

## THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE THEOLOGY OF KARL BARTH

*Church Dogmatics*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, volumes I-1, 1936; I-2, 1956; II-1, 1957; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, II-2, 1957; III-1, 1958; III-2, 1960; III-3, 1960; IV-1, 1956; IV-2, 1961; IV-3, 1962),

*The Epistle to the Romans*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1933).

*The Church and the Political Problems of Our Day*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939).

*A Letter to Great Britain from Switzerland*, (London: The Sheldon Press, 1941).

*The Church and the War*, (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1944).

*Against the Stream: Shorter Post-War Writings, 1946-52*, (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1954).

*The Word of God and the Word of Man*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1957).

*Protestant Thought: From Rousseau to Ritschl*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1959).

*How to Serve God in a Marxist Land*, containing *Letter to a Pastor in the German Democratic Republic*, (New York: Association Press, 1959).

*Community, State, and Church*, (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1960).

*Karl Barth's Table Talk*, (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1963).

*How I Changed My Mind*, (Richmond: The John Knox Press, 1966).

The impact of Karl Barth *on* theology was a shattering event. Nothing has been or could remain the same again after that event. In spite of a number of serious reservations, Barth *was* a hero in the eyes of conservative evangelicals because they saw in him the Giant *who* slew the Dragon *of* Modernism. To the liberals he *was* a monumental challenge for, however much they disagreed with him, his theology simply could *not* be ignored. Moreover, liberals are inclined to *forgive* much to the man who took such a strong stand against Adolf Hitler and *who* was the moving spirit behind the Declaration of Barmen. To virtually all theologians and Christian churchmen, he was the acknowledged founder of Neo-Orthodoxy. The secular world, too, was challenged to its very core because he called into question every culture and civilization, every political and economic system, and every social institution.

What is so shattering about Barth's theology? God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who was incarnate in Jesus Christ and lives and rules in the Church and in the world-gone is the kindly be-whiskered grandfather up in the sky, the vague Supreme Being floating around somewhere, the concept of the Deists, the first cause of the philosophers. In his majesty, glory, and power God is wholly Other-gone is the overly familiar being who invites familiarity, manipulation, and indifference. Jesus Christ is the Son of God and second person in the Trinity-gone is the mere teacher, the amiable leader among many leaders, the good example easily followed by men of goodwill. The Bible is the Word of God, the sword of the Spirit, the infallible rule of faith and practice-gone is the "good book," the collection of religious wisdom among many such collections, the merely and wholly human words of time-bound and culture-bound writers. Christianity is *the* true religion-gone is the pluralism which asserts that Christianity is only one religion among many in the world each of which contains variable amounts of truth and untruth. Sin is an inescapable reality restored to all its stark destructiveness-gone is the fatuous optimism that man is inherently good and liable only to "mistakes" and feelings of "inadequacy" originating in his environment, that progress is inevitable, that science and technology can answer all the problems of life.

The impact of Karl Barth has been mediated largely through his interpreters and popularizers in seminaries, religious journals, pulpits, contemporary confessions of faith, and the reports of denominational boards and agencies. Several factors account for this fact. Barth is an impressively erudite scholar-almost forbiddingly so-who assumes a vast and detailed knowledge of theology and church history and who uses uncompromisingly technical terms. The sheer quantity of his writings is in itself an obstacle demanding a great deal of patience and perseverance. His style is tempestuous, torrential, and powerful-and repetitious and verbose as well. His thought forms and way of approaching problems are profoundly German so that, even in English translation, they are alien to the American reader. As a result, the impact of his theology suffers from a time lag between the publication of his thought and its reception by the American public.

Barth was a theologian, not a political scientist or a political theorist. He would undoubtedly have liked to confine himself exclusively to theology. The natural consequence of a theology as transcendental as Barth's is to make political events seem small and insignificant, like automobiles which look like ants when viewed from

an airplane or the top of a skyscraper. What are such problems as poverty, racial discrimination, economic recessions, and politics when compared to the majesty, glory, and omnipotence of God? Indeed, a sense of the infinite distance between the concerns of a theology so conceived and the concerns of politics never left Barth.

However, Barth lived to be 82 years old. During that long life, he lived through the Great Depression and two world wars and their aftermath. He saw the rise of Communism in Russia, National Socialism in Germany, and Fascism in Italy—each of which was a new phenomenon in world history. He saw the rise of the so-called Third World in Asia and Africa. He saw the rise and fall of the League of Nations and the rise and floundering of the United Nations. Like Martin Luther, Barth was compelled much against his will to face political issues. His involvement in these issues was centered on National Socialism because he took sides and on Communism because he refused to take sides. In both cases, he was forced to defend his position at considerable length.

The sense of the infinite distance previously referred to between theology and politics prevented him from being a social activist or a systematic political philosopher. The political implications of his theology are clearest in his writings before and after World War II, and his refusal to take sides in the conflict between East and West represents a return to his pre-war position. The one exception is his passionate and eloquent repudiation of Nazism. Even here, however, it could be argued that his involvement was not really an exception and could be justified on the basis of his views before and after World War II. It must be conceded that taking sides against the Nazis was an instance of social activism in a practical sense, but he did not justify it in terms of the philosophy of social activism such as we find in the pronouncements of our mainline Protestant denominations, the National Council of Churches, and the World Council of Churches.

### *Revelation*

Revelation, for Barth, is absolutely fundamental. Being "wholly Other" God cannot be discovered by any human process, be it reason, intuition, or experience. God is therefore neither an axiom nor a datum of experience.<sup>1</sup> A conception of him arrived at in such ways

<sup>1</sup> *Church Dogmatics*, vol. II-2, p. 3.

is nothing "but a hypostatized reflection of man."<sup>2</sup> Natural theology is something arrived at by human means, does not extend to salvation, and is the attempted replacement of the divine work by a human manufacture." Man is "better served if no use is made of natural theology at all."<sup>4</sup>

Revelation is the self-disclosure of God which imposes itself upon man. Because he is wholly Other, revelation is the only way by which we could know him or anything about him. Revelation entails a human response to a call. Without that call, there can be neither revelation nor authentic response. "Modernist thought hears man answer without any one having called him. It hears him talk to himself.

