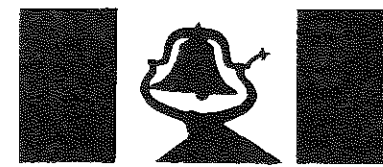
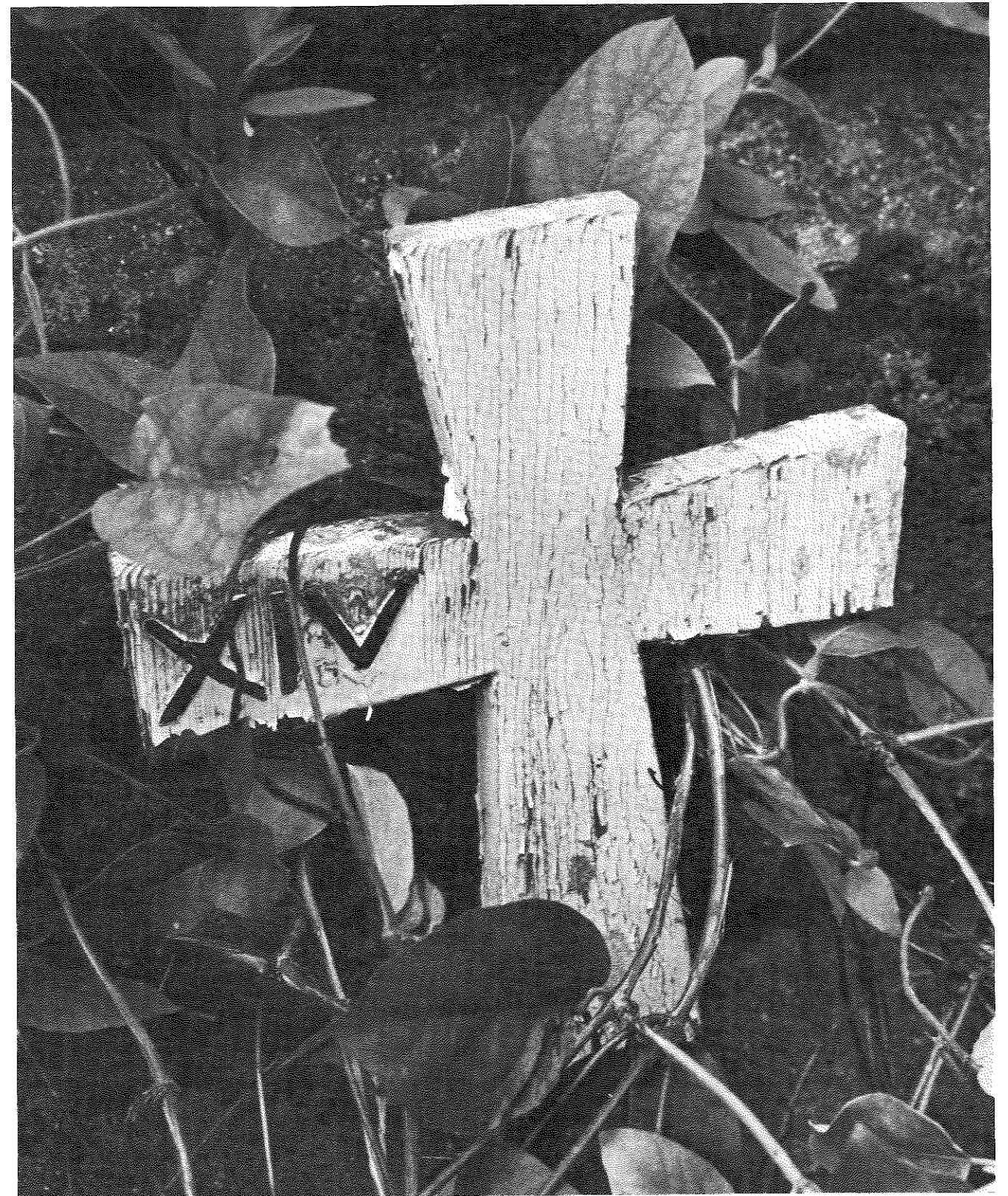


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WILLIAM STRINGFELLOW 1928 - 1985



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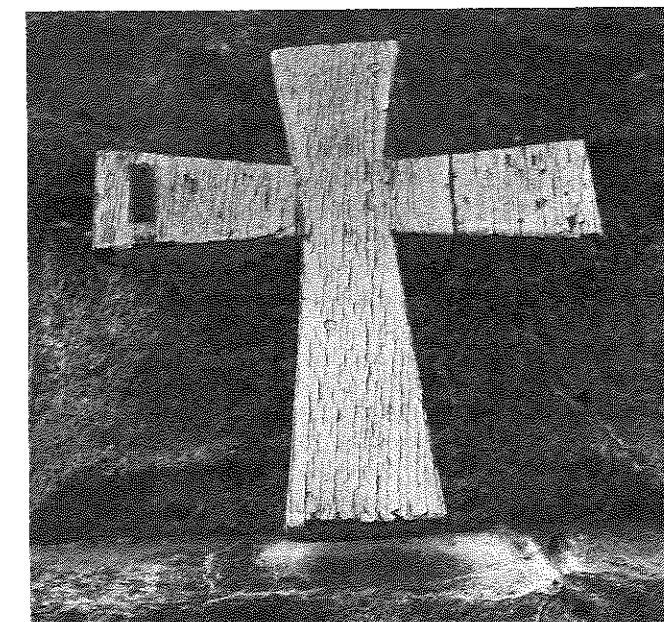
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NOTICE

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ABOUT BILL: MEMORY AS HOPE

Bill Stringfellow "died," whatever that means, in February. "It happens," Bill would say, "I've been working on that." His visits to Berea were frequent the past few years, the evenings spent in conversation with Nancy about the latest "monstrosities" in medicine, for their experiences overlapped. The last visit he was taken by the "passion" for the artificial heart, he'd thought a lot about it, probably made notes somewhere (on hotel stationery). Unlike his speech in formal settings, and his characteristic one- or two-liners, he talked at length informally, sometimes monologues about the first drafts of books or articles, or people and politics. Knowing he'd be with us the Spring semester the following year, it never occurred to us to take notes. Hopefully Bill's notes will turn up someday, somewhere.

This to introduce Stringfellow's consistency during the twenty-five years we knew each other — a gift of grace to integrate experience, language, and suffering with the Word of Scripture. Last December when he visited, he was weak and the old maladies persisted, but Nancy, my colleagues and I never thought he would not return as Visiting Lilly Professor of Religion, Spring 1986. He had been through decades of physical nightmares, which he discussed as dispassionately as he did baseball or the weather.

One of his most endearing qualities to me was the one- or two-liners. To a civic club years ago, "They're supposed to come up with a cure to what awaits my chain smoking. I hope it comes soon. But I doubt it." To a television reporter on a live broadcast, in response to whether he saw any hope in the national and international crises, "Yes. The Second Coming. Mercifully it won't be long." (The poor man never recovered.) To a question from the audience about where the nation was going in the race struggle, "Well. It isn't a race struggle, it's an insurrection. There's a world of difference. The difference is what will be done with the insurgents." On a tough immediate practical problem that called for immediate decision, "No. Let's see what the mail brings." Bill walking in the just framed house, the subject being the energy crises. My colleague ecstatic about the saving he'd made with the use of electric blankets: "No, I wouldn't do that. X's (a very famous man in politics and diplomacy) daughter used one. She was burned to a crisp." Moreover, Bill made the most effective use of his small vocabulary of swear words than anyone I've ever known.

He was a bad correspondent simply because he did not like to write letters. He preferred the telephone — an irresponsibility we recognized we shared before we met the first time. We also recognized from the first we were close politically, but tactically there were differences. So theologically, very close, but some problems tactically that we attributed to my then low church and his high church background. These were closed and, he said, "you came to your senses and stopped listening to a lot of loose talk you never should have listened to." Bill did not like to chat about "theology" — an important factor behind our friendship, for each of us in our own way earned dollars talking formally about "theology" in the classroom or in lectures, a bit of writing and editing. "One does not talk 'business' at home." We talked politics — national, international, ecclesiastical and swapped yarns — some good ones — about people we knew who thought they were "famous." There were exceptions, of course. He introduced me to Dan Berrigan twenty years ago saying, "I have this sermon you ought to print, given at the memorial service for Jonathan Daniels. It's by this Jesuit I know. It's good. There's a lot of blood in it." He called once, from up the Interstate in Georgetown. "Have you finished the proofs of my book?" (*An Ethic For Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*). I had, and a twenty minute exchange followed. "Well. I was wise not to send you the typescript." Last December, he read to thirty or forty students and staff a segment from his most recent book, *The Politics of Spirituality*. Later he gave me a copy: "Read this. We'll talk about it next year. If you want to." I did. December was the beginning of the worst winter we have had here in years. He was stranded two extra days in Boone Tavern because of bad road conditions. The College embargoed their vehicles. On the third day we located a student who was brave enough to drive a friend's car to the Lexington airport. It was a hair-raising ride, a complete turn-around on the Lexington belt-line. I called to get reassurance from Block Island. He was in good spirits. "Yes, I liked it. It was an adventure."

That's how he thought about death — "an adventure," a doctrine very close to the Old Regular Baptists in eastern Kentucky. He was working on the Psalms, the only palliative, he said, for the severe pain he oft-times suffered. Many of us looked to Bill for a lot of things, especially for his friendship. We love him and need him. We shall not see his like this side of Jordan. He lives not only in memory but as hope in the Resurrection.

JYH

TO CELEBRATE THE DEATH AND LIFE OF WILLIAM STRINGFELLOW

Daniel Berrigan, S. J.

A sophisticated people is struck by a shortage of words adequate to describe a bad time and how one might meet it. So we grope with negatives — non-violence, non-compliance, non-betrayal. In such a time, friendship is reduced to the bone. It becomes a matter of non-betrayal.

Stringfellow saw betrayal on all sides (as indeed all but the purblind must see) — the large betrayal of public trust, public monies, the public compact. He went around the world, having come on another way than this. He was non-violent, non-cooperative, non-betraying.

He began his professional life in a good place, among the poor, who according to his faith were non-expendable. So he succored them.

When one president (among many) flagrantly betrayed the public trust, Stringfellow was the first who urged he be removed from office, to the enforced status of non-betrayer.

In the wake of the womens' outcry, he understood immediately the injustice of exclusive male orders in his church. He urged non-compliance and stood among the first in the church courts, demanding justice for women.

He was elected to public office on his beloved Block Island. Here he railed against the betrayal of public trust, the waste of public land, the degradation of the sublime ecology, the greed carving the island into a freehold of the absentees and the irresponsibles. He thundered against the contempt leveled at island folk, as the elderly, the workers, the productive and hopeful were reduced to a landless servant class by the high and mighty who live beyond accountability.

He came to believe that the betrayal of the island and its people was probably irreversible. He may well be right. In any case, money and self-interest served him a hard lesson — he was swept from office. The lesson of the times was brutally clear; there was less and less room for conscience in public life in Washington, Providence or New Shoreham.

He retired. But hardly to nurse his wounds.

His political career on the island had been brief, stormy and electric with hope. Who will ever forget the Town Meetings, how people came alive under the lash of his rhetoric, how issues long buried were laid out and perfidious deals made accountable? He spoke for the powerless, he enraged the powerful. The burning clarity of his mind pierced the smog of sophisticated betrayal.

The times were hostile to such fervent public civility. The servile, the violent, the wheelers and dealers owned America. Betrayal had become a credential for public office, high and low. In such times, what could Stringfellow offer?

What was manifestly impossible in public life he created and cherished up close. He was skilled in ways to define

non-betrayal, non-concession, non-surrender. He would bide his time, and explore those ways. There could exist in such a world a community of non-betrayal, non-cooperation, non-surrender. It required that the members enter a covenant, say their prayers, gather and then scatter to their work and above all, and first of all, cherish one another.

Whether they (or he) affected the course of events in the mad world, freed as they were from lust after power or prestige, was manifestly beside the point. They were to keep the Word of God, in a time when very few kept any word. Keeping one's word, making the work of God one's own was the point.

My encounter with this spirit of Stringfellow and his non-betraying friendship dates notoriously from 1970 and events that occurred up the road from this chapel. I was lifted from the home of Stringfellow and trundled off the island into prison. From that vantage, I learned of the subsequent indictment of William and Anthony for the crime of harboring a fugitive (a strange foretaste of the present sanctuary movement within the church). But for those few days, Stringfellow's home was the only church I knew. It was the only safe place in the universe.

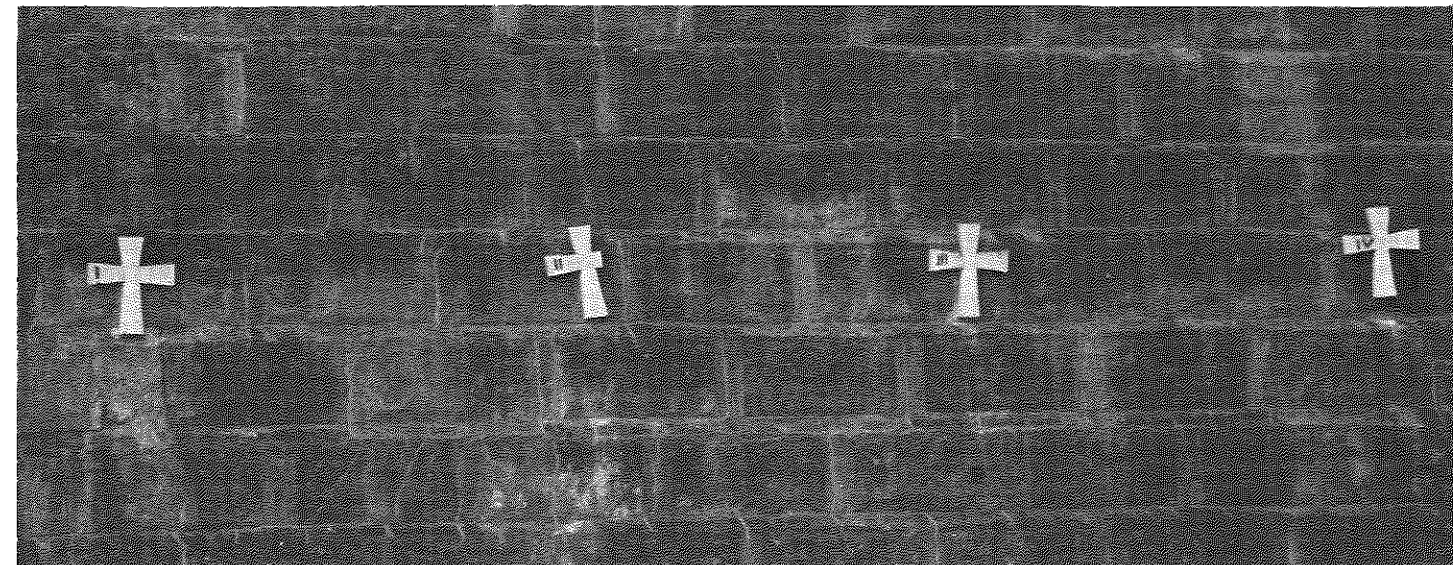
And this was the aspect of Christ that this Christian kept opening before his friends. Christ was our friend, in such a world, in such a lifetime as ours, precisely because He does not betray. He keeps covenant, He keeps His Word, even with us, even when we break covenant, break our word, betray. Christ keeps his Word with the poor, with the blacks, with the women, with the gays, even when all these are betrayed by the church, betrayed by the state, betrayed by racists and sexists and power-brokers and money-grubbers and militarists and office-seekers and property-owners and real-estate-developers and weapons-researchers. Betrayed by those who know with overmastering cynicism that the business of America is not justice or peace or bread for the poor or housing for the indigent or land for the landless or compassion for the powerless, who know, in the words of a classic political entrepreneur, that the business of America is business.

