believe that there is only one, true God, and to adore, trust and thank him alone for what we are and have, is one of the prerequisites of theology. This is the heart and basis of our faith. We cannot differ on this matter in the church.
- This commandment is written in the Bible. We cannot have a critical discussion about its truth or relevance. We in the church can only give an exposition and obey the commandment (1986:129-130).

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- The First Commandment is written as a report on an historical event (an event of God talking to man) but then not to man in general. God spoke to us, as his chosen people and said: *I am your God. You shall not have other gods!* (1986b:130).
- This commandment should be understood as a commandment. God did not provide us with information about himself. This is not a revelation about divine truths. This is a commandment (*Befehl*). He describes himself as God because he demands (*fordert*), commands (*gebietet*) and prohibits (*verbietet*). This commandment rests upon the decision by God to be our God, and our decision to allow him to be our God (1986b:131).
- This commandment should be explained from the perspective of its prehistory (*Vorgeschichte*). The God that speaks here, is the God of the Exile, the redeemer, the liberator, the God who acted in freedom and mercy, the powerful and graceful God. The God of the commandment has already shown his power and mercy. This commandment is therefore built upon the Gospel. The God that speaks here, is the God of the church (*Deus ecclesiae*), the God that should be understood from the perspective of the New Testament (1986b:132-134).

By 1933 Barth realized that the situation in Europe has changed. The church was confronted with a new danger, namely ideologies that functioned like religions. These “new, unfamiliar religions” of the thirties of the twentieth century, were to Barth more dangerous than the “older worldviews” of the first decade of that century. The reason: Politicians discovered new gods and promised that these new gods could bring well-being and even “salvation” to the nations (Barth 1986b:93-99).

It is well known (cf Busch 1978 for all the information) that he fiercely attacked Fascism as a “wrong religion” (Barth 1986b:94).² It is less known that Barth also rejected “Russian Communism” and “Americanism” with its disguised idols “health” and “cosiness” (*Behaglichkeit*) as “new false religions”. These demonic religions – Communism, Fascism and Americanism

² What not many people know is that he started making critical remarks about National Socialism at a relatively late stage. Only as late as 1928 he started supporting the critique against the laws concerning the Jews. This does not mean that he was unsympathetic towards the Jews or that he underestimated Hitler. He trusted that theologians in Germany would draw the necessary consequences from the First Commandment to oppose Hitler (cf Graf 1986:436). As we know, the “Confessing Church”, however, remained a small minority.

– are, according to Barth, structurally identical because they integrate elements of Christian religion into autonomous cultural values and present the new system as a new religion that could offer “salvation”. Faith in the nation (Fascism) and the belief in the individual (Americanism) produce the same god, namely trust in man and his abilities with the exclusion of God (Graf 1986:438).

In 1938 Barth lectured on God’s revelation as the abolition (*Aufhebung*) of religion. These lectures were published in *Church Dogmatics I/2*, paragraph 17 (1960a:304-397). Barth (1960a:324-356) worked with the thesis that religion is unbelief (*Unglaube*). He asserted that all religions, also the Christendom of that time, are not *the* true religion. The only true religion is the one that is built upon God’s revelation and faith (1960a:306-324). He therefore rejected all kinds of “natural theology”. The gods of natural theology are always creations of man himself and therefore transgressions of the Second Commandment. These gods are idols or false gods (1960a:331-356). The only true “religion” is the Christian faith that relies on God’s revelation in Jesus Christ (1960a:356-397).

In 1943 Barth lectured under the title “The creator and his revelation”. In the summer he spoke about “God and the gods” (*Gott und die Götter*), whilst “Faith and the worldviews” received attention in the first part of the winter semester. The original idea was to publish these lectures as paragraph 42 of the *Church Dogmatics*. They were, however, never published as he originally had in mind. The ideas were incorporated into other aspects of his work. As already said, he never gave a reason for this decision (Stoevesandt 1986:457). One reason could have been that he feared that theologians might concentrate on things unworthy of attention. He wanted them to concentrate on God, not the idols. Another reason could have been that he soon realized that the gods, the ideologies, the idols and evil were “nothing” really, and without the capacity to survive.³

In the years that followed, he seldom used this type of terminology explicitly. Only in his last lectures of 1961/62 (published as *Evangelical theology: An introduction*) he again explicitly used this type of terminology. It does not, however, mean that he left the theme aside. On the contrary! His whole *Church Dogmatics* is in a way an explication of the First Commandment (God and not the gods), its foundations and consequences (Stoevesandt 1986:458-460).

³ He later described evil as nothingness (*das Nichtige*) and something without the capacity to keep on existing (*Unwesen*) – cf Stoevesandt (1986:465) for all the references.

