

Christianity Under Assault

A Search for Wisdom and Spirit, by Anne Carr, *Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988. xii + 171 pp. \$16.95.*

Many Mansions, by Harvey Cox, *Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1988. 216 pp. \$18.95.*

Christ and Reason, by George W. Rutler, *Front Royal, Virginia: Christendom Press, 1990. xi + 211 pp. \$9.95 (paper).*

The Assault on Religion, edited by Russell Kirk, *Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1986. ix + 115 pp. \$9.25 (paper).*

Twin Powers: Politics and the Sacred, by Thomas Molnar, *Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1988. xi + 147 pp. \$9.95 (paper).*

TAKEN TOGETHER, these five quite different books provide a picture of Western Christendom at the close of Christianity's second millennium. What they reveal is a religion under assault from both within and without. They give us a snapshot of a religion under attack from elements of its priestly class within and from elements of its culture without.

Of course, Christianity is under attack for more reasons and from more enemies than this small sampling of books reveals. Nonetheless, these books do point

to some major issues that will continue to need attention from those Christians who care about defending, preserving, and communicating the historic Christian faith, a phrase necessary to distinguish the apostolic faith from the many modern counterfeits presently on display in what are still called divinity schools. Anne Carr's *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit* is subtitled *Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self*. It and the Harvey Cox book illustrate some of the problems Christianity faces from those within its walls. This assault assumes the form of attempts to alter (perhaps "mutilate" would be a better word) the very nature of the faith.

It may seem strange to some to find Thomas Merton placed within this group. But even though Anne Carr is primarily concerned to present a sympathetic exposition of what she takes to be Merton's theory of the human self, she cannot avoid reporting information about the spiritual and intellectual odyssey of Merton's later life that should trouble admirers of Merton who still take essential Christian teaching seriously. Carr summarizes Merton's quest as a search for "non-identity." Now, I suppose, this term can be used in a loose and even sloppy way to describe what traditional Christians regard as an important end of the Christian life, namely, the subordination of self to Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul described this experience in the following words: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself to me" (Galatians 2:20, NIV). The Christian sanctification Paul had in mind in this text is an ongoing process in which "I" became less and "he" becomes more. Or as John the Baptist put it, "He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30 NIV). But there is absolutely no resemblance between this kind of biblical self-denial and

the later Merton's search for non-identity. The proper parallel for what Merton was seeking lies in Buddhism, which helps explain his keen interest in that religion late in his life.

Carr tells of a time near the end of his life when a Buddhist told Merton that the Buddhist's thirty years of solitary meditation had failed to bring him to emptiness (non-identity). While any traditional Christian should have used this as an opportunity to tell the Buddhist about the peace that only Jesus Christ can bring, Merton could only report that his own decades of meditation had been equally frustrating. He too had failed to find the non-identity that he sought. Later, Carr reports, Merton had the most dramatic religious experience of his life while visiting a Buddhist shrine. Near the end of her book, Carr leaves her reader with the question, To what extent did Merton remain really Christian? I fear that she has more reason than I to answer in any positive way.

But there is a more fundamental question than what Merton did or did not believe at the end of his life. What factors explain his movement from Christian monk to whatever he was at the end? The danger for all mystics and others who emphasize religious inwardness is that they surrender all objective guideposts. While inward religious experience is indisputably important in Christianity, the Christian faith offers believers revealed truth that serves as a means of testing our experiences. How can I be sure this is the voice of God I am hearing? How can I be sure that it is really God I am experiencing? When they are thinking straight, Christians recognize that God has graciously given us a special revelation of propositional truth that should function as an anchor for our faith. Merton lost touch with that objective anchor and in the process fell victim to one of the major strands of post-Enlightenment liberalism. The fountainhead for

this deviation from historic Christianity was Friedrich Schleiermacher who defined religion as the feeling of ultimate dependence. The search for God exclusively in emotion—a search that ignores the mind, reason, and objectively revealed truth—may avoid heresy; but the avoidance will usually be an accident. The Christian realizes that we can never find God by turning away from the truth God has revealed. Hence, there is nothing very surprising about the sad and empty quest of the later Merton. If there is any lesson to be learned from him, it is that our inward, subjective search for God must never be divorced from the objective truth revealed in the Holy Scriptures.

Harvey Cox, a professor at what is still called Harvard Divinity School, illustrates a different dimension of the same problem we have encountered in Merton. Cox, of course, is not a mystic. But he is totally captive to the presuppositions of post-Enlightenment thought which result in a repudiation of biblical authority and end eventually in a rejection of almost all that the Christian church (both Catholic and Protestant) has regarded as essential. When Cox therefore subtitles his book *A Christian's Encounter With Other Faiths*, the wary believer will remember the essentially contentless meaning the word "Christian" has for Cox.

Cox's book, a collection of previously published pieces in mostly popular sources, is full of interesting stories of his encounters with adherents of other faiths. As such it makes entertaining reading. Cox can tell a good story, at least during those times when the story doesn't come from the Bible. But the book will hardly be satisfying to thinking Christians. For one thing, consider Cox's title, *Many Mansions*, which he borrows from the King James translation of Jesus's words in John 14:2: "In my father's house are many mansions." Cox admits that, in the same chapter, Jesus claimed to be

the Way, the Truth, and the Life. And so, Cox reports, "From Jesus I have learned both that he is the Way and that in God's house there are many mansions." Cox takes the second clause to mean that there are many routes to God. But of course the inescapable meaning of the first clause is that Jesus is the only Way. But Cox does not think the two claims are contradictory. What then could Jesus have possibly meant? Or does the real problem rest with Cox's mishandling of the Scriptures? While we may marvel at this probably unique appeal Cox makes to the King James Version, it should be noted that a more accurate rendering of the Greek text would be "in my father's house are many rooms" (see the New International Version). One can only wonder where anyone could possibly find a justification for some kind of pluralism or universalism in Jesus' statement.

