

Not Being Serious: Thomas Merton & Karl Barth

Rowan Williams

A lecture given to the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland at St Cyprian's, Clarence Gate, London on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of Merton's death in 1968. Karl Barth, the great Swiss reformed theologian, died on the same day.

Alongside Merton's obituaries in 1968, in many publications, appeared obituaries of a very different figure indeed—possibly the greatest Protestant thinker of the twentieth century: Karl Barth. I was at that time a first-year student of theology in Cambridge and during my first term I picked up the newly published British edition of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. And what are the first words of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*? 'Karl Barth had a dream about Mozart'. I found myself speculating, in December 1968, about conversations that might be going in on in some heavenly waiting room between Merton and Barth. Apparently such very diverse figures: the greatest Protestant thinker of the twentieth century, and one of the most widely publicized and widely-read Catholic writers of the age. What would they have to say to each other? Well of course *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* begins to give you the answer to that. The conversation did not begin in the anteroom of heaven (or some department of purgatory) in 1968: it had begun several years earlier. 16 September 1960 is the first reference in Mer-

ton's journals to his reading of Karl Barth, and during the early sixties Barth was so much of a conversation partner for Merton in his private journal writing, that *Conjectures* itself is, for a long time, referred to in the journals under the provisional title *Barth's Dream* (which is still the title of the first part of the published journal, *Conjectures*).

'Karl Barth had a dream about Mozart', and Merton was very struck by what Barth had to say about Mozart. Mozart, according to Barth, posed a major theological problem: Barth's dream was about trying to get Mozart to explain to him why he was an unreconstructed, and not terribly devout, Catholic. Barth took these things seriously and really wanted to know; but, Mozart had no answer to give him. Mozart had said all he wanted to say: and he hadn't said it in theological words. Mozart, said Barth, is the 'divine child' in all of us. And Merton seizes on this image, and says that even for a committed Protestant theologian like Barth, it's the divine child, the Mozart who saves us.

'Barth says... "It is a child, even a

'divine' child, who speaks in Mozart's music to us." Some ... considered Mozart always a child in practical affairs. ... At the same time Mozart, the child prodigy, "was never allowed to be a child in the literal meaning of that word". He gave his first concert at the age of six. Yet he was always a child "in the higher meaning of that word."

'Fear not, Karl Barth! [Merton continues]. Trust in the divine mercy. Though you have grown up to become a theologian, Christ remains a child in you. Your books (and mine) matter less than we might think. There is in us a Mozart who will be our salvation.' (*Conjectures*, pp.3-4)

But Merton connects this in his journals with a much deeper groundswell of interest at that time in what he refers to as 'the *sophianic*': that is, that level of the world where divine wisdom in its receptive femininity is at work. That depth of silent receptivity, represented in scripture and tradition by the language of holy wisdom (particularly represented in the eastern Orthodox tradition by the icons of holy wisdom), is, for Merton, what Barth is feeling for—and not quite articulating. The 'divine child' belongs with this apprehension of divine *Sophia*, the wisdom of the heart of things. And Merton tends to read Barth at this point as if Barth the theologian stands simply for the principle of active—almost aggressive—divine love over against any attempt at human self-justification or human action. He fits Barth very effectively into the polarity between *agape* and *eros*. *agape* the divine love coming down actively, and *eros* the hopeless, human attempt by desire and longing to rise to God, always frustrated. Barth the theologian is on the

side of *agape* and yet, (says Merton) scratch Barth a little and you'll find Mozart, you'll find *eros*, you'll find the divine yearning mediated through the human.

And that goes with Merton's reading of Barth at this point as someone advocating an extreme hostility to, or suspicion of, human culture and also as someone privileging the cerebral over the emotional or imaginative. That is of course how Barth has often been read. But I want to suggest that Merton's reading of Barth moved on very interestingly from that point, and moved on in such a way as to be as one piece with his apprehension of and his use of the very different religious world of Buddhism in his Christian journey. So that the bold suggestion I'm making is that Barth helped Merton to read Buddhists. (Barth, I feel, would not have thanked me for this!)

