



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Does Barth’s understanding of sexual difference conflict with his theological anthropology?

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Abstract

Faye Bodley-Dangelo argues that in his passive depiction of Eve in the *Church Dogmatics* Karl Barth truncates the agency of all women, thereby creating conflict between his theology of sexual difference and his theological anthropology, and denying women image-bearing humanity. This article challenges Bodley-Dangelo’s characterisation of ideal agency as active self-assertion and self-determination, arguing that for Barth the ideal agent – for which the paradigm is Christ – is one who self-dispossesses in response to the determining claim of the peculiar other.

Keywords: Karl Barth; Faye Bodley-Dangelo; I-Thou encounter; sexual difference

Criticisms of Barth’s construction of sexual difference as hierarchical, misogynistic and contrary to the mutuality of his theological anthropology have been manifold. Yet in *Sexual Difference, Gender, and Agency* Faye Bodley-Dangelo levels a novel critique at Barth; problematising not the components of his theology of male–female relations but instead the way in which they are ‘set in motion’.¹ Bodley-Dangelo locates active agency at the heart of Barth’s conception of both the christocentric *imago Dei* and the I–Thou relationship that constitutes this image. She argues that the passivity of Eve in Barth’s Genesis 2 account entails a truncation of the agency of all women, and so a denial of their image-bearing humanity. Further, she argues that Barth’s account of the paradigmatic I–Thou relation – that between men and women – is no I–Thou encounter at all.

I argue that Barth roots male–female relationships and image-bearing humanity not in the self-determining, self-asserting agent of Bodley-Dangelo’s definition (which is rooted in modern ideals of the free, rational subject, of which Barth was highly critical²), but in the I–Thou that is paradigmatically self-giving. I thus maintain that Bodley-Dangelo reads a modern preoccupation with active, self-determining agency into Barth’s Genesis account. In doing so she unmoors Barth’s theology of sexual

¹Rachel Muers, review of F. Bodley-Dangelo, *Sexual Difference, Gender and Agency in Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics*, in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 73/4 (2020), p. 358.

²See Scott A. Kirkland, *Into the Far Country: Karl Barth and the Modern Subject*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2016), pp. 1–54.

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difference from the broader context of his theological anthropology. By a closer reading of the text, this article offers a small corrective to a vein of Barth scholarship that argues that his theology of sexual difference deviates from his theological anthropology.

I begin by summarising Barth's anthropology, followed by an exploration of Bodley-Dangelo's analysis. I then challenge Bodley-Dangelo's emphasis on activity and the contention that Eve's passivity denies her the ability to be the I of genuine encounter and so also her image-bearing humanity. I maintain that Bodley-Dangelo's interpretation troubles relations at all levels of the *analogia relationis*, and that instead there is no reason why the I cannot be passive.

I go on to challenge Bodley-Dangelo's characterisation of agency, arguing that Bodley-Dangelo misinterprets Barth's understanding of what it is to be image-bearing humanity. While she is right that the heart of this humanity is 'being for others', which entails responsiveness to the divine claim in the human other, this responsiveness is not characterised by self-assertion but rather self-dispossession, modelled after the Christ who kenotically self-empties both within the Trinity and in his incarnation. For Barth, Christ's act of rescue in the incarnation and his death and resurrection are not characterised by the exercise of agency, but by its relinquishment.

I conclude by questioning Bodley-Dangelo's assertion that Eve represents model female agency. I argue that in Barth's thinking Eve alone is not intended to establish this paradigm, and that reading the passivity of Eve in concert with the activity the Bride of the Song of Songs offers a richer account of female agency in sexually differentiated encounter.

Barth's theological anthropology

Barth writes, 'The ontological determination of humanity is grounded in the fact that one man among all others is the man Jesus.'³ In a special sense Jesus is the foundation for what it is to be human in that he himself is human. However, Barth argues that we must be careful not to draw direct comparisons between Jesus and the rest of humankind, for Jesus – both fully human and fully divine – is the ground of anthropology by analogy and in his humanity only.⁴ This humanity 'is the image of God, the *imago Dei*', and as those analogical to Christ humanity can reflect this image.⁵ Crucially, Barth is clear to state that this image-reflection is not a faculty or attribute that humankind inherently possesses;⁶ rather, conformation to Christ's image-bearing humanity is a gift of God's grace which must be repeatedly received.⁷

Barth's understanding of the *imago Dei* is rooted in his exegesis of Genesis 1. Barth points out that 'the introductory formula' to the creation of humanity 'is ... not "Let there be" ... but "Let us make man"'.⁸ Here Barth points to the 'non-solitariness of God' in the trinity of the Godhead.⁹ Insofar as human beings are creatures analogical to God, if 'God is in relationship, [then] so too is the man created by Him'.¹⁰ As such,

³Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (hereafter *CD*), 13 vols, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. Forsyth Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–74), III/2, p. 132.