The source of revelation is the Bible: "The revealed Word of God we know only from the Scripture adopted by Church proclamation based on Scripture." It follows that the Church "cannot assess and adjudge Scripture from a view of revelation gained apart from Scripture and not related to it."<sup>7</sup> For Barth the Bible is the normative witness to revelation. "A witness," he says, "is not absolutely identical with that which it witnesses." "The Bible is not a systematized body of propositions' and it is sometimes necessary "to repudiate certain of its detailed and perhaps not unimportant statements."<sup>8</sup>

Barth's view of Scripture has drawn criticism, especially from Reformed theologians like Cornelius van Til, because it seems to deny the authority and infallibility of Scripture. And it is true that some contemporary churchmen have used this concept of normative witness as a means of affirming the validity of some parts of the Bible and denying it to other parts. It is very doubtful that Barth intended his concept of normative witness to be used in this way. His voluminous, meticulous, comprehensive, and exhaustive search of Scripture to establish every point in his theology proves that such was not his intention at all. Furthermore, we have his very words for this when he says that "what we hear in the witness itself is more than witness, what we hear is revelation, and therefore the very Word of God."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 302.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. I-1, p. 68,

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.136.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. II-2, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 463.

*Ibid.*, vol. 1-1, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. I-2, p. 473.

Barth has also been criticized for making a distinction between the Word of God and "the Mighty Acts of God." This, too, is a misinterpretation. He admits that, except for some cases when speaking or writing amounts to taking a stand and therefore acting, there is a difference between word and deed. "But for the Word of God these distinctions do not hold. For it is precisely as a mere word that it is an act."<sup>12</sup> For example, when Genesis relates that God said "Let there be light" it was both a word and a deed since there *was* light. This matter of speaking as action with reference to God sheds light on Barth's treatment of the Book of Genesis. He denies that the Genesis account of creation is either myth or legend, for myth refers to something that never happened and legend to something which has only some basis in fact. The word he uses is *saga* by which he means that the Genesis account of creation is historical in that it took place in time and space but pre-historical in that it took place before any recorded history and is therefore not subject to the usual techniques of historical investigation. It should be noted that the word "saga" is the noun form of the German *sagen* which means to speak. When God spoke, he acted. The French translators of the Bible must have had the same point in mind for, when they came to the word *Logos* in the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel, they translated it by *le Verbe* (which connotes action) and not by *la Parole* (which does not connote action).

In accordance with his rigorously Christocentric theology, Barth asserts "For God is not known and is not knowable except in Jesus Christ."<sup>13</sup> He is himself the Word of God, the *only* Word of God. Here again Barth has been misunderstood by those who try to draw a wedge between the Word-in-the-flesh and the Word-in-the-script. Barth intends no such distinction: "The personification of the concept of the Word of God, which we cannot avoid when we remember that Jesus Christ is the Word of God, does not signify any lessening of its verbal character."<sup>14</sup> And we need to remember that, for Barth, the verbal and the incarnate are one and the same when we refer to God.

It would seem that limiting revelation to Christ and the Bible has the effect of denying any revelation of God in nature and history. If so, Barth is surely parting company with Calvin who asserted other-

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. II-2, p. 509.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. I-1, p. 157.

wise. However, it is well to remember that Calvin was careful to say that natural revelation is enough to convict us but not enough to save us. As a matter of fact, Barth does speak of "lesser lights," but they are emanations from the one true light in Jesus Christ who rules over all men and not just Christians. Commenting *on* one of the Psalms, Barth points out that man can see God's handiwork in the firmament, but this requires the eyes of faith which not all men possess, and faith is a gift of God who was incarnate in Jesus Christ.

### *Barth's Doctrine of Man*

Man is body and soul; and the two are inseparable. In this Barth follows the Hebraic teaching rather than the Greek which held that the soul can exist without the body. That which distinguishes man from animals is his ability to know God, the creature's ability to know its Creator. This ability, however, is not inherent in human nature but the result of revelation. How else could man know someone who is wholly Other from himself? Barth's position that knowing God is what makes man distinctively human separates him from Aristotle who ascribed it to reason, from Reinhold Niebuhr who ascribed it to self-transcendence, and from Hobbes who ascribed it to speech.

Man *is* not what God intended him to be because he is a sinner. The only true and fully human man was Jesus of Nazareth. By virtue of this characteristically Christocentric position, Barth departs from the current popular view which speaks of "true humanity" and "mature humanity." The trouble with this view is that it is humanistic in its secular meaning by leaving Jesus Christ out and substituting a sociological criterion. Barth also rejects introspection as a source of knowing human nature, for introspection is imperfection looking into imperfection, elimination or at least downgrading of the *community* aspect of human life, and an unhealthy pre-occupation with self which can lead to mental illness and even suicide.

It is only when we encounter the person of Jesus Christ that we realize the heights and the depths of human existence. It is in this encounter that we perceive God's judgment upon us and God's forgiveness of us. Barth holds to the doctrine of substitutionary atonement whereby Jesus Christ, by his crucifixion and resurrection, stands in our place, justifies us, and intercedes for us. Jesus was the elected man and the electing God. Saving all men regardless of all human merit and demerit is the effect of grace born of the love of God for the whole world. Grace embraces All men regardless of behavior or belief.

Sin, which is born of pride and sloth, is the attempt of man to reject grace, an attempt which cannot succeed because no man can successfully resist the will of God. Man may be blind or refuse to accept it, but both are ineffectual. The point that grace is irresistible, universal, and all-embracing is repeated by Barth over and over again in all his writings.

It is clear that Barth is a universalist in his assertion that all men will be saved and none rejected. His universalism is not that of secular humanism. Neither is it an espousal of Tillich's famous "You are accepted." Barth's universalism is strictly Christocentric for, without Christ, no one would be saved. He points to Christ's own statement that he came into the world not to condemn the world but to save it.

Nevertheless, Barth's universalism is open to criticism on his own Biblical and Christocentric ground. The same Fourth Gospel says: "He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God."<sup>16</sup> In the Synoptics and the Book of Acts, it is said again and again that repentance and faith are necessary for salvation. The apostle Paul's central message is that we are saved through faith. Obviously, Barth's universalism is a radical departure from the Reformed and Calvinistic teaching in which he was brought up and trained.

Barth's universalism raises many problems. What has the Christian got that non-Christians do not have? Barth does deal with this question by describing the quality of life which is specifically Christian. Perhaps the most important point he makes in this connection is that the Christian alone knows that he is not responsible for the outcome of his witnessing. It is not demanded of him that he be successful, for that is God's decision, but only that he be faithful. The works of non-Christians "are done under the pressure of the anxious question as to their consequences. The Christian community does not stand under this pressure."<sup>16</sup>

Barth's departure from the full and clear teaching of Scripture on the subject of salvation by espousing universalism forces him to draw on non-Biblical sources. His doctrine of evil, for instance, cannot be squared with the Biblical conception of evil as something real, alive,

<sup>16</sup> John 3:18.