But even the very first quotation that Merton makes from Barth ought to flash a few warning signs: because that first quotation is from a Christmas sermon of Barth's in which Barth attacks the whole idea of religious system and religious proof. In other words Barth is undercutting his own intellectualism and cerebral temptation. Thus the Barth that Merton is reading is already rather more complex than simply the prophet of divine, aggressive, active *agape* mediated through the theologian's intellect, and yet secretly subverted by the divine child. And it's fascinating to trace in the journals of the early 1960s just how Merton's reading gradually opens out onto some deeper dimensions of Karl Barth.

In *Conjectures* later on, he's still reading Barth as someone wary of or hostile towards human culture, and compares him unfavourably both with Christopher

Dawson (a great Catholic social thinker) and with Dietrich Bonhoeffer; saying that Bonhoeffer stands much closer to Catholicism than Barth does. But that first layer of the Barth/Merton conversation is already beginning to give way in the journals of this period.

Merton read Barth more and more deeply and by 1963 he had begun to hear another music in Barth. Before 1963 he'd read mostly one or two sermons and some slightly more journalistic pieces by Barth. But in 1963 he was reading Barth's little book *Dogmatics in Outline*: the lectures that Barth gave after the war in the ruins of Bonn University, which are certainly still the best short guide to Barth's thinking. If we turn to the journals of 1963-5 we see something new opening up. Merton has begun to understand that Barth's concept of God, Christ and of faith is a concept far more in tune with some of his own deepest intuitions than he had ever spotted before. Here is some of what he wrote in the journal:

30 September 1963

A magnificent line from Karl Barth: 'Everyone who has to contend with unbelief should be advised that he ought not to take his own unbelief too seriously. Only faith is to be taken seriously. And if we have faith as a grain of mustard seed, that suffices for the devil to have lost his gain.' What stupendous implications in that!

Barth, in *Dogmatics in Outline*, is not simply mounting a conventional attack of *agape* against *eros*, faith against culture: he is rather saying that the self before God is not *serious*, it is *groundless*. It is not something that exists in its own den-

sity and solidity: the self before God is poised on the divine word, the divine communication over an unfathomable abyss. It is both deadly serious in one sense, and totally unserious in another sense. It's not surprising that Merton returns several times in his journal entries to Barth's *humour* in *Dogmatics in Outline*. (It has to be said, against popular myth, that Barth can be a very funny writer indeed, and often is, in these lectures.)

Now there are elements of the old typology still at work in Merton's reception of Barth at this time—a contrast that he draws between Barth and Frithjof Schuon (1907-98) at one point, as representing revelation over against a perennial philosophy of 'the religions'. Yet, more and more, Merton is drawn into what seems to be the heart of Barth's theological vision, and finds there both a deep resonance and a profound challenge. The key passage comes in 24 October 1963. I'll quote it in its original form from the journal, though a version of it is reproduced in *Conjectures*, crucially placed almost at the end of the book—as if it's a point towards which Merton is working. Merton opens with a quote from Barth:

24 October 1963

'To be a man, means to be situated in God's presence: as Jesus is. That is, to be a bearer of the wrath of God.' We need the shock of this sentence, which is of course immediately qualified by Barth himself. And the qualification is implicit, for Jesus bears that wrath and lives. But wrath is on us!

And the Calvinist catechism 'What understandest thou by the little word "suffered"? 'That he all the time of his

life, but especially the end thereof, hath borne in body and soul the wrath of God against the whole human race.' How powerful, and how serious!

Catholic piety sees Christ suffering all his life, but in a different perspective. He is the bearer of all kinds of pains, but they are—so to speak—the pains of a person who has not been 'struck', who is not under the wrath; they are quantitative, detailed, exquisite, etc. But the full enormity of sin is perhaps not seen as well as here, for God seems to be pleased with this pain. No! It is his wrath!