⁴Wolf Krötke, 'The Humanity of the Human Person in Karl Barth's Anthropology', in John Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), p. 167.

⁵Barth, *CD* III/2, p. 219.

⁶John Webster, *Barth* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), p. 120.

⁷Faye Bodley-Dangelo, *Sexual Difference, Gender, and Agency in Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* (London: T&T Clark, 2019), p. 78.

⁸Barth, *CD* III/1, pp. 182–3.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰Barth, *CD* III/2, p. 324; cf. Krötke, 'Humanity of the Human Person', p. 167.

the relationality of the triune God is analogically repeated in what Barth called the *analogia relationis* in Christ's fellowship with humanity, and in humanity's relations with one another.¹¹

Barth argues that it is this relationality, or encounter, that reflects the *imago Dei*. Image-bearing is derived from being *with* God and being *for* the human other.¹² This 'being for others' is realised in 'the true confrontation and reciprocity which are actualised in the reality of an "I" and a "Thou"'.¹³ As the *imago Dei* himself, Jesus is the archetype of this – the 'genuine I'.¹⁴ In this way, Barth reimagines personalist categories by grounding them in his christological and trinitarian theology.¹⁵

There are four movements of image-constituting 'being in encounter'. It is '(1) a being in which one man looks the other in the eye', such that the encounter of the I and Thou is one of mutual openness and receptivity.¹⁶ 'Being in encounter consists (2) in the fact that there is mutual speech and hearing.'¹⁷ The I must 'express itself to the Thou'.¹⁸ As such, I–Thou encounter is not merely receptive, a listening to the self-expression of the other, but 'spontaneous' and characterised by taking the initiative.¹⁹ This exchange is, crucially, reciprocal, with each person both listening and expressing themselves to the other.²⁰ The mutual seeing, listening and speaking of the I–Thou relationship facilitates the third attribute of the I–Thou encounter: 'the fact that we render mutual assistance in the act of being'.²¹ In this way the I is not merely *with* the other, but *for* them. If this aid-summons is not given or answered, then both the would-be recipient and giver are robbed of their image-reflecting humanity, for they are isolated from one another: in turning away from the Thou each cannot be an I. Finally, 'being in encounter consists (4) in the fact that ... it is done on both sides with gladness'.²²

Inherent to the I–Thou encounter is 'differentiation and connexion' – the former being crucial to the latter.²³ Barth writes that 'I and Thou are ultimate creaturely reality in their distinction as well as their relationship'.²⁴ It is precisely this difference that enables genuine I–Thou encounter, for without this confrontation with the peculiar other there would be no dialogue nor exchange, only monologue.²⁵

All I–Thou relations involve those who are profoundly different meeting in genuine encounter, but for Barth the eminent expression of this differentiation and connexion is

¹¹L. P. Stephenson, 'Directed, Ordered and Related: The Male and Female Interpersonal Relation in Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61/4 (2008), p. 439.

¹²See Krötke, 'Humanity of the Human Person', p. 160; and S. D. McLean, 'The Humanity of Man in Karl Barth's Thought', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28/2 (1975), p. 128.

¹³Barth, *CD* III/2, p. 208.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 222.

¹⁵M. J. McInroy, 'Karl Barth and Personalist Philosophy: A Critical Appropriation', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 64/1 (2011), pp. 45–63.

¹⁶Barth, *CD* III/2, p. 250.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 252.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 254.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 253.

²⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 252–3.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 260.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 265.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 292.

²⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 261–2.

²⁵Cf. George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), pp. 175–6; see also David Clough, *Ethics in Crisis: Interpreting Barth's Ethics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 83–4.

seen in relations between male and female.²⁶ Here sexual difference, which is for Barth humanity's primary and most pervasive point of distinction, is also its greatest point of connection. As such, 'the co-existence of man and woman [is] the original and proper form of this fellow-humanity'.²⁷ In this way Barth argues that male-female I-Thou relations (and paradigmatically those between husband and wife²⁸) reflect the *analogia relationis*: the I-Thou relations of the persons of the Godhead *ad intra* and the covenantal I-Thou relation between Christ and humanity.

