

## Karl Barth's Christology and Jan Christian Smuts' Human Rights Rhetoric

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### Abstract

South African statesman Jan Christian Smuts' (1870–1950) domestic and international politics diverge greatly; his domestic policy has been eschewed as a precursor to apartheid (1948–1994), but his international policy heralded for advancing human rights rhetoric because he authored the charters for both the League of Nations (1920) and United Nations (1945). Scholars struggle to reconcile these seemingly conflicting legacies. WEB du Bois, Peder Anker, and Saul Dubow suggest that Smuts embodies capitalist greed, bad science, and redefined political terms. I argue that Karl Barth's theology adroitly illuminates the problem of empire for Smuts and present day appeals to human rights rhetoric. Barth's theology poses a three-fold challenge to Smuts. First, Barth articulates a critique of natural theology found embedded within Smuts' philosophy of holism; second, Barth critiques liberal politics that Smuts typifies; and, third, Barth's refusal to side with Eastern or Western empires runs counter to Smuts' imperial sensibilities. Ultimately, I argue that Barth's Christology offers a constructive alternative vision for sociality.

### Keywords

*Christology; human rights; political theology; Karl Barth; Jan Christian Smuts*

## 1. Introduction

My fellow South Africans are likely attuned to the controversial figure of Jan Christian Smuts. For some South Africans Smuts is a hero, for others he is a villain, but increasingly among younger generations he is

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a stranger.<sup>2</sup> Informed by his passion for literature and philosophy, Smuts is unquestionably accomplished. He represents the intersection of science, religion, and politics that defined his time. Smuts popularized human rights rhetoric when he authored the charters to the League of Nations and the United Nations. So why has he nearly been effaced from history – especially outside of South Africa? In this article, I will first clarify the misconception that Smuts’ international and domestic politics were contradictory; they share a natural theology that shapes statecraft as salvific. Second, I will argue that Karl Barth’s theology offers a useful, alternative epistemology and anthropology. Last, I explore theologian and bioethicist David G. Kirchhoeffer’s scholarship on human dignity to establish Barth’s Christology as a constructive alternative vision for sociality in the present day.

In 1945, William Edward Burghardt du Bois met Smuts face-to-face in San Francisco, California. In an article titled, “Jan Christian Smuts: Story of a Tyrant, How South Africa’s ruler rose to power on double-talk and double-dealing,” Du Bois fumed that Smuts had stood before the assembled nations of the world to plead for human rights, only to turn around and prescribe that persons of African descent be treated as despicably as black South Africans.<sup>3</sup> As such, Du Bois posed a question that continues to perplex scholars today: How can Smuts “be called ‘one of the world’s few illustrious men’ and at the same time stand to most of us as the typical representative of hypocrisy, double-dealing and cold-calculated cruelty of the modern world?”<sup>4</sup> By the end of the calendar year in which he published his article, Smuts delivered the following Christmas message:

Our Christian civilization is based on an eternal order, an endless plan in the message of Christ. Many new messages and messengers will appear in these times of great tribulation. Let us hold on to the

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2 Gregory Garland, “The strange disappearance of Jan Christian Smuts and what it can teach Americans,” *American Diplomacy* (June 21, 2010).

3 “... that is, disenfranchised, forbidden to form or join labor unions, compelled to accept the lowest of modern wages under partially slave conditions, deprived of practically all civil rights.,” W. E. B du Bois “Jan Christian Smuts: Story of a tyrant, how South Africa’s ruler rose to power on double-talk and double-dealing”. *The New Masses* (March 4, 1947), 8.

4 *Ibid*, 8.

eternal message, follow the light which has once shone before us, the greatest light that has arisen on our human horizon, and which can surely lead us to the better world for which we are longing ... And [God's] message is:

“Cherish in love your fellow men, irrespective of race or language, cherish and keep the divine idea in your heart as your highest good.”

In the years to come, the very charters that Smuts authored for the United Nations and League of Nations were later used against him and South Africa on the basis of violating human rights. For example, when Smuts ordered the Bondeschwarts Hottentot resistance be quashed with military force, Dantes Bellegarde of Haiti made a formal request for an investigation into the massacre.<sup>5</sup>

How is it that Smuts accomplished a peaceful joining of nations in the name of human rights, all the while simultaneously dehumanizing black South Africans? For Du Bois, the problem is twofold. First, Smuts' religious Afrikaner heritage was to blame. “We must remember that he belonged to the Boers,” Du Bois explains, “‘God-fearing men’ who regarded the natives of South Africa as made for their benefit, and who said in the constitution of their church, ‘There shall never be any equality between blacks and whites in South Africa’; and there never has been.”<sup>6</sup> Though Smuts' religious commitments might have been nominal, Du Bois suggests that the statesman had been inculcated into a racist theology. Second, Du Bois accused Smuts of capitalist greed: “Why is Mr. Smuts, the great humanitarian, so anxious and insistent on this great expanse of desert, somewhat larger than Texas with only one inhabitant to a square mile[?] The fact is that there are diamonds, gold, tin, vanadium and other minerals in the territory and a good trade in hides.”<sup>7</sup>

