

When Karl met Lollo: the origins and consequences of Karl Barth's relationship with Charlotte von Kirschbaum

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Abstract

This paper extends the scope of earlier studies of Karl Barth's relationship with Charlotte von Kirschbaum by exploring his marriage to Nelly Barth and the deterioration in their relationship in the 1920s. It traces the development and character of Barth's relationship with Kirschbaum, and the *Notgemeinschaft* (emergency community) they formed with Nelly. The paper makes use of Nelly Barth's unpublished letters to her family in which she accounts for her reluctance to divorce her husband in the early 1930s. The second half of the paper explores the impact of Barth's relationship with Kirschbaum on others and goes on to suggest ways in which this had consequences for his theology, particularly in his thinking in *Church Dogmatics* III/4 about the relation between man and woman.

Keywords: Karl Barth, Nelly Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Charlotte von Kirschbaum, marriage

Introduction

In November 2016 Christiane Tietz of the University of Zurich addressed the Karl Barth Society of North America on the subject of 'Karl Barth and Charlotte von Kirschbaum'. She set out to renarrate, more or less in their own words, the story of how Barth and Kirschbaum (known by friends as Lollo) fell in love and came to cohabit with Barth's wife Nelly in an unusual domestic arrangement Barth sometimes called a *Notgemeinschaft*, that is, an emergency mutual aid society. Tietz's paper was based on the publication in 2008 of Barth and Kirschbaum's correspondence from 1925–35.¹ But because the German volume had largely passed unnoticed in the English-speaking world, Tietz's paper set off a small storm in the blogosphere.² She was not the first to tackle this uncomfortable subject.

¹ Rolf-Joachim Erler (ed.), *Karl Barth–Charlotte von Kirschbaum: Briefwechsel*, vol. 1, 1925–1935 (Zurich: TVZ, 2008). Translations from this volume, and from other volumes in the *Barth Gesamtausgabe*, are my own.

² Christiane Tietz, 'Karl Barth and Charlotte von Kirschbaum', *Theology Today* 74/2 (2017), pp. 86–111.

In 1987 Renata Köbler published a monograph with the feather-rustling title *In the Shadow of Karl Barth: Charlotte von Kirschbaum*,³ and in 1998 Suzanne Selinger published *Charlotte von Kirschbaum and Karl Barth: A Study in Biography and the History of Theology*,⁴ which described Kirschbaum as the ‘horizon and focus’ of Barth’s environment and sought to increase her share of credit for Barth’s theological writing. However, perhaps because Tietz made effective use of Barth and Kirschbaum’s own words, Tietz’s paper has had at least as much impact, possibly more, than these monographs.

Alert to the temptation to voyeurism and to moralising, Tietz handles Barth’s and Kirschbaum’s letters with great sensitivity, and there is little in her account that I would want to change, and indeed I retread some of her steps in what follows. But for three reasons there is, I think, more that can and should be said about the origin and consequences of these key relationships in Barth’s life. First, because she focuses – quite reasonably in a short paper – on the volume of letters from 1925–35, Tietz does not explore much of the background to the breakdown of Barth’s relationship with his wife Nelly Hoffman-Barth; nor does she take the story beyond 1935, to the ‘era’ of more-or-less cooperative years in Basel and on to its end in 1975, when Nelly Barth, the sole survivor of the *Notgemeinschaft*, took the decision to bury Charlotte with Karl in the Barth family grave in Kleinbasel. The second reason to look again at the *Notgemeinschaft* is, in my view, the most compelling: it is the virtual absence in any previous account of Nelly Hoffmann-Barth’s perspective. Karl Barth is largely responsible for this. When, in June 1968, he got around to having a will notarised he stipulated that ‘all letters from my wife to me and from me to my wife’ should be excluded from his literary estate.⁵ A little of Barth’s correspondence with Nelly has nevertheless found its way into print, but none that give Nelly’s views of their marriage. But whether the legal stipulation covers Nelly’s letters to others about her marriage has proved a grey area. Some of Nelly’s letters to Thurneysen about unfolding events in the Barth household were included in volumes 2 and 3 of the Barth/Thurneysen correspondence.⁶ But Thurneysen’s primary loyalty was

³ Renata Köbler, *Schattenarbeit: Die Theologin an der Seite Karl Barths* (Cologne: Pahl-Rugenstein Vlg., 1987), ET: *In the Shadow of Karl Barth: Charlotte von Kirschbaum*, trans. Keith Crim (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1989).

⁴ Suzanne Selinger, *Charlotte von Kirschbaum and Karl Barth: A Study in Biography and the History of Theology* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1998).

⁵ Karl Barth’s will was signed on 11 June 1968 and notarised by Dr Conrad Gelzer.

⁶ E. Thurneysen (ed.), *Karl Barth-Eduard Thurneysen Briefwechsel*, vol. 2, 1921–1930, Karl Barth-Gesamtausgabe Abt. V (Zurich: TVZ, 1987); and Caren Algner (ed.), *Karl Barth-Eduard Thurneysen Briefwechsel*, vol. 3, 1930–1935, Karl Barth-Gesamtausgabe Abt. V (Zurich: TVZ, 2000).

always to Karl Barth, and so rather more revealing and powerful are letters from the 1920s and 1930s – the most agonising years in the drama – written by Nelly to her most intimate and partisan confidantes, to her mother, sisters and closest friends, in the Karl Barth Archive. A third reason to add to what has already been written is that so much of the biographical information on which previous accounts have been based derives ultimately from Barth himself. When Barth gave up his attempt to write an autobiography in 1966, Eberhard Busch was employed as a research assistant with a main task, as a PhD dissertation, of completing the job. Busch's conversations with Barth over several years, together with his access to Barth's letters and papers, led in 1975 to the publication of *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*.⁷ In Busch's phrasing, his book presents Barth 'in his own perspective' and 'in his own words'.⁸ But Barth would not be the first elderly person to rewrite, edit or even censor his past. It is often the case that the myths we fashion to account for our younger selves prove more compelling and believable than the truth. If this might possibly be the case, it makes good sense to subject Barth's later recollections of his relationships with Nelly and with Lollo to the scrutiny of what he wrote at the time.