Bodley-Dangelo on Barth

Bodley-Dangelo rightly notes that the I-Thou relationship sits at the heart of Barth's conception of the *imago Dei*: 'Divine-likeness resides in the human subject's hearing and responding to an address, becoming a "Thou" when confronted by an "I"'.²⁹ She argues that Barth identifies the Virgin Mary and her cousin Elizabeth as models of the hearing-and-responding human agency upon which rests the *imago Dei*. Each humbly hears the address of the divine I and responds by faithfully witnessing to it (with Elizabeth's husband Zechariah acting as a counter-example in his unbelief and consequent silence).³⁰ Bodley-Dangelo draws attention throughout her work to Barth's depiction of himself as a model agent in I-Thou encounter, who hears from God and witnesses to the divine address, in contrast with those who claim to know the truth through natural theology.³¹

Bodley-Dangelo shows how the nature of this faithful witness to the divine address is unpacked in Barth's exposition of the parable of the Good Samaritan. In this well-known Lucan narrative a lawyer asks Jesus who his neighbour is, and Jesus responds with a story about a Samaritan man who helps an injured Jew. Barth points out that it is the Samaritan himself who is identified as the neighbour in the story, not the man lying in the road. Barth concludes that the lawyer is intended to see that he himself needs a neighbour – that he is represented by the injured man in the road, and that the Samaritan figures the true good neighbour, Christ himself, who both reveals the lawyer's neediness and comes to his aid.³² This aid is knowledge of forgiveness in Christ, and the neighbour has a responsibility to ensure that the other is aware both of their neediness and this gift of grace. The neighbour does this by witnessing through their speech, the lending of assistance, their demeanour and their orientation towards God: in other words, by becoming an I in confrontation with the fellow-human Thou.³³

Bodley-Dangelo argues that in using the parable of the Good Samaritan Barth presents 'the divine likeness as the divinely enabled response to a miraculous gratuitous divine conferral'.³⁴ The *imago Dei* consists in the individual becoming a Thou in confrontation with the gratuitously generous divine I, and then responding to the divine I by becoming a neighbourly, assisting I to the fellow-human Thou. This twofold movement mirrors the double command to love God and neighbour, following the example

²⁶Krötke, 'Humanity of the Human Person', p. 168.

²⁷Barth, *CD* III/2, p. 292.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 288.

²⁹Bodley-Dangelo, *Sexual Difference*, p. 78.

³⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 32–5.

³¹*Ibid.*, pp. 34–5, 91, 94.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 51.

³³*Ibid.*, pp. 53–4.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 64.

of Christ. The human I is for fellow-humanity in response to divine gratuity, just as Christ is for his human siblings as an overflow of the I–Thou relations of the Trinity.

Bodley-Dangelo is right to identify that for Barth response to the divine claim in fellow-humanity (i.e. in being for one another) is at the heart of image-bearing humanity. Yet, crucially, Bodley-Dangelo characterises this imaging-conferring movement towards fellow-humanity as active and agential. She writes:

I am summoned to act, and so to imitate the model-neighbors presented to me in the biblical witness. A ceaseless activity of speech, act, and attitude is required: the inner reality of the subject's search for (love for) God must be expressed in the outer sign of activity directed toward the other.³⁵

Bodley-Dangelo goes on to argue that this active agency is attributed exclusively to Adam in Barth's exposition of Genesis 2, rendering the I–Thou relationship between Eve and Adam problematically static. Adam receives the divine address, which is the gift of Eve, and witnesses to it by naming her. In this act of speech Adam demonstrates his 'recognition and acceptance of the divine gift of the human other' – in other words, he exercises agency in choosing Eve and actively witnessing to her and, in doing so, comes to her aid.³⁶ By contrast, Eve refrains from speech and choice. Barth writes that Eve 'does not choose, she is chosen ... [Adam's] recognition and acknowledgement imply hers as well. As man chooses her, she has chosen him.'³⁷

Bodley-Dangelo argues that in this passivity Eve is robbed of the active, choosing agency through which she would recognise the divine gift that is Adam and come under obligation to respond to it.³⁸ Eve does not come to Adam's aid in speaking witness to him and consequently does not complete the second movement of the *imago Dei*-constituting I–Thou encounter, which is being for fellow humanity. Eve is addressed by the I, but does not respond, and so never becomes an active, agential I herself, remaining always the passive, receptive Thou. Bodley-Dangelo concludes that, because (in her reading) Adam is always I and Eve ever Thou, the Genesis account is not a true I–Thou encounter. Consequently, in company with Graham Ward, Eugene Rogers and Eloise Fraser, Bodley-Dangelo concludes that Barth's supposedly archetypal I–Thou relationship does not in fact model genuine encounter between the sexes.³⁹ Further, Bodley-Dangelo argues that Eve's agency is intended to be paradigmatic for all female agency, and therefore that Eve's passivity entails that all women are denied the active agency necessary to be an I.