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5 Du Bois writes, “Prime Minister Smuts admitted that to quell ‘a revolt’ he had sent a force of 390 men with four machineguns and two bombing planes against a tribe of natives of whom less than 200 were alleged to have had shotguns; only forty-five guns were actually found. The South Africans killed over a hundred men, women and children, and wounded several hundred more,” in *ibid.*, 8. The cause for protest came after taxes on sheep dogs soared from \$11.25 to \$50.00 over the course of three months.

6 *Ibid.*, 7.

7 *Ibid.*, 8. Du Bois adds, “... over \$100,000,000 of foreign capital had been invested in Southwest Africa, and the Union government had obligingly stepped in and helped

Another explanation for the apparent disjunction between Smuts' white supremacist domestic policy and international human rights rhetoric has to do with the definition of terms during this time period. Historian Saul Dubow explains that the notion of human rights was rooted in *reciprocity*, which does not necessitate *equality*: "Freedom was always a larger concept for Smuts, and this was earned, not granted; freedom implied obligations and duties rather than entitlements and demands. Small wonder that Smuts balked at the ANC's 1943 document 'Africans' Claims.'"<sup>8</sup> Smuts' philosophy of human capacities, based on "personology" and ecology, shed light on this distinction.

Before delving into the details of Dubow's insight, let us also take into consideration historian of science Peder Anker's analysis of Smuts. Anker explains:

South African science has a long tradition of being entangled in politics, particularly in the case of ecological research which often had direct implications for contested issues of racial politics and environmental management. The prime example of the importance of ecology in South African politics is perhaps the story of how the long-time leader of the Union Party, Jan Christian Smuts, based his politics of unification on an ecology informed theory of holism and racial segregation.<sup>9</sup>

Anker points to the dangers of natural theology. He reminds us that, "... the teaching of creationism and rejection of evolutionary theory was intrinsically linked with legitimating the apartheid regime, since the literal interpretation of the Bible according to the Nationalists supported fixed boundaries between races and the moral superiority of whites."<sup>10</sup> Anker argues, "Ever since Smuts' time, grass research has been a topic with intriguing social and political undertones and implications. His holistic

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protect the diamond monopoly in accordance with the pattern now in use in the Union of South Africa ... If this is not the essence of opportunistic hypocrisy, then the word has lost its meaning," in *ibid.*, 8.

8 Saul Dubow "Smuts, the United Nations and the rhetoric of race and rights." *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol. 43, no. 1 (2008), 66.

9 Peder Anker, "Politics of Ecology in South Africa on the Radical Left." *Journal of History of Biology* 37 (2004), 303.

10 *Ibid.*, 319.

theory of evolution and racial social order inspired several ecologists, including [John] Phillips, who used his entire scientific career to sanctify the ecologically informed racial party of his patron.”<sup>11</sup>

To review, Du Bois, Dubow, and Anker provide insight into Smuts’ capitalist greed, historicized terms, and bad science. I argue that Karl Barth’s theology adds to this scholarship the trouble with Smuts’ epistemology and anthropology, which, due to his global influence, was pervasive at the time. Positioning Barth’s theology as a foil to Smuts’ politics, I argue that Barth’s Reformed anthropology and Christological epistemology demonstrate the *consistency* in Smuts’ international and domestic politics. If that is true, we must be critical of historical and contemporary appeals to human rights and dignity.

## 2. Barth as a foil for Smuts

Smuts and Barth share an unwillingness to ascribe to either liberal or conservative parties, though for different reasons; Smuts attempts to inhabit both, whereas Barth refused the two. During the global race to power, Smuts aligned South Africa with Britain, whereas Barth refused to support either the US or Russia throughout the Cold War. Smuts refused asylum to Jewish persons, but also fundraised for Zionist groups. Conversely, Barth resisted the Nazi regime and its anti-Semitism.

While on the surface Smuts appears to affirm the dignity of humanity, he actually conceives of all humans on a hierarchical scale. Conversely, Barth’s “axiom” places everyone in a humble position under God. We receive our dignity from our Creator, according to Barth, whom we find seeking us. “That is the idealist’s peculiar pride. By referring to the timeless truths of reason, directly accessible to everyone, the idealist brushes aside the realist’s accidental and particular truth of history,” Barth explains, “... ‘accessibility’ here can only mean the possibility of God’s access to us, not our access to God.”<sup>12</sup> According to Barth’s epistemology, the only way one

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11 Ibid., 326.