When Karl met Nelly

If we are to make sense of how Barth came to fall in love with Charlotte von Kirschbaum, we need first to grasp something of his relationship with Nelly Hoffmann-Barth. Nelly was born in Zurich in 1893, the daughter of a lawyer who died seven months later, leaving Nelly's mother with five daughters and little income. The family moved to Geneva shortly thereafter. In 1910 Nelly was prepared for confirmation by Barth, then acting pastor of the German-speaking congregation in Geneva. The first letter to survive between them is a postcard written in May 1911 by the 17-year-old Nelly calmly and briefly telling her vicar that she loves him and hopes he may feel the same. A day later Karl Barth proposed marriage. There was good reason for haste. As Barth put it in a letter to his friend Fritz Zulauf, his imminent departure for Safenwil brought the decision to a head: after July the physical distance imposed by Barth's installation as pastor in the Aargau would have made courtship difficult.⁹ After a fairly lengthy engagement Karl and Nelly married on 27 March 1913, in the Nydegkirche in Berne, a few hundred

⁷ Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1975).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

⁹ Karl Barth to Fritz Zulauf, 26 May 1911, unpublished letter in the Karl Barth Archive.

yards from where Barth had grown up. By the time the couple moved to Germany in 1921, they had four children; a fifth followed in 1925.

Many years after his relationship with Nelly had gone badly wrong and he had fallen in love with Lollo, Barth described the circumstances of his engagement and marriage to Nelly in a letter to a Swiss pastor, who had written to him anxiously to establish the truth of rumours that he had kicked his wife out of the house.¹⁰ It was not true, Barth wrote with restrained courtesy, that his wife had been exiled; but it was the case that for nineteen years they had lived personally and publicly in a state of tension. Barth attempted to offer an explanation for this difficult situation; essentially, he had entered the marriage in haste and found himself repenting at leisure. He had, he claimed, married Nelly on the rebound. He had been in love with a girl from Berne, but they had separated, a decision made under some parental pressure. The girl died in 1925 – a date to which Barth seems to attach importance – and he could not forget her.

The Bernese girl Barth wrote of was Rösy Munger, with whom he certainly did have a close relationship between 1907 and 1910. The suggestion that he had been deeply in love with Rösy, that his parents had ruled her unsuitable and that he become engaged to Nelly on the rebound was one Barth went on to suggest on several occasions. In his conversations with Busch between 1965 and 1968 Barth returned repeatedly to his lost love for Rösy.¹¹ In his *Lebenslauf* Busch attributes to Barth's parents the insistence, in connection to a possible engagement, that 'the will of your parents is the will of God',¹² and the interference of his parents has become an accepted explanation for the failure of his marriage. Barth embroidered this version of events still further by tying this disagreement with another, about where he should study, suggesting it occasioned a breach in his relationship with his father, the theologian Fritz Barth, who was suspicious of the liberal theology his son was interested in exploring. But both claims should be taken with a pinch of salt. It is true enough that his parents felt an engagement with Rösy would be unwise; but Fritz was a pastor, his wife Anna was the daughter, granddaughter and sister of pastors: it was reasonable that they should hold views about the qualities likely to be suitable in a pastor's wife. Letters from his parents in late 1909 and early

¹⁰ Karl Barth to Karl Huber, 13 December 1948: unpublished letter in the Karl Barth Archive.

¹¹ In Eberhard Busch, *Meine Zeit mit Karl Barth: Tagebuch 1965–1968* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH: 2011), he reports that Barth discussed Rösy with him on more than a dozen occasions.

¹² Busch, *Karl Barth*, p. 42.

1910 certainly do discourage Karl Barth from becoming engaged to Rösy. Equally certainly, Karl Barth makes the case for marriage in his replies. But he comes round to their viewpoint, and in the spring of 1910 he wrote to his friend Fritz Zulauf, who was part of the same social circle with Barth and Rösy, indicating he himself had decided to make a break with her. Was this merely filial loyalty, or had he actually been persuaded by his parents' case? In his correspondence with his parents the son would often rehearse one line of argument, then a counter-argument, before reaching his own conclusion. But his respect for Fritz was never less than complete. Barth fils may have bridled at the time at the advice his parents gave him, but in these years he never questioned their right to give it. Similarly, though they certainly discussed where Karl might best study theology, Karl continued to write to his father, discussing what he was working on, asking questions and seeking advice. Even in 1909–10, when according to the later Barth relations with his father were at their iciest, he still wrote often to them, sometimes at length.¹³ When she heard of Barth's engagement to Nelly, Rösy wrote to Barth a generous, but poignant letter of congratulation, thanksgiving for their friendship and farewell.¹⁴ A sense of loss, undoubtedly, but hardly the great tragedy Barth later characterised it as.

