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Half-Way Emancipation Essay-review of Suzanne Selinger, *Charlotte von Kirschbaum and Karl Barth. A Study in Biography and the History of Theology*

A refreshing and nevertheless well-balanced contribution to Historical Theology is presented by Suzanne Selinger in her outstanding book on Charlotte von Kirschbaum and Karl Barth.¹ I feel challenged to present her approach and to discuss her methods both because of the person of Charlotte von Kirschbaum and her contribution to a Protestant doctrine of women and because of the convincing way that Suzanne Selinger explores Charlotte von Kirschbaum's relationship to Karl Barth and her contribution to their shared theological position. Suzanne Selinger admits to having had prejudices, especially from a feminist standpoint, and I respect her ability to move beyond them to develop a more complex and unique view by consulting a rich variety of sources. In so doing, Suzanne Selinger shows us how Historical Theology can draw on psychological and biographical insights without losing its own theological perspective. It becomes clear that Historical Theology needs to listen to these different historical aspects in order to fully understand the intention and relevance of these theological thoughts. Specifically, the Dialectic Theology of Karl Barth (and of Charlotte von Kirschbaum) itself compels us to perceive theology not as an abstract, timeless and absolute system but rather as a process of dialogue among humankind (man and woman) and of encountering and answering in our present time what we recognize as God's unique revelation happening in biblical time.

¹ Suzanne Selinger, *Charlotte von Kirschbaum and Karl Barth. A Study in Biography and the History of Theology* (Pennsylvania: State University Press 1998).

Charlotte von Kirschbaum: Life and Publications²

Charlotte von Kirschbaum was born in 1899 in Bavaria as the daughter of an aristocratic family. Influenced by World War I, she signed up for professional training as a nursing sister with the German Red Cross. Her interest in theology led her to make the acquaintance of Karl Barth and in 1929 she accepted his invitation to take her into his household as his private secretary. From that time she assisted him in his administrative duties as a professor. Searching herself for theological perspectives for contemporary society, she also inspired him in his theological work. She matched his theological thinking so well that she was able to represent him in discussions with his students and friends by answering their letters to Barth and by serving as delegate on church conferences during the German *Kirchenkampf* (Church Conflict). During her professional training as a Red Cross nurse and later through her participation in *Soziale Frauenschulen* (Women's Social Schools) in Munich and Berlin, she came into contact with the women's movement. This interest in women's issues was incorporated into her dialogue with Karl Barth, and he specifically integrated gender aspects into his Church Dogmatics at CD III,1.2.4. In 1949 and 1951 Charlotte von Kirschbaum herself published a series of lectures, in which she developed a Protestant doctrine of woman.³ In 1950, she acted as translator of a Dutch publication which criticized the Roman-Catholic understanding of parish ministers, criticism with which she strongly agreed. Further, she was also engaged as a leader of the Swiss branch of the resistance movement *Freies Deutschland* (Free Germany). She passed the last ten years of her life in a kind of mental absence, suggestive of Alzheimer's disease, and died in 1975, seven years after Karl Barth's death. She is buried in the Barth family grave.

Suzanne Selinger's Biographical Approach

Some questions arise immediately from the contemplation of Charlotte von Kirschbaum's life and these have often been asked: Was her illness caused by exhaustion through her work done for Karl Barth? Was her spirit over-

² Cf. Doris Brodbeck, "Charlotte von Kirschbaum (1899-1975). Dialektik von Eigenständigkeit und Unterordnung," in: Bruno Bürki and Stephan Leimgruber (eds.), *Theologische Profile. Schweizer Theologen und Theologinnen im 19. Und 20. Jahrhundert* (Freiburg i. Ue.: Universitätsverlag/Paulusverlag 1999), 173-183 (with bibliography and further literature).

