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Christian Neo-Orthodoxy Approach to Reconstruction of Religious Thought on Selected Theological Issues: An Islamic Analysis

ADIBAH ABDUL RAHIM

ABSTRACT

Christian neo-orthodoxy can be placed as a middle position between traditional orthodoxy and liberalism. Like Muslim reformists' approach of reform, which attempted to reconstruct Islamic religious thought in the light of modern science and knowledge, Christian neo-orthodoxy insisted that Christianity itself needs continually to be rethought and that theology must engage seriously with the modern world in its quest for understanding. Therefore, both Islamic approach of reform and Christian neo-orthodoxy shared a similar objective, but both present different views and methods of interpreting scriptures and traditions in the light of new scientific knowledge. This paper highlights selected theological issues advocated by Christian neo-orthodoxy for reconstruction of religious thought. At the same time, it provides an analysis on those issues from Islamic perspectives. It was found that despite of claiming themselves as belong to mediating position, Christian neo-orthodoxy seemed to ignore their scriptures and depended much on human interpretations. This is obviously contradicted to an Islamic approach which upholds that the fundamental sources of the Qur'an and Sunnah should always be referred to as primary references despite our reliance on modern knowledge and rational inquiries. Since the study is theoretical in nature, it is confined to library research. It is hoped that this study will provide a proper understanding on the response of religious thought from the perspective of two different religions, Christianity and Islam.

Keywords: *Christian Neo-Orthodoxy; Theology; Religions;*

INTRODUCTION: THE BACKGROUND OF NEO- ORTHODOXY

Neo-orthodoxy began in the years following World War 1 with a denial of the Protestant Liberal Movement which had stressed on the accommodation

of Christianity with Western science and culture. Neo-orthodoxy took the position that traditional and liberal Protestantism had lost its insight and the truth of the faith; it can be seen through two perspectives. First, it was a departure from orthodoxy having lead young conservative theologians away from traditional religious formulations, and advocating a new brand of orthodoxy. Second, it was an effort to get back to the basic ideas of the early church as a means of proclaiming the truth of the Gospel in the twentieth century. Thus, neo-orthodoxy attempted to save the Protestant mainstream from Protestant liberalism. The prefix “neo” in the word “neo-orthodoxy” was seen as the validity of new philosophical principles in understanding an accurate view of scripture. (James C. Livingston 1971)

Karl Barth’s work *Commentary on Romans* which was published in 1919 was the first manifestation of the neo-orthodox movement. A number of Swiss and German pastors were also involved in the movement. In 1921, Friedrich Gogarten published his work *Religious Decision* meanwhile Emil Brunner published his *Destoievsky* in 1922. In the same year, Karl Barth once again published the second edition of his *Commentary on Romans*. Again in the same year, a group comprised of these men and a few others who shared their views and their visions began to publish a periodical called *Zwischen den Zeiten* (Between the Times). The movement, then, spread to England, Sweden, and America. With the rise of the Nazis movement in Germany, many of the leaders of neo-orthodox movement met other German Christians in Berman in 1934 and issued a declaration against the evils of Nazism. The resulting crackdown by Hitler forced some neo-orthodox theologian into exile. The movement continued throughout the period of World War 11 and into the postwar period, but with the death of the main leaders it tended to lose its influence in theology.

Selected Theological Views of Christian Neo-Orthodoxy and an Islamic Analysis

Since the impact of modernity on Christianity is a direct result of the Christian theological reformation and the rethinking and redefining of the revealed texts, the focus of discussion will be on major theological issues. I will highlight selected theological issues discussed by neo-orthodoxy and analyze them from an Islamic point of views.

The first theological issue is pertaining to the knowledge of God. The best example of exposition on the concept of God by Christian neo-orthodox theologians could be found in the various writings of the neo-