If the marriage was ill-fated from the outset, there is no sign of it in the earliest letters between Karl and Nelly. Throughout their engagement, Barth's letters to Nelly are full of fun, affection and lovers' endearments. Barth plainly longed for Nelly to arrive in Safenwil to brighten up not only their home, but his life.¹⁵ In the early years of their marriage, Nelly appears to have been in many ways the ideal pastor's wife. She played violin in church services, managed the household efficiently and even attempted to educate herself theologically, reading the Blumhardts and Kierkegaard. But by 1917, niggling signs of differences of opinion between them began to creep in. On 22 November 1917 Nelly warned Barth that if he continued to side in a partisan fashion with the Social Democrats and trade unionists, he risked splitting his congregation. He in turn worried, in letters to Thurneysen, that Nelly was too friendly with the bosses' wives, biasing her against their employees in the parish. In 1918, when Barth went to Zurich for four weeks to work on his *Römerbrief*, Nelly wrote advising that he return sooner rather than later because his absence was proving unpopular with his congregation.

¹³ The month of January 1910 is pretty typical, with six letters or postcards either to both parents or to his father.

¹⁴ The letter is numbered KBA9311.63 in the Karl Barth Archive.

¹⁵ See e.g. Karl Barth to Nelly Barth, 30 June 1912.

Tensions between Karl and Nelly mounted in 1921, following Barth's appointment as an honorary professor of Reformed theology at the University of Göttingen. Nelly put a brave face on the move in letters to her mother, but the move from Switzerland to Germany, and much more the move from the role of pastor's wife to that of professor's wife, proved difficult for her. Marie-Claire Barth, Nelly's daughter-in-law, told me in an interview in Basel in November 2017 that Nelly told her that, after the particularly difficult birth of Hans-Jakob in 1925, she and Karl decided to end their sexual relationship and have no more children. If this is true, then it occurred as one of a number of other factors that made their marriage increasingly difficult in the 1920s. Nelly, who had been at home in Safenwil, felt looked down upon by the wives of her husband's new academic colleagues, a circumstance that was doubtless made worse when his relations with the Faculty deteriorated after a couple of years in post. The demands of a large family and a large household in a period of rampant inflation were considerable. Barth, who suffered greatly from imposter syndrome, very often worked all day and long into the night because he feared his lack of theological expertise would be exposed at the lectern. In 1924, Nelly had health problems, possibly nervous exhaustion, and took herself off to a sanatorium, and then to family in Switzerland for several months. From July to August 1924 Barth wrote her at least twenty-five letters, full of longing, expressing his love and his hurt at the absence of Nelly's replies. They spent a few days together on holiday in August, around which time it would appear that their last child, Hans-Jakob, was conceived. But the relationship was not mended by the expectation of another child, or anything else, and by February 1926 Barth was in love with someone else. What on earth happened?

When Karl met Lollo

It was Georg Merz, a collaborator in the flagship journal of the dialectical theologians *Zwischen den Zeiten*, who introduced Kirschbaum to Barth, and he always regretted having done so. Charlotte von Kirschbaum had been born in 1899, the daughter of a German general killed fighting the French in 1916. In an attempt to salvage something from her loss, Kirschbaum trained as a nurse. In July 1925 Merz, her pastor, took her to Zurich, to the chalet known as the Bergli owned by Barth's friends, the Pestalozzis. Barth worked there during most summer vacations, away from the distraction of his children. Later, once their love for each other had been declared, Barth could tell her that he had at once been aware of danger in his attraction to her. Lollo bore a physical similarity to Nelly; slightly built, with elfin features and with quick, intelligent eyes. Several of Barth's circle, friends and students, remark

on her attractions. Helmut Gollwitzer was half in love with her. When, in Basel in the late 1930s, Barth encouraged her to attend a colleague's lectures on philosophical theology, the colleague proposed marriage on the strength of a couple of meetings over coffee after lectures. Perhaps Barth's initial letters to Kirschbaum seem innocent enough then, but he knew what he was getting into. In the first extant letter from Barth to Kirschbaum he is already on familiar terms.¹⁶ On 23 October 1925, Kirschbaum heard Barth lecture in Elberfeld. A few days later he wrote to her: 'It was indeed good ... to glimpse your friendly face amidst all the reformed Brethren ...'¹⁷ In December, following his move to Münster, Barth made arrangements for her to visit him, forwarding their correspondence about the visit to Nelly to keep her in the loop. Lollo's visit to Münster took place in February, when Nelly was still living with the children in Göttingen. On 26 February, a day after her departure, Barth wrote to her that 'there is so, so much that I want to write to you, but which will remain unwritten' and asks 'write me a good word? You are such a better person than I, and I fear I may have disappointed you terribly.'¹⁸ Lollo's reply appears almost resigned:

Should I write you a *good* word? I can't do it. I can only tell you, what I may and must not say. I have known, quite simply since last Wednesday, that I love you more dearly than you can imagine. Perhaps I didn't want to acknowledge it before, as though I were walking through the world with my eyes shut. But now this is how it is, and it is hard.¹⁹

A day later, at some length, Barth acknowledged that he loved her too. At first, he tried to allow her room for manoeuvre: she should not consider herself bound, should consider herself free to meet someone else. But within days, he was backtracking: he can't live without her, he wants her and wants to keep her. In May, Barth wrote to Kirschbaum that 'what strikes Nelly is the thought that above all, I'm looking for a substitute with a third party for some gap in our marriage, a remedy that would better be found in fixing our marriage. But I replied that I didn't *seek* a substitute, it found me and by accident made me conscious of a gap.' He cannot now go back, not now that Lollo 'belongs to my life ... Oh, how dear you have become to me in these past weeks! ... you can't know just how much effort I must make to hold back the river.'²⁰ In December 1926 Barth sent Kirschbaum a poem, identifying

¹⁶ That is, addressing her as 'Liebe Lollo' and using the 'du' form in his letter dated 4 Oct. 1925, ed. Erler, p. 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Kirschbaum to Barth, 27 Feb. 1926; *ibid.*, p. 22.