³ In English translation: *The Question of Woman: The Collected Writings of Charlotte von Kirschbaum*, translated by John Shepherd, ed. and with an introduction by Eleanor Jackson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1996).

shadowed by Karl Barth's personality? Did she write parts of his publications? Did they live a romantic liaison? Suzanne Selinger picks up these questions and discusses them. She reminds us that there is a medical consensus that Alzheimer's and similar kinds of dementia are not caused by exhaustion and stress factors (10). She does ponder, however, whether Karl Barth may have exploited Charlotte von Kirschbaum's abilities (40f, 76).

Suzanne Selinger asks what these two persons signified in their respective lives. She emphasizes Karl Barth's deep loneliness, arising from his feeling of not being understood, and underlines that loneliness by exploring psychological interpretations of his dreams.⁴ Suzanne Selinger suggests that these dreams indicate that Barth must have experienced his mother and his wife as very dominant against him, more than he could bear. He told Eberhard Busch that his loneliness ended when he met Charlotte von Kirschbaum (6), and Suzanne Selinger recognizes in this grace-filled experience of having found a dialogue partner the primary reason for Barth's turn towards christology and God's grace (83). Thus, she suggests, the term 'romantic liaison' may not fit the complex reality of this relationship. Instead, their relationship was apparently what they both sought to describe as an 'I-Thou relationship': an encounter which allowed each of them to develop their respective personalities – even if only partially. Suzanne Selinger recognizes that Charlotte von Kirschbaum may not have had enough space to pursue and formulate her own projects, although she had her own interests, which she considered as distinct from the work she did for Karl Barth. In CD III,4 he cited her ideas by an explicit reference to her publication (89-90). Charlotte von Kirschbaum, who "proved her loyalty by becoming totally dependent on him," was not threatening for him, and so he could listen to her (83). The suggestion that Charlotte von Kirschbaum may have written parts of his work seems to be unsupported. Suzanne Selinger argues that Karl Barth's style of writing did not change after Charlotte von Kirschbaum became unable to be his assistant. Moreover, although Karl Barth used to involve his assistants in his working process, he formulated his texts independently (58-59, 76-78).

Beyond a Hierarchical Doctrine of Woman

Suzanne Selinger picks up Hannelore Erhart and Leonore Siegele-Wenschke-witz's suggestion that Henriette Visser't Hooft was "using Barth to correct

⁴ Wolfgang Schildmann, *Was sind das für Zeichen? Karl Barths Träume im Kontext von Leben und Lehre* (Munich: Kaiser 1991).

Barth” in her correspondence with Karl Barth.⁵ Suzanne Selinger does this not only with the aim of correcting Karl Barth’s “notoriously hierarchical and antifeminist” doctrine (21), but also to enable other aspects of his doctrine to be seen. Both Karl Barth and Charlotte von Kirschbaum based their doctrine upon their vision of the *Imago Dei* as a male/female I-Thou relationship (119-124). This is truly new in CD III,1, where Karl Barth developed an understanding of marriage and sexuality based on the I-Thou relationship, distinct from family and procreation (153). At the same time, Charlotte von Kirschbaum in her writings emphasized also the valuable nature of the unmarried state. Suzanne Selinger especially mentions that Charlotte von Kirschbaum goes farther than Karl Barth in speaking about Mary as the first person who experienced the incarnation of God in her body (109). Unlike the Roman Catholic doctrine of Mary as the “Queen of Heaven”, Charlotte von Kirschbaum appreciated the reality of Mary’s encounter with God’s grace rather than seeing her “as possessing God’s grace” (114). Suzanne Selinger also cites Charlotte von Kirschbaum’s interpretation of the women in the gospels, who in their encounters with Jesus anticipated the role of believers and of the Christian community (115).

Charlotte von Kirschbaum studied Simone de Beauvoir’s existentialist doctrine intensely and agreed with her social analysis of gender stereotypes and of patriarchy. Together with Karl Barth, Charlotte von Kirschbaum criticized gender spheres and typologies of the sexes (115, 158). They disagreed also with the status of women within patriarchy as object, emphasizing instead a relational concept that accepts the ‘otherness’ of both genders as necessary counterparts or complements (*Gegenüber*). Although Suzanne Selinger is reminded of Lacan’s thesis of the other as “the signifier’s treasure”, she recognizes the I-Thou relationship as a kind of counter-truth, where “the other is you or I or some other real being” (134, 191).