orthodox, Karl Barth. He replaced the liberal emphasis on the immanence of God in nature and human history by the notion of God's transcendence. He emphasized on the infinite distance between God and man. Thus, he opposed rationalism and mysticism for both relies upon human resources and human experience for the knowledge of God¹. He also contended that knowledge of God couldn't be known even through the revelation of scripture². He argued that man, as man can never know God; his wishing, seeking, and striving are all in vain (Karl Barth 1933, p.91). Therefore, Barth observed that religion, education, philosophy, science, intellectualism and metaphysics were all completely impotent means to attain knowledge of God. For Barth, man couldn't know God through system of reason. In this sense, Barth was influenced by Soren Kierkagaard³, a philosopher who was the first to use the term existentialism. Existentialism included the concept that the highest is subjective rather than objective. Existentialism elevates individual experience and personal choice. It is inherently anti-intellectual and against reason. Faith or knowledge of God, therefore, was referred to as rejection of reason and the exaltation of feeling and personal experience. It means that the knowledge of God cannot be rationally proven. Barth has introduced God as 'Wholly Other', that is, exclusive separation or distance between God and man. He said, "God is above us, above space and time, and above all concepts and opinions and all potentialities" (Karl Barth 1939). Barth was in opinion that God is always hidden, unknown, and couldn't be perceived through the heart of man or in the world of nature. Barth believed that there are two realms which do not touch each other; the realm of nature and the realm of the supernatural. He declared the utter separation of the high God and the world. The creation of the world, therefore, is not the manifestation or revelation of God⁴. This view was also

¹ He said, "the power of God can be detected neither in the world of nature nor in the souls of men. It must not be confounded with any high, exalted, force, known or unknowable". See Karl Barth, Hoskyns (trans), *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p.30

² He said, "even after the revelation man cannot know God, for He is ever the unknown God". For further exposition on Karl Barth's views on knowledge of God, refer to his writing 'Knowledge of God', in his *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2, part 1 in Ronnie Little Jhon (editor), *Exploring Christian Theology* (Boston: University Press of America, 1985), pp. 119-131

³ In theology, Kierkagaard can rightfully be considered the father of neo-orthodoxy for the themes of his major works run like those of neo-orthodox theologians. William Mc Neil and Karen S. Feldman, *Continental Philosophy: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 65.

⁴ Barth's view on this matter was influenced by Soren Kierkagaard who claimed that the natural world is not that logical world, but the world of that which has 'come into existence'.

shared by another neo-orthodox theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr who claimed that creation is a mythical idea, which cannot be fully rationalized.

According to Barth, there is no point of contact between God's revelation and man's natural experience and knowledge. He also refused to appeal to science or scientific cosmology to prove that God created all things as rational proofs for the existence of God. He denied that human rationality could infer from scientific data that God designed and created all things as a rational proof for the knowledge of the existence of God. This position shows that Barth rejected the natural theology which describes the manner in which God can be known through nature⁵. In this sense, Barth also saw a gap between revelation and reason. He was less concerned about taking the history and development of science or cosmology as subject matter to deal with in his theology. Barth's theology also did not have any dependent connection with metaphysical or philosophical foundations. It was an independent discipline and had no need to be studied with any other agenda.

From an Islamic point of view, the view that scientific natural order is devoid of religious significance and there is no relation between theology and science is not acceptable. There was some sort of integration between the actual content of science and theology in which knowledge of God could be comprehended and understood within the natural order of creation and science. It is important to be noted that the laws of science are not eternal and absolute. It was an eternal and absolute God who established the patterns of behavior that we call scientific laws, and who created a universe to act in accordance with those laws. Therefore, the universe is not self-originated and self-sustained, and the laws of nature were not sufficient to explain all

Hence, this natural world is the world of change and therefore contingency, and this contingency is mirrored in the uncertainty of knowing that world. What is contingent cannot be necessary truth. See C. Stephen Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 87.

⁵ According to the natural theology, a general knowledge of God may be discerned throughout the creation of humanity, in the natural order, and in the historical process itself. There is a sense of divinity implanted within every human being by God where God has bestowed human beings with some presentiment of the divine existence. This is called human nature and the height of human nature is the human capacity to reason. Thus, one should expect to find traces of God in the human process of reasoning. Furthermore, the inspection of the ordering of the world provides an argument for the existence of God. Discerning and investigating this ordering world involves human nature to ask questions about the world, and there seems to be something about the world, which allows answers to these questions to be given. All of these are forms of natural theology preparing the way for the full knowledge of the existence of God. See Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), pp. 158-160.

phenomena. The natural laws were not self-dependent and self-existent because they were inferred from the relationship of events and phenomena in the universe. The existence as a whole and all phenomena within it were contingent. Their existence was not absolutely necessary; it is equally possible for them to exist or not. Anything whose existence is contingent cannot be eternal and needs one with the power of choice to prefer its existence to its non-existence or merely potential existence. Therefore, the creation is considered as the reign of Divine Law. It has emerged in existence in laws of evolutionary creation through the activity of God's will, and its origin is not a chance-order. The spontaneous creation of the universe should be doubted as men might wonder how, where, why, and by whom that process and working of the cosmos had been originated. The principle of spontaneous creation of the universe remained devoid of the satisfactory answers for these questions. Therefore, the whole creation of the universe contributed the knowledge of the existence of God.

