LATE PROPHETS SPEAK

III. REINHOLD NIEBUHR (1892-1971)

Pilgrim Church, Duluth February 24, 1974 Dr. Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

My students wrote a song one time about the open houses I held on Thursday evenings. It began like this:

When it's eight o'clock on Thurssay night
And books become a bore;
Then we'll leave our desks and climb the golden stair,
We will gather at the master's feet
A-sitting on the floor,
When the beer is served at Reiny's we'll be there.
.....

Every eye is resting on him
Every ear is straining hard
Just to catch the pearls of wisdom as they fall;
Oh production is prolific
And the 'saints' have their reward,
Thursday nights when Reiny's really on the ball.

Undoubtedly I was a prodigious talker. The writer, John Gunther, said that interviewing me was like throwing paper airplanes into an electric fan. But I was a prodigious listener too. Another person said that when I listened to people they felt as if a vacuum cleaner had been turned on their minds. One thing is certain: my mind was continually working. Thousands of people did sit at my feet to discover what my mind was taking in and what it was giving out.

I was a man of two worlds. First there was the churchly world. I was born into that. My father, who left Germany when he was only seventeen, was a minister of the Evangelical Synod. This was a small denomination of largely German Lutheran background that ultimately became part of the United Church of Christ. My mother was the daughter of a minister, and during my days as a bachelor pastor, she did much of the organizational work around my parish. My sister, Hulda, was a professor of Christian Education, and my brother Richard taught theology at Yale. My wife, who was the first woman to win a "first" in theology at Oxford, taught religion at Barnard College. TIME Magazine once called us Niebuhrs the Trapp family of theology.

I was born in the little town of Wright City, Missouri. If you were to visit our church there today, you still would find it packed to the rafters with simple farm folk gathered in the spirit of old-fashioned rural piety. Those who see me mainly as a rebel against religion's liberalism need to see what was there before the liberalism.

When I was ten my father became minister of a church in Lincoln, Illinois. One day as we were walking down the street, he asked me what I wanted "to be."

"A minister," I told him.

"Why?"

"Because you are the most interesting man in town."

I never lost interest in the ministry. After attending a small denominational college and seminary, I spent two years of further study at Yale. I was somewhat reluctant then to accept an assignment to a tiny mission church in Detroit. The annual salary of $900 was not very attractive, especially since I was now supporting my mother. But I stayed for thirteen years and found myself equally reluctant to leave. "There is nothing" I wrote in my diary, "quite like the pastoral relationship."

That down to earth pastoral experience made an abiding contribution to my long career as a professor of social ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York. It was my little anecdotes about my Detroit experience that made my lectures come alive for the future ministers in my classes. When I was offered a special professorship at Harvard at twice my seminary salary I turned it down. Despite my doubts about the church, I always kept a close connection with church institutions. It is probably true to say that scores of young men went into the ministry and thousands of other people took a new interest in the church because they found in me the most interesting man in the country.

The other world in which I lived was a secular world. Already during my Detroit days, I found my life divided between my parish and college campuses. Then I moved into the rallies of social reformers and the smoke-filled rooms of politicians. Many of the people in this secular world knew little about the church and cared less. Sometimes when they found out I was a minister they were surprised. They did not know there existed such a thing as an intelligent minister.

To the people who knew me in the churchly world, I was America's leading theologian. Many of these were not much interested in my political ideas. On the other hand, most of those who knew me in that secular world discounted my religious ideas. Some of my books speak more to one group, some to the other. But for me the two worlds went together. My title at Union was Professor of Applied Christianity with emphasis on the "applied."

Shortly after leaving my Detroit parish I published selections from my diary called Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic. Here the perceptive reader will savor the taste of my wry humor and will discern the germ of much of my later thinking. When John Haynes Holmes reviewed this little book for the New York Times, he said I was neither tamed nor a cynic. You can judge for yourself from these excerpts:

> "Now that I have preached about a dozen sermons I find that I am repeating myself...I don't know whether I can ever accustom myself to the task of bringing light and inspiration in regular weekly installments."