Karl Barth – fearing autonomous women – maintained “Romantic notions about women” (159) which understood women to be more passive than men. He was, however, generally convinced that both genders would actively

⁵ Hannelore Ehrhart and Leonore Siegele-Wenschkewitz, “Vierfache Stufenleiter abwärts...: Gott, Christus, der Mann, das Weib. Karl Barth und die Solidarität und Kritik von Henriette Visser’t Hooft,” in: Renate Jost and Ursula Kubera (eds.), *Wie Theologen Frauen sehen – von der Macht der Bilder* (Freiburg i.B.: Herder 1993), 142-158, here 155. – Suzanne Selinger shortens the quotation, which is: “Sie [H.V.H.] argumentiert mit (dem an ordnungstheologischen Entwürfen Kritik übenden) Karl Barth gegen (den im Hinblick auf die Geschlechterkonstruktion an Ordnungen festhaltenden) Karl Barth.”

choose each other as their counterpart and as a mystery to each other (160). In response to this, Charlotte von Kirschbaum described women as active and contradicted Karl Barth's denial of creativity in women and his portrayal of an active-passive dichotomy between male and female (161). She was also very sincere in her attempts to confront scriptural problems that could injure the integrity of women, while Karl Barth did not recognize this to be a problem, even when he was asked about it by Henriette Visser't Hooft Boddaert.⁶ Besides the discussion of 1 Tim 2.8-15 mentioned by Suzanne Selinger (161) it is interesting to note also in this context Charlotte von Kirschbaum's comments about 1 Cor 11.3 and Eph 5.23,⁷ where she explicitly confronted exegetes who claimed that women had no immediate access to redemption and to Christ.

Reflections on Suzanne Selinger's Approach

My summary has certainly missed some aspects of this very rich and densely-written book. I esteem the way in which Suzanne Selinger has pondered different arguments and sources, and I appreciate the concept of her book and the way in which she considers two persons in their personal reliance and collaboration. I greatly value Suzanne Selinger's accurate knowledge of the writings and the theology of Karl Barth, and also her use of oral sources, which enable her to paint a more complete and definitive picture of his theology and of the way in which it was shaped by his personality and his personal history. Suzanne Selinger's book can help us revise our prejudices and explore the impact of the personal relationship between Charlotte von Kirschbaum and Karl Barth on their theology. She successfully avoided the creation of new prejudices, while at the same time pointing out the limitations of a theological position based on hierarchies of superiority and subordination.

Suzanne Selinger does not aim in this book to reposition Karl Barth and Charlotte von Kirschbaum fully in relation to contemporary women's issues in the churches and the women's movement. Neither does she provide a more far-reaching discussion of the theology developed by Charlotte von Kirschbaum. But, despite the relatively small number of papers published by

⁶ Cf. also Jürgen Moltmann, "Henriette Visser't Hooft and Karl Barth," in: *Theology Today* 55 (1999), 524-531.

⁷ Doris Brodbeck, "Zur Unterordnung der Frau. Henriette Visser't Hooft (1899-1968) und Charlotte von Kirschbaum (1899-1975) in ihrer Auseinandersetzung mit dem Theologen Karl Barth," in: Doris Brodbeck, Yvonne Domhardt, Judith Stofer (eds.), *Aufbrüche von Frauen im Protestantismus, Katholizismus, Christkatholizismus und Judentum* (Bern: eFeF 1998), 41, 46.

