

Theology and the New American Culture: A Problematic Relationship

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MY title calls the relationship of theology and the new American culture “problematic.” That relationship is a problem, I think, on many sides and various levels. The issue involves questions I do not even know how to ask meaningfully, let alone resolve.

First of all, I have all sorts of problems with a term so amorphous as “American culture.” I know there is something distinctive about being American, that is, being heir of and participant in this nation’s history and culture. Yet if forced to characterize that distinctiveness, I find myself either mouthing meaningless abstractions about democracy, freedom, and equality — or simply lost in the sheer diversity of people and experience which make up the country. So it is definitely problematic for me to attempt relating theology to something as hard to pin down as concepts like “American culture” or “the American character.”

Moreover, the turbulence of the 1960’s makes me suspect that America well may have undergone some fundamental changes which indicate the beginnings of a new culture. Yet I am even more puzzled about how to identify and properly characterize this “new American culture” than I am the old. Is the new culture that which is the development of our technological society, or is it rather the “counterculture” of American youth? Are the seemingly momentous changes in the American scene really “new,” or only different ways of construing the familiar American pragmatic and individualistic spirit? In other words, is the so-called “new American culture” something different in kind or but one or several variations on traditional American values and institutions?

Finally, the relationship of these kinds of questions and theology is highly problematic. Today there are numerous “theologies of culture” — not least because it is so unclear as to what such an enterprise entails. Without broaching that thorny matter, I can at least insist that the question of theology’s relation to the “new American culture” be separated from that of religion’s relationship to a culture. Theology is a normative discipline. In the context of the questions we are raising here, theology is concerned with how

religious people *should be* related to culture, regardless of how in fact they are so related. Historically, of course, religion has played a decisive role in the formation of the American spirit. But such a descriptive account has no normative weight for the theologian. At best, awareness of religion's role will inform his enterprise since the theologian must have some idea as to what has been in order to know what should be.¹

At least such has been the traditional view of theology as normative. One of the most striking aspects of contemporary American theology, however, has been its willingness, even avidity, to enter into dialogue with its culture. Today's theologians appear eager to rush in where historians and sociologists fear to tread. Or to change the image, American theologians no longer sit around the hearth of philosophy, but warm themselves with the cultural themes of the day. It is the leaping flames of cultural issues they contemplate, seeking to discern implicit or explicit "religious" significance in that fire.² And no longer is the theologian's handbook Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, but rather Reich's *The Greening of America*.

The difficulty with the resulting theology is, however, deciding why Reich's (or X's or Y's) account of modern American society should be accepted rather than Parsons' (or X's or Y's). With such theology, the theologian's claims seem to be only as good as the cultural commentator he happens to prefer. Nor is it clear how such theology is to be distinguished from journalism.

I do not wish to deny many healthy aspects of the theologian's concern with contemporary culture; but in actual practice the

¹ For example, my own analysis below presupposes the kind of work done by Perry Miller in *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1956) and H. R. Niebuhr in *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper, 1937).

² Harvey Cox's *The Secular City* (New York: Macmillan, 1965) is the classic example of this kind of theology. Many lesser lights continue the attempt over different aspects of culture they find more significant. For example, see Myron Bloy, "The Counter-Culture: It Just Won't Go Away," *Commonweal*, October 17, 1971, pp. 29-34, and Robert Johnson, *Counter Culture and the Vision of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1971). A summary of Michael Novak's work would make a fascinating account in this respect as he originally gave a theological blessing to the "youth movement" but then has begun to be more and more disenchanted with it. For a well-balanced assessment see his "American Youth and the Problem of God: A Theological Reflection," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society* (New York, 1972), pp. 138-155. Many of the essays in this volume are of interest for the subject of this essay.

development has tended to trivialize the theological task. An indication of this danger is the highly faddish and arbitrary nature of such theology. For example, in 1965 Harvey Cox in *The Secular City* gave an almost unqualified baptism to the new "secularity" with its pragmatic and technological style.³ This was necessary, according to Cox, because theology is called upon to make religion relevant and responsive to the new forces of our society. (Thus reversing the ancient Christian assumption that the Christian's task is to make the world relevant to the Gospel.) Yet only four years later we find Cox praising the emphasis on fantasy, play, and celebration in the antitechnology counterculture.⁴ Perhaps Cox has begun to suspect that there is nothing more boring or pathetic than the irrelevancy of the "relevant theology" of the generation just past. Nonetheless, he has created a hard theological world to live in: the theologian must somehow keep up with every new movement the media decide to create.

Such criticism of the recent theology of culture, however, does not reach the basic difficulty. Often the implicit assumption in this kind of theologizing is that the prime duty of theology is to help create or reconstitute Christendom. Such a suggestion may appear odd, since the theology I am criticizing tends to be itself critical of past failures of the church to stand over against the pretensions of American righteousness. It vigorously opposes the willing domestication of the Gospel to believing in belief. Such theology dissociates itself from the church's rather crude baptism of the "American way of life." And this theology insists that its perspective is not determined by the church's good faith, but rather by the bad faith of the church expressed in the acceptance of racists, capitalists, and a dehumanizing society. Thus for the theologians

³ The issue of the relation of religion and "secularity" is of course an important and significant problem for the theologian. The problem with *The Secular City* was the assumption that the meaning of "secularity" and its relation to our contemporary culture was clear. For an excellent collection of essays concerned with this issue see Childress and Harned, eds., *Secularization and the Protestant Prospect* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970).