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Barth gave special attention to two themes in his exposition of the First Commandment namely a) God and the gods, and b) worldviews and ideologies as idols.

2.2.1 God and the gods

As early as 1916 (thus before the first edition of the Commentary on Romans) he said that the god of European culture and religion, the god of Liberal theology, the god of the “new Protestants” (*Neuprotestantismus*), is an idol. He said: “Es ist hohe Zeit, uns fröhlich und offen zu gestehen: dieser Gott, dem wir den Turm von Babel gebaut haben, ist kein Gott. Er ist eine Götze. Er ist tot” (Stoevesandt 1986:461). It was against this background that he started to use the phrase “God is God” since 1916 (cf Stoevesandt 1986:461, footnote 13 for all the references). He thus realized very soon that the god of German culture was an idol and that this idol was not the God of the Bible.

The theologian Gerhard Kuhlmann asked Barth in July of 1934 whether they should now believe in his god, after he has unmasked all other images of God as gods. He replied in a letter of 17th July 1934:

Wenn ich selbst vor jener Frage stehe, so tröste ich mich ja auch nicht des “Gottes” meiner Dogmatik. Er mag als solcher mit der Instanz, die das große Woher und Wohin jener Existentialmetaphysik bildet, nur zu viel Ähnlichkeit haben. Aber abgesehen von allen Göttern, abgesehen auch von dem meiner oder jeder andern Dogmatik kann man ja auch an Gott selbst glauben. Was will ich denn mit meiner Dogmatik? Doch nicht auf meinen “Gott”, sondern auf Gott selbst hinweisen als auf den Gott, an den der Mensch glauben soll und kann, auch wenn ihm alle Götter dieser Welt als Götzen entlarvt sind: gerade dann, erst dann! Glauben kann? Ja weil er an Jesus Christus ... selbst glauben kann.

(in Stoevesandt 1986:475)

In February/March of 1935, Barth gave 16 lectures on the main issues of theology at the University of Utrecht. The lectures were in the form of an exposition of the Apostle’s Creed. Referring to Romans 1:18-19, he (1964a:11-14) made strong remarks about God and the gods. He said that our human knowledge of God is not a preparation for the gospel⁴. Our knowledge or ideas about God are always self-made idols. Even the “unknown God” of

⁴ Kwame Bediako (1997 and 2000) is one of the African theologians that work with the thesis that African Traditional Religion is a preparation for the gospel. Without these religions, the gospel would never have been accepted by Africans. The views of Barth and Bediako put us in front of a serious missiological choice that must eventually be made.

the Athenians is also an idol. Even our knowledge about God is not really God. It is an idol. We can only rely on God's revelation for knowledge about him. We should therefore only believe in the God that reveals himself to us. In his own words:

These are the indicatives that explain the imperative of the First Commandment: Thou shalt have no other gods before me! The grace of revelation compels the dethronement of the other gods by, first of all, forcing us ourselves down into the dust. He who believes lives by grace. He who lives by grace knows that he is forbidden to snatch at deity. He who knows that can indeed know the gods of the human heart, but he can no longer regard them as gods alongside of God. "I believe in God" therefore means: I believe in the one, the incomparable, the *only* God. The uniqueness of God is not a religious postulate nor a philosophical idea, but something that corresponds exactly to the uniqueness of God's revelation.

(Barth 1964a:14-15)

In his lectures on the *Scottish Confession of 1560* in 1937/8 in Aberdeen, Scotland, he accepted the fact that there are many gods and masters. The gods that he had in mind in those years were the divinities of ideologies, mythologies, philosophies and religions. He also knew that the gods were not only to be found somewhere in the world, but also in our own hearts. Without denying God, one can see oneself as a god. This happens often, because people want to be gods (with the consequence that they then give up their own humanness). The only way we can fight idolatry is by believing in the One God who revealed himself in Scripture. Faith in the One God is the disposure of the idols – that even includes the god of Mohammed (1938:53-57).

In the *Church Dogmatics IV, 2* of 1955, he made further remarks on God and the gods from the perspective of the First Commandment. He again said that the God of Islam is an idol because this god is not a human God. He is not one who can come out of his own glory. A God that wants to be God only for himself is not the true God. The true God is Immanuel, the Father of Jesus Christ (1964c:45,432). In this volume he also exposed the gods of the peoples. On the basis of 1 Corinthians 8:5 he accepted the reality of the gods. Very often, the gods are the gods of the peoples. Over against that, he asserted that the God of the Bible is not a peoples' god. He is the universal God, the God of all the peoples (1964c:237, 871). The gods of the peoples have often to do with the "realities of life" (*Gegebenheiten* or *Lebensordnungen*); realities like family, values, honour and possessions. The moment when these things gain importance above all other things, we are already on the road of idolatry. The family as absoluteness, the values of the

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people as absoluteness, the honour of the people as absoluteness are all idols, and Christians should stay away from that (1964c:615).

