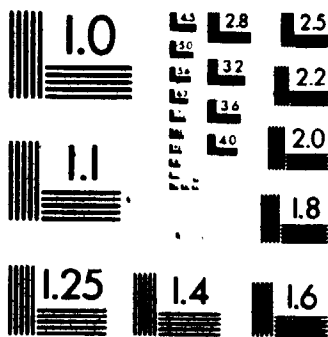


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The Attack on Liberalism:
Reinhold Niebuhr and European Neo-orthodoxy

by

Eric Michael Wees, B.A.

A thesis submitted to

the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of History

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AND EUROPEAN NEO-ORTHODOXY"

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ABSTRACT

After World War I, Western man experienced a sense of crisis regarding his nature and destiny. A solid blow had been dealt to, and serious criticism generated of, the prevailing public philosophy of liberalism that stressed the goodness of man and his potential for unlimited progress through the exercise of reason. Theology had also been flavored by this secular liberalism and it came under attack from a school of "neo-orthodox" theologians, principally among them, Karl Barth, who placed new emphasis upon human sinfulness and reasserted a more Biblical theology. American theological development had been provincial in character, and the liberal Social Gospel had reinforced this provincialism. Reinhold Niebuhr challenged that provincialism by introducing the European neo-orthodox perspectives into the American Protestant Community, thereby joining in the attack on liberalism. This study examines his consolidation of European and American elements into a mature theological paradigm by 1935.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- CC The Christian Century
- DCNR Niebuhr, Reinhold. Does Civilization Need Religion?
A Study in the Social Resources and Limitations of Religion
in Modern life. New York: Macmillan, 1927.
- ICE Niebuhr, Reinhold. An Interpretation of Christian Ethics.
New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935.
- KB Kegley, Charles W., and Robert W. Bretall, eds. Reinhold
Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought.
New York: Macmillan, 1956.
- Leaves Niebuhr, Reinhold. Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic.
1929. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980.
- MMIS Niebuhr, Reinhold. Moral Man and Immoral Society. New York:
Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932.
- REE Niebuhr, Reinhold. Reflections on the End of an Era.
New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934.
- WT The World Tomorrow

A NOTE ON STYLE

On matters of style, the source consulted and followed was:

The Chicago Manual of Style. 13th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago
Press, 1982.

INTRODUCTION

William Barrett, in his study of Existentialist thought, Irrational Man (1962), observes that:

August 1914 ... revealed that the apparent stability, security, and material progress of society had rested, like everything human, upon the void. European man came face to face with himself as a stranger. When he ceased to be contained and sheltered within a stable social and political environment, he saw that his rational and enlightened philosophy could no longer console him with the assurance that it satisfactorily answered the question, What is man?¹

European man entered into a period of prolonged and penetrating self-analysis in the wake of a war that had shaken the foundations of western life. The political and economic consequences of the War (and, as well, of the Russian Revolution) were, by themselves, severely disturbing. Germany remained in a state of dangerous instability as a result of the Versailles treaty, a condition that created serious pressures for other nations and contributed to the oncoming of World War II. But accompanying and exacerbating these problems of public life were other effects of the War that touched European minds and souls, effects that, as Barrett asserts, challenged basic intellectual and spiritual security.

"Death stood at the door of almost every house and called for entrance." This was how the German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer expressed the character of the War experience in a sermon delivered

¹ William Barrett, Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy. Garden City, N.Y.: (Doubleday, Anchor Books edition, 1962), 34.

in the United States in 1931.² For many reflective persons, the events of 1914-1918 (and the modernistic explosion that had preceded, and was intensified by, those events) were experienced and understood as a shattering lesson in humility, a powerful blow to the prevailing public philosophy of liberalism that emphasized human goodness and possibilities. This philosophy derived, most immediately, from the Enlightenment creed - its belief that the exercise of reason would yield evolutionary progress toward an ultimate perfection, or near-perfection, of human society.

Protestant theology in the nineteenth century became heavily imbued with this secular liberal spirit, and consequently proposed perspectives involving greater harmonization of the eternal with a progressing cultural order. Liberal Protestants believed that Christianity and culture in alliance would usher in the long-awaited Kingdom of God. The War brutally dissolved this secular and religious optimism. Disillusionment seized the European mind, raising profound questions concerning the nature of man, especially concerning his capacity for evil. Theologians, philosophers, psychoanalytic theorists, and artists were all engaged in a new exploration of man's "heart of darkness."

Throughout the post-war period, the United States remained relatively insulated from these cultural shocks. America's participation in World War I had been limited in comparison with that of European nations, and geographical distance served to buffer the War's impact on American society. Beyond these factors, however, lay

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes: 1928-1936 (London: Collins, 1965), 78.

others of a more structural, historical nature. America had enjoyed healthy economic growth since the Revolution, and its material prosperity, coupled with isolation after 1815 from European affairs, produced a very prideful collective psychology. Narcissism and messianism are not too strong a pair of terms to use in a description of a nation that came to a belief in its innocence, virtue, incorruptibility, and salvific mission to the world. The pessimism settling over Europe after 1919 did not, for at least a decade, cloud the traditionally confident, optimistic American mood.

The Social Gospel was, appropriately, born in America, and expressed the humanism and perfectionism of both liberal theology and the American character. This movement had grown in part out of a longstanding conviction that America could be the new "promised land," the agent that would usher in the Kingdom. Reinhold Niebuhr began his career as a theologian and social thinker within this movement, but soon emerged as one of its harshest critics. Marx had asserted that the beginning of all criticism is the criticism of religion, and Niebuhr began what would be a lifetime of perpetually explosive, provocative, and polemical criticism by attacking American Protestantism in the 1920s. He found the secular and theological liberalism that had insinuated itself into the churches to be an enervating force that rendered them ineffective as workers for greater justice. Niebuhr's thought revealed a lifelong debt to the Social Gospel for its impression upon him of man's collective needs and the goal of greater social justice, but he came to reject the Social Gospel's assumptions and strategies. A theological foundation other than liberalism was required.

Niebuhr concluded that liberalism was hopelessly unrealistic, a conclusion arrived at as a result of thirteen years as a pastor amid the suffering of Henry Ford's Detroit, and after his introduction to the "new-orthodox" theology of the new European movement dominated by Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, and Emil Brunner. Their ideas were a response to the weaknesses of liberal theology, which they believed had been exposed during and after the war. Also called "crisis theology," this movement was marked by a reassertion of man's sinfulness and God's transcendence; otherwise stated, neo-orthodox theologians sought a separation of the liberal union of God's Word and man's culture. Crisis theologians turned to the Bible, its traditions and perspectives, as a new source of stability for a culture in disintegration. In the words of one of Barth's confères, Eduard Thurneysen:

A huge, yawning abyss opened before us. And if we may call the bourgeois, socialistic, ecclesiastical and religious interpretations of the meaning of the events of the times the bridges which were brought to cross the abyss, we must say that they all proved much too short. They all fell into the pit.... In this situation something very simple happened to us: our attention was presently called to the Bible.... We read it with the eyes of shipwrecked people whose everything had gone overboard.³

Niebuhr turned to the neo-orthodox theologians and the Bible in the later 1920s and the 1930s with the eyes of one trying to find a theological perspective or paradigm that was more realistic, that

³ Eduard Thurneysen, quoted in Wilhelm Pauck, Karl Barth: Prophet of a New Christianity? (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1931), 59.

would address the needs of a society suffering with the depression and the tension of a gathering crisis in Europe. He sought a theology that would confront America's optimistic, liberal provincialism with something substantial and sobering. He desired a perspective that would combine Jesus' concern for the social substance of humanity (derived from the Jewish prophets) with a realistic appreciation of human nature that recognized man's sinfulness.

Niebuhr managed to break through the American religious community's traditional provincialism, serving as a conduit for a European, Biblical perspective that challenged that provincialism. In seeking a new theological basis from which to advance the goals of greater social morality, he was joining European and American colleagues in addressing the crisis of identity then facing Western man concerning human nature and destiny. Niebuhr, combining the strength of several traditions, offered to his readers and listeners a unique perspective that spoke directly to their sense of homelessness and fragmentation. Against the background of European and American intellectual, particularly theological, history, our study will examine the consolidation, from 1915 to 1935, of the Biblical, European, American, and experiential elements in Niebuhr's thought. The resultant paradigm, complete by 1935, incorporated these elements into a mature perspective for which Niebuhr would receive increasingly widespread attention.

CHAPTER ONE

THE DISSOLUTION OF OPTIMISM

When surveying a sweep of history, as when surveying a landscape, human attention is invariably drawn to the irregular and the conspicuous. We require landmarks in order to locate our position, guide our journey, and mark our boundaries. Consequently, we are drawn to a ready observance of that which is prominent and striking. In a view of the historical terrain, there is no lack of outcroppings, depressions, and shifting strata. Historians thus tend to focus upon turning points: moments of crisis or revolution, rises and declines, watersheds, and axial points. The seemingly irrepressible tendency of the human mind to adopt dualistic perspectives has yielded much emphasis in historical writing on conflict.

Upon observing the historical landscape more closely, however, one realizes that the many landmarks by which one is confronted do not necessarily provide a well-defined, coherent guide to the understanding of historical development. Rather, as one investigates more carefully, the dimensions of explanation and understanding - the paths that lead from one position to another and the conditions that form those paths - become more complex and confusing. To continue with our metaphor, when viewed from afar, the land may appear to be clearly marked and easily traversed since distance diminishes and blurs irregular topography. But as one approaches more closely, this supposed clarity is often revealed as illusory and the journey thus becomes more arduous and confounding.

The puzzling character of historical explanation and understanding is especially true in the history of ideas. In the first place, this

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area of study has at times been an object of skeptical comment regarding its legitimacy as a field of historical inquiry; admittedly, it exists on the boundaries that history shares with several other disciplines, and therefore questions are raised in the minds of those who maintain a more narrow definition of history. Secondly, because of its manifold character, intellectual history can prove a difficult subject to manage; one must deal first with the questions of how cultural and intellectual developments are related to one another and how they relate to the broader historical context - whether or not they have a significant causal relation to public events. One does not encounter series of easily comprehensible intellectual conflicts arranged in neat sequence; on the contrary, one is confronted by much causal entanglement, continuity and consensus (as opposed to conflict), and, in general, a good deal of plain mystery and muddle.

There are many periods in Western cultural and intellectual history the study of which reveals these very problems. Much has been written, for example, in analysis of such questions as the impact of Christianity on the classical world; the decline of the Roman empire; the cultural transition from medieval to modern; the intellectual origins of the English, American, and French Revolutions and the legacy of those revolutions; the impact of revolutionary theory on the Western mind; world war and the collisions of ideologies in the twentieth century. One such period, which forms the basis of this chapter's discussion, comprises the general cultural upheaval in Europe that gained momentum in the later 1800s and continued through the 1930s. At the approximate center of this era (if it warrants being so

organized), providing a focal point, is World War I, an event of enormous impact and significance in the attempt to understand the shape taken by culture during these years.

This half-century in Western history has received many appellations and characterizations, among them: modernism; the modern temper or modern movement; an age of anxiety; a crisis in Western civilization or culture. Since the developments in the fields of European and American theology under consideration in this thesis were unfolding in the midst of the period's general upheaval in ideas, we will initially discuss the parameters of this modern temper, both prior to, during, and following World War I.

* * * * *

Between the Paris Commune of 1871 and the revolution in Russia in 1905, Europeans enjoyed a stretch of relative political calm. During this time, the national state was becoming durably established, particularly in France, Germany, and Italy, where national unity was maturing. After a seemingly endless period of conflict within and between confederations, kingdoms, classes, and constitutions, national consolidation and unification was succeeding. This was a movement marked by increasing patriotism, the expansion of the franchise, and the development of mass politics. Great Britain, industrially vigorous, reform-oriented, and more isolated, had been blessed with stable evolution toward political democracy (the Irish question notwithstanding). The exception to this trend was the Austro-Hungarian Empire, debilitated

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by the tensions of agitated nationalistic sentiment. Even the years between 1905 and 1915 were not exceedingly unstable in the eyes of contemporaries. The tremors being felt in the Balkans, the general flexing of nationalistic muscle, and an accelerating arms race were largely accepted as part and parcel of the power politics of national and imperial rivalry.

This is an admittedly less dramatic assessment than one which characterizes the age as one of gathering crisis, chaos, and war alert - a reading of history conditioned by our knowledge of what erupted in August 1914. The challenge in any such reading of history is to judge between what we conclude to have been the actual temper of the times and what alternative explanations we feel warranted to suggest because of our detachment in time and, perhaps, place. However, our knowledge of what transpired after 1914 makes separate, confident conclusions about the character of the pre-war decade very difficult. Suffice it to say that, compared with the life and times of post-1914 Europe, the preceding years were ones of relative stability.

In the realm of social and economic life, the period from 1871 to 1914 was also one of expansion and consolidation. An integrated European economic-industrial-commercial system had emerged with bases in London, Paris, and Berlin, a collective center from which extended the arms of far-flung political and commercial empires. Very much a part, and at the heart, of this general burgeoning was a revolution that, simply put, ushered the West into the modern age. Within this relatively short period of time were made many inventions that would become familiar elements of modern transportation and communication.

One of the consequences of this explosion of industrial, technological, and commercial activity was rapid migration and urbanization between 1850 and 1900. Along with the machine, the city soon became one of the principal symbols of the modern age with its motion and ferment, its diversity of population and occupation, its noise and color. The city, however, was far from being a paradise of son et lumière (although there were many who enthusiastically perceived it in this manner). Industrial swelling created swelling urban masses burdened with poverty, a condition that encouraged the growth of socialist parties, labor organization, protest movements, and strikes. A new center of power was thus emerging and coming into conflict with established aristocratic interests and their nationalist allies in the middle classes.

Despite the upheavals in economic, technological, and social life, the flowering of this "machine age" (a coming into fuller development of an evolving technological spirit that had been unfolding for centuries), with its accompanying social convulsions and its exuberant, expansive temper, generated widespread feelings of optimism. The ideal of progress, which had been the philosophical lifeblood of the Enlightenment, remained the animating spirit of the modern age. Technology was romanticized; it was novel, and its possibilities appeared limitless and therefore breathtaking. As Robert Hughes, in his reflections on modern art, The Shock of the New (1981), has observed:

One could feel present at the end of one kind of history and the start of another, whose emblem was the Machine, many-armed and infinitely various, dancing like Shiva the creator in the midst of the longest

continuous peace that European civilization would ever know.¹

For Hughes, the Eiffel Tower is the exemplary symbol of the age, the great metaphor of this sense of change - its master-image, the one structure that seemed to gather all the meanings of modernity together."² The Tower was completed in time for the 1889 Paris World's Fair, a fête of machine-age capitalistic accomplishment. Marking the centennial of the French Revolution, the Fair was itself proclaiming another revolution, one in technology. Soon yet another revolution would become apparent, one in art and ideas. The Tower, in its unprecedented height and in the sheer audacity of the guiding notion that had brought it into being, represented a further extension of the spirit that had come to govern man's relationship with nature and with God. The historian and sociologist Jacques Ellul has referred to "technique" as the instinct of modern man to strive for ever greater rationality and efficiency in life, especially in science and technology.³ This instinct for technological rationalization is a modern (post-seventeenth century) manifestation of an inherent human instinct to create effective tools - implements to facilitate mechanical operations. This basic technological impulse was married over time

1 Robert Hughes, The Shock of the New (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 15.

2 Hughes, Shock, 9.

3 On Ellul and "technique," see: Jacques Ellul, The Technological Society, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), and Perspectives on Our Age: Jacques Ellul Speaks on His Life and Work, trans. Joachim Neugroschel; ed. William H. Vandenburg (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1981).

to humanism, a way of thinking given its golden formulation in the fifth century B.C. by Protagoras: "Man is the measure of all things." The humanistic philosophy regards the human person as the highest and ultimate source of value - a view with origins in classical thought but which was given systematic development in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. This marriage produced the prideful, experimental spirit that produced the Eiffel Tower and the other contrivances of which the Tower was a symbol. Rising above the earth, it was an apt symbol of our enduring attempt not simply to exalt humanity but, indeed, to surmount it and become godlike.

Contributing greatly to this Protagorean spirit has been man's sense of himself as subject and nature as object. This dualistic division between mind and matter, between man and the rest of creation, has ultimate origins in the Judeo-Christian dogma of creation. In contrast with Greco-Roman and animistic thought, Judeo-Christian biblical belief separates man from, and grants him dominion over, nature within a concept of history that is linear and nonrepetitive.⁴ In the work of Descartes, this dualism was given modern, formal, systematic philosophical expression. Drawing on and interpreting these theological and philosophical traditions, modern man has consequently conducted his relationship with nature in a spirit of anthropocentrism and exploitation; nature is believed to be at man's disposal in his desire for a greater technological rationality and efficiency. Toward the end of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth, this

⁴ See Gen. 1:26.

anthropocentric-technological spirit found new realization in a most dramatic and unsettling manner.

The outward mood of European life in this period was confident, aggressive, and excited. National and international political life was robust, and energetic industry and commerce in combination with the technological innovations of the age were transforming the social landscape. A sense of newness was in the air, a sense that one was witnessing, and assisting at, the birth of something very different, very significant, and very complex. Modernism, whether in technology, social patterns, art, or ideas meant not simply change or evolution, but revolution - a decisive qualitative break with preceding forms.

In looking beyond the superficial vigor of the age, one ponders the effect of these many changes and convulsions on the mind and spirit and also the effect that intellectual and spiritual concerns had on material developments. It has been suggested that the esprit that engenders and sustains the modern technological instinct (and its material offspring) is a fusion of the mechanical instinct and the anthropocentric disposition. What of the reverse effect? What of the impact of this considerable technological and socioeconomic change on ideas and spirit?

In considering this question, one surveys the art and ideas of the age. Artists and other thinkers rarely, if ever, create in a vacuum; they are normally very sensitive to the winds of change that blow through the many avenues of life, and they seek to give creative expression to these conditions and transformations. In their work, they reflect the qualities of mind that they discern in and absorb from the

world around them. Throughout history, art has played the role of capturing and expressing the state of mind, the spirit, the values that underlie and inspire the more external, visible conditions of a given age. In other words, art gives a degree of objectivity to soul.

What kind of mood or spirit, therefore, is revealed in the art and thought of the period being considered?⁵ First, it must be stated that the dominant tastes in art and ideas were still being shaped by nineteenth-century standards; the cultural and intellectual forms that would ultimately be known as "modern" did not gain sway in a cultural coup d'état. But beneath the artistic conventions of the day and the general robustness of the times existed artistic and intellectual restiveness. These restive artists, a minority within a minority, as Alan Bullock characterizes them, had a striking concentration of creative talent and formed the nucleus of an "avant-garde."⁶ This was a group whose work reflected the rapid forward movement in technology that was leaving established mechanical methods scattered behind in an often unreflective dash toward novelty and greater complexity. Art and ideas were radically experimental among these few: they rejected the orthodox in a quest to fashion a new artistic and intellectual language, one that

5 An introductory bibliography on modernism in art and culture would include: Hughes, Shock; Ian Dunlop, The Shock of the New (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1972); Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, eds., Modernism, 1890-1930 (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1976); H.H. Arnason, History of Modern Art (London: Thames & Hudson, 1973); George H. Hamilton, Painting and Sculpture in Europe, 1880-1940 (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1967); John Willett, The New Sobriety, 1917-1933: Art and Politics in the Weimar Period (London: Thames & Hudson, 1978).

6 Alan Bullock, "The Double Image," in Modernism, eds. Bradbury and McFarlane, 68.

would permit a new understanding of man, his society, and his cosmos. Trends observable among this minority in the pre-World War I period provide initial insight into the beginnings of the modern temper.

Early modernists began the process of moving away from positivism, nature, realism, and representationalism and toward experimental and nonrepresentational expression. They turned to the subjective and the imaginative, and this approach yielded an art which has defied easy categorization. No unified, comprehensive, denotable style emerged; this very feature, however, has become a defining characteristic of modernism. As Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane write:

The condition for the style of the work is a presumed absence of style for the age; and each work is a once-and-for-all creation, subsisting less for its referential than its autotelic constituents, the order and rhythm made for itself and submerged by itself.⁷

During this period, such movements as Post-Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, Dadaism, Futurism, and Surrealism either began or were being anticipated. They shared a boldness of personality that featured a spirit of technical innovation and, in more rebellious manifestations, the qualities of the prankster, the provocateur, and the narcissist. Avant-garde works of art, music, and literature were noted for their nonconformism, immodesty, anxiety, and their plunge into the unconscious

⁷ Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, "The Name and Nature of Modernism," in Modernism, eds. Bradbury and McFarlane, 29.

and the irrational.

The period we are calling Modern shows us not the mere rehabilitation of the irrational after a period of ordered Realism, or for that matter the reverse, a period of Classicism after a phase of Romanticism, but rather a compounding of all these potentials: the interpretation, the reconciliation, the coalescence, the fusion - of reason and unreason, intellect and emotion, subjective and objective.⁸

These stirrings of nonconforming, eccentric expression (which, if studied with a longer view, were continued manifestations of the rebellion against rationalism that had begun with the French Revolution and the advent of Romanticism) and their amplification during the pre- and post-War period allow us insight into a growing state of mind that would become synonymous with modernism and with the mood of crisis in Western culture after World War I. However exemplified in art and ideas before 1914, the character of the times was one of anxiety-producing acceleration away from convention in the everyday life of individuals and nations. By its eccentricity, its withdrawal into the irrational and the primitive, its ambivalent treatment of the novelties of the age, its attack on mass bourgeois culture, and its occasionally violent character, the work of the avant-garde contained a clear message: cultural order and direction were beginning to collapse. In other words, before the impact of World War I, a condition of instability had already become manifest

⁸ Bradbury and McFarlane, "Name and Nature," 46.

within European culture - a developing weakness in a previously more solid structure.

* * * * *

World War I dealt a hammer blow to mankind in general and to the European mind in particular. Not initially expected to endure for very long, the war turned out to be a lengthy conflict, a military stalemate involving enormous destruction and heavy loss of life. In a very real sense, Europe went into a general state of shock, the effects of which were evident in the political realm, nationally and internationally, but especially evident in the world of the mind and spirit.

The post-war period is normally described as a period of crisis or malaise in Western cultural and intellectual history; the issue confronting the intellectual historian is the extent to which the War itself inflicted this depression upon the European spirit. The concluding suggestion in the preceding section was that pre-war European culture had already begun to experience subcultural tremors as some artists and intellectuals began distancing themselves from bourgeois society and its norms as part of their reaction to the change occurring around them. Hence, when the impact of the War began to penetrate, its shock waves were striking already-shifting cultural strata. World War I was not itself responsible for creating the conditions that produced what has come to be known as modernism; rather, by pounding the foundations of European cultural and intellectual security it further unleashed the traits inherent in the modernistic impulse as well as

producing a variety of new anxieties and reflections.

In its appalling and protracted barbarity, the War evoked sentiments of disillusionment and rebellion. There prevailed the sense that a promise had been broken or at least unfulfilled, that hopes raised high had been dashed, that an unexpected and crushing deception had occurred. Many of the wonders of the "mechanical paradise" were looked upon as having experienced a metamorphosis, perhaps as having revealed some innate destructive or demonic potential. Their use as tools of destruction and death belied their outwardly progressive character. This was a traumatic experience; having for centuries quested after increasing control over the material world, having optimistically believed that the exercise of reason would yield a technological progress that would better the human situation and bring greater glory to himself, man began to sense that what had been created could not be controlled. The supposed exercise of reason had led to an outpouring of horrendous irrationality. Men had believed that the directions their world was taking were under control; in the aftermath of the War, this appeared to be false. Consequently, man's nature and destiny were in question. Did man really know himself? What further evil might be hidden within him? Had the dream of illimitable progress been nothing but fantasy? To what source to attribute the obvious immorality of the War? Indeed, was there any basis at all for morality?

Whether in focusing on the experience of war itself, the socio-economic system as a factor in creating conditions productive of war, or on the destructive fruits of modern technology, explanations have been determinedly sought for the conditions that created the

disillusionment and pessimism of the post-war years. The purpose here is not to investigate systematically the causes of this state of mind but to discuss its effects, especially in the area of theology. First, though, this cultural disposition ought to be sketched in somewhat greater detail in order that its character be adequately understood.

In many fields, the discoveries and directions that began to receive greater attention in the 1920s and that consequently became significantly influential were the products of work which had been in progress for decades. In science, for example, a veritable revolution was underway in the early twentieth century in which the premises of classical science - the absolute nature of space, time, matter, and motion - were being undermined by the work of such physicists as Albert Einstein (1879-1955). In Special Theory of Relativity (1905) and General Principles of Relativity (1915), Einstein moved physical theory radically away from the assumptions of the early modern theorists who had maintained a strict separation of subject and object and a deterministic view in which predictability and a known chain of cause and effect prevailed. In Stephen Mason's words:

the scientists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries retained the view that there was one particular privileged observation and control point in the universe, just as the Calvinists retained the conception that there was a single and absolute Ruler of the universe after they had

rejected the old system of cosmic government through the hierarchies of angelic beings.⁹

The supplanting of this ordered, stable cosmic view had begun with the work of Albert Michelson and Edward Morley in the 1880s; it was Einstein, however, in the early twentieth century, who brought to physics what we know as relativity theory - the proposition that all points of observation in the cosmos are equivalent or relative - that subject and object are not separate, reality being the interaction of the observer and the observed.

The other leg upon which modern physics was theoretically based was quantum theory, the work of such physicists as Wilhelm Rontgen, Max Planck, Werner Heisenberg, Niels Bohr, and Einstein. The essence of quantum theory is its discussion of matter in terms of energy rather than as an absolute quantity that only varies continuously. Together, relativity and quantum theory fundamentally altered man's understanding of the physical universe, conceiving of it as active, as in flux, as in a process of constantly becoming. One could no longer regard cosmic matter as essentially known, unchanging, and predictable. Certainty in knowledge of this kind could no longer be assumed. A world-view of a strikingly different character was consequently taking shape in the wake of this second scientific revolution.

It was the work of the German physicist Werner Heisenberg (1901-1976) that gave to modern physics the postulate that fittingly expressed the

⁹ Stephen F. Mason, A History of the Sciences, rev. ed. (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 541.

thrust of this new perspective. His Principle of Indeterminacy, or Uncertainty, (1927) stated the impossibility of determining the position and momentum of a subatomic particle with high accuracy; the laws of physics were transformed into relative rather than absolute statements as a consequence of this principle. Universal determinism had been disproved, at least in the subatomic field. Heisenberg's theories were accompanied by the work of Niels Bohr (1885-1962), who, in his Principle of Complementarity, stated that the electron could be both wave and particle, according to context; this would effectively place limits upon observation and experimentation, and, indeed, it challenged the existing laws of physics. Kurt Gödel (1906-1978) introduced into mathematics what was occurring in physics - the realization of limits upon human knowledge. Mathematics, the traditional science of exactitude, was seen by Gödel in 1931 as being founded on propositions that cannot be established within the field of mathematics itself; it was thus not a closed system.

Scientific developments were therefore one part of and perhaps a contributor to what was an expanding climate of uncertainty, indeed mystery, concerning man and his universe, their natures and direction. Aptly capturing the tone of this new appraisal of human knowledge is the title of Sir James Jeans' 1930 study, The Mysterious Universe. Did these revolutionary currents in scientific theory have any parallels in other fields of thought, and, if so, what do these currents reveal about post-war culture? One example of a parallel in philosophy is the existentialism of Martin Heidegger.

The ideas of Heidegger (1889-1976) provide an equivalent in

philosophy to the theories of Heisenberg, Bohr, Godel, and other men of science and mathematics. Heidegger was a representative of early existentialism, a movement in philosophy more commonly associated with the name of Jean-Paul Sartre; however, more than one writer has considered Heidegger to be more "profound and original" than Sartre.¹⁰ Existentialism constituted a major departure from the question that had been central to philosophy since Descartes, the problem of knowledge. Rather than inquire about the objects and means of knowledge, philosophers such as Heidegger chose to question the significance of existence itself and, in so doing, sought to describe the nature of man's existence in this order of reality.

Existentialism was part of the general rejection of Cartesian dualism that characterizes much of twentieth-century philosophy. Existence was seen as an encounter between the self and that which is other than the self - other selves, God, the universe, nothingness. In other words, in this perspective, pure, separate subjects and objects do not exist, a view shared by scientific relativity theory. The existentialist sees man in a perpetual process of becoming, constantly facing and freely defining himself in the encounter with possibilities. He has no permanent essence. The self, normally, is distracted and alienated when confronted by this variability of experience, this ongoing modification of self, by the mundane concerns of daily life. How to arrive at any authentic existence? Heidegger, in Being and Time (1927), suggests that when we experience the angst of comprehending our own temporality,

¹⁰ Bryan Magee, Men of Ideas (London: B.B.C., 1978), 76; John Macquarrie, Twentieth Century Religious Thought (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 352.

our finitude, we are brought to a greater awareness of our wholeness and destiny and moved to exercise our conscience, our resolve; in so doing, we gradually overcome the burdensome sense of alienation from self.

What prompted this penetrating interest in being? Why should philosophers have begun probing the significance of existence and discussing human anxiety and mortality? It is surely not coincidental that this turn of the philosophic mind occurred during the post-World War I years, in the aftermath of a collective traumatic experience in which there was widespread human brutality, suffering, death, and consequent widespread disillusionment about man and machine. As John Macquarrie comments:

Existentialism, as a radical interrogation of human existence, arises when violent upheavals and deep-rooted anxieties bring the question of man's own being forcibly to his notice. It is not surprising therefore that so far existentialism has flourished chiefly on the continent of Europe, and has exerted comparatively little influence in the stable and relatively unscathed societies of Britain and America.¹¹

What science and existential philosophy thus shared was an emphasis on finitude and uncertainty, whether in knowledge or in the assessment of human nature and destiny. Yet another dimension was being added to this pattern by the emerging field of psychoanalysis, whose founder was the Austrian psychiatrist Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). Psychoanalytic

¹¹ Macquarrie, Twentieth Century Religious Thought, 353.

research and practice began in the 1890s, and most of Freud's major original work appeared between 1895 and 1913, but these theories did not make a decisive and widespread impact until after 1918. The basis of psychoanalysis is the belief in a dynamic unconscious mental life composed of irrational elements that is in conflict with the rational portions of the mind. The unconscious, dominated by the sexual instinct and related aggressive, destructive instincts, was considered by Freud to be particularly powerful and often in control. This constituted a sharp turn away from a view of man as rational, predictable, and progressive. As Franklin Baumer observes:

Copernicus had destroyed the cosmological illusion that man stood at the center of the universe. Darwin destroyed the biological illusion that man was a being essentially different from, and superior to, animals. Finally, psychoanalysis delivered the blow that is probably the most resounding of all, namely that man was not even master in his own house, that the ego (reason) did not, as had been commonly assumed, direct the will and all the mind's working.¹²

To the emerging awareness of finitude and uncertainty, as supplied by science and philosophy, was thus added a new comprehension of human irrationality, sparked not only by psychoanalytic discussion but also by the experience of that irrationality during the War. A post-War cultural and intellectual pattern was appearing.

¹² Franklin Baumer, Modern European Thought: Continuity and Change in Ideas, 1600-1950 (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 425.

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Various movements and phenomena in art and cultural life served to mirror this emerging pattern. In the aftermath of the War, for example, artists began gathering in the cafés and cabarets of Zurich, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, and Barcelona. These colonies of the rootless and the cosmopolitan had already begun forming during the War, especially in Switzerland, where antiwar protesters from central Europe gathered. Perhaps the best-known such coterie was that of the Parisian "lost generation." The members of this colony of expatriate artists included Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, John Dos Passos, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, and the character of their milieu is probably best captured in Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises, prefaced as it is by passages from Ecclesiastes that speak of the impermanence of all things: "One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh..."¹³ For many, these were times of querulousness, pessimism, and seeking. The War had disrupted many relationships, personal, political, and cultural, and artists found themselves on a continent that was stunned and in search of its bearings.

In this atmosphere of diversity and discontent, the growth of modernism received major stimulus. A number of "isms" had been launched before or during the War. Cubism, for example, expressed in art what was beginning to shape modern scientific theory - relativity. Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque aimed at conveying knowledge of an object by presenting all possible views of it, by (in other words) dissolving

¹³ Eccles. 1:4; see also James R. Mellow, Charmed Circle (New York: Praeger, 1974).

the conventional relationship between subject and object. Many of these movements did not, however, achieve widespread success and recognition until the post-war era. An example is Expressionism, which had begun to take shape around 1910 and which grew into an anti-war art. It ultimately turned into an art of introspection and narcissism, a plunging inward in quest of the self - the only cognizable point in a world in disintegration. Much art was conceived in and expressed a similar spirit of protest. Continuing the trend that had begun in the later nineteenth century, art was often used as an instrument to criticize the conventional and the bourgeois. In the insecurity and anger of the post-war years, this existing spirit of protest and criticism became even more pronounced.

Berlin, the vanguard of modernism after the War, was set in an environment of considerable political instability. November 1918 was marked by a general socialist uprising in Germany, directed against the military-industrial complex and its guiding class. Political extremism, strikes, street fighting, martial law, and the execution of Communist leaders marred a period during which the Allied blockade was still in effect. For a time, while the Paris Peace Conference was underway, questions prevailed as to whether Germany might in fact become a Communist state. Although the blockade was lifted in March 1919, the harsh terms of the Treaty damaged hopes for economic recovery. Germany had lost the war and the peace. The economic dislocation of the Weimar period to 1925, the greater social freedom, a new internationalism, and the sentiments released by the War led to general outpourings of libertarianism in morals and a descent into licentiousness in the

German cabaret and in other forms of entertainment. As John Willett has observed:

Even at the calmest and apparently sanest moments of the mid-1920s the more sensitive among those people reflected an uneasy precariousness which was often electrifying: "I felt the ground shaking beneath my feet," wrote George Grosz in his autobiography many years later, "and the shaking was visible in my work." This febrile uncertainty is what distinguishes so many of the German reminiscences of the period, whether oral and private or literary and published, from their equivalents in other countries; not only the individual but the whole society around him can be felt to be desperately at hazard, often with fruitful effects for the arts.¹⁴

Similar climates of political instability, social unrest, and suffering existed throughout Europe. Floods of protest, factionalism, and rebellion were unleashed in the disturbed aftermath of World War I and in response to the Bolshevik Revolution.

Artistic expression reflected this general mood of upset by moving in a variety of directions. Whereas Expressionism turned inward in retreat to the shadowy and perplexing, yet somehow comfortable, world of the self (the same realm being explored by Freud and Heidegger), Dadaism moved outward into the pressing social problems of the day. Founded during the War and containing elements of social realism and political comment, Dada was also distinguished by much jest, irreverence, nonsense, and demystification, as exemplified by the art of Marcel Duchamp. The senselessness of Dada was an unmistakable comment on the perceived senselessness of the world at that time. Similar in

¹⁴ Willett, New Sobriety, 16.

thrust was the Futurism of Filippo Marinetti, who attacked convention with the confrontational temper of the child prankster. Surrealism, encountered in the work of André Breton, Max Ernst, Salvador Dali, and others, was perhaps the best illustration of the rebellious, nonconforming instinct joined to a serious interest in the new intellectual currents of the day. A child of Dada and influenced by Freudian psychology, Surrealism stressed, often with flamboyance, the subconscious, the random, and the symbolic - that which was essentially uncontrolled and unknown. In this manner, it mirrored the mood of epistemological uncertainty and awareness of the irrational that in part defined the modern age.

* * * * *

Let us step back and summarize the direction of the subjects discussed in this chapter. Emphasis on finitude or relativity in scientific theory was largely the product of pre-War research and discovery and the counterpart in science of a similar trend in Western ideas and art away from absolutism, formalism, and dualistic thinking - a trend that the new scientific theory itself likely stimulated. Given the increasing complexity of philosophical and psychoanalytic theories concerning the nature of man (and of his society, as represented by the burgeoning fields of social science), of the physical universe, and of the interaction of man with that universe through his technology, confusion was growing about how much man really understood himself and about how he could gain such knowledge. World War I had a concussive

impact on this period of intellectual transition and realignment, indeed of revolution. An already shifting cultural stratum was thus further dislocated by the many penetrating shocks resulting from the experience of total war.

Expressionism, Dadaism, Futurism, and Surrealism shared the essential characteristics of modernism: the movement away from the conventional, the representational, or the formal and toward the abstract and the irrational. It was a period in which new artistic languages were being fashioned: just as Duchamp, Marinetti, and Dali were representative of new languages in art, Arnold Schoenberg was creating a new musical language with the twelve-tone scale, while writers such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, and Thomas Mann were effecting revolutionary change in literary style and theme. These many artistic currents, in their restlessness, rebelliousness, and overall lack of unitive style, gave a degree of objective expression to the unsettled, insecure state of the European mind during the first decades of the twentieth century.

The post-1914 period, therefore, became an era of adjustment during which the European mind absorbed the effects of these many destabilizing experiences. The prevailing cultural and intellectual mood was consequently one of depression, disillusionment, and disorientation. The Parisian "lost generation" and the Existentialism of Heidegger serve as exemplars of this state of mind; the considered inquiry into being exemplified the troubled attitude toward the question of man's nature and destiny, a question that would preoccupy writers and, as shall be discussed, theologians for the remainder of the first half of the century.

CHAPTER TWO

SEPARATING CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE

The sense of crisis that gripped the Western mind during the era of World War I was reflected in many modes of thought and art. Theology is one area that has yet to be discussed, the field of inquiry to which we will now turn. Initially, one asks whether the new directions that theology did take after the War were in any way related to the cultural crisis of the times. Is theology generally affected by such conditions, or does it develop in a stream of its own? Perhaps a tentative definition of this branch of human inquiry is first in order.

Theology, being the field of study that seeks knowledge of God, His nature, and His relation to the universe in general and to man in particular, is considered part of the wide province of the mind and spirit. Most theologians would affirm that the pursuit of an understanding of God is conditioned by both the efforts of our minds (since one is seeking an intellectually comprehensible and communicable body of knowledge in which the infinite and the finite are related) and the efforts of our souls (since, in most cases, the theologian is also striving for clearer spiritual discernment of revelation). Since theological inquiry involves an intellectual dimension, one of the secondary factors that would determine the nature of a theology would likely be the constant historical experience that gives shape to the mind. When cultures are struck by major currents of change, the impact would, in other words, be discerned not only in the intellectual realms of philosophy, literature, or art, but also in theology.

The question to be addressed, then, is how theologians reacted in

the face of the concentrated atrocity and transformation that was altering European life. In essence, their reaction entailed a rejection of the assumptions that had supported nineteenth-century Protestant theology, assumptions of a liberal temper. Under the influence, mainly, of Karl Barth, a new, strong wave of more conservative, orthodox - what came to be known as "neo-orthodox" - Protestant theology moved through the European Protestant community. This is the striking development that will be investigated in its relation to the Western cultural crisis, and the first step in such an investigation will be to discuss briefly the character of nineteenth-century theology against which Barth and other neo-orthodox theologians reacted.

* * * * *

In 1934, Walter Horton wrote the following reflection on the theological temper of the Christian community in 1919:

Fifteen years ago, at the close of the World War, liberalism was still self-confident and aggressive. Strong in the faith that all truth and all value belonged to a single harmonious system, of which the religious insights of the Bible and the guiding conceptions of modern science and philosophy were mutually consistent parts, liberal theologians were convinced that the great task of Christian thought was that of restating the Christian Gospel in terms acceptable to the modern mind.¹

¹ Walter Horton, "Realistic Theology," in Walter Horton, Theology in Transition (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1931), 1.

In these two sentences, Horton succinctly expresses the prevailing theological frame of mind in 1919, which, in fact, was already beginning to come under attack from the new "realistic" theology of which Horton would later be an expositor. The very strength and acuteness of the neo-orthodox offensive was itself testimony to the formidable strength that its opposition, liberal Protestant theology, had enjoyed. When liberalism began to weaken after the World War, an era spanning more than a century (perhaps two centuries, depending upon one's interpretation) was drawing to a close. An adventurous, extensive, multifaceted impulse had become overextended and vulnerable through compromise, overconfidence, and a severe testing in its confrontation with the age of World War I.

Since the beginnings of modern science and thought, Christianity had been coming under increasing pressure from rival and growing intellectual currents. It was becoming clear that Christianity would no longer control the premises, boundaries, or directions of ideas as it had during the medieval age. Confronted with these challenges, Christian thinkers were faced with a basic question: resistance or accommodation? The dominant trend in Western thought since the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution had been one of anthropocentrism - the consideration of man as the central feature and final aim of universal existence; observable phenomena were increasingly being regarded and interpreted in terms of human experience and meaning.

It was during the Enlightenment that this modern humanism blossomed, finding expression in a variety of intellectual and cultural responses.