⁴ Harvey Cox, *The Feast of Fools* (New York: Harper, 1969). Cox explicitly denies that there is any conflict between his earlier and later books and calls the latter only a "companion piece" to *The Secular City*. However, it is extremely hard to see how he can have both worlds; the "festive radical" he calls for surely seems bent on tearing down a good deal that the pragmatic-technological culture wishes to preserve. He is right, however, that there is a continuity between the books as he continues to have a rather touching faith in the goodness of his fellow creatures.

of the "new American culture" the current counterculture movement seems to offer the church a way out of its all-too-willing service to the old culture which has now revealed its true warmaking, racist, and technologically repressive character. Such a way out, however, leads through the same error of the past: confusing the demands of the Gospel with the reigning idealities of culture. The New Left and the counterculture are, in fact, no less aspects of the American phenomenon than are its pragmatic-technological forms.

Thus theologians continue to foster the idea that the church's mission is to translate the Gospel into the pieties of contemporary culture — that her mission is to spiritualize our civilization and our lives by identifying the current moralisms with the meaningfulness of salvation. The church's very success in the past now weds her to the continued bad faith that she is shepherd of the goodness of our culture.⁵ But such a view of the church's mission, I would argue, is theologically askew. The church is not called to build culture or to supply the moral tone of civilization, old or new. The church is called to preach that the Kingdom of God has come close in the person and work of Jesus Christ.⁶ It is only as the church

⁵ James Sellers says, for example, "Christian theology plays its role by seeking to identify those elements in the [American] tradition that express the Gospel, while it is at the same time open to those new elements in our contemporary situation that express new challenges and call for new expressions of the Gospel." *Public Ethics: American Morals and Manners* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 226. Herbert Richardson attempts to identify theology with what he calls the sociotechnic age. Thus, he says, "A sociotechnic theology must develop new ethical principles which will enable men to live in harmony with the new impersonal mechanism of mass society. This ethic will affirm the values of a technical social organization of life in the same way that earlier Protestantism affirmed the values of radical individualism and capitalism." *Toward an American Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967) p. 25. Sellers and Richardson have the virtue of not being mesmerized by the "righteousness" of the counterculture but their theological difference with the counterculture theologians is only over which part of the culture they wish to make the engines of theology serve. To provide one final example, Leroy Moore suggests that the great unfinished theological task of the American church is to construct a theology to support the pluralism and freedom of the American culture. "From Profane to Sacred America: Religion and the Cultural Revolution in the United States," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 39 (September, 1971), 322-324.

⁶ Since I am primarily concerned in this context to criticize what I interpret to be a new form of the "Christ of culture" position, my understanding of the relation of "Christ and culture" may appear more negative than it is. A culture may offer many positive forms of life congruent with the demands of the Gospel. My concern in this essay, however, is to deny that this con-

becomes a community separate from the predominant culture that she has the space and rest from which to speak the truth to that culture.⁷

The church's task, then, is not to choose sides among the competing vitalities of the current culture, but to speak the word of truth amid warring spirits. For the truth she speaks is not any truth; it is the truth of the Kingdom which the bounds of this earth do not contain. That is the reason why the first word the church always speaks to its culture is a word of incompleteness and finitude. However, this is not a word men gladly hear. It is characteristic of our personal and national existence to claim that we have a hold on truth which gives security in this life. We indulge the illusion that we can and do imbue our life and culture with meaning that is not subject to the ravages of time and human perversity. This is the reason a society only confesses its past sins within a framework of later rectitude. To do otherwise would necessitate admitting that the society's call for loyalty and devotion can only be accepted with qualification, or perhaps not at all.

The theologically interesting aspect of the current cultural "crisis" is, therefore, the tension it reveals in the idealism of the American spirit. For, as Reinhold Niebuhr demonstrated in *The Irony of American History*, the great strength and great weakness, the great wisdom and great folly of America have been the assumption that her beginning and history somehow captured the ideal possibilities of man.⁸ To be sure, America often betrayed her ideals

gruence can be *a priori* asserted in the name of relevance or social reform, but occurs only because Christians first take a critical and discriminating stance toward the society in which they happen to find themselves.

⁷ I suspect that this is also true for the university. However, it remains to be seen if the university's commitment to truth in the abstract is sufficient to withstand the temptation to become mistress to the reigning culture. For a position close to my own in this respect see James Schall, "The University, the Monastery, and the City," *Commonweal*, April 7, 1972, pp. 105-110.

⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Scribner's, 1962). Some may interpret this essay as a reassertion of Niebuhrian realism against the idealism and romanticism of the new politics. However, this would be a serious misunderstanding for even though I continue to have deep sympathies with Niebuhr's insights I think much of the recent criticism of "Christian realism" as a position has been just. It would take me too far afield to go into this matter but generally I think Niebuhr failed to appreciate the positive nature of society, or, in more theological terms, he tended to continue to assume, admittedly in a more dynamic fashion, the Lutheran dichotomy between the orders of creation and redemption. However, even if that is the case many of Niebuhr's contemporary critics ignore his positive apprecia-

for lesser goods; but her very hypocrisy proved but another aspect of her spiritual pride. For America's ability to see critically her shortcomings has been interpreted by Americans as another sign of her essential righteousness and distinctiveness among the nations. The theologians of the "new American culture" question no more than those before them that a righteous America is possible. The debate between the representatives of the old and the new cultures concerns only whether we have fallen, or to what degree the fall has occurred, so that the necessary nostrums may be applied.