In 1956, the almost seventy-year old Barth looked back on his early work and acknowledged that he himself fell into the trap of talking about God in terms of a god. Barth (1956:9) referred to his use of the term “totally other” or “wholly other” (*der ganz Andere*).⁵ He realized that this god was also not the God of the Bible, but a philosophical idol. He acknowledged that this “totally other” of Schleiermacher is not a human God like the God of the Bible. In the light of the First Commandment he (1956:14-15) said: “Es wäre eines falschen Gottes falsche Göttlichkeit, in und mit der uns nicht sofort auch seine Menschlichkeit begegnete. Solche falsche Göttlichkeit sind in Jesus Christus ein für allemal zum Spott gemacht ... Der Gott Schleiermachers kann sich nicht erbarmen. Der Gott Abrahams, Isaaks und Jacobs kann und tut es.”

After his retirement, he had another opportunity to lecture. During the winter semester of 1961/62 he gave a series of lectures that was a “summary” of his work of the previous decades. These lectures were published in English under the title *Evangelical Theology: An introduction*. In these lectures, Barth yet again, talked about God from the perspective of the First Commandment. This is what he had to say:

But many things can be meant by the word “God”. For this reason, there are many kinds of theologies. There is no man who does not have his own god or gods as the object of his highest desire and trust, or as the basis of his deepest loyalty and commitment. There is no one who is not to this extent also a theologian. There is, moreover, no religion, no philosophy, no worldview that is not dedicated to some such divinity. Every worldview ... presupposes a divinity interpreted in one way or another and worshiped to some degree, whether wholeheartedly or superficially ... Such an alternative object might be “nature”, creativity, or an unconscious and amorphous will to life. It might also be “reason,” progress, or even a redeeming nothingness into which man would be destined to disappear.

(Barth 1980:3-4)

⁵ The use of this phrase is a mystery to me. Not once (according to the register of the *CD*) did Barth use this metaphor in the *CD*. In the books and journals available to me I could also not trace one paragraph where one can read about God as the “ganz Andere”. It is only in an article of Gerhard Ebeling (1969:343) where I have come across something. According to Ebeling, the early Bultmann referred once to “das ganz Andere”. He, however, got this wording from Rudolf Otto and not from Schleiermacher. I therefore confess my lack of knowledge. Hopefully someone will be able to provide me with the necessary references. An article on this topic would be welcomed. This phrase is used often in many circles in the NHKA. Without references to the texts, it will eventually become an embarrassment.

He then went that one step further by saying again that even theologies have their own gods. Evangelical theology should therefore speak only about the God of biblical revelation. It should not even dare to speak about the “wholly other” - *das ganz Andere*”, because that would also be an idol (1980:10). In those important days of modernity, he also identified progress (and man of progress) as a god (1980:11). He ended his lecture on the idols by reaffirming that the only way we could be obedient to the First Commandment is by believing in the correct way. He reminded us that the Christian faith is not a general belief, not a *credere quod*, but a *credere in* the God of the Bible (1980:103).

2.2.2 Worldviews and ideologies as idols

In his exposition of the First Commandment he (1986b:134-135) said that the biblical texts say nothing about the existence of other gods; only that we should not rely on them. The Israelites should not divide their hearts between God and the gods of other peoples. “I am your God and you should have only me as your God”. The difficult question is: What are “other gods”? Barth fell back on Luther’s definition who said that a god or an idol is that in which man puts his trust, what he believes in, from whom he expects to receive what he loves, and who protects him from what he fears. A “god” is what man hangs his heart on. Gods could therefore be: Money, possessions, pieces of art, cleverness (*Klugheit*), violence, goodwill (*Gunst*), friendship, and even good works. “Gods” are that what is the last resort of trust and hope, that what keeps someone going, and that what is the basis of one’s peace of mind (*Lebensruhe*).