And further — since the business of America is business, it follows ineluctably that its business is also violence and war and racism. And it follows that such as Stringfellow (or you or I) are simply irrelevant to the main chance. Or if indeed we are determined to be relevant, we had best get in line, get into the business of America — the business of words without substance, claims without honor, promises broken, covenants betrayed. For these are the tools and skills of America and knowledge of the tools grants passage — from the estate of the betrayed to the exalted status of betrayer. And the passage, and its attendant rites, might be described as entrance into the American dream.

But there are other rites, another passage. We think today of the Word of God, the word of Stringfellow. I scarcely can distinguish between the two, as we celebrate a rare non-betrayal, the man who kept his word. It is to his supreme honor I mean this, that in his life, the Word of God and his one word, merged, and were one. He kept the Word of God so close, so jealously, with such fervor and attention and acute irony and sense of judgment and anger and reverence and fear and so much more — he kept that Word in such wise that the Word of God and its keeping became his own word and its keeping.

For thousands of us, he became the honored keeper and guardian of the Word of God, that is to say, a Christian who could be trusted to keep his word, which was God's Word made his own. To keep that word close, to speak it afresh, to make it new.

Thus for me, a single notorious example of non-betrayal became an ikon of understanding. He could act honorably and courageously on occasion, in the breach, because he lived that way, over the long haul. In public and private, in good times and ill, in health and sickness, he kept his word.



And that Word he kept and guarded and cherished now keeps him. That is the way with the Word, which we name Christ. The covenant keeps us who keep the covenant.

And if we are assured that He keeps even those who betray the covenant, that God is not bound even by our betrayals, does not cast us off, what shall we say of the reward of this good and faithful servant for whom the keeping of the Word was a simple definition of life itself?

I think we must rejoice that his reward is exceeding great. The "small matters" (to which the Bible reduces in all sobriety the inflation and fury of this world) have yielded in death to something else. Stringfellow has entered into "great matters," matters of great and pressing moment.

He would like that — a vocation consonant with his great talents. "Well done good and faithful servant; because you have been faithful over small matters, I shall place you over great ones."

His vocation has just begun.

Block Island, R.I.
March 5, 1985

A LETTER FROM FLANNERY O'CONNOR ABOUT WISE BLOOD

Sally Fitzgerald

Author's Note: The following remarks are rather loosely hung around a letter from Flannery O'Connor, written in 1954 to the editor of *Epoch* magazine, chiefly on the subject of *Wise Blood*. They are drawn from an edited tape recording of a class held early one morning in March of 1985, at Berea College. The class was John Wallhausser's *God Hidden and Revealed*, and I was the speaker, serving in my capacity as Senior Requirement Outsider for 1985. The Outsider at Berea is a kind of all-round guest conductor, a different person each semester who is invited for the space of three days every Fall and Spring. Following one set lecture, the visitor meets classes in five or six other subjects and attempts to establish links between the subjects under study in those courses and his own particular field of literary or other acquaintance. Naturally, these class meetings are not designed for publication, as will quickly be seen of the following example. The communication between a teacher and a classroom full of students allows for considerably more wandering and wondering than does an article carefully prepared, and it is only reluctantly that any teacher sees ad lib commentary committed in all its dishevelment to the relative indelibility of the printed page. The editors of *Katallagete* have urged that permission be granted in this instance, however, and in deference to their judgment, it has been.

I might wake you up before we start talking about more serious matters by telling you a little story that always reminds me of Flannery. It's about a little girl who was seen furiously drawing in her corner of the living room one day. Her uncle went over in a jovial way and asked, "What are you drawing?" "I'm drawing a picture of God," she answered, and her uncle said, "But you can't draw a picture of God. No one knows what God looks like." "Well," she replied, "they will when I get through."

In a sense this sums up Flannery O'Connor's efforts — not to make a picture of God but to tell us about some of the actions of His grace in what she called "territory held largely by the devil," — that is, ourselves. The God of Flannery O'Connor is very active — not a passive God. People have said that hers were novels and stories of religious quest, but really they aren't. They're novels and stories about people being sought out and found.

Very few of her characters are looking — consciously looking — for God. Instead, they are pounced upon. They are seen through the fortress line of trees, in most of her farm settings, by a surveillant sun like the divine eye on them which usually breaks through. Characters don't try to rise to God in Flannery O'Connor's fiction. He descends to them.

I thought I might open our conversation with this comment, but I do want this to be a conversation. I hope to have

SALLY FITZGERALD edited Flannery O'Connor's lectures and correspondence, *Mystery and Manners* and *The Habit of Being* and is completing the biography *The Mansions of the South: The Life of Flannery O'Connor*.

questions from you because I want to know what you want to know. I may not know the answer, but we can talk about it anyway. Before we do that however, let me read to you a letter from Flannery O'Connor — concerning her first novel. Now you've all read *Wise Blood* I take it. As you know, in general the novels are different from the stories. The novels are a little like poems; they're much closer to the realm of poetry than they are to the usual novel form. In this letter, which was written to a magazine editor back in 1954, the author tried to spell out what she was doing. In this way, she would explain it to herself, too. As she will tell you in this letter, she proceeded by intuition and not by a planned outline. She simply knew when things were right. She starts this letter ...

Dear Mr. Hartman: I would like so much to be able to answer all these questions, and I would really like to try to, but it is always a great struggle to be honest and a great deal of this is just after the fact. As you know, I wrote the book just like Enoch would have, not knowing too well why I did what I did, but knowing it was right. I think everything in the book is right, and I'm astounded by it.

She always thought, as she said, that some of her best effects were what she called "givens." She herself said of some particularly stunning passages — "You have to be chosen to write that, but all the time you're waiting to be chosen, you have to keep writing." And this of course is what she did. But she goes on to say (about the novel),

My view of your view of the book is that your view is too narrow, and I suppose this will make you laugh. I don't think you can be a good Catholic without being catholic.

Now the word *catholic* means universal. It was not devised to separate a denomination, but simply meant the universal Church, just as Christianity in a sense envisioned the universalization of Judaism with of course the essential addition of the Incarnation of God in Christ. Basically, however, at the root of it was the Hebrew religion.

But it was a Judaism that was no longer to be the exclusive province or property of a tribe of people living in the Middle East, but universal, extended to the whole human race, which was to be given this great gift of revelation. It was called catholic simply because that means universal. Flannery goes on to say that *Wise Blood* is about a Protestant saint, written from the point of view of a Catholic. She was a Roman Catholic. She belonged to the ancient Mother Church of Christendom. The primitive church was in a sense catholic and universal. It began to split its splendor up into Eastern and Western factions early on, and of course beginning at the time of the Reformation, it became divided into innumerable groups. Flannery goes on:

Of course I don't mean to imply direct connection between Catholic and the simple fact of Hazel's having to declare there was no fall and no sin. But first you must accept the fact that the book was written by some one who believes there was a fall and has been a redemption and there will be a judgement. This is what I believe as a Catholic and this is what I imply that Hazel could not get away from, although in his terms he could not get away from it — not in mine. So I suppose that if you want to say — you don't want to say it — that the irony is directed against Hazel for having decided that there is no fall, then you are correct — but you are only half-way correct for if there were not more to it than that it would be of no account. The book is about somebody whose insistence on what he would like to think is the truth leads him to what he most does not want. As I see Hazel, he does not want to have been redeemed.

As a little boy, when his mother is accusing Hazel, she tells him that Christ has shed his blood to redeem him and he answers, "I never ask him to." He wants man to be shut of God. Enoch with his "wise blood" is entirely an instinctive creature. Unerringly wise in recognizing what man is like without God, he brings an image for Hazel to have a look at (that is, the shriveled mummy figure).

Now you're right that Hazel himself is without any specific sin in the catalog sense.

He doesn't commit precisely one of the seven deadly sins. He has what Flannery calls an unspecified sense of guilt.

But he has a great sense of sin because he has been taught to believe in the Redemption. If he hadn't believed it he wouldn't have had to reject it so vigorously the society was not forcing it on him. That is, the society of Taulkinham had no interest in it.

He walks a mile with rocks in his shoes to make up for looking at the woman in the sideshow coffin. The Redemption creates a debt that has to be paid. (This is a fact to anybody who believes he has been redeemed by Christ.) The Redemption simply changes everything. The fact is, try as he will, Hazel cannot get rid of his sense of debt and his inner vision of Christ. Mrs. Watts (Leora Watts, horrible as she is) sees this at once. I never see why Mrs. Watts saw it when nobody else seems to. Even the taxi driver sees it.

From my point of view, Hazel does not come into his absolute integrity until he blinds himself.

Now this didn't mean that the author approved of his blinding himself; that was a kind of tragedy. Nevertheless, it is his full self-realization; that is, of the man who stands by choice outside the community, acting according to his own lights. He puts his own lights out, in a sense, in order to see more. So, in a sense, he, as Hazel Motes with his particular character, is fully realized in this act of violence. I'm not sure that all of you were there to see the film, but I did remark at the showing last night that Flannery didn't approve of his blinding himself — she belonged to a church which has outlawed self-mutilation in any form since the 4th century, when a zealous monk, Origen, castrated himself in order to remain chaste. Since then, the Church has severely interdicted any kind of self-mutilation. You can fast and you can pray, but you don't have to do harsh penance. Even flagellation is very strongly discouraged. No one performs flagellation any more, although it used to be practiced in the Middle Ages. Self-punishment — cutting a switch to oneself, so to speak — was once practiced in monasteries and was even practiced by some lay people, to punish themselves. Not mutilation, however. So Flannery O'Connor can't be said to have approved of Hazel's action, but

at the same time it can be said that for this particular man it was self-realization and self-fulfillment. She goes on to say that while he is preaching the Church Without Christ he is going counter actually to his own "wise blood" because he knows — at some level he knows — the reality of Christ (I believe it was Pascal who said, "You would not have sought me if you had not already found me"). If Hazel had not believed, he wouldn't have denied Him so strongly, or tried so hard to escape.

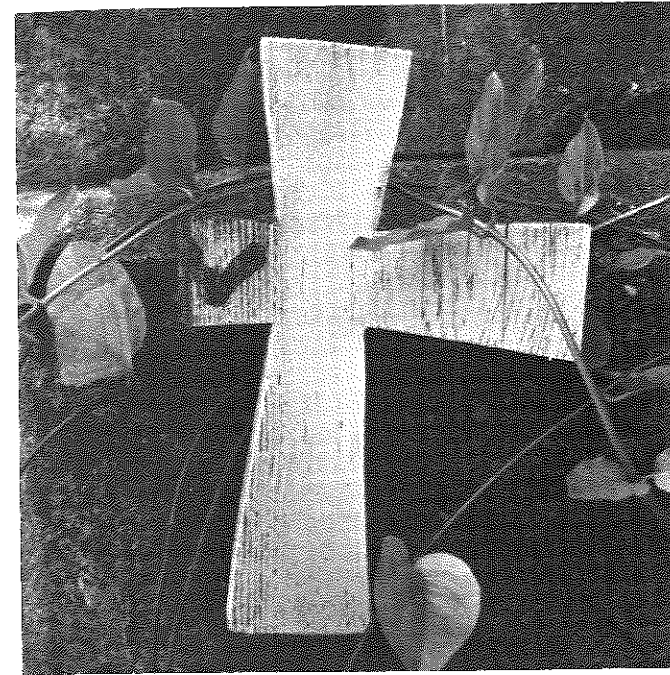
Hazel and Enoch both have "wise blood" which is something that enables you to go in the right direction after what you want. Enoch's gets himself inside an ape suit, and Hazel's gets him further and further inside himself where one may be supposed to find the answer. When I say he negates his way back to the Cross, I only mean that complete nihilism has led him the long way (or perhaps it's really the short way) around to the Redemption again. I sense this is repugnant to you. I wish we could have it both ways, however, I don't think anything I've said contradicts the feeling of the book which is certainly that human beings do have free choice. I, as a Catholic, look on Hazel Motes as the only right kind of man in his circumstances.

She means by this that if you don't believe in Christianity, the claims of Christianity are such that in full integrity you should oppose it. Christianity makes the greatest claims of any system of beliefs imaginable, being founded on the idea that the Creator of the Universe took on flesh and became a man; then died, was buried, and rose again from death — the claim of Resurrection. These are such tremendous mysteries and tremendous claims that if you think they're wrong you almost have a duty to oppose them, as Hazel did. By the same token, if you think the claims are valid, then you have a duty to serve them all your days. Not in the way Hazel did, but in your own way. These problems are inescapable. The Misfit in O'Connor's story *A Good Man is Hard to Find* states it, too. "If he done what he said he done, it's nothin' but to throw away everything and follow him. If he didn't, it's nothin' but to take your pleasure wherever it is." In any case, Christianity is, in the Kierkegaardian term, an "either/or" religion. But Flannery goes on to say:

If the irony is directed against Hazel, this is because he's the only one in the book who can stand it. My Lord, how could you direct any irony at Enoch? Of course, he finds that being an animal is no fun either. But this is just funny. It's not full dress irony, to my way of thinking.

When Hazel blinds himself, he turns entirely to his inner vision. Now the irony is that while he started off teaching the Church Without Christ, he ends up with Christ without a Church. A Catholic can't write about a Catholic world because none exists.

She means exists in the usual sense, as say, the circus world exists, or the hospital world exists. The Catholic world is too universal to be written about specifically. There is in one of her stories what she calls Catholic décor, but the Church is



too universal to be pinned down to what could be called a "Catholic world." So she has to write about the Protestant world in the South where she lived all her life and was one of a very small number of Catholics. She wrote, as she said, about a Protestant world that she could see. She goes on to say,

You're right that I directed irony against this Protestant world and against the society that reads the Bible and the Sears Roebuck catalog wrong, but Hazel himself is in it and of it, he is the ultimate Protestant; he transcends it though.

The point about this is not to say anything against Protestants, with whom she has been so sympathetic that she has been described by many non-Catholic theologians as being actually a "closet" Protestant. This is because her universality extends to all of Christendom, which includes both the separated churches and the nuclear Church which was hers. Hazel is protestant with a small "p". He protested everything, starting at the outset! He protests even the idea of Christ or of Christ as Redeemer when he says, "I don't say he didn't live or he didn't die, but I say he didn't die for you." So, you see, in his final submission he transcends Protestant thought, (which encompasses the theology of so many theologians). It has been a carefully thought out way of life for millions of people over the centuries, with many high qualities, but ultimately it leaves the way too open to ultimate protest, which is what Flannery means to embody in Hazel Motes himself. She said,

It's not either/or, it's both/and, one through the other. To my mind you just aren't right enough.