The interesting "problematic relationship" for me in this essay is therefore the tension created by a necessary theological stance. As a theologian I must be a critic who somehow stands apart from his culture, while remaining at the same time part of it. In attempting such a task I am sure I will make some horrendous errors concerning my perception of the nature of the American culture, both old and new. However, such a risk must be taken, since the Word to which the theologian is first responsible does not go out to the world to come back empty. The theologian shares in the church's desire not to keep a place above the battle, but a place within it, so as to speak the truth about the human condition in its localized cultural dress. Relevancy is not the criterion of truth. It is, however, an obligation of the church and the theologian if they are to avoid narcissistic infatuation which breeds the self-righteousness of men who have forgotten that Christ belongs not to themselves but to the world.

In this essay I am attempting to suggest what I take to be pertinent theological aspects of the current crisis of American culture. For purposes of analysis, I will distinguish between the crisis associated with our institutions and the crisis of persons. I hesitate to employ such a distinction, for it separates the inseparable and tends to suggest a cleavage between the social and personal factors of our life. As a way of sorting out issues, however, I think the distinction will prove functionally useful.

The account of the crises of American institutions is a familiar litany. Our cities are decaying. They are filled with black refugees from the South, who must try to survive strangled by white insen-

tion of community for the flourishing of the self. Moreover, the critics are wrong in their claim that Niebuhr's realism is essentially conservative. This appears to be the case due to Niebuhr's refusal to develop any principles of justice on which discriminating social judgments could be based. In the absence of a substantive view of justice, Niebuhr's realism was and is open to conservative distortion.

sitivity and stupidity. Integration of the blacks has proved more difficult than was originally envisaged; the blacks resist it for reasons of manhood and identity, while whites fight integration in order to preserve the "quality education of the neighborhood school." Then there is the continuing problem of poverty. We have discovered a poor in the midst of society's plenty whom the growth of a mixed-capitalist economy does not seem capable of reaching. On top of it all, we are becoming aware that we are callously destroying our environment, so that we can neither drink our water nor breathe our air without endangering health. And all these problems seem to be occurring at a time when our political institutions are not able to provide even the most basic services for society to keep running at a minimal level.

Brooding over these immense problems is of course the war in Vietnam. The war seems to stand as sign and symbol that America has indeed fallen from the ranks of the righteous. In Vietnam we have engaged in and helped perpetrate an evil so terrible that no possible rationalization can be offered to explain or excuse what we have done.⁹ America seems to have sided with the forces of death and destruction against the forces of life. The only question left is which ones will prevail.

These are extremely serious problems; taken together they pose a real threat to our society's current form of existence. What I am concerned about here, however, is how this common litany of our problems serves to substantiate the claim that we are living in an "apocalyptic" or "crisis" time. Such a proclamation is not a new phenomenon in American life. But framing the current revision of the claim reveals some of the basic illusions associated with the American dream. For this apocalypticism is based on our prior claims to greatness and innocence. That is to say, our apocalypticism is a sign of a disease deeper than the actual problems which we Americans face. It is noteworthy that the radical critiques of American society as corrupt continue to presuppose, as their model of the good society, a purer and more perfect America which supposedly existed in the past. The American radical is not the born cynic but

⁹ I do not mean this to be taken as my own ethical judgment about the Vietnam war. Rather, I am discussing the war insofar as it has become a cultural symbol. It is one of the marks of our ethos that it is so difficult to discuss the war as an issue of ethical ambiguity, for either one must think it a complete evil or a complete good.

the lover who has discovered his beloved works part time in a brothel.

In a decisive way, then, our times render problematic the notion that America represents a new start and opportunity for mankind. We are not, were not, a nation conceived in innocence. The new Eden or the new Israel we have never been and will never be.¹⁰ Yet many continue to presuppose the myth of innocence by suggesting that America's way out of her current crisis is to make a completely new beginning. We have betrayed the original covenant; our hope now lies in making a new contract which allows us to begin again, leaving behind our sin of the past.

This illusory quest for our lost innocence, however, only deepens our problem. It perverts the accuracy of how we describe our current situation. For example, Americans seem unable to believe that our present troubles may possibly be due to the very hardness of the issues, inadvertence, or sheer stupidity.¹¹ If we are in a mess, we prefer to explain it in terms of evil men conspiring to put us there. The war in Vietnam is brutally painful to us. Even if one allows for the incredible deviousness associated with American involvement in Vietnam, the truth is that honorable men with good intentions tragically committed us to the present course. But to admit such a truth means that as a nation Americans must face the fact that we exist in a world of ambiguity. And within that world innocence is bought only at the price of illusion. Put differently, accepting the hard truth means that we must somehow learn that life is often

¹⁰ For a fascinating account of the idea of innocence in early American literature see R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (Chicago: Phoenix Books, 1955). John Barth's *The Sot Weed Factor* is a marvelous satire concerned with the myth of America's birth in innocence (New York: Grossett and Dunlap, 1966). See also Thomas Merton's *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1968), pp. 32-40.

