

## For the Beauty of the Earth

Carol P. Christ

I was brought from the Huntington Hospital just before Christmas to my grandmother's home on Old Ranch Road in Arcadia, California. Peacocks from the adjacent Los Angeles County Arboretum screeched on the roof. There was another baby in the house, my cousin Dee, born a few months earlier. My mother and her sister were living with their mother. The Second World War was over, and they were anticipating the return of their husbands from the Pacific Front. My earliest memory, recovered during a healing energy session, is visual and visceral. I am lying crossways in a crib next to the other baby. There is a soft breeze. The other baby is kicking its legs, and I am trying to do the same. I look up and see three faces looking down at us. Although the faces are blurry in the vision I see, I feel them as female and loving.

My parents had what was called a mixed marriage. My father's family was Roman Catholic and my mother's was Christian Science.

This was at a time when Roman Catholics were viewed with suspicion in the United States. We were brought up in local Protestant churches in the postwar tract home suburbs of Southern California where my parents hoped we would all fit in. In church, I learned about the love of God without much mention of judgment. God was the one who made the ivy twine; He looked for the one lost sheep, and His love was divine, all loves excelling.<sup>1</sup> I knew what this meant, because I never doubted my grandmothers' love for me. There was something about worship that attracted me, and I often begged my parents to get up to take me to church when they would have liked to stay in bed on a Sunday morning. I preferred the grown-ups' service to Sunday school, and I enjoyed the uplifting feeling that enveloped me while singing hymns with the whole congregation. I loved thanking God "For the beauty of the earth, for the glory of the skies, for the love that from our birth, over and around us lies."<sup>2</sup>

My grandmothers were more spiritual than my parents. When we stayed overnight with our grandmother Lena Marie Searing Bergman in Arcadia, we sat on the living room floor and played cards or dominoes while she listened to "The Christian Science Hour" on the radio or read from Mary Baker Eddy's *Science and Health*. My mother didn't discuss Christian Science with us except to say that she had felt embarrassed to have been seen as different in school. Our grandmother did not speak to us about her faith, but we knew that she did not believe in doctors or medicine and that she almost always had a positive attitude toward life. We listened with her to stories of miraculous faith healings, and we were quiet while she read and prayed. Although we got the measles, mumps, and chicken pox, my brother and I were rarely sick and often had perfect attendance records at school. We were raised with the assumption of health.

Grandmother Bergman had been raised on a farm in Michigan and

1. In my individual chapters, I capitalize pronouns used to refer to divinity in order to call attention to the male gender of the traditional God and the disruptive power of the female gender of the Goddess.

2. The refrain of this rousing hymn is, "Lord of All to thee we raise, this our hymn of grateful praise." With "Lord of All" changed to "Goddess in All," this hymn still expresses my theology. <http://www.hymnsite.com/lyrics/umh092.sht>.

was sturdy and tall—I got my height from her German, English, and Huguenot ancestors. Her garden was filled with roses and camellias that always graced her table at much-loved family meals. I can still picture her with a pitchfork in her hand turning over compost in the fruit orchard. Her pantry was filled with fruits and jellies she had preserved. When we were small, there was no fence separating her backyard from the arboretum, and she often took us on special walks through it. Even after the fence was put up, a hole emerged, and she showed us how to crawl through it with her. Grammy taught us that the world was a beautiful and magical place, and the peacocks that spread their tails for us in her garden and the peahens that brought their chicks to her back door convinced us that this was indeed true.

When I was six years old, I went to stay with my father's parents in San Francisco. What was supposed to have been a short visit expanded into a whole summer. My grandparents adored me, and I was probably glad not to have to share the attention of adults with my younger, demanding brother. My grandmother Mary Rita Inglis Christ, who took the name Mae to avoid becoming Mary (the mother of Jesus) Christ, was delicate and tiny, much less than five feet tall. Though I would far surpass her in height, I inherited her Irish freckled skin, strawberry blonde hair, blue-green eyes, and facial structure. She and I would get up early to drive my grandfather Irv to the train he took to work in the mornings. Afterward, we sometimes went to Lake Merced to see the ducks. Other mornings we went to the Pacific Ocean beach where my little grandmother removed her shoes and stockings to run with me in the sand. Usually we also stopped at the local Catholic Church where my Nannie lit a candle in a blue glass vase for Uncle Bobby who was away in the Korean War. We sat together in the still dark church while she prayed the rosary on her lavender faceted beads. She spoke often of the Blessed Virgin. I delighted in her love of life and absorbed her faith without the need of many words.