<sup>10</sup> *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV-3, p. 750.

and personalized. He therefore speaks of "impossible possibilities" and borrows from the existentialists the pale concept of nothingness. "Nothingness," he says not very helpfully, "is not nothing."<sup>17</sup> Whether hell exists or not becomes irrelevant because nobody is going there: "Jesus Christ has gone into hell and locked it up for us, and sealed it off."<sup>18</sup> Heaven becomes hazy and blurred, at least insofar as the individual's destination is concerned, because Barth becomes embroiled in Tillichian discussions of time, timelessness, and eternity. Had he not departed from his principle of *sola scriptura*, these difficulties would have been circumvented. Such is the price he has to pay for his universalism which removes him from Biblical teaching and plunges him into metaphysics.

Man, says Barth, becomes truly human only in encounter. " 'I am' -the true and fulfilled 'I am'-may be thus paraphrased: 'I am in encounter.' "<sup>19</sup> What he means by this is not man as a social animal in the sense that he has to have transactions with 'other men. It is a matter of the I-thou relationship so dear to the existentialists. Not mere service is what we owe to our fellow-man but our very self. We must really look at him and see him. We must hear him in the sense of really listening. We must speak to him and not merely past him and engage in what amounts to a monologue. Two monologues do not constitute a dialogue."<sup>20</sup> Too often, even in sermons and lectures, our words are "an inhuman and barbaric affair."<sup>21</sup> "Each fellow-man is a whole world, and the request he makes of me is not merely that I should know this or that about him, but the man himself, and therefore his whole world."<sup>22</sup> In order to give man and woman the motivation for an I-thou encounter and give them their first experience of it, God created sex and sexuality and prescribed monogamy, thus dissipating what would otherwise be an intolerable and inhuman loneliness.<sup>23</sup> As far back as Genesis it is stated that it is not good for man to be alone.

Complete humanity, however, is not fulfilled by I-thou relationships alone. There must be an I-Thou relationship also. We must have fellowship with God as well, which means with Jesus Christ. Man's encounter with Christ comes through in encounters with his

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. III-3, p. 349.

<sup>18</sup> *Against the Stream*, p. 97.

<sup>19</sup> *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III-2, p. 247.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 260.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 293.

fellow-man. This is not necessarily because a fellow-man is a believer in whom the presence of Christ is evident. It comes just as much, if not more so, from our fellow-men who are not Christians in *any* sense: "Genuine fellowship is ground upon a negative: it *is* grounded upon what men lack. Precisely when we recognize that we are sinners do we perceive that we are brothers."<sup>24</sup> And it is only as we<sup>25</sup> experience the forgiveness of Christ that we know we are sinners. The result of our I-Thou relationship is *to* impart to our encounter with our neighbor "a sacramental significance" so that he "becomes a visible sign of invisible grace, a proof that I, too, am not left alone in this world, but am borne and directed by God."<sup>28</sup>

### *Some Specific Applications of Barth's Doctrine of Man*

The purpose of this section *is* to examine what Barth thinks are the consequences of his doctrine of man as it applies to individual decisions on specific issues, *and* thus reserve the larger political issues for a later section.

The most individual and personal decision a man can make is marriage. "There is no necessity of nature nor general divine law," says Barth, "in virtue of which every *man* is permitted to take a wife, *or* every woman a husband. If this is permitted and commanded, it is a special distinction, a special divine calling, a gift and grace. A man enters and remains in the married state because he recognises that this is the divine will for him, and therefore obligatory."<sup>27</sup> Marriage, like all I-thou relationships, has a sacramental character and is monogamous: "Monogamy *is* authoritatively ordered because it is ordered by Jesus Christ."<sup>28</sup> It follows that it is impossible to accept either a fickle eroticism or polygamy in the relationship of man and woman.<sup>29</sup> Barth is aware, of course, that there are societies in which the missionary encounters polygamy as an institution. In such cases, Barth finds that "it would be sheer brutality for the Christian Church to confront men with the choice between baptism and institutional polygamy."<sup>30</sup> In this matter, we must not think "legalistically"<sup>31</sup> but

<sup>24</sup> *Epistle to the Romans*, p. 101.

<sup>25</sup> *Church Dogmatics*, vol. II-2, p. 768.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. I-2, p. 436.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. III-4, p. 183.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*; p. 199.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

must have "a clear recognition of matter and purpose, but not the brutality of form and method." "

With regard to divorce, it would appear at first that Barth takes the Roman Catholic position: "Divorce is quite impermissible!" In this case as in so many others, appearances are deceptive. True marriages are made in heaven and, as such, are subject to the rule that no man rent asunder whom God has joined. But not all marriages are true marriages. Marriages for sexual satisfaction, money, prestige, family favor, and professional advantage are "a flagrant disobedience to the command of God" and are "only approached and not entered into."<sup>34</sup> Marriage is not "a purely private undertaking" and therefore requires a public wedding regulated by law, but such a wedding "does not constitute marriage."<sup>16</sup> Divorce, in such cases is no divorce in a Christian sense, though it may well be in a legal sense, because there was no true marriage in the first place. In such cases, the Church should give its benediction to second marriages.<sup>36</sup>

The effect of Barth's teaching on marriage is to cast a shadow on every marriage. He admits this in so many words, for a man "may live in marriage which stands deeply under the shadow of the question whether it might not lack the divine joining together and therefore genuine and essential permanence. There is no marriage which may be said to stand altogether outside this shadow."<sup>37</sup> Holy as true marriages are, it must not result in having and rearing a family as an end in itself, precisely because it is holy. The weakening of family ties is the result of just such a shadow which "takes the form of an attack upon the family for its own sake; and the family has been in truth not a holy thing but the voracious idol of the erstwhile middle classes."<sup>38</sup> What Barth says about shadows is of crucial importance because they are by no means confined to marriage but hover over every decision an individual makes.

Human life is a gift of God and therefore should be respected and protected. The man who takes his own life "violates the commandment and murders as well as kills."<sup>36</sup> But for him, as well as for all sinners, there is forgiveness.<sup>40</sup> For "the incurably infirm, the insane,

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>40</sup> *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, p. 292.

<sup>41</sup> *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III-4, p. 405.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 405.

imbeciles, the deformed, persons who are by nature or accident or war completely immobilised and crippled" the answer is not mercy killing, for the answer to mercy killing is "an unequivocal No."<sup>41</sup> Capital punishment is wrong in principle because "the state leaves the human level and acts with usurped divinity."<sup>42</sup> Barth is critical of the Church for having been a spectator during the increase in capital punishment which accompanied the expansion of Christianity.<sup>43</sup> However, capital punishment is justified in cases when a man's existence "threatens the state and its stability" to such an extent that no other choice is available,<sup>44</sup> such as spying and desertion.<sup>45</sup> Tyrannicide is justifiable if the avenger has "a clear and categorical command from God to do it."<sup>46</sup> War necessitates the destruction of life but "is no part of the normal task of the state."<sup>47</sup> Most wars cannot be justified. Among those are the wars of territorial aggrandizement, prestige, power, the balance of power, the containment of revolution abroad, and the pursuit of some supposed national mission.<sup>48</sup> War in self-defense, however, is justifiable" and so is a righteous war such as that against "the inherent Godlessness of National Socialism."<sup>60</sup> "A soldier or a policeman is not a murderer."<sup>161</sup> Pacifism should not be condoned because it condemns all wars in spite of the fact that some wars are justified, and anti-militarism "leads to an illegitimate type of conscientious objection."<sup>62</sup> Conscription is desirable because it eliminates the danger of mercenary or professional armies and broadens political responsibility by making the citizens participate personally in the decisions of their government.<sup>63</sup>

With respect to work, Barth thinks that Protestantism, especially in its Calvinistic form, has overemphasized work as a virtue. "It is obvious," he remarks, "that the Jesus of the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel cannot be claimed in support of this high estimation of

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 423.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 445.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 437.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 446.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 448.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 449.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 458.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 461.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 462.