12 Karl Barth, “Fate and Idea in Theology,” in Martin H. Rumscheidt, (ed.) *The Way of Theology in Karl Barth: Essay and Comments* (Allison Park: Pickwick Publications, 1986), 47; “Not because I found a way to God, but because God found a way to me. Not because I bind myself to God, but because God binds me to himself,” in *ibid.*, 59.

can know anything is by receiving it from God via revelation. This shapes his theological anthropology. “An untenable concept of human nature is also being presupposed, as though human beings themselves possessed the capacity for ascertaining what is or is not revelation, as though they had at their disposal a criterion by which they might recognize and acknowledge Christ.”<sup>13</sup> As such, Barth reorients the human subject to a passive and receptive position where true knowledge originates in God’s free, merciful, and gracious gift.

Barth recognizes humanity’s eagerness to form false gods out of political parties, nations, economies, etc. He defines a god as “that in which beings place their trust, in which they have faith, from which they expect to receive what they love and to protect them from what they fear.”<sup>14</sup> Supremely optimistic in human ability – namely, the capacity for the most evolved personalities being white, western men – Smuts places his confidence in white supremacist politics as god rather than God. With the League of Nations and United Nations, Smuts hopes to fortify and secure South Africa’s global presence and power. Consequently, Barth unveils at least two of Smuts’ fallacies: an inflated sense of humanity and distorted vision of God. The two can be attributed to the epistemological assumptions of the time, which Smuts exemplifies and Barth critiques.

Because Smuts and Barth were prolific writers and well-known figures, I must limit my topics and depth of discussion for a comparison to the following: 1) Smuts’ philosophy of science epitomizes the logic of natural theology, which Barth vehemently critiques, 2) Smuts’ faith in “natural human rights” and the cooperation of nations typifies the sort of liberalism that Barth rejects, 3) Smuts’ imperial sensibilities undergird his notion of human rights, whereas Barth refuses to align with nation-states or empires. In each instance, Smuts swings from one political pole to another, whereas Barth intentionally ascribes to a dialectical approach, thereby refusing either-or categorization. Barth’s position is that the kingdom of God is revealed in scripture and Jesus Christ, which is both strange and

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13 *Ibid.*, 42.

14 *Ibid.*, 69.

new.<sup>15</sup> Therefore he does not feel compelled to ascribe to human constructs, especially “Christian” ones.<sup>16</sup> Once again, we might describe Smuts and Barth’s stances as epistemologically disparate.

### a) Natural theology

Born of a well to do yeomen, Jan Christian Smuts spent his early years in South Africa’s fertile farmland.<sup>17</sup> By the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Smuts was recognized as a world expert on savanna grass, one of which was named in his honour, “and he nurtured a keen interest in botany by maintaining one of the largest libraries in the country on the topic. He read botanical literature as ‘a sweet opiate’ each night before he went to sleep.”<sup>18</sup> But Smuts saw more than plants. Informed by evolutionary theory, Smuts understood biology and society as interconnected.<sup>19</sup> While at Cambridge University’s law school he wrote a treatise in which:

[He] placed civil rights on a Darwinian ladder with inanimate nature at one end of the scale of nature, and human society at the other, sanctioned by an all-embracing divine law given by God. He argues that there was a governing principle of natural law behind the evolutionary development of civil rights. Civic law evolved from the primitive family to the modern state by analogy with the growth of a human being, and civil rights gradually progressed historically toward more and more respect for individual freedom and greater

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15 Indubitably Barth intended for “new” to be understood as ongoing, afresh, and true of all times.

16 “Time and again the Bible gives us the impression that it contains no instructions, counsels, or examples whatsoever, wither for individuals or for nations and governments; and the impression is correct. It offers us not at all what we first seek in it” Karl Barth, “The Strange New World Within the Bible,” in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (USA: The Pilgrim Press, 1928), 39.

17 H. C Armstrong, *Grey Steel: J. C Smuts: A Study in Arrogance* (London: Arthur Barker, 1937), 18. “He grew up in the district of Swartland, known for its fertility, beautiful scenery, vineyards, traditional Dutch country life, and its conservative and largely religious population of farmers,” in Anker, “Jan Christian Smuts,” in *Complete Dictionary of Scientific Biography* (Detroit: Gale, 2007), 483.

18 Anker, “Jan Christian Smuts,” 483. and “Politics of Ecology in South Africa on the Radical Left,” 307.

19 “Smuts saw the emerging science of ecology as a field which could explain how diverse environments and social groups within his country interrelated,” in Anker, “Politics of Ecology in South Africa on the Radical Left,” 307.

unity within humanity. Through the rest of his life Smuts modified and elaborated on this student thesis.<sup>20</sup>

Humans, according to Smuts, merit varying degrees of rights and civil privileges based on their evolutionary status.