Charlotte von Kirschbaum and the little of her own correspondence that she kept (she was always more concentrated on Karl Barth's work than on her own issues), it should now be possible accurately to understand and further to deepen Charlotte von Kirschbaum's own insights into the fundamental theological position she shared with Karl Barth, and which Suzanne Selinger elaborates here. This would be worthy of further consideration, as would be the part played by the concept of gender as presented by Karl Barth and Charlotte von Kirschbaum in the debates of the German and Swiss women's movement, in the struggles of women theologians who sought employment as parish ministers, and in the context of the women's commission of the World Council of Churches.⁸

I would also welcome a continuation of the discussion about the meaning of subordination of women and about what sort of non-patriarchal reply we can give when this biblical, social arrangement is used as a metaphor for God's revelation. We should remember that Karl Barth understood 'order' (Ordnung), not as a timeless natural or divine law, but as the shape of the revelation of the divine. In each era, believers must respond to this metaphorical order in an individual and concrete way that may differ from the examples found in the Bible, even while sharing their intent. In consequence of this understanding of biblical revelation, Charlotte von Kirschbaum interpreted the Pauline commandment of silence for women as a metaphor, with biblical women symbolizing the need of humankind (both men and women) to listen to God's word. She concluded that for the churches of her time, this symbolic listening may be better demonstrated by speaking about one's faith. This paradoxical interpretation of the instruction to silence is already a form of women's emancipation, however much it might have been intended to avoid any escalation of gender struggles, as Hermann Diem supposed when he read her comments on the discussion about women ministers in the *Bekennenden Kirche* (Confessing Church).⁹

Although Charlotte von Kirschbaum alluded to a patriarchal context by using the word "subordination", she wished to subvert patriarchy into con-

⁸ For the contact with WCC compare Jürgen Moltmann, "Henriette Visser't Hooft and Karl Barth," 525-526; Doris Brodbeck, "Zur Unterordnung der Frau," 39-41.

⁹ For example Hermann Diem to Ernst Wolf Nov. 1, 1942 (Federal Archive of Koblenz), published in: Dagmar Herbrecht, Ilse Härter, Hannelore Erhart (eds.), *Der Streit um die Frauenordination in der bekennenden Kirche. Quellentexte zu ihrer Geschichte im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner 1997), 338-339. Her text is unfortunately not included in this collection.

ceding that women are real subjects who act as believers and who are not simply objects of domination. Her argument reminds me of the thought of the French philosopher Luce Irigaray, who much later was to emphasize the idea of overcoming patriarchal orders, not by opposing, and thus strengthening and stabilizing, the order, but rather by bearing patriarchal roles as long as necessary while ‘crossing this mirror’ of roles by knowing ‘another’ personal standpoint besides patriarchy.¹⁰ In my view, this rewriting of subordination may be an acceptable feminist way to handle patriarchy. It may be an alternative to a more confrontational way, especially since Charlotte von Kirschbaum (and Karl Barth) also pointed to the concrete abuse which had to be overcome. We should probably also consider that Charlotte von Kirschbaum did not experience an international Christianity with mutual gender partnerships, as did Henriette Visser’t Hooft, but instead had to overcome the aristocratic tradition of her own family and the patriarchal tradition of Karl Barth’s. Although, or perhaps also because, his father Fritz Barth was already engaged in women’s issues and women’s emancipation,¹¹ Karl Barth harboured strong fears about these questions. Given this personal context, subordination could not change to gender-mutuality in a single step either for Charlotte von Kirschbaum or for Karl Barth.

In addition Charlotte von Kirschbaum was not personally involved in the social and political activism of the women’s movement; nor was she a part of the situation of women theologians in the Protestant churches, who fought for ordination as ministers and to keep their employment in parishes after World War II.¹² And none of the several emancipated women theologians among the friends of Karl Barth and Charlotte von Kirschbaum dared to confront them with contemporary experiences and struggles of women in such a way that those experiences could have been integrated into their Dialectic

¹⁰ Cf. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum de l’autre femme* (Paris: de Minuit 1972).

¹¹ Fritz Barth, Professor in Church History and New Testament in Bern, Switzerland and member of the Church executive there, published in 1903 a brochure about the position of women in Biblical Theology and contemporary Ethics. He also presented and supported the right of women to vote in churches within the debates of the Church Parliament of Bern and on a national level.