<sup>61</sup>*The Church and the War*, p. 5.

<sup>62</sup>*Karl Barth's Table Talk*, p. 80.

<sup>63</sup>*Church Dogmatics*, vol. III-4, p. 468.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 466.

work."<sup>64</sup> Not only did he not direct any of his disciples to engage in secular work but he "seems to have summoned His disciples away **from** their secular work."<sup>65</sup> **It is** true that the apostle Paul engaged in his secular work of tent-making. But his work is done on the fringe of his apostolic instruction. It is evident that Paul has no positive interest either in work itself or in its achievement."<sup>66</sup> Barth therefore condemns work for work's sake just as he did the family for the family's sake. He went so far as to say that he would not be "surprised and indignant, at least not to the depth of our soul, if the Spartacists and communists make answer that they would rather perish and see all perish with them than return again to the yoke of *work for its own sake.*"<sup>67</sup> Competition as a motive force does not help. *On* the contrary, it always means "an inhuman activity" which "can never stand before the command of God."<sup>68</sup>

The fault that Barth finds in all these cases is that they violate the most fundamental duty of man, which is that of witnessing to his Lord. Whether he marries, fights, or works, he must do these things for the glory of God. That is his vocation. Following Calvin, Barth says that a man must accept his station in life-whatever it is -as an assignment from the Lord." Neither for Calvin nor for Barth does the doctrine of vocation have the effect of freezing the status quo, because God is not dead but alive and ruling. Man must therefore always be in "readiness to be called elsewhere."<sup>69</sup>

As we review these specific applications of Barth's doctrine of man, the question naturally arises as to whether Barth can be classified with the advocates of situational ethics. Certainly there are similarities. Barth shares with them and modern thought generally a distrust of legalism, philosophical systems, principles, ideologies, and propositional truth. The effect of this distrust is to blur and weaken the standards which men must rely on to make decisions.

Barth does not, however, discard these standards. He claims that his Christocentric position merely relativizes them. He does not follow Fletcher's teaching that an individual must face a concrete prob-

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p.472.

<sup>65</sup> ***Ibid.*, p. 472.**

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 472.

<sup>67</sup> *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, p.293.

<sup>68</sup> *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III-4, p. 541.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p.642.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p.646.

lem, analyze it, and then do "the loving thing" whereby the individual makes his own decision independently. The difference lies in the notion of command which is fundamental for Barth and non-existent for Fletcher: We obey God, not a principle or idea."<sup>62</sup> Again: We do not decide on principles, but on conclusions."<sup>62</sup> For Barth, revelation is always concrete and very particular. A general command such as we find in the Decalogue becomes real and effective only in the hour of command."<sup>63</sup> The decision, therefore, is not the individual's but God's, not independent but obedient, not rooted in some culture-bound subjective conception of "the loving thing" but in the objective will of God. The command of the hour is perceived by and through conscience and is absolutely decisive. Barth relates that some people in the Netherlands during the Nazi occupation asked him if there were circumstances under which it would be legitimate to lie. "I answered: Do it-but not with a bad conscience. If you have a bad conscience, then do not do it."<sup>64</sup> As previously noted, he did not approve of Count von Stauffenberg's attempt to assassinate Hitler, not because tyrannicide is wrong, but because the Count did not have "a clear and categorical command from God to do it."<sup>65</sup> The proof that he did not have such a command lies in the fact that "no one was prepared to go through with it in absolute disregard for his own life."<sup>66</sup>

### *Barth's View of Politics*

Barth's original and enduring position with regard to politics is evident in the early work which first made him famous, *The Epistle to the Romans*. Politics deal with individuals, humanity, and history. How does he view these things? The word 'humanity' means unredeemed men and women; the word 'history' implies limitation and corruption; the pronoun 'I' spells judgment."<sup>67</sup> Because of this, we can expect little from politics. He condemns conservatism, using the word "Legitimumism" which historically refers to political conservatism, as evil because it attempts to justify the status quo which, like all

<sup>61</sup> *Karl Barth's Table Talk*, p. 81.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>63</sup> *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III-4, p. 15.

<sup>64</sup> *Karl Barth's Table Talk*, p. 79.

<sup>65</sup> *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III-4, p. 449.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 449.

<sup>67</sup> *Epistle to the Romans*, p. 85.

things human, is corrupt and stands under judgment. He also condemns revolution because it fights evil with evil instead of overcoming evil with good and strives for ideals which, like all human ideals, are a delusion. A third alternative, reform; is likewise ruled out: "All reformers are Pharisees."<sup>68</sup>

In a truly unique interpretation of Romans 13, Barth recommends *not-doing* as his conclusion, a conclusion which means that our Christian must neither support nor oppose the status quo. "Our whole visible behaviour," he writes, "is either an acceptance of the present order or a denial of it; and in both cases we do wrong. We can do right only in the 'not-doing' of our relationship to God."<sup>69</sup> The role of the politician is futile: "A political career, for example, becomes possible only when it is seen to be essentially a game . . . in which human possibilities have been renounced."<sup>70</sup> This pessimism extends to the international level as is shown by his contempt for diplomats: "Our gain is that the intelligent person no longer takes any notice when diplomats-if there are- still any real diplomats-foregather, since he knows in advance that nothing of any true importance is likely to emerge. . . ."<sup>71</sup>

If we move from political action-whether conservative, revolutionary, or reformist-to political thought, Barth's answer is not one bit more optimistic. The reason is not that he is unacquainted with political theory and ideologies. The first two chapters of his *Protestant Thought: From Rousseau to Ritschl* show a thorough knowledge of political theory, including a remarkably accurate survey of the theories of Rousseau, Locke, and Hobbes. Regretably, however, that book is pure exposition and contains no evaluation or appraisal whatsoever. Barth was opposed to all systems, whether in the form of natural theology, natural law, or any political "ism." And he denied that his own theology was a system. Taking his cue from what Marx once said about not being a Marxist, Barth could well have said that he is not a Barthian. His objection to all systems is that they originate in human pride by ignoring the finite and sinful nature of man and by presuming to know what only God can know.