Just prior to his practicing law, Smuts used a Middle Temple University Research Society grant to write a book about Walt Whitman.<sup>21</sup> For Smuts, Whitman’s “personality” exemplified what he envisaged as the highest possible biological evolutionary state, “a point of evolution that only men but no women or non-whites could reach.”<sup>22</sup> Three decades later, in 1926, Smuts continued to ruminate over his theory and published a widely read and well-received text titled *Holism and Evolution*. In it he attempts to synthesize science and philosophy in a manner that accounts for both inherited traits as well as environmental effects. Although *Holism and Evolution* allowed for the seemingly liberal notion that disenfranchised members of society could aspire to greater heights, it simultaneously reinforces paternal relations – which for South Africa meant white male “trusteeship” of women and “Natives:”

By analogy to the growth of a human being, Smuts argued that only white men had reached the stage of grown-ups who understood how everything was connected. They were the most suited to organize and govern aspects of the whole; as the whole city of Pretoria, the whole Cape Town Province, the whole Union of South Africa, the whole British Empire, or the whole world through the League of Nations.<sup>23</sup>

Science, religion, and politics mutually informed and advanced one another within Smuts’ holistic framework. What makes Smuts’ book remarkable is not its novelty but rather how fully it represents the thought of his day.<sup>24</sup> However, Smuts’ nuanced philosophy cannot be flatly rejected as biological

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20 Anker, “*Jan Christian Smuts*,” 483.

21 J. C. Smuts, *Walt Whitman: A Study in the Evolution of Personality* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973).

22 *Ibid.*, 483.

23 *Ibid.*, 484.

24 Anker observes, “These were ideas held by many scientists of the period, most notable by the German evolutionary biologist Ernst Haeckel,” *ibid.*, 484.



determinism.<sup>25</sup> Far more insidious, his attention to “personality” attributes something to the individual’s autonomy thereby ascribing a moral evaluation of persons in addition to mere physical observation.<sup>26</sup>

In *Church Dogmatics II.2 paragraph 33* Barth’s sophisticated discussion emphasizes that Jesus is Jewish, elector and elected, human and divine, priest and victim.<sup>27</sup> Most notably, Barth reorients God’s election from Israel and the church (i.e. people) onto the Jewish body of Christ who is both elector and elected. In so doing, Barth accomplishes articulating a theo-centric theology of election and circumvents entho, anthro, or nation-centric alternatives. He also disallows Christians to evoke supersessionism and Jews to exclude Gentiles; both groups become necessary witnesses to each other and the world vis-a-vis Jesus. Their mutual and humble dependence on God facilitates their relationship. Like Edward Roux, who conceived of science in starkly different terms than Smuts, Barth imagines Christianity unlike his contemporaries – as intimately related to Israel and as utterly reliant on God. Rather than scapegoating science or religion as the source of racist politics, then, Barth illumines a more helpful approach. By decentring the human subject and instead focusing on Jesus, Barth presents us with a new epistemology in which humans acknowledge their limitations (mortality, fallibility, and sinful inclinations), trusting instead that God reveals to us who we are. Consequently, Barth’s theology casts knowing and authority as things received from God.<sup>28</sup> Humanity’s equity lies in a common humility rather than dignity for Barth.

Barth contrasts with Smuts, along with many men during his time, by rejecting certainty, safety, and civilization. These ideals, he argues, can only be fulfilled by Jesus Christ and therefore all alternatives foster idolatry. In a world of nations scrambling for dominance and seduced by achievement, Barth counters with a harsh reminder of creaturely limitation and inability – especially in theology. Which is why he stresses, “Theology

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25 Jan Christian Smuts, *Holism and Evolution* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1926), 311.

26 “To be a free Personality represents the highest achievement of which any human is capable,” in J. C Smuts, *Holism and Evolution*, 312.

27 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II.2: The Doctrine of Election* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), 126

28 Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, trans. E. C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 483.

will not try to illuminate the heavens with a searchlight mounted on earth but will try to see and understand earth in the light of heaven.”<sup>29</sup> Christians mistakenly look to creation in order to understand God’s divine order, but in doing so produce troubling hierarchies of being, as Smuts did. Consequently, Barth prescribes an alternative epistemology: that humans humbly receive revelation from God, who continually and freely seeks to impart grace and mercy.