²⁰ Barth to Kirschbaum, 25 May 1926; *ibid.*, p. 46.

with impressive economy the complex currents in what was taking place in their lives:

Und dann ist es über uns hereingebrochen,
Schuldvoll, freudvoll, leidvoll ward es ausgesprochen

And then it broke over us,
Declaring itself full of guilt, full of joy, full of suffering²¹

What was to be done with such feelings? Slowly, Barth hatched a plan to train her as his secretary and research assistant. Thus trained, she could move into the family home legitimately. Nelly was persuaded to tolerate this move as a way to save face publicly. With money given by the Pestalozzis, Lollo took a secretarial course, learning typing and shorthand. She further learned New Testament Greek and Latin. The work was hard for her, but at some point Lollo accepted that the price of having some part of Barth was to be that she must subordinate her goals to his. Shortly before she moved into the Barth household in 1929, Barth wrote indicating the very modest allowance that he would pay her. But financial security was the least of her sacrifices for him: scandalised, her mother and brothers distanced themselves from her for good.

Seeing into the depths of anyone's innermost thoughts, feelings and motivations is an almost impossible task, even without the distortions of time. Barth often said he blamed himself most, or blamed himself completely, but in his letters to Nelly his acceptance of guilt is almost always set in the context of criticism of her intransigence, her fickleness, her coldness and her unwillingness to enter into dialogue. Thurneysen, who was closest to the situation, wrote to a mutual friend in 1931 that, fond as he was of Nelly, he could not escape the conclusion that she had opened the door in the marriage through which Barth had walked; she had not done so out of malice, but simply as a consequence of her deep and irremediable self-absorption.²²

When Nelly met Lollo

Barth was, from the outset, open with Lollo about his sense of duty to Nelly. In his letter to Lollo of 28 February 1926 Barth was clear that:

one thing, above all: you will be as clear as I am that the newly discovered reality is, in the first instance, hardest for my dear, true, brave Nelly.

²¹ Barth to Kirschbaum, 28 Dec. 1926; *ibid.*, p. 75.

²² E. Thurneysen to an unknown correspondent, 7 July 1931, in *Karl Barth – Eduard Thurneysen Briefwechsel*, pp. 921-4.

You've seen our family life. The history of our marriage has, in spite of all the difficulties, been until now a fortunate one.²³

He was equally open with Nelly about Lollo, telling her at once that he was in love. Barth's honesty, while it meant he did not compound his fault with a lie, did nothing to lessen Nelly's terrible sense of hurt and shame. Her support networks were spread out, and she often relied on letters to ameliorate her isolation. As the situation developed, or from the point of view of Nelly's family and friends as it dragged on, Nelly came under increasing pressure to bring the situation to a crisis. Nelly's mother, Anna Hoffmann, was increasingly anxious about the long-term impact of the situation on her daughter's mental health. Anna was convinced that Lollo's intention was not only to steal Nelly's husband but also her children. In her reply, Nelly is torn: she feels real pain, but remains committed to trying somehow to make things work. In November 1929 she replied to her mother's concerns, saying that it was not the case that Lollo had designs on the children. She insists that she has given long and careful thought to her situation, and feels she must simply carry on, as Karl's wife. In January 1930, Nelly wrote to her mother a letter saturated with grief and pain at her changing situation.²⁴ Up to this point she had felt she still played a modest but worthwhile role in Barth's life. But now that Barth had someone else to support him, she felt redundant as a woman. It seems that Nelly used arguments rooted in her Christian convictions to try to defend her decision to remain with Karl. In March 1932 her sister, Anny Schuler, described her as 'God's prisoner' on account of Nelly's argument that she felt obliged to remain married because she felt herself under God's command to do so. Anny urged Nelly to break with Karl as the only way to be free. Nelly thanked Anny for her well-intentioned advice, but insisted that she would not separate the children from their father, adding that if she could not sacrifice her personal interests to those of her children what else could she sacrifice them for?²⁵ Nelly twice refused Karl a divorce: the interests of her children would not allow it; her marriage vows would not allow it; her sense of duty to God would not allow it. And on the other side of the trenches, Lollo felt trapped in an intolerable situation, her sense of distress flaring up periodically in letters to Karl or Nelly or Eduard Thurneysen.

The burden of the *Notgemeinschaft* fell heaviest on Nelly and Lollo, but there were repercussions for others, too. Barth's Pietistic mother took the situation

²³ KB-CvK Briefwechsel vol. 1, p. 23.

²⁴ Nelly Barth to Anna Hoffmann, 25 Jan. 1930; unpublished letter in the Karl Barth Archive.

