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Letter to Elisabeth S. Hilke, August 5, 1974

Elisabeth S. Hilke (1938–) sent Frei some of her work on Barth while working toward a PhD thesis, eventually completed as “Theology as Grammar: An Inquiry into the Function of Language in the Theology of Karl Barth,” Yale 1976. This is an excerpt from Frei’s response. He begins this letter with support and encouragement for the work Hilke is doing. Frei then goes on to articulate his own understanding, providing an illuminating insight into his interpretation of Barth’s thinking on hermeneutics and theological language, and his sense of the harmony and dissonance between himself and Barth on those questions. (CPH 1974k. YDS 2–42)

Barth himself underscored the importance for his own thought of his *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*. It deals with some of the things you tackle. About five pages from the end of the book (p. 165 of the English translation) he says, in comment on the fool’s denial of God’s existence:

When one thinks falsely, and from the foregoing that means directing one’s thinking abstractly to the *vox significans rem* without knowing the *id ipsum quod res est*—as one must think as an *insipiens*—then it is really possible to do what according to the Proof of *Proslogion* 2–3 is impossible. By the miracle of foolishness it is possible to think of God as not existing. But only by this miracle.

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Anselm had certainly not reckoned with this. His statement, and his proof of the statement, “God cannot be thought of as not existing,” rests on the assumption of the *intelligere id ipsum quod res est*. His thinking is, as he admits, the thinking of *fides quaerens intellectum*. How could it think only the word “God”? How could the word that is spoken to it about God be but an empty word? It starts out from the knowledge of God himself whose existence it wants to know.¹

I draw your attention to that passage—typical of the thrust of the book—because it seems to me to illustrate something quite typical in Barth: some things he says are compatible with two quite different, possibly contrary ways of commenting on what he is doing, and yet the two contrary ways *may* in his case be properly complementary rather than contradictory. For what he seems to me to be saying in effect is that indeed “essence is expressed by grammar,” but for a peculiar reason: when one thinks rightly about God (and the conditions for that may include a lot of things, such as ordering one’s life rightly) one knows not merely the signifying word but the reality itself to which the word refers. Let us for a moment ignore the fact that in many cases (including the hermeneutical remarks in I/2) Barth obviously operates with a signifying or referential theory or at least use of language—the kind that Wittgenstein, in the opening remarks of the *Investigations*, finds so misleading and limited. That’s an important matter, but I’ll come back to it under the third point I want to make. So in this context Barth could be understood to be saying, “Yes, essence is expressed by grammar, but that is because the real object fits itself to our concepts and words.” In other words, Barth has—in the example cited as in many other places—something suspiciously like a correspondence theory of truth. In regard to language about God he makes a logical distinction—though not a material separation—between language (understood as functioning conceptually rather than semantically) and knowledge, between depth grammar and epistemology. Then he claims material agreement or correspondence between our concept of God and the reality to which the concept refers. There is correspondence between concept and God, and between language and concept used referringly. The upshot of the situation is that one can say that, for Barth, in this instance, grammar expresses essence because that’s the way God has arranged the relation between reality, knowledge, and linguistic use or meaning. It is as much an ontological affirmation and

1. Barth, *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, 165–66.

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an epistemological one (Barth might call it “noetic”) as a grammatical one: you can pick it up at either end, I understand Barth to suggest. It makes no difference because (per *analogiam fidei*) there is, in the proper use of “God,” material agreement where there is logical distinction. But the logical distinction is there: let me remind you that Barth obviously believes that there is material agreement between a proper doctrine of the Word of God and a proper way of talking about the knowability and knowledge of God. The former is a way of rightly arranging our thinking about the church’s language (and in a way it is a slant on his whole enterprise), the language of proclamation. But then (once again, logically distinctly though in material agreement) in *KD II*, he talks about how it is that in, with, and through the Word of God it makes sense to say that we know God—not how we arrange our language about him—and there he refers the reader to the Anselm book (*KD II/1, 2*). And that book so clearly indicates not only a reference theory of language but a correspondence theory of knowledge and truth (over and above “language as grammar.”)

[At this point Frei turns to offer some general suggestions for the improvement of her essay, and then returns to exposition of Wittgenstein and Barth:]

Wittgenstein’s religious followers, precisely because they have a “descriptive” rather than an “explanatory” theory to work with, tend to deny that they are using a general theory, or that they have a meta-level operation. I have always been dubious about that claim, and because of that dubiety of mine and Barth’s (to me sound) suspicion of every general philosophical theory either to explain what he was doing or convict him of wrongdoing, I have always felt that Wittgenstein taken as more than suggestive, taken very systematically, is perhaps not a good guide for describing what Barth does after all! You see, to put it in a nutshell, there are times when Barth really wants to make very strong and specific truth claims, and times when he uses language clearly cognitively, in sharp dissent from those who claim it operates that way only when also used self-involvingly (or existentially). There are times when he just doesn’t seem to be using language in a way that one can fit under the rule, “language is a form of life.” Now that doesn’t mean—for example—that he feels that the theologian isn’t bound to have to be qualified personally in order to do theology: he or she has to be so qualified! But Barth has no theory—and I think he would strenuously resist any theory—of language that explains how he can get his personal statements

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about the theologian and his conceptual statements about theology into one framework. Thus, I think you are wrong on p. 183 when you claim that he substitutes a statement about the theologian for a hermeneutics. Admittedly he has no special biblical hermeneutics, but he does most decidedly have a general hermeneutical procedure in I/2 (§19.1; §21.2), and he doesn't think that talking about a theologian's personal qualifications eliminates the need to talk about hermeneutics. The question is not *whether* he believes that theological language is both self-involving and (for example) referential or cognitive or descriptive. He does. The question is *how* he wants to ground that coherence between vastly different uses of language all appropriate to the Word of God. I think he wants to leave it with the Word of God and does not want to bolster it by any meta-level theory, even a minimally-descriptive one of how we actually use language, such that it can be both self-involving or performative or a form of life, and also cognitive or descriptive. My hunch is that he would regard any theory as reductive, grounding one's use of language in another—and usually making the distinctly “religious” self-involving use the more basic. Well, he might not be right about himself, were he to say that sort of thing. And I may be wrong about him.

[The letter then closes with more personal advice.]