¹¹ It never seems to occur to the current radicals that part of our problems is the result of the incompatibility of positive moral values. For example, the early S.D.S. manifesto, the *Port Huron Statement*, seems to assume that we can reduce poverty, provide better housing, destroy racism, and at the same time decentralize the governmental process and decrease our dependence on technology. Zbigniew Brzezinski is closer to the truth when he says, "Today's America has set higher standards for itself than any other society: it aims at creating racial harmony on the basis of equality, at achieving social welfare while preserving personal liberty, at eliminating poverty without shackling individual freedom. Tensions in the United States might be less were it to seek less—but in its ambitious goals America retains its innovative character." *Between Two Ages: America's Role in the Technetronic Era* (New York: Viking, 1970), p. 257.

neither good nor bad, but simply tragic. Even more difficult, we must learn how to embody that fact in our experience. Thus Americans might come to see, for example, that we cannot remove the stain of sin by immediate withdrawal from Vietnam, nor even by fighting the war for heightened moral purposes. There is, perhaps, no choice except between evils.

In this matter of overcoming the myth of innocence, the crucial issue before Americans is whether we can include within the account of our history the reality of the black man's existence and struggle. I am not talking about whether we finally are able to integrate the blacks into the larger society, important and necessary as that is. (Integration, in fact, might well be a way of avoiding the hard problem which the black American raises for his white compatriots.) Nor do I mean that our white histories should be written to include the contributions blacks have made to our nation, though that also is necessary. Rather, I want to point up the fact that the black population stands in our midst as a people who have suffered the injustice and humiliation of being systematically oppressed and exploited. As such, black people are a constant check on the American presumption of innocence with its corollary of omnipotence.

As Vincent Harding has put it so well:

The black experience in America allows for no illusions, not even that last ancient hope of the chosen American people whom God will somehow rescue by a special act of his grace. America began with such hopes, but they were tied to the idea of a Covenant, that men would have to do God's will for them to remain as his chosen ones. Somehow, just as America forced black men to do so much of its other dirty but productive work, the nation evidently came to believe that whites could be chosen while blacks did that suffering which has always been identified with the chosen ones. Now that is over. The black past has begun to explode and to reveal to a hidden chosen people that to be the anointed one is to be crushed and humiliated by the forces of the world. So, for all who would see it, the Afro-American past illuminates the meaning of being chosen. Perhaps this is what white Americans must see: that they will either join the ranks of suffering and humiliation or there will be no chosen people on these shores. Either they will submit their children to some of the same educational terrors they have allowed black children to endure or there is no future for any. Either they will give up their affluence to provide necessities for others or there will be neither affluence nor necessities for anyone. Perhaps we were chosen together, and we cannot move towards a new beginning until we have faced all the horror and agony of

the past with absolute honesty. Perhaps integration is indeed irrelevant until the assessment of a long, unpaid debt has been made and significant payments begun. Perhaps atonement, not integration, is the issue at hand.¹²

To speak of institutional crises as finally a matter for atonement may sound odd, since such crises are only solved by action and new programs. It is my contention, however, that while new programs and new institutional forms are certainly necessary in our society, they do not reach to the heart of our current problems. I suspect that as Americans we will find some way to "muddle through." The great tragedy will be if we do so in a way which keeps us trapped in the illusion that further action will free us from the past. A viable moral future for America is possible only if we embrace our sinful past not as an accidental side show, but part and parcel of what it means to be American. That may be asking far too much of any nation; but we can do nothing less if the moral substance of our society is ever to be based on truth rather than illusion.

Severe as it is, the crisis of institutions in America in some ways pales in comparison with the crisis of persons. For in the midst of the most affluent economy in the world and the freest political system, we find a quarrelsome and dissatisfied people. This disquietude appears in its most dramatic form among the youth identified with the New Left and the counterculture.¹³ Common to these is a kind of conventional wisdom about contemporary society. These young people see themselves trapped in an increasingly and seemingly irreversible technological society which leaves nothing to chance. We each become cogs in a completely planned system. The bureaucrat and the expert are the new power brokers in this society. And their power is all the more secure because, with

¹² Vincent Harding, "The Afro-American Past," in *New Theology* No. 6 (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 175-176.

¹³ I do not mean to imply that there are not often profound differences between those associated with the New Left and members of the counterculture. However, for my purposes there is no reason to try to carefully distinguish between them. The standard works describing this phenomenon are of course Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (Garden City: Anchor, 1969); Charles Reich, *The Greening of America* (New York: Bantam, 1970); Jacobs and Landau, *The New Radicals* (New York: Vintage, 1966); and for a good collection of Movement literature see *The Movement Toward a New America: The Beginnings of a Long Revolution*, edited by Mitchell Goodman (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1970).

ideology now relegated to the irrational past, they no longer have to justify their position.¹⁴

In such a technological society democracy becomes but a sham, since government manipulates the masses through the media. Freedom thus becomes but a word for submitting to the choices of those who run the technological machinery. Work becomes pointless and empty. Reich describes work in this society as "mindless, exhausting, boring, servile, and hateful, something to be endured while 'life' is confined to 'time off.'" At the same time our culture has been reduced to the grossly commercial; all cultural values are for sale, and those that fail to make a profit are not preserved. Our life activities have become plastic, vicarious, and false to our genuine needs, activities fabricated by others and forced upon us."¹⁵

The greatest loss we feel in such a society is the loss of self. The system strips us of all personal uniqueness in order to make us productive members of the technological mass society. We tend to become our roles, and thus are alienated from our true selves. Moreover, in such a society all attempts at community are killed, for "modern living has obliterated place, locality, and neighborhood, and given us the anonymous separation of our existence."¹⁶ Thus we are left as machines without souls; we are condemned to a life of meaningless consumption so that our technological society can continue to function.