## Discord and Death

My childhood world was not all rosy. Our father was strict and sometimes angry, and I was an awkward, quiet, tall, smart child who didn't always feel at home with the other kids, especially after we moved to a lower-middle-class neighborhood where being smart was not valued, but playing spin the bottle at the age of nine and ten out of the sight of parents was. In the church we joined after our move, I was not fully accepted by the other girls because we were newcomers in town and lived on the wrong side of the railroad tracks. Their mothers refused to let me join their daughters' Girl Scout troop. My father's family time was given to Little League and incessant baseball practice limited to my brother only. My mother had a baby when I was ten years old, and I threw myself into the role of second mother. I fed and diapered the new baby and treated him like he was my own. I started babysitting and prided myself on being able to put five kids under the age of five to bed all by myself.

When I was fourteen, my world fell apart. My father's mother was diagnosed with cancer and kept alive on tubes much longer than she should have been. My mother vowed that this would never happen to her. Our maternal grandfather, who had been bedridden at home for a long time following a stroke, died the same year. Then the second baby my mother and I were planning to raise together died without even having been brought home from the hospital. The only time I saw him was in the open coffin. While he was dying, I promised God that I would never fight with my other brother again if the baby lived. God did not answer my prayer. My mother fell into a depression that lasted for years. Before I was nineteen, I had also lost my other grandfather in a fire, and one of my only two aunts to a tragic prescription drug overdose. While other students may have felt carefree in their college years, I was struggling to understand the meaning of a life that included so much death.

## Entering into Western Culture

I went to Stanford because my high school guidance counselor told my parents that, with my grades and scores, I should not go to the local junior college, but somewhere that would challenge my mind. My parents would not let me apply out of state. I got into Stanford with a partial California State Scholarship, worked summers as a telephone solicitor, and my parents made personal sacrifices to pay the difference. When they sent me to college, my parents expected me to get a teaching credential, teach for a few years before I got married, and have a profession to fall back on if my husband died. I probably would have followed this path if I had started dating in my first year of college. I did not know any women who spoke about careers and had no ambition to have one. However, because I was over six feet tall, extremely shy, and quite overwhelmed by college, I did not start dating, much to my chagrin. I also was totally unprepared for Stanford, because I had never even heard of Plato and Aristotle or the Middle Ages. At some point, I looked around me and saw that most of the other girls were dating as well as getting better grades than I was. I did not know how to make the boys ask me out, but, I figured, at least I could improve my grades. Because of my lack of background, this meant studying pretty much night and day and during weekends and holidays.

I spent six months of my sophomore year at Stanford-in-Florence. There we read Augustine and Dante and visited Christian churches and immersed ourselves in Christian art. I think living in close connection to monuments of Christian history gave me an embodied sense that Christianity had a history and was much more than the social club it often seemed to be for my parents and their friends. I spent many hours in churches meditating on the frescoes and praying where so many others had prayed before me. I did not always know the questions I was asking, but I sensed that all the feelings of my heart were taken up into the shadowy darkness.