²⁵ Nelly Barth to Anny Schuler, 20 Mar. 1932; unpublished letter.

badly, siding with Nelly. In 1933, when the possibility of divorce was being actively considered, Anna Barth asked with tangible exasperation, 'What's the point of the very sharpest theology if it suffers shipwreck in your own home?'²⁶ Anna was responding to Barth's insistence a day earlier that: 'I will say once again that I'd be very glad if you could find it in you to say that a 47 year-old man must, in the end, be allowed to make his own mind up about what to do when he reaches such a conclusion after 20 years of marriage.'²⁷ In February 1935, Barth's youngest sister, Trudi Lindt, to whom he had always felt close, wrote directly to Lollo to suggest that the right thing for her to do would be to move out of the Barth household, get a flat and to actually be the assistant that she was publicly supposed to be.²⁸ Lollo simply passed the letter to Barth, who replied with restrained courtesy to the effect that both internally and externally the domestic arrangements he, Nelly and Lollo had arrived at were their own affair before God, not hers.²⁹ Eduard Thurneysen was the individual outside the *Notgemeinschaft* on whom there was the greatest impact. Each one of the three leaned on him as a sort of confessor. He was copied in to some of the most significant letters between them and tried to offer friendship and pastoral counsel to each one, often doing so with great sympathy and wisdom. Yet even Thurneysen had an agenda. Throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s, he tried quite subtly, to keep the three in their emergency assistance society, advising Lollo to just stick with things as they are a little longer, advising Nelly that things may not be as bad as she thinks and reflecting back to Barth the reality of his situation without offering him any way out. In a letter of 1927 Thurneysen summed up Barth's dilemma with unsurpassable clarity: 'Love without honour or honour without love'.³⁰

Domestic life

The early years together were the hardest. From 1929 onwards there were periodic truces, some lasting many months, but hostilities always resumed, sometimes in spectacular firefights as for one reason or another Nelly's resentments or Lollo's sense of what she was sacrificing could be restrained no longer. But after the family moved to Basel in 1935, the Barth

²⁶ Anna Barth to Karl Barth, 24 Apr. 1933. The full letter can be found in K. Barth, *Briefe des Jahres 1933*, ed. E. Busch et al. (Zurich: TVZ, 2004).

²⁷ Karl Barth to Anna Barth, 23 Apr. 1933, in *ibid.*, *Briefe*, p. 170.

²⁸ Trudi Lindt Barth to Ch. v. Kirschbaum, 11 Feb. 1935; letter in Thomas Lindt's archive, used here with his kind permission.

²⁹ Karl Barth to Trudi Lindt-Barth, 17 Feb. 1935; letter in Thomas Lindt's archive.

³⁰ Eduard Thurneysen to Karl Barth 20 Jan. 1927; unpublished letter in the Karl Barth Archive.

household increasingly settled into an uneasy equilibrium. The years of Barth's resistance to the forces of *Gleichschaltung*, the policy of conforming the Church and the Academy to the National Socialist programme, had, in many ways, been exhilarating, but there can be little doubt of the strain they placed on Barth personally, and also on Nelly and Lollo. Barth's prominent place on the front line of the church struggle could easily be made into an argument for maintaining the domestic status quo, as friends such as Eduard Thurneysen argued against divorce on the grounds that it would give ammunition that Barth's opponents could turn against him. The fear was real, not imaginary: gossip about Barth's unusual domestic arrangements occasionally surfaced in German Christian pamphlets and in the pro-Nazi press. In 1934 and 1935, as the discipline case against Barth at the University of Bonn reached its denouement,³¹ Thurneysen and others manoeuvred first with the University of Berne, and subsequently and more successfully with the University of Basel to arrange a professorial chair to which Barth could move. Just days after Barth's dismissal from Bonn he was offered a chair at the University of Basel.

After moving to relative safety in Switzerland,³² Barth's focus shifted. While still involved with German church matters, and able to stir up political controversy in Switzerland, Barth's attention focused increasingly on his teaching and on writing the *Church Dogmatics*. In the early 1950s he would make the decision to decline almost all invitations that would distract him from his *magnum opus*. The Barth household now operated within clearly marked territorial lines. Nelly Barth was responsible for domestic arrangements, for raising the younger children, for the kitchen, the dining room and the living room. To Lollo belonged the area of work. Transgressions of these borders could sometimes lead to conflict. On one occasion, for some reason Lollo answered the door to a visitor. After the guest was gone, Nelly was furious at this breach of the arrangements by which their lives were governed. Whatever the situation was privately, it was essential to Nelly's sense of self and pride that she should be publicly perceived as the Frau Professor; being marginalised in her own home was something which she would not put up with. In 2001 Herta Baier, the Barth family housekeeper from 1934–7, was interviewed about her memories of

³¹ The case arose because Barth refused to take a personal oath of allegiance to the Führer, required of all German University Professors, without the addition of a conditional clause limiting his obedience according to his conscience as an Evangelical Christian.