### **b) Human rights rhetoric**

The inner logic of Smuts’ concept of human rights draws together science and religion to endorse racist politics. That is, Smuts organizes humans according to a hierarchy of beings where rights entailed reciprocity. Therefore, rather than critiquing Smuts for hypocrisy or pondering his domestic versus international policies as paradoxical, an accurate understanding of what he meant by human rights unveils not only his consistency but also the trouble with appeals to human rights today. Bernard Freidman detects specious motives:

In his attitude towards the Natives Smuts was not wanting in benevolence; he sincerely desired their advancement but his concern for them was paternal. In this respect Smuts was a true Afrikaner—paternalism was a tradition which he was always ready to honour. Politically, his concern for the Natives advanced no further than Guardianship. (The term ‘Trusteeship’ came into use much later.) Guardianship exercised its authority on the assumption that the Natives were still at a primal stage of development and must be treated as wards. Guardianship may have satisfied the Calvinist conscience of the Afrikaner, but it was no more than a plausible substitute for policy.<sup>30</sup>

What appears to be lost on many adherents of human rights are these insidious origins: paternalistic and white supremacist politics. Appealing

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29 Karl Barth, “First Commandment as an Axiom of Theology,” in Martin H. Rumscheidt, (ed.) *The Way of Theology in Karl Barth: Essay and Comments* (Allison Park: Pickwick Publications, 1986), 74.

30 Bernard Friedman, *Smuts: A Reappraisal* (Johannesburg: Hugh Kearthland Ltd., 1975), 20.

to natural law, Smuts and many of his fellow politicians assume this paternalistic subtext. Peoples labelled “uncivilized” were imagined requiring the guidance and care of rightfully ruling white men.

In South Africa specifically, Dutch Reformed theology prominently undergirded justifications for a racist statecraft. Friedman underscores that, “General Smuts had no problem of conscience. As far as he was concerned the Constitution had been handed down from Sinai. ‘The Constitution’, he said, ‘is not a man’s work. It bears the impress of a Higher Hand.’”<sup>31</sup> Likewise, his people, the Afrikaners, also attribute their social status to the God of Israel: “Deeply imbued with the spirit of the Old Testament, the Voortrekkers likened themselves to the Israelites; they were prepared to face the hazards and hardships of the wilderness rather than endure the decrees of the modern Pharaoh.”<sup>32</sup> Usurping Jewish election for themselves, Afrikaners narrate their presence in the then Cape colony as valid and even predestined:

They would admit of no relationship between White and Black save that of master and servant. The caste system they established was supported by Biblical sanction, that which they recognized no higher authority. White supremacy was part of the Divine order of things. Equality of status for White and Black was not only a revolutionary conception—it was sheer blasphemy.<sup>33</sup>

Consequently, confrontation between Afrikaners and “Natives” necessitated the former dominating the latter in the spirit of rectitude.

Like many of Smuts’ commentators, Emil Brunner struggles to understand Barth’s seemingly inconsistent stance on human rights. In their correspondence, Brunner needles Barth:

The totalitarian State is based on, is in fact identical with, the denial of those rights of the person vis-à-vis the State which are usually called human rights. That was the situation in Hitler’s State, and it is the same now in the Communist totalitarian State. Only the state

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31 *Ibid.*, 64.

32 *Ibid.*, 23.

33 *Ibid.*, 24.

can establish rights, and the individual only has the rights the State gives him and can take away from him at any time.<sup>34</sup>

For Brunner, as for many politically liberal minded moderns, natural human rights were the antidote to injustices such as totalitarian states. He assumes that totalitarianism was diametrically against Christianity and necessitated active resistance.<sup>35</sup> Smuts, however, demonstrates the frightful compatibility between Christianity and a totalitarian state, as do his successors who established apartheid with the misuse of biblical texts. Presumably Brunner was unaware of these relationships for they might have challenged his ardent support for Western powers on the precipice of the Cold War. In all likelihood Barth too did not have Smuts or South Africa in mind when he penned his response to Brunner, however, he exhibits a prescient logic by refusing Brunner's ardent stance. Barth seems to detect the trouble that hindsight might recognize as holism at work within human rights rhetoric.

Barth's understanding of human dignity has to do with God's free choice to care for people rather than innate rights. In this way he preserves the worth of humankind over causes and God over creatures. While Smuts' thesis on holism and Walt Whitman as the penultimate personality encouraged the notion of an "Ideal man" or what Barth calls "the idol Juggernaut."<sup>36</sup> For Smuts, "The ethical message of Holism to man is summed up in two words: Freedom and Purity. The response to that call in the personal life constitutes the great inner drama, the warfare in the Soul, which issues either in the attainment of Wholeness and Freedom and membership in the immortal Order of the Whole, or otherwise in defeat, enslavement

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34 Emil Brunner, "Correspondence with Karl Barth," in Ronald Gregor Smith (ed.), *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-War Writings, 1946–52* (London: SCM Press, 1954), 110.

35 *Ibid.*, 110.