If Bodley-Dangelo is correct and Barth does indeed gender I–Thou roles, then this is deeply problematic for his theological anthropology. As Bodley-Dangelo identifies, if woman is never the I who is truly for her fellows, then she is denied her *imago Dei*-reflecting humanity. Further, if woman is perpetually Thou and man ever I, then

³⁵Ibid., p. 55.

³⁶Ibid., p. 80.

³⁷Ibid., p. 99.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Graham Ward, 'The Erotics of Redemption – After Karl Barth', *Theology and Sexuality* 8 (1998), pp. 52–72; Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999); Eloise Fraser, 'Karl Barth's Doctrine of Humanity: A Reconstructive Exercise in Feminist Narrative Theology (Male, Female, Hierarchy)', Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1986.

both are denied their image-bearing humanity, for they are rendered 'inhuman' by their isolation from each other: lacking a Thou to confront, neither can ever be I.⁴⁰

In fact, if Bodley-Dangelo's assessment of the Genesis 2 account is correct, then Barth's entire theological anthropology and the *analogia relationis* at all levels fall apart. If I–Thou roles are gendered, then not only is the male–female relationship that Barth deems to be the eminent example of the I–Thou relationship not, in fact, an I–Thou encounter at all, but it fails to correspond with its defining basis in the relations of the Trinity. To image the Trinity male and female must *both* be I and Thou, just as each person of the Trinity is Thou and I dynamically.⁴¹ Further, if active agency characterises the I, then the parable of the Good Samaritan is also not a true I–Thou encounter, for the unresponsive injured Jew can never be anything but a Thou. This is highly problematic given that the parable of the Good Samaritan points beyond itself to the true good neighbour, Christ Jesus, the genuine I who comes to our aid. If only the active Christ figure of the Samaritan can be I, and the prone Jew who represents humanity only Thou, then Jesus's relation to us is not a true, mutual I–Thou encounter.⁴² This in turn would deny Jesus' humanity, which is predicated on his engaging us in a genuine I–Thou relationship.

It seems to suppose that Barth's theological anthropology is flawed to such an extent that it taints every layer of the *theologia relationis*. And, indeed, it is; for this static understanding of the I–Thou is the result of an incorrect reading of agency in Barth. For Bodley-Dangelo, image-bearing humanity necessarily involves active, self-determining agency, and so by this reading Barth's theology of sexual difference cannot be reconciled with his theological anthropology. Yet I argue that neither of these things are constitutive of the *imago Dei* for Barth.

Activity

Bodley-Dangelo maintains that the I must be active in responding to the Thou. She draws this conclusion from the narrative of the Good Samaritan, arguing that the Samaritan is a model of the 'ceaseless activity' of the I.⁴³ Yet the Samaritan's activity is only the decisive model of I-ness if we conclude that he is the only I in this encounter; and if only the Samaritan is an I, then this is not an I–Thou encounter at all. So, either the Samaritan tells us nothing at all about I–Thou encounter (because he is not engaged in one), or the Jew must also be I in a manner expressed entirely differently from the Samaritan – in passivity rather than in activity.⁴⁴

It is not the case that the injured Jew's passivity prevents him from being an I in response to a Thou. As the Samaritan responds to the divine address by faithfully witnessing to the injured Jew, he is also responding to the Jew's claim upon him. Even as the Jew lies prone, he makes a claim on the Samaritan and in this becomes an I in confrontation with a Thou. In being claimed by the Jew the Samaritan, in turn, becomes a Thou in confrontation with the human I, even as he is the I who lends aid to the human Thou. In the story of the Good Samaritan we see the oscillation of I and Thou roles characteristic of Barth's understanding of genuine divine encounter.

⁴⁰Barth, *CD III/2*, p. 263.

⁴¹McLean, 'Humanity of Man', p. 131.