The book that most impressed me that year was Augustine's

*Confessions*.<sup>3</sup> I not only read it but reread it many times. I identified with Augustine's search for God and his struggle to understand God's presence in his daily life. His was a spiritual passion combined with intellectual acuity and persistence that I had never experienced before. Until that time, I had often been told that I was thinking too much or that my questions about God didn't really matter. Reading Augustine, I began to see that there was a way to combine my grandmothers' spiritual intensity with my own intellectual curiosity and desire to make sense of the questions that had arisen in my life. I wanted to know why my brother had died, and I wanted to understand why I so often felt alone with my questions. In Augustine, I felt a spiritual kinship that I did not find in church or among my contemporaries at Stanford. I would continue to read and reread Augustine during my undergraduate and graduate school years and use him as a model for bringing full engagement of mind and body, heart and head, to theological questions. In those days, I understood Augustine's struggle with the flesh symbolically and did not identify with the woman he viewed as an impediment to his relationship with God.

### **Falling in Love with God**

When I returned to Stanford, I enrolled in an Old Testament course for background. The professor presented the Bible as a book that raised more questions than it answered. I fell in love with the Old Testament and idolized the professor who taught it. During Christmas break, I learned enough Hebrew on my own to join the second quarter class. I suppose I thought that if I could read the Bible in God's own language I would understand Him better. I was fascinated with a God who did not stay in the heavens but came down to earth to enter into a covenant with His own special people. The Hebrew people did not hold God in awe, but dared to converse and even disagree with Him. God's people, our professor loved to point out, were a "stiff-necked people," but God loved them anyway. God's on-again off-again relationship with His

3. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Books, 1961).

people echoed my father's stormy relationship with me and seemed to hold a clue to the relation of life and death. I needed to believe in a God whose "steadfast love" was overflowing with a compassion that stemmed his judgment and anger. I needed a God whose love conquered death. I was deeply moved by the prophets' understanding that God cares about the widow at the gate and that the proper way to worship Him is to care for her. In my senior year, I chose to write my thesis on "Nature Imagery in Hosea and Second Isaiah" because the images of the trees of the field clapping their hands on the day of redemption resonated with my grandmothers' and my spiritual feelings in nature. At my oral, I stumbled when I was asked if the prophets' imagery was a pathetic fallacy. I did not know the meaning of the term, and it had never crossed my mind that the prophets did not intend to say that God loves and redeems trees as well as people. As in my reading of Augustine, I failed to recognize the significance for me as a woman of the fact that Hosea portrayed female sexuality as source and symbol of evil.

I studied theology with Roman Catholic Michael Novak, whose *Belief and Unbelief*<sup>4</sup> shaped my future study of religion. Novak defined a process of understanding he called "intelligent subjectivity" that incorporates mind, body, and feeling. I was extremely lucky to have been taught to question the widely accepted ideal of scholarly objectivity so early in my career. Through Novak, I was introduced to the idea that all thinking is situated in personal, cultural, and historical experience, long before standpoint theory became popular. Novak gave me the tools I would need to combine head and heart in my studies and to resist ideas and ways of thinking that did not make sense in my own life. He also taught me that theologies need to be open to the world, as advocated by Vatican II. In *Belief and Unbelief*, Novak asked existential theological questions—questions about the meaning of life. He entered into dialogue with Dr. Rieux of Albert Camus's *The Plague*.<sup>5</sup> For Dr. Rieux the pervasiveness of death and undeserved suffering in

4. Michael Novak, *Belief and Unbelief* (New York: New American Library, 1965).

5. Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948).

the world argued against the existence of God. The questions raised in *The Plague* haunted me too, and I would introduce students to them when I began teaching. Novak came very close to agreeing with Camus, but in the end concluded that because we humans “sometimes love and understand,” there is reason to believe in a God who loves and understands.

My favorite theologian was Martin Buber, whose idea that the meaning of life was found in the I-Thou relationship with other human beings, with nature, and with God<sup>6</sup> affirmed my own feelings about life and the view of God I was learning through my study of the Old Testament. Although I had not studied or practiced Judaism, my view of God was in many ways as Jewish as it was Christian. When I prayed, I prayed to God the Father who I understood as the God of the Old Testament. I had very little interest in the New Testament or in Jesus as a teacher, prophet, companion, or savior. I suspect that I never really understood the Trinitarian controversies when I later studied them because I had always been a radical monotheist—I believed God is one, not three-in-one. Though I had become consumed by the study of religion, I did not ever think of becoming a minister, and I certainly did not want to become a dowdy spinster director of Christian education, the only role in the church I had ever seen a woman hold. I had declined confirmation in the Presbyterian Church at age thirteen because I felt the other kids were just going through the motions. I thought we should have been taught something about other denominations and religions before making a choice for one of them. While studying religion in college, I decided to become confirmed in my home church. I remember telling our intellectual and liberal minister that I was not sure if I believed in the divinity of Christ. He said not to worry too much about that. When he confirmed me, he asked if I believed in God, but he did not ask me if I believed in Christ. I will never know if this was intentional or accidental on his part.

