

Looking smart: Visible wisdom

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [August 14, 2002](#) issue

Fifty-five years ago an eccentric and rather egocentric seminary professor called my roommate into his office and asked him to exchange eyeglasses. The professor was farsighted and wore pince-nez spectacles. My classmate was extremely nearsighted and wore the then newly fashionable horn-rimmed glasses. “How do I look?” the professor asked. He could not see himself in the mirror through the student’s glasses, and the student could not even see where the professor was through the exchanged spectacles.

Why did the professor want to know how he looked? World War II had just ended and, through a theological exchange program, he was going to a meeting in Germany. He needed a publicity photo, and wanted it taken with the horn-rimmed glasses. Why? “Because Germany thinks Karl Barth is the world’s greatest dogmatician, and I think I am. I want glasses like Karl Barth’s because I would look better in them than he does. You see, his ears are too low!” One hopes, or wishes, there was a bit of ironic self-deprecation in those words.

There was nothing wrong with the location of Barth’s ears, only with the location of the temples of his glasses, which he cocked high above his ears. When there were theological giants in the earth—Barth, Brunner, Bonhoeffer, Buber and all the other B’s, plus a T or two, such as Tillich and especially Teilhard, and two N’s, Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr—the dust jackets of their books showed them in very distinctive and memorable ways.

I had not thought much about how more recent theologians and religious scholars present themselves until I read Jeffrey Trachtenberg’s *Wall Street Journal* article about how important dust jackets and publicity photos are for selling books. “Brooding” visages are in, as in the photos of Francine Prose, Joyce Carol Oates and Truman Capote created by Marion Ettlinger. Authors, forced to the photographer studio by their agents, spend up to \$2,000 for the pictures.

Said novelist Susan Isaacs, “What’s happening over my publishing life is that more and more, you are becoming an ambulatory ad for your book.” No wonder so many

of us don't sell well. Some theologians' ears are too low, and the hairlines of others are too high, if they exist at all.

I have not monitored recent dust-jacket photos, but I have a few impressions. In the bad old days of male-dominated theology and religion, many of the guys turned in pictures that might as well have been taken in a booth in Union Station. I hope some ambitious reader will do some tracking of women's photos, now that women are doing half the writing and publishing in these fields.

Years ago theologians who wanted to look sage and profound posed with a pipe. Tobacco-infested images do not sell books now. Those of us who were pipeless often were subjected to contortions by photographers, who used what I call the "two digits on the cheek and two under the chin" pose that no one assumes except in brooding photographs. A quick glance at my bookshelves reveals some fellow veterans who were beardless in the '50s, bearded in the '60s and '70s, beardless in the '80s and are now back to beards in photos where they are expected to look wise.

Embarrassed to find myself unbearded on photos from back in the prime ("protest") years of beards but sporting goshawful shaggy sideburns (didn't all the men?), I remembered Dick Cavett's words about those of us who had no beards: "You lack the courage of your convictions. It's like boiling your draft card!" At least, my ears weren't too low.