⁴²God as both I and Thou is explored in Webster, *Barth*, p. 98.

⁴³Bodley-Dangelo, *Sexual Difference*, p. 55.

⁴⁴Indeed, just as the I can be passive, so it seems that for Barth the Thou can be active. See Barth, *CD III/2*, p. 253.

Bodley-Dangelo might respond that the I cannot be passive, because for the I to respond to the Thou they must enact speech and aid-lending. Yet in the parable of the Good Samaritan the passive I witnesses and speaks in the mere fact of his being – he is a religious rival to be shunned or welcomed, an injured man to be helped or walked past, an I demanding the attention of the Thou. Similarly, the passive I lends aid by facilitating the image-reflecting humanity of the other: through his expressive neediness the Jew makes a claim upon his neighbour for aid and so enables the Samaritan to be for his fellow human and reflect the *imago Dei*. In so doing, the Samaritan becomes a Thou claiming the aid of the Jew as I.

This oscillation of claim and counterclaim can also be seen between Adam and Eve. Barth writes that ‘Woman created by God and brought to man reveals herself by her existence. She convinces by her presence. She cannot be mistaken, but can be recognized without any effort on her part.’⁴⁵ Eve expresses herself and witnesses to God by her very being, causing Adam to respond with recognition to her as a gift. In her self-expression Eve claims Adam, inducing his response. Similarly, in claiming Adam, Eve aids him, for it is through his response to her claim that he conforms to the *imago Dei*; and, in turn, Eve, by aiding Adam in his conformation to Christ, is herself conformed. Eve passively claims Adam’s aid and chooses the gift of God in Adam, just as he chooses her.⁴⁶ In this passive agency she is the Thou who claims the I, and in turn an I who chooses and is claimed by the Thou.

Bodley-Dangelo might point out that Barth characterises the I as initiative and argue that Adam alone initiates encounter through his active agency. Rachel Muers similarly challenges Barth’s depiction of Eve as the ‘answer’ to Adam’s initiating question. She argues that:

The shape and content of the question–answer exchange is ... determined entirely by the requirements of the initiating questioner ... [T]o say that the creature-as-question contains ‘within itself’, or requires by its nature, a particular completing answer, is not to say that it effects or controls its own completion; the answer is sought by the man but given by God. None the less, by this characterization the woman is determined before her creation as that which fulfils a ‘lack’ in man; and the erotic relation is determined as a relation founded on lack.⁴⁷

In this way, Muers maintains that Eve as answer is subject to and determined by the requirements of Adam’s initiating question, and that, as such, Eve’s completion of Adam is a kind of subordination. Yet it makes little sense to say, that a question has logical priority over its answer, or that it determines that answer; for a question seeks in an answer that which is greater than and pre-exists itself. Eve as answer does not truly respond to Adam, but rather Adam responds to Eve’s pre-existing claim upon him with a question. This claim is the need for Eve which has been embedded within Adam’s heart by the Creator. From this perspective, it is Eve who is the initiating party in the encounter, in that her nature provokes Adam’s questioning and determines the character of his need (although, truly, it is God who initiates, and who causes Eve and Adam to need and respond to the gift of God in one another). Similarly, the Samaritan’s

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 328.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 304.

⁴⁷Rachel Muers, ‘A Question of Two Answers: Difference and Determination in Barth and Von Balthasar’, *Heythrop Journal* 40/3 (1999), p. 266.

'questioning' aid-lending is provoked by the presence of an 'answer': the injured Jew who lies in his path, demanding his help. In this way the Jew determines the Samaritan by the nature of his claim, not the other way around. In both cases, Eve and the Jew initiate encounter and determine the other in their passivity.

Self-determining agency

Bodley-Dangelo might continue to argue that this passive depiction of the I does not display the agency that she argues constitutes being for humanity. Bodley-Dangelo maintains that in Barth's Genesis 2 account his

description of sexual difference and the relationship between the sexes is ... plagued by his effort to maintain the complete humanity of women as fully functioning agents, while nevertheless securing some sort of agential prerogative for men that consequently diminishes and restrains female agency.⁴⁸

Yet Barth's conception of human agency is very different to Bodley-Dangelo's. In *Sexual Difference* Bodley-Dangelo reads humanity's being for others as a self-assertion, whereas for Barth being for others is a self-dispossession.