The scientific study of creation and the cosmic order existing in the universe is a manifestation of the knowledge of God, His power and wisdom. This involves the exercising of reasoning and reflecting over the inward and outward experience of life and drawing valid conclusions for discovering the truth. Allah appealed man to reflect over the creation in His verse "*travel through the earth and see how Allah did originate creation; so will Allah produce a later creation, for Allah has power all things*" (Qur'an 29: 19-20). Hence, the view of Christian neo-orthodoxy that there was no rationalization of faith is not acceptable. Islam also rejects the division of theology into science and revelation. The assumption that science represented the study of nature and religion only dealt with supernatural realities is not justified. From an Islamic point of view, knowledge of God can also be drawn from the natural sciences, for example, in the knowledge of creation. At the same time, knowledge of the creation could never be complete without sufficient knowledge of the Creator and the principle upon which the universe was created and governed.

Besides observing the physical world, man also can observe his own self as a way to gain the knowledge of God. Knowledge of God is a natural disposition in man, innate and originated by God Himself. The basis of all religions is the belief in the Creator of the universe and the acknowledgement that He was one with no partner to share His sovereignty. It was Revelation that clarifies, confirms, and extends whatever is known through human nature. Western scholars themselves acknowledged the innateness of religion and believed in one God. For example, Earnest Renan who supposed that the Semites were monotheists by nature and the origin of

all gods is one. Max Muller also developed the idea of the natural religion in his work *Introduction to the Source of Religion*. Therefore, it is important to be noted that knowledge of God can be achieved by blending scientific and spiritual evidence, that is, by blending our knowledge of the complicated universe with our inner spiritual feeling deep within us.

Meanwhile, the knowledge of God also can be provided by the prophets. God, by means of *whay*, imparted the true knowledge of His attributes to the prophets, revealed to them His law and the right code of living, gave them the knowledge of the meaning and purpose of the present life and life after death. Therefore, man may discover the knowledge of God through the message of the prophets. The knowledge of God, His attributes, and life after death were given to man by the prophets who had a direct contact with the Divine Being and had been endowed with the correct knowledge. Obviously, another important medium for the achievement of the true knowledge of God is through God's messengers.

It can be concluded that the knowledge of God can be understood and comprehended by various means other than Revelation, such as, scientific reasoning, natural instincts of man, and prophet hood, which involve philosophical and metaphysical discussions. The rejection of any rationalization of faith by any source of knowledge advocated by Christian neo-orthodoxy particularly Karl Barth has no ground. Barth, throughout his writings, wrote about the metaphysical and ethical attributes of God, sovereignty, majesty, holiness, with a degree of certainty. Consequently, we may wonder how he came to know so much about 'unknown God' as claimed God was.

The second theological issue to be discussed is on the sinfulness of mankind. Christian neo-orthodoxy continued to uphold the doctrine of the original sin of mankind. One of the neo-orthodox theologians who greatly discussed this concept was Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1917)⁶. Niebuhr began his arguments by emphasizing the transcendental self, that is, man and his unique capacity to raise himself above the two components of his being, namely, nature and reason. Thus, a human temptation to overstep their bounds and be like God is the precondition of sin. He wrote, "*The real evil in the human situation...lies in man's willingness to recognize and*

⁶ Niebuhr's discussion dealt more with the nature of sin than with the forms of sin although he also treated the later theme. He has also placed the doctrine of sin from within sociology, and deepened it psychologically and existentially under the influence of Soren Kierkegaard. See Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), vol. 1.

acknowledge the weakness, finiteness and dependence of his position, in his inclination to grasp after a power and security which transcend the possibilities of human existence, and in his effort to pretend a virtue and knowledge which are beyond the limits of mere creatures” (Reinhold Niebuhr 1964, p.137).

The original sin of mankind, according to Neibuhr, is inevitably, not necessarily⁷. He did not agree with the view that man inherits either guilt or some internal defects from an historical Adam. In his writings, Neibuhr was more concerned in showing how sin grows out of the present situation, not out humanity's pre-historic past. He said, *“The original sin is not an inherited corruption, but is an inevitable fact of human existence...it is there in every moment of exercise, but it has no history”*. (Reinhold Niebuhr 1956)

The idea of original sin has no place in Islam. From an Islamic point of view, man is born in a natural state of purity, that is, *fitrah*. By this principle, Islam declares that human beings are created with good natures, and whatever becomes of man after birth is the result of external influence and intruding factors. It is man's freedom of choice and not any inborn characteristics that cause him to become evil. It is not because of predestination of God. Therefore, Islam rejects the idea of an original sin for mankind.