After going by the bulletin of a Methodist Church which advertised "A Snappy Song Service" for Good Friday:

> "I wonder if anyone who needs a snappy song service can really appreciate the meaning of the cross. But perhaps this is just a Lutheran prejudice of mine."

> "Gordon suggested that I seemed unable to get as many 'prominent' people into the church as I ought. I told him that we had some very nice people in our church, but that I had no particular desire or ability to cater to 'prominent' people, especially since there are plenty of churches that seem to serve this class quite well."

When the Model "A" appeared:

> "The new Ford car is out. ...Mr. Ford has given out an interview saying that the car has cost him about a hundred million dollars and that after finishing it he still has about a quarter of a billion dollars in the bank.
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> "I have been doing a little arithmetic and have come to the conclusion that the car cost Ford workers at least fifty million in lost wages during the past year. No one knows how many hundreds lost their homes in the period of unemployment, and how many children were taken out of school to help fill the depleted family exchequer....What a civilization this is! Naive gentlemen with a genius for mechanics suddenly become the arbiters over the lives and fortunes of hundreds of thousands. Their moral pretensions are accepted at face value. No one bothers to ask whether an industry which can maintain a cash reserve of a quarter of a billion ought to make some provision for its unemployed. ...The cry of the hungry is drowned in the song, 'Henry Has Made a Lady out of Lizzy.'"

You can tell that I was not a great fan of Henry Ford. During my pastorate in Detroit I saw at first hand the dehumanizing effects of the assembly-line system, the poverty that came from the long layoffs during retooling, and the repressive tactics employed by the auto industry in opposing the unionization of their workers. Once a retired industrialist, who was a member of my church, received a letter from Henry Ford's secretary complaining that his young pastor was being corrupted by certain articles in the Christian Century. The fact was that I had written those articles myself. The member of my church wrote back saying I would be glad to correct any mis-statement of the facts. But Ford's secretary was not heard from again.

The book that made me famous was a bombshell I dropped in 1932 called Moral Man, Immoral Society. In this book I argued that while individuals might sometimes live according to the love ethic of Jesus, governments and social structures never did. Love itself demands that we seek for society not a pie in the sky idealism, but rather systems of justice that balance conflicting interests. I also suggested that the time had come for church people to move to the left politically and to the right theologically. This was a horrifying suggestion since it pointed in directions opposite to where most people in our middle class churches were located.

Another event of those years that pointed to the turn my thought was taking was my resignation from the Fellowship of Reconciliation. This was and remains the leading pacifist organization in America. John Haynes Holmes was one of the founders. For a time I was chairman of this group. But as I moved more and more toward what I called a "realistic" and "pragmatic" outlook on the world, I no longer felt at home with the absolute pacifism of most of the members.

Thus in the 1930's I became known for my vigorous attack upon both religious and secular liberalism. I attacked the religious liberals for promoting a sentimental understanding of human nature, which believed in inevitable progress and which underestimated the force of selfishness in human relationships. I attacked secular liberals who believed that human evil was only due to ignorance and that if people were sufficiently educated, all the world's problems would be solved. I said that their naturalistic viewpoints on man overlooked both the grandeur and the misery of human nature.

Positively I affirmed the freedom of man as a creature who always has the power to rise above himself and his environment and who can answer to a transcendent God. I reaffirmed the perspective of the Bible and of the Protestant reformers on human nature. I showed how the prophetic spirit of the Bible casts light on human pretensions and saves us both from despair and from shallow optimism. I stressed the old teaching of justification by grace through faith. We get right with God not by reminding him of our virtuous deeds, but by accepting humbly his free offer of forgiveness.

A characteristic strategy of mine was to take some ancient Christian symbol and to show its meaning for modern times. One such symvol was "original sin." By this expression I meant the tendency of people and institutions to regard themselves and their own interests more highly than they ought. I did not believe that we inherited this trait as a result of something done by Adam and Eve. But I did believe that the Bible pointed to this universal tendency in human nature, a tendency which modern views of man often overlooked.