And Barth's terrific chapter on Pilate. I think I'll have to become a Christian.

Merton deals here with one of the most difficult, challenging, unattractive and indispensable bits of Barth—humanity under the wrath of God: Jesus under the wrath of God: what Merton calls later an *ontological* sense of wrath: that is, the wrath of God as something written into *being* itself. Merton reads this as saying that God is not 'pleased' with who and what we have made ourselves. But thus, he's not *pleased* with suffering, either Christ's or ours, suffering as quantitatively piled up in order to placate God. Understanding suffering as something we can 'store up' in order to make God be 'soft' on us is to misunderstand completely the nature of the wrath of God and the pain of Christ.

'I think I will have to become a Christian', says Merton, meaning, if I read him correctly, 'I think I will have to understand that a proper theology of the death of Christ tells me I'm not *serious*: God is serious; my condition is serious; sin is serious; the Cross is serious. But somehow, out of all this comes the miracle, the

'unbearable lightness of being' as you might say: the recognition that my reality rests 'like a feather on the breath of God'. It *is* because God speaks, because God loves and it *is* for no other reason. And if we want to know what it *is* to say that I *am*, the only answer is 'I *am* because of the love of God'. And when I seek to justify, defend or systematize what I am, I become 'serious'. I cease to be a feather on the breath of God and gravity draws me down into darkness.

The point is that, at this particular stage, what Merton is picking up on is

And if we want to know what it is to say that I am, the only answer is 'I am because of the love of God'. And when I seek to justify, defend or systematize what I am, I become 'serious'

Barth's sense of God's freedom. God freely causes us to be involved in the life of the Spirit by freely choosing the means of salvation, not being coerced, he says, by some eternal and impersonal decree. God freely chooses to bring about salvation through poverty and death: through a renunciation which makes room for the freedom of God. Here he is later on in *Dancing in the Water of Life*: 'In sacrificing the desire to be absent, man reveals the world to itself as the place of man's meeting with the glory of God in freedom.' Although a summary of Merton's

own reflections at that point, that might equally well be a summary of the first chapter of Barth's *Dogmatics in Outline*, which speaks very powerfully of the world—and the human world—as the theatre of God's glory and liberty.

Merton has absorbed in all this some of the most difficult and apparently unattractive elements of Barth, the interpreter of Calvin. He's understood that when Barth writes about the wrath of God, he's not writing about some emotional feeling that God has towards us which we have to calm down. He's talking rather about that wholly destructive order of being which we set up when we attempt to fill the space that should be filled by the freedom of the love of God. And you'll see how this is developed still further in more depth in some of the later journal entries. It's a very paradoxical kind of 'natural theology', and much later on in *Dancing* (the entry for 12 August 1965), Merton explains what he means—implicitly contrasting Barth here with 'the Barthians', Barth's rather less gifted interpreters.