In this direction-giving lecture he (1986b:135-143) said that the transgression of the First Commandment starts with the “ands” in theology and church-life. He referred to the following theologians: Schleiermacher who worked with revelation *and* religious feelings; Ritschl with revelation *and* cultural ethics; Troeltsch with revelation *and* the history of religion; Brunner with the commandments *and* the ordinances. He carefully said that we cannot judge whether people working with an “and” are true believers or not. We should, however, ask critical questions about their enterprise. If it is a human necessity that we always must talk about faith *and* culture, reason, morality and so forth, then the criterion for the discussion should be God’s revelation and commandment and not the other way round. Faith and revelation should not eventually be replaced by culture, morality or reason. Barth was very critical about the modern Protestant theology of those years. He complained that theology itself was disappearing behind culture, philosophy and ideology. He critically referred for instance to Bultmann. According to him, the God of

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Bultmann was just another word for “neighbour”. He sternly warned the church that certain aspects of culture should not be given divine quality because that would eventually endanger the integrity of the church. His struggle against “natural theology” was in the deepest sense of the word the struggle about true obedience to the First Commandment. Barth was not blatantly judgemental about the others around him because he acknowledged that every theology has its own idols. Idols are there where we expect them the least – namely in our own hearts. The First Commandment therefore forces us into a critical approach to all theologies – including our own.

In his lecture on the 5th December 1938 on “The church and the political questions of today” (*Die Kirche und die politische Frage von heute*), he specifically identified “German National Socialism” as an idol that should be rejected. According to him, this ideology was not only a political experiment, but also a religious program of salvation. It was not only a political problem, but also a religious problem. Christians could not be neutral on this question. Those who were not critical towards that ideology were, according to Barth, not faithful to Jesus Christ. Christians could not support that dictatorship. He said that National Socialism was not even a worldview. It was to him the “new Islam and Hitler was the new Allah”. He described it as “a fanatic secular religion” and an “anti-Christian opposing-church” (*eine antichristliche Gegenkirche*). Christians could not be part of that political system. He saw an evil god behind it. The anti-Semitism of that political party was anti-Christian. It was sin against the Holy Spirit. It rejected the grace of God and destroyed the true state. Christians were called upon to pray for the fall of the regime and the re-installation of a true state and government. That was a matter of urgency because he saw the unity of the church being destroyed (1939:27-51).

In the unpublished lectures of 1943 he equated the theme “God and the gods” with the theme “faith and worldviews”. He saw these themes as the two sides of the same coin. He knew that God did not create other gods. The gods or idols exist because people make “as if” they were creations of God. The gods are in fact creations of man. People create these idols and put them in the place of God. The gods are however, nothing. The weakness of the gods is that they depend upon human worship, veneration and advocates. They disappear when the humans that created them die. The major distinction between God and the gods is that the real God goes out to people; he does not wait for them to venerate him; he shows love and does not wait for their counter-love. He shows mercy and does not need anything in return. This is the difference between God and the *quasi* gods (Stoevesandt 1986:467).

Barth acknowledged the fact that the gods have an advantage in plausibility (*Plausibilitätsvorsprung*). They can be identified. God, on the other hand, lives in a light that cannot be entered (1 Tm 6:16). Human beings can know the gods (mainly due to propaganda, Barth said), but they cannot know God. We can only know God when he reveals himself to us. The existence of the gods can be proven, whilst the existence of God cannot be proven by humans. However, a proven god is not God. Barth had been asked many times what Christians should do to combat that false religion. He always said: "Nothing at all". He said that conquering the gods already happened in Jesus Christ. He made them redundant. The only task of the church is to direct people to Christ. Should we try to *do* something to conquer the gods, we would also fall into idolatry. Faith is therefore not a worldview; faith in God does not need a worldview. Real faith is thus liberation from worldviews⁶ and its gods (Stoevesandt 1986:469-474).

In 1945 Barth (1957:390-394) left the political struggles aside for a moment and concentrated on the Christian faith and the modern scientific worldviews. He asserted that the Christian faith is not a worldview. A worldview works with knowledge and being, and not revelation. It looks at progress or regression of life and constructs theories on that. The doctrine of creation does not attempt to construct these theoretical types. It is therefore neither "neology" nor "ontology". Barth argued that the doctrine of creation should never be transformed into a worldview, and that Christians should learn not to rely on a worldview. This doctrine should also not be used to substantiate a worldview. This doctrine has its own task, namely to speak about the revelation of the creator. It should not try to overthrow scientific knowledge. It should simply proclaim the gospel as revealed in scripture.