I don't mean to suggest that Hazel is Christ, but I believe that everybody through suffering takes part in the Redemption.

Now this is a very Catholic idea, the idea that all suffering takes part in the Redemption and the economy of the Redemption. In another story, called *The Artificial Nigger*, O'Connor raises black suffering to the very level of Christ's

suffering when she makes a little piece of battered lawn sculpture stand as a crucifix, an object which represents the passion of Christ. The little statue represents the suffering of the black people and, standing in front of this sculpture as though in front of a crucifix, a kind of miracle of grace occurs: an old man and a little boy are reconciled from what would have otherwise have been a lifelong quarrel and separation, given the nature of these two. The old man is in despair and the child absolutely unforgiving, but standing in front of this figure, they feel the action of mercy touch them, and, as she said later, "What I meant to suggest by this was the redemptive quality for us all of black suffering." She is expressing here a very Catholic idea of the way that all human suffering goes into the great pool of redemptive suffering by being added ("conjoined" is the word that was used) to the suffering of Christ himself. But back to her letter;

I don't mean to suggest that Hazel is Christ, but I believe that everybody, through suffering, takes part in the redemption and I believe they suffer most who've lived closest to all the possibilities of disbelief, because disbelief is so painful to people who wish to believe and who suffer the torments of doubt. Kierkegaard perhaps throws some light on this, but I had not read Kierkegaard when I wrote the book." She hadn't read lots of things when she wrote the book. It was, as she said, in a sense a given It took her five years to receive this gift, but it was in a sense given to her. Then she goes on to say,

Choosing between trifles is not free choice. It has to be between heaven and hell as far as you can approximate the shades of either in a grey world. But the book certainly says that in the end. Man himself must choose what is sin and what isn't, i.e., conscience is the ultimate sanction. But, paradox or not, and apart from this book, I myself believe this because the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church teaches it. c.f., Fr. Feeney's excommunication in Boston for preaching that there is no salvation outside the Catholic Church.

Father Feeney was a Catholic priest who lived in Boston in the 50's, and who became quite famous for countering the teaching of the Church that anyone who lives a good life in the light of his own understanding, and this includes all Protestants, is saved. The possibility of salvation is always there. The light by which man lives, and the amount of instruction people have had, the chance they've had, in short, is an important factor. This accords perfectly with the idea of the mercy of God. But Fr. Feeney was a legalist and he ran counter to the teaching of the traditional Church, and ended by founding his own schismatic church. He began to preach scandalously in Boston and this caused a great uproar. His Bishop tried to correct him, but he would not accept any correction. First, the priests around him tried and failed. Then the Bishop could do nothing with him. He received a *monitum* (a warning) from the Holy See (from the Pope himself) that he was teaching error and that he must stop it or he would be deprived of his priestly faculties. By this time his pride had grown to such an extent that he continued to inveigh against Catholic teaching, in accordance with his own ideas. Finally an official announcement was made by the Holy See that this man was teaching error, and officially separating him from the priesthood for as long as he maintained this error, whereupon he left St. Paul's Church in Cambridge. I didn't live there then, but I read all about him. It was a long drawn out affair; it went on for months and received a great deal of publicity, so I remember the case very well. Fr. Feeney took a lot of people

with him. He was a little like Rufus Johnson's grandfather who went with the remnant to the hills: one of those "true believers" who went out and founded a utopian society. Fr. Feeney was a sort of "pope" to his little group. Of course he had gone quite mad, and he became so tyrannical that eventually his people began leaving him. He wanted children removed from their parents at birth, and brought up in his day care center in accordance with his notions. He was a bit like Jim Jones, although nothing like as wild. Still, his was the same kind of tyranny over the lives of the people. Eventually the thing broke up. Fr. Feeney died just two or three years ago, finally having renounced his error, as though he had suddenly regained his senses. There he was like the man in Scripture, "fully clothed and in his right mind," but only after 20 years of perpetrating the most terrible mischief by this kind of self-will. That's the Fr. Feeney that Flannery is talking about here.

you probably have not imagined what it is to write as a Catholic knowing that most of the people who read your book will think that what you believe is absolutely rubbish. This explains one reason why my book is grotesque and you were afraid that on sight I might bite. (I don't bite.) I have read people, George Orwell, who say that Catholics can't write novels on account of being Catholic.

You must excuse the tone of this letter which, so far, sounds like the First Epistle to the Heathen. I am not really nearly so sanctimonious as I sound. I just unfortunately have Hazel's vision and Enoch's disposition.

She always said she was more like Enoch than anyone.

But I count on hearing from you again, whether any of this makes sense to you. About the "talks," incidentally, I wasn't being snide when I said I had no learning. I've not been helped or hurt by my education, only kind of haunted. Well, I've made two "talks", one to a ladies club. The heart of my message to them was that they would all fry in hell if they didn't quit reading trash.

A far cry from William Faulkner's remark that Flannery repeats in one of her letters. A lady in Oxford, Mississippi, came up to Faulkner in the drug store waving one of his books in paperback, and burred, "Oh, Mr. Faulkner, Mr. Faulkner, I've got your book. I'm going to read it. Do you think I'll like it?" and he said, "Yes ma'am, that book is trash, I think you'll like it very much." Flannery wasn't as round-about as William Faulkner. She told them they'd fry in hell.

I pretended I was Billy Graham. The other one was to the local college on the novel. Four hundred girls who didn't know a novel from a hole in the head were very impressed with everything I said and would have been if I had said just the opposite. I do fine talking to people who don't know anything. But I couldn't say anything at Cornell that they hadn't already heard before. What I do is read my stories rather well, at least people tell me so and I'm sure when I don't read them very well they enjoy listening to the barbarous Georgia accent. What I mean to say is, that while I don't go in for this sort of thing, I go for leaving town occasionally and need almost no persuasion to do so.

I had been doubting whether to include that story you mentioned. I'm not entirely sure the curse is really off it but I reckon you have persuaded me.

I don't know what story this is. She's obviously thinking about her new collection.

I'm still digging around trying to find out what story she's talking about, but I think it may have been "A Stroke of Good Fortune."

I see I did not send enough money for a proper subscription, but if you will let me know when I have got two dollars worth of Epoch, I will renew the subscription provided I am still being supported by the dole. I already have one of them Bibles.

Yours, Flannery.

Well, there you have Flannery trying to explain herself to one of her early admirers. This letter was written on the second day of March in 1954, about 31 years ago and even before her stories had come out. It was her collection of stories of course, that really brought her the first wide public acclaim. People had been mystified and profoundly irritated by *Wise Blood*, but they were dazzled by her stories. Her talent was described as "blazing." Readers misunderstood her stories, but they admired them and eventually she began to explain. The first breakthrough in public understanding came when she wrote an article herself for Granville Hicks' symposium. *The Living Novel* (she said she really shouldn't be writing things like that because the general idea of the living novel didn't interest her; what interested her was whether *her* novel was living or not). But she did write an article and this provided a kind of handle for grasping Flannery's basic intentions, which were metaphysical and very precisely religious. In her article, as in her fiction, she was trying to make people see; not to explain, but to make them see. She gave as the ultimate charge of the novelist or the fiction writer that of making people see that the spiritual life is lived in the natural life and cannot be separated from it. This is extremely important. It's what she called the sacramental view of life in which the living of "ordinary" life is a kind of sacrament, what you do with your body and with your mind is the visible manifestation of your spiritual life. You can't separate the two. You can't say my spiritual life is over here and my every-day life is over there. She speaks earlier in this letter of the attempt to separate the spiritual from the physical.

In *The Violent Bear It Away*, the wish to do that is at the root of Tarwater's refusal of his vocation. He doesn't care for the way things really are. He wants spiritual manifestations to have nothing to do with the every day, the ordinary. He wants the sun to stop in the heavens, clouds to speak to him. But he receives his first direct revelation when he looks into the face of an idiot child. He knows, *knows* (nobody tells him), that he is meant to baptize this child, and he knows it because he has been touched inwardly by the finger of revelation, but he refuses. He sustains this refusal over a long and dreadful period and only the utmost violence bring him to accept it finally. In a sense that whole second novel is about vocation, and whether one youth will accept *his* vocation, which is both a call and a response. Tarwater does eventually accept it, but only after terrible vicissitudes, brought on by himself. He's a little bit like Habakkuk, having to be picked up by the hair of his head and set down in the lion's den with Daniel. He's like

almost anybody who has refused to do what he knows he is supposed to do. Young Tarwater has been "trained" for prophecy in Flannery's terms (and she is absolutely behind the old prophet, his great uncle who has prepared him for the life that he is to live). She says people think old Mason Tarwater is just plain crazy, but that she's behind him one hundred percent! She believed in private revelation. One of her favorite comments about her fiction — her favorite comment, I think — was made by a writer named George Clay, when he said, "If the Old Testament were being written today, it would sound like *Wise Blood*." That is, an account involving a direct encounter of man with God or one of God's agents. Not through a church, not through any persuasion, and in a sense this is true of most of Flannery's stories. These dramatize direct encounters with grace by various kinds of people — either knowing doubters, or, most often, the complacent, the self-satisfied and the materialistic. These characters, one after the other, are knocked off their pins and they will never be the same afterward. The Holy Ghost in a sense descends upon them in 'tongues of fire' or in the case of Asbury Fox, in 'tongues of ice.'

Well I think I've said almost too much and I haven't left too much time for you to ask questions and to make comments that might be of value. May I now have some questions from you?

Question: Why does Hazel Motes punish himself with blindness?

Answer: When he does punish himself in this way, it's partly to pay his general debt for Redemption. It's partly to pay his specific debt for his own redemption. He has opposed — he has betrayed — the Christ who was taught to him. He has tried to preach disbelief. He has not just said, "I don't believe" to himself. He has tried to *teach* his disbelief to all the people he encounters on the street. He has gone looking for the prostitute. He has entered into a loveless affair with Sabbath Lily. (We'll come back to her in a moment. Remind me about the natural love that she offers and we'll talk about that in a minute, when I finish answering this question.) And then, finally, as I said earlier, he has cold-bloodedly murdered a man — and Flannery emphasizes the cold-bloodedness of this by not only having him run over his victim, but *back* over him. It's one of the coldest murders in literature really. Hazel has all these things on his conscience, so he punishes himself severely. He could go to the police and confess and let himself be subjected to "due process of law" and receive his punishment in that way and assume that it was God's will for him. He doesn't do that, though. He continues on his own proud, self-sufficient way to decide how much the bill is and how he ought to pay it. And he exacts of himself a horrendous cost, of course. But because of his sincerity and his real belief in what he's doing, he also repudiates his "blind" disbelief by taking this action. He certainly has changed his mind by the end of the story. He no longer believes that Christ did not die for him. He knows that He did. And he has in a sense died to this world for Christ, as a witness to Christ, and now the *efficaciousness* of his sacrifice is suggested by the change in the character of his landlady, Mrs. Flood. She is first shown as a grasping, self-centered woman who has "known neither pain nor pleasure, joy, nor real

The penances are certainly acts of decision and even though they are instinctive.

She means Hazel's acts of penance; she's gone back to Hazel now.

Hazel is here asserting his wise blood in the ultimate way. When he says he does it to pay, he means to pay his part in the debt of Redemption.

I think you can break that down a little bit. He's also paying for the murder, the cold-blooded murder of Solace Layfield, which is what his beliefs ultimately bring Hazel to. He said earlier on that "no man with a good car needs to be justified." That, you know, *sounds* funny, but if you use the car as a token for all material satisfactions in this day and age, there are lots of people who live by this tenet. It is "high" technical progress he's made by buying this car. But it becomes the instrument of the greatest sin that he commits. He blasphemes, of course, which is a grave sin of the spirit. Added to this is the sin of murder, with his car as the very instrument he uses for this purpose. So his debt for Redemption first of all begins with the debt that he owes for his *own* Redemption. He pays it then by a severe punishment — much more severe than law or society would have made him pay — which is the loss of his sight, isolation from the rest of the world. He simply ends his life, in a sense, except as a contemplative. This is the heavy price he sets for what he has done. The car is taken away from him. He doesn't know that he can't move on to another city, rather like St. Paul taking the road to Damascus, ready to go and persecute the Christian community in another place. Hazel is stopped as was Paul on the road to Damascus. He's also a little bit like Balaam with his ass. He encounters an angel in the form of a police officer and the car and, like Balaam's ass, doesn't go any farther.

If you feel a mild horror that I should believe these Christian mysteries, understand that my belief in them survives the strain of approaching the whole problem in this book from your point of view, which is Hazel's when he declares they don't exist. I presume

sorrow." She's capable of taking out of the waste basket the money that he has accidentally thrown away from his pension, although he's a blind man, and then giving him back only part of it. First she decides she'd like to marry him for his pension, but before the end of the story, she'd forgotten all about these low motives. He has begun to fascinate her, and she truly loves him for himself. In the movie version of the book, she said, "We'll have it any way you like. You stay upstairs or downstairs, with me to wait on you." She comes to love him selflessly and this is the beginning of the redemption of Mrs. Flood. She's never going to forget Hazel Motes, this mysterious figure who has come into her life. We thus know his sacrifice to be efficacious, through the effect of the saints may have on the people who live around them. Hers has been a narrow life, and she would have been a very hard nut to crack. No one except a saint was ever going to convince her of anything because she was too wooden. In both the movie and the book, she speaks a very important line: "I see you've come home." He has indeed come home, to the beautiful vision of eternity. There is a famous Elizabethan play by Fulke-Greville, in which a character called Eternity says: "I am the measure of felicity." That is, you do not define any earthly happiness to be true felicity unless it will also afford you happiness in eternity because eternity only is the true measure.