Barth was no admirer of the state. He speaks of it as a graceless

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 509.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 489.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 489.

<sup>71</sup> *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III-4, p. 556.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. II-2, p. 722.

order. "This graceless order," he says, "corresponding to the form of this world overcome and abolished in principle by Jesus Christ, is the political order, the rule of law, which is established and protected by threats and the use of physical force."<sup>72</sup> He elaborates his position with even more vigor and detail in the following passage:

The civil community embraces everyone living within its area. The members share no common awareness of their relationship to God, and such awareness cannot be an element in the legal system established by the civil community. No appeal can be made to the Word or Spirit of God in the running of its affairs. The civil community as such is spiritually blind and ignorant. It has neither faith nor love nor hope. It has no creed and no life, and its members are not brothers and sisters.<sup>73</sup>

Barth knows, of course, that the state takes many forms, such as democracy, monarchy, aristocracy, dictatorship, etc. These forms do not make much difference because "the various political forms and systems are human inventions which as such do not bear the distinctive mark of revelation and are not witnessed to as such-and can therefore not lay claim to belief."<sup>74</sup> The function of government is "essentially the same" regardless of state forms.<sup>75</sup>

Were we to limit ourselves to Barth's conception of the state as exemplified in the above quotations, we would have to conclude that he departs radically from Calvin. For Calvin held to a very lofty view of the state according to which the state is not confined to the punishment of the wicked and the maintenance of law and order but has a moral and religious mission to perform. As part of the Providence of God the state is instituted for the good of man and the glory of God. Barth, however, makes other statements which constitute a modification of his apparent pessimism. The state, he concedes, is not "the soulless, despotic and cannibalistic beast of the abyss"<sup>76</sup> but "serves to protect man from the invasion of chaos"<sup>77</sup> and "is ordained of God, so that those who try to evade or oppose it resist the ordinance of God and the kingly rule of His Son."<sup>78</sup> Forgetting what he said in the nineteen twenties in his *Epistle to the Romans* about "not-doing," the nineteen fifties found him demanding that Christians be

<sup>73</sup> *Community, State, and Church*, p. 151.

<sup>74</sup> *Against the Stream*, p. 25.

<sup>76</sup> *The Church and the War*, p. 22.

<sup>77</sup> *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III-4, p. 465.

<sup>78</sup> *Against the Stream*, p. 21.

<sup>78</sup> *Church Dogmatics*, vol. II-2, p. 721.

active in politics, even in "that provisional, graceless order of earthly things."<sup>71</sup> What does Barth expect from the participation of Christians in politics? Time, time to carry out the most fundamental of all obligations of Christians, *i.e.* witnessing to their Lord. "That God wills to give the world and the Church<sup>80</sup> time to receive grace is the secret purpose of the political order.

In spite of what he said about the relative unimportance of state forms, we must be aware of differences of degree. "Thus there is clearly no cause for the Church to act as though it lived, in relation to the State, in a night in which all cats are grey."<sup>81</sup> Barth is willing to say that democracy comes nearer to being an ideal state than any other political system and that socialism comes nearer to being an ideal economic system than capitalism.<sup>82</sup> More than once he stresses that neither anarchy nor tyranny is a state at all and therefore is not included in the admonition of Romans 13 to obey; the powers that be. In this connection we must note that "Democracy is not the middle between<sup>83</sup> anarchy and tyranny, but is *above* both, above this dichotomy.

By democracy Barth does not mean absolute majoritarianism, for the Church "always stands for the constitutional State<sup>84</sup> including the separation of powers between the legislative, executive, and judicial branches.<sup>85</sup> The Church should "concentrate first on the lower and lowest levels of human society"<sup>86</sup> but should beware of absolute equalitarianism because "the mutual fellowship of men" and not "equality" is the objective which should be pursued.<sup>87</sup> Another characteristic of democracy which meets with Barth's approval is the willingness of democracy to bring things into the open, for the Church is the sworn enemy of all secret policies and secret diplomacy."<sup>88</sup> Having made all these concessions to democracy, it is important to remember that Barth always insists that the Church must never identify itself with any political system, even democracy, and that democracy, therefore, is a qualified and conditional one.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 722.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p.722.

<sup>81</sup> *Community, State, and Church*, p. 119.

<sup>82</sup> *Letter to American Christians*, in *The Church and the War*, p.39.

<sup>83</sup> *Karl Barth's Table Talk*, p. 81.

<sup>84</sup> *Against the Stream*, p.35.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>87</sup> *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV-3, p. 899.

<sup>88</sup> *Against the Stream*, p.39.

The position against revolution which is so categorical in the *Epistle to the Romans* is seriously modified in his other writing and becomes much more conventional. In very circumspect language he offers three criteria for legitimate revolution, namely (1) that it have an unquestionably just cause, (2) that all legal and peaceful means of redress have been exhausted so that the overthrow of the regime is the only possible course, (3) that there are convincing reasons for believing that revolution will result in a better situation.<sup>89</sup> It should be noted that the first two criteria are the classic ones spelled out in the writings of John Locke and in the American Declaration of Independence but the third criterion, *i.e.* that only the majority of the people have the right to overthrow the government by revolution, is left out by Barth. He gives no reason for this omission and the substitution of his own third criterion.

When asked if there ever was a revolution which met his three criteria, Barth reply was: "Perhaps, the American Revolution."<sup>90</sup> He went on to comment on the American Declaration of Independence, saying that the word "evident" would be preferable to "self-evident" as applied to the truths we hold because the latter term "smacks of natural theology," better to say that all men are created in togetherness and mutual responsibility" because the phrase created equal is "too formal," and that the liberty with which men are endowed by their Creator should read "freedom of life within the bounds of a rightfully established common order."<sup>91</sup>

The political views of Barth thus far outlined are somewhat vague, inconclusive, and hesitant. They might well have remained so had he not become involved, much against his will, in acrimonious controversies over the Nazi and Communist regimes. The result of his involvement was to bring his political views into a much sharper and clearer focus.