If the Enlightenment had a general end, it was the promotion of human happiness, and the means to this end was the intellectual, scientific, and political progress that could be achieved through the unleashing of human reason and inquiry. This inquiry took the form of a determined study of man and society, the empirical approaches of Newton and Locke providing the methodology. In this empirical approach to a humanistic goal, man was studied on his own, independent of God; the sciences of man were detached from theology. The God in Whom many of the Enlightenment's vanguard did believe was a being utterly separate from His creation, a deity who operated according to the laws that contemporary science, in particular the discoveries of Newton, had revealed and who rarely if ever violated those laws through supernatural action. In reality, this rational religion, or Deism, was secondary to the principal religion of the age - faith in man, or humanism. All that was unknown, it seemed, could ultimately be discovered by man without any reliance on a God who acted outside of empirically verifiable categories.²

Some intellectual historians have come to speak of a Counter-Enlightenment, a later eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reaction against the scientism, rationalism, criticism and analysis, mechanism, legalism, and classicism of the Enlightenment. Otherwise referred to as Romanticism, the Counter-Enlightenment featured a turn toward more

2 An introductory bibliography on the Enlightenment would include: Peter Gay, The Enlightenment, 2 vols. (New York: Norton, 1977); Norman Hampson, The Enlightenment (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1968); Gladys Bryson, Man and Society (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1945); Ernst Cassirer, The Philosophy of the Enlightenment (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951); Carl Becker, The Heavenly City of the 18th-Century Philosophers (Yale: Yale University Press, 1932); Paul Hazard, La pensée européenne au XVIII^{ème} siècle (Paris: Boivin et Cie, 1946).

conservative, organic political and social thought and a new-found interest in the irrational, the intuitive, the sentimental, the moral, and the supernatural in art and thought, generally. In particular, the atrocious failure of the French Revolution to realize its much-vaunted ideals and the subsequent period of political reaction contributed to this cultural and intellectual convulsion.³

To some extent, religious thought and practice shared in this anti-rationalism. H.G. Schenk refers to a "reaffirmation of the supernatural," a new interest in the "otherworldly side of the Christian religion."⁴ In the thought of such figures as Novalis, Schleiermacher, Hamann, Schelling, and Chateaubriand, a reassertion of the nonrational, emotional, personal, mystical, transcendental dimensions of religious experience is evident. The Holy Spirit and Nature became the focus of special interest, as thinkers began looking beyond the mechanics of the natural order to its mystery, beauty, changeability, and to what it might reveal spiritually. Evangelical religion, which had been practiced since the seventeenth century by German Pietists and since the eighteenth century by English Methodists, gained greater appeal and brought new life to many Protestant churches that had grown sluggish in spirit. The

³ An introductory bibliography on the Counter-Enlightenment (or Romanticism) would include: Isaiah Berlin, "The Counter-Enlightenment," in Dictionary of the History of Ideas (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), 2:100-112; H.G. Schenk, The Mind of the European Romantics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); Jacques Barzun, Romanticism and the Modern Ego (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1943); Irving Babbitt, Rousseau and Romanticism (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1919); Lilian Furst, Romanticism in Perspective (New York: Humanities Press, 1969).

⁴ Schenk, European Romantics, ch. 10; p. 88.

nineteenth century witnessed also a Roman Catholic revival of impressive proportions; in a period when new sources of authority and spiritual presence were sought, the authoritarianism of the Church and the character of the Mass (with its many functions through which the real divine presence is believed to be mediated) became objects of attraction. The Catholic Church enjoyed a century of vigorous devotional activity and institutional growth.

It would therefore appear that Christianity was resisting or rejecting the modern intellectual forces that had developed much aggressiveness during the eighteenth century. Belief in the sufficiency of reason, the inevitability of progress, the mechanistic structure of nature, and the spiritual by-product of this thought, rational religion, were opposed with the new interest in the nonrational. However, although moods and subjects of this nature appeared in the poetry of Novalis, the painting of Caspar David Friedrich, the philosophy of Schelling, or in movements within institutional Christianity, what of Protestant theology? Can one speak of theological trends as also having been determined by the character of the Counter-Enlightenment?

Further study reveals that nineteenth-century Protestant theology was not, to the same extent, a part of the Counter-Enlightenment. Indeed, it had more in common with the spirit of the Enlightenment than one might initially assume. As stated above, the dominant trend in post-medieval thought was anthropocentrism - making man the measure of all things. This has been the central organizing principle of modern cultural and intellectual history, and this absorbing interest of man in himself underlay nineteenth-century thought no less solidly than it

had the Enlightenment, despite appearances. Various intellectual (and spiritual) vogues emerged over time, conflicting and adjusting, but anthropocentrism remained a constant. Protestant theology in the nineteenth century, then, must be discussed and analyzed against the background of these fundamental secular and humanistic pressures.

Germany provided the leadership in nineteenth-century theology, and the pervasive, guiding influence on the religious thought of the century was the work of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). It was Kant's critique of rationalism that primarily determined the direction that German theology would take. In Critique of Pure Reason (1781), Kant addressed the questions that had arisen from David Hume's devastating analysis of the principle of causality. Hume had concluded that this principle or law had no a priori basis; hence, the edifice of rationalism was rendered unstable. Kant thus investigated the parameters of reason, seeking to determine its limitations. How much could the mind know of the world beyond it? His conclusions involve a rejection of both sensationalism (all knowledge is derived from external sensation) and rationalism (reason is the primary source of knowledge, and the mind can know some innate truths about reality independent of observation or experience). Kant posits that the mind receives sensation and orders it according to its own categories, but that it can have knowledge only of appearances or the observable or sensible, what he calls "phenomena." As for ultimate truth, "things in themselves" beyond the mind, what he calls "noumena," Kant affirms their reality but denies that they can be objects of knowledge. In essence, he was denying the possibility of metaphysical knowledge.

Although this attack on pure reason was negative in character, Kant's skepticism was intended to open a door to another order of understanding. In Critique of Practical Reason (1788), Kant discusses man's capacity to act morally, referring to this as "practical reason." He believed that there exist categorical convictions or imperatives of morality - axioms that serve to guide us in decision-making, in how we ought to live - and he stated that man can have knowledge of these postulates. He goes on to assert that there must exist a God to lend substance to this morality by providing for our freedom and immortality. Hence, as writers on Kant normally conclude, he viewed religion as an adjunct or complement to man's ethical life.⁵

The fields of reason and religion were therefore separated; in tandem with the effects of Hume's skepticism and empiricism, Kant's critique dealt a destructive blow to the rational theology of the Enlightenment. Religion was reset on its own legs, and its character was determined by concentrating on human experience, specifically on man's moral life. It is in the turning toward human experience and discovering a basis for religion there (rather than in revelation or reason) that one observes the continuity of an anthropocentric emphasis in Western thought and the influence it was exerting on ethical and religious thinking. A summary of the theology of Schleiermacher,

5. See: Henry D. Aiken, The Age of Ideology (New York: Mentor, 1956), 40; Bernard M.G. Reardon, Religious Thought in the Nineteenth Century (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 9; William Nicholls, Systematic and Philosophical Theology (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1969), 50; W.H. Walsh, "Kant, Immanuel," in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy (New York: Macmillan, 1967), IV:305-324; Frederick Copleston, A History of Philosophy (Garden City, New York: Doubleday: Image edition, 1964), VI(2), ch. 14.

Ritschl, and other nineteenth-century liberals will reveal how theology in particular accommodated itself to this emphasis.

By admirers and critics alike, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) is regarded as the dominant voice in post-1800 Protestant theology: Paul Tillich refers to him as "the father of modern Protestant theology," and Karl Barth states that "the first place in a history of the theology of the most recent times belongs and will always belong to Schleiermacher, and he has no rival."⁶ Without question, his work - in particular, Die Christliche Glaube (1821-22) or The Christian Faith, the first modern systematic theology - had an enduring, potent influence on theology from about 1830 until the 1910s. Schleiermacher's theology involves a blend of the human-centered intellectual stance given theoretical elaboration by Kant and some of the themes of Romantic or Counter-Enlightenment thought.

Schleiermacher's attitude was antidogmatic; his desire was to move behind the dogmas of the churches and encounter ordinary human religious reality. Barth comments derisively upon Schleiermacher's lack of accent on dogma, referring to "this fear of objective and expressible pronouncements."⁷ In what was more a philosophy of religion than a theology, Schleiermacher began with a survey of the religions of history, proposing that "the same thing is present in all, but present in a quite different way in each."⁸ He defines this common aspect of man's religious

⁶ Paul Tillich, Perspectives on 19th and 20th Century Protestant Theology, ed. Carl E. Braaten (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 91; Karl Barth, Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century (London: SCM, 1959), 425.

⁷ Barth, Protestant Theology, 455.

⁸ Friedrich Schleiermacher, The Christian Faith, ed. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928), 45.

experience (in other words, he defines religion) not in terms of institutions or doctrines but as "essentially a state of feeling," and, more specifically, as "the direct inward expression of the feeling of absolute dependence."⁹

This definition entailed a rejection of the belief, found in both Calvinism and Deism, that God and man were utterly separate. As Tillich asserts, Schleiermacher was positing a "principle of identity," a belief that the divine identity was present within the finite realm, that God was not objective. It is this experience of identity, of "sharing presently in the eternal, that Schleiermacher refers to as a feeling of unconditional dependence."¹⁰ Schleiermacher's early religious and educational experiences were with the Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine of Count von Zinzendorf, an early eighteenth-century pietist offshoot of the Moravian Brethren. This may help to explain his mystical inclinations, for, according to H.G. Schenk, "Schleiermacher, in his words, always remained a Herrnhuter of the highest order."¹¹

Having discussed the different arrangements or expressions of this shared, essential human desire to be united with the eternal, Schleiermacher concludes that Christianity has been "the most perfect of the most highly developed forms of religion."¹²

⁹ Schleiermacher, Christian Faith, 11, 25.

¹⁰ Tillich, Perspectives, 95ff.

¹¹ Schenk, European Romantics, 113.

¹² Schleiermacher, Christian Faith, 38.

In the realm of Nature also we distinguish perfect and imperfect animals as different stages of the development of animal life, and again on each of these stages different genera, which thus resemble each other as expressions of the same stage; but this does not mean that one genus of the lower stage may not be nearer to the higher, and thus more perfect than the others. Similarly, though several kinds of piety belong to the same stage as Christianity, it may yet be more perfect than any of them.¹³

Christianity is "more perfect," in his opinion, because of Jesus Christ. Christ has served (and continues to serve) as the mediator between, and reconciler of, the infinite and the finite. He offers man personal redemption and renewal, a new relationship with God, if man will but accept him in faith as Lord and redeemer - a unique claim and invitation among religions. As a feature of this new relationship, man is called to imitate Christ and follow his ethical teachings. Since by accepting and imitating Christ one participates in the mediating effort that he initiated, following Christ's ethical teachings, according to Schleiermacher, amounts to advancing the Kingdom of God in history or, in other words, to drawing the eternal into time.

Schleiermacher, to summarize, begins with assumptions that suggest an anthropocentrism. As Heinz Zahrnt expresses it, "man was the subject in his theology and God the predicate."¹⁴ However, Schleiermacher moves, in his discussion, to a Christian theology that can only be called Christocentric because of his emphasis on the role and character

¹³ Schleiermacher, Christian Faith, 33.

¹⁴ Heinz Zahrnt, The Question of God: Protestant Theology in the Twentieth Century, trans. R.A. Wilson (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1966), 38.

of Christ as the perfect mediator between the infinite and the finite. The essence and end of this mediation is synthetic - to bring human ethical action into harmony with the divine will and advance the concrete Kingdom of God - a community of Christian brotherhood - in this world. Schleiermacher's system, then, in the final analysis, aims at blending the will of God and the interests of man. The essence of this system is a blurring of distinctions - between God and creation, Christ and man, the Bible and secular literature, revelation and reason. Noteworthy, as an aspect of this dissolution of traditional categories, is a de-emphasis on the idea of sin and the accompanying experiences of contrition, repentance, and redemption. In this theology, Christ is less a mysterious, atoning mediator than he is an immanent, existential mediator. Significant, therefore, is stress on the New Testament and its Christology and a general reservedness toward the Hebrew Bible and its categories and traditions.

In Schleiermacher's theology, there are clear possibilities for relativism, pantheism, mysticism, and intuitionism - all facets of nineteenth-century thought. In particular, the inclination to advance ideas of synthesis is strongly suggestive of Hegelianism. Georg W.F. Hegel (1770-1831), like Kant, sought to discover the relationship between the mind and the world beyond it.¹⁵ His inquiry yielded an

¹⁵ An introductory bibliography on Hegel would include: Charles Taylor, Hegel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); G.R.G. Mure, An Introduction to Hegel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940); Walter Kaufman, Hegel: Reinterpretation, Texts, and Commentary (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965); W.T. Stace, The Philosophy of Hegel: A Systematic Exposition (London: Macmillan, 1924); Stanley Rosen, G.W.F. Hegel: An Introduction to the Science of Wisdom (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974).

all-embracing philosophical system, whose center was belief in an absolute world-soul that integrated and guided all reality. This spirit, according to Hegel, unfolded historically in dialectical fashion - the inevitable conflict of opposites in universal experience being resolved by necessary synthesis. This dialectical process moved from one synthesis to another in an evolutionary manner, each change representing progress toward greater universal spiritual integrity. The idea of evolution, evident in the eighteenth century in the thought of Buffon and Herder, and to be given celebrated form by Darwin on a physical scale, found unparalleled expression on a metaphysical scale in the work of Hegel.

Theologians such as Schleiermacher share the intellectual boldness of Hegel, the Romantics, and the humanism of modern civilization, interpreting reality according to ideas of evolution and synthesis. Schleiermacher's drawing together of the eternal and the finite, his view of the Kingdom as a presently unfolding reality, and his stress on the ethical imperatives of the Christian religion as a means of advancing that process of unfolding reveal this boldness and characterize what has become known as "liberal" theology.

The attempt to synthesize the metaphysical and the physical - what Tillich calls the "great" or "universal" synthesis, as represented in theology by Schleiermacher and in philosophy by Hegel - came under increasing pressure as the nineteenth century unfolded.¹⁶ Divisions

¹⁶ Tillich, Perspectives, 90-207, passim.

occurred among such Hegelians as David F. Strauss, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Friedrich Schelling. External criticisms of Hegel accumulated, whether from modern science (opposing Hegelian systematic rationalism with empiricism) or from a more orthodox theological position (such as that of Søren Kierkegaard). As the century's intellectual life developed, philosophers such as Karl Marx, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Friedrich Nietzsche further fragmented synthetic thought until Schleiermacher's theological contribution to the great synthesis was becoming lost as a consequence of this intellectual breakdown.

The effort to salvage the fruit of Schleiermacher's labors was dominated by the work of Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889), the recognized founder of the "school" of liberal Protestantism. Schleiermacher may have been the inspiration and intellectual progenitor of liberal theology, but it was under Ritschl that a body of like-minded theologians emerged. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, no one had a greater impact on Protestant theology in Europe than Albrecht Ritschl, whose major work was Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung (1870-74) or The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation. Bernard Reardon observes that Ritschl and his disciples replaced the Hegelians "in the leadership of progressive Christian thought."¹⁷

Ritschl sought to bring a new legitimacy to religion during a

¹⁷ B.M.G. Reardon, Liberal Protestantism (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968), 20.

period when positivism and science were in the ascendant and challenging Christianity. He wished to fashion a religion that would better address the day-to-day needs of modern man, that would be more practical or pragmatic in emphasis. This concern led him to a rejection of the Hegelian attempt to comprehend religion in an all-inclusive system that heavily stressed metaphysics and ontology. It even meant frowning on the systematic, mystical, and emotional dimensions of Schleiermacher's theology. His belief was that Christianity was essentially a matter of ethics, a matter of building a loving community according to the moral teachings of Jesus. This was the reduced, boiled-down version of the Christian faith - purged of supernatural and authoritarian elements - that Ritschl believed could be understood empirically and that would lead to a morally disciplined society.

Ritschl and his disciples, notably Adolf von Harnack and Wilhelm Herrmann, were therefore returning to Kant and building on his conclusions that metaphysical knowledge was unattainable and that the one area about which we can be certain is our moral life. But they were also returning to Schleiermacher and the conviction that the infinite and the finite could be drawn together, that God and man could be reconciled through man's executing the ethical directives of Jesus. Otherwise stated, the means to drawing closer to God were in man's hands. As shall be discussed, some would regard this notion as an unacceptable compromising of God's sovereignty and an unreflective exalting of the human station.

Ritschl was separating Christian theology from metaphysics and substituting Christ's ethical teachings as the foundation of that

theology. Likewise, mysticism was rejected, since it appeared to detach the individual from the social and ethical demands of the unfolding Kingdom, as was eschatology, since it diverts the mind to a preoccupation with something future and uncertain. Ritschlian liberalism was therefore a theology of "mediation" in two senses: it continued the mediative concern of Schleiermacher - stressing Christ as the agent who brings the eternal into time; and it was itself a mediator, between the Christian tradition and the tenets of modern thought and society. Ritschl and those who followed him, despite their distaste for the elaborate metaphysics of Hegel, were clearly influenced by the Hegelian dialectic, by the ideas of evolution and synthesis also prominent in the work of Schleiermacher (and, of course, central to Darwinian theory); they were synthesizing traditional Christian tenets and what they perceived as the leading interests of the modern mind. As a result of this compromise, orthodox Christian beliefs were significantly diluted. Ritschl extended the essential direction of Schleiermacher's theology, but excised a considerable amount of the systematic, metaphysical, and mystical dimensions thereof. He reduced the focus to an even greater concentration on man's ethical life because of his pragmatic concern to render it more "relevant" to modern society.

Since, in the Ritschlian view, Christian theology was not based on an all-embracing absolute spirit, man's collective religious consciousness, or on mystical experience, but rather on the moral teachings of Jesus, investigating the historicity of Jesus became an all-important undertaking; the particular historical circumstances of his life became of great interest and significance. Ritschlian inquiry thus stimulated

an activity that had been in progress since the 1830s: modern critical study of the Bible, in particular of the New Testament.

A sense of the historical was central to the nineteenth-century mind. The Enlightenment had bequeathed a positivist legacy to the nineteenth century - a scientific approach to the study of man. Because of the premise that the nature and life of man were primarily determined by time and place, most fields of human activity became subject to scientific inquiry, including, of course, man's past. Therefore, ancient documents, such as the Bible, came under the scrutiny of historians. Religion was becoming but one of the many objects of man's sharpening critical curiosity. What became known as the "higher criticism" of the Bible - its study according to the new scholarly methods of historical and literary analysis - had begun during the eighteenth century, but gained importance and impetus during the 1830s at Tübingen with the work of Ferdinand C. Bauer (1792-1860), who had been significantly influenced by Hegel. It was Hegel who sharpened this developing sense of the historical with his general view that the cosmic Geist was unfolding progressively in a dialectical manner in history. Added to this were his observations in Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte (1837) or Lectures on the Philosophy of History that human history was progressive, each era representing a stage in the development of man's free mind. In several early, unpublished writings, Hegel even wrote on the life of Jesus and the character of early Christianity, concluding (in explicitly Kantian terms) that Jesus was solely a moral teacher and that the parameters and message of Christianity had been altered, indeed adulterated, by the interpretative work of the

early church.

From these sources emerged a determined attempt to "reconstruct the life of Jesus in human terms," as Josef Altholz describes it.¹⁸ A number of lives of Jesus were published, most notably David F. Strauss' Leben Jesu (1835), the books of Essays and Reviews (1860) by seven graduates of Oxford University, and Ernest Renan's Vie de Jésus (1863), which, along with other attempts, sidestepped or rationalized the supernatural aspects of the story and emphasized the human and ethical elements of Christ and his teaching. Adolf von Harnack, in his monumental Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte (1886-90) or History of Dogma, argued that early Christian ideas had been perverted under Hellenistic influence and that this is what made Christianity difficult for modern minds to accept. As Reardon summarizes Harnack's position:

the essence of Christianity is the gospel, as found in the historic life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Here we have a kernel of precious spiritual truth from which the husk of dogma and ecclesiastical polity must be removed. The written gospels themselves contain a good deal of extraneous matter in the way of "Jewish limitations" and this too must be set aside.¹⁹

The leading account of this extended scholarly expedition is, of course, Albert Schweitzer's The Quest for the Historical Jesus (1906).

In summary, liberal Protestant theology received its initial stimulus from the Kantian argument that metaphysical knowledge is

¹⁸ Josef Altholz, The Churches in the Nineteenth Century (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 134.

¹⁹ Reardon, Religious Thought, 150.

nonexistent. Schleiermacher, influenced by this assertion, proceeded to postulate a new basis for religious knowledge by looking to man's common religious experience; he sought to demonstrate how Christianity was most convincing in comparison with other forms of human religious expression because of the role of Jesus Christ in making possible a synthesis of the eternal and the finite through man's ethical action. Schleiermacher's followers, the school of Ritschl, under pressure from modern positivist thought and from the disintegrative effects of reaction to Hegel, wished to preserve this argument for Christianity's superiority and, in a spirit of "mediation," lend it justification in the face of the modernist challenge. This they attempted by turning to the techniques of critical history and by striving, through historical research into the life and times of Christ, to bring a foundation of historical validity to his ethical teachings. Ritschlians believed that these moral directives were not only the essence of Christian belief but the dimension that was most easily understood and accepted by the individual and most relevant to society. It is these assumptions that helped to give stimulus to a variety of social Christian movements, among them the American Social Gospel, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

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The theological liberalism just discussed held sway in European circles through the remainder of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, although weaknesses were developing in its structure by

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the early 1900s, as shall be discussed below. For simplicity of argument, the age of liberal Protestant theology can be defined as approximately from 1820 to 1919, from the decade of Schleiermacher's Die christliche Glaube to the publication of the first edition of Karl Barth's Der Römerbrief, although one could easily extend the initial date back to the eighteenth century, given the influences of the Enlightenment and of Kant on nineteenth-century religious thought.

A radical change of direction occurred after 1919 under the impact of the work of Barth and of like-minded theologians who gathered around him. Although stirrings of discontent with liberalism had always been present and had become more noticeable during the preceding two or three decades, Barth's theological salvo snook the Protestant community and permanently transformed it. As Walter Horton comments, "Barth was the stormy petrel of this whole movement; his shrill, raucous storm warnings first caught our ear, and we therefore tend to associate all that followed with his name."²⁰ Since Barth's development serves as a microcosm of the changes that were overtaking European culture and theology, his earlier years ought to be initially sketched.

Karl Barth (1886-1968) began his theological studies in Berne in

²⁰ Walter Horton, Contemporary Continental Theology (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938), xx. In addition to Horton, an introductory bibliography on the movement that became known as "neo-orthodox," or "dialectical theology," or "crisis theology," would include: Nicholls, Systematic and Philosophical Theology; Zahrnt, The Question of God; Macquarrie, Twentieth Century Religious Thought; Edwin Lewis, A Christian Manifesto (New York: Abingdon Press, 1934); Walter Lowrie, Our Concern with the Theology of Crisis (Boston: Meador, 1932).

1904, moving to Berlin in 1906, where he remained until 1907.²¹ During the Berne period, he was introduced to the work of Kant; he later remembered the Critique of Practical Reason as "the first book which really moved me as a student."²² While in Berlin, he came to admire the work of Schleiermacher, and, as Eberhard Busch states, "from the time of the Berlin semester onwards, Schleiermacher was for years the leading light in his thought."²³ But the main feature of the Berlin period was his opportunity to study under Adolf von Harnack. In Barth's words, as assembled by Busch:

None of the many Swiss who were with me there was more enthusiastic about the personality and teaching of this man. My admiration reached such a pitch that because of the work which I had to do for his seminar and with which I was occupied virtually night and day for months, I almost completely neglected to take proper notice of the Kaiser Friedrich Museum and the other Berlin sights or to make necessary use of the manifold stimuli offered by the great foreign capital for my general education. I said to myself, "This is the great moment: here you are with the theologian of the day, why should you be bothered with museums, theatres and concert halls?"²⁴

21 An introductory bibliography on Barth would include: Eberhard busch, Karl Barth, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1975); Herbert Hartwell, The Theology of Karl Barth: An Introduction (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964); Hans Urs von Balthasar, The Theology of Karl Barth, trans. John Drury (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971); Thomas F. Torrance, Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology, 1910-1931 (London: SCM, 1962); George Casalis, Portrait of Karl Barth, trans. Robert McAfee Brown (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Anchor Books edition, 1964).

22 Karl Barth, Autobiographical Sketch, 1927, cited in Busch, Karl Barth, 34.

23 Busch, Karl Barth, 40.

24 Karl Barth to Agnes von Zann, 23 Dec. 1935; Autobiographical Sketch, 1927; interview with H. Fischer-Barnicol, 1964, cited in Busch, Karl Barth, 39.

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In 1907, Barth's studies brought him briefly back to Berne, then to Tübingen until April 1908, when he moved to Marburg and entered a phase of vigorous study and activity in a profoundly liberal milieu. While in Berlin, he had become acquainted with the work of Wilhelm Herrmann (1846-1922) and later spoke of his first encounter with Herrmann's Ethics as a major point of departure in his intellectual development.²⁵ In Marburg he became an actual pupil of Herrmann; later, Barth would write: "Herrmann was the theological teacher of my student years," and that because of him the Marburg semesters were "far and away the happiest student memory."²⁶ Herrmann and Harnack, Ritschl's principal followers, were the transmitters of Kant, Schleiermacher, and Ritschl to Barth and other budding theologians of the early twentieth century. Although Herrmann and contemporaries such as Martin Kahler diverged somewhat from Ritschl, they adhered to the general assumptions of the nineteenth century: metaphysics and mysticism were divorced from theology; theology was Christocentric and based on the historical fact of Jesus; and Jesus' moral teachings were the proper substance of the religious life.

Although he later claimed that he and his generation despised both "old liberalism" and "orthodoxy," he considered himself a "committed supporter of modern theology."²⁷ Simply put, the young Barth was at

25 Karl Barth, Theology and Church, 236, cited in Busch, Karl Barth, 40-41.

26 Barth, Theology and Church, 236, cited in Busch, Karl Barth, 44; Autobiographical Sketch, 1927, cited in Busch, Karl Barth, 44.

27 Barth, interview with H. Fischer-Barnicol, 1964, cited in Busch, Karl Barth, 45; Autobiographical Sketch, 1927, cited in Busch, Karl Barth, 50.

that adventurous stage where one drinks many and varied intellectual draughts, open to all in a spirit of curiosity, relativism, and confidence. From among these, needless to say, he was receiving a potent quantity of liberal thought. That he was comfortable with liberalism is indicated by his joining Christliche welt (Christian World), a leading journal of the "modern" school of theology, published at Marburg and considered the most influential journal of liberal Protestantism. Barth worked as an assistant editor, and William Nicholls maintains that Barth's "earliest writings were entirely in the liberal tradition in which he had been trained."²⁸

In November 1908, Barth was ordained a minister of the Swiss Reformed Church. He began his pastoral ministry in 1909 as an assistant pastor in Geneva; then, in the summer of 1911, he became pastor of the Reformed Church in Safenwil, a village in the Aargau region in Switzerland. The majority of his parishioners were nonunionized laborers doing mill work and receiving low wages. Barth was confronted with conditions with which he had had little prior experience. He describes his response:

Class warfare, which was going on in my parish, before my eyes, introduced me almost for the first time to the real problems of real life. The result of this was that my main study was not directed towards factory legislation, insurance, trade union affairs and so on, and my energies were taken up in disputes sparked off by my support for the workers, not only in the neighborhood but in the canton.²⁹

28 Nicholls, Systematic and Philosophical Theology, 77-78.

29 Barth, Autobiographical Sketch, 1927, cited in Busch, Karl Barth, 69.

Barth found himself in an environment that challenged and developed his pastoral skills and, although he appeared to be largely absorbed in questions of economics and politics, continued the shaping of his theological perspective. Indeed, the experience of Safenwil life during the following years constantly tested his theological assumptions and gradually led him away from liberalism in search of new bases of belief.

Many years later, Barth wrote:

Any young Swiss pastor of the time who wasn't asleep, or didn't live somewhere on the other side of the moon, or hadn't been corrupted in some way, was a Religious Socialist in the narrower or the wider sense. We were vehemently anti-bourgeois (we were better at knowing what we were against than what we were for).³⁰

The Religious Socialist movement and its journal, Neue Wege (new ways), emerged in 1906 in Switzerland through the leadership of Leonhard Ragaz (1868-1945) and Herrmann Kutter (1863-1931). Through his close friend Eduard Thurneysen, who also went on to become a noted theologian, Barth became acquainted with Kutter and intrigued with the effort among Swiss theologians at advancing God's Kingdom by supporting and contributing to the Social Democratic workers movement. Barth became gradually more involved on behalf of workers' interests, helping to form a Workers' Association and, eventually, three trade unions. He also defended them in industrial conflicts and lectured to

³⁰ Karl Barth, "Rückblick," in Das Wort sie sollen lassen stahn, Festschrift für Albert Schadelin, 1950, cited in Busch, Karl Barth, 77.

them on socialism and Christianity and on workers issues. His interest in socialism was thus more practical than theoretical. As he recalled: "The aspect of socialism which interested me most in Safenwil was the problem of the trade union movement.... I was only marginally interested in socialist principles and ideology."³¹ In January 1915, he joined the Social Democratic Party and thereafter was sometimes known as "comrade pastor" and "the red pastor of Safenwil."³² Barth's role in these affairs created considerable tension within the Safenwil community and within his church; he lost several of his congregants as a result of his outspokenness and activism.

Barth's embrace of socialism itself proved to be a significant factor in moving him away from the liberalism of his early training and thought. The Religious Socialists, as noted above, were "vehemently anti-bourgeois" and had made clear their opposition to liberalism and positivism in theology (and in politics), since an unhealthy alliance had formed between organized Christianity and the middle classes at the expense of the poor. As he became more exposed to, and active in, socialist endeavors, he was forced to confront some of the theological premises he had accepted from his Ritschlian teachers.

Disenchantment with liberalism also arose from his experience with the pastoral responsibility of preaching. In the Reformed Church, preaching was regarded as a mechanism of great importance in fulfilling the church's objectives of glorifying God and attracting and nurturing

³¹ Karl Barth, Letzte Zeugnisse, 1969, 44f, cited in Busch, Karl Barth, 103-04.

³² Busch, Karl Barth, 82-83.

disciples. As Nicholls explains:

It sees the sermon as the central act of public worship, having the same sort of solemnity and importance as Catholics attach to the sacrifice of the Mass. If the worshipper today still goes to church primarily to hear the sermon, that is not because he hopes to be passively entertained, but because he expects God to address him and his fellow worshippers through the words of the preacher.³³

There are, needless to say, formidable expectations for the preacher to bear and attempt to realize. This burden lay heavily upon Karl Barth, driving him to intense reflection that would ultimately produce a major adjustment to his theology. Could the liberal theology in which he had been trained provide him with the requisite tools for such preaching? His accumulating experience was that it could not. Liberal theology was academic and analytic in nature, concerned very much with intellectual and social issues, and had made compromises with the temper of the times; such a theology could not adequately come to terms with the deeply felt, personal spiritual needs of most people as they sat before the pulpit. As Heinz Zahrnt asks:

How is it possible to preach with a newspaper open on one side of the desk and the New Testament on the other - where is the organic connection between the two worlds, and how can they be drawn together?³⁴

The roles of pastor and theologian, Barth discovered, were inseparable;

³³ Nicholls, Systematic and Philosophical Theology, 79.

³⁴ Zahrnt, The question of God, 17.

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effective pastoring required a proper, relevant theological foundation, one that took individual spiritual needs into account. How and where would he find such a foundation?

There was, however, an even more fundamental question at issue: Can the preacher even speak of God at all? Can human beings, in their limited capacity for knowledge and understanding, make any positive pronouncements about God? This, of course, had been Kant's question, to which he answered no, the starting point from which nineteenth-century theologians had embarked in search of resolution. Barth was discovering the truth of this Kantian conclusion as he grappled with the demands of pastoral ministry, but he embarked in a different direction in search of a solution. On this point, Eberhard Busch remarks:

And the discovery that he now made was this, that to recognize the basic difficulty in speaking of God is in itself relevant knowledge of God. He felt that this discovery was a profound change from his previous theologizing.³⁵

Barth, in other words, had to re-approach the central problem of theology: what is the nature of the mind or "Word" of God, has it been revealed, and, if so, how? For answers, he set aside liberal academic theory and turned to the Bible, engaging in concentrated study with a view to discovering an essential message regarding the relationship of God and man.

Amid this search came an event that proved decisive in severing

³⁵ Busch, Karl Barth, 91.

Barth from nineteenth-century theology. On August 1, 1914, ninety-three German intellectuals issued a manifesto identifying themselves with the German war policy of Kaiser Wilhelm II. As Barth later described this "Manifesto of the Intellectuals":

Among these intellectuals I discovered to my horror almost all of my theological teachers whom I had greatly venerated. In despair over what this indicated about the signs of the times, I suddenly realized that I could not any longer follow either their ethics and dogmatics or their understanding of the Bible and history. For me, at least, nineteenth-century theology no longer held any future.³⁶

In Barth's opinion, to be able to support such a war policy, there must be something unsound about their ethics, and if their ethics were flawed, then their theology (on which he believed ethics to be based) was misguided. Writing in 1915, he commented: "It was like the twilight of the gods when I saw the reaction of Harnack, Herrmann, Naue, Lucken and company to the new situation."³⁷ In his Autobiographical Sketch, 1927, he reflected: "To me they seemed to have been hopelessly compromised by what I regarded as their failure in the face of the ideology of war."³⁸ It was the suggestion of a disturbing alliance between theology and cultural currents that further impelled Barth to find a new foundation for theology. This search eventually led him to Scripture and to a new study of the apostle Paul's letter to the Christian Church at Rome.

³⁶ Karl Barth, The Humanity of God (London: Collins, 1961), 14.

³⁷ Karl Barth to W. Spoendlin, 4 Jan. 1915, cited in Busch, Karl Barth, 61.

³⁸ Barth, Autobiographical Sketch, 1927, cited in Busch, Karl Barth, 61.

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Karl Barth's The Epistle to the Romans, the extraordinary and influential work that represented his answers to the amassed perplexities of his years in Safenwil, was not, by any means, the first criticism of nineteenth-century theology to appear, although it certainly proved to carry the greatest impact. Voices of dissent had been heard toward the end of the nineteenth century as problems arose about the Ritschlian portrait of the Jesus of history. Some thinkers began reinvestigating the relationship of Christ, his teachings, and the beginnings of Christianity to the contemporary religious and intellectual life of the first-century Near East. In the first place, they asked, is the real Jesus of history accessible at all, or is he in fact obscured by the mythological language of the time, in other words, by what early communities thought of him?

Writers such as Otto Pfleiderer (1839-1908) and Ernest Troeltsch (1865-1925) concluded that the historical Jesus was indeed inaccessible. Others took a somewhat less skeptical view and attempted a revised character sketch of Jesus by studying him in relation to his own cultural milieu, thereby rejecting the nineteenth-century attempt to "modernize" him. In Schweitzer's words:

The study of the Life of Jesus has had a curious history. It set out in quest of the historical Jesus, believing that when it had found Him it could bring Him straight into our time as a Teacher and Saviour.... But he does not stay; He passes by.

our time and returns to His own.... by the same inevitable necessity by which the liberated pendulum returns to its original position.³⁹

Johannes Weiss (1863-1914) and Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) adopted the position that became known as "consistent eschatology" - that Jesus saw himself and was seen as part of the Jewish apocalyptic mind-set that anticipated a Messiah who would usher in a supernatural, eschatological Kingdom. As Zahrnt comments, referring to Schweitzer's quest:

As its 'negative result,' this work uncovered the hidden self-deception of the liberal quest of the historical Jesus, and demonstrated the historical untenability of the portrait of the historical Jesus which it produced. The portrait of the historical Jesus which Schweitzer produced in his turn was completely different. According to him, Jesus was a man with strange, dark anxieties and ideas, an apocalyptic teacher remote from the world, who expected the imminent onset of the Kingdom of God, but whose expectations and hopes came to nothing.⁴⁰

As a result, the gradual breakup of the liberal assumption that one could accurately know the historical Jesus pointed the way back to faith as a basis for belief. Kant's denial of the possibility of metaphysical knowledge also pointed to the necessity of faith, but liberals rejected this option and sought an empirical basis for belief. More generally, it led thinkers to begin turning in new directions (as Barth had, back to Scripture) as a means of cultivating a more reliable

³⁹ Albert Schweitzer, The Quest of the Historical Jesus (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 399.

⁴⁰ Zahrnt, The Question of God, 51.

understanding of Jesus Christ. Hence, Barth's new direction in theology was not unprecedented, but it did give the activating charge to an engine of change that had been warming and gaining potential energy for some time.

Discontent with nineteenth-century theology, however, had not been restricted to such later theologians as Pfleiderer, Weiss, or Schweitzer. One nineteenth-century thinker who, early on, revealed the inner weaknesses of theological liberalism and who came to have a decisive influence on Karl Barth and the other twentieth-century theologians who would become known as "neo-orthodox" was Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855).⁴¹ Kierkegaard attracted little interest in his own lifetime beyond his native Denmark; he was, in effect, "discovered" by German thinkers when his works appeared in German translation during the decade preceding World War I. Kierkegaard was a solitary and prophetic figure. The very impressive work of his short life was marked by deep intellectual and spiritual sensitivity, melancholy, and sarcasm. He wrote in a tone of urgency, lamenting the state of his Church, of Christianity in general, and of modern culture.

The target, broadly speaking, against which Kierkegaard directed his passionate and penetrating broadsides was the liberal, Hegelian

41 An introductory bibliography on Kierkegaard would include: John D. Mullen, Kierkegaard's Philosophy: Self-Deception and Cowardice in the Present Age (New York: Mentor, 1961); Edward J. Carnell, The Burden of Søren Kierkegaard (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1965); Johannes Hohlenberg, Søren Kierkegaard, trans. T.H. Croxall (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954); William Hubben, Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Kafka: Four Prophets of Our Destiny (New York: Macmillan, Collier Books edition, 1962); Ernest Becker, The Denial of Death (New York: Free Press, 1973).

spirit of compromise or synthesis that Kierkegaard believed was informing most aspects of political, ecclesiastical, intellectual, and spiritual life. This was the "bourgeois" world that he rejected as a young man, a world in which mass liberal politics offered "progress" as an attainable goal - a secularized version of salvation - through the charting of a compromise-filled course. He also observed the established Lutheran Church growing more worldly, comfortable, and allied in mind with the state. In Christian theology, he viewed the attempt to harmonize the eternal and the temporal as an effort that was relieving the individual of moral responsibility and shifting Christianity's institutional energies too far toward issues of social reform. As John Mullen explains:

Hegelianism when applied in social and individual life has the effect, Kierkegaard will argue, of a mass lobotomy. And the life of the lobotomized individual, the life which Hegelianism generates and legitimizes, is precisely bourgeois life. It is a life cluttered with compromises, where each time what is gained is a little bit of peace and what is lost is a little bit of integrity. Søren Kierkegaard was a person to whom compromise did not come easily.⁴²

The question to which Kierkegaard's concerns can be reduced is that of existence, the same question addressed by the post-World War I and post-World War II thinkers who were living in climates of cultural upheaval. The tensions of existence, according to Kierkegaard, could never be reconciled or synthesized in a Hegelian manner. Because man

42 Mullen, Kierkegaard's Philosophy, 33.

exists between time and eternity, that existence necessarily entails conflict, mystery, anxiety, despair, and pathos - a constant process of struggling with the demands of a finite composition and a divine calling.

For Kierkegaard, an "infinite qualitative distinction," a chasm, lies between the finite and the infinite that cannot be bridged by any means. There can be no peace, no resolution of existential anxiety through the idealistic circuitry of the Hegelian metaphysical dialectic, for example. Indeed, to Kierkegaard, such attempts at resolution were cowardly; despair must be accepted as a part of human personhood. However, he suggested that the situation was not quite as hopeless and grim as it sounded: this very despair might itself open the way to a leap of faith, a total personal surrender to God. In Malcolm Muggeridge's words, Kierkegaard "was insistent that the only way out of these gathering clouds of fantasy was to climb doggedly upwards to the rocky peak above them, where God dwells."⁴³ Faith was the only means of bridging the existential gap and realizing one's true self. Kierkegaard does not focus on Jesus' ethical teachings as the major facet of his ministry but on the Cross - the suffering and sacrifice in atonement that continues to bring man the possibility of salvation. The Cross becomes the enduring symbol and model for human existence: as he (in whom the infinite and the finite were joined through Incarnation) made his suffering the way of salvation, so must we (in our divided nature) endure our existential suffering in the patience born of faith. As

⁴³ Malcolm Muggeridge, A Third Testament (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976), 119.

William Hubben reflects, Jesus' Gethsemane experience ("rather, if it is Your will, remove this cup from Me; nevertheless not My will but Yours be done") is the "supreme example" of that "state of anxious suspense" which is our existence.⁴⁴

Kierkegaard's emphasis, then, in such marked contrast to Schleiermacher and other nineteenth-century religious thinkers, was on the darker, painful, existential life of the individual and on the transcendent, mysterious nature of God. He asserted that we must choose, in either/or terms, between Christ and the world. These essentially Kierkegaardian themes - which, it must not be left unstated, are also vivid in the work of Dostoevsky - had a profound influence on the twentieth century, in particular on those who became known as existentialists. As stated, however, our interest is in noting Kierkegaard's ideas as a factor in determining neo-orthodox theology, especially that of Karl Barth.

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The first edition of Barth's Der Romerbrief (1919) or The Epistle to the Romans was short-lived; after less than three years of further intensive study, he produced an expanded and much-revised second edition in 1922. This was the edition that would capture the theological world's attention and guarantee Barth's renown. In 1925,

⁴⁴ Hubben, Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Kafka, 43; Luke 22:42.

in Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie, or The Word of God and the Word of Man, Barth further brought out and made explicit the themes introduced in Romans. As Heinz Zahrnt succinctly remarks, "The effect of his epistle to the Romans was that of a violent explosion."⁴⁵ Paul Tillich, in The Religious Situation, called it "a book of truly prophetic power and penetration," and went on to write: "There can be no doubt that this theology is of the highest importance for the religious situation of the present."⁴⁶ Walter Horton, writing in the 1930s, compared Barth's manner to that of Amos at Bethel or Elijah at Mount Carmel.⁴⁷ In the pugnancy of its reflection and message and the vigor of its delivery, Romans was indeed a work that, in the words of Karl Adam, "fell like a bomb on the playground of the theologians."⁴⁸

It was when faced with the growing concern about how to preach - how to speak about God - and when stunned by the decision made by academic theologians in 1914 to support the German war policy that Barth began a reassessment of his theological principles. The "turning point" - if such a moment can be spoken of - came in 1918. In Barth's recollections:

It was Thurneysen who whispered the key phrase to me, half-aloud, while we were alone together: "what we need for preaching, instruction and pastoral care is 'a wholly other' theological foundation".... but where to begin?... we tried to learn our

45 Zahrnt, The Question of God, 23.
 46 Paul Tillich, The Religious Situation, trans. H.H. Niebuhr (Cleveland: Living Age, 1932), 217-18.
 47 Horton, Contemporary Continental Theology, 107.
 48 Karl Adam, quoted in Nicholls, Systematic and Philosophical Theology, 75.

theological Act all over again, beginning by reading and interpreting the writing of the Old and New Testaments, more thoughtfully than before.⁴⁷

Barth focused on Paul's epistle to the Roman Church because of its comprehensiveness and its importance as a compendium of the Gospel as interpreted by this apostle. He applied himself to Romans "with all the resources that were available to me at the time.... I began to read it as though I had never read it before."⁴⁸ What Barth, in essence, discovered was the substance that would lend weight to Eduard Thurneysen's words. In Romans, he encountered a God who was indeed wholly other.