Bodley-Dangelo sees in Christ's aid-lending I-Thou encounter with the rest of humanity the assertion of agency in order to save the world.⁴⁹ She argues that 'the most important feature of the would-be-imitator of Christ, [is] the ethical spontaneity that effects an initiating move toward and on behalf of others'.⁵⁰ This move toward and on behalf of others is a 'performance' of 'speech, act and attitude' modelled after the exemplary 'I's of the biblical narrative.⁵¹ It is this dynamic, agential imitation of the self-expressing and aid-lending actions of Christ that constitutes, for Bodley-Dangelo, the being for the other that sits at the heart of image-bearing humanity – and it is this kind of agency that she sees lacking in Barth's representation of Eve.

Yet Barth sees in Christ not the assertion of agency but its relinquishment, as Christ obeys the Father and allows himself to be determined by the human Thou. For Barth the agency of the I is significant insofar as Christ exercises it to 'elect obedience' to the will of God and so his own self-dispossession.⁵² The I of Barth's understanding is one who does not assert his agency for the good of the other but gives away his very self to his fellow.

This difference in conception of the ideal agent can be seen in Bodley-Dangelo's understanding of the I-Thou, which is more Buberian than Barthian in character. For Martin Buber, genuine encounter includes relationships with non-human subjects, such as trees.⁵³ This entails that the I-Thou relation occurs *between* each self-contained party, not *within* them – for a tree has no 'within'. The result is that the I and Thou remain relatively unaltered by that meeting.⁵⁴ Barth resisted this conception of the

⁴⁸Bodley-Dangelo, *Sexual Difference*, p. 83.

⁴⁹Kirkland, *Into the Far Country*, pp. 1–7.

⁵⁰Bodley-Dangelo, *Sexual Difference*, p. 117.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 54.

⁵²Eberhard Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, trans. Garrett E. Paul (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1986), p. 88.

⁵³Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1937), p. 6; H. P. Santmire, 'I-Thou, I-It, and I-Ens', *Journal of Religion* 48/3 (1968), p. 260.

⁵⁴McInroy, 'Karl Barth and Personalist Philosophy', 60.

I–Thou, critiquing Buber in a 1944 lecture on the grounds that, in his rendering of the I–Thou relation, one remains ‘undisturbed in one’s substance’.⁵⁵

This Buberian account of the I–Thou is consonant with a modern conception of the ideal self-determining human agent who is free from the limitations of definition by the other. This perspective reflects Immanuel Kant’s description of the Enlightenment as ‘man’s emergence from his self-imposed minority’ – emergence into a world in which human rationality is absolute in determining the nature of reality, rather than being determined by an external authority.⁵⁶ Barth disapprovingly argues that in modernity

Man, who discovers his own power and ability, the potentiality dormant in his humanity, that is, his human being as such, and looks upon it as the final, the real and absolute, I mean as something ‘detached’, self-justifying, with its own authority and power, which he can therefore set in motion in all directions and without any restraint – this man is absolute man.⁵⁷

Barth argues that the anthropology of absolute man leads to the individualisation of faith: ‘Individualisation means the enthronement of man – not of humanity, but of man, of the man experiencing himself here and now as the secret, yet for himself supremely real king of at least the sublunar world.’⁵⁸ This individualisation leads to the ‘supersession of all alien external authority in favour of the inner, personal authority of the man whose ultimate foundation as an individual is in himself’.⁵⁹ In this way the agent ‘obtrudes himself’ upon the external world, leading to the ‘appropriation of the object to be the purpose of his domination’.⁶⁰ This appropriation of the object extends to other human agents, who are to be assimilated to, or at least not to challenge, the absolute man’s authority to define himself and the world around him. In other words, in the Christianity of the absolute man, fellow-humanity ‘is no longer to disturb me by his otherness ... Community is not to disquieten me, but to strengthen me.’⁶¹

In a similar way, in Bodley-Dangelo’s Buberian understanding of the I–Thou male and female are entirely self-contained and act upon each other from a position of self-determined, undisrupted agency.⁶² Yet in this account the I–Thou relationship is fundamentally diminished, becoming an encounter in which each agent makes the other the object of their authority and action. By contrast, for Barth true I–Thou encounter takes place in the very being of those involved, who are profoundly disrupted and irrevocably changed by the exchange. In this way, the I and Thou are not self-governing free agents, but utterly determined by each other. Hunsinger writes that for Barth, ‘The fellowship that God wills with us is not “external and casual,” but “internal and essential.” It involves the most “inward and central and decisive” act of our heart, in which “our existence cannot continue to be alien to his but may become and be analogous.”’⁶³

The paradigmatic result and sign of the profound internal movement of I–Thou encounter is God’s great act of fellowship with humanity: the incarnation. Here God

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. McGregor (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), p. 12.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 22.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 99.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 103.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 99.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 102.