During my junior year, my advisor in the Humanities Honors

6. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons: 1958 [1937]).

Program called me into his office to discuss my future. With my grades, he said, I could go on to graduate school anywhere I wanted and with a full fellowship. He suggested that I should become a university professor of religious studies, not a high school teacher. When I told my parents my new plans on the way home from the airport at spring break, my mother started to cry, saying I would never get married if I pursued my studies. My father said curtly that I had wasted the money he spent on my education. He did not speak to me or look at me again for the whole two weeks I was home. This was a time when fellowships for graduate study were plentiful, and a year later, I managed to win both Danforth and Woodrow Wilson fellowships, which paid for my entire graduate education, plus living expenses.

### **Civil Rights, Poverty, and an Unjust War**

During college, I had not ventured far from the conservative values of my upbringing. Because I was so focused on my studies, I was pretty much unaware of the Civil Rights Movement and the social upheaval that was going on around me. I spent the summer after graduation on the Stanford campus where I took a class in the German language. My best friend and I rented rooms in a fraternity. One of the guys with whom we hashed—served food in the dining hall to the other girls in exchange for our board—was staying there too. He decided to make it his summer project to convert me from conservative to liberal, a journey he himself had made. He plied me with information and managed to convince me that caring about civil rights and poverty and opposing the war in Vietnam followed from the Christian value of loving your neighbor as yourself and the American value of freedom and justice for all. Before I left Stanford to go back east for graduate school, I had become deeply committed to ending discrimination, poverty, and the war in Vietnam. Needless to say, my parents were horrified.

### **And Then There Was Yale**

When I left Stanford for Yale with the intention to study and later teach Old Testament, and to discuss religion and values with my students, as the Danforth Fellowship specified, I brought my religious and value commitments with me. I believed in the loving and punishing, but ultimately merciful, God of the Old Testament who I understood to be kind of like a really good version of my father and my professors. I was a Christian, but had no ethnic, family, or other strong ties to my Protestant denomination. Presbyterianism was not the religion of my grandparents or cousins; I had experienced class discrimination within my church, and my family no longer went to church because my father refused to listen to sermons about civil rights. I remembered my grandmother's devotion when I learned of the new Catholicism of Vatican II. I was open to the idea of faith healing that my other grandmother had so deeply believed in and sensed that I owed my good health in part to her influence. I was deeply moved by the writings of Jewish theologian Martin Buber, and also by hearing Abraham Joshua Heschel give a series of lectures at Stanford during my senior year. I felt a deep sense of spiritual communion in nature, particularly in my grandmother's garden with the peacocks, flowers, and fruit trees, and in the Pacific Ocean. I loved to float into a state of trance on calm days, and to feel the exhilaration of being part of the ocean's power when the waves were high and I dove under them at the last minute. I was still seeking to understand why there was so much death in my life. I was newly committed to working for social justice and to ending the war in Vietnam and considered this a religious as well as a moral commitment. The dean of the Stanford Chapel, B. Davie Napier, who had relocated from Yale, told me that I would have a hard time at Yale because the Yale professors didn't like women. I remember brushing this warning off, saying, "I am as smart as any man and surely they will recognize my intelligence." More than thirty years later, I met B. Davie again, and we had a good laugh.