Against such a system, American youth see the only hope in forming a counterculture based on love and friendship. It becomes a political act to "do your own thing," for "the system" cannot stand any form of deviation. Style thus becomes a matter of political substance as it embodies the "idea that an individual need not accept the pattern that society has formed for him, but may make his own choice."¹⁷ Genuine participatory democracy must be made

¹⁴ It is interesting that Roszak relies so heavily on Jacques Ellul's book, *The Technological Society* (New York: Vintage, 1964), for the implications of Ellul's analysis is that there is no way of opting out or fighting a technological society without becoming part of it. This is but one example of the failure of the New Left to find adequate intellectual positions that would make intelligible the profound dissatisfaction they feel.

¹⁵ Reich, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7. One wonders why Reich thinks work was otherwise in the past.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 395. The New Left makes no attempt to distinguish between a political and a cultural revolution. That is why it often appears totalitarian. It wishes to transform the political form of society to get at the general culture. In some ways Reich's naive view of the necessity of changing "consciousness"

a reality, even if it means the violent overthrow of the current rule.

What is impressive about this position is not the analysis of our society associated with it, but rather the profound dissatisfaction to which it witnesses. The dissatisfaction, however, is all the more tragic because of its failure to perceive accurately and face the reality of our contemporary experience. The New Left and the counterculture are thus more interesting as a symptom of our times than as a herald of our future.¹⁸ But these movements are indeed a significant symptom. The language of their protest reveals their profound commitment to traditional American values—the very values that are often the source of their dissatisfaction. What is so striking about Reich's description of Consciousness III, for example, is not how new it is, but how very American it is with its optimistic and individualistic assumptions about man.¹⁹

first is nearer to the truth, but that implies a far longer, harder, and more ambiguous process than many associated with the New Left want to contemplate. For that reason Reich is considered by many of the New Left to be dangerous, since he assumes social change can occur without a transfer of power.

¹⁸ Brzezinski, *op. cit.*, p. 232. He goes on to claim that the New Left "is an escapist phenomenon rather than a determined revolutionary movement; it proclaims its desire to change society but by and large offers only a refuge from society. More concerned with self-gratification than with social consequences of its acts, the New Left can afford to engage in the wildest verbal abuse, without any regard for the fact that it alienates even those who are potential supporters. Its concern is to create a sense of personal involvement for its adherents and to release their passions; it provides a psychological safety valve for its youthful militants and a sense of vicarious fulfillment for its more passive, affluent, and older admirers." Though I am sure there is much truth in this kind of *ad hominem*, we must be careful not to let the excesses of the youth culture blind us to its importance. For without such protest, I suspect we would feel a good deal less the oddness of our everyday life than in fact we do.

¹⁹ Reich, *op. cit.*, p. 338. The romantic element in Reich's account of our modern situation is unmistakable. He assumes that if we could just strip from our existence the old forms of consciousness and structures, we would find the naked-beautiful-creative-loving self. The *Port Huron Statement* also argues that men have "unfulfilled capacities for reason, freedom, and love," and "unrealized potential for self-cultivation, self-direction, self-understanding and creativity." The current attempt of theologians to identify with this understanding of man makes one wonder how deeply Reinhold Niebuhr's work is capable of penetrating the American spirit.

The contradictions in Reich are obvious but perhaps the most important is the tension between his stress on community and individuality. Though he insists that the self can only be realized in community (p. 417), it is a community only of autonomous, self-realizing individuals who must refuse to accept any group responsibility, for "the individual self is the only true reality" (p. 242). Thus the individual of Consciousness III rejects all general standards and classifications since each person is intrinsically different, and values are but the subjectivistic choice of our sovereign will. While we can use no person as a means,

Undoubtedly many Americans do feel profoundly alienated. But this alienation is not necessarily due to an oppressive technological culture.²⁰ Nor is the estrangement due to a fundamental denial of the original promise of America. Rather the alienation is rooted precisely in the fulfillment of that promise—ironic as it seems. The current malaise of our people stems not from the failure of the American dream, but from the fact that we are now closer than ever to realizing it. And we are beginning to suspect that dream may be a nightmare. In America we have sought to create a society of individuals—autonomous, self-sufficient, and stable—and the criterion of our success was taken to be the progressive emancipation of the individual from the “irrational” social constraints of the past.²¹ Such freedom, it was assumed, would allow for a breakthrough of creativity and universal brotherhood, for the particularistic ties of kinship and tribe were taken to be the barrier to human fellowship. But to our dismay, we now discover that this “freedom is accompanied not by the sense of creative release but by the sense of disenchantment and alienation. The alienation of man from historic moral certitudes has been followed by the sense of man’s alienation from fellow man.”²²

The freedom America gives the individual has occasioned the furious quest for community in our society. The attraction of many to the New Left lies in being given a sense of participating in a reality larger than the confines of one’s own ego. But the amorphous and self-destructive nature of “The Movement” cannot be sufficient to supply the community required, without that community itself

it is equally wrong to alter oneself for someone else’s sake (p. 244). What makes Reich’s position so ironical is he entirely fails to see that he has restated the bourgeois individualism of pluralist democracy in a new style. He has reaffirmed the ethic of the middle class in a form that its children will accept.