⁶²Kirkland, *Into the Far Country*, pp. 1–4.

⁶³Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, p. 174.

in Christ 'does not remain outside [humanity], as he gives himself to them, as in the divine power of his Spirit he unites himself with them'.⁶⁴ This giving of himself involves the giving of Christ's very life on the cross – the ultimate act of self-dispossession.⁶⁵ Jesus allows himself to be determined by humanity to the extent that he takes on our sinfulness and suffering.⁶⁶ our 'whole plight [is] now his own'.⁶⁷ In this way, the Barthian I–Thou relationship is characterised by an eccentric existence, whereby the I and Thou live so fully in the other that their whole existence is centred on the other.⁶⁸ This eccentricity is essential to image-bearing humanity, for 'being human is a function of the relation borne to us by another, and a very particular other'.⁶⁹ Humanity is fundamentally *derivative* from God and the human other; never unoriginated nor spontaneous. As such the most 'genuine human under-takings' are responsibility and gratitude, for these are acts that are always in response to and determined by the other.⁷⁰

As Scott Kirkland observes, there is 'a movement of noetic (and ontic) dispossession that shapes Barth's entire oeuvre to the extent that he finds himself unable to accept the terms of the turn to the subject' seen in modernity.⁷¹ For this reason, Barth's conception of true humanity is incompatible with Bodley-Dangelo's self-determining, self-asserting ideal agent. Instead, in Barthian kenotic I–Thou relationship, the I and Thou are utterly determined and dispossessed by the peculiar other.⁷² Therefore, the significance of the responsiveness that Bodley-Dangelo identifies at the heart of the *imago Dei* is not in the opportunity to exercise active agency, but in the fact that responses are always derivative: dependent on the claim of the other. Following the example of Christ, the I is one who empties herself on behalf of the other, becoming claimed and so determined by the Thou who confronts her. This self-dispossessing agency is fully consonant with the representation of the passively agential Eve we see in Barth's account.

Eve as the paradigmatic passive female agent

So far, I have argued against Bodley-Dangelo's contention that in her passivity Eve cannot be the I of true encounter and resisted Bodley-Dangelo's conception of Christ-like agency as self-determining self-assertion rather than self-dispossession. Bodley-Dangelo goes on to argue that the representation of Eve's agency in Barth's Genesis 2 account – and, for her, its truncation – is to be understood as paradigmatic for all female agents. She writes that in Barth's account,

Eve says and does nothing at all, her immobility illustrating the docility and restraint that Barth (now himself playing Adam) recognizes and declares to be biblically normative for female agency in its subordination to the divinely guided process of male decision-making.⁷³

⁶⁴Barth, *CD* IV/3, p. 542.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Clough, *Ethics in Crisis*, p. 84.

⁶⁷Barth, *CD* III/2, p. 213.

⁶⁸Barth, *CD* IV/3, p. 548; cf. Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, p. 174.

⁶⁹Webster, *Barth*, p. 121.

⁷⁰Ibid., pp. 121–5.

⁷¹Kirkland, *Into the Far Country*, p. 6.

⁷²Bruce L. McCormack, 'Karl Barth's Christology as a Resource for a Reformed Version of Kenoticism', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8/3 (2006), p. 248.

⁷³Bodley-Dangelo, *Sexual Difference*, p. 92.

Yet elsewhere Bodley-Dangelo acknowledges that Mary and Elizabeth are expressly cited as Barth's models of hearing-and-responding human agency, with whom Barth draws parallels to himself in his act of theological reflection.⁷⁴ Similarly, she notes the active agency of the Bride of the Song of Songs – a 'seeking, choosing, speaking female agent'⁷⁵ – whom Barth explicates in favourable contrast to the passive agency of Eve.⁷⁶ Barth writes that in the Song of Songs 'woman ... now answers just as loudly and expressly as she is addressed by [man]. ... It is she who now seeks him with pain and finds him with joy.'⁷⁷ Here Barth introduces the actively agential bride who seeks her husband with expressive gladness.