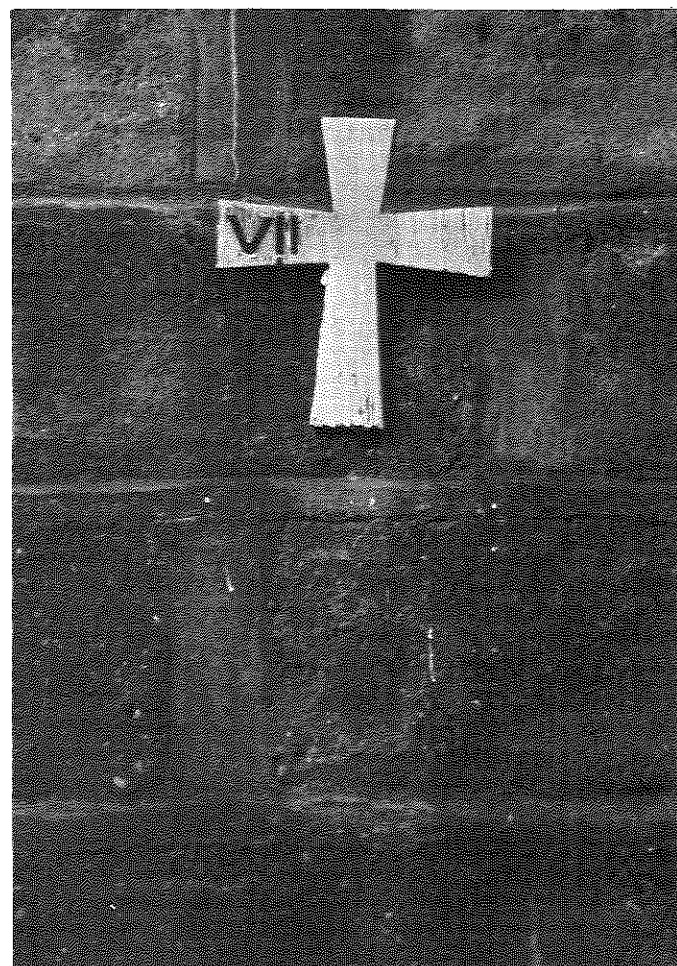
I did want to speak about the curious episode in *Wise Blood* when Sabbath Lily leads Hazel off into the woods. You know he's had the idea that he's going to seduce Sabbath Lily, but he's a babe-in-arms compared to her, so that he very soon finds himself the hunter who is now being hunted. But Sabbath Lily is not a little monster. She's kind of a precursor of Lolita. She's also a sad little girl whose father doesn't want her around. That story she tells about the baby nobody wants and the cruel grandmother is obviously a fantasy about her own situation in life and the grandmother is an image of the father's real attitude toward her. He wants to get rid of her, too. Now, I couldn't see this for a long time. I thought this is just sort of a slapstick travesty of a seduction scene in which Hazel means to seduce Sabbath but she ends up trying to seduce him. But at the beginning of this scene in the movie there is a pillar of cloud, or at least a large cloud, which moves ahead of them as though they were the children of Israel wandering in the wilderness. It moves ahead of Hazel and Sabbath as long as they are driving, and then off to the left when they turn on that side road, as though one of the things that might have saved Hazel Motes was natural human love: love for a wife, an ability to love this young girl, to marry her, to have a family. Love is all of a piece. Human love is extremely valuable for it is though human love that we know God's love, as for example, through the love that the child knows the parents feel, that the husband and wife feel for each other, or that friends feel for each other. These are our experiences of love, and reflect aspects of divine love. And it is as if God, who led the Israelites in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, is leading Hazel toward this possibility, but Hazel can't accept that. He gets up and runs away from her. Finally, Sabbath throws herself into his bed. But that first little love scene there in the woods is very touching, and when he flings himself away and refuses human love too, what had been a pillar of cloud turns into a bird with wide wings and flies off *in the other direction* as though it were a figure for the Holy Ghost going away from Hazel, who is again only bent on getting his deified car fixed. When he does get the car repaired he goes off muttering that this car "wasn't

made by no one-armed man" and so forth, that it was made by people with their "eyes open, who know where they're going." This suggests that Hazel cannot be redeemed even slightly by natural love. In a sense, he can only be redeemed by exactly what happens — stopped on the road where he sees his car kicked into limbo, or inferno, whichever it is.

Question: One thing that kind of stays in the mind, going back to the scene where Hazel follows the false prophet and commits that horrible murder, is that he approaches the prophet and says to him, "Why do you do it? Why do you preach what you don't believe?"

Answer: He could ask himself the same question.

Question: Am I way off base in thinking that the murder Hazel committed was really kind of a predecessor to what was going to happen?



Answer: You are absolutely right. The same kind of violence he turns against Solace Layfield he turns against himself, on the natural level.

Question: What does Enoch represent?

Answer: Animal man, instinctive man. Enoch is a young man who wants to be a success in a world where people will stand in line to shake hands with an ape. That's a pretty low ambition when you stop to think about it. He wants all sorts of animal satisfactions, and at the same time, he wants to live a kind of ritualistic life. He has a strong ritual bent, but he wants to lead an instinctive life, too. Enoch finds no fault in nature and he wants to be a part of nature, but at the same time he thinks of himself as the young man of the future. This gives you an idea of what Flannery thought the young man of the future would be like. Enoch recognizes that the little mummified figure he finds in the zoo at the heart of the park is the god that is worshipped by such a man he imagines he wishes to be. What it is, though, is a little mummified figure shrunk by some savage practices. They're not really occult practices, they're actually natural practices: simply taking the bones out of the skull. Some Indian tribes did this in South America. I used to see those things. They were sold in country fairs. People would go down to South America and buy up a few bushels and bring them back and sell them. But it was a natural process by which they were made. The Indians took the skull out and the head was preserved and mummified, embalmed, to form the horrible little head that you saw in the film. They didn't do this to the body, it would have been much too complicated. Reducing the body was all fictional. But Enoch recognized that this would be the logical end of "redeemed" man in what he envisioned as his earthly paradise, and also the logical end of man as Hazel envisioned him. A Jesus not like any other, who hasn't any blood to spare, partly because he's an embalmed figure. He is certainly not going to be resurrected; he's not going to rise after three days in the figure that you see in the film and that O'Connor talks about in the book. In a sense, he is the Jesus of Hazel's religion and of Enoch's religion, as well.

Question: Do you think that by saying that people needed a new Christ, a new kind of Christ, that Hazel Motes was trying to revive or bring life back to the religious Christ?

Answer: No. O'Connor was trying to say that Hazel said that Christ *didn't* die for you, that Christ was not the Son of God; that Christ was not anything he said he was; that Christ was a trick on working people, for which he used a much ruder term. This is a restatement of the Marxian theory that religion is the opiate of the people. He is not trying to revive an interest in Christ, he's trying to destroy Christ.

Question: Indirectly?

Answer: No, no sir. Hazel doesn't mean to give Christ one single indirect motive except to get away from or destroy the Christ his grandfather and his mother have told him about. That is, a Christ who is presented as so harsh and so disapproving, so threatening, that Hazel wants to get away from him. And he wants to declare that this figure is our enemy, not our Savior. But he finds that in the end, although he is very articulate in trying to destroy Christ, he is so stunned by the knowledge of the absolute reality of the *fact* of Christ that Hazel can only mutely witness to it by the way he lives, not by anything he says. But he is not trying to say anything in the end. Flannery is trying to revive an awareness of the figure of Christ, but Hazel Motes, in the story she tells, in the contained dramatic action that she describes in this novel, does *not* have that intention.

Question: What happened to Enoch?

Answer: Enoch goes against the laws of society when he steals the ape suit. You see, he, too, is willing to kill in defense of his disbeliefs. He climbs into the truck with the man who plays Gonga and who refuses to shake his hand again. Poor Enoch just wants to shake hands with somebody, but he is always shunned. He's like a stray dog on the street. Nobody will have anything to do with him. So when the "ape" shakes his hand, he finds that the "ape's" hand is warm and soft, he comes back four or five times. But Gonga and the other men only say, "Here's that idiot again." It's pitiful, but after Enoch gets into the truck, it is presumed that he kills the man in the ape suit or, knocks him out. He then steals the costume and goes out to be a big success like Gonga, only to find that outside the situation in which he has seen Gonga advertising the movie, everybody still shuns him and is afraid of him. In the meantime, he has buried his clothes and, as Flannery said in another letter, "This was not a symbolic action. He just knows he's not going to need them again." Well, one of the reasons he isn't going to need them again is that he's going to jail. He's going to become like the animals behind bars he has gone to watch in the zoo. He has assaulted, and very likely killed, someone to get his ape suit, and now, as an animal, he's going to be confined in a cage like an animal. So it's a kind of tragic end for such a pathetic figure: trying to become an animal is not the way to go, either.

Question: Why does Enoch hate the animals in the cages so much?

Answer: I think they remind him a little bit of himself. It's not entirely clear. Partly it's envy. He says they just sit there



eating T-bone steaks all day and don't have to do anything, so that his hatred is just a kind of free floating malice. They hate him equally. Flannery makes the point in the book that they fly into a rage every time they see him, and even in the film they manage to catch the little chimpanzee banging on the glass and shaking his fists at Enoch. Enoch really is subject to universal rejection. Flannery was the only one who ever claimed kin to him when she said she had his disposition — friendly.

Question: What is meant by "wise blood"?

Answer: Well, I think it has to do with a sort of sixth sense, an untaught conviction, as when you act in accordance with truly intuitive knowledge. O'Connor says "If your blood is wise, you will go in the direction you want to go. He's trying to find peace, but he has to go all the way around Robin Hood's barn to get there — walking backwards. It's like his own shadow. It's described in the book as a thin nervous shadow, sometimes broken up by other people's shadows, walking backwards. Of course, that is a perfect description of Hazel himself.

Question: Do you think Flannery has wise blood?

Answer: I think she was wise blood and wise brains too, which is a happy combination. But she said of course, that she didn't invent, or at least, that though she invented her fiction, she didn't invent her theology. She thought it incredible that people would say that a Catholic couldn't write novels, since both she and Caroline Gordon found that being Catholic had freed them from trying to invent the universe for themselves. It is as though in every generation someone has felt as though we had to invent the wheel all over again. O'Connor and Gordon felt that by having a system of beliefs, especially one as fully satisfying as that of our redemption in Christ, freed them to observe what they saw around them. Fiction is made of the observable, of the visible, of what you can touch and smell and see and hear. The invisible realities are inside these things in human existence. Well, if you know what you believe, you're not going to try to *preach* that belief in what you write, but you are going to write from a point of view which affects the way you see things. Let's take a simple and direct example. If you believe that adultery is not wrong, then you're going to read *Madame Bovary* — let alone *write Madame Bovary* — in a very different way. Emma is going to become — what? Nothing, in fact, because she won't be written from any point of view, but rather from a *lack* of a point of view.

Question: Would you comment on O'Connor's uses of violence as a means to depict the invasion of grace. Why is it necessary to employ those devices?

Answer: Well, she says that she uses violence because her characters' heads are so hard that they can't be penetrated in any other way. And in the case of Mrs. May, in the wonderful story, *Greenleaf*, the heroine is gored through the heart by a bull, her heart being pretty hard, too. She has an impenetrable personality; nothing really gets through to her. This is why the only thing that will, in a sense, penetrate her consciousness is death itself, a death delivered by a figure who is a kind of image, not of Christ the tiger, as in Eliot, but Christ symbolized by a bull. Now this goes back to the Greek myths in which gods assume various forms in coming to woo humans that they desire. Of course, in *Greenleaf*, the bull figure is on a different level from the Greek gods. What Christ wants is Mrs. May's soul. She says, "I'll die *when I get good and ready*." When she dies, however, she dies in *His* good time, as the Scriptures tell us that we all will. She is neither good *nor* ready.

Question: What about Solace? He was run over by a car and he was neither good nor bad.

Answer: No, but he makes his confession and here again, because it is Hazel's vocation to be a man of faith, a religious man, he is turned into a confessor who is required to give what is called in the Catholic Church, the Last Rites. Solace confesses, "Never give my mama no rest ... told them where my daddy's still was for five dollars ... Help me, Jesus." Solace makes his whole confession. It's a deathbed confession, but it is a confession and a prayer for mercy, and of course, at the very essence of Christianity is the teaching that up to your last breath, mercy is there waiting for you if you will ask for and accept it. "Between the stirrup and the ground" as the old poem goes, "he mercy sought and mercy found." That's perfectly true of Solace Layfield, and Hazel is there as priestly witness to this.

Question: When they were looking for this new Christ, and the new Jesus in the little figure, what do you think that the author was trying to say?

Answer: What she wanted to say was that the real Christ wasn't the kind of God that they *wanted* to recognize. They didn't know that. They wouldn't have been able to define God. They knew that they were rejecting Jesus, in favor of 'freedom' and 'success,' but they didn't know what they were rejecting. What they were promoting, the kind of god they were both *actually* promoting, was the shrunken figure. Now, Enoch instinctively knew that there was something deeply

mysterious about that figure. He just doesn't know what it is. Hazel recognizes it with a very bad conscience because he *knows* that this is what man is like without Christ, without God, without the Spirit — just a handful of dust. The mummy is an image of eternal death.

Question: What is the significance of the automobile?

Answer: Oh, that is the most significant thing in the book. Hazel says "I really want a place to be." in the book he keeps a coffee pot in it, and a pillow, and a board he sleeps on. He's very ascetic so the car serves as his home, his pulpit. He even stands up on the hood of it to preach. It's also his way to get away, a means of going where he wants to go. It is his coffin besides. It is all he needs in order to exist, or all he thinks he needs. It is his god.

Question: What about the policeman on the road?

Answer: The policeman, if you notice when you read his description, is not like any of the other policemen in the novel. He's rather an angelic figure. His eyes are described as being as clear as ice. He's very friendly, extremely friendly: "I will show you a view. Prettiest view you ever saw." That is the view of the true country, the country of the spirit. "Now would you mind stepping right out here?" And after he kicks the car over the hill, "Was you going somewhere? Can I help you?" He is really quite kind. Of course, Hazel refuses his help, but then the policeman leans down, puts his hand on Hazel's shoulder and he is benevolent, while the other police are not. Finally, the last thing he says to Hazel is, "I'll be seeing you." It is shocking to an audience in this day and age to say that he is an angelic figure, but to my mind, he is. I was very happy to get recently a new batch of letters in which someone described him to Flannery as a "tempter" and she said, "Well, I don't see how you can think him as a tempter. To my mind, he's an angel of light when he pushes that car over the hill." So you will find here an example of one of the uses of angels. The one-armed mechanic might even be considered angelic, for that matter, but this policeman unquestionably is. He is under orders. He's there not to be rude or cruel to Hazel, but to stop Hazel, turn him around on Highway 666. Now most of you know what that number means. Flannery drops this in although most of the present day audience wouldn't know what 666 signified. Nevertheless, the number is there in the book for you who do know. Hazel is on the devil's highway, the road under the sign of the great beast, the number 666, and he is stopped and turned around and sent back toward his true home.

BARTH, BARMEN AND THE CONFESSING CHURCH TODAY

George Hunsinger

Introduction

Fifty years ago, in response to an acute political and theological crisis, 139 delegates from nineteen territorial churches (Lutheran, Reformed, and United) gathered together in the German Rhineland city of Barmen. At the time the delegates could not have known they were about to take a historic stand for the faith of the church. Yet the implications of this stand would be decisive, not only for their encounter with National Socialism, but also far beyond that down to the present day. The delegates placed themselves in an exposed position. As articulated in the famous "Theological Declaration Concerning the Present Situation of the German Evangelical Church," written primarily by Karl Barth and adopted unanimously by the synod, their confession of faith risked maximum fidelity to Scripture at a time when they could expect only minimum support from the prevailing culture. Indeed the Barmen Declaration set them on a collision course not only with their government but also with the fundamental assumptions of academic theology as practiced for nearly two hundred years. The delegates audaciously believed that between what they had to oppose politically and what they had to oppose theologically there existed an intrinsic connection.

Today, as I shall argue, we too stand in an acute political and theological crisis. Our political situation is more ambiguous and more precarious than that faced by the church in Germany — more ambiguous because we are surrounded by the trappings of democracy, more precarious because we face the prospect not of persecution but of annihilation. The American theological situation, furthermore, both in the academy and in the congregations, is largely one of confusion, if measured by the standards of Barmen, and we would thus do well to refrain from publishing bold new professions of the faith.

We would not do well, however, to refrain from pondering what it might mean were some analogue to the German confessing church to emerge on the American scene. Could it be, for example, that despite our current limitations, a church might emerge which knew how to defend itself against temptation, to align itself with historic Christianity against the prevailing culture, and to draw the consequences in action? Is it still possible to hope for the emergence of a remnant church, a resisting church, a resilient church, a repentant church? I will pursue these questions under three headings: the need for a confessing church today, lessons from the confessing church of yesterday, and prospects for a confessing church tomorrow.