36 In the "Ideal Man" emotions "will be relegated to the subordinate position to which their more primitive crude characters entitles them. In the Ideal Man the discords of ethical life will be composed, because there will be a harmonious correlation of higher and lower; the harmony will be richer in proportion to the variety of elements which have been conserved and will thus combine to produce it," Smuts, *Holism and Evolution*, 312. He goes on to explain, "It is this combination, in a harmonious form, of all grades of ethical evolution in the ideal Personality which will make it truly human, while at the same time it will be expressive of the universal order. To secure that harmony ought to be the supreme aim of the ethical individual," in Smuts, *Holism and Evolution*, 313.

and death.”<sup>37</sup> His understanding of human rights as informed by racist and sexist hierarchies and requiring self-assertion showcase what Barth critiques most.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps not acquainted with Smuts himself, though indubitably exposed to thinkers who shared his sentiments, Barth refuses to trust in any political party, human, or ideal as salvific. As a theologian quite different than Brunner, Barth conscientiously places God in the person of Jesus at the centre of his epistemology. Barth’s doctrine of the incarnation disallows blind adherence to human rights as the answer to the world’s iniquity. Instead Barth asserts that the Church, informed by the person Jesus Christ, should endeavour to call us back to our true humanity:

[The Church believes in, and proclaims, the freedom of God, namely the majestic freedom of His grace which does not make human justice superfluous, but which in fact impetuously demands the rule of human justice ... Its task must be to call men back to humanity, and that is its contribution to reconstruction.<sup>39</sup>

What it means to be human, within Barth’s framework, has less to do with natural capacities and everything to do with God’s freedom to impart grace and mercy—especially via the incarnation. Barth carefully avoids separatism from the state, because Barth believes that the church should be involved in politics. But instead of ascribing to this party or that ideology, Barth suggests that the church always opt for a third option—to proclaim God’s kingdom:

Thus, the Christian approach surpasses both individualism and collectivism. The Church knows and recognizes the ‘interest’ of the individual and of the ‘whole,’ but it resists them both when they want to have the last word. It subordinates them to the being of the citizen, the being of the civil community before the law, over which neither the individuals nor the ‘whole’ are to hold sway, but which

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37 Smuts, *Holism and Evolution*, 316.

38 Smuts describes sentiments frightfully similar to Nazism and Apartheid, “The Personality should reach such a standard of purity and homogeneity that there will be no alien stuff in it to offer resistant to the prompting of Conscience or Duty or to cause friction or disquietude in the soul,” in *Holism and Evolution*, 314.

39 Karl Barth, “The Church Between East and West,” in Ronald Gregor Smith (ed.), *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-War Writing 1946–52* (London: SCM Press, 1954), 145.

they are to seek after, to find, and to serve – always with a view to limiting and preserving the life of man.<sup>40</sup>

Here Barth redefines the individual's relationship with the whole in terms utterly oppositional to Smuts. People cannot be reduced to playing a part within the hierarchical whole. Allegiance, for the Christian, Barth maintains, should only be to God. As creaturely constructs, all political parties are flawed. Although the church should participate in politics, it should never confuse its identity or purpose with the state.

### 3. Implications for today

If the United Nations and League of Nations were able to use Smuts' concept of human rights and dignity against him and South Africa's apartheid government, is that not a testament to the usefulness of these concepts in the present day? Theologian and bioethicist David G. Kirchhoeffer devotes his scholarship to the question of the usefulness of human rights rhetoric and dignity talk. He explains that the notion of human dignity rightly informs bioethical guidelines and legal policies. In addition, Pope Benedict XVI appeals to the concept of human dignity in his theology on the basis of the *imago dei*, doctrine of creation, and *telos* in order to develop a normative morality.<sup>41</sup> Despite this, Kirchhoeffer explains, the concept of human dignity occupies a position tenuous today, "From once bearing the promise of a new universal ethic in the wake of the horrors of the Second World War, human dignity is now facing the charge that it is useless ... is human dignity a universally relevant concept, fundamentally valuable to contemporary ethical discourse and policymaking, or is it actually useless?"<sup>42</sup>

Kirchhoeffer maps various notions of human dignity, from being an inviolable value inherent to all people, to dignity being something that

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40 Karl Barth, *Community, State, and Church: 3 Essays* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1960), 174.

41 David G. Kirchhoeffer, "Benedict XVI, Human Dignity, and Absolute Moral Norms," *New Blackfriars* 91, no. 1035 (2009): 586–608.

42 David G. Kirchhoeffer, "Bioethics and the Demise of the Concept of Human Dignity: Has Medicine Killed Ethics?" *Human Reproduction and Genetic Ethics*, 17, no.2 (2011): 141–154.

human beings acquire. The broad use of human dignity in public discourse to mean all manner of things, including but not limited to autonomy, life, creation, and respect, exacerbates such debates. Kirchhoeffter carefully critiques definitions of human dignity that are reducible to species-membership, possession of a particular capacity, a sense of self-worth, or moral behaviour. In other words, the notion of human dignity is either conceived of too broadly or too narrowly. It has its origins in centuries old Christian theology, and, according to Kirchhoeffter, post-World War II policymakers turned to this concept to settle moral disputes. He argues that human dignity cannot be reduced to rational paradigms, secular ethics, or *techné* (the application of a process or technique).