In the summer of 1946 Barth returned to Bonn. In the ruins of the stately *Kurfürsten Schloß* he gave lectures on the *Apostle's Creed*. These lectures were first published in 1947. The English version carries the title *Dogmatics in outline*. In this semester, just after the war, he had time to reflect with the German students on what went wrong since 1933. The views that he expressed in that semester were exactly the same views that he held before the war. The fundamental problems in the time of National Socialism were the lack of critical thought and the inability to recognize that we can only know God from his self-revelation in Christ (and therefore not from the unfolding political history). Barth (1966:9-14) said that the lack of critical dogmatic thinking was one important reason for the crisis in Germany. He asserted that Dogmatics is a science. As a science it should critically evaluate the preaching of the church in a specific era in the light of the Bible and the

⁶ Interestingly Barth once thought about something like a "Christian worldview" in a positive way (*CD III/3*, 64-66, but soon rejected it again (*CD IV/3*, 293-299). Cf Stoevesandt (1986:474) footnotes 35 and 36 for all the information.

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confessions of the church. Without this critical activity, heresies develop. And this happened before and during the World War. According to Barth there were two reasons why God’s self-revelation (and the authority of Scripture) went begging in Germany: Firstly, wrong faith and secondly, the trust in idols. Both these issues come back to obedience and disobedience to the First Commandment.

- Barth explained that faith is a gift from God. This gift is the freedom to hear the Word and the freedom to accept his grace and the freedom to trust his goodness. Real faith, therefore, does not trust false gods, because it obeys the First Commandment. Barth said trust in things that are wrong, is not faith at all, and

[s]o also trust in any sort of authorities, who might offer themselves to me as trustworthy, as an anchor which I ought to hold on to, has become frail and superfluous. Trust in any sort of gods has become frail and superfluous. These are the gods set up, honoured and worshipped by means in ancient and recent times: the authorities on whom man relies, no matter whether they have the form of ideas or of any sort of powers of destiny, no matter what they are called. Faith delivers us from trust in such gods, and therefore also from fear of them, from the disillusionments which they inevitably prepare for us again and again. We are given freedom to trust in Him who in distinction from all other authorities is and will remain faithful.

(Barth 1966:19)

- Barth had been convinced that trust in false gods or idols was a basic reason for the catastrophe of the World War. Not only was it trust in the “peoples’ God of the Germans” that misled the people of Europe, but also the trust in gods outside the Christian faith. When man speaks of “God” outside the Christian faith, Barth (1966:35) said, he is usually

... the object of the universally present and active longing, the object of man’s homesickness and man’s hope for unity, a basis, a meaning to his existence, and the meaning of the world; he means thereby the existence and the nature of a Being who, whether in this or that connexion with the realities other than Himself, is to be regarded as the Supreme Being that determines and dominates all that exists.

He (1966:36) continued:

God is not to be found in the series of gods. He is not to be found in the pantheon of human piety and religious inventive skill ... When we Christians speak of 'God', we may and must be clear that this word signifies *a priori* the fundamentally Other, the fundamental deliverance from that whole world of man's seeking, conjecturing, illusion, imagining and speculating ... the God of the Christian Confession is, in distinction from all gods, not a found or invented God or one at last and at the end discovered by man; He is not a fulfilment ... of what man was in course of seeking and finding.

The God of the Bible is totally different from the gods. Once we discovered the God of the Bible, there is no need for another god. The other gods are nothing compared to Him. This is the secret of the First Commandment. There is also no need to transgress the Second Commandment. There is no need to make an image of the God that reveals himself in Christ. We need no imagery for this revelation – not reason, art, politics or culture (1966:40-41).

In the summer of 1947 Barth lectured on the *Heidelberg Catechism* (without any written notes) in Bonn. He (1964b:17) argued that the Christian doctrine (*Christliche Lehre*) is not a description of an idea or a worldview. Faith as such can never be a worldview. He asserted without any hesitation: "Every conception and every presentation of a God who is not this three-in-one God, however beautiful and profound it may be, can only set up an idol, a false image of God" (1964b:57). According to Barth, this was the heart of the problem of those previous decades. National Socialism invented a national god and presented it as the God of Christianity – and the people, uncritically, believed that.

In 1948 (1959b:3-20) Barth warned the church in the same breath about gods, worldviews and idols. He stated that dogmatics does not have the task to develop a "Christian worldview" on man or reality. The biblical message does not contain an "ontology of heavenly or earthly things". He saw worldviews as a fall from faith and a fall into the worship of idols.

In 1959 he (1959c:293-295) again expressed the opinion that worldviews are transgressions of the First Commandment. Worldviews (magical, naturalistic, political and historical) try to understand and explain reality from one limited, personal point of view. They create the expectation that life and history will continue to be the same and that life will happen according to this understanding of reality. A worldview is thus an attempt of man to understand him by human standards – simply for the sake of human understanding.