Allah said, *“Then set your face upright for creation in the right sate, the nature made by Allah in which He has made man; there is no altering of Allah's creation, that is the right path, but most people do not know”*. (Qur'an 30:30)

“Assuredly We have created man in the best form of creation”. (Qur'an 95:4)

Besides believing in the original of mankind, Christian neo-orthodox theologians also rejected the Divine origin of the bible. In their perception, the Bible is not an absolute Divine Revelation. Thus, it is not, in its essence, the word of God. For them, Revelation is an activity of God which communicates with us. In this connection, Karl Barth, for instance, has made a distinction between the word of God and the Bible. The word of God was understood as a living subject, which repeats the action from time to time while the Bible is similar to one of the events of the word of God. Barth claimed that (Karl Barth 1958, p. 60; James C. Livingston 1971, p.332.),

⁷ For further explanation on his concept of original sin, see his essay on “Man as Sinner” quoted from his work *The “Nature and Destiny of Man”* in Ronnie Little John (editor), *Exploring Christian Theology*, pp. 279-290

“The word of God still happens today in the Bible; and apart from this happening the bible is not the word of God, but a book like other books”.

Describing Revelation as an encounter between man and God, Christian neo-orthodox theologians believed that the Bible became the word of God only when it spoke to man personally. Thus, man stands in the judgment of God’s word to determine whether or not the Bible is the word of God based upon his subjective experience. This attitude of neo-orthodoxy towards Scripture represents the whole idea of existentialist philosophy. As explained earlier, existentialism always presents subjective arguments, and neo-orthodoxy imposed this subjectivism on all the doctrine of historic Christianity. Familiar terms are used, but are redefined or employed in a way that is purposely vague, not to convey objective but subjective meaning. Consequently, what the Bible means becomes unimportant. What it means to an individual man is important. All of this resoundingly echoes Soren Kierkagaard’s concept of ‘truth that is true for me’⁸.

Since the Bible is not the touchstone of Revelation, nor sacred or Divine, Christian neo-orthodox theologians rejected its authority. On the other hand, they fully reinterpreted it according to scientific knowledge and the historical-critical methods to discover that the believer might choose to regard as authoritative. Therefore, the Bible has been regarded like any other book of religion and has been reduced to a collection of religious writings. Since humans have always tended to err, all human writings including the Bible are tainted with errors, misconceptions, and overstatements or understatements. The radically human and fallible character of the Bible is one of neo-orthodoxy’s most consistent themes⁹. For neo-orthodox theologians, the Bible does not contain universally noble and sublime truths. Karl Barth, for example, said (Karl Barth, *Word of God and Word of Man*, p. 60),

“The Bible is the literary monument of an ancient racial religion and of a Hellenistic culture’s religion and of the Near East. It is a human document like any other”.

⁸ See Soren Kierkagaard’s discussion on subjectivism of truth in Micheal Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenback and David Basinger (editors), *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 80-83. Also, L. Nathan Oaklander, *Existentialist Philosophy: An Introduction* (New Jersey: Englewood Cliffs, 1992), pp. 11-19. Also, H.J.Blackham, *Six Existentialist Thinkers* (London: New York: Routledge Publication, 1991), pp 1-22.

⁹ Barth emphasized this point in strongly polemical terms throughout his *Church Dogmatics* and his *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1963), pp.30.

This means that the Biblical witnesses were fallible men whose historical and scientific judgments were often erroneous. Barth wrote (Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, vol.2, p. 539),

“The prophets and apostles as such...even their function as witnesses, even in their act of writing down their witnesses, were real, historical men as we are, and therefore sinful in their acting and capable and actually guilty of error in their spoken and written word...they shared the culture of their age and environment, whose form and content could be contested by other ages and environment...In this biblical view of the world and of man we are constantly coming up against presuppositions which are not ours, and statements we cannot accept”.

On the other note, Karl Barth argued that the Bible gives a little practical value because it is a witness to the world of God, not of this world. He said Karl Barth, Word of God and Word of Man, pp.43-45),

“We have found in the Bible a new world, God, God’s sovereignty, God’s glory, God’s incomprehensible love. Not the history of man but the history of God! Not the virtues of man but the virtues of Him who hath called us out of darkness into His marvelous light! Not human standpoint of God”.