Barth's conception of the nature of God and God's relationship to human individuals and to society took on a distinctly Kierkegaardian character. Barth later recalled:

He only entered my thought seriously, and more extensively, in 1919, at the critical turning point between the first and second editions of my Romans; after that he could be seen in a more important role in my other literary works.... He was one of the cocks whose voice seemed to proclaim to us from near and far the dawn of a really new day.⁴⁹

The idea of the wholly other nature of God became the first element of this early Barthian theology. In Barth's words, from Romans:

47 Karl Barth, "Nachwort," in Schleiermacher-Auswahl, Siebenstern Taschenbuch 113-14, 1968, 294f, cited in Busch, Karl Barth, 97.

48 Barth, "Nachwort," in Schleiermacher-Auswahl, Siebenstern Taschenbuch 113-14, 1968, 294f, cited in Busch, Karl Barth, 97-98.

49 Karl Barth, "Dank und Reverenz," Evangelische Theologie, 1963, 339f, cited in Busch, Karl Barth, 116.

If I have a system, it is limited to a recognition of what Kierkegaard called the 'infinite qualitative distinction' between time and eternity, and to my regarding this as possessing negative as well as positive significance: "God is in heaven and Thou art on earth." The relation between such a God and such a Man, and the relation between such a man and such a God, is for me the theme of the Bible and the essence of philosophy.⁵²

Barth, in contrast with the theologians of the nineteenth century, was emphasizing the deity, transcendence, and mystery of God. What this emphasis constituted was a return to the mind of the reformator, specifically to the Calvinist doctrine of finitum non capax infiniti - the finite cannot contain the infinite.⁵³ Yet Barth even surpassed reformation dualism in his pronounced insistence on the unknowability of God.

The one certain source of divine revelation was not to be found in Scripture, in nature, in the collective human soul, in the intellectual propositions of Thomists or Hegelians, or through the mediative instruments of Catholicism, but in Jesus Christ alone - the word made flesh - to whom the Bible bears witness. Barth describes God's self-disclosure in Christ as a "point on the line of intersection," "as a tangent touches a circle," "the crater made at the percussion point of an exploding shell."⁵⁴ These phrases, which describe the one, certain source of revelation, nevertheless suggest a revelation that is

⁵² Karl Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, trans. Lewis J. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 10.

⁵³ On this point, see Nicholls, Systematic and Philosophical Theology, 34, 198-99; Zarrnt, The Question of God, 28-29.

⁵⁴ Barth, Romans, 29-30.

incapable of being directly observed - a suggestion consistent with the general Barthian stress on divine mystery.

That human reason was impaired by sin was a further cause of the diastasis between God and man. Barth's stress on human sin ("Sin is that by which man as we know him is defined, for we know nothing of sinless man"⁵⁵) is the second key element in his theology as revealed in Romans.

... sin is robbery, in the sense that it is the falling of men out of direct relationship with God, the rending asunder of the spiritual bond which unites God with the world and with men, the Creator with His creation. It is an assumption of independence in which God is forgotten.⁵⁶

This corruption by sin makes divine grace, not human effort, the means of gaining any knowledge about God and therefore being able to speak about Him and proclaim His word. "Grace is the gift of Christ, who exposes the gulf which separates God and man, and by exposing it, bridges it."⁵⁷

If God were qualitatively distinct from the finite order and man innately and permanently depraved by sin, there could be no correspondence of the eternal and the temporal, as many nineteenth-century theologians had asserted. Barth's theology was called dialectical because of this thesis-antithesis relationship existing

⁵⁵ Barth, Romans, 167.

⁵⁶ Barth, Romans, 168.

⁵⁷ Barth, Romans, 31.

between God and the world. The conflicts that arise between divine reality and finite yearning reveal the inadequacy of human reason relative to the transcendent. Hence, the Barthian dialectic significantly differs from the Hegelian in the repudiation of a third, synthetic stage. Man is therefore held by the tension of this dialectic and, like Moses, can only gaze onto the Promised Land but never enter it.

Dialectical theology affirmed the impossibility of participation in, or manipulation of, the divine. Barth, with a strong, deep thrust and cut of his critical blade, severed the liberal link between God and culture. An apt symbol of the nineteenth century's attempt to compromise the otherness of God and empower mankind is the mythical Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods and gave it to man - an ancient Greek parallel of the Biblical Adam and Eve's destructive hunger for divine knowledge, an enduring "fall" that Barth sees as a constant of human history:

Sin is a robbing of God: a robbery which becomes apparent in our arrogant endeavor to cross the line of death by which we are bounded; in our drunken blurring of the distance which separates us from God; in our forgetfulness of his invisibility; in our investing of men with the form of God, and of God with the form of man; and in our devotion to some romantic infinity, some 'No-God' of this world, which we have created for ourselves. And all the time we are oblivious that we must die in ungodliness and unrighteousness.⁵⁸

In particular, organized religion was excoriated for its repeated vain

⁵⁸ Barth, Romans, 168.

striving to cross this line and rob God of what is only His:

Whenever men suppose themselves conscious of the emotion of nearness to God, whenever they speak and write of divine things, whenever sermon-making and temple-building are thought of as an ultimate human occupation, whenever men are aware of divine appointment and of being entrusted with a divine mission, sin veritably abounds.... No human demeanour is more open to criticism, more doubtful or more dangerous, than religious demeanour. No undertaking subjects men to so severe a judgment as the undertaking of religion.⁵⁹

rather than enter into an unhealthy liaison with the world, religion must confront the world with what it believes to be - through faith and the blessings of grace - the word of God. Moreover, he writes of man's need for religion as being linked with "a veritable macrocosm of social lusts."⁶⁰ Therefore, like Kierkegaard, Barth lashes out at man's attempt to institutionalize revelation, an attempt resulting in arrogance, complacency, and destructive compromise.

It follows from these positions that Barth placed heavy emphasis on divine judgment, and herein we discover the meaning of "crisis theology," another appellation for the early Barthian stance. The Greek word is krisis, used in the New Testament to mean a decisive moment in which judgment produces separation or parting (as of sheep from goats), judgment that, by implication, suggests accusation, condemnation, and punishment. Barth, as summarized by Walter Horton, states that God's judgment "lowers like a thundercloud, and sooner or later it descends senkrecht von oben, straight down like a thunderbolt to proclaim that

⁵⁹ Barth, Romans, 136.

⁶⁰ Barth, Romans, 209.

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All things human are bounded by the "death line."⁶¹

Through sin, death entered into the world - as KRISIS. There is here a twofold meaning. Death is the supreme law of the world, but it also points to a lawgiver who as such is above His law. It is judgment and betterment, barrier and exit, end and beginning, 'No' and 'Yes,' the sign of the wrath of God and the signal of His imminent salvation.... The judgment of God is the end of history, not the beginning of a new, second epoch. By it history is not prolonged, but done away with.⁶²

In summary, Barth's early theology was essentially "orthodox" in content, in that it affirmed the following positions: the transcendence, majesty, and mystery of God; the inherent sinfulness of man, the consequent corruption of his reason, and hence the primacy of faith and divine grace as the only means of bridging the existential gap; the rejection of man's attempts at drawing the divine essence into time in order to transform the world qualitatively; the chastening reality of divine judgment that separates righteous from unrighteous. These ideas were not, of course, in themselves new. Some, at first, might consider them reactionary, but they contrasted so strikingly with the assumptions of the preceding theological age, were pronounced during a period of cultural malaise, and were communicated with such intensity and urgency, seizing the attention of Barth's world, that "revolutionary" is more apt. In other words, it was not simply what Barth said, but very much how, where, and when he said it. This revolution in modern theology came to be known as "neo-orthodoxy,"

⁶¹ Horton, Contemporary Continental Theology, 101.

⁶² Barth, Romans, 169, 77.

since it was, after all, a new or recent manifestation of Christian theological orthodoxy, generated by contemporary factors. Barth's own ideas would change significantly in future years, but the earlier thought, which is the focus of this discussion, endured on its own, packing a solid theological punch whenever encountered.

* * * * *

Thus far, Barthian theology has been discussed in terms of the pastoral and theological problems by which it was, in part, occasioned - the difficulties of preaching and pastoral care on the basis of liberal theological premises. Our discussion must ultimately return to the question posed at the outset of this chapter: what relationship existed between the theological movement of which Barth was the prime mover and the transformations that were altering European life as a result of technological change and World War I? Comment on this relationship will form this chapter's Summary. First, however, our definition of neo-orthodoxy must be expanded through a brief consideration of some other theologians' work in the post-war period.

At such gatherings as the conference for religious socialists held in Tambach, Thuringia, in 1919 and the Aarau student conference of 1920, Barth received opportunities to present the ideas that were appearing in the first two editions of Romans. Many were struck and attracted by his powerful message, especially those whose ideas had been developing along similar lines. In the period from 1920 through 1925, there consequently appeared a variety of writings following the

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general path cleared by Barth. Such theologians as Karl Holl, Georg Merz, Friedrich Gogarten, Rudolf Sultmann, Eduard Thurneysen, and Heinrich Barth produced books that echoed the assertions of Romans. It was the work of Paul Tillich and Emil Brunner, however, that imparted the most substantial and innovative dimensions to emerging neo-orthodoxy.

That Paul Tillich (1886-1965) can be considered a neo-orthodox theologian is, admittedly, debatable.⁶⁴ A survey of his views will appear to place him at odds with Karl Barth on a number of important issues, but there is - as will be argued here - enough common ground to allow him a place alongside Barth in this post-war movement of renewal.

The prominent characteristic of Tillich's theology is its eclecticism, or, as he put it, its position "on the boundary," both externally with other disciplines and internally in its heterogeneity. Hence, no "school" formed around Paul Tillich as there did around Barth, whose early theology was much more monolithic; nevertheless, Tillich has had a great influence on other twentieth-century religious thinkers. From his 1946 essay, "On the Boundary":

when I was asked to give an account of the way my ideas have developed from my life, I thought that the concept of the boundary might be the fitting

⁶⁴ An introductory bibliography on Tillich would include: Charles W. Kegley, ed., The Theology of Paul Tillich (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1982); David H. Kelsey, The Fabric of Paul Tillich's Theology (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967); David Hopper, Tillich: A Theological Portrait (Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott, 1968); J. Heywood Thomas, Paul Tillich: An Appraisal (London: SCM, 1963); George H. Tavard, Paul Tillich and the Christian Message (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962).

symbol for the whole of my personal and intellectual development. At almost every point I have had to stand between alternative possibilities of existence, to be completely at home in neither and to take no definitive stand against either.⁶⁴

Tillich is markedly more flexible and innovative than Barth in his handling of Christian doctrine, but he brings many of Barth's concerns to his theological effort and arrives at conclusions that are generally compatible with neo-orthodoxy.

Along with early twentieth-century theologians, Tillich rejected knowledge of the historical Jesus as a basis for faith, and he shared in the consequent desire to establish a new understanding of God. As opposed to Barth, however, Tillich did not begin with doubts as to whether we can speak about God. From the beginning, he was convinced that God and human culture are not as radically distinct as Kierkegaard and Barth believed them to be. Tillich, indeed, was particularly interested in defining God's relation to culture. His starting point, to put it another way, was not only to gain a new understanding of God, but, equally, to gain a new understanding about human history and culture and how these relate (or should relate) to God. As Zahnt concisely expresses this contrast: "Whereas Karl Barth looks up into the heights of heaven and contemplates the eternal interplay of the Trinity, Paul Tillich looks down into the depths of reality and is captivated by the constant flux of history."⁶⁵

It was the first world war and its shattering effect on the liberal

⁶⁴ Paul Tillich, On the Boundary: An Autobiographical Sketch (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), 13.

⁶⁵ Zahnt, The Question of God, 298.

optimism underlying bourgeois culture that, more than any other factor, moved Tillich, along with Barth and others of their generation, to this search for new understanding.⁶⁶ In particular, as mentioned, it moved Tillich to an interest in the meaning of history and how Christianity has been related to culture and could reform culture. This interest led him first to existential questions and awarenesses and, from there, to the ontological component of theology. To put it another way, he sought healing for man's existential suffering in the ontology of the Christian message.

The state of our whole life is estrangement from others and ourselves, because we are estranged from the Ground of our being, because we are estranged from the origin and aim of our life. And we do not know where we have come from, or where we are going. We are separated from the mystery, the depth, and the greatness of our existence. We hear the voice of that depth; but our ears are closed.⁶⁷

Tillich believed that man's existential anxiety originated in this estrangement of our individual being from its ground (he defines *sin* in terms of this estrangement), and, as a means of reconciliation, he suggested a new understanding of God.

Tillich defined God as "being itself," the ground of all being, in whom the contradictions of our finite being are resolved - a conception of the divine that goes beyond conventional supernaturalism or naturalism. In this view, God is no longer a particular being or

⁶⁶ See Tillich's reflections on his world war I experiences in On the Boundary, 52.

⁶⁷ Paul Tillich, The Shaking of the Foundations (London: Pelican, 1962), 162f.

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person who is "out there" or "up there" in the radically separate sense of Kierkegaard and Barth. Tillich thinks of God in terms of depth and of ultimate reality. whether or not Tillich retains the category of transcendence or "otherness" of dialectical theology is open to question; he is at least reinterpreting it, continuing a stress on God's separateness from our orders of nature, reason, and personality, but relating God to us through being. He thus goes beyond both the definitions of Barth and of liberal theology and tries to find a middle ground. Tillich's idea of God and God's relation to the world should not be seen as a thinly disguised liberalism. It should be understood in the light of what he terms "the Protestant principle" - the protest against any effort to divinize what is finite or, conversely, reducing God to finite dimensions. Hence, in this regard, Tillich asserts the inability to say any more about God than that He is being itself, which is compatible with the dialectical theologians' insistence on His mystery and distinctiveness.

Tillich proceeded to point to Jesus Christ as the "New being," whose crucifixion and triumphant resurrection admit us to participation in the ground of being itself, God, and thereby to an overcoming of existential estrangement (sin) and its anxiety. Man, as a consequence, acquires the "courage to be" (the title of a 1952 work by Tillich). His theology is Christocentric, and it is the Biblical Christ, not the Jesus of History, who is pivotal in his schema. Tillich's objective is to liberate man from the deceptive security of the modern world, a world into which nineteenth-century liberal theologians had drawn the divine mind in a very direct, pervasive manner. Tillich affirms that

Christ, the New Being, the first and final revelation, offers us the possibility of renewing ourselves and our culture through a new existential relationship with God, who nevertheless remains apart from the world.

What are Tillich's ideas on how a new relationship with God (the ground of being) can renew our culture and thus set us free from the destructive forces of modernism? As opposed to strict Barthian theology, Tillich affirmed that finitum capax infiniti: he understood grace, in William Nicholl's words, "not simply as the vertical descent of the divine favour upon sinful man, but as taking shape in history through structures."⁶⁸ Here we encounter Tillich's theory of culture, in which he discusses how culture relates to the divine ground. He posits three possible relationships, which he calls heteronomy, autonomy, and theonomy. In a heteronomous culture, the divine presence and power rest in certain mediative, authoritarian institutions. Protesting against this is the autonomous principle - that one can discover ultimate truth by and in oneself apart from an external institution or other authority. But superior to these two, in Tillich's estimate, is theonomy, defined in his words as "a culture in which the ultimate meaning of existence shines through all finite forms of thought and action; the culture is transparent, and its creations are vessels of a spiritual content."⁶⁹ In a theonomous society, "religion

68 Nicholls, Systematic and Philosophical Theology, 269.

69 Paul Tillich, The Protestant Era, abridged edition, trans. James Luther Adams (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, Phoenix edition, 1957), xii.

is the substance of culture and culture the form of religion."⁷⁰

Tillich believed theonomy to be a possibility, and he thought that with its realization the fragmentation and self-centeredness of modern social and technological life could be overcome; a theonomous society would have a new and greater unity because of its collective acceptance of God as the ground of all life.

Tillich considered religious socialism to be the vehicle that could usher in a theonomous culture. He was always sensitive to historical conditions, and his writings reflect a healthy interest in the many facets of human culture, especially political and economic man. Tillich believed that capitalist culture was a serious obstacle to theonomous awareness. In his extended criticism of capitalism, principally in Die religiöse Lage der Gegenwart (1926) or The Religious Situation, he attacks the philosophy of progress through self-sufficiency, which he believed was encouraging disintegration and depersonalization and exacerbating our estrangement from God. H. Richard Niebuhr summarizes Tillich's idea of the capitalist temper: "its hope and purpose is the establishment of human control over the world of nature and mind. Natural science, technique and capitalist economy - a trinity of powers which reinforce each other - support and control the civilization."⁷¹

Tillich reflects on the spirit of self-sufficiency as it has manifested itself in various cultural forms; moreover, there is no question but that he believes organized religion and theology also have shared

⁷⁰ Tillich, Protestant Era, 57.

⁷¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, Translator's Preface to Tillich, Religious Situation, 10.

in this spirit, as he makes clear in the following passage:

we come out of a time in which existence was directed toward itself, in which the forms of life were self-sufficient and closed against invasions of the eternal. Not a single phase of that life out of which we have come, not even the explicitly religious phase, was excepted from this attitude.... The total movement with which we are concerned is the slowly developing defeat of the spiritual temper of the nineteenth century. The self-sufficient this-worldliness of capitalist culture and religion is being disturbed.

Echoing Max Weber, he further observes that "Protestantism stands at the very center of the problem of church and capitalist society. Its history has proceeded in very close connection with the history of the capitalist spirit."

Tillich, unlike Barth or Spengler, does not merely lament the "decline" of western civilization. He calls for resistance, and religious socialism was his suggested means for undermining the self-sufficient spirit and encouraging theonomy. He accepted the essential Marxist criticism of capitalism and the call for leadership by the proletariat. He criticized contemporary socialism for being too companionable with liberal, bourgeois assumptions and for lacking a favorable disposition toward existential and religious concerns.

Religious socialism is not "Marxism," neither political Marxism in the sense of communism nor "scientific" Marxism in the sense of economic doctrines. We have, however, learned more from

72 Tillich, Religious Situation, 50-52.

73 Tillich, Religious Situation, 191.

Marx's dialectical analysis of bourgeois society
than from any other analysis of our period. We
have found in it an understanding of human nature
and history which is much nearer to the classical
Christian doctrine of man with its empirical
pessimism and its eschatological hope than is the
picture of man in idealistic theology.⁷⁴

Tillich therefore envisaged religious socialism as encouraging a
transcending of self, an opening of minds to community, personality,
and the unconditional, and a closing of the gap between religion and
culture.

In the aftermath of World War I, it was Tillich's opinion that a
moment full of opportunity, a potentially fruitful occasion, had
emerged in which the conditions for advancing religious socialism and
theonomous culture were very auspicious. Tillich calls such moments

Kairos:

... we believed that a new beginning, a period of
radical transformation, a fulfilment of time, or
as we called it with a New Testament term, a kairos
had come upon us, in spite of breakdown and
misery ... we also saw a new chance, a moment
pregnant with creative possibilities.... This is
what we hoped for and what religious socialism
fought for, and to it we tried to give a philosophi-
cal and theological basis. The idea of a
"theonomous culture" seemed to be adequate for this
aim.⁷⁵

The appearance of Christ in history had been the key, epochal kairos,
beginning the process of possible reconciliation between man and
the ground of his being.. In the post-1919 world, Tillich was calling

74 Tillich, Protestant Era, xiv.

75 Tillich, Protestant Era, 5b.

on man to allow the eternal to invade history, and he therefore sought to make human culture aware of its divine foundation. He wished, in other words, to prepare man to receive grace. History had been the setting for God's original self-disclosure to man and the setting in which would occur his continued movement toward fulfillment of his will.

In conclusion, the points at which Tillich departs from the Barthian positions are clear: his general blending of philosophy and political thought with theology; his point of departure in existentialism and his arrival at a heavily ontological definition of God; his extensive side-trip into an anticapitalist polemic as an integral part of his overall theology. In some ways, Tillich is in a mediating position between Barth and the nineteenth century. Indeed, this is how he describes his relationship to the liberal and neo-orthodox trends:

My theology can be understood as an attempt to overcome the conflict between these two types of theology. It intends to show that the alternative expressed in those names is not valid; that most of the contrasting statements are expressions of an obsolete stage of theological thought.⁷⁶

Indeed, as Nicholls maintains, "in liberal circles he has sometimes been taken for a Barthian, as he is commonly taken for a liberal in Barthian ones."⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Paul Tillich, Protestant Era, xxii-xxiii.

⁷⁷ Nicholls, Systematic and Philosophical Theology, 250.

Fillich was motivated by many of the same concerns faced by Karl Barth and other contemporaries: the opposition to the bourgeois temper of the nineteenth century and its optimistic faith in self-sufficient, moral, progressive humanity, a faith promoted by organized Christianity; the shift away from a preponderant interest in ethics and toward a reconciliation of metaphysics and theology; the inclination, given the collapse of idealism and the shock of Europe's wartime experience, to re-evaluate the understanding of God and His relation to man. Fillich's aim, like Barth's, was to purify faith and theology by separating them from the contaminating influence of modern secular culture and giving them a new clarity of definition. Both theologians placed strong, renewed emphasis on the biblical Christ, not on the Jesus of history, a Christ whose mediation was necessary for redemption. Lastly, although Fillich's representation of God is of a different character than that of Barth, it in no way returns to the immanentism of Schleiermacher; the God of Fillich's theology is unequivocally "other," but not radically or wholly so.

Fillich preferred the term "neo-dialectical" to "neo-orthodox," but he defined "dialectical" in a different sense - hence the difficulty faced by any writer who wishes to create and name a category into which Barth, Fillich, and others can all be grouped - a category for which there would exist adequate common ground. "Neo-orthodox" shall be retained because, as has evidently become the consensus among historians and theologians, it describes this common ground somewhat better than other suggested terms. In contrast with the unravelled, wayward condition of theology in the nineteenth century, all post-World

war I theology returns to a "straighter opinion" in the literal sense of the original Greek (ortho-doxa).

In comparison with Karl Barth and Paul Tillich, Emil Brunner (1889-1966) is less complex in substance and more modest in style. Like Tillich, he departs from the sharply drawn orthodoxy of Barth's Romans, but he does not share the same degree of inclination to engage in eclectic, reinterpretive inquiry that Tillich does. In his pre-1914 years, Brunner was at one with his German and Swiss peers in accepting academic liberal theology, its harmony of theology and philosophy, and its emphasis on Christian ethics. Following the war, he joined Barth and the other advocates of dialectical theology in subjecting liberalism to harsh criticism, arguing that revelation cannot be discovered in subjective or objective experience.

The difficulty with which Brunner grappled, like Barth, was the matter of how to speak of and preach the word of God in contemporary culture - a matter that Barth never adequately resolved in his early writing. Brunner began by forming a doctrine of man rather than plunging into an investigation of the nature of God, as had Barth; Brunner's objective in so doing was to discover in such a doctrine a "point of contact" with the mind or word of God.

Brunner wrote considerably on Christianity's encounter with society and politics, and this, as with Tillich, set him apart from Barth, who paid little attention in Romans and other early writing to

78 An introductory bibliography on Brunner would include: Charles W. Kegley, ed., The Theology of Emil Brunner (New York: Macmillan, 1962); J. Edward Humphrey, Emil Brunner (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1976); Cornelius Van Til, The New Modernism: An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner (London: James Clarke, 1946).

the aspects of meeting with "other" society. Barth's driving conviction was that the Christian faith and the world must be kept separate, but Brunner saw the faith to be ever in conflict with the world and therefore believed that dialogue must ensue. The absence of any concrete dialogue between man and God led him to the thesis presented in Rede Person or Widerspruch (1937) or Man in Revolt: that man has been living in a condition of disharmony with God and that this state of revolt has deepened his relationships within society. He must cease to trust himself in the illusory securities of this world and return to his source, his center, the word of God, wherein he will find the peace that accompanies such reconciliation. This is Brunner's counterpart to Kierkegaard's focus on man's existential estrangement and Barth's simpler, Biblical discussion of sin.

Brunner's elaboration on the nature of this reconciliation with God and with man's fellows was discussed in Wahrheit als Begegnung (1948) or Truth as Encounter. He sought to avoid both objectivism and subjectivism, the former with its propensity to legalize, intellectualize, sacramentalize, or institutionalize the truth or word, and the latter with its tendency toward the mysticism and excessive liberties taken by such liberal theologians as Schleiermacher. In opposition to these two alternatives, Brunner posited that our encounter with truth must be personal, and he derives this category from the "I-Thou" theory of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1873-1965) as found in Buber's Ich und Du (1923) or I and Thou. Buber suggested that man seeks and finds his identity beyond himself, in a relationship with another person, a Thou. In such a relationship, the I is completely personally involved

in the "otherness" of the Incor, retaining none of the self. In Brunner's opinion, this must be the form of man's relationship with God; each man must be the other's Incor. Through this embrace, man would cease to be in revolt.

The actual "point of contact" in this I-Incor relationship between God and man is the biblical Christ, the mediator, the saving revelation in which God and man encounter one another person to person. Brunner, in adopting this perspective, is in line with neo-orthodox thinking. He is asserting the centrality of Christ in the process of reconciliation between fallen or estranged man and God. Beyond revelation in Christ, Brunner does suggest that a limited point of contact exists in creation itself, that an antecedent knowledge of the divine was necessary to provide man with a basis for understanding revelation in Christ. He furthermore pointed to the faculties of hearing and speech as points of contact, since these are, after all, the essential means of communication between most persons.

Brunner was putting forward a tentative "natural theology," and this aroused the wrath of Karl Barth, who, of course, resisted any suggestion of revelation outside Christ. The two Swiss theologians were, as a result, drawn into heated conflict during the early 1930s. Barth, it must be added, was particularly sensitive to any suggestion of revelation beyond Christ because of his fierce opposition to the effort of the "German Christians" to ally themselves with Nazi ideology, an ideology that contained the belief that God's will was revealed in the German Volk.

Although Emil Brunner had differences with Barth, his theology

proceeds from the same bases: the wish to purify the Christian faith by properly separating the word from the world; the concern with man's alienation from God and from other human persons; the lament over man's self-destructive preoccupation with contemporary culture; and the emphatic affirmation that the agent of reconciliation and renewal was Jesus Christ.

* * * * *

The trends and ideas in theology associated with, and exemplified by, Barth, Tillich, and Brunner were widespread. Religious thinkers throughout Europe were shaken by what has been called a sense of "crisis" that had settled upon western civilization, specifically upon continental Europe in the wake of World War I. A revival of Eastern Orthodoxy was reflected in the writings of Nicholas Berdyaev and Mikhail Bulgakov. Within Roman Catholicism such critics as Leon Bloy, Jacques Maritain, and Erich Przywara were emphasizing orthodox and Thomist positions. From the German-Swiss-Austrian community, in addition to Buber and the three theologians with whom we have dealt, Rudolf Otto's Das Heilige (1917) or The Idea of the Holy became widely known as a reflection on the mystery and the irrational dimensions of the Bible and of spiritual experience. Many of these thinkers were, in part, awakened by a "discovery" of Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky, who, as such commentators as Walter Horton and William Hubben have observed, were thought of as "prophets of the fourth dimension" in their call for an awareness of both the divine and of the depths of

evil.¹⁹

The neo-orthodox theologians expressed similar convictions. They returned to the bible as the best means of gaining insight into the divine will, especially as that will was revealed in Christ. They concluded that such insight was not to be discovered in the individual or collective soul of man, in nature, or in some symbiotic union of the divine order, the Christian Church, and human culture. God must once again be seen as unequivocally transcendent; mystery and majesty must once again become explicit divine properties. God's will must be regarded as unfolding in history, but he must not be drawn directly into history except for the one distinct revelation in Christ.

The neo-orthodox approach to that revelation, Christ, was a critical departure from one of the prominent features of nineteenth-century liberal Christian thought. Liberals had substituted positivist, empirical bases of belief for the rationalist bases of Thomism and Deism that Kant had destroyed in Critique of Pure Reason; moreover, they seized on Kant's conclusion that man's ethical life was the only opening to the transcendent. Hence, in their unwillingness to confront the complexity and mystery of the multidimensional biblical Christ, they retreated into a preoccupation with the one dimension they could, in a positivist spirit, measure, understand, and feel secure with - the historical Jesus, the teacher of morals. In practical terms, these theological assumptions would lead liberal-minded Christians into a compulsive interest in social-reform activity with a view to

79 Horton, Contemporary Continental Theology, 217; Hubben, Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Kafka, chapters one and two, passim.

establishing the kingdom of God in history. These efforts, furthermore, often led to compromises with the objects of that reform, compromises that tled the Church of its integrity.

Nec-orthodox theologians proceeded from the same Kantian assertion (the impossibility of gaining knowledge of metaphysical truth), but arrived at a different conclusion: if direct knowledge of transcendent reality is impossible, then one must be willing to accept mystery in humility and faith. Christ was thus rediscovered in the fullness of the biblical account. His role as agent of reconciliation and salvation through sacrificial atonement was given a firm reemphasis. The kingdom of God to which he pointed was to be less a concrete historical phenomenon than a personal and eschatological reality, to be advanced during history but experienced outside it. because of the crucial function performed by Christ in their systems or accounts, these theologians' work can be termed Christocentric.

Barts and the Eastern Orthodox thinkers placed a new stress on evil and human sin. The idea of sin showed up in nec-orthodoxy generally, whether under the guise of the biblical fall, existential estrangement, or man "in revolt." The horror of the war had dissolved the modern, optimistic trust in progress, in the reliability of human reason, and in empirical inquiry, trust that had underlain and informed liberal theology. Because society and culture were corrupted by the inherent sinfulness of its members, the Church must be separated from that culture. A new relationship must be forged between them in which the Christian message resolutely confronts the structures of contemporary culture in order to renew them. This was a sharp turnabout from

Anti-protestantism, of which accommodation, pragmatism, and complacency were the characteristic features. In other words, the lines of definition and demarcation were sharply drawn between the Christian life and man's secular social life.

Lastly, then, what was the probable nature of the relationship between the neo-orthodox theological reaction discussed in this chapter and the crisis in western civilization sketched in the first chapter? It is evident that during and after world War I there emerged throughout the different avenues of thought and art a common observation that mankind had plunged into a period of decline and self-destruction. The war was not only to blame but also the rapid, revolutionary change occurring in technology and economic organization, which itself encouraged and buttressed the muscular nationalism that hastened the war. Responses to all of this were varied: the explosion of interest in Freud and his ideas about the unconscious and irrational dimensions of human behavior; the provocative, rebellious art of the expressionists and Dadaists; Heideggerian existentialism; Buber's reaction to the depersonalizing forces of modernism in his "I-Thou" theory; and, of course, Oswald Spengler's pessimistic theory of history in Untergang des Abendlandes (1918-1922) or The Decline of the West.

Let it be remembered that perhaps the pivotal moment in Karl Barth's acceleration toward neo-orthodoxy was the discovery that his theological professors, all leaders in academic liberal theology, had supported the war policy of the German Kaiser in 1914. Mainstream Christianity of that age thus appeared to be in league with all that was wrong with the bourgeois modern world - the nationalism, militarism,

and secularism of the machine age. Here was one final, unacceptable compromise with the world, a frustration that culminated in the burst of prophetic anger that was The Epistle to the Romans. Writing in 1937, Friedrich Gogarten recalled:

This radical thought brought us dangerously close to the general crisis which shook human life to its foundation throughout the war and the post-war period, and to the feeling that there was no exit, and that the end had been reached, a feeling shared by many people at that time. There is no doubt that this general crisis was not without its influence upon the radicalism of our thought.⁸⁰

Both Franklin Baumer and Heinz Zahrnt refer to Romans as the "theological counterpart" or "analogue" to Spengler.⁸¹ Barth himself took an inconclusive position in 1940: "I cannot and really do not wish to demonstrate that we would have stood where we do now without the World War. But then who can demonstrate that it was the World War which led us to this decision?"⁸² Neo-orthodoxy was the reaction that grew out of the puzzlement and discouragement experienced by several young pastors and theologians, trained in liberal theology, as they sought to preach the Word of God in a rapidly changing and increasingly unstable cultural environment; the ensuing major crisis in that environment, World War I, would itself prove to be a decisive factor in shaping the parameters of their reaction.

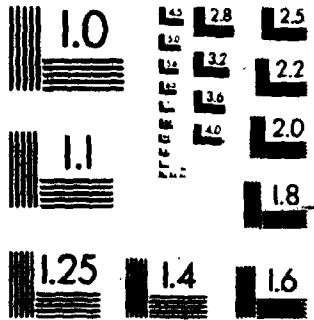
80 Friedrich Gogarten, Gericht oder Skepsis. Eine Streitschrift gegen Karl Barth, 1937, 8.13, cited in Zahrnt, The Question of God, 47.

81 Baumer, Modern European Thought, 445; Zahrnt, The Question of God, 26.

82 Karl Barth, Kirchenblatt f.d. ref. Schweiz, 1940, 100, cited in Zahrnt, The Question of God, 26.

The neo-orthodox theologians reacted to the liberal-Protestant axis as Kierkegaard had reacted to Hegel: Christianity must free itself from this deadly embrace, and become oppositional. Indeed, if a common intellectual and spiritual antecedent may be found for this multifaceted movement we are calling neo-orthodox, it must be the sensitive, conservative, prophetic Kierkegaard. His awareness of existentialist anxiety and of life's other darker dimensions and his apprehension of Europe's growing spiritual malaise anticipated and stimulated the early twentieth-century mind. Kierkegaard and his neo-orthodox followers in many ways echoed the convictions and actions of the Reformation theologians who had aimed at counteracting the liberalism of the Renaissance. Both Reformers and Kierkegaardian neo-orthodox reformers turned to the church of the first century in search of a valid, purifying orthodoxy that would bring God, the church, and man and his culture into a truly harmonious relationship.

2



CHAPTER THREE
THE AMERICAN SOCIAL GOSPEL

Liberal Protestantism, whose theological origins were examined in the preceding chapter, spread and grew beyond its German academic seedbed, assuming a number of forms and attracting a variety of criticism on the European continent, in Britain, and in the United States. Its most active, ambitious manifestations were the social Christian movements that appeared in Germany, Switzerland, Britain, and America. To this point, we have surveyed the theological origins, looking at liberal Protestantism's roots in modern thought, particularly in Kant, and its development in the work of Schleiermacher and Ritschl; we then dwelled on the many-sided neo-orthodox attack to which it was subjected during the unsettled years of the early twentieth century. Having set out these primary, originative events, now we turn our attention to the spreading forms and different settings in which liberal Protestantism appeared, to the critical responses that were encountered, and to the resemblances between this criticism and the continental situation that has been described.

In particular, the remaining chapters will focus on America, its Social Gospel movement, and on the American version of the neo-orthodox reaction. This will be done by following and examining the experience and thought of Reinhold Niebuhr, one American religious and social thinker who, like his European counterparts, had early experience with liberal Protestantism but who gradually became dissatisfied with it. In the example of Niebuhr and his sharpening attack on liberal Christianity, we can observe and investigate the

form that this theological conflict was taking in the United States and the degree to which continental neo-orthodoxy was gaining entrance to, and playing a role in, America and its Protestant community during the interwar years.

The Social Gospel was the peculiarly American form that liberal Protestantism assumed across the Atlantic, and it was this movement that provides the background for Reinhold Niebuhr's initial experience as a leader in American Protestantism. The factors giving shape to the Social Gospel - as it was constituted in 1915 - are several: historical liberal culture, especially in its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century development; liberal theology; the American Protestant tradition; American social conditions in the post-Civil War period; and the Progressive movement. A brief survey of these elements will aid in defining the character of American liberal Protestantism as revealed in the Social Gospel and thereby establish the nature of the target at which Reinhold Niebuhr would later take aim with an emerging Christian realism.

* * * * *

To recapitulate, the premises of cultural liberalism - belief in man's essential goodness and in the enlightening, progressive, saving function of reason - have their origins in Hellenistic and Roman thought, especially in Epicureanism and Stoicism. In these classical schools (growing from the work of the Sophists, Plato, and Aristotle), attention was fastened more on man, his conduct, and his

society than on nature; men emerged as rational creatures, the objects of confident consideration. Philosophy, with its aim of revealing and liberating reason, was thought of as a path to an ultimate deliverance. This humanism was reasserted and enlarged upon as a major part of the Renaissance of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Also contributing to this widening and ever-faster flowing stream of new learning were achievements in science and technology (associated with such names as Galileo, Copernicus, Benedetti, and Bacon) that stimulated new interests and furnished new substance for philosophical reflection. This age of scientific advance had become truly revolutionary by the mid-sixteenth century and culminated in the work of Newton in the later seventeenth century.

This scientific revolution was assimilated on a wide cultural scale, producing what we have come to call the Enlightenment, discussed briefly in the preceding chapter.¹ The humanistic tradition of classical and Renaissance thought and the experimental approach of the scientific age combined to generate a period of persistent, enthusiastic inquiry into man's social, political, economic, ethical, and religious life. Moreover, major developments such as the growth of an individualistic middle-class consciousness - a spirit serving as a driving force for rising capitalism - and the accompanying, liberating stimulus of the Protestant Reformation had quickened this centuries-long process of transition and transformation from medieval to modern.

¹ See above, pp. 32-33.

A mood of optimistic belief in human possibilities was also reflected in the wave of democratic revolution in which this age was awash. It was assumed that, with greater political and intellectual liberty and education, reason would be unleashed, thereby revealing truth and providing the tools for the promotion of progress and happiness. The unfettering of ideas, economic initiative, and popular will, it was believed, would result in a harmonization or reconciliation of individual and general interests. This philosophy was given perhaps its best chance at realization in late-eighteenth century America. The assumptions expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the mechanisms and goals of the U.S. Constitution, as well as the state constitutions, gave concrete expression to many Enlightenment ideals.² The Enlightenment was, in short, a time of unprecedented confidence in man and his future; by 1800, the basic features of liberal culture had been well established in the transatlantic world. The evolutionary categories given prominence in nineteenth-century Western intellectual discourse by the work of Hegel and Darwin would add a new chapter and new substance to the long history of liberal, progressive philosophy. Liberalism thus becomes an element of continuity, of consensus, in explaining the rise of the Social Gospel.

² An introductory bibliography on the Enlightenment and America would include: Bernard Bailyn, The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1967); Donald H. Meyer, The Democratic Enlightenment (New York: Capricorn Books, 1976); Henry F. May, The Enlightenment in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Garry Wills, Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence (New York: Random House, 1978); Morton White, The Philosophy of the American Revolution (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

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We have noted in the second chapter how the anthropocentrism of modern liberal culture was an important factor in the emergence of liberal Protestant theology.³ Faced with this humanistic challenge, theologians had either to resist or accommodate, and the latter course, by and large, was chosen. In this introductory survey of the origins of the Social Gospel, let us briefly recapitulate what has been said about the second factor in the forging of that movement - liberal Protestant theology.

This trend in theology received the appellation liberal because of an optimistic, progressive, humanistic orientation that mirrored and derived from liberal culture. Kant's conclusion that the human mind could not attain to metaphysical knowledge, combined with the progressive temper of the Enlightenment and the immanentism of Romantic thought, led theologians to a new consideration of man's nonrational spiritual capacities and also shifted their interest to the sphere of human ethics. In liberal theology, the strict dualism of traditional Christian thought that separated finite from transcendent reality was overcome; beginning with Friedrich Schleiermacher, it was advanced that God was transacting his redemptive purpose in and through the ongoing historical experience of his creatures. God's Kingdom was thus being revealed and would be realized by means of man's own progress. As developed in the ideas of the school of Albrecht Ritschl, the key to that progress was applying

³ See above, pp. 32ff.

the ethical teachings of the historical Jesus to human activity. This was, certainly, a very idealistic perspective; it placed great faith in general human potential and in the possibilities of harnessing the spiritual wisdom of the individual for social purposes.

As the nineteenth century unfolded, this liberal theological-cultural orientation of mind and spirit had to confront the fact of increasing social difficulty associated with the rise of industry and the city. The problematic conditions of social and economic life in the new urban industrial centers of the transatlantic world were seen as major impediments to the advance of the Kingdom. An increased emphasis, consequently, was placed on understanding and combatting social evil, and from this emphasis emerged social Christian movements.

America did possess a liberal theological tradition of its own that facilitated the entry and acceptance of European theological liberalism and social Christian action. Under the leadership of such figures as Charles Chauncy (1705-1787) and Jonathan Mayhew (1720-1766), a liberal movement had arisen within Congregationalism in protest against revivalism and Calvinist theology. This stream of liberal dissent, nourished by American Deism, was developed in the work of the liberal Congregationalist William Ellery Channing (1780-1842), the Unitarian Theodore Parker (1810-1860), and the Transcendentalists. Present therein are the humanistic and immanentist ideas central to Schleiermacher's theology. It was Horace Bushnell, however, who, according to George Hammar, was the Schleiermacher and Ritschl of America and the most influential American

theologian after Jonathan Edwards.⁴ The ideas of Bushnell - a Congregational pastor and theological writer - were very close to Ritschl's, and he served as a medium for the transmission of Ritschlian theology to America.