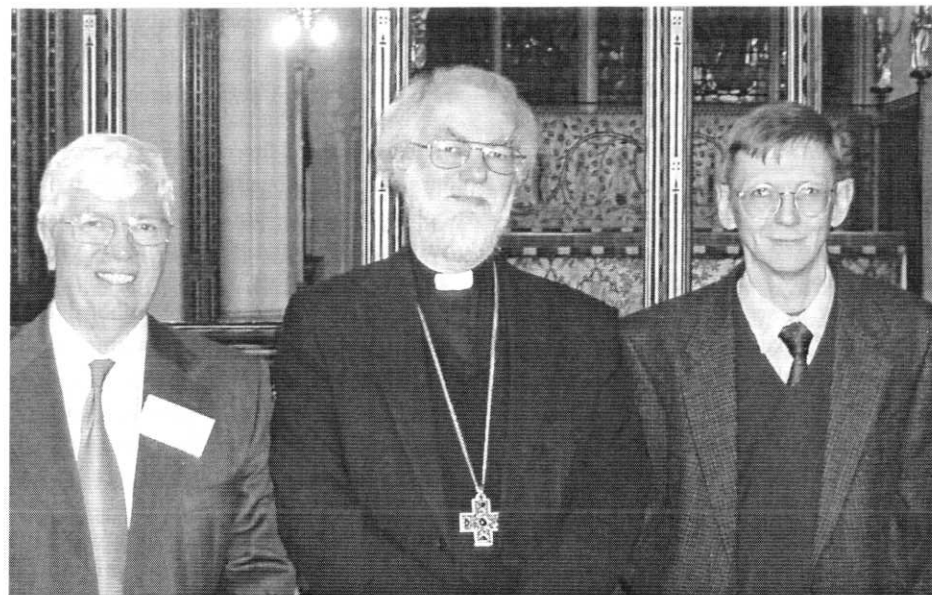
12 August 1965

Our very creation itself is a beginning of revelation. Making us in His image, God reveals Himself to us, we are already his words to ourselves! Our very creation itself is a vocation to union with Him and our life, and in the world around us, if we persist in honesty and simplicity, cannot help speaking of him and of our calling. The trouble is that there are no 'pure' natural traditions and everything gets overlaid with error. Still, there is truth there for those who are still able to seek it, even if they are few. Ought it to be called 'theology'? That is a technical question.

Our very creation is a vocation. Once again the centrality in Barth's theology of the calling of God as the essence of the creative act is used by Merton to establish what he thinks is a kind of natural theology that avoids the reproach of simply trying to climb from the world to God by a ladder of analogy. Existence itself is a *word*, my being is God's *word* to me. And in that entry, Merton sees this as something quite in tune, not only with Barth, but with Anselm.

It's not that there is, from this perspective, something in us, some element of human longing, human *eros*, which links us to God and leads us to God: not that there's some bit of us which if we spot it correctly gives us the right clues to work out the existence of God. It's the bare fact of our *being*, resting on God's gift: that is, 'word', calling, summons, the beginning of union. And that's why I used earlier on the admittedly quite controversial word, 'groundlessness'. I used that because it's one of the concepts that bridges something of the world of Barth and the world that Merton at the very same time was immersing himself in, more and more deeply: the world of Buddhist meditation and speculation. Groundlessness: there is no solid self independent of the relations, the chains of interaction, that compose the world: there is no solid self which exists over against God: there is only the call of God and the echo set up in creation: the possibility of union.

It's not to say everything is contained within God (this is not pantheism): it's to say rather that what *is*, is because God addresses it, because God relates to it. Although Merton doesn't seem to make the connection explicitly, this has all kinds of resonances with the Eastern



Archbishop Rowan Williams on the day of the lecture at St Cyprian's with the other speaker, Dr Paul M. Pearson (right), Director of the Merton Studies Center, and Larry Culliford, the Chair of the Thomas Merton Society.

Christian idea that it is the *logoi*, the words of God, which are the foundation of everything. Every reality is a communication of God, and everything exists therefore in virtue of God's communicating act.

Elements of Barth are feeding in here to the way in which Merton in this period is appropriating Taoism and Zen particularly. They become part of his own revolt against the seriousness of images of the self.

18 June 1965

'Solitude' becomes for me less and less of a specialty, and simply 'life' itself. I do not seek to 'be a solitary' or anything else, for 'being anything' is a distraction. It is enough to be, in an ordinary human mode, with only hunger and sleep, one's cold and warmth; rising and going to bed.

Putting on blankets and taking them off (two last night—it is cold for June!) Making coffee and then drinking it. Defrosting the refrigerator, reading, meditating, working (ought to get on to the article on symbolism today), praying. I live as my fathers have lived on this earth until eventually I die. Amen. There is no need to make an assertion of my life, especially to assert it as MINE, though it is doubtless not somebody else's.