The theological contents of the Bible, according to Barth, were not authentic. He claimed that (Karl Barth 1954, p.221),

“Not a single verse of the Bible has come down to us with such absolute certainty and clarity that alternative versions cannot be suggested. We are therefore on uncertain ground”.

In contrast to Neo-orthodoxy’s views on the fallible, unauthentic and human elements of the Bible, the Muslim Scripture, *Qur’an* is regarded as the most essential element in Islam. The *Qur’an* is the word of God inspired by the inner spiritual sense, brought to Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) through the angel of jibril. The process of compilation of the *Qur’an* is clear in the history of Islam. During the Prophet’s life, whenever a revelation came to him, he would proclaim it to people, then many of his followers would learn it by heart, and it would also be put into writing at the same time. About six months after the Prophet’s death, which took place in 632 C.E, work was undertaken to collect a complete copy of the *Qur’an* consisting of all the writings made in the Prophet’s presence. This was done on the instruction

of the first ruler of the Muslims, Abu Bakr, and with the help of the scribes and the companions of the Prophet (p.b.u.h). In this way, a master copy of the *Qur'an* was collected. Some fifteen years later, when Muslim rule had spread far and wide, the third ruler of the Muslims, Uthman ordered further copies to be transcribed from this master copy. These copies were sent to the big cities of the Muslim world to be kept as standard copies. Muslim also kept up the practice of memorizing parts of the *Qur'an*, many learning the whole of it by heart. In this way, the *Qur'an* was passed down through the ages, in both written and oral form. Due to these processes, the text of the *Qur'an* has been preserved in its original purity and no proof has even been presented to dispute or deny the authenticity of the manuscript compiled during the caliphate of Uthman ibn Affan. In fact, God had given a promise in the *Qur'an* itself that He would Himself guard this Scripture. Allah said, *"Surely We have revealed the reminder (Qur'an), and surely We are its Guardian"*. (Qur'an 15:9)

"In truth that We sent down the Qur'an and with truth it was revealed to the Prophet". (Qur'an 17:105)

Unlike the Bible which was merely a witness to revelation or became revelation in an encounter as claimed by Christian neo-orthodoxy, the *Qur'an* in its entirety is the direct word of God and there was no distortion or falsehood in God's words. Thus, the *Qur'an* was infallible that is, far from misleading us, rather, it is true and reliable in all matters it addresses. The Prophet (p.b.u.h) was also infallible in conveying the divine message of the *Qur'an* as Allah said,

"O mankind! The Messenger hath come to you in truth from Allah; believe in him, it is the best for you". (Qur'an 4:170)

The Prophet (p.b.u.h) was seen as a special person prepared and chosen by God to deliver His message to mankind. The Prophet's honesty and truthfulness, his intelligence and integrity are beyond doubt. The Prophet (p.b.u.h) was also seen as the impetus and motivating force for all intellectual developments in the world.

It is important to be noted that Islam perceives the *Qur'an* as the most certain and highest source of knowledge. The *Qur'an* was the most authentic document and it pointed to other sources of knowledge by referring to the historical, metaphysical, sociological, natural, and eschatological phenomena. Thus, the *Qur'an* as a Muslims' Scripture has been given much

significance and far more important than neo-orthodox views on their scripture.

CONCLUSION

It was found that there were clearly significant differences between Christian neo-orthodoxy and an Islamic perspective on the issues of the knowledge of God, sinfulness of mankind and the perception towards the Scripture. On these matters, Islam reminds the Muslims to give emphasis on the supremacy of tradition as the basis of their thought. Although neo-orthodoxy claimed to be a synthesis of Reformation Christianity and nineteenth-century liberalism, the union of these two different traditions has proved to be problematic. There is no objectivity in neo-orthodoxy since neo-orthodox theologians went so far in their argument and fell into a trap of subjectivism. Moreover, neo-orthodoxy resorted to the same dialecticism and abstractness of human reason that it was criticizing in Protestant liberalism. What philosophers had already said in secular language was expressed by neo-orthodoxy in theological language. However, neo-orthodoxy has had a wide appeal and influence due to its representation a union between the old and new ideas.

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Assoc Prof. Dr. Adibah Abdul Rahim
Department of Usul al Din and Comparative Religion
Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences
International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM)
adibahar@iium.edu.my