Bodley-Dangelo identifies these women as anomalies in Barth's overall truncation of female agency, revealing incoherence in his thinking.⁷⁸ Yet to over-emphasise the passive agency of Eve and dismiss other portrayals of the female agent is to overlook Barth's characteristic mode of theological discourse. The themes of Barth's *Church Dogmatics* are crafted gradually over several volumes, with topics repeatedly returned to and considered from different angles.⁷⁹ As such, in order to begin to understand the fullness of Barth's conception of model female agency one must attempt to read synthetically across his corpus and hold all examples of the female agent together.

When considering the nature of female agency within sexually differentiated encounter, we see that Barth explicitly identifies the marriage relationship described in the Song of Songs as a continuation of what has been begun in Genesis 2: 'It is in this book alone [of the Old Testament corpus] ... that Gen. 2 is developed.'⁸⁰ Barth points out that in the vocal, seeking, actively agential Bride of the Song of Songs 'we have here a note which cannot be heard in Gen. 2', and in this Barth sees the central claim of Genesis 2 – that humanity is only truly human in genuine, I–Thou encounter – taken up and 'enlarged'.⁸¹ Crucially, the note of active female agency 'heard' in the Bride of the Song of Songs is not *absent* in Eve in her encounter with Adam, it is merely not *audible*. In the Bride of Song of Songs, that which is present but unheard in Eve is vocally expressed. Contrary to Bodley-Dangelo's contention, in the actively agential Bride of the Song of Songs, we find not a contradiction of passively agential Eve but her expansion.

Bodley-Dangelo's dismissal of the Bride of the Song of Songs might be traced back to the fixedness she reads in Barth's depiction of male-female I–Thou encounter. If there is no oscillation of I and Thou between male and female, then the Adam–Eve tableau represents the totality of genuine encounter: it is a static phenomenon. Yet if it is true, as I have argued, that Eve can passively be the I of genuine encounter, then the Adam–Eve tableau is set in motion, and the alternation of I and Thou necessary for genuine encounter and the *imago Dei* can occur. Once the fluidity of the I–Thou exchange is recognised, we see that Genesis 2 does not define I–Thou encounter in totality, for by its nature the I–Thou is an ongoing and continuous back-and-forth. Instead, the exchange between Adam and Eve is the inauguration of a genuine encounter between

⁷⁴Ibid., pp. 32–5.

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 106.

⁷⁶Barth, *CD III/1*, p. 313.

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Bodley-Dangelo, *Sexual Difference*, pp. 106–12.

⁷⁹Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, p. 28.

⁸⁰Barth, *CD III/1*, p. 313.

⁸¹Ibid.

male and female which continues beyond this particular scene. In the interaction of the Bride of the Song of Songs and her beloved, we see the continuation of the paradigm for I–Thou encounter between male and female. Here we are presented with woman as an actively agential I and Thou in relation to man, offering an expansion of Eve’s passive agency and enriching the paradigm for female agency.

Conclusion

Bodley-Dangelo argues that Barth’s theology of sexual difference cannot be held together with his theological anthropology. She contends that Barth establishes Adam as the perpetually active agential I and Eve as the ever passive non-agential Thou, thereby denying woman her image-bearing humanity. However, by reading Barth closely it is possible to identify the point at which Bodley-Dangelo and Barth’s conceptions of the I–Thou diverge, and so argue that Barth’s theological anthropology and theology of sexual difference are not in conflict.

I have argued that Eve’s passivity in the Genesis 2 account does not deny her agency nor the mutuality of the *imago Dei*-constituting I–Thou relation. Bodley-Dangelo’s conception of encounter is hampered by an imported modern concern with active, self-determining agency and a Buberian conception of the I–Thou. Instead, I have identified that it is not the assertion of agency, but rather its relinquishment that is modelled by the supreme I, Christ himself, and so grounds true humanity and genuine encounter.

Finally, I have concluded that in *Sexual Difference, Gender and Agency* Bodley-Dangelo fails to read female agency synthetically across Barth’s corpus. Consonant with the cumulative nature of Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*, Genesis 2 is not by itself intended to be an isolated norm for female agency. Instead, the Adam–Eve encounter is merely the inauguration of an I–Thou relationship that is ongoing and dynamic, in which both male and female act as actively and passively agential I and Thou, as demonstrated by Barth’s expansion of passively agential Eve with the actively agential Bride of the Song of Songs. By holding together both Eve and the Bride of the Song of Songs, it is possible to find in Barth a far richer account of female agency in sexually differentiated I–Thou encounter.