²⁰ Of course, I do not mean to deny that technology poses many different and complex problems for our society. But as it is often used in radical literature, technology is but a symbol for all that is wrong with our society. That makes the term descriptively about as interesting as saying, “We are all sinful.”

²¹ Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 4. My general debt to Nisbet’s thought should be apparent in this essay.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 10. In this paper I am concerned with the more general cultural aspects of this phenomenon. However in my “Politics, Vision, and the Common Good” I have tried to relate these individualistic and utilitarian assumptions to the nature of pluralist democracy and the resulting political problems. *Cross Currents*, XX (Fall, 1970), 399-414.

becoming totalitarian.²³ Groups and societies are not sustained simply because men desire to be together, but because they share common purposes and loyalties. The high failure rate of the communes currently being formed is due largely to the fact that no society, even very small ones, can sustain itself for the sole purpose of letting everyone "do his own thing."

The other side of the American quest for community is our search for the self or identity. Contrary to the New Left assertion that technological society robs us of our identity, the problem is that it leaves us free, or even forces us to choose what we shall be. It would take us too far afield to engage here in an extensive comparison of our modern legal-rational social order as compared to traditional societies; suffice it to say that all modern sociological analysis confirms that we live in a highly differentiated society.²⁴ Such a society is individualistic and voluntaristic, for it separates men from their communal or ascribed societal structures. Men no longer belong to groups that give them a place within the whole, but join associations built around specific goals and purposes. Such

²³ One of the striking things about the development of the New Left is how dependent it is on the paradigm of community and solidarity which many of its leaders shared while working in the early civil rights movement in the South. In effect, these people have moved from one cause to another in an attempt to preserve their original experience of community. Moreover, their political ideal derives from this experience as they wish somehow to apply this experience of community to wider society. In a sense, the New Left is a sectarian community trying to make a church of society. For as the *Port Huron Statement* says, participatory democracy must provide the necessary "means of finding meaning in personal life"—that is, it must at least provide the opportunity for salvation. For an interesting but unsuccessful attempt to relate the New Left to traditional forms of Christian sectarianism see Arthur Gish, *The New Left and Christian Radicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969). In this context the New Left differs significantly from the adherents of the counterculture as the former continues to exemplify and embody the American faith in man's dominance over his environment, both political and natural, through work and activity. It may be that some form of the more passive counterculture is a significant alternative to the American spirit.

²⁴ For a good summary of this contrast see James Nelson, *Moral Nexus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), pp. 131-144. This sociological point is important for it makes clear why America was able to give actual institutional form to its basic value commitments. Every society emphasizes some values as peculiarly its own, but seldom have societies had the institutional means to make their "preferred" values dominate all other forms of values embodied in other social relations as has America. By characterizing America's stress on individualism I do not mean that other societies do not share this value nor that Americans do not share some values that tend to qualify their individualism. However, I have isolated the idea of "individualism" here because I think it illuminates the current American malaise.

voluntary associations make no claim to supply a unified world view. Paradoxically, in such a society the more independence we achieve the more interdependent we become; but our interdependence is highly formal since we meet one another only in specific roles and functions.

Philip Slater characterizes our quest for independence by describing the kind of vicious circularity that results:

Technological change, mobility, and the individualistic ethos combine to rupture the bonds that tie each individual to a family, a community, a kinship network, a geographical location—bonds that give him a comfortable sense of himself. As this sense of himself erodes, he seeks ways of affirming it. But his efforts at self enhancement automatically accelerate the very erosion he seeks to halt. It is easy to produce examples of the many ways in which Americans attempt to minimize, circumvent, or deny the interdependence upon which all societies are based. We seek a private house, a private means of transportation, a private garden, a private laundry, self-service stores, and do-it-yourself skills of every kind. An enormous technology seems to have set itself the task of making it unnecessary for one human being ever to ask anything of another in the course of going about his daily business. Even within the family Americans are unique in their feeling that each member should have a separate room, and even a separate telephone, television and car, when economically possible. We seek more and more privacy, and feel more and more alienated and lonely when we get it. What accidental contacts we do have, furthermore, seem more intrusive, not only because they are unsought but because they are unconnected with any familiar pattern of interdependence.²⁵

²⁵ Philip E. Slater, *The Pursuit of Loneliness* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), p. 7. Slater's book is easily the most suggestive of the popular critiques of contemporary American society. For Slater, technology is not an evil in itself; the power of technology becomes perverse only when we attempt to regulate it with the assumptions of an individualistic society. It is extremely interesting to compare Slater's book with Reich's. On the surface they seem to be in agreement, since both find our society overcompetitive, impersonal, garish, and boring. Yet Slater's analysis is fundamentally antithetical to the naive individualism characteristic of Reich's book.