I was accepted into the Old Testament program in the religious

studies department at Yale. My Old Testament professor at Stanford had been one of the first to practice a method of interpreting the Bible that analyzed the literary conventions of Hebrew poetry and narrative as a way of uncovering the meaning of the texts. This approach is common today but it was not then. At my first meeting with the professor I had come all the way across the country to study with, I got my initial taste of the reality behind B. Davie Napier's warning. Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and all of twenty-one years old, I told the professor that I had used literary methods to explore nature imagery in the prophets in my senior thesis and said that I hoped to continue this kind of work in graduate school. When I finished, the man I had chosen to become my new mentor replied, "Well, Miss Christ, then why didn't you go into comparative literature?" This was the first, but not the last, time I was simply erased at Yale.

When I met the other students in Old Testament, I found myself among a group of married men with devoted wives who were helping to support their husbands' studies by working as secretaries, and who copyedited, proofread, and typed their husbands' manuscripts. These male graduate students had all completed divinity degrees before beginning graduate school, so they were quite a bit older than I was. There was only one other woman in the religious studies program, Margaret Farley, a Roman Catholic sister, still in partial habit and ten years older than I was, who did not socialize with the other students. There were a few male students who had also come into the religious studies program without a divinity degree, but they were in the minority and none of them were in Old Testament. I had entered a culture defined by men of another generation—who were not baby boomers and who were not as concerned as I was about social issues—and I was effectively the only woman among them. I would learn that both professors and students imagined California to be a strange place—the summer of love, of which I had not been part, had just concluded. For them, the West Coast was not the kind of place a scholar should come from.

At that time, graduate students socialized primarily with other

graduate students. Although my colleagues and I were in the newly formed religious studies department, there were still strong links with the Divinity School. Most of our classes were at the Divinity School; we used the Divinity School library as much as the larger Yale library; we ate lunch in the Divinity School dining hall; and we celebrated the week's end at the sometimes drunken Friday afternoon sherry hour hosted by the Divinity School for faculty and students. Theoretically, the Divinity School professed religion and the religious studies department studied it objectively, but in practice, these divisions were blurred. Almost all of the students in the religious studies program already had degrees making them eligible for the Christian ministry or priesthood. While Stanford had accepted women undergraduates from its inception, Yale was very much a gentleman's club. The architecture of the main campus is medieval; imposing oil portraits of men in academic robes hang on cold stone or dark wood-paneled walls; the arm-chairs and couches are leather; and in my day, men in suits sat on them smoking cigars and pipes. The faculty had very little experience teaching women. There were no women undergraduates and only a small number of women graduate students. Although I never had a woman professor at Stanford and can remember having been assigned to read only one book by a woman—Hannah Arendt's *Eichman in Jerusalem* in my freshman year—I was not consciously aware of having been discriminated against. Male professors recognized my mind and encouraged me to break what was still the pattern for Stanford women students of getting married right after graduation or pursuing grade school or high school teaching degrees.

Not feeling there was anyone I could talk to in the Old Testament program, I found that there were at least a few students not married, closer to my age, and, like me, having trouble adjusting to Yale, in the theology program. Two of them were Roman Catholic, and we, along with two Protestant male divinity students, had many long late-night conversations in which we tried to figure out what was wrong with the way theology was being taught at Yale. Because I could speak with these students, I changed my area of study to theology part-way

into my first semester. I did not have as extensive or the same kind of background in theology as most of the other students, and I did not understand the abstract conversations they were having with the professors in the classroom. For example, when a student asked if a certain theologian was making “an ontological or merely an aesthetic statement,” I did not know what this meant. By the next year, I was beginning to grasp that the professors and the other students were debating the orthodoxy of theological statements by testing them against lines in the sand they perceived to have been drawn by favored theologians like Karl Barth and Martin Luther. In the meantime, I was flailing. At the end of my first year, the Director of Graduate Studies wrote to the director of the Danforth Foundation that he had serious reservations as to “whether I had a theological mind” that could grasp the subtleties of theological questions. I was put on probation by the Danforth Foundation, which was quite humiliating, and a senior professor was asked to assess my capacity to study theology at the end of the summer.

