1 *Atheism for Lent*

". . . Yes, you heard me right. I propose the serious and sustained reading of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as a Lenten penance."

"You've got to be kidding. That's positively outrageous."

"Perhaps it is. But I'm not kidding. I'm quite serious."

"But you've named three of the most militant atheists of modern times, three founding fathers of secular humanism."

"I know, though I like to think of them as the great modern theologians of original sin. In any case, it is precisely their critique of religion that I recommend for Lenten reflection, more specifically their critique of the Christianity of the Christendom in which they lived as unbelievers."

"But isn't the purpose of Lent to aid the victory of the Spirit over the flesh, the religious over the secular in us?"

"Now we're getting somewhere."

The conversation is imaginary, but what Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud can help us see, if we let them, is that the distinction between the flesh and the Spirit does not coincide with the distinction between the secular and the sacred for the simple reason that religion, too, can be a work of the flesh. If "*all* our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment" (Isa. 64:6), why should we suppose our religious life to be otherwise? If "the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt" (Jer. 17:9), why should it not put the respectability of religion to work for devious purposes?[1] Isn't Karl Barth right when he

1. Mike Martin tells us that the first book-length study of self-deception he can find, Daniel Dyke's *The Mystery of Selfe-Deceiving*, takes Jeremiah 17:9 as its theme. See *Self-Deception and Morality* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1986), p. 32.

reminds us that it was the church and not the world that crucified Christ?[2]

Let's back up to more familiar territory. The movement of Lent is from penance to penitence to repentance. Acts of penance such as fasting (or reading) are an important part of Lenten observance, but they are not ends in themselves. Their goal is to lead to penitence, true sorrow for our sins. Thus the traditional "epistle" lesson for Ash Wednesday from Joel 2 begins with the admonition to "rend your heart, and not your garments." That is prophetic parlance for the challenge to let all our external acts of penance serve only to melt the inward hardness of our hearts.

While true sorrow for our sins is valuable in itself, it is not complete by itself. Just as faith without works is dead, so penitence without repentance is sterile. To the initial movement from outward act to inward feeling there must be joined the movement back to outward act. This is why Paul rejoiced, not that the Corinthians were grieved, but that they were "grieved into repenting. . . . For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret" (2 Cor. 7:9-10). Thus the traditional collect for the first Sunday in Lent asks, with reference to fasting, "Give us grace to use such abstinence, that our flesh being subdued to the Spirit, we may ever obey thy godly motions in righteousness, and true holiness." This means it is even possible to define Lent as "the time when Christians are called upon to change their opinion and practice in the light of Christ's person and message."[3] So understood, of course, Lent is not so much a distinct time of the Christian year as a necessary dimension of the life of faith at any time of the year.

It is easy to understand (if not to practice) the idea that Lent is every day, that the call to repentance is as permanent as the good news of grace. But how shall we understand the strange idea that the works of the flesh that need to be subdued to the Spirit include our piety and that our religious opinions and practices are among those that need changing? Having finally gotten clear about the relation between faith and works, are we now to repent of both our faith and our works?

We might jump right in and start reading Marx's, Nietzsche's, and Freud's critiques of religion. But since that might be a little too much

2. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (New York: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 389.

3. L. W. Cowie and John Gummer, *The Christian Calendar* (Springfield:

like learning to swim by jumping off the end of the dock, let us turn first to (apparently) less threatening writers: Luther and Barth. In opposition to the rationalist and idealist views of human nature, which assimilate the contrast of flesh and spirit to that of body and mind or sense and reason, Luther regards reason itself as an expression of the flesh, repeatedly explaining this in terms of reason's role in "the presumption of religion," in which "they select acts of worship and works that they themselves like." Where such "self-chosen works and forms of worship" prevail, we witness "the invention of an idol in the heart." Instead of true worship of the true God, religion becomes "superstition."[4]

Since Luther's enemies were primarily religious, it is not surprising that he discovered that religion, too, can be a work of the flesh. Nor is it surprising that he did not frequently transcend the natural (fallen) tendency to assume that such false religion was "their" religion. In his case, "they" are primarily Jews, Muslims ("Turks"), and Roman Catholics ("papists").