Barth's detestation of and opposition to the Nazi regime was absolute and total. Nevertheless, they were slow to grow and to surface, even after he had been fired from his professorship in a German university for refusing to take an oath of loyalty to Hitler. Barth has been criticized for his slowness, but there was a reason for it which lies at the core of his theology. He does not like abstractions and

<sup>89</sup> *Karl Barth's Table Talk*, p. 76.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77. The substitutions suggested by Barth which are in **quotation** marks are italicized by Barth in the text.

philosophical systems of whatever kind, including political "isms." He regards them as unreal until they have reached fruition in action. "The Church can never defend and proclaim-or even attack-abstract norms, ideals, historical laws and socio-political ideologies as such. Its concern must never be with political principles, creeds, and catechisms but only with definite and concrete political constellations. It cannot make itself responsible either for any -ism or for rejecting it:"<sup>82</sup> When the Nazi regime first came into power, "the Church in Germany at that time-this is still my conviction to-day-had the right and the duty to confine herself to giving it, as a political experiment, first of all time and a chance, and therefore to adopting herself first of all a strictly neutral position. In this regard neutrality was in plain terms at that time the form of Church decision enjoined."<sup>83</sup>

Even when he had reached the conclusion that the Nazi regime was "a definite and concrete political constellation," Barth believed<sup>84</sup> that there were wrong or inadequate reasons for opposing it. In his letter to British Christians written in the midst of war, he warned against appealing to such grounds as the values of Western civilization, the freedom of the individual, and the infinite value of human personality.<sup>85</sup> He also warned against arguments based on natural law as completely ineffective in coping with the Nazi monster: "All arguments based on Natural Law are Janus-headed. They do not lead to the light of clear decisions, but to the misty twilight in which all cats become grey. They lead to-Munich."<sup>86</sup> These grounds and arguments, aside from being tainted because they are human inventions, do not generate enough direction and power to overcome incarnate evil.

What, then, were adequate grounds for fighting the Nazis to the finish? The Hitler regime "is the enterprise of an evil spirit,"<sup>87</sup> the incarnation of an "overwhelming flagrant injustice,"<sup>88</sup> and "the in-breaking of open inhumanity."<sup>89</sup> Bearing in mind what Barth said about anarchy and tyranny not being included in the admonition of Romans 13 to obey the powers that be, it is a decisive conclusion

<sup>82</sup> *Against the Stream*, p. 91.

<sup>83</sup> *The Church and the War*, p. 31.

<sup>84</sup> *A Letter to Great Britain from Switzerland*, p. 16.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

that "this State is anarchy tempered by tyranny, or tyranny tempered by anarchy, but it is certainly *no* State."<sup>99</sup> The Nazi regime had its roots in the German "heritage of a paganism that is mystical" and in Luther's erroneous understanding of the relations of the temporal and spiritual which "confirmed and idealized the natural paganism of the German people, instead of limiting and restraining it."<sup>100</sup> In other words, Nazism was a pagan religion.

If there was one thing about the Nazi regime which most infuriated Barth and was absolutely conclusive for him, that thing was anti-Semitism. "He who is a radical enemy of the Jews, were he in every other regard an angel of light, shows himself, as such, to be a radical enemy of Jesus Christ. Anti-Semitism is sin against the Holy Ghost."<sup>101</sup> So great is his emphasis on this particular aspect of Nazism that we must give our attention to what Barth has to say about the Jews.<sup>102</sup>

For Barth, the continued identity of the Jews as a people over the centuries is a miracle, the evidence of the reality and faithfulness of God. Many people, including Jews, have asked the question: what is a Jew? The Jews are not a race. They belong to the Semitic race, but they are not a race because there are other Semites, notably their arch enemies the Arabs. They do not have a language because only a few Jews speak Hebrew. They have no specific culture of their own like the French and the Germans because their contributions have been to the cultures of the nations in which they live. They have no state or territory, for the state of Israel is quite new and includes only a very small percentage of the Jews in the world. They have had no common connected history since Biblical times. They do not even have a common religion because many Jews do not subscribe to Judaism. What, then, do they have? The simple fact that they were, are, and will continue to be the Chosen People of God. Their existence can be accounted for only in the faithfulness of God who keeps his Covenant even though the Jews do not.

Why, asks Barth, is anti-Semitism so universal and pervasive throughout all history? Is it because the Jews have unpleasant char-

<sup>99</sup> *The Church and the War*, p. 55.

<sup>100</sup> **"First Letter** to the French Protestants, in appendix of *A Letter to Great Britain from Switzerland*, p. 36.

<sup>101</sup> *The Church and the War*, p. 51.

<sup>102</sup> The longest and most detailed account, here summarized, is to be found in *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III-3, pp. 210-226.

acteristics? No. All people have unpleasant characteristics. The Jews are the living witness of what it means to exist by divine election and that alone. Since all men are elected, all men ought to live by it. But only the Jews live by it, however unwillingly. Non-Jews find their identity and security in the nation, money, social prestige, political power, cultural traditions. In doing so, they reject and conceal from themselves the grace of God in divine election. The Jews are a constant reminder of our disbelief in the faithfulness of God and, in them, our mask is torn off and our cloak is stripped from us-and we do not like it! In the deepest sense, therefore, Barth's opposition to the Nazi regime was a religious one.

While Barth took a strong stand against Nazism, it is well known that he refused to do the same against Communism. He did make it clear that he was not a Communist, was on record as disapproving of Communism and its system and its methods"<sup>103</sup> and dismissed the classless society as a "grotesquely optimistic" belief "which can occur only to dreamers and visionaries."<sup>104</sup> Yet he was slow in responding to demands that he take a stand. "I regard anti-communism as a matter of principle an evil greater than communism itself.""<sup>105</sup>

Several things are wrong with anti-Communism, according to Barth. It is a cause and, as such, one of those ideologies in which the Church has no interest. "Man has not to serve causes; causes have to serve man."<sup>106</sup> Writing to a pastor in East Germany, Barth said that the Christian message is "just as repugnant and embarrassing to the West as it is to the East" and perhaps more so.<sup>107</sup> In view of this, how can anti-Communism justifiably recast the Eastern collective man into an angel of darkness and the Western 'organisation man' into an angel of light?"<sup>108</sup> Moreover, Soviet Russia, in spite of "very bloody and very dirty hands" is engaged in the pursuit of a "constructive idea" by tackling the social problem:"<sup>109</sup> Also in favor of the East is the fact that, unlike Nazism, Communism has not tried "to falsify Christianity" and "never committed the basic crime of anti-Semitism."<sup>110</sup> Fundamentally, the conflict between East and

<sup>100</sup> *Against the Stream*, p.116.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>105</sup> *How I Changed My Mind*, p. 63.

<sup>106</sup> *Against the Stream*, p. 35.

<sup>107</sup> *How to Serve God in a Marxist Land*, p. 52.

<sup>108</sup> *How I Changed My Mind*, p. 64.