The professor assigned to this task determined that I did have a theological mind and was making progress toward filling in the gaps in my knowledge, and so I was able to keep my fellowship and continue my studies. However, my theological comments and questions continued to be ignored in the classroom and at social gatherings. When I spoke of my interest in Martin Buber, I was told that he was “only a poet” and that his ideas about having an I-Thou relationship with a tree made no sense. If I countered that maybe theology needed more poetry in order to connect it to real life, the conversation continued as if I had said nothing. A new Director of Graduate Studies later told me that it was his opinion that, after I caught up with the other students, I surpassed most of them. He said that, because I was asking a different level of questions than they were, they still thought of me as ignorant. This was a comfort, but a small one, as it did not change the day-to-day reality, which was that I was being ignored and silenced.

### **Women and Theology Don't Mix**

During the time I was at Yale, my skirts were short, as was the fashion of the day, and I rode around on a red Vespa motor scooter. Most of the faculty and student wives dressed and acted in ways that would not call attention to themselves or their sexuality. I was also over six feet tall. When I walked into a room, I was consciously and unconsciously perceived as a threat to a world that these men had simply assumed was theirs. Their response was to categorize me as a sexual being (I was once introduced as “our department bunny”) and to erase my mind. I was to discover that the male graduate students were making bets in the dining hall about “where she will sit today.” One of my friends frequently fell down and feigned to worship me when I passed him in the hallways. I had never received so much attention from men before and it was flattering.

At the same time, I was told by these men that of course “no one expected me to finish my degree” and that even if I did, “all of the jobs should go to men who have families to support.” The generic male, as in “when a man finishes his PhD,” was the common language of both faculty and students. If I protested, I was reminded that I probably would not finish my degree anyway. I dated two of the other students in my first year, fell in love with one of them, and lost my virginity to the other. They both dumped me. I was being told in every way possible that I could not be a woman and a theologian. There was such a disconnect between the way I was perceived and the way I perceived myself that I came close to suffering a mental breakdown.

I found a clue to what was going on in a most unexpected place. While reading the assigned passages from medieval theologian Saint Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*, I decided to see what the great man had to say about women. I discovered that he agreed with the philosopher Aristotle that women were defective males and that our defect was a lesser rational capacity.<sup>7</sup> With respect to each other,

7. Thomas of Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Cincinnati: Benziger Publishers, 1947), question 92.

woman was body, and man was mind. Thus, the revered theologian opined, man was to rule over woman as a man's mind rules over his body. I was both angry and excited to discover that theology itself was the key to understanding what I was experiencing. If the men with whom I was studying accepted the view that, in relation to me, they were mind and I was body, then everything fell into place. When I tried to explain to the men who were ignoring my mind why they were doing it, they erased me again. "No one thinks that way anymore," they replied. With that simple statement, they killed three birds with one stone. They excused the history of male dominance in theology; they refused to look at their current attitudes; and they made me feel stupid.

When I discovered that Karl Barth had said a version of the same thing in the twentieth century,<sup>8</sup> I was told, "No one reads that part of his work because it isn't important." Two years later, I wrote a class paper in which I argued that Barth's view of the man-woman relationship is important. Barth used the same model of hierarchical domination combined with love—sometimes described as love patriarchy—to explain the "man-woman" and the "God-man" relationship. The relation of man and woman is one of love, but man is to have "initiative, precedence, and authority." In relation to each other, man will be A and woman will be B. Barth used exactly the same words to describe the relation of God to man. I argued that if we criticized Barth's understanding of the man-woman relationship, we ought to think about criticizing his understanding of the God-human relationship as well.<sup>9</sup> My paper demonstrated beyond a doubt that I could think systematically. The professor (the same one who had earlier concluded that I did have a theological mind) glanced at my paper and flicked it aside.

8. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III*, ed. G. W. Bromily and T. F. Torrance, trans. J. W. Edwards, O. Bussey, and H. Knight (New York: T & T Clark, Ltd., 1958).