Instead, Kirchhoeffter advocates for hermeneutical ethics. Hermeneutical ethics, he explains, presupposes that human beings are meaning-seeking, meaning-making, and always situated in historical relationships. This, Kirchhoeffter asserts, enables human dignity to initiate ethical reflection rather than settle debates. Within this framework, he believes that human beings objectively have dignity and also human dignity is something that they subjectively seek.<sup>43</sup> Within Kirchhoeffter's more recent publications, he specifies the usefulness of human dignity as facilitating human flourishing when realized by multidimensional, whole persons being-in-relationship-over-time.<sup>44</sup> Despite his clear reasoning and compelling suggestion that an adequately rich and dynamic understanding of human dignity is essential to ethical inquiry, the problem with Kirchhoeffter, Smuts, and human rights rhetoric is that they all maintain a high vision of humanity. What makes Barth's theology distinct and valuable is the opposite – his low view of humanity. For Barth, anthropology, statecraft, and the church always occupy a humble position relative to God in Christ.

As early as Barth's commentary on the Epistle to the Romans he articulates a third option, beyond "Legitimization" and "Revolution," for the church's relationship to the state. The former, he argues, trusts in government and

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43 David G. Kirchhoeffter, "Bioethics and the Demise of the Concept of Human Dignity: Has Medicine Killed Ethics?" *Human Reproduction and Genetic Ethics*, 17.2 (2011): 141–154.

44 David G. Kirchhoeffter, "Human Dignity and Human Enhancement: A Multidimensional Approach," *Bioethics* 31, no.5 (2017): 375–383.

the latter in self for salvation that only God in Jesus provides. “It is God who wishes to be recognized,” Barth reminds us, “as He that *overcometh* the unrighteousness of the existing order.”<sup>45</sup> Consistently returning to God in Jesus, Barth critiques all systems and ideologies that promise what only God can provide: “[The revolutionary] forgets that he is not the One, that he is not the subject of the freedom which he so earnestly desires, that, for all the strange brightness of his eyes, he is not the Christ who stands before the Grand Inquisitor, but is, contrariwise, the Grand Inquisitor encountered by the Christ.”<sup>46</sup> Once again Barth’s diagnosis is a wrongly centred subject – the space that only God should occupy—as well as an epistemological fallacy—trust in human capacities to know rather than passively receiving understanding from God. Provocatively, Barth asks, “What man has the right to propound and represent the ‘New’, whether it be a new age, or a new world, or even a new – spirit?”<sup>47</sup> Only Jesus the Messiah inaugurates the truly new. Consequently, Barth insists: “This judgment is based upon the fact that the real revolution comes from God and not from human revolt.”<sup>48</sup>

Barth’s understanding of human dignity has to do with God’s free choice to care for people rather than innate rights. In this way he preserves the worth of humankind over causes, and God over creatures. Smuts’ thesis on holism and Walt Whitman as the penultimate personality encouraged the notion of an “Ideal man” or what Barth calls “the idol Juggernaut.” His understanding of human rights as informed by racist and sexist hierarchies and requiring self-assertion showcase what Barth critiques most. Perhaps not acquainted with Smuts himself, though indubitably exposed to thinkers who shared his sentiments, Barth refuses to trust in any political party, human, or ideal as salvific. As a theologian quite different than Brunner, Barth conscientiously places God in the person of Jesus at the centre of his epistemology. Barth’s doctrine of the incarnation disallows blind adherence to human rights as the answer to the world’s iniquity. Instead Barth asserts that the Church, informed by the person Jesus Christ, should endeavour

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45 Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 481.

46 Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 480.

47 Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 480.

48 Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 485.



to call us back to our true humanity. What it means to be human, within Barth's framework, has less to do with natural capacities and everything to do with God's freedom to impart grace and mercy—especially via the incarnation.

#### 4. Conclusion

Barth's theology illuminates the *continuity*, rather than paradoxical character, of Smuts' human rights rhetoric and racist sensibilities. While current day analysts struggle to reconcile Smuts' international and domestic policies, extolling the former and censuring the latter, they fail to recognize Smuts' consistency. Devotion to the United Nations or human rights rhetoric displays a misunderstanding of Smuts' philosophy of holism. Smuts' hierarchy of humanity lurks as the foundation for each, despite contemporary assumptions that these promote equality. Human rights rhetoric, like natural theology, relies on the notion that people innately deserve freedom, peace, and security. Barth provocatively aligns these aspirations with the devil tempting Jesus in the desert. All nations crave power and stability, however Barth, from a theological perspective, points out that creaturely existence is marked by mortality and dependence on God. Striving to establish self-sufficiency, within Barth's theology, asserts misguided notions of human freedom over and against God's freedom. The latter, he characterizes as imparting mercy and grace to humanity. However, it necessitates humility, passivity, and receptivity—hardly alluring attributes when compared to Smuts' ideal personality.