<sup>109</sup> *Against the Stream*, p. 139.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

West is nothing but a struggle for power between the United States and the Soviet Union."<sup>111</sup>

Barth admitted his pro-Western leanings, but not enough to issue a pronouncement which would cast all kinds of fuel in the fire of anti-communism" when there was no necessity for doing so.<sup>112</sup> It was not necessary because Communism is not at all tempting to the West anyway, thereby differing greatly from Nazism which "hypnotized" the West even in the churches as a rabbit by a giant snake."<sup>113</sup> For all these reasons, the same man who refused to take an oath of loyalty to Hitler was able to tell an East German pastor: "I would not see any difficulty, were I in your shoes, in offering this loyalty to the East German Republic, and thus in truthfully pledging the oath that is required of you."<sup>114</sup>

It is easy to see how Barth was influenced by his anti-intellectual attitude toward political "isms" and philosophical systems, for it led him not to take Communism as a doctrine seriously, however-misguided such an attitude is. But it is difficult to understand why he could not recognize the Soviet Union as one of those "definite and concrete political constellations" which he says fall within the purview of the Church. It is even more difficult to understand why Barth took no notice of Soviet anti-Semitism which, though not a part of Marxist doctrine, is very much a Soviet policy.

### *The Institutional Church and Political Activity*

We have touched upon the problem of the institutional church and political activity from time to time in connection with other topics. Now we are ready to examine what Barth has to say about it more systematically. When theologians and church bodies deal with this problem, they usually do so under the rubric of reconciliation understood in its horizontal aspect of doing away with the alienation of men from each other and treat it under the heading of the ministry or service of the Church to humanity. It is the diaconate function of the Church.

The first observation to make is that Barth is not very much interested in this problem. His allocation of space is in itself indicative

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>112</sup> *Letter to a Pastor in the German Democratic Republic, in How to Serve God in a Marxist Land*, p. 49.

<sup>113</sup> *Against the Stream*, p. 115.

<sup>114</sup> *Letter to a Pastor in the German Democratic Republic, in op. cit.*, p. 68.

of his attitude. He devoted three fat tomes of his *Church Dogmatics* to the topic of reconciliation. All of the first two volumes and the major part of the third volume deal with the vertical aspect of reconciliation, *i.e.* the reconciliation of man to God. In the 901 pages of this third volume, only 71 pages are devoted to the horizontal aspect in a section entitled "The Ministry of the Community." Most of these pages deal with theological topics like proclaiming, teaching, preaching, evangelizing, theologizing, praising, foreign missions, and prayer. The last part of this section deals with the diaconate (service to humanity) and only 12 pages are allocated to it and, of these 12 pages, a mere 5 pages are devoted to the so-called "prophetic" function of the Church!

If we look at Barth's conception of the diaconate, we discover that it is quite traditional in the sense of having very little of what we call today the social gospel. The diaconate, he explains, consists of such activities as "caring for the sick, the feeble, and the mentally confused and threatened, looking after orphans; helping prisoners, finding homes for refugees, stretching out a hand to stranded fellowmen of all :"<sup>915</sup> It is true that Barth does say that the Church should "summon the world to reflect on social injustice and its consequences and to alter the conditions and relationships in question."<sup>18</sup> It is true that he advises the Church "to tackle at their social roots the evils by which they are confronted in detail."<sup>17</sup> Such statements do point to a social gospel and would appear to be an espousal of the currently popular concept of "corporate responsibility" as applied to the Church.

Barth does not, however, deal with these social aspects at all systematically, and he hardly goes beyond scattered and disconnected comments, occasionally denunciatory and always critical, of such things as capitalism, militarism, nationalism, and racism as these come up, mostly in his political writings. He does not go into detail on these matters or dwell on them. Most significant is the striking fact that these comments are always negative and there is never one scintilla of positive suggestions or programs.

The explanation for this attitude lies deep in his conception of Providence. The world is ruled by Providence. Man "cannot anticipate God's providence or its use in God's living hand,"<sup>118</sup> there is no

<sup>11</sup> *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV-3, p. 891.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 892.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 893.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. III-3, p. 52.

"system of Christian truth,"<sup>110</sup> and he cannot know "the -strategic plan of the divine world-governance."<sup>120</sup> Out of the window, therefore, goes the current theological fad of discovering "what God is doing in the-world" of which so much denominational literature is full. This rejection is part of his conception of God as wholly Other. "He is not like a schoolmaster who gives the same lesson to the whole class, or an officer who moves his whole squadron in the same direction, or a bureaucrat who once an outlook or principle is embedded in his own little head rules his whole department in accordance with it."<sup>121</sup> God is free and therefore unpredictable.

"Have we not observed the simple fact," he asked British Christians, "that we cannot shape the future in the smallest things, not to speak of the great?"<sup>122</sup> In giving his advice to French Protestants, he wrote that this advice was in no sense an attempt to assume the role of a prophet.<sup>123</sup> He criticized American Christians for devoting "superfluous time and energy" to formulating war aims and speculating on what the post-war period would or should be like.<sup>124</sup> "Doesn't your Bible, too, contain the command not to take thought for the morrow because sufficient to the day are the evils thereof?"<sup>122</sup> What, then, is a Christian layman or a Church body or a Christian public official to do? We have already seen what Barth's answer to that question is: wait for "the command of the hour."

How do we know what the command of the hour" is and when it has struck? Barth's answer is that it is disclosed to us when we are under an inner and external compulsion to take a stand, and not before or after. To the French Protestants he said: "I wrote as I felt I must write in the circumstances of that time in the discharge of my responsibility to - the Holy Scriptures."<sup>126</sup> In explaining to an East German pastor why he had been so long and so reluctant in saying anything about the East and West conflict, he said: "it is because as time goes on, I like less and less to discuss a matter unless both outer

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. I-1, p. 88.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. III-3, p. 260.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>122</sup> *A Letter to Great Britain from Switzerland*, p. 23.

<sup>123</sup> *Second Letter to the French Protestants*, appendix in *A Letter to Great Britain from Switzerland*, p. 44.

<sup>124</sup> *A Letter to American Christians*, chapter II of *The Church and the War*,

p. 36.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>126</sup> *Second Letter to the French Protestants*, in *op. cit.*, p. 44.

necessity and inner necessity compel me to say something definite."<sup>127</sup> In defending Switzerland against French criticism of its neutrality, Barth contended that the Swiss should never "voluntarily" discard their policy of neutrality "without the compulsion of external pressure."<sup>128</sup> As for the Church, It cannot and must not be a harum-scarum, demanding to be heard on every occasion and in every situation. It can and must speak only when an inner compulsion of its own impels it to speak."<sup>129</sup> The Church is issuing much paper, which is not necessarily a bad thing, but it should be very careful as to "what is written on this paper, and whether or how far it is genuinely Christian. . . ." <sup>130</sup> As it does so, It cannot attach itself to any world-view, nor can it produce, propagate and defend any supposed Christian world-view of its own <sup>131</sup>

It is this particular danger which makes Barth hostile to political parties. He asserts that parties are one of the most questionable phenomena in political life" and the chief interest of the Church "must be rather that Christians all not mass together in a special party, since their task is to defend and proclaim, in decisions based on it, the Christian gospel that concerns all men."<sup>132</sup> A "non-political Christianity" is impossible <sup>133</sup> but its political aspect comes with the participation of Christians as individuals in political parties, provided they do so anonymously because "waging a political battle for the Church . . . will inevitably bring discredit and disgrace on the Christian name."<sup>134</sup>

What saves Barth from pessimism about politics is his conviction that God is in full control, turning evil into good. Everyone would concede, for instance, that Pilate's deed of ordering the crucifixion of Jesus was a travesty of justice by a Roman official who was too cowardly to jeopardize his political career by doing what he knew was right, i.e. to release an innocent man. But no, says Barth, because without the crucifixion there would have been no atonement and no resurrection. Pilate was carrying out God's plan without the slightest inkling that he was doing so. Therefore, says Barth, Pilate "became

<sup>127</sup> *How to Serve God in a Marxist Land*, p. 47.