³² The safety was only relative, because the threat of invasion by Germany was more than theoretical, particularly in the first years of the war.

the family's life.³³ She described a household ordered around the demands of the Professor's work. He lectured most days at 7:00, followed by breakfast, which was taken with Frl. von Kirschbaum, in Barth's study. There, the two would spend the entire day, breaking for half an hour for lunch together in the study; sometimes they played chess. Frau Baier liked Frl. von Kirschbaum, 'a very lovely person'. She liked the Frau Professor too, but felt she found it hard to be the wife of a famous man and missed terribly being a simple pastor's wife. The Professor was something of a demi-god for the whole household. They had many visitors, who would often join them for dinner, when the family always sat in exactly the same configuration at the dining table, with Barth at the head, and Lollo and Nelly on either side of him, then any visitors, the children and finally herself. Speaking in 2002, Renate Barth, the widow of the Barths' youngest son, Hans-Jakob, reported she always felt a tension within the Barth household. Her mother-in-law was, she felt, a deeply unhappy person. Possibly seeing matters through her late husband's eyes, she was always suspicious of Lollo: 'I always felt', she said, 'she was too sweet, a little bit false'. Renate Barth, too, was conscious of a household with clear demarcations. On occasions when she was in Barth's study, Renate said 'I can't recall Nelly ever being there too: she didn't come upstairs'.³⁴

In the 1950s Karl and Nelly's son Markus moved with his family to America to teach New Testament; Christoph Barth left for a job teaching Old Testament studies in Indonesia. Barth's relationships with his eldest sons were sound, if by contemporary standards sometimes appearing more than physically distant. But letters were not frequent with either son and their father, and often it would be Lollo who would write to them beginning, for example, 'Papa is very busy with volume III/1 and unable to reply to you ...'. Barth's popularity in the United States eventuated periodically in invitations to lecture there, which offered up the enticing chance for Barth to visit Markus and his grandchildren in America. But when in 1953 Barth raised with Nelly the possibility he might travel to America with Lollo, with whom he routinely travelled on lecture tours, she 'made a scene'.³⁵ When Barth eventually did travel to America, it would be with neither Nelly or Lollo.

³³ Herta Baier, interview recorded in 2001 in Hamm, Germany; held in the Center for Barth Studies, Princeton.

³⁴ Renate Barth, interview recorded in Riehen, Switzerland, 2002; held in the Princeton Center for Barth Studies.

³⁵ Karl Barth to Markus Barth, 19 Oct. 1953.

Work

Lollo proved invaluable to Barth's work. A researcher in the Karl Barth Archive sees at once that before 1929 Barth's record keeping was a mess; after 1929 there was dramatic improvement. Lollo managed Barth's correspondence and diary, and provided skilled research assistance. Barth kept a card index of sources and quotations, carefully ordered according to doctrinal loci. There are some thirteen drawers full of this material; around a third of entries are in Lollo's handwriting. At one point, Lollo wrote to a friend that she was exhausted by the task of reading all Luther's sermons in order to draw relevant citations from them.

Once in Basel, they settled into a pattern of work. From the 1950s until his compulsory retirement in 1962, Barth decided to lecture only on *Church Dogmatics*. He lectured twice each week for one hour, slowing to once a week in later years. During the university vacations Barth and Lollo would research those sections on which he would lecture in the coming semester. In the run-up to each lecture in the University Barth would write his lectures in his meticulous Latin-script handwriting. Typically manuscript drafts of the *Dogmatics* were destroyed but the few that survive suggest Barth wrote with very few additions, deletions or corrections. The manuscript would then be typed by Lollo in preparation for his lecture. Sometimes, she told friends in her letters, she would only finish typing in the small hours of the morning prior to Barth's 8:00 am lecture. Before and during his lecture Barth would typically make small marginal notes on the typescript, which after the lecture was retyped by Lollo and sent the same day to his publisher in Zurich.

Hans Pfeiffer, a former student, told me of his impressions of Barth's lectures in the 1950s. The lecture theatre, almost always the same room, would fill quickly, with a high proportion of visiting students: it paid to arrive early. A seat was reserved on the front row and, shortly before Professor Barth mounted the stage, Frau Professor Nelly Barth would arrive and take it. Behind and a little to one side of Barth on the podium Lollo would sit at a desk in order to record on her carbon copy any verbal comments or corrections Barth made. Lollo knew already what Barth was to say, while Nelly sat with the students to hear it for the first time. Pfeiffer told me that even at the time the poignancy of this peculiar choreography was not lost on him.

Consequences for Barth's theology

The relevance of biographical context to theological ideas is not immediately obvious. I take the view that ideas don't generate themselves, and that therefore any history of ideas that does not take into account the material

conditions of their generation will tend to fly off into abstract idealism. Because it is not obvious, it is worth pointing speculatively to at least one place where a connection between Barth's personal life and his theology might be looked for, and to another where it is already perfectly clear.

The first – more tentative suggestion – is that Barth's increasingly fraught personal relationships after 1926 may have been one reason among several that led him to abandon the binary oppositions of dialectical theology. As is well known, Barth came to see limitations in the descriptor 'dialectical' to describe his approach to theology. But there can be little doubt that during and after the First World War Barth, Thurneysen and colleagues such as Gogarten and Bultmann, with whom they collaborated, embraced the idea that they were engaged in a conflict in which the Christian theologian must choose sides. At the end of the Great War in 1918 the cultural and political basis of much of Europe had been reduced to rubble by the terrible slaughter of the trenches. European political, philosophical and artistic culture dramatically changed course. In each sphere, ideas of crisis and judgement, of the need for strong action and for decisions, caught hold. This was not less the case in theology. Dialectical theology was a theology, captured in the title of the journal *Zwischen den Zeiten* ('Between the Times'), undertaken in and through the dialectic of God's 'yes' and God's 'no'. Its currency was the 'either/or', the choice for or against. By 1933, when Barth told his colleagues that he would no longer participate in this journal, a decision that led to its immediate collapse, he had become dissatisfied with simplistic binary oppositions, even as rhetorical devices. My growing suspicion is that one seed in this may have been the complexity of his life after 1926. In the course of 1933 Barth had ended *Zwischen den Zeiten* and divorced himself from dialectical theology, and at exactly the same time he was imploring Nelly to grant him a divorce in order that he could marry Lollo. Throughout the year, he made implacable enemies in the church struggle with many who had once been colleagues and even friends. In August he wrote to Eduard Thurneysen – who else could he be so frank with? – to lament his deepening isolation: 'why must I be so isolated – particularly among the righteous, with whom I'd still prefer, truthfully, to be at one, than to be so wretchedly divided as is now the case'.³⁶