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I. Our Unseen Crisis: The Need for a Confessing Church Today

Our two-fold crisis — political and theological — is all the more remarkable for going largely undiagnosed. Those who perceive the political dimension are often those perpetuating theological disarray, those with some inkling of the theological crisis are usually politically naive, and those who plumb neither the political nor the theological crises in their depths and underlying unity are doubtless the great majority. No truly confessing church will be possible for us today if we cannot find the courage to probe our two-fold crises to the end.

Executioners and Their Accomplices: The Political Need

In a recent issue of *The New York Review of Books*, Istvan Deak, a professor of history at Columbia University, published an essay under the title, "How Guilty Were the Germans?"¹ The question has contemporary significance, Prof. Deak believes, because large scale acts of brutality are still sanctioned by ideology, and because the belief is still widespread that to correct perceived wrongs any and every means is legitimate. As examples, he cites cases from present-day Iran, North Korea, Zaire, Rumania and Northern Ireland. (With the partial exception of Zaire, his list consists of countries well beyond the sphere of official United States influence, a point to which we shall return). With the contemporary situation in mind, Deak focuses on two questions: whether ordinary Germans upheld the Nazi proposition that the Jews should be murdered and whether they possessed significant knowledge of Hitler's Final Solution. The first question is answered with a qualified No. Recent research has uncovered the extraordinary fact that most Germans (including Nazi Party members) had no desire to see Jews brutalized or killed. Widespread disapproval of brutality and killings seems to have been the main reason why persecution of the Jews had to be conducted in secret. Extreme antisemitism, Deak notes, was not a primary motive of people who voted for Hitler. They were more likely moved by the misery of the Depression, fear of communism, resurgent nationalism to avenge the Versailles Treaty and other factors. However, if the Germans did not actively hate the Jews, does this mean they are absolved? Deak thinks otherwise: "What condemns the German population, in my opinion," he writes, "is not that they volunteered to kill, because generally they did not, but that they were indifferent."²

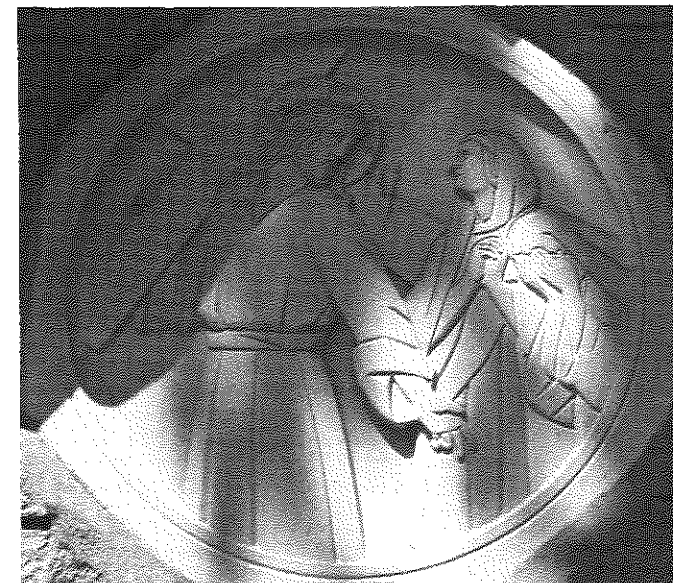
¹Istvan Deak, "How Guilty Were the Germans?," *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. 31, No. 9 (May 31, 1984), pp. 37-42.

²*Ibid.*, p. 40.

The second question concerns how much the Germans knew about Hitler's greatest crime — the slaughter of many millions of Europeans, most prominently Jews. Civilian awareness of Hitler's massacres is difficult to gauge, and Deak notes historical confusion about this question. He estimates that the mass extermination programs directed at the Jews must generally have been known but that their extent remained a secret. Moreover, that non-Jews were being indiscriminately murdered in Eastern Europe must also have been public knowledge. "For example," writes Deak, "virtually every German soldier in the Eastern theatre of operations must have been aware that the Russian prisoners of war simply were not fed. This awareness must have been communicated to the Germans at home. After all . . . the Nazis starved to death or otherwise murdered three million non-Jewish Poles and 3,300,000 Russian prisoners of war."³

A communication such as Deak surmises must have been common can be found in Eberhard Bethge's biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.⁴ One of Bonhoeffer's former theology students wrote him a letter from the Eastern front which tells of liquidating fifty prisoners of war in a single day, of shooting women and children in the back of the neck for sneaking food to the captured and of burning down entire villages. All these actions, which by Nuremberg standards would qualify as war crimes, are defended in anxious tones by Bonhoeffer's young correspondent as having been committed because of "military necessity."

Deak concludes with these words: "The German people in 1933 did not unanimously choose Hitler, nor did they, as a whole, obey him gladly and voluntarily. But most of them gave up the values of skepticism and freedom for the sake of immediate material benefits, revenge for Versailles, and national greatness. Even worse, they became or were casual, indifferent, and callous toward persecution."⁵ Deak leaves us with a picture in which most Germans were guilty of unspeakable crimes not because they were executioners but because directly or indirectly they were the executioners' accomplices.



That there might be some dark continuity between our society and Nazi Germany is a deeply forbidden thought. Nazi extermination camps are, of course, in a class by themselves. Yet it would be a mistake to allow our moral grids to become so widespread that only the most enormous crimes could show up on our ethical screens.⁶ An even worse mistake would be to allow Hitler's enormities to define the bare minimum for what sort of crime is to be condemned, as if anything less were now tolerable. Unconscionable criminal parallels can exist in a qualitative rather than quantitative sense.

If we turn to current U.S. relations to Third World countries, the relevant caption was penned by George Orwell: "The nationalist," he writes, "not only does not disapprove of atrocities committed by his own side, but he has a remarkable capacity for not even hearing about them."⁷ Just as so-called necessity, military or otherwise, is the classic excuse of executioners, so ignorance is the classic plea of accomplices. Neither rationalization was accepted at Nuremberg and still less should we admit them in the church. How much longer will the principle of military necessity or of national security be invoked to justify actions criminal from the standpoint of international law and sinful by canons of the church? How much longer can such actions be condoned as the systematic terror bombing of residential areas, torture on an administrative basis, mass murder by government-supported death squads and other forms of state terrorism? The systematic slaughter of civilians can never be justified by the standards of Christian ethics, and a government engaging in such crimes, whether directly or by proxy, must be resisted as vigorously as possible.

Let us begin with current U.S. policy in Central America. In the fall of 1983 a disturbing article on our government's policies, entitled "Human Rights Dehumanized," was published in *Foreign Policy* by Charles Maechling, Jr., a prominent international lawyer and a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Once again, as so often happened during the Vietnam War,⁸ the specter of Nuremberg has come back to haunt us. "In El Salvador and Guatemala," Maechling writes, "the administration's acquiescence in practices of torture and mass murder by client governments comes perilously close to endorsement of offenses condemned at the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunals — specifically, the indiscriminate killing, torture, and secret detention of unarmed civilians for their political sympathies or

³*Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁴Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 608.

⁵Deak, "How Guilty Were the Germans?," p. 42.

⁶I owe this metaphor to Theodore A. Gill, "What Can America Learn from the German Church Struggle?" in *The German Church Struggle and the Holocaust*, ed. by Franklin H. Littell and Hubert G. Locke (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974), p. 289.

⁷George Orwell, "Notes on Nationalism" in *As I Please, The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Vol. III (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), p. 370.

⁸See Telford Taylor, *Nuremberg and Vietnam: An American Tragedy* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970). See also the critical discussion of Taylor's book: "Review Symposium: War Crimes," *The Yale Law Journal* 80 (1971), pp. 1456-1528.

support of resistance movements.⁹ Although abundant evidence may be obtained from virtually every independent human rights organization in the world, and although a summary of his article appeared prominently in *The New York Times* (September 4, 1983), Maechling's sober pronouncement, like others before and since, has vanished from public notice without a trace.

The Maechling example, which could be multiplied many times over, demonstrates that Orwell was right. Atrocities committed by our own side do not meet with our disapproval, and we have developed a remarkable capacity for not hearing about them. "There is no crime," Orwell wrote, "absolutely none, that cannot be condoned when 'our' side commits it Loyalty is involved, and so pity ceases to function."¹⁰ Idolatrous loyalty, the will to believe patriotic truths, the lack of skepticism and the fatal indifference of which Deak warned — these attitudes are so deeply ingrained in our culture (not least in our churches) that it seems as though nothing will ever shake our faith in America's benevolence toward the outside world. The very notion of American exceptionalism — that unlike other nations, wealth and power in our case somehow do not corrupt — is integral to the national myth. Whatever we do must be virtuous, simply because we do it.

Orwell, knowing that every imperial power has justified its actions on "idealistic" grounds, issued the corrective we ought to recall the next time we listen to a presidential press conference. "In our time," he notes, "political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness."¹¹ Then, as if he were describing a scene from El Salvador today or Vietnam a decade ago, though he wrote in 1946, Orwell continues: "Defenseless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*

Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them."¹² "Political language," Orwell concludes, "... is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give the appearance of solidity to sheer wind."¹³

Even if one approved of the ends that supposedly guide us, there still come moments, as Michael Waltzer points out, "when the sheer criminality of the means ... overwhelms and

annuls all righteous intentions."¹⁴ The great unexamined question at the heart of our political crisis today is the question of the sheer criminality of the means. That is not say the question of ends is unimportant. The ends for which the United States installs its clients and fights its wars in the Third World are matters of grave importance. Yet even if U.S. foreign policy were not governed by narrow business interests, even if it were not more concerned about markets, cheap labor and investments than about human rights, even if it had not grown hard on communism only to become soft on facism or subfacism such as one finds in South Korea, Chile or Zaire, even if it had the best intentions in the world, the question would still remain about the sheer criminality of the means. The question extends from the sponsoring of torture on an administrative basis¹⁵ to the destruction of civilian populations as required by doctrines of counter-insurgency¹⁶ to the development of weaponry that cannot be used without slaughtering large numbers of non-combatants. These latter weapons which threaten to unhinge the future, call for special consideration.



(January 7, 1979). Hersh quotes from Jesse Leaf, the CIA's chief analyst on Iran from 1968-73, as saying that the CIA conducted torture seminars for SAVAK, Iran's dreaded secret police, and that the seminars "were based on German torture techniques from World War II." A more systematic account may be found in Michael T. Kalre and Cynthia Arnson, *Supplying Repression, U.S. Support for Authoritarian Regimes Abroad* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Policy Studies, 1981). Also valuable is A.J. Langguth, *Hidden Terrors: The Truth about U.S. Police Operations in Latin America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978). Above all, however, mention must be made of the indefatigable, extensively documented and largely ignored writings of Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, especially their joint work, *The Political Economy of Human Rights*, Vol. I (Boston: South End Press, 1979). I am greatly indebted to their analysis; the article by Seymour Hersh, mentioned above, which they cite on p. 364 n. 40, is typical of the kind of material they are able to glean from an assiduous reading of establishment sources. Apart from political considerations, which no doubt are dominant, perhaps one reason their work has not received the attention it deserves is the highly censorious tone in which they write, regardless of how justified it may be by the subject matter.

¹⁶For a summary of these doctrines, see Waltzer, "Moral Judgment in Time of War," pp. 58-60.

The United States has invested heavily in indiscriminate weapons of mass destruction.¹⁷ It has also used them and sold them to other countries. Recall the kinds of weapons the U.S. used in Vietnam,¹⁸ some of which are again being used in El Salvador today:¹⁹ napalm, described by peasants as fire from the sky, which rolls and splatters over wide areas, incinerating everything in sight, including homes, farms, even shelters; white phosphorous bombs, also indiscriminate, designed among other things to imbed in human flesh burning pieces of phosphorous which cannot be extinguished by water; cluster bombs, perhaps the deadliest of "conventional" weapons, by which an area more than a mile long and a quarter mile wide can be shredded by a million steel fragments. Recall also the clear and historic teaching of the church that the killing of noncombatants by direct intention — even if undertaken as a means to a much greater good — is equivalent to murder and a clear moral wrong. (Some moral theologians and ethicists, of course, attempt to legitimize indiscriminate weaponry on the grounds that its use does not kill noncombatants by direct but only by indirect intention. This is sometimes called "collateral damage," a term Orwell would have appreciated. To my mind weaponry that cannot be used without violating the most minimal rules of warfare transcends any fine academic distinctions between "direct" and "indirect" intention. Certainly to the dead it is a distinction without a difference.)²⁰ Recall, finally, the church's long-standing inability to utter a clear and unequivocal *NO!* to these developments in a way that commands consent and

¹⁷For a critical survey of the United States arsenal, see the Boston Study Group, *The Price of Defense* (New York: Times Books, 1979). For the eroding difference between conventional and nuclear weapons, see Michael T. Kalre, "Conventional Arms, Military Doctrine, and Nuclear War: The Vanishing Firebreak," *Thought*, Vol. 59, No. 232 (March 1984), pp. 55-63. For the way in which wars in recent decades have led to a progressive increase in civilian destruction, see Ruth Leger Sivard, *World Military and Social Expenditures* (Leesburg, Virginia: World Priorities, 1982), p. 15.

George Kennan's recent comments are worth pondering:

"I had always resisted the suggestion that war, as a phenomenon of international life, could be totally ruled out

"I am now bound to say that while the earliest possible elimination of nuclear weaponry is of no less vital importance in my eyes than it ever was, this would not be enough, in itself, to give Western civilization even an adequate chance of survival. War itself, as a means of settling differences at least between great industrial powers, will have to be in some way ruled out; and with it there will have to be dismantled (for without this the whole outlawing of war would be futile) the greater part of the vast military establishments now maintained with a view to the possibility that war might take place. The weapons of this age — even the so-called conventional ones — are of such destructiveness that there can be no clear line between the discriminate ones and the weapons of mass destruction

"No one could be more aware than I am of the difficulty of ruling out war among great states." [George Kennan, *The Nuclear Delusion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), pp. xxviii-xxix.]

¹⁸See for example, Frank Harvey, *Air War — Vietnam* (New York: Bantam, 1967). See also Robert Crichton, "Our Air War," *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (January 4, 1968). These works are conveniently summarized in Phillip Slater, *The Pursuit of Loneliness* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), pp. 29-52.

¹⁹See for example the interview with Charles Clements, an American medical doctor who has worked among Salvadoran peasants, in Alexander Cockburn and James Ridgeway, "On the Guapaza Front: Vietnam in El Salvador," *The Village Voice* (3 May 1983). See also Chris Hedges, "Salvadorans Allege Use of Napalm, Phosphorus Bombing Near Volcano," *The National Catholic Reporter*, Vol. 20, No. 28 (May 4, 1984), p. 19. For a description of Vietnam-style terror bombing, see Chris Hedges, "El Salvador War Escalates,

commitment from the pews, and you have a good picture of our crisis in its underlying unity and depths.