<sup>128</sup> *First Letter to the French Protestants, in op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>129</sup> *Against the Stream*, p. 92.

<sup>130</sup> *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III-4, p. 557.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. IV-1, p. 837.

<sup>132</sup> *Against the Stream*, p. 45.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

the involuntary agent and herald of divine justification"" and a Roman governor "became the virtual founder of the Church."<sup>136</sup> For Barth, the guiding hand which controlled a Roman politician 2000 years ago also controls the politicians of our time. Christians have no reason to despair of the present, to be anxious for the morrow, and to waste time devising ideologies, policies, and programs which are stricken by finiteness, tainted by sin, and ineffectual attempts to crystal-gaze what God is doing in the world. All they have to do, in Barth's view, is to be receptive and responsive to the will of God as it is disclosed to them in the command of the hour."

### *Conclusion*

As we review Barth's monumental theological edifice, we find it impossible to classify him as a conservative or a liberal either theologically or politically. He simply defies classification. He draws too much from both camps and some of his contributions are uniquely his own.

Officially he was an adherent of the Reformed faith, was a member of the Reformed Church, had a profound admiration for Calvin, and felt a strong sentimental attachment to the Reformed tradition. In his reliance on the authority of Scripture, his emphasis on the centrality of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, his acceptance of the Virgin Birth, and his view of the transcendence of God, he was a Calvinist and a conservative. On the other hand, his universalism, his concept of evil, his fuzzy handling of heaven and hell had more affinity with theological liberalism.

In the political realm, too, it is difficult to pin a label on him. His instinctive attitude toward conservatism and liberalism was essentially: a plague on both your houses! And he would not have gone beyond this position had not circumstances propelled him into saying something more enlightening. On the whole, it would be fair to say that he leaned more toward the liberal direction because of his distrust for propositional truth, his critique of society and especially capitalism, his sympathy for socialism and mixed feelings about Communism, and his individualism in giving to each person the sole right and duty of discovering and obeying the command of the hour." And yet, liberals could not be too happy about his attitude toward

<sup>vie</sup> *Community, State, and Church*, p. 113.

<sup>vsa</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111,

revolution and reform, his disbelief in secular goals and programs, and his profound skepticism about the value and Christian authenticity of most Church pronouncements.

Let us therefore give up any attempt to pin a label on Barth that would place him somewhere in the conservative-liberal spectrum and, instead, ask ourselves what Barth's theology has contributed to political theory that could help potential thinkers and practical politicians.

On the plus side, one could say that Barthian theology, if adhered to, would make it impossible for anyone to treat political ideologies, party programs, and state policies as idols. Every political doctrine is robbed of its divisiveness by being placed in the perspective of the majesty, glory, and omnipotence of God. The contrast between the righteous God and an unrighteous world has the effect of sensitizing the individual and collective conscience to the scandal of human injustice and suffering. No one in a Barthian world which Barth regards as God's handiwork and the theatre of God's action would be guilty of desecrating, exploiting, and polluting man's physical environment.

But there is a minus side to Barth's influence too-very much so, unfortunately. Its main source is what one is obliged to characterize as Barth's anti-intellectualism. Principles, rules, and laws have no authority for him because he regards them as abstractions and therefore ineffectual either as guides or as restraints. They have no authority whatever until they become "definite and concrete political constellations." He applies this limitation to public officials, whether Christian or non-Christian, quite as much as to Church bodies. This means that there can be no forethought and no preparation until the definite and concrete political constellation" stares us in the face. It means that we can do nothing about a crisis until we are in its very midst and hope for that "command of the hour" which does not always come.

Barth's anti-intellectual attitude is unrealistic in that it makes no room for the power of ideas. We do not have to take the Hegelian position that ideas make conditions or the Marxist position that conditions make ideas. It is enough to say that ideas and conditions interact and, because they do, we cannot afford to ignore the influence of ideas and ideologies on politics. As men believe, so they will act, whatever circumstances and conditions may have led them to believe what they do. It was Barth's failure to appreciate the impact of ideas

-ideas prior to their becoming "definite and concrete political constellations"-which is responsible for his failure to ascribe to Communist doctrine its true importance. It is quite unnecessary to argue that the doctrine of Marx and Lenin accounts entirely and solely for Soviet policies. It is perfectly accurate to recognize that Soviet policies are influenced by geography and inherited much from Czarist policies. But it would be thoroughly inaccurate to imagine that the doctrine of Marx and Lenin had no part in influencing Soviet policies. Can anyone imagine that Czarist Russia would have benefitted from fifth columns and subservient political parties in Western Europe and in the Americas? To imagine such a thing would be sheer nonsense, or worse.

By his negativism with regard to social and political action, Barth does something else that has enormous political consequences: he denies humanity of political and social goals. If the Allies in World War II had had no conception of what they were fighting for, no vision of a world better than the inferno exemplified in the Nazi regime that they could hold up to their peoples, the outcome of the war might have been very different. It was precisely the failure of our government to have or to make clear the goals behind the Vietnam War which brought upon us the disastrous and disgraceful consequences we all lived through.

In his emphasis on God as "wholly Other" Barth forgot that this very God gave us minds with which to think and did not sentence us to be the prey of the pressures of the moment. Granted that men are by nature finite and biased, we should not conclude that we cannot think of goals for the future and programs for the present which, if adhered to with the humility to admit that nothing human is perfect and free from error, are nevertheless sufficient to make the difference between a better world and a blind and hopeless subjection to a mere trial-and-error existence. Rather ironically, the non-Barthian and the non-Christian are better off because they are not restrained from setting goals and making plans by Barthian qualms about objective truth and the ability of public officials to change and improve conditions.

With this passionate fealty to the Word of God in Scripture, Barth should have remembered that the Bible says that, without vision, the people perish.

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