A more direct, and readily demonstrable case for the impact of Barth's personal situation on his theology can be made in connection with his thinking about 'Man and Woman' in CD III/4. It is a treatment that, as it happens, also helps us to address here one of the questions – perhaps we

³⁶ 25 Aug. 1933, *Barth-Thurneysen Briefwechsel*, vol. 3, pp. 483–4.

may say the question – that Barth's domestic situation has inevitably placed in the minds of his readers. In a word, the question is 'sex': was Karl Barth's relationship with Lollo ever sexually active? There is little direct evidence one way or another. At no point in their letters do any of those involved discuss, in so many words, the question of sex, leaving commentators to draw their own conclusions.

It may help to begin with what can be known with certainty. Karl and Lollo fell deeply in love in 1926 and remained so for the remainder of their lives. They spent considerable periods of time alone. For example, before Barth's family had moved to Göttingen but after Barth had himself relocated, Lollo visited him twice, on each occasion for several days. On a number of occasions, beginning in 1926, Barth and Lollo went on holiday together with the Pestalozzis. While Nelly Barth's family photograph albums picture Lollo and Karl working together – for example, both scribbling away at their desk in the Bergli – Kirschbaum's albums, and those of the Pestalozzis, tell a different story. These albums, particularly those with pictures of the holiday trips taken by Karl, Lollo and the Pestalozzis, show a couple in love, a couple who are physically intimate – Lollo on Karl's knee or holding his hand; Karl with his arm around Lollo, his hand on her back; or the couple looking with evident affection into each other's eyes. In April 1933 Barth asked Nelly for permission to move into the spare room,³⁷ and, if Marie-Claire Barth's recollection is accurate, they may have ceased being sexually active as a married couple as early as 1925. On the other hand, we may set the raw fact that Lollo did not become pregnant in an era decades before the contraceptive pill and when acquiring prophylactics cannot have been easy for a prominent professor. We may never know the answer for sure, but whether there had been a sexual relationship between Karl and Lollo in the 1920s or not, after 1929, when Lollo moved into the family home, it must surely have been an accepted condition of the *Notgemeinschaft* that all three would be sexually abstinent. However, the question of sex is not all that matters: sexual intercourse is not the only form taken by adultery and it may not even be the most damaging.

A little oddly perhaps, Karl Barth may provide us with the theological insight with which to assess his (in his own phrasing) 'full of guilt, full of joy, full of suffering' situation.³⁸ He also, I am convinced, gives compelling evidence that in at least once instance, his mature theological thinking was directly influenced by his personal situation. In 1951, when, in his *Doctrine of Creation*, Barth explored the freedom in fellowship of man and woman in

³⁷ 19 May 1933, *Barth-Thurneysen Briefwechsel*, vol. 3, p. 400.

³⁸ Barth GA 45, p. 75

response to the command of God the creator, Karl, Nelly and Lollo had been living together for over twenty years – plenty of time to have thought their situation through. It strengthens a case for linking this discussion in *Church Dogmatics* III/4 to Barth's own situation to note that he identifies as a source for his thinking about men and women Charlotte von Kirschbaum's 1949 monograph on *Das Wirkliche Frau* which, he tells us, travels 'along the lines we have been following'.³⁹ The one section of the *Dogmatics*, therefore, in which it can be shown beyond any doubt that Barth's is influenced by Lollo's own ideas is his treatment of the male/female relation. And what is it he says? In approaching this subject, he writes:

We must now issue a particular warning against the tendency within the complex of questions concerning the relation of men and women to think supremely or exclusively of the so-called sexual problem in the narrower sense. Whether the purport of this tendency is moral or non-moral – and both are possible – it is false.⁴⁰

In other words, while 'the sexual problem' matters, it isn't all that matters, and it may even be the wrong place to begin. Within a few sentences, Barth writes something else that catches our attention: he tells us that, irrespective of how a man uses his sexual organs, before the command of God, he is inclined to be a fool and a failure:

Here a man (*mensch*) assuredly proves himself emphatically to be either a wise man or a fool (*ein Narr*), an able man or a bungler (*ein Stümper*), a pious man or an impious (*Gottloser*). And sooner or later each man must discover that in regard to the command of God he is a failure, that measured by it we all belong to the category of fools, bunglers and impious who can only cling to the promise hidden in the command, but who certainly cannot congratulate themselves upon nor live in the strength of its fulfilment.⁴¹

Barth has clear ideas about what a man under the commandment of God should and should not be doing with his sexual organs; he tells us, for

³⁹ Charlotte von Kirschbaum, *Das Wirkliche Frau* (Zurich: Evangelischer Vlg., 1949). The *Basler Nachrichten* carried a positive review of the book on 22 Sept. 1950; the review does not mention Barth. Barth's reference can be found in *Church Dogmatics*, 13 vols., ed. T. F. Torrance and G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956–74), III/4, p. 172.