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In 1960 (we suspect) Barth lectured on “the Lordless powers” (*die Herrenlosen Gewalten*). These lectures are taken up in the *Church Dogmatics IV, 4* (the Lecture Fragments) that deals with Christian life. In these lectures (1981:213-233) he referred to the evil forces as the ideological “isms”. The most dangerous “ism” is the evil of political absolutism. Political absolutism is behind evil governments and inhuman empires (the Leviathan) that promise nations a paradise on earth. He had named not only communism, but also capitalism as dangerous ideologies that deprive people of their freedom and sense of responsibility (1981:219-222). He told his audience that one can identify evil ideologies by their slogans and catchwords like “Germany wake up!”, “Africa for the Africans”, “biblical reformed insight” and “the American way of life”. Ideologies normally use propaganda that puts things in black and white perspective and acts apologetically and polemically for a political dream (1981:226). According to Barth, Mammon also functions as a second god. People trust Mammon for earthly security, but it also corrupts the human heart (1981:222-225). He lastly warned against the “chthonic forces” (*chthonische Mächte*). These earthly, visible forces draw people down to an earthly level. These Lordless powers of the earth are things like technology, sport, pleasure, transportation, travelling and constant movement (1981:227-232).

In answer to a question by an American magazine in 1961, who or what the most influential idols (*Götter*) in that time might have been, he answered as follows:

Der Ort, wo die falschen Götter stehen und verehrt werden, ist heute wie zu allen Zeiten zuerst die Kirche selbst. Sie glaubt an die Güte und Macht ihrer eigenen Tradition, Moral und religiösen Aktivität. Sie glaubt an die Vortrefflichkeit der Christen im Unterschied zu den sie umgebenden Indifferenten, Atheisten und Kommunisten. Sie glaubt an das von ihr entworfene Menschenbild, Weltbild und Gottesbild. Sie tut damit dasselbe wie die, die an das Geld, den Sport, die Technik, die Sexualität oder auch einfach an die Herrlichkeit eines bequemen Leben glauben. Die Kirche hat zu beweisen, dass sie selbst an den Gott glaubt, der die Menschen von allen falschen Göttern befreit hat.

(Stoevesandt 1986:457)

Barth correctly stated that the dangerous idols are not those that are already morally suspicious, like all the “isms” and the clearly identifiable gods like Eros and Mammon, but those who are not easily recognized like self-justification and the not-yet-questioned attitudes and aspirations of certain groups like political parties. Thus: the gods that are not yet identified as morally suspicious are the really dangerous ones (Stoevesandt 1986:462).

A question that is of great interest to us today is how do we deal with gods, ideologies and evil? Barth provided us through the years with thought-provoking answers. In an interview in 1968 on German Swiss Radio (broadcasted only on the 7th April 1969), he reminded his audience that he was an opponent of Liberal theology, although he himself was a liberal human being. "Liberalism" to him meant freedom from ideologies and openness towards the future. The biblical revelation made him free from "isms" and ideologies (including liberalism). It liberated him from nationalism, especially National Socialism. He favoured socialism, but was never a doctrinaire socialist. To him, freedom could never be individual freedom. Real freedom was to him the freedom to be part of the Christian community that shares in the freedom of God (1977:33-39).

In his life, the older Barth had been confronted by Soviet Communism. He (1969:63) publicly rejected the ideology because it presented itself as a doctrine of salvation. He, however, also rejected the American "solution" to this danger. In Chicago 1962 he warned against the American "theology of fear" and proposed a "theology of freedom" (1969:79). He could not see a solution in the politics of "combating the evil", but rather in the presentation of a better justice to the world (1969:57).

This last remark leads us to the question: What is our missionary task in a world filled with idols and ideologies? I am sure that Barth would have said that he had provided us, as far back as 1933, with an answer to this question. The task of the church amidst the idols and ideologies of the world is a missionary task. This missionary task is to refer people to the gospel. By discovering the true God of the Bible, ideologists will realize that the gods of their ideologies will not be able to provide solutions to their deepest needs. Let us listen to Barth himself!

Die Mission gegenüber den Religionen müßte anfangen mit dem Geständnis des "Christentums", daß es weiß, was die Verkündiger der Religionen nicht wissen, daß der Mensch im Dienste des einen wahren Gottes ein Armer ist, der Gott nicht entdeckt hat und nie entdecken wird, sondern immer nur dessen harren kann, daß Gott sich ihm entdecke. Wissend um diese Armut, müßten sich die Christen mit Kommunisten, Faschisten und allen andern Religiösen *solidarisch* wissen ... Wer an Gottes Offenbarung glaubt und also weiß, daß er hören und Gott reden muß, der ist eben dadurch sozusagen automatisch mit jedem Menschen verbunden: er wird auch in seiner Fremdreligion die gemeinsame Not und Frage, um die der Andere freilich nicht weiß, wiedererkennen. So verbunden mit ihm wird er mit *Autorität* zu ihm reden können.