For an analysis that I find in many ways similar to Slater's, yet more profound, see Simone Weil, *The Need For Roots* (New York: Harper, 1952). For example, she says, "When the possibilities of choice are so wide as to injure the commonweal, men cease to enjoy liberty. For they must either seek refuge in irresponsibility, puerility, and indifference—a refuge where the most they can find is boredom—or feel themselves weighted down by responsibilities at all times for fear of causing harm to others" (p. 13). Even though this was written with France in mind, there is no better analysis of the difference between

Thus living in a highly pluralistic society means that we are called upon to make more choices every day, "with fewer 'givens,' more ambiguous criteria, less environmental stability, and less social structural support, than any people in history."²⁶ In contrast to traditional social orders, our public institutions no longer contribute to the formation of the individual personality. "Personal identity becomes, essentially, a private phenomenon."²⁷ Men are now free to construct their personal identity as we are left to ourselves to choose our friends, marriage partners, neighbors and even "ultimate" meanings. Our culture is "no longer an obligatory structure of interpretive and evaluative schemes with a distinct hierarchy of significance. It is, rather, a rich, heterogeneous assortment of possibilities which, in principle, are accessible to any individual consumer."²⁸

But as we are thrown back upon ourselves, when we lose the sense of moral and social involvement, we become prey to sensations of anxiety and guilt. For we perceive the pain our aloneness causes others and our consequent guilt eats on our soul; but our only choice

the American middle class and the young as the former retreats into the suburbs of uncared to avoid the moral agony of being alive in such times, and the latter rush to claim total responsibility to assure their moral righteousness. We no longer seem to have any way to appreciate the man that faithfully fulfills his limited duties in this time and this place. To quote Weil again, "Uprootedness is by far the most dangerous malady to which human societies are exposed, for it is a self-propagating one. For people who are really uprooted there remain only two possible sorts of behavior: either to fall into a spiritual lethargy resembling death, like the majority of the slaves in the days of the Roman Empire, or to hurl themselves into some form of activity necessarily designed to uproot, often by the most violent methods, those who are not yet uprooted, or only partly so" (p. 47).

²⁶ Slater, *op. cit.*, p. 21. Contrary to the radicals' charge, Americans are not forced to conform by an oppressive system, but their very individualism produces uniformity. In a highly cooperative and traditional society variety and eccentricity can be tolerated. It is assumed the social order is a going concern. In a highly individualistic society, however, eccentricity represents to the individual the threat of societal chaos and anarchy that he cannot bear to contemplate. In other words, the conformist aspects of American society are a correlate of our inability to handle the freedom that society forces upon us. In America there is seldom a battle between individualism and conformity, but a conflict between antithetical styles of conforming. For a still provocative treatment of this theme, see Winston White, *Beyond Conformity* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1961).

²⁷ Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion* (London: Macmillan Co., 1967), p. 97. For similar analyses that have influenced my presentation see Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), and Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Doubleday, 1966).

²⁸ Luckmann, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

seems to be to call our self-hatred the pursuit of happiness. There appears to be no external reality strong enough to call us from the monad-like form of our existence, for value has become privatized. Morally, it is assumed that our ethical positions are but subjective preferences. The only way of establishing the best preference is by observing which are held by the largest number of individuals, or those that can be forced by power. Religion becomes a matter of voluntary choice and thus must be marketed in forms palatable to the pagan pieties of those who still feel they should be "religious." Thus by relegating all values to subjective choice, we cut ourselves off from any resources that might call us out of infatuation with our aloneness. Even if religious institutions wished to speak critically to the American culture, they would find their resources spent by having already accepted the option of that privatized religiosity so amenable to the American spirit.

The new upsurge in religiosity among the young is but a variation on the individualistic piety of their parents. The rise of "Jesus groups" and the interest in Eastern mysticism are to be expected, for when "the institutional framework of religion begins to break up, the search for a direct experience which people can feel to be religious facilitates the rise of cults."²⁹ The religious search is one aspect of the kind of political immersion and/or drug experience shared by many today. Each in its own way is an attempt to fly from the self, to dissolve the self in "mystical" experience or political involvement.

Yet this flight from the self is not just the province of the young. Their experience in this respect is not more intense than that of their elders. For none of us has yet discovered how to live morally in our consumer society without becoming a collector of the seemingly endless array of goods constantly produced for our pleasure. In our aloneness we are tempted to think that surely our lives have more significance than increasing our wealth to buy more and different goods, or bequeathing to our children the ability to consume more than we ourselves were able to do. Even if we turn our attention to helping those in our society who have less, we are struck by absurdities. For example, the idea that helping the poor is to

²⁹ Daniel Bell, "Religion in the Sixties," *Social Research*, XXXVIII (Autumn, 1971), 474. In no way should what I am saying be taken as a denial of the religious integrity of many who share this kind of religious experience. The mystic has an honored position among the religions of the world.

provide them with the opportunity to share the kind of life that the affluent now find so unsatisfactory. We are thus tempted to romanticize what it means to be poor. Some have even begun to play at being poor, in order to escape the self-hatred occasioned by the meaningless existence brought on by our wealth.