⁴⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/4, p. 130.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*; cf. the German original in *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III/4, p. 144.

example, that a man should not use his organs for sex with another man, and in saying this uses an argument that, counter to our normal expectations of him, seems very like an argument based on natural law. But the broader point is that one must think about men and women in the totality of their being, and therefore that the sexual act narrowly understood is only one way in which a man (and for that matter a woman) can make a fool of themselves. If Barth has his own situation at the back of his mind, how hard is he on himself? Does the vocabulary he uses – foolishness, bungling, impiety – go far enough to describe a state of sin that follows from breaking the seventh commandment?⁴² Both the Psalmist and the authors of the Wisdom literature, frequently use the word ‘fool’ to describe the sinner (e.g. Psalm 14:1, Proverbs 1:7, etc.): perhaps this is in Barth’s mind?⁴³ But it is difficult to evade the impression, *pace* Romans 3:23, that in arguing that *each* person falls short of the standard of God’s law Barth may very gently be letting off the hook one particular person.

Reconciliation? Barth’s last letter to Markus Barth

When, after retirement, the rhythm of teaching new sections of the *Dogmatics* ended, the momentum of writing petered out. In any case, the two main protagonists in the venture were both exhausted. At some point in the early 1960s Lollo began drifting into some form of dementia. Like many with her condition she tried to find some explanation. She found it in her relationship with Barth. She had, she said, worn her mind out in meeting the incessant demands his work made upon her. Her wits had all been poured into the thirsty vat of his theology, until there were none left. It is not altogether a fanciful claim: emerging medical evidence suggests there may be an association between some forms of dementia and prolonged periods of sleep deprivation. Lollo’s comments are an unbearable testimony to love’s labour’s lost. Early in 1966 Lollo moved into residential care, paid for by Barth, an arrangement subsequently guaranteed in his will. Karl visited her on a weekly basis, often with Nelly, a tradition she and Max Zellweger continued to observe from 1968 until Lollo herself died in 1975.

The removal of Lollo from the Barth family home, so heartrendingly tragic for Barth and for Lollo, ushered in a final period of peace and contentment for Nelly Hoffman-Barth. It seemed to Nelly, and also to

⁴² The seventh, that is, in the Reformed order: the prohibition of adultery is the sixth commandment according to the Roman Catholic Catechism and Luther’s *Small Catechism*.

⁴³ Note, however, that both the *Lutherbibel* and the *Zürcherbibel* employ *Thoren/Toren*, rather than *Narr* to do so.

the wider circle of Barth's family, as if she had her husband back after so many years of distance between them. It seems possible that Barth, too, felt able in late life to acknowledge Nelly's contribution to his life and work. In 1967 when the final part IV/4 of the *Church Dogmatics* appeared, he dedicated it 'To my wife, Nelly Barth with great gratitude'. Thomas Lindt, Barth's nephew and for a time also his student, told me that his mother, Barth's sister, Gertrud Barth-Lindt, was overjoyed when she saw this dedication, regarding it as long overdue: Barth had dedicated volume III/3 to Charlotte von Kirschbaum as long ago as 1950.

Perhaps Barth accepted that Nelly was owed his last years, but it is difficult to know with certainty. Like many of his class and time, Barth seldom wore his heart on his sleeve. His feelings and any thoughts he might have about his personal relationships were more often than not kept out of sight behind high fences and barred gates. Barth was a man able to preach at the funerals of both his father and his son without discernible emotion, and in letters following these devastating events mention his losses as if simple matters of fact. In his early letters to Thurneysen and in his occasional poems and letters for Lollo, Barth was able to express feelings. But after his return to Basel, when he saw Eduard often and Lollo almost every day, his interior life retreats almost completely between the lines of his letters and theological writing. And so the unpublished letter to his son Markus of 2 December 1968 stands out as among the most remarkable of any of the things Barth wrote for its openness, emotional intelligence and insight. Written eight days before Barth died in his sleep, it is hard not to read into it a valedictory tone, as if he is parting company not only with his son, but taking leave of life. The letter is marked by his sense that he and his wife, having set out with the best intentions, had never really managed to connect, while he still speaks of Lollo, disappearing in the fog of dementia, with a translucent love. It is a letter in which there is an unmistakable coming to terms, an acceptance of his own failure, of what has happened and cannot now be altered. It is a letter in which Barth places hope in the God who, after all, is able by grace to make something from the crooked timbers of humanity. It is as if, at the end, Barth has faith that the reconciliation that he never managed to complete in writing his *Church Dogmatics* will, after all, come to pass in his relationships. Nelly, Barth tells their son, is someone who has never, really, come to terms with the realities of the world, preferring to live in her imagination and in a brittle, old-fashioned morality. Not a criticism – just an observation, he adds. But Barth acknowledges that he had fallen far short as a husband, and as a father, indeed with all those he has loved. He recalls how acute was Lollo's insight, how beautiful her appearance: and

now? Language is quite beyond her comprehension. And now? Well, Barth concludes, “‘What is Man...!’” But He knows His own’.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Karl Barth to Markus Barth, 2 Dec. 1968. I am grateful to Peter Zocher at the Karl Barth Archive in Basel for his invaluable assistance in the research leading to this paper; the views expressed are, of course, entirely my own. The research will lead to a biography of Karl Barth planned for publication in 2021 by Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group. Early drafts of this paper were presented at the Christian Theology Seminar at the University of Cambridge and at the Theology and Ethics Research Seminar at the University of Durham: I am grateful to all those who commented on it.