How can we as Christians avoid the conclusion drawn by George Kennan that "the great weapons of mass destruction — and nuclear weapons are not the only conceivable ones — should never be in human hands"²¹ "The real problem at issue," he wrote as early as 1950, "... is the problem of our attitude toward weapons of mass destruction in general, and the role we allot to these weapons in our own military planning."²² Kennan faces us with a great either/or. "We cannot get away from it: either we approve of mass destruction as a means of warfare regardless of the disasters it holds for much of humanity, our own civilization included ... or we disapprove of it, in which case we should ... take the consequences ... and ... resolve that we shall not be the first to inaugurate this means of warfare — that we will find other means to assure our defense."²³ That is why from the very beginning of the nuclear age, Kennan has insisted on the principle of "no first use," which requires a completely different military structure than the one we developed, and on the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons themselves. "I see no solution to the problem," he writes, "other than the complete elimination of these and all other weapons of mass destruction from national arsenals; and the sooner we move toward that solution, and the greater courage we show in doing so, the safer we will be."²⁴ As things now stand, however, our government has planned to increase by 70 percent the total number of American nuclear weapons, from about 25,000 to more than 40,000 and to deploy a whole new generation of them.²⁵

Populated Areas Targeted," *Ibid.*, No. 27 (April 27, 1984), pp. 1ff. Also Janis L. Zandel, "With the Peasants in El Salvador: Walking and Running, Hiding and Dying," *Christianity and Crisis* (July 22, 1985), pp. 285-288.

²⁰The distinction between "direct" and "indirect" intention when it comes to killing noncombatants is perhaps most strongly associated with the work of Paul Ramsey, especially in his book *The Just War* (New York: Scribners, 1968). An internal critique of Ramsey's logic, different from but compatible with my own, has been advanced recently by Douglas P. Lackey, *Moral Principles and Nuclear Weapons* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Allanheld, 1984): "... Ramsey's insistence on the connection between the wrongfulness of X and the wrongfulness of intending X, his connection of intention with desire rather than with foreseeability, leads to the rather bizarre result that it is morally preferable to kill 10 million people unintentionally than one million people intentionally, even when the 10 million deaths are perfectly foreseeable" (p. 207). Lackey argues that our best moral alternative is the nonpossession of nuclear weapons.

²¹Kennan, *The Nuclear Delusion*, p. 72.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 3.

²³*Ibid.*, pp. 107-108.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 160.

²⁵Andrew Winnick, "Rapid Deployment and Nuclear War: Reagan's New Military Strategy," *Socialist Review* 73 (January-February 1984), p. 21. Our government also plans, as things now stand, to pursue a massive research and development project designed to place vast numbers of weapons in outer space (the President's so-called Star Wars proposal). Apart from major questions of feasibility and cost, at least two others have been raised. The first concerns mere prudence. According to Richard Garwin and John Pike, a program for nullifying nuclear weapons from outer space would lead to an "inherently unstable" confrontation between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, "needing only the smallest spark to bring on a nuclear confrontation" (Garwin and Pike, "Space Weapons," in *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 40, May 1984). The other question, even more serious morally, has to do with the role of space-based weapons in a first-strike nuclear strategy. For background see Ch. 8, "Space Warfare," in Robert C. Aldridge, *First Strike! The Pentagon's Strategy for Nuclear War* (Boston: South End Press, 1983).

Too often in the past, especially in this terrible century in which we live, a century marked perhaps more than any other by the perpetration of unspeakable atrocities, Christians have remained silent, have not taken risks, have supported the status quo when their faith should have moved them to do otherwise. As professing and committed Christians, we can no longer afford to perpetuate this inaction and this silence. If Christians will not speak out and put themselves on the line while there is still time, then who will?

When I survey the great vault of corpses and mutilated bodies that begins with Hiroshima and Nagasaki, that stretches to the Indochinese corridor, where our government dropped the explosive equivalent of one Nagasaki bomb every week for seven and a half years,²⁶ and that extends now to the torture chambers and death-squad barracks of Central America and beyond, and when I contemplate the even greater vault of corpses that awaits us in the future and that will surely signify the end of Western civilization and perhaps of life itself on earth, should something serious not soon be done to reverse the nuclear arms race, and when I remember Deak's strictures about a casual, indifferent and callous people, then I am forced to the painful conclusion that today to be an American is to be an executioner or, what is much the same thing, an accomplice to the executioners.

It will immediately be objected that I have confined myself to the culpability of the United States and have neglected the crimes of other nations, especially those under communism. In reply I can only ask how the crimes of others in any way detract from our own. Furthermore, why concentrate on the crimes of others when they are constantly held aloft in this society for all to behold? Finally, why protest against crimes one can do almost nothing about instead of against those one might, in concert with others, still do something to rectify?

We do not expect to live in a world without murder, wrote Albert Camus in his essay "Neither Victims Nor Executioners," but we can at least fight for a world in which murder is no longer legitimate. "All I ask," he said, "is that, in the midst of a murderous world, we agree to reflect on murder and to make a choice. After that, we can distinguish those who accept the consequences of being murderers themselves or the accomplices of murderers, and those who refuse to do so with all their force and being."²⁷ The need for a confessing church in America today, politically speaking, is the need for a grouping of Christians "resolved to speak out clearly and to pay up personally,"²⁸ who realize Camus's "terrible dividing line" actually exists,²⁹ and who know on which side they are awaited by their Lord.

Protestantism Without Reformation: The Theological Need

Our political crisis is so severe and plainly intractable that it may seem hard to imagine a theological crisis to match it. Two points can immediately be made: First, it is a symptom of the crisis itself and, one from which none of us are immune to believe that the subject matter of theology is not a matter of life and death, that it does not make binding claims to truth, and that it does not finally force us to decisions of ultimate consequence. Second, our tendencies toward self-destruction, which could scarcely be writ larger than they are today, can be interpreted theologically as a drastic outcome of our underlying universal condition. To turn from God (sin) inevitably leads to self-destruction (death); that is the biblical diagnosis. Despite our abandonment of God, we are not abandoned in return (grace); that is the biblical hope. In these terms our political crisis is not autonomous, and to obscure either the diagnosis or the hope contributes directly or indirectly to our collapse. The theological crisis in America today may be summed up by saying that such contributions occur with breathtaking regularity.

Perhaps the definitive assessment of the American theological scene was produced by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in an essay called "Protestantism Without Reformation."³⁰ Written five years after the Barmen Declaration at the end of Bonhoeffer's second American tour in 1939, it not only betrays the influence of Barmen but also analyzes the American religious character so cannily as to make Bonhoeffer our theological de Tocqueville. The analysis covers six points: (1) the nature of a confessing church, (2) truth and tolerance, (3) the freedom of the gospel, (4) church and state, (5) black church vitality, and (6) the dislocation of doctrine. (No brief summary can do justice to the richness of Bonhoeffer's discussion.)

1 The Nature of a Confessing Church

Bonhoeffer had no interest in detailing ecclesiastical oddities, but he was deeply concerned to figure out why the American church struck him as alien and strange. Neutral observations of the historical, political or sociological variety could not satisfy him. What he wanted was "a serious encounter," "a binding discussion," which to him could occur only on theological ground.³¹ He found himself caught in an inward struggle to articulate as charitably as possible what he knew he finally had to say, yet his basic, most considered judgment could not help sounding severe: "God," he was to conclude, "has granted American Christianity no Reformation."³²

Bonhoeffer's first insight was that American churches do not understand themselves as churches; they understand themselves as "denominations." This is not a theological concept. It is not oriented toward the creed as the standard that determines the church's basic identity. Strictly speaking, therefore, denominations cannot be called confessing churches, for they exhibit little or no urgency about the question of theological truth. Members of denominations are likely to feel that the church's identity is more a matter of life and work than of confessions and creeds. There is a strength here as well as a weakness, but the basic orientation makes it difficult, Bonhoeffer observed, "for the American denominations to understand aright the struggle for a confessing church."³³

2 Truth and Tolerance

Although confessional stringency is conspicuous by its absence, tolerance and forbearance abound. In American denominationalism, Bonhoeffer notes, "the concept of tolerance becomes the basic principle of everything Christian. Any intolerance is in itself unchristian." Theology and church in liberal America are unlikely to press for a decision against clear distortions of biblical truth. Bonhoeffer connects the "peculiar relativism" of American Christianity to the country's history as a refuge from religious persecution.³⁴

3 The Freedom of the Gospel

Praise for the nation's religious freedom resounds everywhere from America's pulpits. Yet freedom from state intervention is by no means essential to the church. Freedom in the deeper sense is not a possibility guaranteed by the state, but an event granted again and again by grace. "The essential freedom of the church is not a gift of the world to the church, but the freedom of the Word of God to gain a hearing."³⁵ The church's true freedom is present only where it actually proclaims God's Word. It is not found where the church has possibilities, "but only where the gospel really and in its own power makes room for itself on earth, even and precisely when no such possibilities are offered to it But where thanks for institutional freedom must be rendered by the sacrifice of freedom of preaching, the church is in chains, even if it believes itself to be free."³⁶

4 Church and State

In America the principle of church/state separation has assumed "almost dogmatic significance."³⁷ Yet nowhere is church participation in public life more pronounced than in this country with no state church. The explanation for this apparent paradox is that American separation of church and state rests not on the doctrine of two kingdoms, but on the doctrine that God's kingdom limits all earthly power. The church is thus free from any unbounded claim by the state but assumes responsibility for guiding formulation of state policy. Much of the secularization of American Christianity derives from the fact that in practice the church often adopts a highly

secular role to the neglect of other matters and "from the enthusiastic claim of the church to universal influence on the world."³⁸

5 Black Church Vitality

The historic American discrimination against blacks, even to the point of segregated worship, indicates "a deep cleft in the church of Jesus Christ."³⁹ "Black and white hear the Word and receive the sacrament in separation. They have no common worship."⁴⁰ After sketching the origins of racial segregation in the church, Bonhoeffer sounds the most enthusiastic note in the essay: "One may also say that nowhere is revival preaching still so vigorous and so widespread as among the Negroes, that here the gospel of Jesus Christ, the saviour of the sinner, is really preached and accepted with great welcome and visible emotion."⁴¹

6 The Dislocation of Doctrine

It is appropriate to mention theology in last place, because that is more or less the position it occupies in American Christianity. The dislocation of doctrine by practice, or by "religion and ethics," is perhaps the most salient feature of American Christian life (apart from fundamentalist circles, which Bonhoeffer considered hidebound and uninteresting). Characteristic is the utter neglect of christology. Even in the most significant and creative of American theologians, who certainly have something to offer (Bonhoeffer thinks especially here of Reinhold Niebuhr), a full-fledged doctrine of Jesus Christ's person and redemptive work is not found. (Niebuhr's Gifford Lectures, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, had yet to be given — whether they would have satisfied Bonhoeffer is open to question.) The dislocation of doctrine in general and of Jesus Christ in particular is the chief reason, as Bonhoeffer saw it, for the "almost incalculably deep opposition" between American Christianity and the continental Reformation.⁴²

Bonhoeffer's closing statement deserves to be quoted at length:

American theology and the American church as a whole have never been able to understand the meaning of "criticism" by the Word of God and all that signifies. Right to the last they do not understand that God's "criticism" touches every religion, the Christianity of the churches and the sanctification of Christians, and that God has founded his church beyond religion and beyond ethics. A symptom of this is the general adherence to natural theology... But because of this, the person and work of Jesus Christ must, for theology, sink into the background and in the long run remain misunderstood, because it is not recognized as the sole ground of radical judgment and radical forgiveness.⁴³

²⁶Amory B. Lovins et al., "Nuclear Power and Nuclear Bombs," *Foreign Affairs* 58 (Summer 1980), p. 1175.

²⁷Albert Camus, "Neither Victims Nor Executioners," *Politics* (July-August 1947), pp. 146-147.

²⁸Albert Camus, "The Unbeliever and Christians," in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* (New York: The Modern Library, 1963), p. 53.

²⁹Camus, "Neither Victims Nor Executioners," p. 147.

³⁰Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Protestantism Without Reformation," in *No Rusty Swords*, ed. by Edwin H. Robertson (London: Fontana Library, 1970), pp. 88-113. (In this edition the title is misrepresented as "Protestantism With Reformation.")

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 88.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 112.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 97 (translation revised).

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 99.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 100.

³⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 100, 101 (italics dropped).

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 101.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 104.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 113.

Throughout Bonhoeffer's essay, the imperiled situation of the confessing church in Germany is never far from his mind. Only by virtue of a vigorous contemporary declaration of faith, the Barmen Declaration, had this church survived the twin dangers of temptation from within and persecution from without. It was a church which knew that the Christian community lives only by the subject matter to which confession and creed bear witness. It knew how to rise above relativism to resist clear distortions of biblical truth. When faced with no possibilities, it had found that on earth God's Word creates its own possibilities and does not return empty. It was a church which had resisted the imposition of racial segregation within its ranks. Above all it was a church which, clinging to Jesus Christ as the center of its life, had separated itself from natural theology and attached itself for judgment and renewal solely to God's Word. "Culture shock" would probably be too tame to describe what Bonhoeffer, fresh from the church struggle in Germany, must have experienced in his final encounter with the American church.

Two recent publications show why it is still difficult for American Christians to understand what Bonhoeffer called "the struggle for a confessing church." No two books are likely to be regarded as more divergent, and even more at odds with

each other, than Richard Neuhaus' *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Eerdmans, 1984) and Harvey Cox's *Religion in the Secular City: Toward a Postmodern Theology* (Simon and Schuster, 1984). Few books dealing with theological topics have been accompanied by so much media promotion and advance praise. Here, apparently, are the books many people have been waiting for. Although we cannot examine the contents in detail, we can ask a basic question: Viewed separately and together, do these books contribute to or detract from the formation of a theologically vital confessing church in America today?

From a political conservative like Neuhaus, who sees in Jerry Falwell a potential hope for the future of democracy (p. 176) and who desires nothing more earnestly than an effacement of the memory of Vietnam (p. 184), one can reasonably hope for enlightenment only on matters of theology. It is at this point, however, that his book seems most hopelessly confused. The book in general is vague, repetitious and self-contradictory, but nowhere more so than in arguing its central thesis. At its most general level the thesis is that although democracy cannot long thrive without religious legitimation, religion in our society has been banished from the "public square" and consequently we may confidently expect to be overrun by communist totalitarianism if something is not soon done about it. The interesting part of this thesis for our purposes has to do with what Neuhaus means by "religion" and "religious legitimation."

Three competing and mutually incompatible definitions of "religion" vie with one another in the text. Following Neuhaus we may call them "particularist religion," "lowest-common-denominator religion," and the religion of a "community of virtue." The idea of a community of virtue is not incompatible with the idea of a confessing church. It implies a community whose religion cultivates the integrity or virtue of its members, however defined, and whose primary concern does not as such involve exerting direct influence on the public realm. Unfortunately, Neuhaus shows little interest in this form of religion and mentions it only vaguely in passing. Most of the book has Neuhaus swinging wildly back and forth between the other two religious forms. At a maximum he hankers for a "Christian America" — a term he actually uses (pp. 122ff.) — in which as a normal part of public discourse Christian symbols would be invoked to explain and sanctify the meaning of imperial America "within the larger purposes of God in world-historical change," much as Eusebius long ago provided the same benefit of clergy for imperial Rome (p. 61). ("Constantinianism" is explicitly endorsed; see p. 172.) At a pinch, however, Neuhaus settles for a religion of the lowest common denominator if it will do its duty of religious legitimation (p. 141); most of the time his preferred religious vocabulary is of the deracinated type which speaks nebulously of "the transcendent," "experiences of the absolute," and other assorted nonentities.