¹² I refer to the reviews of Charlotte von Kirschbaum’s publications collected in the Karl Barth Archive in Basel (Switzerland). Among many positive comments by male theologians and a few women, such as the Swiss theologian Dorothee Hoch, a friend of Karl Barth and Charlotte von Kirschbaum, there are some distinctly negative reviews by Swiss women theologians such as Marie Speiser and Marga Bührig. Compare Doris Brodbeck, “Charlotte von Kirschbaum,” 178-179.

Theology.¹³ Thus, the doctrine of ‘The Real Woman’ (Die wirkliche Frau) – the title is chosen in opposition to a book on ‘The True Woman’ (Die wahre Frau), written by the Roman Catholic theologian Gertrud von Le Fort – did not touch the social reality of women. On the other hand, our criticism should not be too harsh, for Charlotte von Kirschbaum was aware of this lack: “The consequences [of CD III,2 and III,4] for the concrete problems of the entire spheres of marriage, celibacy, family and vocation [Beruf] have still to be worked out”, she wrote.¹⁴ Moreover, she named the spheres in which women should be recognized theologically and understood thereby to include professional life as a range of women’s activities which at that time had not yet been explored in theological ethics.

We can conclude that, in spite of its hopeful beginning in understanding the Imago Dei to be male and female standing in an I-Thou relationship, Dialectical Theology did not fit the debate about women’s emancipation and gender partnership. In that sense, this emancipation stopped half-way. Nevertheless, I appreciate the attempt made by Charlotte von Kirschbaum and Karl Barth to revisit the theological thoughts of order, subordination, and hierarchy in the relationship between God and humankind. This can be recognised as an important step in the history of theology, even though it was not consistent with a stream of feminism already based on thoughts of mutuality, partnership, and a more equal covenant of God and humankind.

Le livre de l’Américaine Suzanne Selinger sur Charlotte von Kirschbaum et Karl Barth est intéressant à deux égards: pour la doctrine protestante de la femme, développée par Charlotte von Kirschbaum, et les réflexions de Suzanne Selinger révélant que le cheminement religieux est lié à certaines expériences biographiques. Si l’on en croit son raisonnement, le dialogue entre Karl Barth et Charlotte von Kirschbaum a favorisé l’interprétation de l’*imago Dei* comme une relation moi-toi, notamment comme une rencontre entre les sexes, mais l’a confinée dans le modèle de rapport hiérarchique entre les sexes des temps bibliques. Doris Brodbeck s’interroge sur la signification de l’ordre biblique dans la pensée de la théologie dialectique et recherche les raisons personnelles qui ont pu faire obstacle au dialogue avec le mouvement des femmes et à une approche de sa conception d’un rapport solidaire entre les sexes.

¹³ Doris Brodbeck, “Charlotte von Kirschbaum,” 179-180.

¹⁴ Charlotte von Kirschbaum, “Book-Review,” in: *The Student World* 45 (1952), 222-224, here 224. The German manuscript is held in the Karl Barth Archive at Basel.

Das Buch der Amerikanerin Suzanne Selinger über “Charlotte von Kirschbaum and Karl Barth. A Study in Biography and the History of Theology” interessiert aus zwei Gründen: erstens wegen der protestantischen Lehre der Frau, die Charlotte von Kirschbaum entwickelt hat, und zweitens wegen des Denkansatzes von Suzanne Selinger, der Zusammenhänge zwischen biographischen Erfahrungen und theologischen Entwicklungen aufzeigen will. Die Dialogerfahrung Karl Barths mit Charlotte von Kirschbaum hat demnach die Deutung der Imago Dei als Ich-Du-Beziehung, im besonderen als Begegnung zwischen den Geschlechtern, gefördert, sie aber auf ein hierarchisches Geschlechtermodell aus biblischer Zeit eingeschränkt. Doris Brodbeck fragt nach der Bedeutung der biblischen Ordnungsvorstellungen im Denken der dialektischen Theologie und sucht nach den persönlichen Gründen, die einer Auseinandersetzung mit der Frauenbewegung und einer Annäherung an deren partnerschaftliche Geschlechtervorstellungen im Weg standen.

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