Put another way, the attempt to find our identity in this society inevitably seems to create a tension between becoming a useful member of society and a real person. For to be "useful" means we must be able to play well a repertory of roles; but to be a real person implies we possess a core of personal reality which controls the roles so that we are not swallowed up by our societal existence. But we live in a world that rewards those most adroit at completely identifying with their roles.³⁰ Yet the more adaptive we become to our roles the more we wish to deny ourselves; we can no longer distinguish who we are from our public appearance which, by the way, we cannot stand.

The wish we spoke of earlier—to return to a purer, more simple, innocent America—can thus be seen as the social form of our personal crisis. As Daniel Bell characterizes it, the desire is "to step outside one's social skin, to divest oneself of all the multiple roles which contain behavior, and to find a lost innocence which has been overlaid by rules and norms. The search for feeling is a search for fantasy and its unrestricted play."³¹ Such a longing assumes that if we could just divest ourselves of our degenerate culture, underneath the decay we would find a self morally worthy and uncomplicated. But secretly we know that all we would find is the emptiness of a life that has no moral form, and that suspicion paralyzes our souls and we abandon ourselves to complete activity. What we flee in our alienation is not external structures but the internal guilt of our existence occasioned by living in a suffering world as rich men who have lacked for nothing except the meaning that makes life worth living. We have failed to understand that the only way to gain

³⁰ For example, Alvin Toffler says, "What is involved in increasing the through-put of people in one's life are the abilities not only to make ties but to break them, not only to affiliate but to disaffiliate. Those who seem most capable of this adaptive skill are also among the most richly rewarded in society." *Future Shock* (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 105.

³¹ Bell, *op. cit.*, p. 488. A topic I have not treated associated with the new culture is the rediscovery of the body and sensuality. I suppose one of the reasons for this is my uncertainty whether the body has ever been lost. However, for an interesting analysis of religion and the "new American culture" written from this point of view, see Leroy Moore's article cited above.

wholeness in such a world is to grasp and understand the suffering and the world's needs with a patience that refuses to create more suffering in the name of some who suffer.

Theologically it is tempting to grasp this search for the self as true religion. But such an interpretation is no more viable than the attempt to develop a new "civil religion," "story," or "myth" for the American ethos.³² No doubt a renewed sense of national purpose would provide many a solution for the personal crisis of our times.³³ But such a purpose, I suspect, would only create new myths which would create more persistent illusions about our capacities. For the flight from the self which I have been describing is not simply a flight from the peculiar difficulties of living in American society. Like the American dream itself, I fear it is an attempt to flee the human condition of finitude, limitation, and guilt. The radical and the nonradical have much to criticize about the American culture, but the very extent of their criticism is a clue that they seek an escape from the limitation of personal and social existence. In such a context the primary task for adherents of the Gospel is to remind ourselves and others that such an escape is not possible or desirable. The Gospel's primary thrust is not to provide the details

³² Robert Bellah's famous article, "Civil Religion in America," made respectable again the idea of a theology of support for American ideals. It is indeed a temptation hard to resist as so many of the values of the American ethos seem to have such a natural relation to the Gospel. Bellah's article can be found in *Secularization and the Protestant Prospect*, pp. 93-116. To see the influence of Bellah, see Novak's suggestion of the need for a new American "story" and Richard Neuhaus' idea of the new American "myth." Novak, *Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove* (New York: Harper, 1971), and Neuhaus, *In Defense of People* (New York: Macmillan, 1971). Neither Novak nor Neuhaus makes clear the relation of theology to the development of such a "story" or "myth," or how such a "story" can embody the sense of the tragic I have tried to articulate above.

³³ Theologically, the attempt to alleviate our personal aloneness by constituting the American people, as such, as the primary group of our society must be resisted. Such an attempt inevitably runs the risk of imbuing the political order with more significance than it deserves. The greatness of realism, for all of its weaknesses, was its appreciation of the ambiguity of the political. A national purpose we need, but not at the cost of the development of the individual through groups less quantitatively extensive than the nation but qualitatively more substantive. Nisbet, I think, is quite right that the great danger of the current quest for community is the totalitarian potential of constituting the state as the one source of ultimate meaning for society. Politically the hard problem confronting America is how to embody at once a substantive sense of the common good as an alternative to interest group or pluralist democracy as an end in itself without destroying the authentic diversity that a healthy society must have.

for the development of a just society, but rather to give men the strength to see their problems and condition honestly and without illusion. Only on such a basis is it possible to establish social justice, for lasting justice can only be built and sustained by a people who have no fear of the truth. A justice not so grounded becomes but the injustice of the next generation for it has no defense against those that would claim it in the name of their peculiar version of the truth.

The hard struggle that the American people now confront is not a struggle to overcome external adversities, though there is still much to be done. Rather, it is a crisis of spirit. It requires we face honestly what we have been and what we must do in a world where death is the one sure reality. The problem of living in America is that there literally seems to be nothing worth dying for. We manufacture "moral-political" causes to hide this from ourselves but the emptiness of our lives cannot long be filled with such goods. For to be willing to die means our lives have significance yet without significance our self-hatred is so intense it must seek to destroy any significance we see in the lives of others. We fail to see that significance is only possible when we are able to accept ourselves, our nation, and our "crises times" as having less than an eternal form, or, in more traditional language, as standing under the judgment of God's eternal kingdom.