28 August 1965

I realized then that I have been running the risk these past few days of tying myself down with a mental delusion—taking the hermitage too seriously and myself with it—identifying myself with this stupid little cottage as if my whole life was bound up with it. What total absurdity. Looking at the hills and recovering the

freedom of true prayer (of which, incidentally I have had so much at the hermitage too), I realized, that what is important is not the house, not the hermit image, but my own self and my sonship as a child of God.

Merton's revolt against the *seriousness* of the self-image, and therefore with an extraordinary prescience and depth, an acceptance of what he calls an 'unavoidable wrongness' in us.

5 July 1965

Certainly enough is evident merely in this Journal to destroy me for ever, after I am dead. But that's the point: not to live as one who can be so 'destroyed'. This means not ingeniously discovering infallible ways of being 'true' in the eyes of others and of posterity (if any!) but accepting my untruth in the untransferable anguish which is characteristic of death, and leaving all 'justification' to God. Everything else is only wrath, flame, torment, judgement.

I think you can see in that extract what Merton has done with Barth's notion of the wrath of God. It is what happens when we take ourselves seriously, when the self-image takes over from reality. And that passage is to me a very poignant 'opening out' onto the agonies of introspection in *Learning to Love* (the sixth volume of the journals), the volume which covers those anguished months of Merton's love affair. Here I can only refer to a few typical statements, where all of that thinking and reflecting of a couple of years previously comes into focus in the light of an experience of *wrongness*; being at odds, being unable to provide a self-

justification and unable to settle down with a satisfying image of the self. As Merton says—rather poignantly and wryly—in the journals, he is both a bad monk and a bad lover. There is no way of bringing it all together in a single frame. So he can write—in a way markedly contrasting with some of what he said earlier about Christopher Dawson—about the risks of an escape into a 'beautiful lost world of extinct Christian culture. Will that simply reinforce the deceptions and delusions of my "monastic" life? I don't say these are answers: but they are real questions.'

5 September 1966

What I see is this: that while I imagined I was functioning fairly successfully, I was living a sort of patched up, crazy existence, a series of rather hopeless improvisations, a life of unreality in many ways. Always underlain by a certain solid silence and presence, a faith, a clinging to the invisible God—and this clinging (perhaps rather His holding on to me) has been in the end the only thing that made sense. The rest has been absurdity. There is 'I'—this patchwork, this bundle of questions and doubts and obsessions, this gravitation to silence and to the woods and to love. This incoherence! There is no longer anything to pride my self in, least of all 'being a monk' or being anything—a writer or anything.

Again, that same month.

Where I am now, nothing unambiguous is possible. In a certain sense I have to be wrong up to a point, and what I'm trying to learn is how to be at least simple and honest about it and not try to say I am

right, and not try to whitewash myself in terms of something or someone I cannot be. I am neither a good monk nor a good lover.

In those pages some of what both Barth and Buddhism have fed into Merton becomes incarnate in the most uncomfortable and challenging way. Because if it's true that I am a 'feather on the breath of God', that I exist because called, summoned into relation by God, that I have no seriousness within myself, but only the joyful 'unbearable lightness' of knowing myself held by God—if all that is true, then there is never going to be a way in which I can map my life, my sense of my

**...if it's true that I am a
'feather on the breath of
God'... then there is
never going to be a way
in which I can map my
life, my sense of my
identity ...**

identity onto a fore-ordained pattern of *rightness* and justification. I am bound to be dependent. I am bound to be receiving. I am bound to put on hold whether I can show myself to be 'right'. And it leads Merton to make some very stinging remarks in these journals about 'religion' as a means of self-justification, religion as a drama which seeks to gloss or to soften the challenge of faith: a very Barthian theme indeed. There's another telling little aside where Merton is reflecting on Teilhard de Chardin. He was initially

quite enthusiastic about Teilhard, then read a bit and found it much duller than he expected.