The American Social Gospel can therefore be partly understood in the light of prior European experience. Because of the provincial, self-concerned nature of the American religious tradition, this serious "looking over the shoulder" at European developments and the consequent reception of what was observed was an important step. Although the Social Gospel remained a decidedly provincial affair, it had at least revealed a willingness to open the American window and admit a transatlantic breeze. Significantly, the ultimate overthrow of the Social Gospel would also be occasioned when American theologians (principally among them, Reinhold Niebuhr) took a serious look at European trends, introduced them into the American Protestant community, and thereby further advanced the overthrow of cultural provincialism.

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In addition to liberal culture and theology, which had become the matrix of progressive Western political and religious thought, the religious traditions of individual Christian communities also were decisive factors in lending personality to efforts at social Christian action. In the case of the United States, although European developments

⁴ George Hammar, Christian Realism in Contemporary American Theology (Uppsala, Sweden: Lundequistiska Bokhandeln, 1940), 119-30.

"provided a vital prologue to American Social Gospel history,"⁵ in Sidney Ahlstrom's work, the nation's own Protestant historical experience also was of vital importance, and this serves as the third factor in determining the nature of the Social Gospel.

In 1927, André Siegfried commented that "the civilization of the United States is essentially Protestant.... Protestantism is the only national religion, and to ignore that fact is to view the country from a false angle."⁶ Siegfried was observing what is critical to the understanding of American history: that Protestant Christianity has been a chief determinant in shaping that history. Seventeenth-century settlement in New England was largely a religious enterprise; the spirit of Christian renewal at the heart of the Protestant Reformation and especially central to the Puritan personality was planted in America at its beginning. The corporate strength of the Massachusetts Bay community was sustained by its desire to create a comprehensive Puritan society, a City of God in the New World. In the establishment of this New Jerusalem, to be made secure by a theology of covenant, the Puritan clergy directly intervened in public affairs; there was no distinct line between church and state.

The theocratic character of seventeenth-century Puritanism in Massachusetts has had an enduring influence on the American religious mind. As a consequence of this early blending of Puritan theological principle and secular political action, the Protestant clergy developed a habit of involvement in public issues. Although church and state, in

5 Sydney A. Ahlstrom, A Religious History of the American People, 2 vols. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Image Books, 1975), 2:255.

6 André Siegfried, America Comes of Age: A French Analysis (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1927), 33.

the institutional sense, were constitutionally separated in the United States in the later 1700s, religion and politics have never been divorced. Religious-ethical beliefs have been assertively brought to bear on public policy-making since the Puritan period. For example, during the three decades preceding the Civil War - a period that was as much an age of reform as the age of Jackson - the origin and organization of much of its reform activity was ecclesiastical.

Furthermore, given the democratic spirit pervading American culture and, in particular, that culture's institutions, and given the generally democratic nature of Protestant church polity, the churches have fitted comfortably within American democratic cultural-institutional life. They have played a historically responsive and active role, giving shape to American democracy and to the principal social concerns of the day and also shaping the responses to those concerns.

Behind and beneath these traits has lain a widely shared and strongly held belief in a greater American destiny, expressed most notably in John Winthrop's sermon delivered aboard the Arbella in 1630 and captured in such movements or moods as Manifest Destiny. The conviction that America was a nation set apart by God, a "city upon a hill" with a higher destiny, has added further motive to religious concern about, and activity in, public affairs.

Another of André Siegfried's comments touches on a characteristic of American life that has informed the religious style as it has influenced the political style and other areas of social life: "The American is entirely at ease only in practical matters for he is completely out of

his element when he is not active."⁷ American Protestantism's responsiveness in the democratic setting and its historical propensity for social and political involvement are in keeping with this general tendency to the utilitarian, pragmatic, active life that has often been noted by writers on America. The Social Gospel, as shall be discussed, continued in this tradition, channeling its concerns and energy into social and political action within the context of American democratic life and proceeding with a guiding sense of national destiny within an unfolding Kingdom.

In more concrete terms, the revivalistic and perfectionistic tradition in American religion had a direct formative influence on the social Christianity of the later nineteenth century.⁸ The revivals, with their optimistic, anti-intellectual, perfectionistic, millennial flavor, were a vital preparation for the Social Gospel. The broad revivalistic spirit that flourished from 1840 to 1865, particularly in the cities, had the effect of blurring lines between denominations and thereby encouraging interdenominational activity in the area of urban social-ethical reform. In addition, the revivals transmitted to the later nineteenth century the aspiration for the "Kingdom," which had been a pervasive theme, assuming different forms since the seventeenth century.⁹ This theme was manifest in Puritan America in an attitude of deference to a sovereign God Who ruled directly and completely; it then

⁷ Siegfried, America Comes of Age, 40.

⁸ On this argument, see: Timothy L. Smith, Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America (Nashville: Abingdon, 1957).

⁹ This is the view of H. Richard Niebuhr in The Kingdom of God in America (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937).

became manifest in the personal experience of the "Kingdom of Christ" - the renewing acceptance of Christ that was at the heart of the religious revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As the nineteenth century unfolded, the idea of the Kingdom became more secularized, communal, and institutional. The accent on individual hope, conversion, and ultimate salvation gave way to a stress on the transformation of social life on earth through progressive Christian ethical teaching and action.

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These constituents of the American Protestant religious tradition - the responsive, active, reforming instinct and the consistent quest for the Kingdom as defined in early Protestantism and mediated by the religious revival - were important elements in determining the type of social Christian movement that emerged in the late nineteenth century. But apart from these formal conditions that give evidence of continuity in religious experience, there were new, immediate conditions - and these serve as the fourth factor in explaining the rise of the Social Gospel - which acted as efficient or propelling causes.

Stressing continuity in American intellectual history (either with reference to cultural liberalism or to American religious traditions) or stressing the influence of prior European social Christian movements have both been the exception rather than the rule in Social Gospel historiography. In fact, most specialized treatments of the subject have chosen to emphasize discontinuity in nineteenth-century American Protestant history and have dwelled on the "Americanness" of the Social Gospel. In the

works of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Charles H. Hopkins, Aaron I. Abell, Henry P. May, and Robert M. Miller, among others, the Social Gospel is discussed as, essentially, a response to social and economic developments in post-Civil War America.¹⁰

Schlesinger, in a trail-blazing article, wrote of the last quarter of the nineteenth century that "perhaps at no time in its American development has the path of Christianity been so sorely beset with pitfalls and perils."¹¹ The period is described as presenting two new and major challenges to American religion: urbanization and industrialization, on the one hand, and science and scholarship, on the other. The Social Gospel is therefore understood as a response to the stimulus provided by these contemporary factors. As a Progressive historian, Schlesinger emphasized conflict rather than consensus in U.S. history and regarded social and economic factors as the principal determinants of historical change.

The other writers mentioned followed Schlesinger in the Progressive stream of interpretation, generally characterizing the age as one of increasing social crisis. Postbellum economic expansion was marked by a renewal of railroad construction and by historic advances in manufacturing; these advances had been stimulated by a profusion of inventions.

¹⁰ An introductory bibliography on the origins of the Social Gospel, from the socioeconomic perspective, would include: Arthur M. Schlesinger, "A Critical Period in American Religion, 1875-1900," Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society 64 (1932): 523-47; Charles H. Hopkins, The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865-1900 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1943); Henry P. May, Protestant Churches and Industrial America (New York: Octagon, 1949); Robert M. Miller, American Protestantism and Social Issues, 1919-1939 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958).

¹¹ Schlesinger, "Critical Period," 523.

and by political conditions that left enterprise unrestricted. Burgeoning farm production and sharp increases in population contributed to this manufacturing vigor and therefore helped usher America into the community of industrial powers.

Industrial growth in America was attendant upon the beginnings of larger-scale enterprises (the corporation) and the modern factory system. The new economics of larger-scale industry, in particular the power of the "captains of industry," drove a wedge between employers and employees and induced a protracted season of labor conflict. Industrialization also generated greater urbanization and, specifically, the spread of urban poverty, tenement housing, and consequent social evils. Swelling these urban environments and contributing to the new industrial labor force were Americans migrating from rural sections and a massive influx of immigrants between 1870 and 1920 from southern and eastern Europe who sought liberties and opportunities denied them in their native lands. As the prospering upper and middle classes moved to the new suburbs of urban America, the inner city became dominated by a population living in crowded, impoverished, unsanitary conditions.

As Abell asserts, "the rapid growth of industrial cities after 1865 burdened religion to the breaking point."¹² Confronted by these disturbing and worsening conditions, Christians were forced to address the situation, and many progressive-minded Protestant leaders began calling for social reform. Miller compares the church's apprehension of this challenge with the original Protestant settlers' confrontation with the

¹² Abell, Urban Impact, 3.

New World wilderness.¹³ Abell and May contrast Christian social action with the pre-1870 Protestant establishment - one, in their view, characterized by conservatism and complacency, a dearth of interest in the condition of the poor, and an espousal of a Social Darwinist "gospel of wealth and success." Hence, in the opinion of these historians, the Social Gospel emerges in response not only to urban social blight, but as a necessary criticism of the Protestant alliance with wealth and established interests.

Merle Curti and Maurice Latta widen the discussion by suggesting that Protestant churches quickly became aware, in the face of rapid urbanization and immigration, that they were losing influence with the growing urban working class, many of whom were of Catholic and of Jewish backgrounds.¹⁴ Since Protestantism's base and strength had been in rural, small-town, native America and among more established social groups, the churches lacked a secure constituency among the newer urban working class. Moreover, when the upper and middle classes began moving to the suburbs, they took their churches with them. Protestantism was therefore compelled to compete at a disadvantage in a turbulent, heterogeneous, and often ill-disposed milieu. This state of affairs persuaded some Protestant churchmen that a new strategy was required to make gains among the urban poor, a strategy that addressed social needs and criticized the economic status quo. Furthermore, in an age of rising prosperity, the urban laborer was as interested as everyone in

13 Miller, American Protestantism, 12.

14 Merle Curti, The Growth of American Thought (New York: Harper & Row, 1943); Maurice Latta, "The Background for the Social Gospel in American Protestantism," Church History 5 (1936): 256-70.

securing a piece of the expanding pie. As Latta observes:

The satisfactions of the present age proving so multiform and novel, men cared little for any others and listened with scant pleasure to a church which could not sympathize with the common man's desire to enjoy some of the new goods. The church succumbed and joined its voice to that of others demanding a better division of the new wealth.¹⁵

Along similar lines of argument, Richard Hofstadter has maintained that the Protestant clergy in particular were conscious of a diminished social influence or status in society and that this played an important role in determining the movement of many into the Social Gospel.¹⁶ With the post-Civil War development of new industrial and corporate tools of production and profit and with the accompanying rise of larger cities, a class of nouveau riche capitalists were supplanting the antebellum guardians of status; the latter included smaller merchants and manufacturers, lawyers, clergymen, and other established professionals of local distinction. These increasingly alienated intellectuals and professionals, Hofstadter argues, expressed their frustration through participating in, and giving leadership to, the movement of liberal criticism that became known as Progressivism.

Protestant clergymen shared in the social and political repercussions that issued from this "status revolution." Indeed, Hofstadter suggests they were "probably the most conspicuous losers," owing to the considerable secularization that was overcoming American social and intellectual

¹⁵ Latta, "Background for the Social Gospel," 266.

¹⁶ Richard Hofstadter, The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968). See pp. 131-63.

life as the new century approached.¹⁷ Confronted by this ebbing of influence (and an accompanying decline in income) and by their churches' uncertain standing within the new, dislocating social arrangements of the big city, many clergy joined their fellow victims of the status revolution in an embrace of progressive dissent. In Hofstadter's words:

The increasingly vigorous interest in the social gospel so clearly manifested by the clergy after 1890, was in many respects an attempt to restore through secular leadership some of the spiritual influence and authority and social prestige that clergymen had lost through the upheaval in the system of status and the secularization of society.¹⁸

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This consideration of Hofstadter's views has introduced the subject of Progressivism, to be treated here as the fifth factor lending shape to the Social Gospel movement as constituted by 1915, when Reinhold Niebuhr was beginning the first stage of his public career. A great deal has been (and will continue to be) written by historians about Progressivism, the optimistic, reform-oriented, and often paradoxical spirit that dominated the period from 1890 to 1920.¹⁹ Progressives retooled the

17 Hofstadter, Age of Reform, 150.

18 Hofstadter, Age of Reform, 152.

19 An introductory bibliography on Progressivism would include: Robert H. Wiebe, The Search for Order, 1877-1920 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967); David W. Noble, The Progressive Mind (Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1970); Hofstadter, Age of Reform; Gabriel Kolko, The Triumph of Conservatism (New York: The Free Press, 1963); David M. Chalmers, The Social and Political Ideas of the Muckrakers (New York: Citadel Press, 1964).

ideological machinery of liberalism, making social concern a prominent new component. They directed their criticism toward the injustices of Gilded Age corporate and industrial behavior, corruption in urban politics, and the social evils consequent to these abuses. Their moralistic, reforming impulse (moderate in mood) was expressed in calls for greater democratization of government and extension of its activity through increased public service, regulation of large corporations, and energetic efforts at promoting social justice in the inner city, in the workplace, and as part of such other public moral crusades as prohibition.

Progressivism was imbued with an experimental, resourceful temper. It was highly critical of the structures and practices that had dominated American political and economic management, education, law, and other areas of cultural and intellectual activity.²⁰ An urban, largely middle-class movement, it gathered together many leading contemporary thinkers, especially from the relatively new, expanding, popular social sciences. Progressives (to make a long and complex story short) participated in the overturning of nineteenth-century patterns of economic, social, and political thought and behavior.

As has been suggested, Social Gospel clergymen numbered among the Progressive dramatic personae. Indeed, their role was prominent, enabling them to regain some lost prestige in addition to confronting the troubling realities of the day. As distinct from an earlier age when, in Henry May's words, the Protestant clergy was "a massive, almost unbroken front in its defense of the status quo," the Progressive protest

²⁰ On this idea, see Morton White, Social Thought in America: The Revolt Against Formalism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

received inspiration and sanction from a clerical regiment whose social and political conscience had been newly and powerfully awakened.²¹ As Paul Merkley has written: "Just as the Anglican Church in the eighteenth century could be seen as 'the Tory party at prayer,' so a case could be made out that Progressivism was the Protestant establishment in political action."²²

The relationship between Progressivism and the Social Gospel was, in effect, reciprocal in formative influence. Just as the Social Gospel and its leaders contributed to the form being taken by Progressivism, so the overall Progressive spirit flavored the Social Gospel. Progressivism sharpened the Social Gospel's already well-defined focus on urban social difficulty (or social sin, as the liberal social Christian would describe it) and further informed the Social Gospel with the progressive, optimistic assumptions and strategies of liberal social and political thought. The Social Gospel shared in Progressivism's idealism, its essential faith in the "American way of life" (albeit, moderately reformed), and its enthusiastic embrace of social scientific methods. Placing emphasis on social defects, both the Progressive and the Social Gospelers believed that a campaign of social-institutional engineering would correct the principal defects of the age and secure for urban America a more just and abundant life.

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²¹ May, Protestant Churches, 91. See also: Hofstadter, Age of Reform, 152; Richard Hofstadter, The Progressive Movement, 1900-1915 (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Spectrum Books, 1963), 8.

²² Paul Merkley, Reinhold Niebuhr: A Political Account (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975), 41.

In the story of the Social Gospel, we observe an attempt to Christianize the liberal cultural spirit and program that was being derived, most immediately, from the Enlightenment. To accomplish this, however, required the elaboration of a theology. Since the concerns of progressive Christian thinkers had become social in nature (lessening the orthodox emphasis on individual sin and personal salvation), the task was to give these concerns a proper theological foundation, one that would have a basis in scripture and tradition. The idea of the Kingdom of God provided such a foundation, an idea, as discussed above, very much at the heart of both the dominant liberal theology of the nineteenth century and of the American Protestant tradition.

It was the liberal, communal version of Kingdom theology that gave Social Gospel theology its personality. The stress therein was on Jesus' gospel as a call to earthly redemption (an emphasis we examined in the preceding chapter), and in his introduction to Christianity and the Social Crisis, Walter Rauschenbusch, the foremost proponent of the Social Gospel, succinctly expressed the spirit of this theology: "the essential purpose of Christianity was to transform human society into the Kingdom of God by regenerating all human relations and reconstituting them in accordance with the will of God."²³ A Social Gospel exposition of scripture would highlight Jesus' ethical teaching, arguing that his deepest desire was for a brotherhood of man and the alleviation of all forms of poverty. Salvation would therefore be presented as a collective experience attained when social injustices and disunities had been

²³ Walter Rauschenbusch, Christianity and the Social Crisis (New York: Macmillan, 1907), xiii.

eradicated and the resultant Kingdom of God had been established on earth. Discussion of such subjects as original sin and the need for divine grace (or of anything else that conveyed a sense of human weakness) would be minimal; on the contrary, attention would be drawn to man's capacity for altruism, to the potential unity of man and nature and between man and man, and to the applicability of Jesus' moral commands to the problems of the social order. The watchwords of the Social Gospel - proceeding from a liberal, nonevangelical theology - would thus include the primacy of ethical teaching among the functions of the church and, within the area of ethical teaching, the primacy of Jesus' absolute imperative to love one's neighbor.

To the Social Gospeler, advancing the Kingdom required the development of Christian character in and between individuals, and this development itself required a conducive social environment. In this pattern of thought, the role of sociology in the Social Gospel becomes clear; in the same way that the ideas and behavior of an individual are formed by the social environment in which that individual has moved (according to the social scientific perspective), so the same relationship between individual and environment prevails in furthering the unfolding of God's Kingdom. Whereas conservative Protestant Christians devoted the bulk of their energy to "saving" the individual, more liberal or socially oriented Protestant Christians asserted that the individual will never be saved unless collective life is first transfigured.²⁴ In addition, since structural social and economic reform was a major part of the

24 On this aspect of the mind of the Social Gospel, as represented in the thought of Rauschenbusch, see Vernon P. Bodein, "Walter Rauschenbusch," Religion in Life 6 (1937): 420-31.

strategy by which socially generated evil would be eliminated, questions of political activity gradually became part of the Social Gospel agenda. The Word joined forces with politics - righteousness with power, as described by Donald Meyer.²⁵

The area of collective life to which the Social Gospel gave considerable attention, and at which it leveled persistent, searching criticism, was American economic activity and its institutions. The conflicts of labor and capital were subjects of particular ongoing absorption.²⁶ As part of this criticism, the ideas of Progressive era social scientists (who, in some cases, were also connected with the Social Gospel) were to the fore; their relativistic assumptions, reformist goals, and positivistic methods became instruments of criticism directed against laissez-faire economic theory and its nineteenth-century apologists. Just as liberal theology (largely German) was crossing the Atlantic, penetrating American schools, and shaping the directions taken by religious leaders, so modern sociological and economic thought (also largely German) was becoming influential in secular scholarly circles. In combination, liberal theology and the social sciences gave the Social Gospel motive force and an agenda for action.

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25 See Donald B. Meyer, The Protestant Search for Political Realism, 1919-1941 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960), 36-37.

26 The involvement of the Social Gospel in problems of labor and capital is given emphasis in Hopkins, Rise of the Social Gospel.

Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918) provides an example of the Social Gospel in action and one whose ideas can and will be compared, in the remainder of this study, with those of Reinhold Niebuhr. Rauschenbusch has commonly been acknowledged as "the foremost interpreter in his time of modern social Christianity."²⁷ His career, like that of Niebuhr (and Karl Barth, for that matter), began in the pastoral ministry before continuing in the academy; from 1886 until 1897 he was minister at Second German Baptist Church in New York, located in a poor, industrialized area on the border of "Hell's Kitchen." This pastorate was the decisive formative experience for Rauschenbusch; it brought him into intimate contact with the suffering of urban, industrial America, thereby determining the direction that his theology, his writing, and his activity would take during the three subsequent decades. At the midpoint of this pastorate, he took a year's absence in order to study Christianity and sociology in Germany. In Rauschenbusch's words, "that is a good combination and likely to produce results."²⁸ During his New York years, he also studied the writings of the British Christian Socialists and of the Fabians. As David Noble has commented:

As a minister of the gospel who was also aware of the last two decades of economic and sociological writing, Rauschenbusch was perfectly qualified for that task of synthesis which would blend science and revelation into an explicit fighting faith.²⁹

27 Justin W. Nixon, "Walter Rauschenbusch - Ten Years After," CC 45 (1928): 1359.

28 Cited in Nixon, "Walter Rauschenbusch," 1359.

29 David Noble, The Paradox of Progressive Thought (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958), 230.

Rauschenbusch's experiences - the sobering urban work, the encounter with European liberal theology and social science - were repeated by many who would rank with the Social Gospel-Progressive persuasion.

Rauschenbusch's interpretation of Christianity placed particular emphasis on its Jewish origins and argued that the perspective of the ancient Jewish prophets ("Their writings are like channel-buoys anchored by God, and we shall do well to heed them now that the roar of an angry surf is in our ears"³⁰) provided the basis for Jesus' own teachings. Rauschenbusch places Jesus in a community in which the concept of Kingdom of God was familiar, potent, and popular. The prophets and their followers had looked to a messianic and apocalyptic hope in which - despite the changes over time in this expectation - Israel would be liberated from political oppression and in which justice, righteousness, and prosperity would be established.³¹ Rauschenbusch suggests that Jesus modified this hope, downplaying the violent, futuristic, apocalyptic aspects of this expectation and stressing present-day social renewal: "With the glorious idealism of faith and love Jesus threw away the sword and advanced on the intrenchments of wrong with hand outstretched and heart exposed."³² Jesus' sympathies were with the poor and oppressed, and his spirit, according to Rauschenbusch, was revolutionary; after Christ, it was the primitive Jewish Christian churches that most faithfully preserved this radical social teaching and

³⁰ Rauschenbusch, Christianity and the Social Crisis, 58.

³¹ On the prophets, see Rauschenbusch, Christianity and the Social Crisis, chapter one: "The Historical Roots of Christianity: The Hebrew Prophets."

³² Rauschenbusch, Christianity and the Social Crisis, 58.

"passionate moral energy."³³

The fundamental purpose of Jesus was the establishment of the Kingdom of God, which involved a thorough regeneration and reconstitution of social life. Primitive Christianity cherished an ardent hope of a radically new era, and within its limits sought to realize a social life on a new moral basis.³⁴

In choosing to emphasize the prophets and the importance of Jewishness in the life and teachings of Jesus and of the early Christian community, Rauschenbusch gave the Social Gospel a greater Biblical foundation. The movement's immediate origins were to be found in the cultural and intellectual history of the preceding two or three centuries, especially in the very recent history of the United States, and on these conditions other theorists dwelled. But Rauschenbusch reached back to a tradition he believed would provide the movement with a more solid, durable, time-honored foundation. This emphasis should be considered his principal contribution. In the same way that Karl Barth, across the Atlantic, would turn to the Bible and discover in his interpretation of its thought the only true basis for a neo-reformed theology, Rauschenbusch (although of a very different theological persuasion) found in Biblical tradition, and his interpretation of it, the basis of his mature theology. Unlike Barth, however, Rauschenbusch adopted a Biblical interpretation that did not challenge the prevailing assumptions of secular and religious liberalism; indeed, his reading of the prophetic

³³ Rauschenbusch, Christianity and the Social Crisis, 116.

³⁴ Rauschenbusch, Christianity and the Social Crisis, 143.

tradition served to buttress the decidedly optimistic, provincial American Social Gospel. We shall see that Reinhold Niebuhr, as his theology matured, participated in this serious reconsideration of Biblical thought and, in so doing, arrived at a position somewhere between those of Rauschenbusch and Barth.

Writing in the first decade of the twentieth century, Rauschenbusch was calling for that same "regeneration and reconstitution of social life" to which he referred in Christianity and the Social Crisis. The fifth chapter of this book, "The Present Crisis," describes the basic Social Gospel assertion - that the social crisis was fundamentally economic; industrialization and its consequences were destroying democracy, social harmony, and Christianity. Rauschenbusch, in the seventh chapter, "What To do," prescribes a more fraternal organization of society in which Christian idealism is allied with the interests of the working class. Two other books followed, but it was this first one that made Rauschenbusch's mark. In the words of Ellis Barnes:

Professor Rauschenbusch has given us the last word on the new social order. Men received his book as though a modern Isaiah had spoken. Not only was the message pure gold, but as a literary production it is worthy of a place on any five-foot shelf. In thousands of pulpits men took heart and affirmed anew what they had affirmed with hesitancy, while the more forward rejoiced that their message had not been in vain.³⁵

Rauschenbusch was representative of the Social Gospel in his pastoral and educational experiences and in his ideas. Reinhold Niebuhr, in an essay on Rauschenbusch written several decades after his death,

³⁵ Ellis B. Barnes, "Preachers and Progress," CC 37 (1920): 12.

succinctly characterized his work:

His message was simply to insist on the social relevance of the Christian faith and the social responsibility of the Christian. He did this by a special emphasis or special application of the liberal interpretation of the Gospel which was regnant in the nineteenth century and which was, in a sense, the religious application of the idea of progress and of the perfectibility of man.³⁶

* * * * *

In this chapter, we have surveyed the Social Gospel - America's contribution to the transatlantic liberal Protestant movement of the later nineteenth century - as a preparatory step to examining Reinhold Niebuhr's criticism of liberal Protestantism. It is clear that the origins of the Social Gospel were various and were complex in their interrelation, owing to their basis in both European and American conditions - conditions, furthermore, of a theological, philosophical, and socioeconomic nature. We have examined five factors (reflecting both "conflict" and "consensus" interpretations) that, taken together, gave the Social Gospel the particular form it assumed by the era of World War I, when Rauschenbusch was writing the definitive theology of the movement and when Reinhold Niebuhr, just graduated from Yale Divinity School, was beginning his Detroit pastorate.

After the Civil War, the American Protestant style or personality -

³⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Walter Rauschenbusch in Historical Perspective," in Reinhold Niebuhr, Faith and Politics: A Commentary on Religious, Social and Political Thought in a Technological Age, ed. by Ronald H. Stone (New York: George Braziller, 1968), 37.

one of active, reform-minded responsiveness in the American social and political milieu, one that had long been in quest of different "kingdoms" - was brought face to face with the dislocating conditions arising from industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. This encounter and the reflection it induced prompted many American churchmen to consider new modes of ministry - pastoral, teaching, and evangelical activity designed to alleviate industrial and urban problems. Over the next several decades, from about 1880 to 1920, the new orientation was fueled by influences both external and indigenous: liberal culture, liberal theology, and Progressivism. Of these, liberal culture was the key element in that it was very much responsible for the forms taken by both theology and progressive sociopolitical thought during the nineteenth century. Liberalism lay behind the Social Gospel and Progressive outlooks, and these movements in turn, in the course of developing their programs, gave liberalism a social emphasis; the Social Gospel, in particular, attempted to Christianize liberalism. Among Social Gospelers, Walter Rauschenbusch exemplified the belief that Jesus' teachings were relevant as instruments of reform in urban America and that, if applied, the social progress central to liberal theory and Kingdom theology would be realized. With this sketch of American liberal Protestantism in place, let us go on to discuss the thought of one who would bring a concentrated criticism to bear against that liberalism, joining with his European neo-orthodox colleagues in what would amount to a major redirection in Western Christian theology.

CHAPTER FOUR

DISCOVERING THE TRAGIC: REINHOLD NIEBUHR IN DETROIT

Following the impressive intellectual feat of earning a B.D. and an M.A. from Yale Divinity School in two years of study, Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) graduated in 1915 and accepted a parish of his denomination, the Evangelical Synod of North America, in Detroit. From 1915 until 1928, when he joined the faculty of Union Theological Seminary in New York, Niebuhr was pastor at Bethel Evangelical Church, a newly organized church in this German Lutheran denomination (now part of the United Church of Christ). This chapter will concentrate on these thirteen years of Niebuhr's early career, during which he gradually shifted his position from that of a young Social Gospel clergyman educated in the contemporary currents of liberal theology to that of an increasing critic of liberalism - a process that would continue and take on complex dimensions during the 1930s.

The years in Detroit were critical in the development of the young Niebuhr's ideas, a fact attested to by almost every writer who has devoted space to this period of his life. Donald Meyer expresses this succinctly: "Detroit was laboratory."¹ Bob Patterson does the same in stating that "his first lessons came from personal experience," and in an essay on Niebuhr's social ethics, John Bennett writes:

The Detroit of 1915 gave Niebuhr many targets for his Christian imagination. This early exposure to American industrialism in the raw (long before the

¹ Meyer, Protestant Search, 218.

days of the Ford Foundation!) was a decisive factor in the development of Niebuhr's social ethics.²

Niebuhr himself acknowledges this in more than one place. In his "Intellectual Autobiography," written in the 1950s, he states that industrial and urban ferment in Detroit "determined my development more than any books which I may have read." He also makes the same point throughout the partly autobiographical article "Ten Years That Shook My World," written in 1939, and in an interview conducted by Patrick Granfield in 1966.³ The decisive character of these initial years in an active pastorate parallels the experience of Walter Rauschenbusch in New York and Karl Barth in Safenwil. But, as shall be made clear, whereas Rauschenbusch's urban pastoral experience impelled him toward a sure embrace of liberal Protestantism, Niebuhr and Barth were led by their experience to begin asking the kind of searching questions that ultimately drew them away from liberalism.

Niebuhr's important responsiveness to conditions in Detroit was a reflection of a more general trait one encounters when studying his intellectual life: that, like many leading figures in American intellectual history, he was rarely away from the active, sociopolitical mainstream and that it was in this mainstream (not apart, in a vacuum) that he developed his ideas. Niebuhr was both pastorally and theologically sensitive and active in politics and social action, as Thomas Jefferson,

² Bob E. Patterson, Reinhold Niebuhr (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1977), 23; John C. Bennett, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Social Ethics," in KB, 62.

³ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Intellectual Autobiography," in KB, 5, and "Ten Years That Shook My World," CC 56 (1939): 542-46; Patrick Granfield, Theologians at Work (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 51.

in a similar sense, was both philosophe and statesman. As Martin Marty observes, he "dealt constantly with the language of a believing and practicing ecclesiastical and national community.... He possessed a rare gift of relating idea to circumstance."⁴ In the following passage, Robert McAfee Brown also discusses Niebuhr's ease in both roles and communities:

Niebuhr will probably be remembered most as a prophet and social critic. But full justice will not be done until he is also remembered as priest and pastor - one who not only made pragmatic political judgments but also meditated on the mystery of human existence and passed on to those who knew him a deep wisdom born not of sophistication but of humility. Indeed, his greatest gift was probably his ability to combine these roles, so that biblical insights could be related to the common market.⁵

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. also has called our attention to the relation between Niebuhr's thought and his environment: "Niebuhr's philosophy always bore to a degree the imprint of events; this was to be an essential source of his strength and relevance."⁶ Kenneth Thompson, in writing on Niebuhr's political philosophy, stresses that the development of that philosophy "was rooted in personal experience, including the impressions of an informed student of contemporary history."⁷ What was

4 Martin E. Marty, "Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and the American Experience," Journal of Religion 54 (1974): 336, 338.

5 Robert McAfee Brown, "Reinhold Niebuhr: A Study in Humanity and Humility," Journal of Religion 54 (1974): 330.

6 Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Reinhold Niebuhr's Role in American Political Thought and Life," in KB, 133.

7 Kenneth Thompson, "The Political Philosophy of Reinhold Niebuhr," in KB, 156.

the nature of this environment that played such an important role in determining the direction of Niebuhr's early thinking? A moment spent in outlining the chief features of the political, social, and economic setting in the period between the end of World War I and the Depression - Niebuhr's most productive years in Detroit - will allow for a clearer understanding of his theological ideas.

* * * * *

World War I had a searing effect on European life, and its effects on American conditions, although of a different order altogether, were nonetheless far-reaching. In America, the exigencies of wartime had allowed the spirit and strategies of Progressivism to be realized in concrete form. Wartime economic and political conditions had made greater rationalization and centralization of national economic and industrial management both necessary and possible. Woodrow Wilson, who, in his first term, had appropriated the Progressive Party platform of 1912, and who had run on a progressive, reform-oriented platform in 1916, led the nation through a period of unprecedented regulation in 1917 and 1918. However, the country tired of "war socialism" and, following the peace, the many programs were quickly dismantled in response to a general desire to return to traditional economic practice. As Schlesinger comments: "war had produced a season of moral dedication. With peace, selfishness returned."⁸ Many who had supported Wilson were,

⁸ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Age of Roosevelt: The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919-1933 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956), 41-42.

moreover, disturbed at the degree to which state power had been used to suppress dissent, a practice that continued into the immediate post-War period. Beyond these factors and, perhaps most importantly, when the realities of the War and the peace were measured against the idealism and rhetoric in which Wilson had bathed the nation, widespread disillusionment was felt.

The results of the election of 1920, as a consequence of these turbulent and upsetting events, reset the United States on a course with which it was more familiar and comfortable, but one which would also see certain trends and tendencies develop to degrees previously unknown. In Roderick Nash's view, Americans of the 1920s were not so much a "lost" as a "nervous generation":

The decade after the war was a time of heightened anxiety when intellectual guideposts were sorely needed and diligently sought. Many clung tightly to the familiar moorings of traditional custom and value. Others actively sought new ways of understanding and ordering their existence. Americans of 1917 to 1930 constituted a nervous generation, groping for what certainty they could find.... Popular thought in these years was remarkably conservative. Beneath the eye-catching outward iconoclasm, the symbolic revolt, was a thick layer of respect for time honored American ways, means, and rationales.⁹

The administration of Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge provided the American people with the "small town" government that many evidently sought. Government minimized its intervention in national life, a style reminiscent of Gilded Age politics when a relatively free hand had been

⁹ Roderick Nash, The Nervous Generation: American Thought, 1917-1930 (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1970), 2, 4.

granted to business and industry. In contrast to the later-nineteenth century, however, this was not an age of political equilibrium; the Republican Party controlled the White House and both houses of Congress for almost the entire 1921-33 period, losing only the House to the Democrats in 1931. For Democrats and progressive-minded political groups, it was a decade of disruption; faced with the task of defining a new identity after the Wilson era, the fact of a strong economy, and the fact of powerful competition from a popular, united G.O.P., Democrats spent much of this period dealing with internal division, building new bases of support, and seeking both issues on which to build an effective agenda and new leadership to promote that agenda.

"Normalcy" as reflected in government economic policy aided in stimulating a period of considerable economic growth. That Andrew Mellon, financier and industrialist, could serve as Secretary of the Treasury from 1921 to 1932 surely qualifies him (along with, of course, Henry Ford) for consideration as "symbol for the age." It was a time of great faith in business, justified, it seemed, by impressive technological innovation and soaring industrial output. From 1922 to 1929, G.N.P., profits, and stock prices were all on the rise, unemployment was very low, and price levels very stable. The primary concerns of federal administrations were reduction in federal expenditure and national debt with a view to balancing the budget; the lowering of taxes; the weakening of regulatory power; and the general encouraging of economic growth through a policy of laissez-faire. One could argue that, in these policies, there existed an unintended but incipient "supply-side" economic theory at work. Or, as Ellis Hawley has maintained, in writing of the search for a new managerial order, the 1920s were "the premature

spring of the kind of modern capitalism that would take shape in the America of the 1940s and 1950s."¹⁰ Whether the 1920s ought to be seen as a resumption of Gilded Age entrepreneurial vigor, as a hiatus between the reform-minded eras of Progressivism and the New Deal, or as the embryonic form of later, even more robust periods of free enterprise, its apparent degree of economic prosperity and stability was impressive. The American economy was, simply, the envy of the world.

Despite the undeniable gains made across the board in national economic life, there was (as always) a shadow side to the picture. The image of mass affluence was partly the product of a traditional American "boosterism" - a tendency to exaggerate and oversimplify the nation's strengths and accomplishments. The 1920s were, in fact, marked by their share of suffering, and Reinhold Niebuhr's Detroit was a representative example. The 1920 federal census indicated that, for the first time, a majority of Americans lived in urban areas, a development comparable in significance to the 1880 census which had revealed the close of the frontier. Industrialization occasioned migration and immigration and therefore contributed greatly to urban growth. Detroit, for example, under the impact of the young, burgeoning automobile industry, tripled in population during Niebuhr's years there. Some of the detrimental consequences of industrial and urban expansion included: the dehumanizing and stressful effects of new technological processes; poor working conditions and inadequate wages and benefits; the rising incidence of management-labor conflict; the reality that "sick" industries

¹⁰ Ellis W. Hawley, The Great War and the Search for a Modern Order (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), vi.

did exist despite general productivity; increasing environmental pollution; and the growth in squalid neighborhoods, urban poverty, and crime. Although, during these years, the poor fared somewhat better in their overall situation, the gap between rich and poor widened.¹¹

Attempts to mitigate these ills fared poorly, given the reigning public philosophy of laissez-faire and the weakened state of liberal and progressive forces. Organized labor, for example, suffered a major decline in membership and influence over the decade, in effect balancing the gains it had made through the 1910s. The reform impulses of earlier decades seemed at least temporarily bumped aside in a rush of preoccupation with a set of new "ethnocultural" issues such as prohibition, immigration controls, the teaching of the theory of evolution in public schools, and minority rights. The revival of the Ku Klux Klan and the strength of militant fundamentalist Protestantism were related to this resurgence of nativist, racist, nationalist, antimodernist sentiment. As many writers have stated, this latter-day "Know-Nothingism," coupled with the attractions of the businessman's way of life, transmuted the moral energy that had directed Progressivism's paths. Liberalism, in general, was being buffeted by heavy cultural winds.¹²

Reinhold Niebuhr therefore began his ministry during a very turbulent period in modern American history. His position in Detroit,

11. That the rich were getting richer and the poor poorer is stated by most writers on the 1920s, including: George E. Mowry, The Urban Nation (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 16; Hawley, Search for a Modern Order, 81; Schlesinger, Crisis of the Old Order, 65-68.

12. On this point, see: George B. Tindall, America: A Narrative History (New York: Norton, 1984), 2:1025; Paul Carter, The Decline and Revival of the Social Gospel (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1954), 41-42; Schlesinger, Crisis of the Old Order, 142-144.

moreover, brought him face to face with many of the acute problems of the period. The new industrialism of the automobile industry, reliant upon unorganized, semiskilled workers and fueled by the business ethos of the age (largely untempered by progressive protest), was not only creating social dislocation and promoting the economics of a new organizational order, but, in consequence, generating serious questions of an ethical nature. For a young pastor recently trained in liberal theology, "the brutal facts of life in a great industrial center," as Niebuhr phrased it, compelled him to confront squarely the timeless, confounding problems of man as he never had before.¹³ Liberal Christianity was to be put to a stern test by the conspicuous defects that Niebuhr encountered in the industrial, urban culture of post-War America.

* * * * *

From the perspective of 1939, Niebuhr wrote of his intellectual life in the post-war decade:

About midway in my ministry which extends roughly from the peace of Versailles to the peace of Munich, measured in terms of Western history, I underwent a fairly complete conversion of thought which involved rejection of almost all the liberal theological ideals and ideas with which I ventured forth in 1915.¹⁴

¹³ Niebuhr, "Ten Years," 545.

¹⁴ Niebuhr, "Ten Years," 542.

This is not the only example of Niebuhr, in his later reflections, painting with broad brush strokes and in simple forms what was, in fact, much more gradual and complex. The "conversion of thought" to which he referred was certainly not of a rapid, root-and-branch character. His rejection of liberalism was sure but uneven and at times tentative; it advanced in stages and was shaped by the constant need to reevaluate the definition and value of liberalism and of the Social Gospel in response to the facts of accumulating experience. That such a rejection was taking place from the early 1920s and was largely complete by the later 1930s is undisputed, but it was of a different nature than that implied in Niebuhr's later, oversimplified summation. What will be elaborated and analyzed in the remainder of this chapter is the development of that rejection in the period to 1928.

Niebuhr's divinity school training made the first major formative contribution to his thought and set him in a particular theological stance as he began his ministry. What he absorbed and accepted at Yale he brought with him to Detroit as armor and as his fund of resources in tackling the responsibilities of pastoral ministry. Yale Divinity School, in the 1910s, was teaching the liberal theology which, at that time, was very much in vogue. This theology emphasized, as we have seen, the historical-critical method of Biblical study; the serious study of contemporary social conditions; ethics; the humanity of Jesus; evolutionary categories; and religious optimism regarding human nature and destiny. In 1927, Niebuhr reflected on his college and university experience in the article "A Religion Worth Fighting For":

Like most budding theologians, I spent my time trying to adjust traditional concepts to the new world of science.... Like most liberals I was driven to root my religious certitudes in the gospel of Jesus, chiefly because its theological simplicities saved me from the conflicts with modern science into which orthodox and traditional theological formulas always betrayed religion.¹⁵

In the interview with Granfield, Niebuhr refers to a professor at Yale who "was of the school of nineteenth-century empirical theology" and who "claimed theology was an empirical science." Niebuhr, in this interview conducted fifty years after the events, maintains that he was bored and unconvinced by this claim.¹⁶ One might suggest that the older, conservative Niebuhr was remembering with not a little embarrassment, and was thus attempting to downplay, a youthful enthusiasm for the popular liberal theology of the day. In fact, he was clearly not bored and unconvinced by the general tenor of what he was being taught. In a letter to a former teacher, Samuel D. Press, written in 1915, he states with assuredness his acceptance of the liberal credo:

I have not gone for two years to Yale without absorbing a good deal of its liberalism. I have enough confidence in myself to believe that I did not simply fall prey to my environment.... Now I am a good deal worried that my liberalism will not at all be liked in our church and will jeopardize any influence which I might in time have won in our church.¹⁷

15 Reinhold Niebuhr, "A Religion Worth Fighting For," The Survey 58 (1927): 444.

16 Granfield, Theologians at Work, 65.

17 Cited in June Bingham, Courage to Change: An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 87.

This is an explicit statement, written upon graduation, of the young Niebuhr's theological orientation as he prepared to accept a parish of his denomination. As Karl Barth had set out in 1911 to Safenwil on his first major pastoral assignment, equipped with the liberal training of Berne, Berlin, Tubingen, and Marburg, so Niebuhr began his career by accepting a pastorate and bringing to it a similar background.