This technique of using biblical ideas in a symbolic way was misunderstood. Toward the end of my life I admitted that it was a mistake to have spoken of original sin. I said that I was still right in principle. But I erred as a teacher in trying "to challenge modern optimism with the theological doctrine which was anathema to modern culture."

My attack on liberalism was frequently misunderstood too. Again that is partly my own fault. Politically I always worked with the liberals even though I sometimes ridiculed their assumptions. I was a vice-president of New York's Liberal Party and one of the founders of Americans for Democratic Action. I shared in a general revival of Christian traditions that came to this country around World War II. But I admitted to being at least 51% a theological liberal myself. I abhorred the label "neo-orthodox". The truth is that my attack on liberal theology was criticism from one who stood within liberalism himself.

After two world wars and a great depression, the sentimental optimism of the old Protestant liberalism was dead. I called the church back to a view of the world more in keeping with the facts. I pointed to the light that the Bible and Jesus Christ shed upon that world. A new breed of young ministers were eager to hear my message. Those ministers are now in their middle years. If you want to understand how they differ from the older men who went before and from the younger ministers who are coming after, it will help if you know something about me.

In 1939 I received what is perhaps the greatest honor that can come to a religious thinker, the invitation to deliver the Gifford lectures at Edinburgh. My lectures began as World War II broke out. They say I never looked up when bombs fell all around us. Out of those lectures came my master-work, The Nature and Destiny of Man.

Always I was quick to scent the stench of tyranny. Though I was attracted by Marxist ideas in the 1930's, I became a vigorous opponent of Stalinist communism. Long before most Americans were concerned, I saw the danger of Hitler. I kept in touch with people in the German underground. It was I who helped Paul Tillich escape to America and who arranged for Dietrich Bonhoeffer to leave Germany as well.

In 1952 I suffered a series of heart attacks that curtailed my activity for the rest of my life. But I returned to teaching, to writing and always

to thinking. I was associated with many powerful political figures and influential intellectuals. The list of those founding a teaching chair in my honor at Union Seminary includes Hubert Humphrey, Charles Malik, George F. Kennan, Eleanor Roosevelt, Jacques Maritain, T. S. Eliot and many others equally well known. I guess I could not escape those "prominent people" after all.

The people I criticized were well known too. With characteristic verve I took out in those later years after Billy Graham, Norman Vincent Peale, John Foster Dulles, Eric Fromm and Alfred Kinsey of the Kinsey reports. Some people felt I was becoming too conservative. I was a staunch cold warrior and I even came to appreciate some things in Henry Ford. But the movements for peace and civil rights of the 60's won my hearty support.

I have often been accused of being a pessimist. I tended to regard the self-seeking side of human nature as more powerful than the self-giving side, especially in the behavior of classes and governments. At times it seemed as if I were saying that the only hope for us was God's forgiveness. Throughout my life my idealism struggled with my cynicism. But I always was at work trying to change the world for the better. It may be true that what I called my "realism" became an excuse for others to give up trying. In the post World War II period when people prized security above everything, it was easy to distort my ideas in this way.

Perhaps I did not put enough stress on the kind of venturesome vision that is needed to move the world forward.

If I were alive today I think I would point to all the new evidence of how people and institutions are corrupted by power. I would observe how pretensions to virtue, to the rule of law, to democracy and freedom are confounded by the blindness that comes from pride. I would see this as an especially dangerous hour when people hide from the issues while the world comes apart at the seams. I would call on people to face up to their responsibilities.

There is a passage in my book, The Irony of American History, that sums up my outlook.

> "Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quire as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our standpoint. Therefore, we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness."

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Perhaps my most enduring legacy is a little prayer that has become a kind of motto for Alcoholics Anonymous. A great deal of me is in that little prayer. Perhaps you will join in it with me:

God grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change
To change the things I can
And wisdom to know the difference.