Rejecting theocracy and separatism, Barth advocated for the church's active participation in politics without becoming confused with the state. Because the church's allegiance is to God, not nation nor ideology, it cannot align itself with East or West, the United States or Russia, Northern or Southern hemisphere (we might say today); Christians, he asserts, ascribe to the law of the Gospel and no human law.<sup>49</sup> Freedom, then, reigns within God's freedom for humanity. Faith in the triune God endows people not with natural human rights but rather the gift of mercy and grace. For Barth, this

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49 Karl Barth's Response to Brunner in *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-War Writings*, 118.

humble posture more than any political scheme promotes peace because it prioritizes the work of God over human achievement. However, Barth's theocentricism encourages the Church's active participation in politics. He believes that epistemologically, Christians who receive from God the revelation of their utter dependence on God above all else should seek to inform politics.<sup>50</sup>

South Africa's National Party that instituted Apartheid from 1948–1994 justified white supremacy on the basis of Dutch Reformed theology and exegesis. In light of this Christians might quiver at Barth's proposition. However, that would misunderstand his exhortation, for Barth challenges Nazi Germany's ideology by affirming Jesus' Jewish flesh and Israel's election. Unlike some Afrikaners who misappropriated Israel's covenant, forgetting their humble Gentile status as grafted into election, Barth prescribes a Christo-centric theology where both Jew and Gentile mutually witness to one another in light of Jesus.<sup>51</sup> In this way his doctrine of election, creation, and reconciliation oppose Smuts and all human attempts at inaugurating what only God can—namely true justice, peace, life, and liberty.

A human construction like politics, theology also has the potential to misdirect our loyalties, according to Barth. He critiques theologians most heavily because Barth dreaded the kind of justification that South Africa's National Party employed—that supposedly God ordained racism. Perhaps even more susceptible to evil due to the supposed divine sanction behind it, theology, for Barth, occupies a liminal space: “Theology (even theology!) is continually asked where its heart, its concern and interest really lie, and whether its heart might not be divided secretly between this god and other gods.”<sup>52</sup> It would be misguided, then, to reduce Barth's epistemology to chariness over politics. On the contrary, all human endeavours, and especially theology, he contends, must recognize their creaturely limitations

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50 Barth, “The Church Between East and West” 143.

51 Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), J. Kameron Carter's *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), and his “An Unlikely Convergence: W.E.B. Du Bois, Karl Barth, and the Problem of the Imperial God-Man,” *The New Centennial Review* Vol. 11, no. 3 (2011): 167-224 argue that the Jewishness of Jesus disabuses Christian theology of supersessionism and racist claims to election.

52 Barth, “First Commandment as an Axiom of Theology.”

and vulnerability to sin. He asserts: “At no time is theology ever *not* in danger, ever *not* in temptation ... Just as theology is tempted by philosophy, so too the church stands in the parallel danger and temptation of either trying to become the state or of being absorbed by the state.”<sup>53</sup> Church and State should interact without subsuming on another, Barth argues. Both continually face the temptation of taking over the other and should resist this inclination. Once again, Barth identifies an epistemological problem: “An untenable concept of human nature is also being presupposed, as though human beings themselves possessed the capacity for ascertaining what is or is not revelation, as though they had at their disposal a criterion by which they might recognize and acknowledge Christ.”<sup>54</sup> Neither the church nor state can discern what it means to be human. All creatures, according to Barth, require the gift of God’s revelation in order to know God and only subsequently themselves.

On the basis of his theology Barth was able to resist choosing between competing ideologies.<sup>55</sup> A foil for Smuts’ holism, Barth’s “third way” introduces an alternative between dichotomies; Smuts’ philosophy drew everything together into a homogenous and “pure” hierarchical whole, whereas Barth proposed an alien and disruptive element—the divine. In opposition to the inflated sense of human potential, Barth casts the church as humble voices within the political sphere: “No, when the Church witnesses it moves in fear and trembling, not with the stream but against it.”<sup>56</sup> Writing after the First World War, Barth intuits the trajectory of an androcentric epistemology. Distrusting of human capacity to rightly discern the good, justice, or even their own humanity, Barth maintains the necessity of divine revelation against natural theology. Only from God, he proclaims, can people know themselves, their situation, and their inability to contend with sin. In utter disharmony with the beliefs of his

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53 Barth, “Fate and Idea in Theology,” 30.

54 Barth “Fate and Idea in Theology,” 42.

55 “... Afrikaner nationalists back home, who reviled [Smuts] as the ‘handyman of empire’, or to white workers and socialists, who regarded him as a lackey of capitalist imperialism” Dubow, 52.

56 Karl Barth’s Response to Brunner in *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-War Writings*, 117.

contemporaries, especially Smuts, Barth argues for an epistemology of humility dependent on God's free gift of mercy and grace.

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