"I came to Carthage, where a caldron of shameful loves seethed and sounded about me on every side." So St. Augustine introduced the discussion of his years in Carthage in the Confessions, and in a somewhat similar way Niebuhr would eventually speak of Detroit. The "caldron of shameful loves" that would oppress Niebuhr was a brew of urban social, industrial, and ecclesiastical attitudes and conditions - loves for productivity, profit, and status. Karl Barth's Safenwil was certainly not the large city that Detroit was, but both were centers of industrial activity and both Barth and Niebuhr found themselves drawn into a vortex of conflict that put them and their theology to the test. As a result of these early exposures and experiences, Barth and Niebuhr, like Augustine, ultimately embraced a more Pauline theology.

As discussed already, Niebuhr was especially sensitive to the unfolding social, economic, industrial, and political events in his environment. Emil Brunner has observed that "Reinhold Niebuhr's first and most passionate concern was the criticism of American social conditions," and throughout his life it was the area of collective justice and injustice to which he remained particularly sensitive.¹⁸ In the

¹⁸ Emil Brunner, "Some Remarks on Reinhold Niebuhr's Work as a Christian Thinker," in KB, 29-30.

1960s, he more than once acknowledged an "increasing sympathy" for Catholic and Jewish thought and tradition because, in his view, they placed greater importance on the "social substance of man's existence" than did American Protestantism.¹⁹ In the search for answers to problems of collective life, Niebuhr's theological ideas were front and center - both determining the answers and being further shaped through the search itself. Although both his theology and his ideas on social ethics changed over time, he never lost either a fundamental social concern or an instinct to bring a theological perspective to bear on that concern.²⁰

The other important object of Niebuhr's criticism was the disposition and reactions of contemporary organized Protestant religion to developments in American collective life. Not only was Niebuhr targeting problems of socioeconomic life, but also those churches that failed to exert leadership in attacking those problems. It is in this double-barreled criticism of society and religion that Niebuhr's permanent intellectual debt to the Social Gospel is revealed.²¹ Social Gospelers, of course, believed that socioeconomic reform was necessary to the advance of the Kingdom and that churches should be in the vanguard of such reform. The influence of Walter Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel was still strong through the early 1920s, and many young clergymen and committed laypersons were quite naturally swept along in the current

19 Niebuhr, Man's Nature and His Communities (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), 15-20; Granfield, Theologians at Work, 60-62.

20 On the important relationship in Niebuhr's thought between theology and social ethics or other areas of his thought, see Bennett, "Niebuhr's Social Ethics"; Merkley, Reinhold Niebuhr, 22-23.

21 On Niebuhr as a "child of the Social Gospel," see Bennett, "Niebuhr's Ethics," 62; Schlesinger, "Niebuhr's Role," 131.

of what was still a movement of great idealism and energy.


Reinhold Niebuhr was very much a part of that still coursing current well into the 1920s. A list of his activities and involvements during these years is testimony to his early embrace of progressive Christian and secular thought. Niebuhr was active with the Mayor's Commission on Inter-racial Relations, the Detroit Council of Churches' Industrial Relations Commission, the Federal Council of Churches, the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order, and its successor The Fellowship of Reconciliation; he was Detroit chairman of the Robert La Follete (Progressive) presidential campaign in 1924 and active on behalf of Norman Thomas (Socialist) in 1928; he was on the editorial boards of The Christian Century - the leading organ of the Social Gospel - and of The World Tomorrow, on the masthead of which was the subtitle: "A Journal Looking Toward a Social Order Based on the Principles of Jesus." Niebuhr, in reflecting at a later date on these years, referred to the influence of Episcopal Bishop Charles Williams, a leading Social Gospeler. Calling Williams a "lonely, dissenting religious voice in the religious complacency of the city," he identifies the Bishop as "my mentor and guide" and as one who introduced him to the "radical social ethic of Israel's prophets," a dominant theme in the work of Walter Rauschenbusch.²² Clearly, Niebuhr moved in Social Gospel and other liberal or progressive circles, and this was most evident at the outset of his career.

In the way of a preliminary observation or two on the development of Niebuhr's thought to 1928; in particular on the forming of his critique of liberalism, it must be remembered, as stated above, that

²² Niebuhr, Man's Nature, 18; Granfield, Theologians at Work, 52.

Niebuhr was not a born-again opponent of liberalism; there was no sudden, dramatic, wholehearted turning from one way of life and thought to another. For much of this earlier period, a noticeable struggle took place between the liberal religious idealism with which he began and an encroaching realism that was altering the tone and the direction of his ideas. In addition, it must be noted that the challenge facing the interpreter of Niebuhr's thought is to determine what he meant by liberalism, what the relationship was between liberalism and the Social Gospel, and therefore what, precisely, Niebuhr was rejecting and retaining as his critique took shape. The salient point is that the Social Gospel and liberal theology are not synonymous; although the Social Gospel was built on the premises of theological liberalism and most Social Gospelers were theological liberals, there were theological liberals who did not espouse the Social Gospel.

At the outset, from a Social Gospel position, Niebuhr targets these extra-Social Gospel liberals - those attracted to liberalism primarily on intellectual grounds, those who incorporated its assumptions into the perspective and practice of "respectable," "sophisticated," conforming, reserved Protestantism, those who were uncomfortable with the prophetic, crusading, radical style of the Social Gospel. Over time, however, he began turning on the Social Gospel itself, until his rejection of liberalism in all its manifestations was complete. Despite this rejection, to repeat the point made above, the Social Gospel did make an enduring formative impression on Niebuhr, generating a lifelong desire to understand and remedy the ills of collective life.



* * * * *

There is ample evidence of a progressive stance in Reinhold Niebuhr's early writing. This shows up both in his recurring comment on one or two major themes and in a variety of scattered comments on miscellaneous subjects. In the latter category, for example, is his first article, "The Failure of German-Americanism" (1916). Herein is found a clear statement of the primacy of society and the community over the individual. Niebuhr is criticizing German-Americans for their indifference and lack of commitment to the critical issues then at the head of America's national agenda; he refers to a "social revolution or social reformation" of which the U.S. has been "in the throes," and comments critically on the German-American that:

His virtues seem to be individualistic rather than social.... He has manifested no great interest in a single one of the great moral, political, or religious questions that have agitated the minds of the American people in late years.²³

Niebuhr is discouraged that these immigrants from a nation with a "communistic" tradition have adopted the Anglo-Saxon individualism of the founding group. Also noteworthy in this first article is the friendly treatment accorded to modern theology. He criticizes the German-American community for its aloofness from the interdenominational efforts of the Christian churches (a Social Gospel-inspired effort) and for its doctrinal conservatism and repudiation of the liberal theology

23 Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Failure of German-Americanism," Atlantic Monthly 118 (1916): 14-15.

being propounded in its ancestral country:

Nowhere have Christian theologians worked with greater freedom in reinterpreting the old truths of the Christian faith in the light of modern scientific discovery than in Germany. But the old dogmatic orthodoxy, which the German church was first to overcome, has nowhere been more obstinately maintained than in the German-American church.²⁴

In both their lack of social commitment and their rejection of theological liberalism, Niebuhr suggests that German-Americans were being false to their own heritage.

That Niebuhr saw himself as within the liberal camp stands out in the following selections. In 1922, in his Detroit diary, Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, he records the following story:

Just received a pitiful letter from a young pastor who is losing his church because he has been "too liberal." I suppose there are churches which will crucify a leader who tries to lead them into the modern world of life and thought.... If preachers get into trouble in pursuance of their task of reinterpreting affirmations in the light of modern knowledge I think it must be partly because they beat their drums too loudly when they make their retreats from untenable positions of ancient orthodoxy.²⁵

In these few words, Niebuhr makes very clear his bias toward the "modern world of life and thought" and makes no serious effort to conceal his distaste for the "untenable positions of ancient orthodoxy." In 1923, he espouses a classically liberal position in a reflection on World War I:

²⁴ Niebuhr, "Failure of German-Americanism," 10.

²⁵ Leaves, 40.

There doesn't seem to be very much malice in the world. There is simply not enough intelligence to conduct the intricate affairs of a complex civilization. All the chief actors in the war appear now in the light of children who played with dangerous toys.²⁶

This is a plain espousal of the liberal assumptions that man is essentially good and that the extension of reason and knowledge through education would ensure general progress and the advance of civilization - a theory that had enjoyed celebrated support in America from the time of Thomas Jefferson and other philosophes of the American Enlightenment and that was occupying a prominent place in Progressive thought. The following year, Niebuhr voiced the same assumption in a diary entry that also brings into focus his theological position relative to the popular fundamentalism of the day:

A revival meeting seems never to get under my skin. Perhaps I am too fish-blooded to enjoy them. But I object not so much to the emotionalism as to the lack of intellectual honesty of the average revival preacher. I do not mean to imply that the evangelists are necessarily consciously dishonest. They just don't know enough about life and history to present the problem of the Christian life in its full meaning. They are always assuming that nothing but an emotional commitment to Christ is needed to save the soul from its sin and chaos. They seem never to realize how many of the miseries of mankind are due not to malice but to misdirected zeal and unbalanced virtue.²⁷

This is a most revealing passage. First, it makes manifest Niebuhr's distance from the very conservative, revivalistic Christianity

26 Leaves, 43.

27 Leaves, 50.

associated with such names as William Jennings Bryan, Billy Sunday, and Aimee Semple McPherson. Acknowledging the strength of this wave of "old time" religion is essential to understanding religious history in the 1920s, but Reinhold Niebuhr and America's other progressive-minded Christians put conspicuous (and often elitist) distance between themselves and this prevalent, robust, populist movement. Secondly, it betrays the youthful pride of the 32-year-old pastor and budding intellectual; casually and complacently, he dismisses the revivalists (in a "wise beyond his years" tone) with the matter-of-fact assertion that "they just don't know enough about life and history to present the problem of the Christian life in its full meaning." Thirdly, this passage again brings out the traditional liberal belief that the miseries of mankind stem not from anything malicious or innately evil, but from that which is "misdirected" or "unbalanced" - features that are contingent or accidental and therefore alterable. The notion of balance or proportion in human affairs is one with roots in classical philosophy and in the neo-classical philosophy of the Enlightenment from which liberalism received much of its modern form.

During the stormy and divisive conflict between fundamentalism and modernism that dominated North American Christian life in the 1920s and shaped its history for decades thereafter, there was no doubt as to which camp Reinhold Niebuhr attached himself. Indeed, even after his rejection of liberalism was largely complete, he (like Barth) also kept his distance from the alternative pole of fundamentalism, opting for an affiliation with the emerging camp of Christian realism or neo-orthodoxy - a position by no means at total odds with (although cautious in its

approach to) modern thought. In the earlier 1920s, his attachment to the modern cause was expressed without inhibition. An example is this entry from Leaves in 1924:

The eyes of so many people have been covered by superstitions and illusions that they are not strong enough to preserve their sight in the daylight of knowledge. Freed from their superstitions, they are blinded in the very moment that they are given an unhindered view.²⁸

Does this not read like neo-Enlightenment writing with its references to the illuminating agency of knowledge? The younger Niebuhr was unabashed in his waving of the progressive banner; he had grown up and been educated during an age when human inquiry was expanding into new fields and penetrating to new and startling degrees, when knowledge was growing and proliferating at a stunning rate, and when the face of Western culture was consequently being transfigured and, in some respects, disfigured. Confronted by the shock waves of the era, Niebuhr chose the path of progressivism rather than reaction; in the company of Progressives and Social Gospelers, he preferred to push for the crest, excited by the forces at work around them, and forward-looking in the belief that betterment was to be achieved by working with and through the leading secular and humanistic movements for reform. This basic adventurousness, a driving, fearless desire to explore and inquire, was a permanent feature of Reinhold Niebuhr's personality. The abandonment of liberalism would not mean a closing of the mind. As shall be discussed, Niebuhr's unbounded intellectual vigor made the rejection

²⁸ Leaves, 58.

of liberalism and the turn to more orthodox theology a most interesting and unusual journey.

In Niebuhr's first article, his positive comment on, and ease with, liberalism was one of the two principal features; the second was the importance he attached to social concerns, and it is Niebuhr as Social Gospeler who now draws our attention. In early writings, Niebuhr's dominant interest in social ethics is prevalent and easily identifiable. In 1920, in Leaves, he reveals the enthusiasm of a young Social Gospel pastor:

I am really beginning to like the ministry. I think since I have stopped worrying so much about the intellectual problems of religion and have begun to explore some of its ethical problems there is more of a thrill in preaching.²⁹

A Christian ethics that could be actualized was what Niebuhr sought, and in "Wanted: A Christian Morality" (1923), as in other articles, he called for the putting into practice of such an ethics:

A Christian metaphysics ought inevitably to issue in a Christian ethics.... Christians are not known, as Jesus wanted them to be known, by the breadth and passion of their social sympathies.³⁰

In these sentiments, Niebuhr was at one with Walter Rauschenbusch, who had summarized Jesus' message as:

All human goodness must be social goodness. Man is fundamentally gregarious and his morality consists

²⁹ Leaves, 27.

³⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Wanted: A Christian Morality," CC 40 (1923): 201.

in being a good member of his community. A man is moral when he is social; he is immoral when he is anti-social.³¹

Throughout his work, Rauschenbusch lamented the failure of the church, historically, to undertake reconstructive social action, and he called upon the church of his day to Christianize the social order. Likewise, Sherwood Eddy, a Social Gospel Missionary and organizer, described his "call" to the Social Gospel in these terms:

I came to the conclusion that henceforth I must live a social life, proclaim a social message, and help to organize a socialized society.... Our task, then, was not only to win or change individuals, all-important as that was, but to build a new social order and to Christianize the whole of life and all its relations, industrial, social, racial, and international.³²

Eddy went on to credit "that true prophet" Walter Rauschenbusch with helping to move him and many others after the War "gropingly to realize the social implications of religion."³³ Within this group was Reinhold Niebuhr, and the area of his commentary that best brings out a social concern is his writing on industrial matters.

In "The Church and the Industrial Crisis" (1920), Niebuhr presents impeccable Social-Gospel credentials in what is a spirited attack on both the economic order and the church. With regard to the former, Niebuhr calls for a rigorous and uncompromising application of the "Christian principle of love and unselfishness" and for some major economic

³¹ Rauschenbusch, Christianity and the Social Crisis, 67.

³² Sherwood Eddy, Eighty Adventurous Years (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955), 118-19.

³³ Eddy, Eighty Adventurous Years, 120.

engineering:

The wrongs of modern civilization cannot be righted without fundamental and constitutional changes in our whole economic order which will involve a radical reapportionment of social privilege and economic rights. Some traditional privileges of property must be destroyed and much authority heretofore vested in the holding classes must be distributed. Democracy, in short, must be applied in our industrial and commercial as well as in our political life.³⁴

He proceeds to assert that "the intensive development of the kingdom waits upon the establishment of more equitable relations in business and industry," and concludes with the sentence: "What the world needs is not only the gospel specifically applied but the gospel undefiled."³⁵ What Reinhold Niebuhr has set out here is the Social Gospel undefiled. The belief that the advance of God's Kingdom was conditional on changes in the economic and industrial order was a cardinal tenet of the Social Gospel.³⁶

In "The Church and the Middle Class" (1922), he continues the theme that the church must apply the "gospel of love and brotherhood" to "the urgent problems of modern life." Specifically, he focuses on the difficulties facing labor, with the recent strike against U.S. Steel and the report of the Interchurch World Movement in mind. This major labor dispute brought Interchurch, a mission-oriented movement favorably

³⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Church and the Industrial Crisis," The Biblical World (1920): 589.

³⁵ Niebuhr, "Church and the Industrial Crisis," 591, 592.

³⁶ See, for example: Rauschenbusch, Christianity and the Social Crisis, chapters five and seven.

disposed toward Social Gospel-labor interests, into conflict with its supporters in the business community. Here was an event on which sides were quickly taken, and Niebuhr, writing two years later, comments:

The Interchurch World movement report on the steel strike and many other pronouncements of the Federal Council of Churches prove that the leaders of the Protestant church are moving steadily in the direction of an intelligent application of the gospel principles to economic life and fully realize the necessity of changing the whole motive power of our modern industry if industrial strife is to be abolished.... As long as selfishness is enthroned in economic and industrial life labor will not only be provoked to use the weapon of the strike but will be compelled to avail itself of its power to equalize its unequal struggle with capital.³⁷

In this article, Niebuhr is again dwelling on a fundamental, consistent Social Gospel theme, concern for the situation of the working class relative to capital, and he declares that reform of the labor-management relationship would be necessary if greater progress and renewal were to be realized. The same theme is expressed two months later in "Wanted: A Christian Morality"; writing on modern industrialism, he says:

It has humanized the machine and dehumanized the machinist and has been so happy to claim the material fruits of its dextrous efficiency that it has forgotten to inquire after the welfare of the human automata who are almost lost in its intricacies.³⁸

Related to these comments were remarks on the alienation that had

37 Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Church and the Middle Class," CC 39 (1922): 1514.

38 Niebuhr, "Wanted: A Christian Morality," 202.

developed between labor and the Protestant church, an issue dating from early Social Gospel days. Comparing how Protestantism in Germany and America were faring, Niebuhr observes that the "manual worker" has graduated out of the church in America and that in both countries Catholicism "has had some success in holding the laboring man. The Protestant church has failed completely."³⁹ In another article, written shortly thereafter, he echoes the same view: "Catholicism seems more sympathetic to the needs of the common men who bear the burdens of modern life than the churches of the Reformation."⁴⁰ In these early articles, Niebuhr provides a perspective on Catholicism that, as has been mentioned, would continue to find elaboration in his thought as late as the mid-1960s - that Catholicism has maintained a greater awareness than Protestantism of the social aspect of man's existence and has therefore been more sensitive to the needs of the working class.

In a number of pieces, Niebuhr lashed out directly at Henry Ford and the young, muscular automobile industry of Detroit. Ford had become a popular American hero in the twenties - a man of small-town, traditional morality and an industrialist of shrewdness and success who amassed profits while selling cheaply and, supposedly, paying his workers generously.⁴¹ Here was the Protestant, Calvinistic work ethic in triumphant action. It would fall to Niebuhr and his progressive colleagues to reveal the chimerical proportions of this representation.

39 Reinhold Niebuhr, "Protestantism in Germany," CC 40 (1923): 1258.

40 Reinhold Niebuhr, "Is Protestantism Self-Deceived?" CC 41 (1924): 1662.

41-On Ford as a cult figure or symbol, see: William Leuchtenburg, The Perils of Prosperity (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 186-87; Nash, Nervous Generation, ch. 5.

In reality, Ford's workers were losing out to the accelerated production methods of ever-changing technology. The impact on the worker included layoffs, shorter hours, and physical exhaustion, and Ford provided no benefit or welfare packages to serve as a shock absorber. To all of this, Niebuhr addressed himself throughout the middle and later 1920s.

In 1925, Niebuhr reflected that "none of us is sensitive enough to care how much in human values the efficiency of the modern factory costs," and in 1926 restated this in stronger, harsher terms:

Look at the industrial enterprise anywhere and you find criminal indifference on the part of the strong to the fate of the weak. The lust for power and greed for gain are the dominant note in business. An industrial overlord will not share his power with his workers until he is forced to do so by tremendous pressure. The middle classes, with the exception of a small minority of intelligentsia, do not aid the worker in exerting this pressure. He must fight alone.⁴²

Also in 1926, in "How Philanthropic is Henry Ford?," Niebuhr bluntly discusses Ford's practices with such words and phrases as "ruthlessness," "conscience is lacking," "disregard of ultimate effects," "at least as naive as he is shrewd." He treated the Ford experience as a microcosm of the state in which he found America, describing the nation as "utterly naive in matters of industrial ethics" and identifying Ford as the symbol of:

an America which has risen almost in a generation from an agrarian to an industrial economic order and now applies the social intelligence of a

⁴² Leaves, 79, 94.

country village to the most complex industrial life the world has ever known.⁴³

The following year, in "Ford's Five-Day Week Shrinks," Niebuhr continues this severe indictment of Ford over the treatment of his workers, and he speaks contemptuously of the praise then being lavished on Ford, deploring the "incompetence of the social conscience of our age."⁴⁴ When reflecting during the 1960s on the Detroit years, Niebuhr had lost none of his spite for Ford, calling him the "tin god of Detroit," and stating tersely that Ford had "promised to solve all problems, but aggravated most of them."⁴⁵

During this period, Niebuhr's most thoroughgoing inquiry into the failings of the economic and industrial system was "Why We Need a New Economic Order" (1928). This article continues the pattern of criticism of the economic and social status quo that appears throughout his writing in the 1920s. Niebuhr observes, for example, that "competition is being eliminated by larger and larger combinations," that there has occurred a "continual decrease in the wages of the unorganized laborers," that "ownership is drifting into the hands of the banks," and that "the great wealth of the nation obscures the defects of the system." He notes the "failure of modern economic society to distribute its profits with any degree of fairness," and states:

While profits pile higher and higher, such bare necessities for the workers as compensation for

43 Reinhold Niebuhr, "How Philanthropic is Henry Ford?," CC 43 (1926): 1517.

44 Reinhold Niebuhr, "Ford's Five-Day Week Shrinks," CC 44 (1927): 714.

45 Granfield, Theologians at Work, 52; Niebuhr, Man's Nature, 17.

injury, unemployment insurance and old age pensions are practically unknown in American industry except where they have been forced upon the industry by the political state.

He concludes this article with the sullen, uncompromising assertion that "there can, therefore, be no health in the cultural and spiritual life of Western society as long as its present economic system is not seriously modified."⁴⁶

Although Niebuhr's thoughts on other matters would undergo change, this necessary relationship between economic reform and transformation in the collective spiritual life is a constant in his writing during these years. The belief that the traditional order was irredeemable and in need of replacement by a more socialistic form of management, in tune with the principles of the gospel, indicates his closeness to the Social Gospel. Rauschenbusch had tirelessly argued that Christianity and socialism were compatible and necessary partners, in such assertions as: "there cannot really be any doubt that the spirit of Christianity has more affinity for a social system based on solidarity and human fraternity than for one based on selfishness and mutual antagonism." Rauschenbusch also argued emphatically for the alliance of labor and progressive Christian action:

The new Christian principle of brotherly association must ally itself with the working class if both are to conquer. Each depends on the other. The idealistic movement alone would be a soul without a body; the economic class movement alone

⁴⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Why We Need a New Economic Order," WT 11 (1928): 396, 397.

would be a body without a soul. It needs the high
 elation and faith that come through religion.⁴⁷

The younger Niebuhr ran with endurance the race that Rauschenbusch and other fathers of the Social Gospel had set before him. The criticism he directed at society - the conviction that classical laissez-faire economics was inimical to the Kingdom's advance - provided the basis for his other main critical thrust, his thrust against the church.

* * * * *

When Reinhold Niebuhr's attack on liberalism is mentioned, there is a tendency to bring quickly to mind the period of the Gifford Lectures and The Nature and Destiny of Man, when that attack had matured beyond its earlier, changing form into something more stable, sophisticated, and fully theological. Having absorbed the orthodoxy of Barth and of classical Christian theology, he fired a powerful broadside at theological liberalism. What is important to note, therefore, is that Niebuhr's mature Christian realism was the product of some twenty years of heating and hammering theological perspectives in the forges of Detroit and New York. His attack on liberalism had begun by 1920, in the aftermath of a world war and in the midst of economic and social discontent, but it underwent major change between then and 1935.

Paradoxical as it initially sounds, it was Niebuhr's dedication to the goals of the Social Gospel that began turning him against liberalism.

47 Rauschenbusch, Christianity and the Social Crisis, 397, 409.

His understanding of, and sensitivity toward, the problems identified by the Social Gospel impelled him to push beyond its norms to a more forceful, radical criticism, one that would ultimately bring him, in the 1930s, to an embrace of Marxist propositions. Although within the boundaries of the Social Gospel, Niebuhr did not hesitate to rebuke its own churches in addition to passing censorious judgment on churches beyond its orbit. His main target was the community of "complacent" Protestant churches, many of them liberal, that kept their distance from the idealism and activism of the Social Gospel. Niebuhr, however, believed that even the movement itself was not measuring up to its potential. Writing during the 1920s, he increasingly and ever more sharply condemned the churches' lack of adequate interest in social ethics, their excessive institutional self-concernedness, their worldliness and susceptibility to class interests, and their consequent ineffectiveness.

Two early articles reveal that these criticisms quickly emerged in his thought. In "The Twilight of Liberalism" (1919), written after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, Niebuhr confesses his disillusionment and exasperation with the philosophy and the process that had produced, in the eyes of many, a highly disappointing peace. The liberalism to which he refers is, in this case, not theological liberalism but the secular liberalism associated principally with Wilson. Granted, it must be remembered that for the Social Gospel adherent the goals of political reform were inseparable from theological ends; the overriding, integrating purpose was the realization of God's Kingdom. Hence, when Niebuhr deplores the failure of Wilsonian liberalism at Versailles, this is not a disconnected comment, but one that laments

what is a setback to progressive Christian hope. Moreover, and most importantly, the secular liberal spirit identified in this passage does represent a spirit that Niebuhr believed was infiltrating many of the churches.

There is a gray spirit of compromise in most liberalism ancient as well as modern. It is afraid to tear down old houses and build new ones. It just tinkers around on the old ones and has no better luck with them than the architects have. It lacks the spirit of enthusiasm, not to say fanaticism, which is so necessary to move the world out of its beaten tracks. Liberalism is too intellectual and too little emotional to be an efficient force in history. It is the philosophy of the middle aged, lacking the fervency of youth and its willingness to take a chance and accept a challenge.... we need something less circumspect than liberalism to save the world.⁴⁸

Niebuhr's déte noire here is compromise. The young Social Gospel pastor betrays his idealism and enthusiasm, his impatience with "old houses," his willingness to take risks in the replacement of those old houses with new, soaring towers. Writing some forty-five years later, in Man's Nature and His Communities, Niebuhr described his response to the Versailles peace as "a reaction of pacifist perfectionism."⁴⁹ Perfectionism was then very much a central element in his thought, and he would begin to become aware of its presence and its drawbacks before very many more years had passed.

This same perfectionism, born of the fervency of a committed Social Gospeler, was directed at contemporary churches and first appeared

⁴⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Twilight of Liberalism," The New Republic 13 (1919): 218.

⁴⁹ Niebuhr, Man's Nature, 21.

in print in "Religion's Limitations" (1920). The main thrust of the article was a criticism of the churches' behavior during the War - their precipitate support of American entry and their "unreflective belligerency." Along with many progressive-minded Protestants, Niebuhr was disillusioned that the churches, liberal and other, had succumbed with indecent haste to war enthusiasm (and Niebuhr's own tail hung between his legs as he recalled his patriotic boosterism and temporary shelving of pacifism). Religion and nationalism had joined in an unwelcome alliance, and although the churches emerged from wartime eager to apply their self-satisfied, crusading energy to missionary purposes, their propensity to bend the knee to popular passions and to compromise with culture dismayed such critics as Reinhold Niebuhr. As Donald Meyer writes: "the critical lesson of the war lay in the church's acquiescence to the claim of eternal significance for ends that had no eternal value."⁵⁰ In the article "What the War Did to My Mind" (1928), Niebuhr writes of the churches' "undue vehemence, the unreflective fervor," the "degradation of its own inner life," and concludes by stating that "the war convinced me that religion can be effective only if it resists the embraces of civilization."⁵¹

The starting point of "Religion's Limitations," then, was criticism of the church for its unreflective, excessive passion during the War. This, however, turns out to be only one aspect of a larger criticism that becomes the central feature of the article and an early, coherent statement of what would become a leading theme in his developing criticism.

⁵⁰ Meyer, Protestant Search, 220.

⁵¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, "What the War Did to My Mind," CC 45 (1928): 1162.

In the first paragraph, he makes a critical distinction between the priestly and prophetic functions of the church and asserts that it enjoys the former too much and has been deficient in its execution of the latter. It is the prophetic element in religion, he maintains, that is more concerned with questions of moral interest and, specifically, of social morality (an element that was of great importance in Niebuhr's thought at the time, but that would take on fuller meaning and become even more important in his mature theology, as shall be discussed in the final chapter). Here is the careful student of Rauschenbusch, for in this comment on the church's functions one clearly hears Rauschenbusch's emphasis on the importance of the Jewish prophets - their insistent, passionate call for social justice and their protest against an excessive stress on ritual, individualism, status, and the other aspects of priestly religion. Dealing with the present moment, Niebuhr writes:

With the rise of industrialism and the consequent shift of emphasis from a purely personal to a social morality, the church discarded its individual and other-worldly morality no faster than an enlightened public opinion forced that course upon it; and while it is now preaching the "social gospel" with sincere conviction the average pulpit is still out of touch with the problems of modern industry and indifferent to its wrongs.⁵²

The limitations that Niebuhr discerned in organized Protestantism, limitations that he would discuss in numerous articles, were the reason why even Social Gospel pulpits were ineffective in dealing with dominant social problems. In this early article, he sets out many of these

⁵² Reinhold Niebuhr, "Religion's Limitations," WT 3 (1920): 78.

limitations, and it thus serves as an introduction to what would follow.

The essence of the priestly/prophetic distinction was that there were limitations stemming from "priestliness" which were inhibiting religion's prophetic task. Primary among these limitations was its inability "to direct and apply the righteous motives which it inspires." To explain this, Niebuhr identifies the church's tendency to concentrate on personal morality rather than on social morality, its desire for "worldly wisdom," its "insincere bargaining for public favor," and its temptation to "give man comfort and peace by the magic of the ritual or the purely subjective experience."⁵³ To Reinhold Niebuhr, these limitations or failures were largely the result of encroachment of that "gray spirit of compromise in most liberalism" that he excoriated in 1919, a secular spirit inimical to the progressive designs of the Social Gospel. Compromise, in this case, meant an unwillingness to carry fully into practice the directions implicit in liberal theology. To clarify again what may appear paradoxical, religious liberalism outside of the Social Gospel in Niebuhr's day was a house divided. Although following in a theological tradition that had strong, extensive nineteenth-century roots, a tradition with assumptions that unequivocally entailed a social Christianity, religious liberalism was a compound - it contained a secular liberal spirit that was so enamored with modernism, secularism, and humanism as to dilute the theological strength of the whole. From the Social Gospel perspective, which (theoretically) renounced secular liberal compromising in favor of a more radical

⁵³ Niebuhr, "Religion's Limitations," 77, 78.

politics, Niebuhr was condemning the ineffectiveness of churches, generally, because of their commerce with the attractions of the modern. He would express this idea well in Does Civilization Need Religion? (1927):

Since liberal Christianity is the product of an adjustment of the main tenets of orthodox Protestantism to the sophistication of the cities and the growing intelligence of the privileged and therefore educated classes, its whole moral atmosphere is much more determined by the special interests of these classes than it is willing to admit.⁵⁴

Writing in 1924, an election year (during which he actively supported the Progressive presidential campaign), Niebuhr called for the linking of theological liberalism with political radicalism - in other words, the separation of secular and theological liberalism. In at least two pieces, he chided the churches for their complacency and conservatism and argued that Christian idealism must find political realization. In "Christianity and Contemporary Politics," Niebuhr dwells on "the lack of vigorous social idealism in America" and makes extended comparisons with European society.

We are satisfied with our civilization. America is the one nation of the western world which is oblivious to the moral defects of modern civilization. Our political life reveals this blindness. When we pray for the kingdom of God we do not know what we mean, for our every attitude betrays our assumption that the kingdom is already realized in contemporary industrial civilization.

54 DCNR, 67-68.

Niebuhr warns of the danger of associating the Kingdom with the "American way of life" and bemoans the lack of "real radicalism" in his country. This is contrasted with the attitude of the British labor party, which "believes in a thoroughgoing and fundamental change in our social and political order, in order that competitive strife may be discouraged, unequal economic and social privilege divided and unjust economic authority destroyed."⁵⁵ This theme is continued in "European and American Reform - How It Differs," in which he regrets the absence of "an equal willingness or capacity to think honestly and profoundly upon the implications of the Christian Gospel for the reconstruction of human society, which has become such a marked characteristic of the British churches."⁵⁶ The same sentiment, that theological liberalism and political radicalism ought to dovetail, was expressed in Leaves in 1924; Niebuhr writes about speaking to a liberal-minded group and poking fun at them "for enjoying their theological liberalism so much in this part of the country, while they were afraid of even the mildest economic and political heresy." He continues by observing:

There is no one quite so ridiculous as a preacher who prides himself upon his theological radicalism in a city where the theological battle was won a generation ago, while he meanwhile speaks his convictions on matters of economics only in anxious whispers.⁵⁷

Niebuhr's progressive Christian credentials and his disapproval of

55 Reinhold Niebuhr, "Christianity and Contemporary Politics," CC 41 (1924): 498, 499.

56 Reinhold Niebuhr, "European and American Reform - How It Differs," CC 41 (1924): 1109.

57 Leaves, 62.

the churches' destructive compromise with the secular American cultural mainstream is illustrated in numerous articles in which he exposed Protestantism's individualism and its uncritical approach to classical laissez-faire economics. We have noted how, in "Religion's Limitations," Niebuhr remarks on the churches' greater interest in individual rather than in social or political morality; choosing the smoother, well-traveled road of personal salvationism, rather than the more rough, dangerous path of socially active Christianity, is an example, in his opinion, of religion's lack of rigor. In "The Church and the Industrial Crisis," Niebuhr writes of the churches' complacency:

The rank and file of the clergy seem not to share the insight of their leaders and still manifest a discouraging inclination to pious sentiments and vague phrases that are not feared by the foes of a new order and produce no confidence among its friends.⁵⁸

The "sin of equivocation" in response to the major social challenges of the day is discussed in "The Church and the Middle Class" (1922), and Niebuhr begins by making an explicit connection between Protestantism's limitations and its captivity to the middle-class character:

The church declares her faith in the gospel of love and brotherhood but fails to be specific in applying it to the urgent problems of modern life.... The vague and ambiguous sentimentalism which frequently characterizes religious utterances on economic issues does not only save the powerful elements of her constituency who are now the chief beneficiaries of economic wrong, but it is also a natural expression of the moral convictions of her preponderant

⁵⁸ Niebuhr, "Church and the Industrial Crisis," 589.

middle-class membership. Sentimentalism is a middle-class vice.⁵⁹

The idea of captivity to class is Marxist in its origin, and although Niebuhr made no violently partisan statements in behalf of the Marxist faith at that time, its premises appeared in embryonic form in many of his remarks, providing early-warning signals of what would burst forth in the 1930s. In the earlier 1920s, this class-based interpretation provided a framework for analyzing and criticizing the church's compromise with the culture of the American marketplace.

Niebuhr took the church to task in "Wanted: A Christian Morality" for another of its limitations, one of particular notoriety during the decade of "normalcy" - its harboring of race and class prejudice, which "flourishes without rebuke within the churches."

Anything would be better than the church's present policy of thinly disguising the fears and prejudices of the world with phrases and words which suggest a faith which the church does not possess.⁶⁰

The assertion that the church was not practicing what it preached had always been the basic Social Gospel criticism; the ethical teachings of Jesus were surely plain and absolute, yet the church seemed to be evasively avoiding the practice of its founder's ethical teachings, an argument Niebuhr makes in "The Paradox of Institutions" (1923):

The principles of Christ's gospel are not really popular with the average man. They run counter to his interests and cross his natural instincts.

⁵⁹ Niebuhr, "Church and the Middle Class," 1513.

⁶⁰ Niebuhr, "Wanted: A Christian Morality," 201, 202.

He covets the victory and peace which the gospel promises, but tries to escape the rigors of the moral battles to which it challenges.⁶¹

One of the reasons for the church's seeming paralysis regarding its social mission, according to Niebuhr, is the "instinct of self-preservation" that strengthened as the church grew institutionally. "The Christian church has never completely recovered the fine spiritual passion of the apostolic era which it lost when Constantine made Christianity fashionable."⁶² It is the church's desire to maintain a sense of prestige that blocks its potential agency as a force for social change. This again illustrates the dividedness of religious liberalism - the internal conflict between its theological positions and its institutional life. However progressive its theological leanings, it was greatly tempted by the secular spirit of the principality in which it found itself.

The temptation to compromise its ideals for the sake of its prestige is one reason for the strange preoccupation of the church with personal morality, and for its failure to emphasize all the social implications of the gospel. Men are usually more complacent in their social than in their individual sins.⁶³

In the steady stream of articles he produced through the 1920s, Niebuhr continued to bemoan the American church's dearth of social idealism. The legacy of the Reformation on the American church became

61 Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Paradox of Institutions," WT 6 (1923): 231.

62 Niebuhr, "Paradox of Institutions," 232.

63 Niebuhr, "Paradox of Institutions," 232.

a recurring theme through the middle years of the decade. The identifying principle of Protestantism is liberty of individual spiritual interpretation, and, in "Is Protestantism Self-Deceived?" (1924), Niebuhr writes that "the insistence on liberty made the Reformation the cradle of modern civilization and the beginning of modern progress." He quickly qualifies this by stating that "Protestantism's insistence on liberty has not been an unmixed blessing and its perils are becoming increasingly apparent." The peril that received Niebuhr's attention was Protestantism's historical encouragement of the liberal belief that more social and political liberty was a sufficient remedy for all collective ills. "The people who believed this belonged to the new commercial middle classes." Consequently, Protestantism has given "moral sanction to the idea of an economic life without moral sanction," and is therefore "hampered by its traditions and its whole mental and moral outlook from assuming moral leadership in our present economic world." Niebuhr then applied this analysis to American society of his day, where the commercial-minded were enjoying a decade of power and influence. He finds it fitting that Calvin Coolidge, a son of New England (the seedbed of American Protestantism and Calvinistic commercialism), should be occupying the White House at that moment.

The commercial classes are dominant in America and they are Protestant. They imagine themselves the devotees of the ideal of liberty but the liberty they love is the liberty which has given them a chance to gain control of the vast machinery of modern industrial civilization.⁶⁴

64) Reinhold Niebuhr, "Is Protestantism Self-Deceived?," CC 41 (1924): 1661, 1662.

Niebuhr had found a solid foundation for his statements on the connections between Protestant individualism and modern commercialism in the work of Max Weber, which was relatively unknown in America in the 1920s. Indeed, Niebuhr and his brother, Helmut Niebuhr, helped to introduce knowledge of Weber to America through their writings. Niebuhr does not conceal his familiarity with Weber, making explicit references in at least three places to the German sociologist and his thesis that Calvinistic Protestantism's individualism, belief in the sanctity of work, and conviction that prosperity rewards righteousness are the roots of the capitalistic spirit.^{b5}

Niebuhr repeats elsewhere the theme that the Reformation "paid a heavy price for its advances" because of its individualism, often comparing Protestantism's development in America with European experience. In "European and American Reform - How It Differs," he employs the term "puritanism" to describe the dominant form taken by the prohibition movement in the United States. Using this movement and other areas of personal and family morality as examples, he declares that America has become "the puritan nation of the world" but has demonstrated "a complete indifference to the problems of social life."

American idealism is narrowly individualistic partly because of the very Protestantism which produced it and which is older than the wealth of America. Puritanism is constitutionally individualistic.... Economically it expresses itself in the immoral doctrine of laissez faire.^{b6}

b5 Reinhold Niebuhr, "Capitalism - A Protestant Offspring," CC 42 (1925): 600-601, and "Puritanism and Prosperity," Atlantic Monthly 137 (1926): 721-25, and DCNR, ch. 5.

b6 Niebuhr, "European and American Reform," 1108-1110.

The spirit of the Reformation, refined by American puritanism, became Niebuhr's principal basis for explaining the nature of American Protestant idealism in the 1920s. He viewed European idealism, by contrast, as social in nature, given the strength of Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Anglicanism and their contribution to the creation of cultural and theological environments inhospitable to puritanism.