Barth takes us beyond this Lord-I-thank-Thee-that-I-am-a-Protestant-Christian complacency into which Luther habitually falls. Instead of separating himself from the target of the Pauline polemic against the religion of human choice and human achievement, he lets that critique include him first of all. When he speaks of "the criminal arrogance of religion" in which people become preoccupied with "their religious needs" to "surround themselves with comfortable illusions about their knowledge of God and particularly about their union with Him," it is he and his own Reformed tradition of which he primarily speaks. The illusory god that we create in our own image to conform to our knowledge and our values provides us with confidence and security; but as we are secretly the masters of this god, it turns out to be "No-God" at all, but rather, on closer examination, just idols such as "Family, Nation, State, Church, Fatherland." Since idolatry is inherently polytheistic, it is not surprising that, just as Zeus and Hera once squabbled on Mount Olympus, so today's "No-God" presents itself to us as the conflict between "Nature and Civilization, Materialism and Idealism, Capitalism and Socialism, Secularism and Ecclesiasticism, Imperialism and Democracy," all of which express our willingness to make ourselves ultimate. "The cry of revolt against such a god is nearer the truth than is the sophistry with which men attempt to justify him."[5]

4. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), trans. Jaroslav Pelikan, in vols. 26-27 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963-64), 26:309, 229, 397; 27:54-57.

5. Barth, pp. 37-52.

It is in this context that Barth seeks to guard against an anti-Semitic reading of the Gospels' critique of religion. Instead of saying that it was the Jews and not the Romans who crucified Christ (which leaves us out, since we are neither), he says that it was the church rather than the world that did it. The implication is that the sophistry which seeks to justify the "No-God" in its various incarnations is to be found in the church, and that since the atheism of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud can be understood as a cry of revolt against such a god, we would do well to pay close attention to them. But this claim is not identical to these atheists' claim that they have the truth and that the church knows nothing but error, superstition, and illusion. It is rather the claim, scarcely less disturbing, that there is an atheism which is closer to the truth than a certain kind of religion, not the religion of "somebody else," but quite possibly our own.

It is not surprising that an early edition of Barth's commentary on Romans received a very negative review in the official organ of the Dutch Reformed Church. The members of that church were warned that the book was too "negative" and thus "foreign to their piety."[6] I am not in a position to dispute the factual accuracy of this latter claim. Insofar as it is correct, I suspect that it does not distinguish the Dutch church from most churches in the English-speaking world. There is surely a discrepancy between Barth's Lutheranism, which sees even our own religion as a work of the flesh, and the prevailing piety of most Christian churches, Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox. The question unavoidably arises, however, whether this reflects negatively on Barth's critique or on that piety.

Perhaps we need to see Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, along with Luther and Barth, as expressing a Promethean protest against all the Zeuses of *instrumental religion, the piety that reduces God to a means or instrument for achieving our own human purposes with professedly divine power and sanction.*

To see what such piety looks like in the flesh, consider the devout Salieri of Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus.* By the age of twelve, he tells us, "My one desire was to join all the composers who had celebrated [God's] glory through the long Italian past." At sixteen, he prays, "I will honor You with much music all the days of my life. . . . I am your servant for life. . . . Let your voice enter me! Let me conduct you." As a suitable moral context for this fervent devotion, he takes on vows of chastity and charity. "I will live with virtue. I will strive to better

6. Barth, p. 21.

the lot of my fellows."[7] How beautiful the faith of youth, how inspiring its passion!

Not quite. This soaring self-transcendence has a flip side of sordid self-interest. Salieri gives himself to God, but not exactly as a gift. His merchant parents thought of God as "a superior Habsburg emperor, inhabiting a Heaven only slightly farther off than Vienna. All they required of Him was to protect commerce, and keep them forever preserved in mediocrity. My own requirements were very different. [Pause] I wanted Fame. Not to deceive you, I wanted to blaze like a comet across the firmament of Europe! Yet only in one special way. Music! Absolute music!" Conveniently, the frescoed God Salieri saw in church every Sunday was

> staring at the world with dealer's eyes. Tradesmen had put him up there. Those eyes made bargains, real and irreversible. "You gave me so — I'll give you so! No more. No less!" . . . The night before I left Legnago forever, I went to see Him, and made a bargain with Him myself! . . . I knelt before the God of Bargains, and I prayed through the moldering plaster with all my soul. [He kneels] "Signore, let me be a composer! Grant me sufficient fame to enjoy it. In return . . .