(Barth 1986b:98-99)

One year later in 1934, Barth (1986e:169-170) gave us another piece of advice concerning the idols of the world. He said that we should simply ignore them (with the consequence of possible persecution). We must simply be church. The church is there, where people listen to the God of the Bible and obey him - not the gods or the “divine” (*Göttliches*). We thus deal with the idols when we rely on the God that reveals himself to us in the Bible and reject all other idols.

3. THE RELEVANCE FOR SOUTH AFRICANS⁷

It is a great disappointment that most theologians of the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk (NHKA) did not recognize the central role of the First Commandment (and the consequences thereof, for inter alia the ecclesiology) in Barth’s theology. The impression has often been created that this church had a great appreciation for the theology of Barth. How can one claim that honour, when dominant theological constructions of this church (like its ecclesiology) are in conflict with Barth’s exposition of the First commandment? How can we claim to be Barthian in our theology when we did not understand his central thesis and therefore uncritically tolerated ecclesiological views that were diametrically opposed to his theology?

In 1933 Barth wrote his famous booklet on “Theological existence today” (*Theologische Existenz heute*). This booklet was the launch of the resistance against the “German Christians”. The central theme had to do with the freedom of faith and the freedom of the church (cf Sauter 1986 for a systematic explication of Barth’s theology of freedom). Barth worked it out in detail why the Christian faith and freedom goes hand in hand. Christians should be free from ideological pressure and political captivity. Only in freedom can one hear and proclaim the gospel. Churches that turn politics into religion become the slaves of the politicians. Slavery prevents Christians to critically evaluate politics. An uncritical church eventually means nothing to the people because it cannot see dangers coming.

His “theology of freedom” was the main reason behind his critique against the idea of the “people’s church”.⁸ He said for instance on the 21st July

⁷ This paragraph is written in critical solidarity. Hopefully readers will not see this paragraph as judgmental arrogance. Although the First Commandment is a constant challenge to all Christians, we must display the maturity to discuss this theme also as a contextual problem. Theology is not only about faith in general. It is also about our faith – the people living here and now in South Africa.

⁸ He of course, also used other arguments in criticizing this ecclesiology. In 1944 he published the book called *Jesus and the people* (*Jesus und das Volk*). In this publication he concentrated on some of the most basic arguments against the idea of a “people’s church”. Barth (1944:6) said: “Die Leute sind nicht die Jünger. Das Volk ist nicht die Gemeinde, nicht die Kirche. Das Wort ‘Volkskirche’ ist, von daher betrachtet, ein seltsames Wort!”

1942 in a lecture, *The church in contestation (Anfechtung)*, that the respect of church leaders for the anti-Jewish laws in Germany is nothing less than a new form of emperor veneration, and therefore totally unacceptable. He expected the church to keep its distance from the politicians and especially politics with inhumane tendencies. Barth warned that a “people’s church” tend to rob the church of its freedom to speak out against inhumane politics. Well knowing that the church cannot turn its back on its own people, he once formulated the dilemma in the following way. He said; should the church turn away from national life, it shuts its own mouth. But, should the church become the spokesman for the political aspirations of the people, they – the people – will eventually shut the mouth of the church.⁹ Thus: the church cannot turn her back on political life, but should also not become the spokesperson for specific political ideologies. The church must maintain its freedom in order to be ready to protest and to resist the *Zeitgeist* when obedience to the First Commandment is at stake (1986g:294-299). It would be inappropriate for me to judge my predecessors. My appeal is that we should, today, listen to Barth. It is now our task to see to it that we maintain the freedom that one expects from a church that wants to stand in the legacy of Karl Barth. A free church will act as a political guardian and contribute to the social deaconate (*politische Wächteramt und soziale Samariterdienst*) – two of the tasks that Barth (1948:18) envisaged for the church of today.

The theology of Barth does not only have relevancy concerning political ideologies and the idea of the people’s church, but also regarding other present-day problems. In a lecture on the 27th August 1935 on the theological prerequisites for the shaping of the church, he (1986f:234-241) stressed the importance of unity of the national church. He warned against people who are destroying the unity of the church by enforcing upon the church one of the following three approaches:

- People with fascist tendencies who want to use the church to promote “national ideals” in the name of the gospel.
- People with liberal inclinations. They want to satisfy the needs of modern-day people beyond the basic needs like food, love and respect.
- People with a cultural-critical approach to life. These people want to incorporate all kinds of minority groups into the church. They want to use the church as a social construction to offer these minority groups a

⁹ This argument may not be clear to everyone. This is, however, Barth’s own argument, and I therefore keep it as he formulated it.

