

worldview

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A WORD FOR KARL BARTH

Karl Barth, one of the most eminent theologians of this century, has reaffirmed his stand against a religious commitment in the Cold War. In a "Letter to a Pastor in the German Democratic Republic," reported in the *New York Times* last month, he has again insisted that if it is to be true to its vocation, the Christian Church must remain neutral in the present world struggle.

But Barth seems to have moved beyond the neutralism he expressed in his famous 1948 lecture, "The Church Between East and West": now, ten years later, he clearly is neutral against the United States. The East German pastor had asked him whether Christians living under Communist regimes might properly seek to "pray away" their oppression. "Might you not fear," the theologian replied, "that He might grant your prayers in the fearful fashion of letting you awake one morning among the fleshpots of Egypt as a man bounden to the American way of life?"

This answer, with all that it implies, has caused considerable anguish among many Christians. In West Germany Barth has been criticized for proclaiming "the worst kind of neutralism." In the United States *The Christian Century* (in an editorial quoted elsewhere in this issue) asks: "Why is this man, who condemned Naziism, blind to the evils of totalitarianism when it appears in its Communist form?" In both Europe and America, the controversy that the new Barth pronouncement has aroused takes us back to the heart of the question of religion and international affairs.

As Reinhold Niebuhr has stated, Karl Barth is certainly "neither a 'primitive anti-Communist,' nor a 'secret pro-Communist.'" He is merely a very eminent theologian, trying desperately to be impartial in his judgments." The premise of Barth's neutralism is basic to his theological thought: the transcendence of God over all times and places, and the duty of the Church to witness to, and to judge, all times and places, including, most especially, those times and places which seem most congenial to the Church.

Beware of the seducer, Barth warns Christians in the West. When an age, a culture, a State seem to offer you the most, that is when you, as Christians, are in deadly danger. And to Christians in the East he seems to offer the ancient comfort: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."

The first thing we must state quite clearly to those who demand that the Church take sides between East and West, Barth wrote ten years ago, is "that the Church is not identical with the West, that the Western conscience and judgment is not necessarily the Christian judgment. Just as the Christian judgment and the Christian conscience are not necessarily the Eastern conscience and judgment either." And addressing those in the West who point to the official atheism of the East as reason for a religious-political Crusade he asked: "What should the Church do? Join in a general Eastern front as the representative of the special interests of the Divine?"

No, he answered, religion can have nothing to do with a "partisan" Crusade against Communism. "Not a Crusade but the word of the Cross is what the Church in the West owes to the godless East, but above all to the West itself." And he warned, then as now, that if we pray for the destruction of the bulwarks of Communism, "then we shall have to pray in the same breath for the destruction of the bulwarks of the Western anti-Christ as well."

Theologically, Barth's position seems unassailable. Religion, ultimately, is transcendent or it is nothing. The Church in every age must say a firm No to every invitation to become a kind of pampered, flattered courtesan of the State or of political camps. Many of the criticisms of Barth's position, from Christian sources, seem to miss this, Barth's essential truth. And this is a truth that needs constant retelling in societies where religion and a partisan "patriotism" are too often confused.

The Christian Churches—both Protestant and Catholic—have not made this confusion in their official pronouncements. Despite strong pressures and criticisms, the World Council of Churches has consistently refused to identify its cause with the political cause of the West. And the Church of Rome (which politicians love to praise as “the West’s greatest ally against Communism”) has very carefully insisted that its mission is in no way tied to the military-political objectives of Western power.

But some individual (and also highly-placed) Churchmen, both Protestant and Catholic, have spoken and written as though God had taken a desk in the U.S. State Department, and they have seemed to imply that any questioning of State Department policies—for example its China policy—is somehow a questioning of the Eternal Decrees. For all such Churchmen, Barth’s position should come as a thundering reminder of essential religious truths. One might say, indeed, that only those Churchmen who have remembered these truths in their own situations, who have refused to tie religion to political objectives and who have tried to speak religion’s judging word to national pretensions, have any right now to criticize Karl Barth.

It is not in the theological essentials of his position that Barth is open to criticism. Unpleasant, inexpedient as these may sound to most Western—and perhaps to some Eastern—ears, they are hard truths that religion forgets at its own peril. It is rather (and “of course”) in his political dicta that the theologian invites the criticism, not of “bad faith” or “pro-Communism,” but rather of an astounding naiveté.

Barth seems quite incapable of distinguishing any middle ground of relative justice in the current struggle between East and West. He sees, quite rightly, that the West as well as the East is under God’s judgment, and he sees, again quite rightly, that religion must proclaim that judgment to Washington, Paris and Bonn as well as to Moscow. But because he sees these things, he can see nothing else. Because he cannot say Yes or No to either side, he can say nothing—except to pronounce a transcendent plague-on-both-your-houses. He is politically irresponsible because he cannot utter the “perhaps” and the “maybe” that are the necessary vocabulary of political art.

Karl Barth, however, is not a statesman, or even a political amateur. He is a theologian, and it is as a theologian that he speaks. In fact, his new “Letter” makes it clear that he can speak *only* as a theologian. In the dense forest of political relativities he is unable to distinguish one injustice, one hypocrisy, from a worse injustice and a worse hypocrisy. Because all the roads are twisted, he cannot see that some give a chance, at least, for freedom, and others lead only to regimentation and death.

But, stripped of its serious political naiveté, Barth’s continued insistence on the ultimate freedom of religion in the world struggle, on the urgency for religion’s examining and challenging the illusions of the West as well as of the East, is very relevant indeed. And it is a position for which we can all be grateful.

McCARTHYISM REVISITED

Last month the *Saturday Evening Post* ran an interesting editorial. Its rather pugnacious title asked: “Who Says 38,000,000 Protestants Want to Recognize Red China?” The *Post* supplied the answer in the editorial’s lead paragraph. It was, it seems, the *Worker*—that tired weekly whisper of the American Communist Party—that said this startling thing.

And why did the *Worker* say it? According to the *Post*, it was because of the November meeting in Cleveland of the World Order Study Conference of the National Council of Churches. At this meeting the delegates passed a resolution favoring U.S. recognition of Communist China and its admission to the United Nations.

The *Post*’s implication is clear: by this resolution the Conference gave aid and comfort to the *Worker*. Otherwise, why did the *Post* have to seek out its information from the Communist paper, and, in reporting it editorially, imply that the news was published in the Communist paper as a kind of scoop? After all, the *New York Times* gave considerable coverage to the Conference, and its China resolution, at the time of the meeting in November, and reports on the proceedings appeared in most of the nation’s religious press. But reporting stories as “from the *Worker*” is an old trick of those who wish to insinuate that something is Communist-tainted—a trick well taught, in his day, by the master of such insinuation himself.