If one asks just what Neuhaus wants religion to legitimate, the answer is America's role in the world — but at this point (if not sooner) Neuhaus would vigorously object. He would insist that what he wants religion to legitimate is not America's role in the world but democracy, and he could appeal to many passages in the book which say just that. Unfortunately, however, democracy and America's role are so firmly combined in his mind that he seems incapable of imagining the former without the latter. The litmus test, furthermore, of just what Neuhaus wants to legitimate is whether he can countenance a systematic critique of America's role in the name of democratic ideals. The fact is that he cannot. Anyone with serious doubts about America's current influence for good is accused not of poor judgment but quite shockingly of disloyalty (p. 73). Neuhaus implies that such a person is guilty of betraying his or her country (p. 75). Denial of the overall benevolence of American influence is taken as though it were a betrayal of democracy itself. By resorting to rhetoric of disloyalty and betrayal at the crucial point, Neuhaus displays a striking incapacity to differentiate between the American system and democratic ideals, thereby indicating how much he piously equates them. Be that as it may, whether the object is America or democracy or both, religion appears here strictly for purposes of legitimation. Neuhaus is quite right to suggest that any reduction of religion to the role of social utility is a form of blasphemy (p. 44), but all things considered I cannot see what else he is doing in this book.

⁴⁴These phrasings are from Cox's discussion of contemporary conservatism (*Religion in the Secular City*, p. 75), but they describe Neuhaus's positions well. See *The Naked Public Square*, pp. 75 (divorce); 111 (pornography); 147-148 (banning God from public school); 96-97, 111 (homosexuality); 55-77 (civility); *passim* (secularization).

The clearest difference between Richard Neuhaus and Harvey Cox is in their political views. Whereas Neuhaus laments such things as "the runaway divorce rate, the pornography plague, the banning of God from the schoolhouse, the rise in homosexuality," "the disappearance of civility," and "the disease of secularization,"⁴⁴ Cox wants "a theology that affirms social justice, the rights of the poor, a communal understanding of salvation" (*Religion in the Secular City*, p. 25). He endorses the idea of "class conflict" (p. 157) and underscores the nuclear peril of our age (p. 78).

Cox has also written the more engaging book. He is master of the vivid description, the telling detail, the well-honed phrase. Among theologians writing in English, he is perhaps the best stylist we have. The danger inherent in his brand of theological journalism, which he carries out at a very high level, is an almost unavoidable tendency toward glibness, as noted by more than one critic. Riding the crest of the latest trend can no doubt be exhilarating, but one always wonders what is left once the wave has hit the shore.

The trend this time is something called "postmodernism." The modern world is passing away, and the postmodern struggling to be born. What this means for theology is a new conversation partner and a new set of problems. The old conversation partner were the skeptics, usually a highly educated, socially privileged group; the new conversation partner will be the poor in the struggle to throw off their chains. The new set of problems will be how to maintain liberating practices based on theological norms in the midst of an increasingly pluralistic world. Resources to solve these problems will be found only among those pockets of the theological community which have not bought into the modernist project. Cox therefore turns to the fundamentalists in the United States and the liberationists in Latin America to see if he can find what he is looking for. Much of the book is an account of this quest by way of delightful first-hand experiences. At the end the fundamentalists are found wanting for capitulating to that most modern of inventions, the electronic media, and therefore (Cox thinks) to modernity; whereas the liberationists have yet to appreciate the pressures exerted by pluralism on theology, though otherwise Cox affirms their intent. Nor does the liberationist shortcoming seem to matter much, since Cox concludes that what really counts is not one's theological beliefs so much as which side one takes in "the combat against social evil." "Sacred stories" can only be judged by whether they do or do not serve this end; and religionists of all stripes are invited to put other differences aside by celebrating "the promise of life" (p. 238), whatever that may be, and by appreciating one another's "expressions of the same primal reality" (p. 249). (Whether the reality they express is the same, primal or even real is not discussed.)⁴⁵

⁴⁵For a lively and provocative discussion which gives qualified support to a position like Cox's, see Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1980), especially pp. 143-172. For a powerful counter-argument, see George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), pp. 30-72.



One problem with Cox's analysis, which many will be sure to note, is that there really is nothing "postmodern" about it. At best it simply rearranges the furniture in the old modernist room. Perhaps theology is just getting around to appropriating Marx's insights about how the poor are exploited and Lessing's insights in "Nathan the Wise" about the plurality and underlying unity of religions, but that hardly seems any reason to dignify the affair with an exalted term like "postmodern." After all, why have modern skeptics been so skeptical if not largely because their encounter with religious pluralism convinced them that all religious truth-claims are arbitrary? Nor are Cox's constructive proposals about how to cope with pluralism in any meaningful sense "postmodern." The modernist theological strategy when confronted with the fact of pluralism has always been to downgrade the cognitive element of religious truth-claims in favor of the affective dimension to religious symbols and the practical consequences one hopes to extract from them. Cox's appeal to "combat against social evil" (practical) and to "expressions of the same primal reality" (affective) in no way removes us from the familiar modernist rut.

Theologically speaking, what Cox and Neuhaus have in common is more impressive and important than anything that sets them apart. In their commonality they typify the problems Bonhoeffer diagnosed in American theological discussion. Both despite themselves cannot help thinking of religion primarily in terms of social utility, though Cox is more candid about this than Neuhaus; and both manifest much the same pervasive anxiety about influence that is well-nigh inevitable when in a pluralistic society some type of culture formation, whether imperialist or liberationist does not matter, is virtually the only meaningful role for religion. (Cox and Neuhaus would both deny that for them this is religion's "only" role; suffice it to say that this role seems to be the only thing that gets their juices flowing.)

What unites Cox and Neuhaus, in other words, is a common assumption that religion and culture are related by mutual immanence. Culture, as the saying goes, is the bearer of religion. For Neuhaus this means a symbiosis between the nation with the soul of a church and the church with the soul of a nation, whereas for Cox it means revolution ratified by religion and religion by revolution. Either way we are not far from the view that defines Christ by norms of culture. "The terms differ," wrote H. Richard Niebuhr, "but the logic is always the same: Christ is identified with what men conceive to be their finest ideals, their noblest institutions, and their best philosophy."⁴⁶

The Christ of culture tends to be connotative and even derivative, to endorse but not to reign, precisely because he depends for his reality on our capacity to endow him with meaning. Where Jesus Christ is worshipped for reasons of cultural utility, he is not worshipped as Lord, and to that extent he is not worshipped at all. The Lordship of Jesus Christ over and beyond all relativities of human culture is, so far as the church is concerned, a matter of life and death, a binding truth and a decision of ultimate consequence. That is why Bonhoeffer insisted that "God has founded his church beyond religion and beyond ethics." That is why he stressed the meaning of "criticism" by God's Word and the importance of confession and creed. And that is why he worried so much about a relativism that could not resist distortions of biblical truth. Until we can move beyond "Protestantism without Reformation," we have little hope for the emergence of a theologically articulate confessing church.

II. The Clear and the Vague: Lessons from the Confessing Church of Yesterday

The great lesson from the confessing church of yesterday is the Barmen Declaration itself, and one decisive lesson about the Barmen Declaration was the Stuttgart Confession of Guilt issued in October 1945. The Stuttgart Confession indicates that the Barmen Declaration was a peculiar mixture of the clear and the vague, of the theologically explicit and the politically all-too-implicit. It suggests that an explicit theology without an equally explicit corresponding politics will ill-serve any future confessing church. "Unending suffering has been brought by us to many peoples and countries," declared the confessing church leaders at Stuttgart — to the immediate and intense scandal of their fellow countrymen and women.⁴⁷ "We accuse ourselves," they continued, "that we did not witness more courageously, pray more faithfully, believe more joyously, love more ardently."⁴⁸ The church in America today might consider beginning with its own confession of guilt, even if its resources are scarce for a theological declaration of faith. In other words, perhaps this time it would be well if the sequence from Barmen to Stuttgart were reversed.

For his part, Karl Barth found even the Stuttgart Confession too vague. Without a more specific enumeration of crucial matters (such as antisemitism and unchecked militarism), he felt the Confession might dwindle to an exercise in unrepentance.⁴⁹ As early as 1935, Barth had warned

the confessing church not to shrink from political consequences he considered to flow from Barmen. The confessing church, he wrote, "has fought hard to a certain extent for the freedom and purity of its proclamation, but it has, for example, remained silent on the action against the Jews, on the amazing treatment of political opponents, on the suppression of the freedom of the press in the new Germany and on so much else against which the Old Testament prophets would certainly have spoken out."⁵⁰ Even the confessing church's resistance to Nazi assimilation of its internal affairs had difficulty surviving the pressures of a state at war, and by 1941 Barth found himself writing to churches abroad that the German church struggle had "now almost come to a stop."⁵¹

Our purpose is not to blame the German confessing church for its shortcomings, especially considering the severity of its persecution for even limited resistance, and especially considering the great theological heritage it has bequeathed to us. If shortcomings cannot be overlooked, it is only because we cannot afford to ignore them for the sake of the future. As Barth himself pointed out in 1942, most members of the confessing church "thought they could agree to, or at least sympathize with, the political and social aims of National Socialism." "Up until the year 1934, while I was still in Germany," he admitted, "I myself thought I could relegate my political opposition to the background" and work only along the lines of resisting Nazi intrusion in church affairs.⁵² Indeed, one cannot read through the history of the German confessing church without sensing the anxiety felt by its adherents that charges of disloyalty to the nation would be made to stick against them. In his book *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches*, historian John S. Conway identifies this anxiety as a decisive reason for failure. "With the refusal of most churchmen to follow a course of political and theological disloyalty," he writes, "hopes for a centre of resistance to Nazism quickly faded, while Luther's supposed teaching of obedience to the state was extended and misinterpreted to cover the submission of increasing numbers of Churchmen."⁵³ "Their attempts to create an effective opposition were doomed to failure from the start," he goes on, "— indeed considering the psychological obstacles in their way, it is perhaps surprising that an opposition existed at all. For most Germans, national loyalty dictated their political outlook, even in the Confessing Church."⁵⁴

Karl Barth was convinced that our political outlook ought to be dictated by our loyalty to Jesus Christ. He was also convinced that the Barmen Declaration contained sufficient

guidance and force to dispel from the church all political outlooks dictated by narrow national loyalties. Although history did not always bear out his second conviction in German confessing church practice, his first conviction remains unassailable; and his second conviction is, I believe, still correct in principle. Properly understood, Barmen lays a foundation for political resistance by the church. A brief glance at the political implications of the First Article of the Barmen Declaration will back this claim.

The positive thesis of Article I runs as follows: "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death."⁵⁵ Stated more formally, this thesis can be interpreted to mean that in matters of faith and practice, the voice of Jesus Christ, as conveyed to us by the witness of Scripture, is both necessary and sufficient. Regarding faith, this is the one voice necessary and sufficient for us to hear; and regarding practice, this is the one voice necessary and sufficient for us to trust and obey in life and in death. No other voice can carry this authority, for no other voice is the Word of God.

As is true for every article of Barmen, this positive thesis is followed by a negative. We may paraphrase it as saying that no other voice apart from or alongside the authentic, scriptural voice of Jesus Christ may become a source of authority for what the church proclaims and teaches. Here we have Barmen's famous rejection of natural theology. Two points about it are important to note.

First, it is primarily directed against natural theology in the form of culture-religion. Where Jesus Christ "no longer speaks the first and last word, but only at best an additional word," wrote Barth, an "assimilated and domesticated theology" will be the inevitable result.⁵⁶ Such domesticated theology may emerge in apparently agreeable and sophisticated forms, but once allowed in principle, it relativizes Christ's voice so that it is no longer understood as necessary, sufficient and supreme. This relativizing is fatal partly because it undercuts any decisive defense against culture-religion in its more tribal and barbarous forms. The logic of the one admits the logic of the other. The Christ of natural theology is always openly or secretly the relativized Christ of culture. The trajectory of natural theology leads from the Christ who is not supreme to the Christ who is not sufficient and finally to the Christ who is not necessary. Culture-religion, relativization, and domestication or assimilation indicate that the Lordship of Jesus Christ is no longer believed in or understood. By rejecting all independent or second authorities, Barmen reaffirmed Christ's Lordship against the inroads of cultural self-assertion in the church.

Second, it is important to realize that Barmen's rejection of natural theology is epistemological in force. It does not imply that nothing good, beautiful, true or worth noticing exists outside of Scripture or the church. "God may speak to us,"

Confessing Church in Germany," *Journal of Church and State* 3 (1961), pp. 41-52; on p. 50.

⁴⁶Littell, *loc. cit.*

⁴⁷Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), pp. 329, 341.

⁵⁰Karl Barth, *The German Church Conflict* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1965), p. 45.

⁵¹Karl Barth, *A Letter to Great Britain from Switzerland* (London: The Sheldon Press, 1941), p. 17.

⁵²Karl Barth, *The Church and the War* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1944), p. 8.

⁵³John S. Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 86.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁵⁵English translation in Arthur C. Cochrane, *The Church's Confession Under Hitler* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), p. 239.

⁵⁶Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. II, Part 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), p. 163.

⁴⁶H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1951), p. 103.

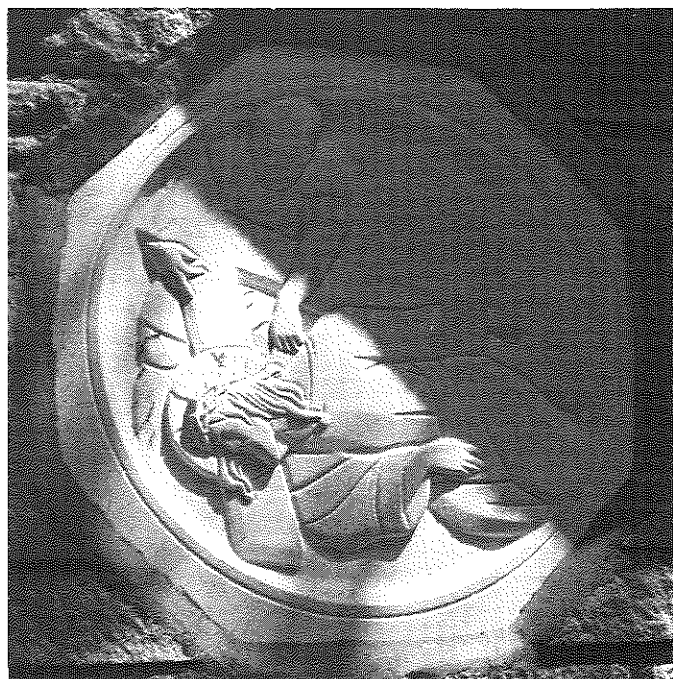
⁴⁷See *Die Schuld der Kirche, Dokumente und Reflexionen zur Stuttgarter Schulderklärung vom 18./19. Oktober 1945*, ed. by Martin Greschat (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1982). For a translation of the Stuttgart Confession, see Franklin H. Littell, "From Barmen (1934) to Stuttgart (1945): The Path of the

wrote Barth, "through Russian communism or a flute concerto, a blossoming shrub or a dead dog. We shall do well to listen to him if he really does so."⁵⁷ No such object, however, can ever be allowed to become a source of authority for the church's preaching, for no such object can have independent revelatory or epistemological status. Only by criteria derived from the one authentic scriptural voice of Christ can we know if God might be speaking to us in those ways or not.