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better social standing. They expect the rest of the church community to fulfil these created social expectations.

I am certain that Barth would not object if I add a fourth approach to this list. Americanism is most probably a greater threat to the unity of the NHKA than the other three approaches. Americanism in the form of faith in the power of money is gradually corrupting our calling as ministers. When economic success replaces humble service to the weak, there is no hope to remain united. Americanism in the form of religious show business is threatening to destroy our common and proud European theological heritage. The desire of a section of the church to entertain has already destroyed, to some extent, our common theological tradition.

The NHKA is a church that is presently discovering the importance of its missionary task. In this regard we can and must learn a few important lessons from Barth. We must not only open our eyes to the unique forms of secularism in our country, but also to the new dimensions of heathenism. Missiologists need to urgently give guidance in this regard (1986f:233). However, we also have to learn from Barth that the heathen are also inside the church. We are the heathen. We are the first people who should listen to the gospel. The big battle about the truth of the gospel should be fought inside the church (Barth 1986c:101). We should always remember that mission starts and ends with theology (that is in the first instance exegesis – 1986c:112). Theology cannot end up in Missiology (1986c:111). Theology is the critical activity of the church that brings the church back to the basic issues of the Christian faith. This also counts for the Missiology of the church.

The theology of Barth is also relevant to the African churches. His theology can be helpful in many ways. The first important lesson that Africans should learn from Barth is to be critical in life. Ancestral traditions are not beyond criticism. Africans must develop the freedom to question all legacies. Without this freedom to evaluate, judge and criticise that which is handed down to them, they will remain slaves of inhuman and detrimental political systems, social constructions and religious ideas. The second lesson to be learnt from Barth is that the First Commandment should form the cornerstone of a theology that wants to be Biblical in nature. One of the consequences of this is that a confrontation between this commandment and the African notion of ancestorship has to take place sooner or later. African theologians, in many instances, avoid this confrontation at all costs. The new *Africa Bible Commentary* edited by Tokunboh Adeyemo (2006) has however, given a few steps forward towards a much needed theological confrontation. This theme is simply avoided in the sections on the Ten Commandments. The articles on

ancestors (2006:480) acknowledge the fact that African ancestors are sometimes seen as “gods” and that Christians cannot venerate Christ and their ancestors at the same time. The article on idolatry (2006:840) also warns that idols include spiritual beings (like ancestors). The writer of the article, Emeka Nwankpa, also concentrates on sacrifices, intermediaries and moral legacies. Without saying it openly, he lays the table for that confrontation which must come. The writer of the article on Yahweh and other gods, Abel Ndjerareou, cautiously said that the spiritual beings (the oldest ancestors) that Africans worship fall into the category of false gods, and that Christians should stay away from this type of religiosity.

The question of ancestor veneration is, however, a difficult theological question. In a next article I will concentrate exclusively on the relationship between the First and Second Commandments and African ancestors. Here I want to close with two quotations from two world renowned and highly respected Ghanaians on this matter. Kwame Bediako said the following, in spite of the fact that he acknowledge that ancestorship falls into the category of “myth-making” (2000:30):

... to take the ancestors from an African is robbing him from his personality ... Africans live with their dead. It becomes essential, therefore, that there should be a Christian theology of ancestors ... an Ancestor-Christology ... is meant to show that Christ, by virtue of his Incarnation, death resurrection and ascension into the realm of spirit-power, can rightly be designated, in African terms, as Ancestor, indeed Supreme Ancestor ... one of the values of Ancestor-Christology is precisely that it helps to clarify the place and significance of ‘natural’ ancestors ... Because ancestors ... remain in African understanding essentially human just like ourselves, they cannot therefore ultimately be rivals of Christ in Christian consciousness ... there exists a qualitative distinction between Christ as Ancestor and natural ancestors.

(Bediako [1995] 1997a:216)

Kwame Gyekye (1998:125-126) on the other hand, says the following:

If we consider the sayings of our traditional African sages, we would find that there is no good reason for us to stubbornly adhere to all aspects or elements of the ancestral heritage ... There is indeed a very significant Akan maxim that directly and clearly states the need to critically evaluate a cultural past. *A person cutting a path does not know that the part that has been cleared behind him is crooked* ... The path refers to the cultural values, practices, and institutions

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created and maintained by the forbears. The maxim means that later generations (including the present generations) are expected to take a critical look at their cultural heritage with a view to eliminating the “crooked” aspects of that heritage ... an evaluation of African traditions, then, must necessarily include an evaluation of the status of ancestorship.

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