

# KARL BARTH AND THOMAS MERTON: GRACE AS DEMAND

William Clancy

*In the midst of the Church he opened his mouth;  
and the Lord filled him with the spirit of wisdom  
and understanding.*

From the Mass for Doctors of the Church

One should not make too much of the fact that Karl Barth and Thomas Merton died on the same day. Barth was an old man, a Doctor of the Church in the highest tradition, and his historic task was surely accomplished. Merton was still "young," a famous public and troubled seeker after God and man, and no one now will ever know what he might have become. Barth, one supposes, had not read Merton; and Merton, one suspects, had not read deeply in Barth. But the sadness and shock of reading their obituaries together in the *New York Times* last month brought to mind certain values to which they both bore witness—with whatever differences of temperament, generation and style. They are values worth remembering in this time when, we are told, man has come of age and the Church is everywhere advised to adjust itself to this "new" situation if the Church is to survive at all.

In his old age, Barth was vastly and bitterly amused by the talk about man's having "come of age"—in spite, he said, of evidence everywhere to the contrary. He heard such talk, and the consequent urging of the Church to an ever more radical Contemporaneity and Relevance, as the ancient myth, the primal hübris and temptation, put forth once again as if for the first time.

Barth had long before written about such situations in the second volume of the *Church Dogmatics* when he described how matters stood when the German Church was confronted with the new totalitarian state of 1933. In this situation, he said, once again, as had happened so often before in history (and as would happen so often again until history's end) "the representative of a new trend and movement of the human spirit knocked at the door of the Church. Its petition was very understandable in the

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light of every precedent. It asked simply that its ideas and ideals should be allowed into the Church like those of all earlier times and places. Its argument was that they constituted a more timely form, a new historical hinterland, a point of contact given by God Himself, *rebus sic stantibus*, for the proclamation of the Gospel."

And, with the irony that was so characteristic of his mind and style, Barth pointed out that those German Christians who accepted the petition and hastened to accommodate the Church to the new secular order should not be blamed too much: "There were so many parallels to it in England and America, in Holland and Switzerland, in Denmark and the Scandinavian countries that no one outside had the right to cast a stone at Germany."

The passion of Karl Barth here as always was for the transcendence and majesty of God's Word, for its awful sovereignty and serene independence, for the judgment in which it stands over every word and work of man. The Church throughout all ages proclaims the Word, he insisted, and the Church must always say both Yes and No to man: Yes; you are saved, accepted and, in Saint Paul's words, called "to redeem the time, because the days are evil"; No; you must not mistake anything else—yourself, your nation or race, your politics, your culture and its institutions, your generation or century, the highest aspirations of humanity, the most lofty and refined humanism even—for the Ultimate and Other who alone is God.

The Church is not the handmaiden of any time or place, any civilization, nation, ideology, or culture. If it is to remain the Church and not fall into servitude or idolatry, it must speak God's judgment against pretensions to finality which all conditioned things carry within themselves and attempt in ever new guises to assert.

Out of all this came Barth's historic opposition to "cultural" or "ideological" Christianity and his distrust of any Christian "program" for the world. Out of it came too his opposition to those in any age who, in the name of "relevance" or of man himself, would reduce theology to anthropology, sociology, econom-

ics, politics. Against all such efforts he warned, the No of the Gospel is uttered.

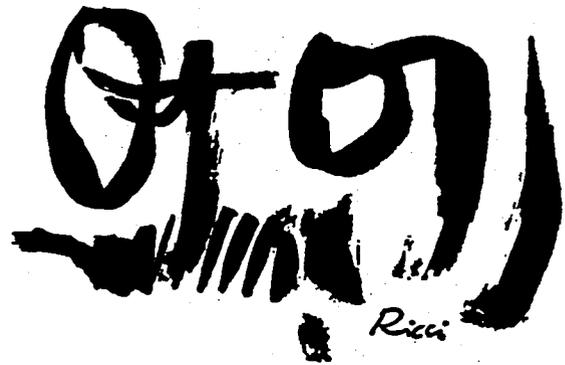
And yet Barth's journey and his vision, especially from the early 1930's until the end of his life, was from God to man. *Qui propter nos homines et propter nostram salutem*—Who for us men and for our salvation: this ancient affirmation of the Christian Creed, Barth knew, makes any final separation between religious faith and political commitment insupportable, no matter how rigidly distinctions between the Word of God and the word of man must be maintained. We must not absolutize our culture, our politics, or, even, our service to mankind; but this does not excuse us from the obligation of deep involvement in culture, in politics, and in the service of mankind. On the contrary, the very absolutes of faith, with their affirmation of God's Yes to His own creation, calls us to all these things. Grace is Commitment, Barth insisted. Grace, he wrote, must be accepted by us as a "demand" for involvement. "For man and for his salvation"—this is the high and self-emptying service to which the believer is called, and he is called precisely as a sharer in the self-giving of God.

Man cannot stand apart from man. There is no sacred place where he can remain hidden, shielded from life's conflicts, because God himself, as He is confessed in faith, did not remain hidden. The *Deus Absconditus* has become, for the Christian, the *Deus Revelatus*; and He has been revealed as self-emptied for others (for ourselves), universally and until the end of time. This is the message which the Church proclaims to every age, never accommodating itself to the illusion of any age that it has no need of deliverance.

There are, I think, clear and moving parallels between Barth's affirmations and Merton's searchings. Like Barth, Merton moved, without hint of confusion, from God to man. Like Barth, he increasingly realized the demands of grace, the consequences in service and commitment to mankind that follow upon faith. As a young man Merton fled the "world"; *The Seven Storey Mountain* is the sometimes embarrassing record of his flight. (In the fervor of his new found faith, he told us there, he destroyed copies of James Joyce and his other "worldly" books.) But as Merton grew in faith he returned to man. He realized ever more sharply that for the believer there are no islands cut off from the needs of a suffering and often despairing humanity. With his own deep sense of the Godness of God and the Manness of man, he yet wrote and acted politically, and this was because he too accepted grace as demand.

Nothing human was strange to either of these men because, for them, everything human had been taken up, and made new by God Himself. But they both despised the folly of any generation that thinks the "real" questions and answers are its original discovery and that the Church's vocation is to reflect an age. (When did history really begin? Was it in 1789, 1848, or 1945? Or was it, as many now seem to think, in 1966?) In 1966, for example, Merton wrote: "The world cannot be a problem to anyone who sees that ultimately Christ, the world, his brother and his own inmost grounds are made one and the same in grace and redemptive love. If all the current talk about the world helps people to discover this, then it is fine. But if it produces nothing but a whole new divisive gamut of obligatory positions and 'contemporary answers' we might as well forget it." Surely the beginning of wisdom lies here.

A Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, has written that the theology of Karl Barth is an affirma-



tion "of the eternal light shining over all nature and fulfilling every promise; God's eternal Yea and Amen to Himself and His Creation." Barth himself heard this Yea and Amen in the music of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and he heard it uttered with a sublimity unattained in any theology. Of Mozart's death he wrote: "What does a grave matter when a life is permitted simply and unpretentiously, and therefore serenely, authentically and impressively, to express the good creation of God, which also includes the limitation and end of man."

No greater epitaph than this could be written for Barth himself; nor could there be a better summing up of the vision towards which Merton was moving. These men spoke in the midst of the Church, and the Lord filled them with the Spirit of wisdom and understanding.