

## Not to use religion to mask the stench of war

Karl Barth taught us not to use religion to mask the stench of war. In the midst of the carnage of the first world war in Germany, the great Protestant theologian argued that Christianity involves more than inner morality and being a ‘good person’



It will be a century this coming summer that the great Protestant theologian Karl Barth began his revolutionary commentary on St Paul’s Epistle to the Romans. A quiet and studious man of simple tastes, Barth was an unlikely revolutionary. He listened to Mozart, smoked his pipe and read the paper: “Theology is done with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other,” he said. But mostly he sat and wrote. His Church Dogmatics is more than six million words. And no, I haven’t read it all. But his considerably shorter Epistle to the Romans, written earlier, was the decisive turning point in 20th-century theology. It was a book that dropped a bomb on the comfortable assumptions of German liberal thought. And it’s a bomb that needs dropping again – but this time much closer to home.

Barth’s target was the sort of theology offered by his tutor, Adolf von Harnack. For the universally admired Harnack, Christianity was a religion of inner morality – of good people, in their local congregations, who sought nothing more than personal transformation. They respected the state and didn’t cause trouble. It was, to use the language familiar today, religion as a private matter, equally suspicious of outward forms of ritualism and popular superstition. Cultured and rational, it stayed out of party politics and set its mind on higher things. For Harnack, Christianity was fundamentally a religion of individual righteousness.

On the day war was declared between Britain and Germany, the Kaiser gave a speech to the assembled members of the Reichstag in which he made the moral case for Germany going to war. The speech was partly written by Harnack. Two months later, an open letter by 93 German intellectuals – 11 of whom, including the great theoretical physicist Max Planck, went on to be Nobel prize winners – made the same case. The war was a sacred mission. It was a question of survival for a superior culture that had given the world Goethe, Beethoven and Kant. Harnack's name was among the 93 signatories.

And Barth's world was in tatters. "In despair over what this indicated about the signs of the time I suddenly realised that I could not any longer follow either their ethics and dogmatics or their understanding of the Bible." He suddenly saw how the individual religion of good, non-trouble causing Christians was easily purloined to beat the drum for war. Running together the sacredness of the state with the mission of the church, even the non-political were swiftly requisitioned into the war effort. When it came to the Kaiser's call to arms, German Christians went over like a giraffe on roller skates.

The problem, for Barth, was that the religion of "good people" had become just another sphere of human activity – like playing golf or going to a concert. And, as a consequence, its theology had come to be imprisoned by the dominant cultural imagery. Locked away in private prayer, Christianity abandoned its critical engagement with the fullness of reality, and so had no grounds for objection when the state shaped a pliant and deferential cultural Christianity for the purposes of statecraft. Germany had sacralised the culture-state complex, and by so doing, had come to worship something other than God: the military-industrial complex. Something Barth called Woden, the Nordic God of war.

Which brings me to David Cameron's message of Christmas cheer, that we are a "Christian country". Given the rapid decline in the number of church-going Christians, and given Cameron's sketchy relationship to faith, what he probably meant is that we are a Christian culture; that the ethos of Christianity is woven into the warp and weft of British institutional life. Oh, what a slippery word "ethos" is – Christianity in homeopathic doses. Barth would not have approved. For what is frittered away in this mutually back-slapping accommodation between faith and the state is the ability of the church to stand up to the state's propensity for war. Indeed, the point of saying that Jesus is Lord is to say that Caesar isn't. Neither Caesar nor his armies nor his civilising institutions. Which is why Christians should always call time on their religion being used as a deodorant to mask the stench of war and death.

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