Then follows Salieri's pledge of allegiance, and he hears God say, "Bene. Go forth, Antonio. Serve Me and mankind, and you will be blessed" (pp. 11-12).

At thirty-one we find Salieri as an upwardly mobile, "prolific composer to the Habsburg court." He was very much in love, "or at least in lust," with his prize pupil, Katherina Cavalieri, "a bubbling student with merry eyes and a sweet, eatable mouth. . . . But because of my vow to God I was entirely faithful to my wife. I had never laid a finger upon the girl — except occasionally to depress her diaphragm in the way of teaching her to sing" (pp. 14-15). He was keeping his bargain.

But God was not keeping his. As if to repudiate the idea that he was the God of Bargains in the first place, he created Mozart at precisely the wrong time and place. The perfection of Mozart's music revealed the mediocrity of Salieri's. Even when the latter became "the most famous musician in Europe" after the former's death, the divine mes-

7. Peter Shaffer, *Amadeus* (New York: New American Library, 1984), pp. 11-12, 30. Subsequent pages, given in the text, are from this edition. Soon enough it becomes clear that by virtue Salieri means sexual virtue.

sage lost none of its sting. "I was to be bricked up in fame! Embalmed in fame! Buried in fame — but for work I know to be *absolutely worthless!* This was my sentence: I must endure thirty years of being called 'Distinguished' by people incapable of distinguishing" (p. 147).

Salieri's response? All-out war on God. With all the anger and sarcasm of which he is capable, he prays once again.

> Grazie, Signore! You gave me the desire to serve You — which most men do not have — then saw to it the service was shameful in the ears of the server. Grazie! You gave me the desire to praise You — which most men do not feel — then made me mute. Grazie tanti! You put into me perception of the Incomparable — which most men never know! — then ensured that I would know myself forever mediocre. . . . You know how hard I've worked! Solely [sic] that in the end, in the practice of the art which alone makes the world comprehensible to me, I might hear Your Voice! And now I do hear it — and it says only one name: MOZART! . . . [Savagely] Grazie e grazie ancora! [Pause] So be it! From this time we are enemies, You and I! I'll not accept it from You — do you hear? . . . [ellipsis in the text] They say God is not mocked. I tell you, Man is not mocked! . . . [ellipsis in the text] I am not mocked. . . . And this I swear: To my last breath I shall block You on earth, as far as I am able! [He glares up at God. To audience] What use, after all, is man, if not to teach God His lessons? (pp. 73-75)

To complete the retraction of his original promise to God, "I am your servant for life," Salieri canceled the moral vows that had accompanied it.

> The next day, when Katherina Cavalieri came for her lesson, I made the same halting speech about "coins of tenderness," and I dubbed the girl La Generosa. . . . She consumed twenty "Nipples of Venus" — kissed me with brandied breath — and slipped easily into my bed. . . . She remained there as my mistress for many years behind my good wife's back. . . . So much for my vow of sexual virtue. [Slight pause] The same evening I went to the Palace and resigned from all my committees to help the lot of poor musicians. So much for my vow of social virtue. (pp. 80-81)

Salieri presents us with a vivid picture of the piety that reduces God to a means to the believer's own ends. Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche find this sort of piety to be the rule rather than the exception. Behind

what professes to be love of God and neighbor they regularly find love of self, disguised beyond recognition, at least to those who perpetrate this pious fraud. To see our three atheists as critics of instrumental religion could be to make them instruments for self-examination and sanctification. Reading them at any time of the year could be a Lenten spiritual exercise that could lead to godly sorrow and the repentance "that leads to salvation and brings no regret."