A huge lacuna exists at the very heart of Cox's book. What is the cognitive content of what Cox calls "Christianity"? Is there anything that anyone must believe to be admitted to one of Cox's "mansions"? Is there anything one might believe or do that would cause such a person to be excluded? It is impossible to say. Cox totally fails to address the really important matter of explaining how his view bridges the logical inconsistencies among the world's religions without violating their essential cognitive center. One suspects that Cox doesn't think the difference between truth and error counts for much in religion.

We do learn along the way that Cox has no sympathy for any belief in the deity of Jesus. He thinks there is merit instead in regarding Jesus as some kind of guru. Nor does the resurrection of Jesus count for anything in Cox's understanding of Christianity. It would appear that the honorable thing to do in such a case is find some new name for Cox's new religion. It certainly is not Christianity.

Many will know that there is a long history behind the sort of stuff Cox now preaches. George Rutler's *Christ and Reason* provides some helpful background on that history. Rutler, a priest in New York City, pulls the covers away from the post-Kantian presuppositions that helped to create the "intellectual" climate within which Cox and the later Merton operate. Rutler helpfully takes his reader all the way back to Immanuel Kant whose epistemology ruled out any possibility of humans attaining cognitive knowledge about the transcendent. But since Kant's position was internally incoherent, why should anyone take his position seriously? Rutler's chapter on Kierkegaard is fascinating. In contrast to some, like Brand Blanshard of Yale, who saw Kierkegaard as an enemy of the law of non-contradiction, Rutler produces a much more satisfying exposition of Kierkegaard's thought. While Kierkegaard was a romantic of sorts, he was not an irrationalist. His subjectivism was an important corrective to the excesses of both Hegel and Schleiermacher. Throughout his subsequent analyses of thinkers like Kahler, Harnack, Tyrell, and Barth, Rutler insists on the necessary role for objective and revealed information about God. His alternative for the proponents of error he studies is John Henry Newman.

Rutler's study disappoints in at least one respect. It is regrettable that the only Protestant he can offer as an alternative to liberalism is Karl Barth. It is unfortunate that Rutler is unaware of earlier books that have plowed much of the same ground, such as James Orr's *The Christian View of God and the World* (1904), Gordon Clark's *A Christian View of Men and Things* (1952), J. Gresham Machen's *What is Liberalism?* (1925), Carl Henry's *God, Revelation and Authority* (1976), and the present writer's *The Word of God and the Mind of Man* (1982). Perhaps Rutler would then be encouraged

to learn that he has much in common with some twentieth-century evangelical Protestants.

Ideas always have consequences, of course. Hence, the turn towards naturalistic and humanistic presuppositions that began with Hume and Kant and that continues today has had inevitable effects within our culture. Russell Kirk's *The Assault on Religion* is an important examination of some of these presuppositions. The book is a selection of papers presented at a Washington, D.C. conference in January 1984. Sponsored by the Center for Judicial Studies, the conference dealt with court decisions that have had a strong, negative effect on religious liberty in the U.S. Each chapter deals with instances of increasing governmental intervention in the religious affairs of American citizens. Even though a lot of water has gone over the dam since that 1984 conference, alert citizens ought to read this book and learn more about how the courts are systematically undermining important First Amendment liberties.

Thomas Molnar's fine little book is titled *Twin Powers: Politics and the Sacred*. It is a brilliant defense of an important but overlooked thesis, namely, that throughout recorded history humans have held that political power and those holding it have had something sacred about them. This belief that one's community is grounded in the sacred has been a major reason for the cohesion that characterizes societies. Human communities are earthly images of a higher and sacred reality.

However, as Molnar points out, the rise of modernity has brought an end to the linkage between politics and the sacred. Today moderns challenge the sacred character of power; they deny it and finally repudiate it. Government—indeed most of the major institutions of society—has been desacralized. This has brought about a complete alteration of the nature of politics. Human communi-

ties will continue to exhibit a power structure along with a hierarchy that uses that power. But if the power no longer has its ground in the sacred, how can the power continue to provide the ground for order in society? Will that power not be transformed into a source of disorder? Molnar's question then is this: How can the desacralized power that characterizes contemporary states continue to serve as the ordering principle of society? How can we prevent this desacralized power from bringing about disorder and anarchy?

We continue to believe that we are political and social animals. But, Molnar insists, we are also religious beings. In the history of our species, the religious and the political have never been separated—until now. This situation has helped produce a crisis that lies at the very center of our social being.

According to the contributors to Kirk's book, we must resist attempts to use the court to desacralize American society. According to Molnar, the way to do this is call Americans back to the recognition that ordered societies are required to operate under the aegis of Twin Powers. According to Rutler, it is a matter of utmost urgency that we recover the cognitive and the doctrinal, foundations of our historic faith.

—Reviewed by Ronald Nash