Niebuhr's frustration with the faintheartedness of mainstream American Protestantism grew no less pronounced as the decade unfolded. In "Our Secularized Civilization" (1926), he is blunt in his assessment:

No religion is more ineffective than protestantism against the major social sins of our day, economic greed and race hatred.... No real progress can be made against the secularization of modern life until protestantism overcomes its pride and complacency and realizes that it has itself connived with the secularists.... Protestantism, it might be said, does not seem to know that soul lives in a body, and that the body is part of a world in which the laws of the jungle still prevail.⁶⁷

American Protestantism separated the life of the spirit from man's collective life, adopting an attitude of laissez-faire toward happenings in the socioeconomic order. This seemed highly appropriate during a period when the disposition of American government toward the economic arena and toward commitment in world affairs also was one of caution and independence. In the same way that American domestic policy swung sharply away from the reformist, progressive interventionism of Roosevelt and Wilson and American foreign policy reflected a strong national desire to avoid war and other entanglements, so the churches backed away from spheres of activity that might have involved them in

67 Reinhold Niebuhr, "Our Secularized Civilization," CC 43 (1926): 509.

complex, demanding commitments. Niebuhr was obviously appalled at the anemic state of this Christianity, and ceaselessly appealed for a purging from the churches of liberal connivance, compromise, and complacency and for a recognition of the social context of man's spiritual as well as temporal existence. The article "Does Religion Quiet or Disquiet?" (1926) makes this point in its very title. Religion disquiets the individual conscience about personal shortcomings but leaves unmentioned the subject of social sin. In Leaves, in a 1925 entry, Niebuhr allows himself a bit more candor and humor than in his published pieces in the following sketch of a colleague at a ministers' gathering - "one portly and prosperous priest" - who neatly symbolized what Niebuhr was railing against:

He seemed to me to be one of those satisfied and complacent chaplains who has fed so long at the flesh-pots of Egypt that he resents anything which disturbs his ease. A man like that reminds me of the eunuchs of old who were robbed of their virility that they might adorn without endangering their master's luxurious establishments.⁶⁸

The dominant aspect of Reinhold Niebuhr's critique of American religion through the middle 1920s, therefore, was his condemnation of Protestantism's tendency to compromise, in complacent liberal fashion, with what he considered some of contemporary American culture's less redeeming features. Specifically, he emphasized Protestantism's comfortable relationship with classical liberal economics, making considerable polemical use of Max Weber's thesis that capitalism is an offspring of Protestantism. In this criticism, Niebuhr was targeting

68 Leaves, 76-77.

most Protestant churches, but he was especially upset with churches that preached a theologically liberal or even Social Gospel message, but that, in the final analysis, failed to practice what they preached - failed to understand adequately the ills of modern society and the degree of commitment necessary to struggle for remedies. Few churches, in his estimate, were sufficiently radical in their embrace of social Christianity.

Niebuhr's criticism of the enervating effects of the secular liberal spirit on the churches was thus launched from a position of radical, idealistic, social Christianity. In the Social Gospel tradition, he called for an application of the absolute ethic of Jesus - to trust, love, and forgive in a spirit of brotherhood. In Leaves, he records the account of a Sunday school class in which one of the boys, responding to the skepticism of his classmates regarding the practicability of putting this ethic into action, suggests, "Maybe it would work if we tried it hard enough." Niebuhr then comments: "That may be the answer to the whole question."⁶⁹ This, indeed, was his message to the Christian community - why would they not at least try a little harder?

A love which is based upon trust and which can issue in forgiveness requires a high degree of spiritual passion and imagination. The current religions of western civilization are supplying neither the passion nor the imagination.⁷⁰

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⁶⁹ Leaves, 122.

⁷⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Germany and Modern Civilization," Atlantic Monthly 135 (1925): 847.

In the second stage of Reinhold Niebuhr's attack on liberalism during the 1920s, cracks begin to appear in the idealism that had been the driving force behind his critique of American social conditions and of religion. These cracks did not quickly widen into fissures and bring the structure tumbling down, but they did signal the beginning of new directions in Niebuhr's thought and foreshadowed major shifts to come. Questions began to be asked and observations made that were foreign to his writing of the early 1920s. Evidence of a greater awareness and understanding of the tragic, brutal, and relative elements in life began creeping into his reflections. There was, it must be repeated, no clear break or turn in his thought; the transformation was gradual, these awarenesses coexisting with prevailing ideas but gradually gaining a more secure foothold. It was the rise of these elements in his thought that first created resemblances between Niebuhr and the European neo-orthodox theologians. Social Gospelers and religious socialists were plentiful in the transatlantic world both before and after the war, but those who took the path of Karl Barth were few, and in America even fewer. That doubt was beginning to press on some of the perfectionist assumptions of Niebuhr's Social Gospel-Progressive faith alerts us to the rumblings that presaged upheaval in his own theology and in that of many peers. As we shall examine at greater length in the following chapter, this doubt was emerging at a time when another kind of doubt was beginning to press on some who had participated in the roaring self-confidence of the twenties - doubt in the solidity of the American "economic miracle" and in the strength of the peace that the world was enduring.

At least three factors were involved in tempering Niebuhr's

generally optimistic estimate of human possibilities: the War and his increasing exposure to its effects on Europe, his pastoral work in Detroit, and his introduction to the theology of Karl Barth. The War made the same general impression on Reinhold Niebuhr that it had on Barth, Tillich, and the many other Western intellectuals whose thought and work were redirected in the aftermath of its concussive effect. Like many Europeans, Niebuhr, as we have seen, gave the War his support. His first article was virile in its patriotism; he would later write that he, like most of his colleagues, had "succumbed to President Wilson's idealism" and had persuaded himself that "the war would serve a good purpose."⁷¹ By the early 1920s, however, the disillusionment had begun to penetrate. In 1923, he confided to his diary: "Gradually the whole horrible truth about the war is being revealed. Every new book destroys some further illusion."⁷²

It was in 1928, in "What the War Did to My Mind," that he commented at length on its impact, both on him and on the church. When read in perspective, this is one of those pieces that seems to package everything a bit too tightly and neatly. Some statements, such as the following, appear to telescope into the immediate post-War period what actually took a number of years to develop. Of the War, he says:

It created my whole world-view. It made me a child of the age of disillusionment. When the war started I was a young man trying to be an optimist without falling into sentimentality. When it ended

71 Niebuhr, "A Religion Worth Fighting For," 444.

72 Leaves, 42.

and the full tragedy of its fratricides had been revealed, I had become a realist trying to save myself from cynicism.⁷³

Was Niebuhr trying to convince his readers that by 1919 or 1920 he had it all figured out and never thereafter wavered in his ideas? His writing from that time would hardly be called "realistic"; in fact, at the time of writing, 1928, he was in the very throes of intellectual transition and would take some sharp turns yet before settling down. The point, nevertheless, is that the reality of the War did give him serious pause, shaking many of his assumptions and planting questions that would gnaw at him over the following years. Throughout the article, he mentions that the war had qualified his optimism, lowering his confidence in simple moral absolutes and their application to collective action. Most important, he explicitly repudiates one of nineteenth-century liberal theology's main beliefs - that civilization was the vehicle that advanced the kingdom:

I thought that freedom was broadening down from precedent to precedent and that virtue needed only time and the aid of electricity to win its victories. I identified civilization with the kingdom of God. Now I saw how civilization was enlarging the areas of conflict, increasing the units of battle and sharpening the tools of destruction.... The war convinced me that religion can be effective only if it resists the embraces of civilization. The moral and religious ideal is in conflict with civilization.⁷⁴

The belief that religion was being corrupted by secular liberalism was

73 Niebuhr, "What the War Did to My Mind," 1161.

74 Niebuhr, "What the War Did to My Mind," 1162-63.

expressed in his early criticism of liberalism's compromises, but by 1928 that criticism was being incorporated in a fuller attack which included an emerging rejection of the optimistic, evolutionary liberal theology that had linked Christianity and culture.

The awareness generated by experience of the War was supplemented as a result of travels in Europe during the summers of 1923 and 1924. In a French zone of occupation in Germany, the Ruhr district, Niebuhr observed first-hand the consequences of the War and recorded his reaction with succinctness: "The Ruhr cities are the closest thing to hell I have ever seen." After some general observations, he moves to the theological and ethical planes: "I am done with the war business.... The times of man's ignorance God may wink at, but now he calls us all to repent. I am done with this business. I hope I can make that resolution stick."⁷⁵ These are obviously the words of a person shocked into acknowledging a truth with which he had hitherto avoided coming to terms. In other writing of this period, his new attitude finds expression in such phrases as "the horrors of the war," "the wreck of the war," and "the terrible national fears and animosities" - words pronounced in a tone of contrition, given America's "indifference to the great task of building a new civilization."⁷⁶ A note of realism was struck, a sound unfamiliar to his own ears and to those following his work of the early 1920s. From that basis, however, additional notes were slowly added, until a coherent, consonant pattern of notes was sounding themes of realism throughout his work. These are also the words of one bitter over

⁷⁵ Leaves, 46, 47.

⁷⁶ Niebuhr, "European and American Reform," 1109.

his own abandonment of Christian pacifism during wartime. The tragedy of war had left a lasting imprint on his mind.

On the home front, the everyday demands of being a pastor in an urban, industrial community also were introducing him to the tragic and engendering a more realistic outlook. No other experience contributed as much to the sobering of his perspective on man, society, human possibilities, and human destiny as did his years in active Christian ministry. Whereas the world knew Ford's automobile industry in terms of a material output, Niebuhr knew it in terms of human pain: "Detroit produces automobiles and is not yet willing to admit that the poor automata who are geared in on the production lines have any human problems."⁷⁷ By 1927, he was acknowledging the significance of personal contact and experience with the "victims of modern industrialism" - victims of lost wages, unemployment, inadequate skills, illness, hunger, and age. "No one asks about the toll in human lives."⁷⁸

The death of Bishop Williams in 1924 evoked from Niebuhr a relatively early admission that his enthusiasm and optimism were showing signs of wear:

It must be admitted that he didn't change the prevailing attitude of Detroit by a hair's breadth... If a bishop with all his prestige could make no bigger dent upon the prevailing mood of the city, what chance is there for the rest of us?... Society resists every effort to bring its processes under ethical restraint so stubbornly that one must finally be satisfied

⁷⁷ Leaves, 112.

⁷⁸ Leaves, 149-50; 154-55.

with preserving one's moral integrity in a necessary and yet futile struggle.⁷⁹

The burden of grief at the sudden loss of one who was a personal hero ("Bishop Williams is dead. I sit and stare at the floor while I say that to myself and try to believe it"⁸⁰) may have caused a momentary collapse of will, but these remarks did foreshadow similar observations. In 1925, after touring one of the large automobile factories, he commented soberly:

We are all responsible. We all want the things which the factory produces and none of us is sensitive enough to care how much in human values the efficiency of the modern factory costs. Besides the brutal facts of modern industrial life, how futile are all our homiletical spoutings!⁸¹

Comments such as these on the seeming ineffectiveness of the church - what he once called its "present impotence"⁸² - multiplied as the decade wore on. In 1926, for example, he made the following comparison: "The church is like the Red Cross in wartime. It keeps life from degenerating into a consistent inhumanity, but it does not materially alter the fact of the struggle itself."⁸³ Writing of the churches' importance as agents of moral restraint, he argued that they were therefore indispensable, "however irrelevant their ethical idealism may be to the main

79 Leaves, 72-73.

80 Leaves, 72.

81 Leaves, 78-79.

82 Niebuhr, "A Religion Worth Fighting For," 444.

83 Leaves, 113.

facts of an industrial civilization."⁸⁴ In 1928, in the last entry made in his Detroit diary, he wrote:

When one deals with the affairs of a civilization, one is trying to make the principle of love effective as far as possible, but one cannot escape the conclusion that society as such is brutal, and that the Christian principle may never be more than a leaven in it.⁸⁵

The crowning, summarizing expression of this realization was recorded in "Ten Years That Shook My World" (1939). Written when his rejection of theological liberalism was complete, the article lingers in its cataloguing of the failings of liberal Christianity before its author gets around to making a perfunctory autobiographical remark or two:

Such theological convictions which I hold today began to dawn upon me during the end of a pastorate in a great industrial city. They dawned upon me because the simple little moral homilies, which were preached in that as in other cities, by myself and others, seemed completely irrelevant to the brutal facts of life in a great industrial center. Whether irrelevant or not, they were certainly futile. They did not change human actions or attitudes in any problem of collective behavior by a hair's breadth.⁸⁶

Like Karl Barth in Safenwil, Reinhold Niebuhr was finding that liberal theology was inadequate as a means of dealing with the spiritual needs he confronted in everyday pastoral work. The objects of his criticism - problems of the industrial situation and American Protestantism's

⁸⁴ Leaves, 117.

⁸⁵ Leaves, 197.

⁸⁶ Niebuhr, "Ten Years That Shook My World," 545.

insufficiently radical response to them - did not change throughout the 1920s; what did begin to change was the theological basis from which was formed a strategy for doing battle with these objects. Concluding that the "simple little moral homilies," the unyielding adherence to a set of absolute, ideal ethical principles, was perhaps ineffective and unrealistic, he began considering alternative perspectives and strategies that might more relevantly assess and engage these targets. His writing, consequently, revealed increasing reflection on such matters as the relativities of social and political life, the comparison of love and justice as ethical norms, the strength of self-interested behavior, and the uses of power.

Niebuhr's remarks on human nature, for example, are illustrative of the transitional state of his thought from the middle 1920s onward. In "Can Christianity Survive?" (1925), he begins by espousing what is, on the surface, a theologically liberal belief; he writes that the world "can be saved only by a spiritual ethics which will inspire men to trust human nature as essentially good." He proceeds, however, to bring sharp criticism to bear on liberal Christianity, arguing that "it fails to understand how evil essentially good men can be. That is why Christian liberalism, particularly in America, is corrupted and vitiated by a facile optimism."⁸⁷ Sensing, perhaps, that this sounded paradoxical, he offered the following explanation in a future article:

Liberal Protestantism, which imagines itself very realistic, is particularly given to the vice of overvaluing human nature and obscuring its defects. It has fallen into this error partly because of the

⁸⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Can Christianity Survive?," Atlantic Monthly 139 (1927): 637.

influences of Romanticism upon its thought. In holding to the essential goodness of human nature it has lost the paradoxical attitude of Jesus who had the habit of telling good people how evil they were and of discovering unsuspected goodness in those who passed as bad people.⁸⁸

The same composite assessment appeared in his diary in a 1925 entry. He says that there seems to be "no reason why we can not cure people of greed," and he speaks of "the task of world regeneration." But he also insists on a "spirit of patience and humility" and cautions that the modern pulpit is "not really preaching repentance."⁸⁹ Such words as humility and repentance were rare in Niebuhr's earlier writing; as the years went by, however, they and related ideas would be given increasing space.

In 1927 and 1928, this theological balancing act continued as Niebuhr tried to define his unstable, evolving ideas on the subject of man's nature. He admits distance from liberal optimism in comparing his own views with those of a colleague: "He has preserved a confidence in the goodness of men and ultimate triumph of righteousness which I do not lack, but to which I do not hold so unwaveringly."⁹⁰ In another place he similarly maintains that "human nature is an intriguing amalgam of potential virtue and inchoate vice, in proportions sufficiently variable to prompt both trust and fear."⁹¹ In "A Religion Worth Fighting For," he writes about "the modern religious over-estimate

⁸⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Does Religion Quiet or Disquiet?," WT 9 (1926): 221.

⁸⁹ Leaves, 90, 91.

⁹⁰ Leaves, 132.

⁹¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, "A Critique of Pacifism," Atlantic Monthly 139 (1927): 637.

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of human nature" and the "fathomless sentimentality which corrupts the life of the modern church," yet loses no belief and hope that "religious idealism may be made socially effective in modern civilization."

The religion which seems to me worth fighting for is one which knows how to rebuke men and yet preserve respect for them, which knows how to be wise as a serpent in analyzing the delinquencies of men and yet can be innocent as a dove in its confidence in the essential goodness of men.⁹²

In Does Civilization Need Religion?, Niebuhr again refers to liberal Christianity's borrowing from Rousseau and the eighteenth century and suggests that this was a mixed blessing:

Here again religion suffered the fate of snatching error while it was borrowing truth from its opponents. Renouncing the idea of total depravity which was central in medieval religion, and in orthodox Protestantism for that matter, it evolved a sentimental overestimate of human virtue which is no nearer the truth than the mediéval conceptions of original sin.⁹³

By the time of The Nature and Destiny of Man, Niebuhr would become very comfortable with the idea of original sin, brandishing it with Augustinian vigor. But in 1927, although it was evident that he was edging away from theological liberalism, he still insisted on making clear his rejection of any concept that assumes the innate depravity of man.

In an article with the candid and expressive title "The Confessions of a Tired Radical," Niebuhr's ambivalence in his thoughts on man's nature and the question of innateness continued to show through. He

⁹² Niebuhr, "A Religion Worth Fighting For," 445, 446, 480.

⁹³ DCNR, 206.

begins with characteristic forthrightness: "I am fed up with liberals, with their creeds, their idiosyncracies and their attitudes." The object of his criticism is the insincerity of group behavior, specifically the group's habit of deprecating other groups while maintaining a belief in its own purity. His argument is that all human groups - because they are composed of humans - are subject to the same vices: "Is the evidence not all for the thesis that we are dealing not with the peculiar vices of particular groups but with characteristics of man?" Niebuhr, in this remark, made an admission of the importance of intrinsic human qualities, and, in fact, the observation he makes in this article on the relationship between individual vice and group vice became, with development, the basic premise in Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932). But, as he was apt to do at that time, he offers contradictory comments, concluding the article by stating that "the technological achievements of the west rather than any innate defects in the character of the white man have created the moral limitations of western civilization."⁹⁴ whereas at first he appears to be espousing a theologically orthodox view of man's nature that emphasizes the innate, he retreats to a liberal theological relativism in which material causation accounts for moral condition.

The same issues are dealt with in Niebuhr's first extended comment, on the theology of Karl Barth, "Barth - Apostle of the Absolute" (1928). In the wake of Barth's theological blast, whose impact was moving through the west (and only just arriving in the United States), religious

⁹⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Confessions of a Tired Radical," CC 45 (1928): 1046, 1047.

thinkers were forced to reevaluate their beliefs. There was simply no sidestepping such a challenge to prevailing ideas. Niebuhr too had to define his position, however unsteady and transitional it was at that time. Admitting the value of Barthian realism - "a wholesome antidote to the superficial optimism of most current theology" - and admiring its vitality, he nonetheless questioned whether too high a "moral" price was being paid, whether Barth was too preoccupied with the inner life.

It is quite possible that such a religious consciousness of sin has the moral limitation that it preoccupies the soul with an ultimate problem of life to such a degree that it loses interest in specific moral problems and struggles which must be faced day by day. But the merit of this note of tragedy in religion is that it saves us from the easy optimisms into which we have been betrayed by our moral evolutionism.⁹⁵

This is Niebuhr's first extended response to Barth and the neo-orthodox position. Over the following decade the response would evolve, and the forms taken by that evolution will be the subject of our final chapter. In 1928, he was obviously receptive to the themes of repentance, guilt, humility, holiness, tragedy; but pulling against the force of these themes was the counterforce of his formative Social Gospel experience. Schlesinger's pertinent comment that Niebuhr was a "child of the Social Gospel" is very much applicable to him at that time. The imperative to advance social-ethical righteousness remained at the top of his agenda, and the perfectionistic impulse that underlay this

95 Reinhold Niebuhr, "Barth - Apostle of the Absolute," CC 45 (1928): 1523, 1524.

imperative was still alive, thus mitigating any serious inclination toward theologies of realism. Niebuhr was yet to join comfortably Christian realism and political radicalism.

The importance he continued to attach to social-ethical reconstruction is well discussed in his first book, Does Civilization Need Religion? In this work, he questions the purpose, and evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of, religion. This endeavor was born of pessimism, specifically of an admission that many formidable obstacles block religion's effectiveness and that it thus does not play an influential role in social amelioration. His conclusion, nonetheless, is that civilization definitely does need religion. Niebuhr's analysis includes and extends many of the criticisms of American Protestantism discussed above - its individualistic, middle-class, worldly, overly optimistic character and its social impotence. The Social Gospel criticisms are augmented by a particular stress on religion as "the champion of personality in a seemingly impersonal world" - an obvious reference to the effects of automation on the labor force.⁹⁶ Indeed, he goes on to praise religion's redemptive value in saying that "the creative and redemptive force is a faith which defies the real in the name of the ideal and subdues it.... The religious interpretation of the world is essentially an insistence that the ideal is real and that the real can be understood only in the light of the ideal."⁹⁷ He still understood religion, then, primarily in terms of a moral idealism to be directed against social and industrial injustice.

⁹⁶ DCNR, 4.

⁹⁷ DCNR, 45, 46.

Although Niebuhr's idealism still appeared to be essentially strong, serving as a buffer and preventing bartnian theology from making a major impact, that idealism was nevertheless now sharing space with other, potentially opposing constituents in his thought. His growing recognition of suffering and tragedy in life had led him to take a fresh look at, and to place greater emphasis on, the meaning of the cross and its significance in worship and preaching. In a diary entry from 1926, he writes:

The cross is central in the Christian religion, moreover, because it symbolizes a cosmic as well as an historic truth. Love conquers the world but its victory is not an easy one. The price of all creativity and redemption is pain.⁹⁸

The previous year he had stated that there were too many men in the pulpit "who look and act for all the world like cute little altar boys who have no idea that the mass in which they are participating is a dramatization of tragedy."⁹⁹ It was his belief that liberalism did not adequately appreciate the tragic element in life and that this was reflected in a failure to understand the cross of Christ as representing "something in the very heart of reality, something in universal experience."¹⁰⁰ This was Niebuhr the pastor speaking. In his pastoral experience in Detroit he had seen and come to understand the human suffering for which he considered Christ's Passion an everlasting model, and he thus sought to give greater attention to this event in the

98 Leaves, 102.

99 Leaves, 89.

100 Leaves, 85.

Gospel narrative.

The placing of greater emphasis on the cross was one example of the entry into Niebuhr's thought of perspectives which can be called "neo-orthodox." Through the 1920s, these new ingredients remained in the background, but did not fail to exert a subtle and increasing influence on the more prominent areas of his thought. While in Europe in 1924, for example, he writes of "a sense of awe and reverence" experienced in Yorkminster Cathedral in England, and he reflects on an element in religion he finds conspicuously lacking in American Protestantism:

Religion is a reaction to life's mysteries and a reverence before the infinitudes of the universe The cathedral with its dim religious light, its vaulted ceiling, its altar screen, and its hushed whispers is symbolic of the element of mystery in religion.... The very appearance of many of our churches betrays the loss of one necessary element in religion. Everything suggests the secular rather than the religious.¹⁰¹

He writes that the soul learns "how to apprehend the infinite in terms of holiness and worships a God who transcends both our knowledge and our conscience."¹⁰² These reflections found practical, liturgical application in his own worship services once he returned home to Detroit:

Since spending the summer in Europe I have been devoting the entire fall to a development of our worship service.... I am now developing a program with litanies, confessions, acts of praise and every other bit of liturgical beauty and meaning

¹⁰¹ Leaves, 55, 56.

¹⁰² Leaves, 55.

by which the service can be enriched. It's a shame we have permitted our services to become so barren.¹⁰³

Niebuhr here echoes a common insight - a dissatisfaction with worship services which are rather anemic and reserved, which lack spiritual warmth and depth, which fail to bring the congregation to a sense that they are in the presence of God. His exposure to Anglican ritual served to open his eyes to this failing and, with characteristic reformist enthusiasm, he plunged into the process of liturgical renovation.

His principal argument in these particular diary entries is that there are "religious values in the cathedral which one cannot find in a discussion of ethical problems however vital."¹⁰⁴ This is a significant admission from a radical Social Gospeler, and it is also significant that he felt moved to reflect on it at greater than average length in his diary. Again, something of Europe broke through and touched him. Like his trip to the Ruhr, which jolted him and brought into focus his ideas on the war, this visit to the cathedral evidently gave him great spiritual pause. Standing out from his usual exhortations on the Christian's social-ethical task, this noticeably more peaceful reflection concludes that a balance is necessary between the ethical and the mystical, the scientific and the poetic. As it was uncommon to note references to humility and repentance in his earlier work, emphasis on the transcendence of God and on the idea of the holy

103 Leaves, 60.

104 Leaves, 61.

or the mysterious was also new. One does not normally expect to encounter in the writings of America's leading Social Gospelers such remarks as "a really beautiful worship service actually gives me a mystic sense of the divine."¹⁰⁵ These, of course, were the dominant interests of Karl Barth, Rudolf Otto, and other European theological realists and "prophets of the fourth dimension." In an English cathedral, during a moment of quiet and retreat from the crusade to reform the American social order, Niebuhr made contact with the understandings and the spirit which were essential to neo-orthodoxy. At least eight years, however, would pass before change in Niebuhr's intellectual and spiritual makeup permitted others to consider including him in the neo-orthodox camp.

By the time of Does Civilization Need Religion?, Niebuhr had formed a view of religion and of its role, which was opposed to the view which had emerged from nineteenth-century liberal theology. He asserts that religion must detach itself from culture rather than seek the kind of liberal partnership wherein religion seeks common cause with the priorities of society's cultural and intellectual leadership.

Whenever religion feels completely at home in the world, it is the salt which has lost its savor.... A religion which is perfectly at home in the world has no counsel for it which the world could not gain by an easier method.¹⁰⁶

Losing none of his belief in religion's role in "the moral regener-

105 Leaves, 55.

106 DCNR, 166, 177.

ation of society," he nevertheless concluded in view of the sorry state in which he found liberal Protestantism, that the church was no longer fit to assume leadership in the struggle, at least for the time being.

Meanwhile even the possibility of the future usefulness of religion demands the largest possible measure of immediate detachment from the unethical characteristics of modern society. If religion cannot transform society, it must find its social function in criticizing present realities from some ideal perspective and in presenting the ideal without corruption.¹⁰⁷

In arriving at this conclusion, he was in effect, abandoning one of the planks of the Social Gospel's traditional platform - that the church must be the vanguard of this movement for social-ethical regeneration. This was not an idealism of fatalistic, passive withdrawal from life, as he went out of his way to make clear in comparisons of Western with Eastern religion. He opposed the strategies of both West and East: "The Oriental soul is like a bird, freed of its cage, but with no wings to fly. The Occidental soul has wings but is so fascinated by its gilded cage that it does not care to fly."¹⁰⁸ Niebuhr was striving for a middle course between engagement and detachment, a position never successfully defined in Does Civilization Need Religion? That he stated a need for some degree of withdrawal, however, is proof of an increasing disdain for the world's values and an increasing regard for the significance of the transcendental element in religion - features of the neo-orthodox perspective; it was in the realm of the infinite on which he was placing more importance, as revealed in this

107 DCNR, 164.

108 DCNR, 185.

statement of undeniably neo-orthodox character:

It is man's sublime and tragic fate that he must find happiness in the search for infinitude amidst the flux of time, and he can therefore never accept the portion of morality for himself with equanimity.¹⁰⁹

Religion, then, was to stand apart from and convict the world, teaching it of the ultimate and inescapable meaning which can be found only in transcendent reality. He expressed this idea, as we have seen, in Does Civilization Need Religion? and also in "Barth - Apostle of the Absolute":

It is the highest function of religion to create a sense of guilt, to make man conscious of the fact that his inadequacies are more than excusable limitations.... Religion ought to condemn the achievements of history by bringing them into juxtaposition to the "holiness of God".... It is the business of religion to create a sensitive conscience.¹¹⁰

Our consideration of Niebuhr's thought to 1928 therefore returns to and concludes with his first major comment on the work of Karl Barth. It does appear that the Barthian message contributed to the modification in his idealism already taking place; specifically, it tempered that idealism by bringing him new insight into the question of the source of moral wrong:

If religion can help man see that the root of imperialism is the imperialism of the individual and that social misery and discord is in some sense due to the perversity of the individual

109 DCNR, 175-76.

110 Niebuhr, "Barth - Apostle," 1523, 1524.

soul, it has a tremendous social and moral function.¹¹¹

The important words here are the admission that social misery can be caused by individual sin - an innate factor. This is clearly an acknowledgment toward which he was struggling in the later 1920s, as we have seen, but which he seemed terribly reluctant to accept and affirm. His exposure to Barthian theology made it possible for him to state this position with, at least, the beginnings of assuredness. As Niebuhr came to affirm a fundamental evil in man, it became more difficult for him to maintain the degree of social-ethical realism to which he had adhered. A gap had opened in his thought between sinful man, on the one side, and a good, transcendent God, on the other. Lines which had once been indistinct were now becoming more sharply drawn, and this redrawing of the relationship between man and God would entail a redrawing of society's position in the picture.

This exposure to Barth, to a weighty presentation of themes which Niebuhr had started to consider with greater seriousness, served as a catalyst. The sense of tragedy created by the War and the social (often tragic) realism being learned in the neighborhoods and factories of Detroit were given forceful expression (actually too forceful for Niebuhr) in the Barthian credo. In the early 1920s, he had been quick to articulate his objection to the contaminative influence of secular liberalism on the churches; from roughly the middle of the decade onward, he began conscientiously questioning the premises

¹¹¹ Niebuhr, "Barth - Apostle," 152.

of theological liberalism, and his reading of Barth certainly provided him with a model against which to compare his tentative, transitional criticisms. In 1928, he wrote in his Detroit diary:

Everyone must decide for himself just where he is going to put his peg; where he is going to arrive at some stable equilibrium between moral adventure and necessary criticism.... A reasonable person adjusts his moral goal somewhere between Christ and Aristotle, between an ethic of love and an ethic of moderation. I hope there is more of Christ than of Aristotle in my position. But I would not be too sure of it.¹¹²

The lack of certainty as to his commitment to the absolute ethic of love reflects a decade of accumulating experience with the resoluteness of evil. The perfectionism of 1919-20 was being ravaged by the tragic dimension of man's social life. Soon that tragedy would intensify with the stock market collapse and consequent Depression and with the gathering storm in Europe. Niebuhr's theological adjustments to the steady withering of the Progressive-Social Gospel hope had only just begun. In 1928, he was still a long way from deciding where he was going to "put his peg," but Barth had given him solid spiritual food for thought, and its nourishment would strengthen and inspire him as he struggled through the turbulent times ahead.

¹¹² Leaves, 167.

CHAPTER FIVE

NEO-ORTHODOX THEOLOGY AND POST-WAR AMERICA

By 1930, the Barthian message had captured the spiritual attention of Europe. A mood of uncertainty had overtaken western culture in the wake of World War I. The insecurity of the Versailles peace, the internally crippled state of Germany, uncertainty over the future of the Russian experiment with communism, fragility in the international economic order, and, ultimately, worldwide financial crisis left Europeans profoundly disturbed, a disturbance that showed up in art and ideas. This same mood also created Europe's receptivity to "crisis theology." Barth and his followers wrote of the sovereignty, mystery, and judgment of God, of man's propensity for sin and his need for repentance, and of the importance of establishing a Biblical foundation for the Christian task. These proclamations sounded new emphases in theological discourse, coming after a century of liberal theology, and they found sympathetic listeners among a people whose self-confidence has been upset. Ideas on man, God, and religion had been disturbed and Barthianism offered a reformed theology that, for many, rang with relevance.

Protestantism was in a moment of crisis because of the unsettling questions raised by the war experience and by the realization that its presentation of Christian revelation was inadequate. Did the church still have a role to play? If so, what would its message be? As Adolf Keller writes:

For the first time the church has been called into question not from without, not by atheism, socialism, science, not by bourgeois indifference, but rather, it has been questioned from within, from out of its

own midst, out of its very nature - a situation which reminds us of the opposition of Israel's Prophetism within the religious Communion of the Old Testament.¹

It was Barthianism that was questioning the church from within and, by confronting it with a starkly Pauline, Augustinian, reformational theology, challenged it to identify itself. Barthianism attracted increasing attention and was embraced by large numbers of theological students. Accustomed to a liberal theological status quo, they found it radical and exciting in its possibilities. Perhaps, thought the growing number of born-again Barthians, they might oversee renewal in a despairing community and, indeed, usher in a new Christian age.

Did the same sentiments prevail in American culture during the same period, and did Barthianism find an audience? By the early 1930s, there was no shortage of published studies on Barthian theology in the English speaking world.² In addition, Barth's own works and those of other neo-orthodox theologians were becoming available in

¹ Adolf Keller, Karl Barth and Christian Unity: The Influence of the Barthian Movement Upon the Churches of the World (New York: Macmillan, 1933), 37.

² These include: George W. Richards, Creative Controversies in Christianity (New York: Revell, 1928); Alvin S. Zerbe, The Karl Barth Theology or the New Transcendentalism (Cleveland: Central Publishing House, 1930); R. Birch Hoyle, The Teaching of Karl Barth: An Exposition (London: SCM, 1930); Pauck, Barth: Prophet; John McConnachie, The Significance of Karl Barth (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1931); Walter Lowrie, Our Concern with the Theology of Crisis (Boston: Meador, 1932); Keller, Barth and Christian Unity; Edwin Lewis, A Christian Manifesto (New York: Abingdon Press, 1934); John McConnachie, The Barthian Theology and the Man of Today (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1934); Horton, Contemporary Continental Theology.

translation.³ Nevertheless, the character of the American religious mind was markedly different from that of its European counterpart, and this determined the manner in which Barthianism was received.

America had not suffered the same upheaval as had Europe. The United States had not entered World War I until April 1917, and American troops did not first go to the front until October of that year. Moreover, the Atlantic Ocean served as a psychological buffer, insulating Americans (in an age not possessed of the instruments of mass media) from the horrors with which Europeans had become familiar. In the immediate post-war years, the United States suffered an inevitable economic slump as wartime orders and exports ended, spending, prices, and profits fell, and underemployment and unemployment rose. But this downturn lasted only from 1920 until 1922 and was followed by seven years of even recovery. The period from 1921 to 1929 was also one of political stability - a marked contrast from the turbulence, indeed chaos, that plagued European public life.

The United States had built up a self-image and reputation of seeming invulnerability. For its first two centuries, America had been the primary object of its own attention. Virtually all its aspirations had been met, and, maintaining an illusion of innocence and virtue, it had not seriously discovered the meaning of frustration, fallibility and decay. One would think that the Civil War might have confronted America with a realization that it, too, could suffer, that there was an unpleasant side to its life. The Civil War, however, was fought

³ The principal works in translation to 1935: Karl Barth, The Word of God and the Word of Man, trans. Douglas Horton (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1928), and Romans; Emil Brunner, The Word and the World (London: SCM, 1931), and The Theology of Crisis (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931); Tillich, Religious Situation.

(in the North, at any rate) with a sense of sanctified mission; it was a "holy war" in which shed blood was meant to cleanse. The nation's narcissistic, messianic obsession, far from overcome, was reinforced. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the Civil War, little time was spent in subdued, shamed introspection; on the contrary, the United States plunged into a period of unprecedented economic and industrial expansion. No native philosophers of existential pain gathered to ponder the larger significance of this descent into fratricidal carnage. As Donald Meyer has stated, writing of the American mind:

"Repentance was not an abiding pattern in the American style of experience on any level, because in the atmosphere of the pervading "utilitarian" morality, the experiences that inspire repentance were lacking. Tragedy, abysses of meaninglessness, catastrophe, the experiences by which men realize the truth of the gospel, were not necessarily in lives led according to the American system, because the system was successful."⁴

Resistance to philosophies and moods of angst would occur again, after World War II, in the failure of existentialism to cloud American skies. As William Barrett noted: "Once again the old drama of America confronting Europe was being played out. Existentialism was so definitely a European expression that its very somberness went against the grain of our native youthfulness and optimism."⁵

As C. Vann Woodward so incisively remarked in "The Irony of Southern History" (1953), the assumption "that American ideals, values, and principles inevitably prevail in the end.... exposes us to the temptation

4 Meyer, Protestant Search, 301.

5 Barrett, Irrational Man, 10.

of believing that we are somehow immune from the forces of history."⁶ Woodward proceeds to say that the South has not participated in this "legend of success and victory," that the South's experience is thus closer to that of Europe's and that Southern historians, consequently, have a more realistic appreciation of history, especially of its grimness. Woodward was taking a cue from Reinhold Niebuhr's The Irony of American History (1952), which:

adjures us to disavow the pretensions and illusions of innocence derived from our national childhood, along with all self-righteousness, complacency; and humorless idealism. If we would understand our plight and prepare for the role we must play, we must grasp the ironic implications of our history.⁷

Niebuhr's point was that these illusions still reigned in 1952, and that trying to maintain such illusions alongside the responsibilities of new, staggering power and influence involved America in ironic perils. Woodward, in sympathy with Niebuhr's concerns, presented the Southern experience as one from which the rest of the nation might derive wisdom.

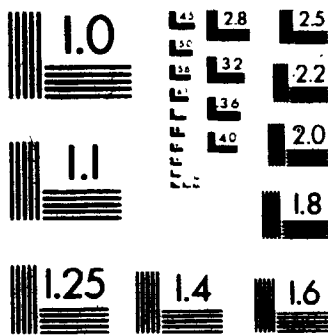
Twenty-five years earlier, those illusions had remained undisturbed by World War I. Since the American mind did not receive the same jolt that had shaken Europe, cultural patterns, including religious ones, remained essentially undisturbed. Liberal theological premises held sway, and the Social Gospel's popularity persisted through the middle 1920s (as we saw in examining Niebuhr's development). Whereas European Christian thinkers had become attracted to Barthianism in

⁶ C. Vann Woodward, "The Irony of Southern History," in The Burden of Southern History, rev. ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 189.

⁷ Woodward, "Irony of Southern History," 193.

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sizeable numbers in the early 1920s, Americans remained largely uninterested in, and ignorant of, continental theology during those years. America's uninjured pride precluded for the moment any important philosophical or theological revision. Yet in the later 1920s, some of America's theologically-minded would begin seriously investigating the Barthian option. If such an investigation did not occur for the reasons it had in Europe, what were the generating factors?

* * * * *

Many Americans may have believed that no significant weaknesses then existed in the general fabric of American life, but weaknesses assuredly did exist in the particular sphere of American Christianity. To begin with, American Christian religion mirrored the pluralism, restlessness, and pragmatism found generally in American life. As Keller observed in 1933:

Perhaps nowhere does the transitional character of present-day Christianity find such strong expression as in America. The ever-increasing diversity and confused variegation, the quick shifting from position to position, the pursuit of new systems, the experimentation with religious and educational methods, the mission spirit, and the wild tangle of religious sects - all these make evident the fact that a landslide has been started within the depths of the American soul which will not readily be halted.⁸

Wilhelm Pauck, writing in 1931, had stated that "American Christianity is still, historically speaking, inarticulate."⁹ By this, Pauck meant

⁸ Keller, Barth and Christian Unity, 177.

⁹ Pauck, Barth: Prophet, 8.

that the development of American Christianity and its theology had been largely provincial in character. Attention had been rarely paid to foreign traditions and trends. Furthermore, theological discourse had yet to attain to the degree of sophistication characteristic of European theology.

It was the latter point - the relative lack of sophistication in American theology - that was repeatedly noted by European theologians. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) studied as a graduate student at Union Theological Seminary, New York, in 1930-31. His reflections convey the impression of American theology as startlingly insubstantial. In a letter to Bonhoeffer, his correspondent remarks that Bonhoeffer had written to him of "the theological grotesqueness of the American church."¹⁰ Elsewhere, Bonhoeffer observes that "the intellectual preparation for the ministry is extraordinarily thin."¹¹ That American candidates for Christian ministry received a heavy emphasis on practical work was a traditionally prominent aspect of American seminary training. Seminary life was very communitarian and active. Among Bonhoeffer's reflections:

The average American student of theology does not fell in his element in a dogmatics seminar.... To understand the American student it is important to have experienced life in a hostel.... it is possible to become a minister without ever having heard any dogmatics lectures.... The American student of theology has one powerful advantage over his German counterpart; he knows much more of everyday matters.... The theological atmosphere of the Union Theological Seminary is accelerating

¹⁰ Helmut Rossler to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 22 February 1931, in Bonhoeffer, No Rusty Swords, 72.

¹¹ Bonhoeffer, No Rusty Swords, 88.

the process of the secularisation of Christianity in America.¹²

Bonhoeffer had immediately observed the students' lack of interest in the continental traditions of more rigorous, individual theological scholarship and their uneasiness, in particular, with German theology.¹³

Paul Tillich, who from 1933 made the United States his home, echoed Bonhoeffer's impressions. Reflecting in Theology of Culture (1953), he writes:

While in Continental Europe the theological faculties were the leaders of the Protestant churches, in American Protestantism the real power was in the hands of the presbytery or the corresponding bodies. Theology is not dismissed but it is reduced to a secondary role in American Protestantism.¹⁴

Tillich contrasts the American interest in social-ethical action and interdenominational activity with the "isolated system-builders in Continental theology."¹⁵ This American habit of not separating academic theology from the pastoral needs of the church - "the interaction between the training of the ministry and the training of scholars," as John C. Bennett describes it¹⁶ - became the distinguishing and most formative feature of American theology. H. Richard Niebuhr also

12 Bonhoeffer, No Rusty Swords, 87, 88, 91.

13 Bonhoeffer, No Rusty Swords, 71.

14 Paul Tillich, Theology of Culture, ed. Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 164-65.

15 Tillich, Theology of Culture, 171.

16 John C. Bennett, interviewed by Patrick Granfield, in Granfield, Theologians at Work, 201.

commented on the provincialism that characterized American Christianity.

In 1931, he wrote:

The German theologian appears to live several generations nearer to the Reformation than does the American since he is surrounded by a culture on which this movement has left its physical and spiritual impress in a fashion not possible in a new world civilization which received its Protestant heritage at second hand.... The American theologian or philosopher appears to abstract individual experience unduly from its historic context and to be inadequately aware of the cultural matrix out of which his experience is born.¹⁷

American historical development had been brief compared with that of Europe. Sweeping away obstacles to material gain - primarily in the areas of territorial and entrepreneurial expansion - had been the dominant features of American life after 1815. Educational and cultural refinement were not high priorities on the public agenda of a society where the "common man" was king. Consequently, the cultivation of theology and the education of ministers never received an abundance of attention. George Hammar points out that, even in 1926, only an estimated one-quarter to one-third of white Protestant ministers had been trained in colleges and seminaries.¹⁸ Hammar attributes this, in part, to "the calamitous rôle played by the mentality of revivalism in theology."¹⁹ The anti-intellectual, egalitarian mood of the revival, with its stress on instantaneous spiritual "rebirth," was an impediment to the establishment and growth of a rigorous academic theological

17 H. Richard Niebuhr, "Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century," in Religious Realism, ed. D.C. Macintosh (New York: Macmillan, 1931), 426, 427.