9. The original typescript of this paper, written in 1970, is in the Alverno College Library Archives and can be viewed online at <https://feminismandreligion.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/barths-theology-and-the-man-woman-relationship-by-carol-p-christ-1971.pdf>; a version of it distributed as "A Question for Investigation: Karl Barth's View of Women" by the Conference of Women Theologians, Alverno College, 1971 is also in the Alverno College Library Archives and can be viewed online at <https://feminismandreligion.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/a-question-for-investigation-christ.pdf>.

### **Roman Catholic Years**

While I was at Yale, I regularly attended the Roman Catholic folk mass on Sunday evenings at the Yale Roman Catholic chapel. This mass was attended by a motley group of graduate students who understood that, though we were at Yale, we certainly were not part of the white American Protestant elite of one thousand male leaders that Yale professed to turn out every year. I first went to the mass with a boyfriend, but after we broke up, I stayed in the community. The mass was part of the movement to open the church to the world. The priest faced us, the bread and wine were real, and we hugged each other after taking communion. A common meal with wine followed the service. I loved the Easter drama. I experienced it as an enactment of God loving the world so much that He was willing to share its suffering and to redeem it from death—set within nature’s drama of the celebration of rebirth and renewal in spring. One of the priests, who was also an older male graduate student in our program, knew that I was not a baptized Catholic, and he loved to joke that while many baptized Catholics did not “practice” (go to church regularly), I was a “practicing Catholic.” After *Humanae Vitae* prohibited the use of contraception among Catholics, Father Bob delivered a sermon telling us that we should follow our consciences. This was the time of post-Vatican II optimism when we really believed that the Church would change. I liked the ritual of the Roman Catholic mass, and it felt good to be part of a Church that was far larger and more diverse than the Presbyterian churches I had known or, for that matter, the Yale Chapel ministered to by the flamboyant political activist and white male elitist William Sloane Coffin Jr. Being a practicing Catholic connected me to my paternal grandmother and to half of my family, including relatives on Long Island with whom I celebrated Thanksgiving and Easter.

### **Questions That Could Not Be Asked**

I was voicing my newfound political convictions every chance I could. I wore a button with a drawing of a starving baby in Biafra on my

raincoat. I asked the faculty what they were doing to end racism, poverty, and an unjust war. I attended graduate student meetings to discuss the politics of the New Left, and I took the bus with other students to Washington to take part in demonstrations. I supported Eugene McCarthy's antiwar bid for the presidency. When Yale went on strike in support of Black Panther Bobby Seale's assertion that he could not get a fair trial, and against the war in Vietnam, I was in the thick of it. Like others of my generation, I really did believe that the world could change. My desire to change the world was not something that came and went depending on what else was going on in my life. It was an ever-present reality that colored everything. I felt the bombing of Vietnamese villages and the horror of rats crawling across beds in ghetto apartments in the United States, almost as if these things were happening to me—and I also felt responsible for the fact that they were happening to others. I believed that we could end racism, poverty, and war in my lifetime. I was disillusioned to discover that most of the Yale faculty was not as outraged about injustice or the war as I was. For the most part, my professors believed that theology and politics should be kept separate.

Protestant Neo-orthodoxy reigned at the Divinity School and in the Department of Religion. Karl Barth's assertion that man could not save himself or know anything about God apart from revelation was the unspoken standard by which other theologies were judged. As I had studied theology with a Roman Catholic theologian who, like his mentor Aquinas, had a great respect for the human mind and for human beings' capacity to act morally, Barth's view was foreign to me. However, as everyone else seemed to revere Barth, I tried to adopt his way of thinking. When Barth died in the first semester of my second year of study, I played Mozart's *Requiem* for a whole day in honor of Barth's love for Mozart,<sup>10</sup> and then put Barthianism behind me. However, my failure to grasp the Barthian standpoint in the beginning

10. Barth's statement, "It may be that when the angels go about their task praising God, they play only Bach. I am sure, however, that when they are together *en famille* they play Mozart," was fondly repeated in the classroom. See Barth, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, reprint 2003).