10 June 1967

Are the neologisms of Teilhard much better? Good intentions, heart in the right place, wanting the right thing, but did he really have the necessary gifts? If it comes to science I would gladly read later and better scientists. If it comes to poets... he does not even begin to be one. As for theology, I must admit that I become more and more suspicious of it in its contemporary form. After Barth....

As if something about the ambitious, harmonic cosmology of Teilhard comes to be insupportable once you've really digested Barth not only as a theologian, but as someone describing your reality, your *unjustifiable* reality which depends on the mercy of God. I don't fully endorse that judgement of Teilhard: it's a very typical bit of Merton's wild overstatement. But that little sentence 'After Barth...' is very significant there.

He sums a lot of this up in an entry from the private journal written in the summer of 1966 and designed for the woman he loved.

20 June 1966

The great joke is this: having a self that is to be taken seriously, that is to be proved, free, right, logical, consistent, beautiful, successful and in a word 'not absurd'.

4 February 1967

Let the idol fall on its face in the presence of the hidden Child.

Right back to where we started—only the

'divine child' this time is not a sort of innocent, sophianic, indwelling reality, yearning heavenwards towards God; or a sort of buried innocence that you can strip your way down to. The divine child this time is the birth of God's freedom in the emptiness of solitude and the emptiness of realizing that there is no justification. And even having said that, we have to be careful: the full quotation is: *'Let the idol fall on its face in the presence of the hidden Child. (Yeah, but beware!!)'*

We're back full-circle to Barth and Mozart. The experience of real *eros* in 1966 was not for Merton a revelation of original innocence or of a deeply buried 'image', but a revelation of the groundlessness of the self, a revelation of the inescapability of finding yourself wrong—and neither justifying the wrong nor pretending to be justified in any other way. A revelation of groundlessness (and yes, in that sense, 'Buddhist' up to a point) but still underpinned by an essentially Christ-focused awareness, awareness of the bearing of 'wrath' in Christ. It is Christ in life and death and resurrection who shows us how *unserious* we are, how little we can begin to do to justify ourselves because everything is gift. And it may sound strange to read incarnation and cross and resurrection in that light, and yet in all those millions of words of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, that is where he is driving. Although Merton hadn't worked his way through those millions of words, he had apprehended something central and focal in Barth's vision: We are not 'pleasing' to God: yet God wills to be 'pleased'. That's to say that we are not condemned to keep God happy, we are not bound to the fiery wheel of entertaining God, placating God or preserving God's good moods. Because

God's pleasure is God's being and God's will directed towards us in creation and redemption, and therefore all we can do is say 'yes' to it. And to know this is to be finally free from the idols of the self.

Merton didn't discover all this in Barth; it's already strongly adumbrated in the 1950s in parts of *Thoughts in Solitude*—one of his most profound and abidingly impressive books. But somehow making the Christological connection seems to be one of those things that, with all the intellectual and spiritual and emotional turbulence of the mid-'60s in Merton's life, anchored him in the classical Christian vision of the Son sent forth from the Father, returning to the Father ('the Son's journey into the far country', as Barth calls it) the whole of our life, our universe, our individual pilgrimage swept up into that movement of outgoing and returning love, a love bestowed, a love which is also our homecoming, a love so profoundly anchored ontologically in the reality of God, eternally, non-negotiably, that the only thing we can do about any attempt ourselves to think that we have a part in this is to laugh. Barth's unseriousness, Merton's unseriousness, and perhaps Mozart's glorious unseriousness all converge here. To say this is not to minimize the depth of human betrayal or the intensity of human suffering. But it is to say—to go back to that phrase of Merton's in the '66/'67 journals 'the great joke is having a self that is to be taken seriously', when what is to be taken seriously—and yet unbearably lightly—is only and eternally God.

Rowan Williams is the Archbishop of Canterbury.