18 Hammar, Christian Realism, 111.

19 Hammar, Christian Realism, 112.

tradition. These traits of the American religious personality were ingrained and would remain prominent. In the middle 1960s, for example, Markus Barth made comments that could easily have been delivered in the early 1930s:

There has always been a strong tendency in American preaching to demythologize, that is, to moralize, to rationalize, to repeat platitudes.... Americans don't like to think systematically, abstractly, or philosophically.... Most Americans are pragmatists, and their theology can't help but be pragmatic.²⁰

In short, American Protestantism made a bad impression on Europeans in the 1920s and 1930s. American theology and church life appeared still to be dominated by the Social Gospel - in Europe's eyes a quintessentially "Yankee" theology because of its seeming shallowness. At the First World Conference on Life and Work, held at Stockholm in 1925, and the World Conference on Faith and Order, held at Lausanne in 1927, the American Social Gospel came under severe attack from continental critics. These conferences brought together Americans and their critics for the first time, and the confrontation gave pause to Americans who had little, if any, familiarity with such meaty, pungent theology.²¹ As Paul Carter states: "Many American churchmen equated any sort of theological reasoning with medieval attempts to

²⁰ Markus Barth, interviewed by Patrick Granfield, in Granfield, Theologians at Work, 232, 238.

²¹ On these meetings, see: Hammar, Christian Realism, 3; Paul A. Carter, The Decline and Revival of the Social Gospel: Social and Political Liberalism in American Protestant Churches, 1920-1940 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1954), 109-21; Kenneth S. Latourette, Christianity in a Revolutionary Age (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), vol. 5, The Twentieth Century Outside Europe, 506-7.

count the angels dancing on a pinpoint."²² Exposure to the Barthian movement, however, began to alter attitudes and was one of the several factors that caused cracks in the prevailing structure of American liberal Protestantism. Although, as revealed in the foregoing comments of Bonhoeffer, Tillich, Bennett, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Markus Barth, common features marked the American theological character through and beyond the 1930s, an undercurrent of criticism was beginning in the later 1920s. As Carter notes:

It was after Lausanne that Barth and others of his school began to be translated and discussed in the United States, and it was also after Lausanne that Richard and Reinhold Niebuhr began to be heard from as, in effect, mediators between the European theologians and their own countrymen.²³

The very structural "diversity and confused variegation," as Keller describes it, of American Christianity created a weakness that invited consolidation. The unresolved (and perennially unresolvable) conflict between fundamentalism and modernism that dominated North American Protestant life in the 1920s, shamed reflective Protestants and created an openness to alternative paths. At this moment of weakness, a source of strength was perceived in the newly-emerging Barthian movement. This movement's ideas, to be mediated by a group of younger, reform-minded theologians that included, prominently, Reinhold Niebuhr, appealed to a community beset by such instability.

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²² Carter, Decline and Revival, 114.

²³ Carter, Decline and Revival, 118.

During the unfolding of this confusion and the initial exposure to Barthian theology, the Depression struck. Carter writes:

The crash of 1929 and its aftermath were a psychological as well as an economic event. "Depression" meant not only "hard times," in the simple financial sense, but a deep, continuing, and pervasive spiritual gloom. And once the depression had settled in, it tried the spirits of Americans more sorely than even the war had tried them.²⁴

For Americans, these were years when a theology of "crisis" was indeed relevant. The country was learning first-hand and en masse, to a degree it previously had not, about hardship: unemployment and under-employment were severe; labor and farm income had fallen; profits and G.N.P. had tumbled; housing crises arose; public health deteriorated; malnutrition, disease, and mendicancy became serious problems; suicide rates climbed. The effect of this crisis was more painful in a nation conditioned to think of itself as a "people of plenty," a nation traditionally convinced that it had been chosen by God and blessed with abundance and virtue.

This scouring of the national mood led many intellectuals to rethink their assumptions. Among them, theologians, ever sensitive to the vicissitudes of human life (and especially to the presence of the tragic), were given particularly poignant food for reflection. In the darker moments of this somber period, such meditations as expressed in the following passage from Barth's Romans found sensitive ears:

Our present human existence...is overshadowed by suffering, as by a dark mantle, by a drawn sword, by an overhanging wall.... Our experiences of the

²⁴ Carter, Decline and Revival, 141, 142.

temporal limitations of our existence, of the narrow emptiness of our natural powers, of the great and petty tribulations which, as fragments of earth, we must "endure in pain," are but the shadows of our essential finiteness. That sooner or later we must encounter the final barrier is the Pain in our pains.... In the Spirit, we are enabled to know the meaning of our life, as it is manifested in suffering. In the Spirit, suffering, endured and apprehended, can become our advance to the glory of God.²⁵

Many Depression-era Americans were painfully discovering the "temporal limitations" of their existence, experiencing the "narrow emptiness" of their natural powers, and tragically encountering their "final barrier." Crisis theology, previously ignored for lack of interest and understanding, now came alive for some observers. Religion had always been a vital part of American life, but American religion was, more often than not, supportive of established culture. Precisely because of the nation's success, it had rarely challenged that culture. The Social Gospel had led one of the first serious charges, but (as Reinhold Niebuhr discovered in the 1920s) after a brave beginning had become pusillanimous - tamed by the keepers of the socioeconomic status quo. The onset of a crisis of such proportions as the Depression, however, made America's public philosophy and institutions fair game for criticism. Many religious thinkers, consequently, looked with interest to the new theology from the continent as an instrument with which to evaluate American conditions. The way had been prepared by the instability within the American Protestant community and by the initial introduction to Barth at, and after Lausanne, but the Depression served as a catalyst - creating the

25 Barth, Romans, 301.

conditions that enhanced sensitivity toward and understanding of, Barthianism.

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These remarks are not meant to suggest that Barthian theology suddenly swept through the halls of America's seminaries and became an overnight rage. Those theologians and other religious thinkers who warmed to, or even embraced, the ideas of the crisis theologians were not large in number, but even this movement was highly significant when understood in terms of America's traditional spurning of realistic philosophies or theologies. Hammar identifies three Americans "who show a distinctly Barthian accent in their theology": George W. Richards, Walter Lowrie, and Elmer G. Homrighausen.²⁶ Hammar, writing at the end of the 1930s, asserts: "That Karl Barth can get an American follower like G.W. Richards is a proof of the shift towards neo-supernaturalism."²⁷ Bonhoeffer, also writing in the later 1930s, makes the same point:

Where ten years previously interest was predominantly centered in the "social gospel," today an explicitly dogmatic interest has been aroused and is particularly perceptible in the most significant place of theological education in the country, Union Theological Seminary in New York.²⁸

In the earlier 1930s among the inquiring, the attitude ranged from curiosity to urgency. In 1930, Alvin S. Zerbe captured the general

²⁶ Hammar, Christian Realism, 4.

²⁷ Hammar, Christian Realism, 65.

²⁸ Bonhoeffer, No Rusty Swords, 115.

mood:

People in the United States who have kept in touch with religious thought know that the celebrated Swiss theologian, Dr. Karl Barth, has hurled an enormous bomb into the theological camp and caused quite a scatterment right and left. Theologians are not quite certain what has hit them, but they agree that it was something beyond the ordinary.²⁹

Walter Lowrie, writing in 1932, wrote with greater insistence of the need for America to gain access to Barth's work:

It is deplorable that none of his important works have yet been translated into English. The general curiosity about the imposing movement which he started would seem to be enough to embolden publishers to produce his works for English readers.³⁰

Adolf Keller notes that "interest in Barth has already been awakened," and that in America:

the new possibilities which the movement is opening for a disoriented generation are just as plainly to be seen as the limitations which it finds in the religious and psychological peculiarities of American thinking.... American Christianity is drifting toward the same religious crisis as Europe.... One glance at the Christian Century and the World Tomorrow reveals a profound anxiety concerning the meaning of religion today.³¹

Wilhelm Pauck begins his study of Barth by remarking on the increasing interest among American and British Protestants in continental theology and states that "this book has been written in answer to this need."³²

29 Zerbe, The Karl Barth Theology, v.

30 Lowrie, Our Concern, 10.

31 Keller, Barth and Christian Unity, 194, xix, 193.

32 Pauck, Barth: Prophet, v.

Walter M. Horton became the most articulate and committed exponent of the need for Americans to give careful study to continental theology:

Experience has shown that some of the richest insights into religious truth come when two groups of Christians with contrasting backgrounds wrestle with one another over some fundamental issue, candidly but respectfully, listening for the word that God may be seeking to convey to them through their theological adversaries. I am sure Continental theology has something to contribute to Anglo-American theology, just because it cuts across our accustomed ways of thinking, because it refuses to be drawn over into our system of thought or comprehended in terms of our categories.... At one point, particularly, I am convinced that the sympathetic study of Continental theology will tend to deepen, correct and steady our faith: at the point where we face the mystery of the future, the mystery of human destiny.³³

Horton wrote of a generalized disease corrupting industrial civilization which, he believed, had reached a critical stage in Europe and which would soon plague America as well:

A line of crisis is moving across our world like the shadow of an eclipse; we need not wait for it passively or fatalistically, but we must pass through it.... What I wish to commend to the studious attention of the Anglo-Saxon world is not just Barth's "Theology of Crisis," but the great, multiform movement of Christian thought which has emerged simultaneously within the various Continental churches.³⁴

Horton placed continental theology within this broader "multiform movement," which included such thinkers as Léon Bloy, Jacques Maritain,

³³ Horton, Contemporary Continental Theology, xv.

³⁴ Horton, Contemporary Continental Theology, xix. xx.

Erich Przywara, Mikhail Bulgakov, and Nicholas Berdyaev. He identifies them all as leaders of "that four-dimensional, mysterious, tragic view of life that has affected all the principal leaders of Continental thought today and which sets them apart as a group from the prevailing temper of the Anglo-Saxon world."³⁵ Horton believed that the groundswell of change destroying political and theological liberalism elsewhere in the world was beginning to shake America and that the American theological community thus needed exposure to continental thought to give it stability and depth.³⁶

One American who is representative of this developing interest in crisis theology and whose work underwent a major change was Edwin Lewis. In 1924, he gained attention for Jesus Christ and the Human Quest, which he later described as an attempt "to preserve the great evangelical emphases of Christianity on a philosophical basis arrived at in the first place with no least reference to Christianity itself."³⁷ The premises were liberal, revealed in his naturalistic belief in the ontological unity of God, nature, and man. Lewis recounts the key aspects of change in his thought:

It became increasingly clear to me that Christianity could not be "adjusted" to any kind of a priori philosophy, because it contains its own philosophy Christianity.... called, I became convinced, for a living God, who knows what he is doing and why he is doing it; a God who is prior to his creation and other than his creation, and who in his creation is fulfilling a purpose which he himself freely chose.... a God to whom sin is a reality and an offence.³⁸

³⁵ Horton, Contemporary Continental Theology, xv.

³⁶ See Horton, Contemporary Continental Theology, 144-45, 230.

³⁷ Edwin Lewis, "From Philosophy to Revelation," CC 56 (1939): 762.

³⁸ Lewis, "From Philosophy to Revelation," 762-63.

"The Fatal Apostasy of the Modern Church" appeared in 1933 and A Christian Manifesto in 1934. In these, Lewis takes Barthian positions on the otherness of God, sin, the Atonement, and the Bible as God's Word. In the following excerpt, Lewis contrasts liberalism and orthodoxy:

Modern theological liberalism undoubtedly rendered the church an important service.... Nevertheless, all is not well with us. Liberalism has not brought us to the Promised Land.... We so stressed the Bible as coming to us in "the words of men" that the sense in which it is also "the word of God" has become increasingly vague.... We exposed all the delicate nuances of spiritual experience to the cold dispassionate gaze of psychology, until it has become a question whether psychology of religion is not in danger of destroying the very thing it lives by. And in particular we were so determined to recover for the church "the human Jesus" that we lost sight of the fact that the church is the creation of "the divine Christ."³⁹

The tone of this article was echoed in Christian Manifesto, a book about which he later stated: "I am firmly convinced that the book, with all its faults of overemphasis represents the real meaning of the Christian revelation."⁴⁰ For taking his positions with vigor, Lewis was heavily criticized, in some cases with hostility. To many who were not attracted by continental theology and were ignorant of its true character, such positions could be evidence of a sell-out to fundamentalism, a failure of professional creativity, or senility.⁴¹

³⁹ Edwin Lewis, "The Fatal Apostasy of the Modern Church," Religion in Life (1933): 483.

⁴⁰ Lewis, "From Philosophy to Revelation," 764.

⁴¹ See Lewis' mention of reactions to "Fatal Apostasy" in Christian Manifesto, 9.

Edwin Lewis, then, is an easily-identifiable example of one who made a clear swing from theological liberalism to an embrace of crisis theology, from "an attempt to graft the gospel on a philosophy" to "an attempt to take the gospel 'as is.'"⁴²

That liberal theology, once novel and fashionable, was past its prime, sluggish, and under attack, is perhaps best illustrated by the comments made in 1935 by the one-time celebrated spokesman of American theological liberalism, Harry Emerson Fosdick. In "Beyond Modernism," Fosdick argues that the adjustment of Christian thought to modern knowledge was necessary: "We refused to live bifurcated lives, our intellect in the late nineteenth century and our religion in the early sixteenth century."⁴³ But he goes on to make the important point that this indispensable harmonization of Christianity and the new science does not entail compromising with contemporary culture. He calls on the church: "Stop this endeavor to harmonize yourself with modern culture as though that were a standard and criterion." He refers to the "illusory belief in inevitable progress" and its accompanying "lush optimism." Again, he tells the church: "I say to you as to myself: Come out of these intellectual cubicles and sentimental retreats which we built by adapting Christian faith to an optimistic era. Underline this: Sin is real."⁴⁴ Fosdick's call for the church to go beyond modernism to a more critical, realistic, less compromising stance is surely indicative of the forces at work in the American Protestant community.

⁴² Lewis, "From Philosophy to Revelation," 764.

⁴³ Harry Emerson Fosdick, "Beyond Modernism: A Sermon," CC 52 (1935): 1549.

⁴⁴ Fosdick, "Beyond Modernism," 1550, 1551.

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Neo-orthodoxy, it has been argued here, had a genuine following in America. Some became outright disciples of the European movement; others represented a more inquiring, transitional position, calling liberal assumptions into question but treating Barthianism and its theological relatives with caution. Neo-orthodoxy arose, as Sydney Ahlstrom importantly notes, not from an attempt to find a "median or center position" between modernism and fundamentalism. Rather, it:

tended more to transcend than to grow out of the stalemated "debate" between modernists and fundamentalists. It conceived its task largely as that of emphasizing the relevance of the faith to a generation which was deemed poorly schooled for the tragedies history was preparing.⁴⁵

The American religious community was extremely heterogeneous, and it derived its guiding theological ideas from an unstable, evolving liberal theology that did not proceed from a set of fundamentals, but which adapted itself to contemporary culture as it went along. The tenuousness of this situation, exacerbated by the fundamentalist-modernist conflict, provided an opening for alternative approaches that would transcend this particular conflict and offer hope for greater theological unity and rigor. The European conferences provided exposure to such an approach, and continental theology gained entry and attention after 1927. The Depression, because of the tragedy with which it opposed the lightheartedness, self-assurance, and material plenitude of America, became a catalyst - creating conditions that further focused

45 Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "Neo-Orthodoxy Demythologized," CC 74 (1957): 650.

theologians' minds on the relevance of neo-orthodoxy.

In the final chapter, to follow, we will reintroduce our discussion of Reinhold Niebuhr, continuing our analysis of his attack on theological liberalism as it grew into its fullest form in the middle 1930s. Niebuhr serves as the remaining, and most important, factor that contributed to the introduction of Christian realism into the American Protestant community. Although he belongs to the broad group of critics and reformers whose situation has been sketched in this chapter, he stands out conspicuously from that group, giving it leadership and bringing it attention. His theology is of a nature that defies easy categorization and, hence, quickly segregates him. Because of Niebuhr's influence, if we examine his position relative to both European and American traditions in the period from 1929 to 1935 we will be better able to understand the changing character of American Protestant theology during those years.

CHAPTER SIX

REINHOLD NIEBUHR'S MATURE THEOLOGY

To state that Reinhold Niebuhr was the premier American exponent of crisis theology - the mediator between one theological community and another - is partly true, but it leaves much of the story untold. In arriving at a mature theology by 1935, he joined Edwin Lewis, Walter Horton, and others in giving pronounced emphasis to theological themes that went against the liberal grain. Yet Niebuhr attracted vastly disproportionate attention. This was so because of the greater sophistication of his ideas and because of the polemical, often magnetic, quality of his work and of his personality. The more sophisticated nature of his ideas is of interest to us because here we discover that Niebuhr was not a neo-orthodox clone, not a publicity agent who merely transcribed and announced without offering interpretation. On the contrary, Niebuhr's mature theology became a complex blend derived from Biblical thought and tradition, continental theological influence, American cultural and religious patterns, and personal experience.

In the period from 1929 to 1935, despite change in his thought, Niebuhr continued to stand out as a child of the Social Gospel. These were years of frenetic activity on behalf of various causes during which the pace he had set for himself in Detroit was not only equalled but surpassed. Besides teaching at Union Theological Seminary and authoring several books and numerous articles, he was often "on the road," lecturing at other colleges and universities. He continued editorial work on the boards of leading periodicals of religious and secular opinion; he was active on commissions of the Federal Council of Churches and of the ruling body of the Evangelical Synod; he played roles in

organizing the League for Independent Political Action, The Fellowship of Socialist Christians, and the Theological Discussion Group; he worked closely with political liberals on behalf of Southern coal-miners and sharecroppers during the crisis years of the early 1930s; he actively supported Norman Thomas (Socialist) for President in 1932 and 1936; and he was instrumental in securing a home in America for many refugees from Nazi Germany (most notably among them, Paul Tillich).

As in the 1920s, it was Niebuhr's grappling with social-ethical problems that contributed greatly to revision in his theological ideas. During the 1920s, the tragedy of urban life in Detroit and the failure of many liberal churches to confront adequately the prevailing injustices had led Niebuhr to question secular and religious liberalism. His desire, initially, was to see the Social Gospel, built on the perfectionistic ethic of Christian love, uncompromisingly lock horns with the capitalistic socioeconomic system and its defenders in the Protestant churches. He first turned his idealism against the secular liberalism that had permitted the disappointing Versailles peace. This secular liberal spirit had insinuated itself into some of the liberal Protestant churches (already weakened by their individualistic heritage), thereby limiting their effectiveness as agents of the Kingdom's coming.¹ But as the decade advanced, his estimate of what was possible diminished as a result of his pastoral experience and his increasing exposure to the effects of the War on Europe. In other words, because of an increasing familiarity with human misery, his idealism was worn thin. He could not fail to observe that lust for power and material gain were constants in human

¹ On this first phase of his criticism, see above, pp. 146-47, 151-52, 160-61.

individual and collective behavior. He was continually running up against these natural forces with deepening frustration, and this moved him to a reconsideration of theological assumptions. By 1929, he was moving beyond the Social Gospel criticism of the secular liberal spirit and its manifestation in the churches to a criticism of liberal theology.

Niebuhr's initial exposure to the work of Karl Barth also was an important factor in giving shape and confidence to a criticism of liberal theology. Barth's ideas provided a solid model against which to measure his own embryonic criticism, and he felt more fortified in his own positions having read Barth's vigorous exposition of the new theology. Over the course of the early 1930s, Niebuhr's understanding of Barth and the other Europeans would increase, thus enhancing their role in shaping his criticism.

Niebuhr's Social-Gospel-derived conviction that greater social-ethical justice must be contended for never waned, as revealed in the lengthy list of his secular and religious involvements in the 1930s. But Niebuhr, by 1935, had parted company with the rest of the Social Gospel approach. By the late 1920s, he was repudiating liberal theology as an adequate basis from which to pursue the goals of the Social Gospel. The goal of greater social righteousness, he came to believe, could not be approached by relying on assumptions or strategies rooted in a naturalistic harmonization of God and creation and an evolutionary optimism about human nature. The assumptions created expectations that could not be realized and the strategies proved impracticable. Simply put, a better foundation was required for the pursuit of this important goal.

* * * * *

Niebuhr located the building materials for a new foundation in the Hebrew prophetic tradition as found in the history of ancient Israël (and recorded in the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament) and, he believed, in the life and teachings of Jesus. In adopting a basis for belief and action in this tradition, Niebuhr was basing his mature thought on Scripture in the same manner as had Karl Barth when he discovered liberal theology to be a weak foundation for pastoral work. According to Eduard Thurneysen, he and Barth read the Bible "with the eyes of shipwrecked people whose everything had gone overboard."² Niebuhr also read with these eyes, given the wreck of both the American socio-economic system in the early 1930s and (in his opinion) of the liberal theology-based Social Gospel that had spearheaded the attack on social problems through the 1920s.

Besides Barth, Rauschenbusch also had turned to the Bible, in particular to the prophets, and had therein found a basis for his presentation of the Social Gospel. But, as mentioned, Rauschenbusch's interpretation of that tradition supported the prevailing premises of secular and religious liberalism.³ Niebuhr's use of the prophets was different. He was much impressed by Rauschenbusch's presentation of them as public men, as teachers of social righteousness. Indeed, the Social Gospel, as mediated by Rauschenbusch, was the immediate source from which he derived a disposition to Hebrew prophetic history and thought. Niebuhr, nevertheless, came to believe that Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel were only investigating one-half of the picture

² Eduard Thurneysen, quoted in Pauck, Barth: Prophet, 59.

³ See above, pp. 114-15.

and that there was significantly more to the prophetic tradition than what had been discussed in the pages of Christianity and the Social Crisis.

It was as a consequence of encountering the tenacity of human sin in collective life over many years that Niebuhr realized there was another side to the prophetic picture. At the same time, in crisis theology and in classical Christian theology, he was encountering a theoretical explanation of why that sin was so stubborn and of what was possible and impossible because of it. His experience in the trenches of urban America and his exposure to continental theology dovetailed, providing him with the other half of the picture. This other half stressed human limitations as intrinsic - a condition that points us to a transcendent God, the creator and sustainer of all being, Who alone can effect transformation.

In its integral form, the prophetic perspective on man asserted the spiritual importance of temporal life, but affirmed the error of attempting to realize ideals fully. Niebuhr thus rejected both the evolutionary ethical perfectionism of the liberal pole (which envisaged transforming society into the Kingdom) and, at the other pole, theologies of quietism, mysticism, rationalism, or extreme pessimism (which advocated flight from the demands of the temporal). Niebuhr's theology became known as "dialectical" because he understood human nature as poised between these two extremes - the ideal and the real, freedom and finitude. Man is both creature and yet, in spirit, able to transcend his creatureliness. The goals of Christ's ethics must be kept in sight, but the laws of those ethics could only be approximated in practice because of sin. Hence, we must live in society, working for

its improvement but be always ready to acknowledge our limitations and to pray for the grace of God. This is the paradox, the anxiety with which man must live, and this would become the central feature of the mature Niebuhrian theology.

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At a later date, Niebuhr reflected that: "There are few people who passed through the thirties who even dare or can recall what that time was really like or what it did to human beings.... there was poison in the air then."⁴ Given the domestic trauma of the Depression and the international tension that built relentlessly through the decade, a mood of crisis pervaded Niebuhr's thought. Among his many articles, he wrote repeatedly on problems of both American and European life. In 1931, for example, he stated: "The real fact about our civilization is that it is flirting with disaster."⁵ The space Niebuhr always provided for discussion of public affairs gives evidence of his sensitivity to the unfolding of events in the temporal realm. This was an aspect of prophetic thought upon which he would place great emphasis - the belief in the holiness of the everyday and the ultimate redemption of the historical. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, however, he had yet to begin explicitly affirming prophetic thought as a paradigm for understanding human nature and destiny. The path to that affirmation began with a greater stress on human sin, and

4 Reinhold Niebuhr, cited in Bingham, Courage to Change, 145.

5 Reinhold Niebuhr, "Let Liberal Churches Stop Fooling Themselves!," CC 48 (1931): 402.

this is the emphasis that would ultimately become the centerpiece in his theology, the emphasis by which every other component in that theology was judged.

In 1965, Niebuhr stated that "the world Depression and the rise of the Nazi terror swept away the last remnants of liberal utopianism." These blows to liberal optimism did not catch Niebuhr unaware. During the 1920s, as we have seen, he had been developing a sharpened sense of the tragic. In 1929, he wrote a Lenten piece entitled "The Terrible Beauty of the Cross." As the decade had progressed, he had shown an increasing willingness to consider such subjects as the Crucifixion, the Atonement, contrition, and repentance. This piece deals in these themes to an unprecedented extent. He concludes it by writing:

If there is any moral meaning in the universe there must also be tragedy in it. There is no real beauty without tragedy. Therefore the cross has become both the power of God and the wisdom of God, the inspiration of the noblest life and the key to the interpretation of ultimate reality.⁷

In 1930, in "The Preaching of Repentance," he states:

The insistence of religion upon repentance is in fact the measure of its divinity.... What damns the church of our generation more than any other defect in its life is its inability or unwillingness to preach an adequate gospel of repentance.... Constant contrition is the only means of achieving a gospel which has the power of repentance in it.⁸

In these articles, Niebuhr makes a major departure from the Social

6 Niebuhr, Man's Nature, 22.

7 Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Terrible Beauty of the Cross," CC 46 (1929): 388.

8 Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Preaching of Repentance," CC 47 (1930): 779, 781.

Gospel and liberal theology. Seldom during the heyday of the Social Gospel was much attention given to anything suggestive of human limitation; the watchword had been unlimited possibility. Thus, Niebuhr's insistence on repentance as paramount constitutes a striking alteration from his earlier point of view.

Admitting the need for repentance presupposes an admission of the seriousness of sin, and this was an assumption emphatically discussed in Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932), the book that "put Niebuhr on the intellectual map," in June Bingham's words.⁹ With this book, he plunged into the subject of man's nature and destiny. This was the absorbing interest of Western thought after World War I and Moral Man was the first of Niebuhr's contributions to that inquiry. Hammar called it "epoch-making in American theology" and "the signal for an American attack on liberal theology."¹⁰ Mary Thelen also suggested that it marked the beginning of realistic theology in America.¹¹ In 1937, only five years after the publication of Moral Man, John C. Bennett indicated that it had produced "a profound change in the climate of American religious opinion."¹²

Niebuhr, in Moral Man, makes reference to Freud, Jung, and Adler and their common identification of libido as a self-preserving energy that expresses itself in egoistic impulses.¹³ Like other theorists of his day, Niebuhr became convinced of the thinness of the liberal

⁹ Bingham, Courage to Change, 161.

¹⁰ Hammar, Christian Realism, 4.

¹¹ Mary F. Thelen, Man as Sinner in Contemporary American Realistic Theology (New York: King's Crown Press, 1946), 63.

¹² John C. Bennett, "The Contribution of Reinhold Niebuhr," Religion in Life (1937): 268.

¹³ MMIS, 26.

assessment of humanity and began examining man's shadow side. For Niebuhr, this book represented the first confident step in the shift from being a student of the conscious and the constructive to being a student of the unconscious and the destructive. He was discovering that the ultimate source of our troubles could not be located in factors external to man, but within man. In Hans Hofmann's words:

He became ever more certain that all the theological inconsistencies and all the multiple dislocations and miseries in human society are simply effects, arising from the sole and grievous cause of earth's chaos - the cause in man himself. It is not the disjointed relation between gospel and world which is the cause of man's confusion in his world environment; the relation of the individual to both gospel and world is perverted because man is perverted in himself.¹⁴

In this study, Niebuhr was practicing the admonition he had issued in "The Preaching of Repentance"; he was convicting man of the sinfulness of preoccupation with self and identifying this as religion's most important function. He develops this idea in Moral Man:

If the recognition of selfishness is prerequisite to the mitigation of its force and the diminution of its anti-social consequences in society, religion should be a dominant influence in the socialisation of man; for religion is fruitful of the spirit of contrition. Feeling himself under the scrutiny of an omniscient eye, and setting his puny will into juxtaposition with a holy and omnipotent will, the religious man is filled with a sense of shame for the impertinence of his self-centered life.¹⁵

14 Hans Hofmann, The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), 236.

15 MMIS, 51.

This turn to the subject of sin and the opposition of selfish man to an omniscient, omnipotent God brought Niebuhr into line with the content of the neo-orthodox theologians. He had been edging closer to the neo-orthodox line since the later 1920s. As was discussed earlier, Niebuhr's first article on Barthian ideas was cautiously receptive to Barth's assertion that sin originated with the individual and was innate.¹⁶ This receptivity reveals his increasing uneasiness with liberalism, as does a story recounted by Emil Brunner who tells of a post-lecture evening discussion at Union in 1928 at which he, Henry Van Dusen, and Niebuhr sat and discussed the theme of original sin:

What I had said in my lecture about sin led to an animated and passionate discussion. The concept of sin in those days had almost disappeared from the vocabulary of enlightened theologians. But I sensed how this basic term seemed to stimulate Niebuhr and set fire to his imagination.¹⁷

In 1930, writing to the Christian Century from Holland where he had attended a World Student Federation conference, he clearly expresses his admiration for many aspects of the continental movement:

Whatever the dangers of this religion of quietism and pessimism, one is grateful for contact with it when it expresses itself in the deep piety of such men as one finds at this student conference. Its profound sense of the tragic character of life; its realistic analysis of the processes of history which Anglo-Saxons always tend to give an undeserved aura of virtue and sanctity; its faith in a transcendent God whose holiness prompts the believer to deep contrition and whose grace saves him from sin, its insistence on absolute certainties which can be set against the relativities of time and

¹⁶ See above, pp. 180-81.

¹⁷ Brunner, "Some Remarks," 28.

place, all these characteristics will be judged by the superficial humanist as vestigial remnants of the thought forms of other days, while those who look more deeply into life's profundities will recognize in them the evidence of the return of our age to the issues which transcend time and history.¹⁸

The following year, in a comment on the American Barthian E.G. Homrighausen's article, "Barthianism and the Kingdom," Niebuhr touches on some of the movement's strengths:

There is always a touch of the sense of the absolute in vital religion and in so far as the Barthians have this sense they are religiously superior to the liberals who have been so completely lost in the relativities of history that every slight eminence in the landscape of time seems to them to be the final mountain peak of the kingdom of God.¹⁹

By the time of Moral Man, then, he had developed a clear understanding of, and selective admiration for, the main lines of crisis theology.

In 1929, Niebuhr wrote: "The curse of modern religion is that it is so busy adjusting itself to the modern mind that it can find no energy to challenge the modern conscience."²⁰ This is in spirit with the continental position that Christianity must confront culture, especially a culture of liberalism. In the second chapter of Moral Man, he takes aim at the "faith of the Enlightenment," which, in his view, has been qualified "only in the slightest degree" by "the sorry plight of our civilisation." He focuses on educators (with John Dewey in mind) and writes:

¹⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Europe's Religious Pessimism," CC 47 (1930): 1032.

¹⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr, A "Comment" on E.G. Homrighausen, "Barthianism and the Kingdom," CC 48 (1931): 924.

²⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Would Jesus be a Modernist Today?," WT 12 (1929): 123.

The men of learning persist in their hope that more intelligence will solve the social problem. They may view present realities quite realistically; but they cling to their hope that an adequate pedagogical technique will finally produce the "socialised man" and thus solve the problems of society.²¹

This assertion represents a near-complete turnabout for Niebuhr from a position taken and recorded in his Detroit diary in 1923: "There doesn't seem to be very much malice in the world. There is simply not enough intelligence to conduct the intricate affairs of a complex civilization."²² Like the crisis theologians and many other intellectuals, Niebuhr was explicitly repudiating the Enlightenment creed, a move made because of his reassessment of human nature and its possibilities.

The fact that by the early 1930s he had no illusions about the possible purity of human motivation is illustrated by a written exchange with his brother, Helmut Richard, on the pages of the Christian Century in 1932. The propelling cause of this debate was the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and the issue addressed was the proper American response. Whereas H. Richard advocated noninvolvement, arguing that it was better not to act at all rather than to act from motives tainted by self-interest, Reinhold argued that purity of motive is impossible; self-interest is a constant in human behavior and often it becomes necessary to employ a lesser evil in order to overcome a greater one (such as the use of American force to curb Japanese aggression, in this case). This view is the basis of a moral justification for engaging in armed conflict, and it became

²¹ MMIS, 24.

²² Leaves, 43; see above, pp. 134-35.

the principal reason why Niebuhr rejected the idealistic pacifism and belief in the sole efficacy of moral suasion propounded by the Social Gospel.²³

The premise of Moral Man, then, is the belief that our problems, at root, lie within the individual, with original sin. But the book, for the most part, is concerned with what, in Niebuhr's view, necessarily follows from this premise: that the human group is flawed by the same egoism. As he later pointed out, the thesis of the book was "that collective self-regard of class, race, and nation is more stubborn and persistent than the egoism of individuals."²⁴ The rather misleading title is meant to highlight the relatively greater egoism of the group, but the basis of collective egoism remains, nevertheless, individual sin. As Niebuhr makes the point:

A young friend of mine recently observed that, in light of all the facts and my more consistent "realism" in regard to both individual and collective behavior, a better title might have been The Not So Moral Man in His Less Moral Communities.²⁵

In other words, the cause of immoral society is immoral man. In "The Confession of a Tired Radical" (1928), he had foreshadowed a strong criticism of group behavior when he made such statements as: "all human groups are essentially predatory."²⁶

In one sense, Niebuhr reveals the influence of the Social Gospel and

²³ See H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Grace of Doing Nothing," CC 49 (1932): 378-80; Reinhold Niebuhr, "Must We Do Nothing?," CC 49 (1932): 415-17; John D. Barbour, "Niebuhr Versus Niebuhr: The Tragic Nature of History," CC 101 (1984): 1096-99.

²⁴ Niebuhr, Man's Nature, 22. (emphasis mine)

²⁵ Niebuhr, Man's Nature, 22.

²⁶ Niebuhr, "Confessions of a Tired Radical," 1046; see above, pp. 171-72.

Progressivism (and their debt to social science) in the very focus of the book - that human society is to be understood not in terms of its individuals but as a composition of groups, and that our understanding of man therefore requires an understanding of group behavior. Here, Niebuhr's lifelong interest in the social substance of man is plain to see. But beyond the general features of his focus, Niebuhr makes specific departures from the Social Gospel. He departs from perfectionism, directing the sharpest criticism at social scientists, politicians, and religious idealists who believe that society can be "saved" through various forms of changed attitudes and social engineering:

Insofar as this treatise has a polemic interest it is directed against the moralists, both religious and secular, who imagine that the egoism of individuals is being progressively checked by the development of rationality or the growth of a religiously inspired goodwill and that nothing but the continuance of this process is necessary to establish social harmony between all the human societies and collectives.²⁷

Similarly, in 1931 he wrote:

Any philosophy of history which proceeds upon the assumption that a religious change of heart or any type of social education will make one economic group perfectly ethical toward another economic group without some pressure from the underprivileged group is discredited by the facts of history.²⁸

The argument that aroused the ire of liberals was Niebuhr's contention that the use of force and other instruments of power must be accepted as legitimate means of achieving justice. Otherwise stated, Niebuhr had reached the conclusion that agape, the Christian absolute ideal of

27. MMIS, xii.

28 Reinhold Niebuhr, "Socialism and Christianity," CC 48 (1931): 1039.

love, was not an appropriate ethical norm in a world characterized by relativity. Hence, Niebuhr substituted justice for agape as the social-ethical norm and, accepting the strength of sin in individual and collective life, he countenanced the use of force.

Niebuhr recognized the lust for power in group behavior; he refers to the "brutal character of the behavior of all human collectives, and the power of self-interest and collective egoism in all inter-group relations," and to force as "an inevitable part of the process of social cohesion." He also writes that "the demand of religious moralists that nations subject themselves to 'the law of Christ' is an unrealistic demand and the hope that they will do so is a sentimental one."²⁹ Perhaps the most pointed presentation of the belief that Christ's law of love can not be completely fulfilled occurred in an extended exchange with Charles Clayton Morrison, editor of the Christian Century, in 1933. Niebuhr argued that compromise with the laws of nature was unavoidable, that the Christian must realistically understand power relations:

The law of love would avail if anyone fully lived by it; but none of us does. We approximate it to a lesser or greater degree. Politics, being forced to deal with averages, must take account of the fact that most of us do not approximate the law of love very fully and must set interest against interest to achieve justice.³⁰

The setting of interest against interest - balancing power - became Niebuhr's chosen approach to effecting justice in a fallen world; it was a far cry from the sentimentalism and pacifism of the Social Gospel.

²⁹ MMIS, xx, 6, 75.

³⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr, "An Editorial Conversation: Mr. Niebuhr to the Editor," CC 50 (1933): 950.

He does not, it must be made clear, retreat from liberal perfectionism into a reactionary posture. He retained the goal of revolutionary social change which had prevailed in his thought from the outset, but he altered the strategy because of change in his theological ideas: human nature was not about to be changed through religious teaching or social redesign, so we must accept it and attempt to harness its natural forces.

It is thus very clear in Niebuhr's writing of the early 1930s that the Social Gospel was being eclipsed. By rejecting the primacy of agape and placing weight on the brutal aspects of human behavior and the necessity of occasionally making coercion an ally of reason, Niebuhr was dismissing the assumptions of nineteenth-century liberal theology and of the Social Gospel. Needless to say, many were upset by Niebuhr's repudiation of liberal tenets. In rejoinders to some of his critics, Niebuhr states:

Almost all of the moralists have been shocked by my insistence that coercion is an inevitability in man's collective life. Yet every page of history is a proof of the assertion.... There is no scientific proof that innate human intelligence has increased since the dawn of history.³¹

Moral Man brought Niebuhr into the American and European spotlights and served notice to an older, frailer Social Gospel that a younger, polemical, unyielding exponent of a more realistic Christian theology had entered the field. From 1932, theological liberalism was under increasing attack from Niebuhr's exceptionally active pen.

³¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Optimism and Utopianism," WT 16 (1933): 179; and "Human Nature and Social Change," CC 50 (1933): 364.

* * * * *

As a result of his longtime experience with social action and his new theological emphases, Niebuhr developed an openness to Marxism, and this ideological position served as an instrument for criticizing the sentimentalism and perfectionism of liberalism. In one sense, his interest in Marxism is understandable. Marxism's concentration on man's collective fate and its savage treatment of free-enterprise economics were appealing, to a child of the Social Gospel, one who had put in much time among the dispossessed of urban America. What was even more appealing, what fitted with his new stress on original sin, was Marxism's realistic assessment of man's moral and rational capacities. As Niebuhr wrote in "The Religion of Communism" (1931), Marxism's "disillusioned realism was the natural fruit of Europe's nineteenth century, which saw the eighteenth century's dreams of progress issue in the horrors of the new industrialism."³² In this respect, Marxism and neo-orthodoxy both reject liberalism by discounting the power of reason or morality to effect significant progressive change.

In Moral Man, Niebuhr writes approvingly of the "complete moral cynicism" that is derived from Marxism.³³ Marxism was part of the romantic rebellion against a rationally-structured natural order, as revealed in its establishment of material lust as substructural. In Marxist theory, nature and spirit are not separate and opposed, but directly related: nature (selfish desire) as substructure controls spirit (cultural interests) as superstructure. Niebuhr, given his increasing conviction that man's social problems were grounded in the selfishness born of individual sin,

³² Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Religion of Communism," Atlantic Monthly 147 (1931): 465.

³³ MMIS, 145-46.

was favorably disposed toward Marxism's absence of illusions regarding man's nature. He openly concurred with the Marxist axiom that economic interests were of great significance in determining human, especially political, behavior. This was stated repeatedly in his writings of the early 1930s. In "Property and the Ethical Life" (1931), he writes:

The important fact in modern society is that significant power derives from the ownership of property. Through ownership of property some men achieve more political power than others and practically dictate the policies of state in defiance of the alleged principles of democracy.³⁴

These ideas appear frequently in Moral Man in such lines as: "economic, rather than the political and military, power has become the significant coercive force of modern society" and "the ownership of the means of production is the significant power in modern society. The clear recognition of that fact is the greatest ethical contribution which Marxian thought has made to the problem of social life."³⁵ The Depression, naturally, had sharpened his criticism of American economic practices, and the Marxist critique seemed highly relevant.

The legendary Niebuhr impatience, what Bingham calls his "courage to change," was directed toward his desire to see greater social righteousness established. He never remained an unmoveable disciple of any single point of view if it did not appear to be effective as a means of realizing this desire. Consequently, in Moral Man and the works that followed, Niebuhr's espousal of Marxist ideas was qualified, increasingly so as the decade advanced. Despite the areas of concurrence, Niebuhr

³⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Property and the Ethical Life," WT 14 (1931): 19.

³⁵ MMIS, 15, 163.

was cautious with respect to some of Marxism's implications; his Christian principles simply stood in the way. Although he regarded Marxism's general social analysis and its realistic assessment of human nature as on the right track and its "social vision as society's legitimate goal,"³⁶ he could not accept Marxism's rigorous materialism and determinism or its sanction of violence as a means of bringing about revolutionary change. Niebuhr could not believe that our relation to the material was the principal determinant of values and behavior and that economic disharmony would necessarily result in social destruction and utopian reconstruction. No room in the Marxist causal scheme was made for individual freedom, for such "organic forces" as "historic tradition, national sentiment, cultural inheritances, and unconscious loyalties,"³⁷ or for spiritual forces.

In Reflections on the End of an Era (1934), Niebuhr wrote:

While Christianity must come to terms with Marxian mythology it cannot afford to capitulate to it. To do so means that the distinction between spirit and nature, established in pure Christianity, is lost, and Marxism thereby betrays the ethical enterprise into an illusion.... The tension between spirit and nature must remain to the end of history lest the impulses of nature clothe themselves with the moral prestige of the spiritual and secure a moral community behind which they express themselves without moral restraint.³⁸

The essence of his criticism of Marxism (and of liberalism) is that the Christian cannot accept an ideology in which spirit and nature are too bound up with one another; in fact, in Marxism, spirit is subordinated

³⁶ MMIS, 167.

³⁷ ICE, 192

³⁸ REE, 135-36.

to nature. Niebuhr believed that Marxism needed to be corrected by Christianity, by a perspective that introduced a transcendent dimension. The error involved in being too supportive of Marxism, he felt, is in identifying Christianity with anything relative. Indeed, religious sanction can exacerbate any latent extremism existing in a secular movement:

If the demonic enters into human life through the religious sanctification of partial and relative values it can be exorcised from social life only by the worship of a God who transcends all partial and imperfect values. This accounts for the inability of Christianity at its best to identify itself completely with any political movement.³⁹

Niebuhr, in other words, shared Marxism's belief in man's self-centeredness, but the difference lay in his belief that the human situation could be transformed only through the grace of a transcendent God, not through historical forces and agents. Because sin was innate and beyond the remedial power of man, the source of its defeat was extra-human. The tenacity of sin, in fact, was the reason behind the Christian's need to fear politics and yet also the reason why he should be politically active. On the one hand, Christianity must not lend its approval to any "partial and relative" (and therefore sinful) movements, however generally enlightened. In particular, he realized, one must be careful about Marxism's easy condoning of brutality. Niebuhr regarded coercion as a necessary evil, whereas some Marxists seemed to regard it as a necessary good. As he wrote in Reflections: "The spirit of vengeance

³⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Problem of Communist Religion," WT 17 (1934): 379; see also, Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Church and Political Action," CC 51 (1934): 992-94.

is necessarily cruel because it is blind to the similarity of the evil in the self and in the other."⁴⁰ All secular movements are burdened by the sins of group behavior discussed in Moral Man and are therefore fallible. On the other hand, despite this caution, he writes:

The church can be the body of Christ only if it has two feet, and one of its feet, at least, is planted in the world of the dispossessed.... The necessity of political action is given by the realities of a sinful world where sin must be held in check by balances of power and contests of interest.⁴¹

We must not, he is saying become quietists and attempt withdrawal from a sinful world of which we are a part and in which we have moral responsibilities because of our connection to all of God's creation.

This stance, in which we are both attached to, yet detached from, the world, is the essence of the Hebrew prophetic perspective and the hallmark of his mature theology. Niebuhr's unfolding attempt to define the relationship between Christianity and Marxism is an excellent example of this compound perspective. In the early-middle 1930s, he made generous room for Marxism, in fact, in 1933, Charles C. Morrison referred to Niebuhr's "Marxist discipleship" as being complete,⁴² but this is an overstatement. Niebuhr's spirited reception of Marxism was tempered by his theological positions (as, indeed, were most aspects of his thought) and his theology at that time was making a larger place for themes of limitation and paradox.

⁴⁰ RBE, 170.

⁴¹ Niebuhr, "The Church and Political Action," 993.

⁴² Charles C. Morrison, "The Editor's Reply," CC 50 (1933): 951.

Beyond these considerations, Niebuhr had no difficulty with Marxism's identification of the proletariat as the leading vehicle of social change. Niebuhr was well acquainted with proletarian discontent after thirteen years in Detroit and had come to agree that this class was a proper agent of collective judgment and salvation. Alliance with this class, in his view, was a counterforce to the middle-class individualism of American society and, especially, of American Protestantism, which he had been excoriating since the 1920s. Writing with Jesus' perpetual ministry to the poor and the apostle Paul's words from 2 Cor. 12:7-10 in mind, Niebuhr stated:

In the eschatology of the true Marxian, justice will be established because weakness will be made strong through economic forces operating with inexorable logic in human history.... There are tendencies in history which make for the casting of the mighty from their seats, both morally and politically.... Who is better able to understand the true character of a civilisation than those who suffer most from its limitation? Who is better able to state the social ideal in unqualified terms than those who have experienced the bankruptcy of old social realities in their own lives? Who will have more creative vigor in destroying the old and building the new than those in whose lives hunger, vengeance and holy dreams have compounded a tempestuous passion?⁴³

In these words, there is an eschatological tone which, as we shall see, appeared with greater strength in subsequent writing. Niebuhr found satisfaction in the catastrophism and the other "religious" qualities of communism. In Moral Man, he comments that both Marxism and Christianity "expect the realization of the absolute" and that, for the Marxist, "political hopes achieve religious verification."⁴⁴

43 MMIS, 155, 156, 157.

44 MMIS, 156.

Niebuhr opposed the catastrophic element in Marxism, which bore undeniable resemblances to Jewish and early Jewish-Christian eschatology, to the optimistic, evolutionary view of liberalism. In "The Religion of Communism," he wrote of Marxism: "Far from believing that history is proceeding automatically toward a millenium, it holds that history is drifting toward disaster. Its saving faith is that somehow the new world will spring out of the disaster."⁴⁵ Niebuhr's positive response to Marxist catastrophism revealed his interest in Jewish thought as represented in the prophetic tradition, and this would become a leading feature of his next two works, Reflections and An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (1935).

* * * * *

Reflections ushered in Reinhold Niebuhr the mature theologian. Whereas Moral Man falls more into the category of social psychology or social theology, Reflections is more theologically conventional. His position in the book is characterized by a rightward shift in theology and a continued political radicalism, thus maintaining the compound of Christian realism and political radicalism that was the mark of his mature attack on liberalism. This is expressed in the preface to Reflections, in which he discusses the "basic conviction" of the book:

The liberal culture of modernity is quite unable to give guidance and direction to a confused generation which faces the disintegration of a

⁴⁵ Niebuhr, "Religion of Communism," 463.

social system and the task of building a new one. In my opinion adequate spiritual guidance can come only through a more radical political orientation and more conservative religious convictions than are comprehended in the culture of our era.⁴⁶

This study bears resemblances to Tillich's Religious Situation since both asserted that the contemporary liberal, capitalistic era was ending and that the irreligious culture of that era ought to be replaced by a culture that made room for the eternal - what Tillich called theonomous culture.⁴⁷ In his review of Religious Situation in the World Tomorrow (the title of this periodical itself possessing eschatological implications), Niebuhr summarizes, and comments on, Tillich's work:

Wherever religion has accepted the myth of progress it has betrayed its capitulation to the spirit of modernity, to the ethos of a capitalistic civilization. It is for this reason that the catastrophic political theories of the proletarian world are regarded as more significant for the future of religion than the religiosity of the churches.... It is an analysis which could not possibly have been written in America and which many liberal, semi-radical and unreligious radical Americans will find meaningless. America is still too thoroughly immersed in the illusions and superstitions of liberal, middle-class culture to appreciate just what Tillich is trying to do.⁴⁸

Niebuhr's recognition of Tillich's analysis as one that could not have been written in America evidently spurred Niebuhr to correct that situation and write a homegrown analysis that would bring out similar themes.

46 REE, ix.

47 See above, pp. 76-77.

48 Reinhold Niebuhr, "Eternity and Our Time," a review of Paul Tillich, The Religious Situation, WT 15 (1932): 596.

In the review of Religious Situation, Niebuhr described the "religious attitude" commended by Tillich as "an attitude in which the religious tension between time and eternity, between the absolute and the relative, is maintained."⁴⁹ This is the attitude for which Niebuhr, too, called and which he promoted as relevant in a period of crisis. In Reflections, the parameters of that crisis are front and center and he observes that "our western society is obviously in a process of disintegration."⁵⁰ He blamed this crisis on the economic and social consequences of capitalism, and he understood fascism as a joining of the capitalistic system with a spirit of militarism. He sensed that, because of these factors, major world conflict was approaching:

The fascist adventures, upon which most of the modern capitalistic nations seem destined to embark before they finally succumb, are most aptly characterized by the metaphor of the delirium which precedes death.... American capitalism is like a once robust man who suffers from premature senility but fails to note his critical situation.... A dying civilization invites the peril of barbarism.... new war in Europe is only a matter of years.⁵¹

The gathering domestic and foreign crises created in Niebuhr a disposition toward catastrophic thought and served as a catalyst. They enhanced his radical sociopolitical concern, his awareness of human limitation, and his recognition of the need for the healing and transformation which only a transcendent God could effect. These enhanced elements came together to form the prophetic paradigm, which became the identifying mark of his mature theology.

49 Niebuhr, "Eternity and Our Time," 596.

50 REE, 23.

51 REE, 53, 83, 165, 247.

In An Interpretation, Niebuhr states that: "It will be necessary for our generation to return to the faith of prophetic Christianity to solve its problems."⁵² It is this book in which the prophetic paradigm is most fully expressed. In Does Civilization Need Religion? and Moral Man, liberal theology is attacked, but nothing concrete appears in its place. But in Reflections and An Interpretation, this changes. In the latter, first presented as the Rauschenbusch Memorial Lectures in Rochester in 1934, Niebuhr reads more like a systematic theologian (although he would never resemble one, in the European manner). He continues, in effect, to answer the question does civilization need religion, and his answer this time is that it needs prophetic religion. The prophetic paradigm was a means by which to understand the moral worth of creation and to maintain hope in its ultimate redemption. This hope had been dominant in Niebuhr's thought from the beginning, but now could that hope be sustained after his renunciation of liberal theology and in the midst of national and international tragedy? The prophetic perspective allowed such hope by assembling various beliefs in a new, integrated manner.

The prophetic religion from which Niebuhr drew inspiration was Jewish, and it is the Jewishness of his theology that became its distinctive feature. It is in the light of this characteristic that we can best see and understand the form taken by his attack on liberalism. Like Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr had great respect for the Hebrew prophets, but whereas Rauschenbusch concentrated on their roles as exhorters of

⁵² ICE, 98-99.

social morality, Niebuhr concentrated on their theology. Specifically, he identified therein a tension between the transcendental and the historical that could provide a model for understanding the troubled relationship in contemporary Western theology between sociopolitical exigencies and the desire for a realistic theology. The instability he sought to address was observable in the tendency to slip either into optimistic, relativistic naturalism or pessimistic, absolutistic dualism. In his opinion, both were in error, thus inviting a third way. He repeatedly summarized this conviction and the following quotation is representative:

Naturally it is not easy to preserve a delicate balance between the ethical urge to realize perfection in history and the religious need of reconciliation with a hostile world. In particular periods of history the one will devour the other. Sometimes the ethical urge will degenerate into an illusion-cramped ethical utopianism; at other times religious insights will betray the soul into a premature peace with and transcendence over the world's imperfections. But the human spirit will always discover in time that sanity and wholesomeness are possible only when two partially incompatible, partially supplementary attitudes toward life are both embraced and espoused.⁵³

The "ethical urge" could be seen in orthodox Jewish reverence for the details and deeds of everyday life. Here, it is believed, and not in elaborate world-saving strategies or the like, does one find meaning and build character. A person is what he or she encounters in the everyday. What others might consider mundane is, in this view, considered sanctified. This is the Halakic way, - a path of living defined by the Halakah, the body of Jewish law and tradition. In

⁵³ MLL, 296.

Halakah, one discovers God's interest in, and blessing of, everyday human actions. It was this path which struck Niebuhr as relevant and which formed a major part of what he called prophetic religion. In An Interpretation, he states:

Only a vital Christian faith, renewing its youth in its prophetic origin, is capable of dealing adequately with the moral and social problems of our age; only such a faith can affirm the significance of temporal and mundane existence without capitulating unduly to the relativities of the temporal process Prophetic religion does not accept finitude complacently, for it recognizes that reality is more than flux.⁵⁴

Niebuhr always stood at the intersection of Christianity and society.

Hofmann describes the "central problem of all Niebuhr's work" as:

"What is the essential and special character of man and his world to which the gospel must speak?"⁵⁵ Indeed, the very understanding of Christ's nature and mission that he shared with fellow Christians was part of a theology in which God cared strongly enough about creation to take human form and suffer for our redemption. As he writes: "Even the purest religious message must relate itself to social ethics if it is a message about the word made flesh and deals with the needs of human beings rather than disembodied saints."⁵⁶

Niebuhr articulates a strong opposition to philosophies and theologies that radically divorce the infinite from the finite and regard the latter as either insignificant or outright evil:

⁵⁴ ICE, 33, 68.

⁵⁵ Hofmann, Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, 234.

⁵⁶ Niebuhr, "Church and Political Action," 492.

In the more rigorous and classical versions of rationalistic religion the tension between the finite and the infinite, between the conditioned and unconditioned, is increased until the world breaks in two. Finite existence is left without meaning or significance, and eternity without content.⁵⁷

In particular, he singled out the influence of Greek thought on Christianity, claiming that it had infiltrated the early Christian community, supplanting the Jewish thought of Jesus and the early believers. In the article "Marx, Barth, and Israel's Prophets" (1935), Niebuhr discusses the distinction between these two modes of thought:

The prophetic insistence upon the meaningfulness of human history is a natural consequence of the Jewish conception of the unity of body and soul. There is no suggestion in Hebrew thought of a good mind and an evil body, an idea which is the base of all Greek ethics.... There is in genuine prophetic ethics no moral distinction between emotion and reason or between body and mind. For this reason Jews never had a doctrine of the immortality of the soul, but only a hope of resurrection.⁵⁸

The distinction extended to the question of if, how, and when the historical world experience redemption. In the following excerpt from an essay by the Biblical scholar Christopher Butler, this difference is defined:

Greek philosophy had concentrated upon the central issue of "being," and it had located "being in itself" at a level above both space and time, and therefore remote from history and "becoming." But Jewish thought had been profoundly historical

⁵⁷ 102, 33, 68.

⁵⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Marx, Barth, and Israel's Prophets," CC 52 (1935): 139.

from the start and remained so throughout, at least in its central Palestinian tradition.... The Greek looked upwards toward a timeless deity above the cosmic spheres. The Jewish believers looked forwards to a God who would ultimately reveal his power in an act that would end all mundane history, the eschaton or final divine triumph.⁵⁹

Niebuhr placed considerable weight in his writings in 1934 and 1935 on the Hebrew conception of salvation and stressed its place in the teachings of Christ. In Reflections, he writes of Jesus:

The kingdom of God of which he spoke was a social conception. True to his Jewish heritage he believed that it would be established upon earth. The note of supra-worldliness, introduced into Christianity by Greek thought, was foreign to him.⁶⁰

Marxism's parallels with Jewish eschatology help to explain Niebuhr's Marxist leanings. In 1935, he defined the relationship: "Marxism is a secularized version of the prophetic interpretation of history."⁶¹ He noted a common preference for the disinherited classes. Beginning with Amos, prophetic proclamation had inveighed against oppression of the poor. Rauschenbusch wrote: "When the prophets conceived Jehovah as the special vindicator of these voiceless classes, it was another way of saying that it is the chief duty in religious morality to stand for the rights of the helpless."⁶² Rauschenbusch went on, as we have discussed, to urge that the same preference for the poor be exercised in modern American society. Niebuhr, writing

⁵⁹ Christopher Butler, "Jesus and Later Orthodoxy," in The Truth of God Incarnate, ed. Michael Green (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), 92.

⁶⁰ REE, 214.

⁶¹ Niebuhr, "Marx, Barth, and Israel's Prophets," 138.

⁶² Rauschenbusch, Christianity and the Social Crisis, 12.

more than twenty-five years later, with the Marxist proletarian movement in mind, repeated that analysis:

The prophets and Jesus blessed the poor, not because they were morally superior as individuals to the privileged, but because they are by virtue of their position in society the forces of progress and creativity in it.... The destructive and constructive force must come from below.⁶³

He accepted the Hebrew prophetic-Marxist belief that the poorer classes would be the forces of construction, bringing moral order into contemporary chaos, but Jewish thought (and Niebuhr's thought) parted with Marxism over the ultimate source of that destruction and reconstruction.

* * * * *

By the time of An Interpretation, Niebuhr was firmly articulating the differences he had with Marxism, as illustrated in the following quotation:

Marxism is as naturalistic as modern liberalism. It is therefore deficient in an ultimate perspective upon historic and relative moral achievements. It is as prone to identify the characteristic attitudes and values of the workers with the absolute truth as is liberalism to identify the bourgeois perspective with eternal values.⁶⁴

Although he regarded Marxism as "a purer derivative of the prophetic movement" than liberalism, he showed no hesitation, by this time, in pointing out in what ways prophetic Christianity and Marxism parted

⁶³ Niebuhr, "Marx, Barth, and Israel's Prophets," 138.

⁶⁴ Idem, 17.

company. Niebuhr recognized that a mature theology must possess another, more realistic dimension. It had taken him several years to securely embrace it, but when he did, the picture was complete and the prophetic paradigm thus became fundamental.

Acknowledging sin to be innate had been the starting point in Niebuhr's embrace of this realistic dimension. He described man's experience of arriving at such an acknowledgement as involving both contrition and an understanding of God as transcendent and as the source of salvation. In Reflections is found one of his best statements of this:

In straining after the highest moral possibilities of life that individual becomes more conscious of the inertia of nature which prevents him from realizing them. He recognizes that there is a "law in my members which wars against the law that is in my mind." That is how the consciousness of God and the consciousness of sin become a part of the same religious experience and are inextricably intertwined with each other.⁶⁵

In An Interpretation, he expressed it this way: "repentance is the gateway into the kingdom of God."⁶⁶ Only, in other words, by accepting (and not denying, as we are wont to do) our finitude and mortality does our guard of pride drop, and in that moment of humility, the eyes of the soul are unveiled, allowing one to apprehend the greatness of God.

Stressing impossibility rather than possibility became a mark of his mature theology. Taking on full dimensions in Reflections and An Interpretation is the theme by which his theology became usually

65 REE, 114.

66 ICE, 121.

identified: the origination of sin in the pretension to overcome finitude, and the identification of liberalism, secular or religious, as the most notorious example of that pretension. In Reflections, he made this charge against the leading social scientists of his day:

Men of power are not as amenable to the counsels of the wise men as the whole school of liberal rationalists assume. There is something rather pathetic about the simple confidence of our social scientists and preachers of international and economic righteousness in the redemptive power of their advice. They are quite sure that nothing but a "cultural lag" prevents modern society from curing its vices.⁶⁷

In 1933, in "Optimism and Utopianism," he had described liberalism's "confusion of the absolute and the historical" as "the mark of the intellectual immaturity of our whole liberal culture."⁶⁸ This criticism of liberalism - that it identified the relative with the absolute - was the basic position in neo-orthodox theology. The essence of Barth's opposition to Schleiermacher and the nineteenth-century tradition was the opposition of a theology that sought to disengage Christianity from culture to one that had promoted their compatibility. Niebuhr joined in this opposition, writing about liberal culture from the perspective of the turbulent middle 1930s:

Its energy for some decades has been devoted to the task of proving religion and science compatible, a purpose which it has sought to fulfill by disavowing the more incredible portion of its religious heritage and clothing the remainder in terms acceptable to the "modern mind." It has discovered rather belatedly that this same modern mind, which only yesterday

67 REE, 45.

68 Niebuhr, "Optimism and Utopianism," 180.

seemed to be the final arbiter of truth, beauty, and goodness, is in a sad state of confusion today, amidst the debris of the shattered temple of its dreams and hopes.... The adjustment of modern religion to the "mind" of modern culture inevitably involved capitulation to its thin "soul." Liberal Christianity, in adjusting itself to the ethos of this age, therefore sacrificed its most characteristic religious and Christian heritage by destroying the sense of depth and the experience of tension typical of profound religion.... It is by faith in transcendence that a profound religion is saved from complete capitulation to the culture of any age, past or present.⁶⁹

The "sense of depth and the experience of tension" was at the heart of the Hebrew prophetic tradition and his opposition of the prophetic paradigm to liberalism was the defining and culminating feature of his attack on liberalism. The "sense of depth" of which he wrote (and for which Barth had become best known) was belief in a transcendent God who convicts the world of its sin and who alone is able to redeem it. In Moral Man, he describes religion as essentially "a sense of the absolute," and he repeated this in Reflections: "This yearning after the absolute is the very core of religion."⁷⁰ He gave new emphasis to the distinction between transcendent and finite reality and to the function of grace as the only bridge between them, themes that are Barthian in nature. He believed that Jesus' ethical demands would only be fulfilled "when God transmutes the present chaos of this world into its final unity." The logic of this thought is obviously under the influence of the later apocalypses of Jewish prophesy.⁷¹ Writing elsewhere against liberalism, he summarizes what he believes to have been Jesus' teaching on grace:

69 ICE, 5, 15, 16.

70 MMIS, 52; REE, 114.

71 ICE, 56-57.

"The Kingdom of God...will be established not by the goodness of loving men but by the grace of God."⁷² Niebuhr had traveled far from Social Gospel Christology in making such a statement. He no longer understood Jesus **only** as "a figure of heroic love who reveals the full possibilities of human nature to us," but also, and most importantly, as one who modeled both human limitation and divine transcendence.⁷³

* * * * *

Niebuhr's admiration for Barthian theology was generously expressed in the early 1930s, but in 1934 and 1935, statements of praise were far less common. As he got a secure grip on the prophetic perspective, Barthian positions came under new scrutiny and criticism. Although he continued to stress sin and divine transcendence, these elements had entered into union with the other elements of the prophetic perspective. Because of this union, Barthianism became a qualified element in his theology. Niebuhr, in the prophetic dialectic, did not, like Kierkegaard and Barth, assert an "infinite qualitative distinction" between God and the temporal. Even in the early 1930s, he was criticizing the Barthians for making too complete a division between history and God, suggesting that Barthian theology leads to an undervaluing of social-ethical experience. In 1930, he expressed admiration for much in the Barthian credo, but then lamented: "If only this emphasis were possible without forcing the adventure to become an experience quite irrelevant to every ethical effort!"⁷⁴ In 1931, he wrote:

⁷² REE, 283.

⁷³ ICE, 120; see also, ICE, 15; REE, 282-83.

⁷⁴ Niebuhr, "Europe's Religious Pessimism," 1032.

Perhaps most dangerous of all is the pessimism which is sweeping the religious life of Europe and is robbing many of its sensitive spirits of the last shred of ambition to save their world from collapse. For the Barthians the world is too evil to be saved and all moral striving is, though necessary, futile.⁷⁵

Similarly, in Moral Man, he stated:

The emphasis upon the difference between the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man is so absolute that man is convicted, not of any particular breaches against the life of the human community but of being human and not divine.⁷⁶

By the time of An Interpretation, this criticism was established and solid:

One of the vices of a really profound religion is that its insights into the ultimate problems of the human spirit frequently betray it into indifference toward the immediate problems of justice and equity in human relations.... A socially imperiled generation will have both the inclination and the right to dismiss profound and ultimate interpretations of life which are not made relevant to the immediate problems of social justice.⁷⁷

Barthianism, in other words, was too extreme an alternative to liberalism. Niebuhr discussed Christianity's historical failure as a force for social-ethical amelioration in terms of its tendency to "destroy the dialectic of prophetic religion, either by sacrificing time and history to eternity or by giving ultimate significance to the relativities of history."⁷⁸ To state it somewhat differently, by

75 Niebuhr, "Let Liberal Churches Stop Fooling Themselves!," 403.

76 MMLs, 68.

77 ICE, 93, 140.

78 ICE, 141.

1935, the attack had become one on both liberalism and certain aspects of Barthianism. The God of liberalism lacked the transcendence of one whose otherness throws relative values into perspective and prevents them from being absolutized. The Barthian God seemed too aloof, too possessed of the qualities that Niebuhr had linked with Hellenistic philosophy. The Jew, on the other hand, believed that a mysterious immediacy characterized his relationship with a God who was mighty yet tender, feared for his anger yet loved for his intimacy with his creation. Niebuhr evidently liked this conception because it shines through in his mature theology. In 1955, he wrote of this prophetic understanding of God:

The God of the Hebrew prophets was transcendent as both the creator and the judge of the world, as both the ground of all existence and as its goal and end.... For the Hebrew prophets this transcendence of God never meant that the world of historic existence was meaningless or sinful as such, and that the realm of meaning and goodness was above the world. The transcendent God worked in history, and the prophets pointed out how he worked.⁷⁹

Niebuhr concluded that effective Christian social ethics required a theological basis that maintained a tension between the transcendent and the historical, and he found this basis in Jewish thought.

The mythical basis of the Hebraic world view enables Hebraic spirituality to enjoy the pleasures of this life without becoming engrossed in them, and to affirm the significance of human history without undue reverence for the merely human. In the Hebraic world both nature and history glorify the Creator.... The second Isaiah, whose

⁷⁹ Niebuhr, "Marx, Barth, and Israel's Prophets," 138.

prophetic insights lift Hebraic religion to its sublimest heights, finds the majesty of God in both his creative nearness to and his distance from the created world.⁸⁰

The rabbi and scholar Abraham J. Heschel captures this aspect of the Jewish mind when he writes that "Jewish thinking and living can only be adequately understood in terms of a dialectical pattern, containing opposite or contrasted properties."⁸¹ Elsewhere, he remarks that:

Most high religions make an effort to present the world and life as a unified whole and to regard all discord and incongruities as provisional or illusory.... In contrast, the emphasis in Jewish mysticism is upon the contradictory, the paradoxical, and the unresolved mystery.⁸²

In Jewish thought, finite experience points to the source from which it springs and toward which it moves. Because He is creator, God transcends creation, but, for the same reason, he is revealed in it. In Reflections, Niebuhr writes that: "The processes of nature and history are revelations of grace."⁸³ This ranks Niebuhr with Emil Brunner and those at whom Barth shouted his famous, emphatic "Nein!" to the suggestion that there could be any divine revelation apart from Christ, the Holy Spirit and divine grace, and the Bible. Brunner had joined in the neo-orthodox attack on liberal subjectivism in theology, but he resisted the objectivism of Barth as well.⁸⁴ He attempted to reconcile

⁸⁰ ICE, 28.

⁸¹ Abraham J. Heschel, interviewed by Patrick Granfield, in Granfield, Theologians at Work, 74-75.

⁸² Abraham J. Heschel, "A Hebrew evaluation of Reinhold Niebuhr," in KE, 400.

⁸³ REE, 285.

⁸⁴ See above, pp. 82-85.

as well, and often better than the latter because he has not been led astray by artificial rules."¹⁰¹ Traditional Jewish belief in the moral worth of the "mundane" is comparable to traditional American democratic faith in the virtues and wisdom of the "common man" and the worthiness of his secular pursuits. The Puritans, envisaging America as the "New Jerusalem," had created a society with communal strength, one which recognized the presence of God in everyday life and awaited His transforming work - a society similar in spirit to that of ancient Israel. The Puritan temper and its Jewish qualities had a lasting, formative effect on American culture; as we discussed, it appeared clearly and strongly in the theology of the Social Gospel (as best expressed by Hauschenbusch) and was thus mediated to Reinhold Niebuhr.

To say the least, Niebuhr did not possess an intellectual soul mate in Morton White. White, who made clear his distaste for Niebuhr's ideas, made no secret of his allegiance to the camp of Lewey.¹⁰² White's peace was disturbed by the element of paradox, the stress on sin, and the other "unscientific" qualities in Niebuhr's thought. He seemed to enjoy referring to Niebuhr's espousal of the doctrine of original sin because it allowed him to tar Niebuhr with implications of medievalism, obscurantism, and other connotations of retrogression.

If Niebuhr had been an evangelical or fundamentalist revivalist, one who displayed an anti-intellectualism and believed in playing on the emotions as the principal means of reaching the soul and its hidden truths, White might have been able to score more points. But

101 Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, 10 August 1787, The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, ed. Julian P. Boyd (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1950-), 12:15.

102 White, Social Thought in America, xxxi-xxxii.

that this had on Niebuhr's mind. Niebuhr himself, writing in the 1950s, states: "I may say that Brunner's whole theological position is close to mine and that it is one to which I am more indebted than any other."⁸⁸

Like Brunner, Paul Tillich rejected the objectivism of Barth and developed a theology in which the personal and the transcendent were more closely joined. We noted how Niebuhr, in reviewing Tillich, described theonomy in terms that were similar to the prophetic understanding of the human situation: both of these perspectives dealt with the tension existing between time and eternity. In 1935, Tillich commented on Barthianism:

When I am asked, what is wrong with the "dialectic" theology? I reply that it is not "dialectic." A dialectic theology is one in which "yes" and "no" being inseparably together. In the so-called "dialectic" theology they are irreconcilably separated, and that is why this theology is not dialectic. Rather, it is paradoxical, and therein lies its strength; and it is supernatural, which constitutes its weakness.⁸⁹

Tillich, like Niebuhr and Brunner, criticized Barthians for drawing too sharp a division between God and creation. He goes on, for example, to say that Barth "deprives the human of any relation to the divine."⁹⁰ The object of Tillich's religious socialism was the creation of a new social order that would invite God's presence and activity. This vision provided Niebuhr with an influential model; it stimulated those aspects of the prophetic paradigm that were concerned with the moral

⁸⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism," in KB, 437.

⁸⁹ Paul Tillich, "What is wrong with the 'Dialectic' Theology," The Journal of Religion 15 (1935): 129.

⁹⁰ Tillich, "What is wrong," 141.

redemption of society. Therefore, although his work did not show evidence of a link to Jewish ideas as did the work of Brunner, Tillich, in his religious socialism, reinforced those aspects of the prophetic perspective that Niebuhr had derived from Jewish thought.

• Niebuhr was neither the systematic theologian that Tillich was, nor did he share his interest in ontology or his inclination to utopianism. Barth and the lessons of urban social work had taught Niebuhr too much about sin and the necessary transcendence of God for him to subscribe to Tillich's more adventurous ideas. Niebuhr was a simpler theologian. (he even disclaimed such a title for himself) with, as we have stressed, great interest in the practical, and apologetic and a temperament that did not lend itself to systematic, dogmatic study. As Hofmann has noted, he was related to the Europeans in the content of his thought more than in form or method.⁹¹ June Bingham has expressed it this way:

The truth for Niebuhr can never be plotted on a nice, neat, straight line.... he deals deliberately with "both-and" rather than "either-or," not in order to be perverse or difficult, but because this is progressively how the truth about the incongruity of the human situation and the irony of history have appeared to him. Indeed, if one could fairly make an oversimplification of Niebuhr's thought, it would be that he is forever at war with oversimplification.⁹²

Alan Richardson mentions how easy, it might have been for one in Niebuhr's position,

having once seen through the illusions of liberal

⁹¹ Hofmann, Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, 22.

⁹² Bingham, Course to Change, 32, 33.

rationalism, to have rebounded to the opposite extreme.... Niebuhr's strength was that right from the beginning of his work he was able to see that the defects of one way of thinking are not valid reasons for embracing its opposite.⁷³

Will Herberg and John J. Bennett have both contrasted the unsystematic (and, therefore, more typically American) character of Niebuhr's theology with Tillich's (more typically European) quest for unity, identity, and synthesis.⁹⁴ Brunner has remarked that:

The label "neo-orthodox" is rather unfortunate, since in all the world there is nothing more unorthodox than the spiritual volcano Reinhold Niebuhr. For most people "orthodoxy" means something like spiritual conformism, while Niebuhr is a true son of an independent non-conformism. The term "radical Protestant" would suit him very much better.⁹⁵

Herberg contrasts Niebuhr and Tillich on the basis of an ontological versus a historical interest:

For Niebuhr, human being can be grasped only in its historicity; more, the very substance of human being is its historicity.... This contrast between the ontological and the historical - the one rooted in the Greek philosophical tradition, the other in the biblical-Hebraic dramatic imagination - is what at bottom distinguishes the thinking of Tillich and Niebuhr.⁹⁶

To employ the categories used here and above, both Barth and Tillich allowed Greek-derived ideas to shape their theologies, as revealed in Barth's strong dualism and Tillich's interest in "being." On the

⁷³ Alan Richardson, "Reinhold Niebuhr as Apologist," in KB, 222.

⁹⁴ See Will Herberg, "Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich," The Chaplain, 10 (October 1959): 8; Bennett, in Granfield, Theologians at work, 200.

⁹⁵ Brunner, "Some Remarks," 28-29.

⁹⁶ Herberg, "Niebuhr and Tillich," 5.

contrary, Brunner and Niebuhr avoided this inclination, instead incorporating Jewish thought and its leading interest in the social substance of humanity into their work.

* * * * *

That he had a strong practical, apologetic interest, that pluralism, paradox, and lack of system characterized his thought, that he was an underdog neo-orthodox theologian, that the Hebrew prophetic perspective became very important to him - all these features reveal the Americanness of Reinhold Niebuhr. Among historians of the American identity, Michael Kammen has written on America's "contrapuntal" culture - the dynamism of its contrasts in tension. Americans, in his view, are a "people of paradox." Kammen's starting point is the work of Erik Erikson, who made the following observation about the United States:

It is a commonplace to state that whatever one may come to consider a truly American trait can be shown to have its equally characteristic opposite.... This dynamic country subjects its inhabitants to more extreme contrasts and abrupt changes during a lifetime or a generation than is normally the case with other great nations.⁹⁷

Kammen proceeds from these observations and employs the concept of bifurcality (the conjunction of two organisms without loss of identity, a pair of correlative things, a paradoxical coupling of opposites) as "central to a proper perspective upon American civilization."⁹⁸ His

97 Erik Erikson, quoted in Michael Kammen, People of Paradox: An Inquiry Concerning the Origins of American Civilization (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 97.

98 Kammen, People of Paradox, 89-90.

position is that American culture ought to be understood in terms of such "paradoxical coupling of opposites." His purpose, in other words, is to move beyond single-factor or conflict/consensus interpretations of American historical development. From this perspective, Reinhold Niebuhr appears to be a quintessentially American theologian.

In his thought, as we have seen, he conspicuously avoided single-factor theologies, as shown in his refusal to rebound to the opposite extreme after having rejected liberalism. His mature theology, informed by Hebrew thought, was characterized by the unresolved dialectic, by the conjunction of two principles without loss of identity. Our calling to redeem the social order with the guidance of a transcendent God must, he maintained, be held in tension with a recognition that our sinfulness places limits upon what is possible. In method, this is a contrapuntal or biform theology, and therein is found a quality that mirrors the paradoxes and dynamic tensions of American culture, a quality less common to Europe with its love of system and unity.

Niebuhr also relates congruously with a characteristic of American intellectual life that Morton White identifies in his study of American philosophical thought, Science and Sentiment in America. White argues that "the most important and most interesting strain of American philosophy" has been its response to the challenge of modern science and scientific method, in particular to the Lockean belief that fundamental moral truths can be discovered by reason.⁹⁹ America

⁹⁹ Morton White, Science and Sentiment in America: Philosophical Thought From Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 3.

lacked a tradition of technical or systematic philosophy and American thinkers, white states, have placed special emphasis on the sentiments (for example, the soul, emotion, experience, intuition, and other "sixth senses") as means of establishing knowledge that are "fundamentally different from that used by the sciences."¹⁰⁰ White desired that the scholar unite logic, learning, experience, and sentiment in his pursuit of greater understanding; his quarrel was with "philosophical anti-intellectualism" - the tendency to place all of one's epistemological eggs in the basket of sentiment.

Niebuhr stands with the dominant group, the "sentimentalists," since he believes, as a Christian, that some of our most important knowledge is obtained through divine revelation and spiritual discernment. Furthermore, his emphasis on original sin was a direct attack on the literal belief that the exercise of reason is a foolproof means of gaining knowledge and achieving progress; this attack ranks him with those who oppose some form of sentiment to, or combine some form of it with, reason.

The Jewish dimension of his mature thought also leads him beyond reason in the search for meaning. Hebrew thought, as we saw, taught him that meaning was discovered in the everyday-- where we work with our hands and our hearts more than we do with our heads. This idea is very much in spirit with the thought of one of America's leading representatives of the sentimental, Thomas Jefferson (much influenced by Scottish common-sense philosophy), who, in 1787, wrote: "State a moral case, to a ploughman and a professor. The former will decide it

¹⁰⁰ White, Science and Sentiment, 297.

as well, and often better than the latter because he has not been led astray by artificial rules."¹⁰¹ Traditional Jewish belief in the moral worth of the "mundane" is comparable to traditional American democratic faith in the virtues and wisdom of the "common man" and the worthiness of his secular pursuits. The Puritans, envisaging America as the "New Jerusalem," had created a society with communal strength, one which recognized the presence of God in everyday life and awaited His transforming work - a society similar in spirit to that of ancient Israel. The Puritan temper and its Jewish qualities had a lasting, formative effect on American culture; as we discussed, it appeared clearly and strongly in the theology of the Social Gospel (as best expressed by Kauschenbusch) and was thus mediated to Reinhold Niebuhr.

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¹⁰¹ Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, 10 August 1787, The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, ed. Julian P. Boyd (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1950-), 12:15.

¹⁰² White, Social Thought in America, xxxi-xxxii.

Niebuhr was no advocate of a "religion of the heart." As discussed earlier, he, like Barth, rejected the fundamentalist reaction as a path to truth with the same vigor that he rejected the rational methods of secular and religious liberalism. As Bingham notes of Niebuhr the preacher: "His approach is deliberately to stir the mind rather than the emotions of his listener."¹⁰³ Niebuhr was not a philosophical anti-intellectual, and the best evidence of this is his acceptance of the intellectually complex neo-orthodox theologies and his blending of them with aspects of the social Gospel so as to yield the full bodied prophetic paradigm. Although some aspects of his thought reflected the American disposition toward the "sentimental" (in White's sense of the term), other aspects revealed that he was moving beyond American traits.

Because of his melding of European and American theologies, Niebuhr was one who attempted to conquer American intellectual provincialism, which secular and religious liberalism (with their optimistic, pragmatic instinct) had greatly reinforced. Bonhoeffer, Tillich, and other observers were quick to comment on this provincialism and on Niebuhr's role as its leading indigenous foe. Niebuhr's most significant contribution was in aggressively trying to reveal to America that it, too, shared in human frailty. But America, like a spoiled child, has never suffered limitations gladly. It has enjoyed thinking of itself, in David Potter's words, as a "people of plenty."¹⁰⁴ especially in Moral Man, Niebuhr sought to weaken America's

¹⁰³ Bingham, Courage to Change, 24.

¹⁰⁴ See David M. Potter, People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

narcissism and thereby expose it to its corruptibility. In that book, he wrote: "The truth is," declared James Madison, "that all men having power ought to be distrusted." The history of nations bears testimony to the truth of that observation.¹⁰⁵ Niebuhr's emphasis on human sin and on the need to fear, and therefore balance, power is rather Madisonian in character; it identifies Niebuhr with that minority of realistic minds in American history, best represented by John Adams and the other conservative, whig-minded federalists and neo-federalists who had no illusions about man's nature and who retained a fond admiration for European traditions, manners, and thought.

John C. Bennett, in 1937, called Niebuhr "the soul of Europe hovering over American thought" and George Hammar, in 1940, stated that "Niebuhr is certainly a sorely needed mediator between American and European theology."¹⁰⁶ Hammar correctly realized that Americans could never accept Barthianism and would therefore need someone who could mediate aspects of it in a palatable form. George Richards, considered the leading American Barthian at that time, conceded the difficulty of the task: "Of one thing I am certain, that only an act of omnipotent grace can turn the American philosopher and theologian from the method of Schleiermacher, Ritschl, and Troeltsch, to the way of Kierkegaard and Barth."¹⁰⁷ Niebuhr's strength - why he stood out conspicuously from Richards, Lowrie, and others - was in his mediation. In 1933, Charles C. Morrison wrote about Niebuhr: "My chief concern has been, if he will let me say it, to save him from that religious

¹⁰⁵ MNIS, 164

¹⁰⁶ Bennett, "The Contribution of Reinhold Niebuhr," 26; Hammar, Christian Realism, 61.

¹⁰⁷ Richards, Creative Controversies, 217-18.

transcendentalism and illusionism to which his rich acquaintance with German theology predisposes him."¹⁰⁸ Morrison need not have worried. Niebuhr's genius was his conjunction of the European neo-orthodox corrective with those aspects of a social Christian orientation that had deep roots in American history, a conjunction expressed in the Hebrew prophetic paradigm. In the words of Emil Brunner:

Niebuhr has made out of the dialectical theology something quite new, something genuinely American while translating its concepts from the theological language into that of the philosophy of culture and social criticism, and kindling them with his prophetic spirit. In his hands the new theological concepts were used to throw a light upon the spiritual and social framework of modern civilization and lay bare its fundamental flaws and errors. By virtue of an unusual facility for dealing with the abstractions of cultural history he succeeds in relating social facts, cultural principles, and spiritual tendencies to the teachings and concerns of Christian faith. Thus he makes clear the essence of both the present-day world and the Christian faith.¹⁰⁹

Brunner (who was also principally involved in relating social and cultural facts to the Christian faith) and Niebuhr joined in incorporating Jewish ideas into their theologies, and this element became central in the words they addressed to a world in which liberal panaceas and reassurances had lost credibility. To these men fell the prophetic task of answering the confusion, anxiety, and disillusionment of a culture in disintegration by offering a message imbued with the theme of relatedness.

¹⁰⁸ Charles J. Morrison, "The Editor's Reply," 30 50 (1933): 747.

¹⁰⁹ Brunner, "Some Remarks," 29.

The prophetic paradigm was the centerpiece of Niebuhr's theology in 1935, when An Interpretation was published. It represented his arrival at a mature theology, one which incorporated the biblical, European, American, and experiential elements with which he had been working for two decades. He began within the Social Gospel tradition but his experience in Detroit proved to be an unsettling challenge. It was neo-orthodoxy that reintroduced stability, serving as a catalyst that consolidated these elements into a paradigm. Although Niebuhr was not uncritical of European ideas, he recognized therein a substantial challenge to liberalism and a reason for joining the attack on it. Our analysis has focused on the process of that consolidation, the development of that attack, and their fulfillment by 1935. The dissemination of this mature theology continued after 1935, receiving more extended, polished treatment, and gaining more widespread attention, in the Gifford Lectures of 1939, which became The Nature and Destiny of Man (1941-43).

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