The political implications of the First Article are spelled out, directly and indirectly, by the rest of the Barmen Declaration. Only the most cursory notice of their direction can be indicated here. Article II, which declares that no area of life can be said to be outside the Lordship of Jesus Christ, implies that christocentric theology may not be severed from politics or from political judgments in the church. Article III, which claims the church as the exclusive possession of Jesus Christ, carries the reverse implication that no christocentric theology may be subordinated or reduced to political programs or ideals. In other words, whereas Article II implies that theology and politics may not be separated or divided, Article III implies that they may not be confused or mixed. Article IV rejects any imposition on the church of an alien form of polity and implies the nonconformity of the church to the world. Article V interprets the traditional two-kingdoms doctrine in a christocentric way so that our hierarchies of loyalty are clear and so that in the church's eyes only conditional loyalty is enjoyed by the state. Finally, Article VI, which rejects any "arbitrarily chosen desires, purposes and plans" while affirming service to the message of God's free grace, implies that all political activity engaged in by the church will carry the basic status of a witness to grace.

Of these several themes, two are most important: Barmen's interpretation of the two-kingdoms doctrine and Barmen's overall suggestion that theology and politics stand in a pattern of differentiated hierarchy and unity.

Two competing understandings of the status of state authority have contended with one another in the history of the church.⁵⁸ The one view, which held sway in German Protestantism right down to the confessing church (as well as elsewhere), believed Scripture to teach that, being instituted by God, the state could command unconditional loyalty within its sphere of competence and was to be resisted by noncompliance only if it sought to meddle with church affairs and beliefs. Perhaps more rightly than wrongly, this view is associated with Luther and Augustine. The other view agreed completely about the state's limited sphere of competence and about the measures to be taken when the state overstepped itself relative to the church. Where it differed from the first view was its belief that Scripture did not teach a requirement of unconditional obedience to any state so long as it merely



respected ecclesiastical bounds. Rather, this view understood Scripture to mean that, being instituted by God, the state had obligations to fulfill, such as rewarding good and punishing evil. If these obligations were flagrantly and systematically violated so as to establish an unmistakable pattern of malfeasance, the state would forfeit its status as a state and therefore its mantle of divine legitimacy. This view is associated with Calvin and Aquinas. The difference between the two views is clear: the one holds that to obey the state, even the radically unjust state, is to render obedience to God; the other holds that times may come when obedience to God requires political disobedience and resistance to the state.

The Fifth Article of Barmen is compatible with the second view. It is a novel version of that view to the extent that the question of obligations is stated, though only indirectly, in terms of a hierarchy of loyalties culminating in our loyalty to Jesus Christ. The state is assigned the task of "providing for justice and peace." Of course, the peace and justice it provides will never be more than rough, since we live in "the as yet unredeemed world." Should the state systematically violate its appointment, then the article implies that the church is to trust and obey "the power of the Word of God by which God upholds all things." For although the emperor is to be honored, when warranted, God alone is the one to be feared.⁵⁹

In his writings during the Nazi period, especially after 1935, Barth always interpreted these ideas as a mandate for political resistance, for the National Socialist state was clearly

guilty of a systematic pattern of crimes against justice and peace. However, while Barth's interpretation is most apt considering Barmen's overall spirit and the crisis of the times, neither Article V nor the Declaration as a whole sufficiently rules out the possibility that the opposite interpretation might also be regarded as compatible with the wording of the Fifth Article. Article V, in other words, does not unequivocally reject a reading along the lines of the other traditional, deeply ingrained view that the state within its sphere of competence must be obeyed unconditionally. Barmen V clearly sets forth the state's basic obligations but not the church's duty to resist should those obligations be grievously transgressed. Be that as it may, the text certainly seems to imply that even in its own sphere the state's legitimacy is not unconditional. Moreover, it is hard to see how a state sponsoring systematic human rights violations and proliferating the indiscriminate weaponry of mass destruction could reasonably be regarded, under a Barthian reading of Article V, as not inspiring a similar mandate to resistance.

Several Barmen articles, when taken together, imply a relationship between theology and politics involving unity, hierarchy and differentiation. This "Chalcedonian" relationship is at the heart of Barth's political theology, but it has not always been an easy one to grasp. In fact, it has commonly driven Barth's critics to exasperation. Some, for example, have noticed the hierarchy and differentiation but not the unity. Thus Reinhold Niebuhr accused Barth of soaring above political reality in "an eschatological airplane" which never came down to earth.⁶⁰ Others, on the other hand, have experienced the unity Barth assumed at full blast. Thus the great church historian Hans von Campenhausen is said one time to have "quivered with anger because Karl Barth gave his political views in such a way that those who differed were necessarily put into question." To which Barth is said characteristically to have retorted: "Why don't you put forward your view with the same (Christian) commitment?"⁶¹ (The issue on which they divided was postwar German rearmament, Barth being vehemently against it.) How is it possible for the same man to have so coolly proposed in the midst of the 1933 Nazi crisis that theology and church should proceed "as if nothing had happened,"⁶² while at other times he seemed to make political decisions into virtually a *status confessionis*?

Part of the answer lies in Barth's belief that the necessary political implications would follow indirectly and of their own accord if the church would simply pursue its proper tasks such as Bible study, prayer and theological reflection.⁶³ "It must be

clear," he once wrote in 1942, "that our resistance can have meaning only to the extent that it is able to nourish itself from its own roots."⁶⁴ Or as he insisted much earlier in 1934: "Let theology at last become primary for us and Church politics only secondary, so that in this properly ordered relationship it may become good politics!"⁶⁵ Statements like these underscore the sense of hierarchy and proper differentiation Barth strove to write into the Barmen Declaration.

One of Barth's most suggestive treatments of this question appears in an article solicited by the American journal *Foreign Affairs*, which appeared in January 1943.⁶⁶ At one point Barth contrasts the churches in Holland, Norway and Britain and the confessing church in Germany. The former he regards as politically progressive but theologically lacking, for they resist Nazism but not culture-bound theology. The latter are just the reverse, theologically progressive but politically lacking, and for the opposite reason. Despite their praiseworthy theology, they do not see that to Nazism, Christian belief has no choice but to utter a whole-hearted and unequivocal "No!" Those who do otherwise have failed to understand National Socialism, have failed to think through the message of the Bible, or "have developed a kind of schizophrenia in which totally divergent yardsticks are adopted for the inner and the external life"⁶⁷ — an allusion not only to the traditional German two kingdoms doctrine, but also to the false separations and divisions rejected by Barmen Article II.

Then, with the confessing church still in mind, Barth drives home the unity he believed inexorably to obtain between theology and politics: "No matter how far they (the confessing church) may have progressed in other directions, they will have to learn from the other churches that there is a Christian center and a Christian periphery, that the Christian substance and its political application are indeed two different things, but that there is only one truth and one justice — and that no one can serve two masters."⁶⁸

Barth contends here that there is a center and a periphery, the gospel and its political application, and that they need to be kept eternally distinct. Yet just as the periphery cannot be had without the center, so the center cannot be had without the periphery. Together gospel and political application form one circle, one unitary whole. When to stress their distinction and when to stress their unity depend almost entirely on the situation. Not every political issue of the day demands a decision from the church, but for those like National Socialism that do, the decision must be forceful and clear-cut.

⁵⁷Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. I, Part 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936), p. 60. (Hereafter cited as CD I/1.)

⁵⁸Compare the relevant sections in the discussions of Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin in A. J. and R. W. Carlyle, *A History of Medieval Political Thought in the West*, 6 vols. (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons LTD, 1903-1936).

⁵⁹For a similar line interpretation, see Wolfgang Huber, "Gebot für den Staat, zur Aktualität des Barmer Bekenntnisses," *Evangelische Kommentare*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (February 1984), pp. 67-70.

⁶⁰Reinhold Niebuhr, "Why is Barth Silent on Hungary?," in *Essays in Applied Christianity* (New York: Meridian Living Age Books, 1959), p. 186.

⁶¹Busch, *Karl Barth* (n. 47), p. 405.

⁶²Karl Barth, *Theological Existence Today!* (Lexington, Kentucky: American Theological Library Association Committee on Reprinting, 1962), p. 9. Cf. what Barth says later in the essay: "In this way, perhaps, there might even be created a centre of resistance, which, because unsought, might one of these days possess an outstanding 'political' importance for the Church and be effective against the danger impending over the Church to-day" (pp. 75-76). Cf. also what Barth says about theology and politics in the "Forward" to CD I/1, p. xiii.

⁶³For a critique of this assumption, see George Hunsinger, "Karl Barth and Radical Politics: Some Further Considerations," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 7 (1978), pp. 181-183.

⁶⁴Barth, *The Church and the War*, p. 14.

⁶⁵Barth, *The German Church Conflict*, p. 39.

⁶⁶Karl Barth, "The Protestant Churches in Europe," *Foreign Affairs* 21 (January 1943), pp. 260-275. Reprinted in *The Church and the War*, pp. 1-18. German original in Karl Barth, *Eine Schweizer Stimme, 1938-1945* (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag A. G. Zollikon, 1948), pp. 251-271.

⁶⁷Barth, *The Church and the War*, p. 12.

⁶⁸*Ibid.* (translation revised).

No periphery without the center! That is what Barth insisted to politically progressive Christians who wanted to stress their politics at the expense of the gospel, or to sacrifice the gospel's uniqueness by reinterpreting it in political terms, or perhaps in their zeal to dispense with the gospel altogether. Without the vital center, Barth insisted, without the gospel's utter uniqueness, the prospects for the periphery — for vibrant and chastened social action — are not good. To have the periphery without the center, the ethics without the doctrine, is the impossible modernist dream that sooner or later becomes a nightmare.

No center without the periphery! That in turn is what Barth urged upon the politically timid confessing church and upon all theologically traditional Christians who wanted the gospel at the expense of progressive politics⁶⁹ — who wanted to avoid the gospel's political imperatives by quietly diluting them or by expunging them completely. Without the progressive periphery, he believed, the doctrinal center not only appears rather dubious, but is inwardly debased. A circle's center without its periphery is a contradiction in terms. Where Christian doctrine is held while the imperatives of peace and justice are denied, questions arise whether the gospel has been encountered or understood at all. Happily, however, between evangelical truth and social justice we need not choose, for in the unity of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, "there is only one truth and one justice — and no one can serve two masters."

Note that two kinds of argument are in play here. First is that the gospel is intrinsically true and self-authenticating in its radical uniqueness beyond all cultural possibilities. Second is that the gospel has salutary political consequences which at times are directly to be pursued, consequences that will be subverted should gospel qua gospel cease to be the core. The first argument might be described as axiomatic, the second as functional. The salient point is that Barth employs both arguments dialectically, according to the pattern of thought just described. To put it another way, he has nothing against politically functional arguments so long as one brings out in strong relief that the functional is not central, that the axiomatic is not peripheral and that finally neither can be had without the other.

The great lesson from the confessing church of yesterday, therefore, with its theological successes and its political failures, as each in its own way is indicated by the Barmen Declaration, is that we can no longer afford to be satisfied with mixtures of the clear and the vague. Loyalty to Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one standard by which we are to abide in all theological and all political decisions. Our fear of disloyalty to any human cause, even when nationalist or revolutionary, may never be greater than our fear of disloyalty to him, for he alone is to be loved and feared above all things. Loving and fearing only him in this way, it will not surprise us if times should come when loyalty

to some particular human cause, especially in the political realm, must be met with a clear and vigorous "No!"

III. Resistance and Suffering: Prospects for a Confessing Church Tomorrow

If our present need can be granted and yesterday's lessons are clear, are there prospects for a confessing church tomorrow? Might a church grounded in biblical witness and committed to justice and peace be emerging on the horizon? Dare we hope for a grouping of Christians prepared in theology and politics to resist our more disturbing trends?

Perhaps the first thing to keep in mind is the vitality of the black church to which Bonhoeffer called our attention. No doubt a strong case could be made that the black church in America has always been close, both politically and theologically, to the kind of confessing church we are considering. The white church in America, to the extent that it split into an unfortunate, self-perpetuating and ugly division between fundamentalists without justice and liberals without doctrine, could then be regarded as living in two forms of a single apostasy, which the black church with its surer historic grasp of these matters might still help the white church overcome. Certainly no confessing church tomorrow, fighting for human rights and nuclear disarmament, could ignore today's racism and injustice at home. The black church within any larger confessing church would do what it has always done to keep the rest of us honest.

A second point to bear in mind is that the best parallel between the confessing church of yesterday and the one possible tomorrow may already exist to the south. In Latin America the church is enjoying an unprecedented spiritual renewal through the formation of small groups centered on Bible study, eucharist and prayer. At the same time this church is suffering across the entire continent a persecution of historic proportions, directed at those who stand up for the most elemental human rights. Once again, as in Hitler's Germany, the church has become the last institutional refuge against state terror and repression. Also bearing comparison to the Nazi period in Europe is the flight of the persecuted. Nowhere is this reality more heart-rending today than in the flight from Central America. Rather than welcoming these refugees, our government seeks to deport them, sending them back to a fate uncertain or perhaps all-too-certain.

The growing resistance to this deportation now underway in the American churches is one of the most hopeful signs for a confessing church tomorrow.⁷⁰ Sanctuary is offered to the refugees even to the point of breaking what our government

interprets as the law. No confessing church tomorrow can afford to ignore its persecuted sisters and brothers to the south. If developments like the sanctuary movement deepen, perhaps we will not need to say of our country what after the war Karl Barth said of his: "The Rhine will not wash away our guilt for having turned away ten thousand fugitives and having treated unworthily those whom we did accept."⁷¹

Finally, the sanctuary movement points us to a great but still uncertain trend: spiritually grounded civil disobedience. Forces of spiritual renewal — among Roman Catholics groups like Pax Christi, among Protestants groups like World Peacemakers — bear fruit in actions of resistance. Good Friday vigils through the streets of Manhattan ending in civil disobedience at nuclear weapons research institutes; Peace Pentecosts in which Christians singing gospel songs and praying for peace are dragged in arrest from the rotunda of the Capitol building while within earshot Congress debates funding for the MX missile program — these could be seeds of a confessing church tomorrow.

Although for the historic reasons mentioned a renewed and resisting church in America is not likely to emerge on an explicitly confessional basis, our traditional American activism, as Bonhoeffer recognized, could still be an asset. As an example of the best in American Christian renewal that might inform a confessing church tomorrow, I offer these words from a Roman Catholic woman named Helen Woodson, who on September 2, 1982 was arrested for pouring blood on the floor of the White House. At her trial she read these words to the judge:

For the past 18 years of my life has been children — one birth child, 7 adopted children and 3 foster children. 10 of my kids are mentally retarded. We also share our home with a paraplegic Cuban refugee and with ex-prisoners and others who need shelter. All of these people are considered of little value by society. My children will never contribute to the Gross National Product, they will never pay taxes to the war machine, they will never cast a vote for corporate political interests, they will never turn their bodies and minds over to Selective Service. They are of no value in a society based on competition, profit and war, and yet it is these useless people who have taught me what I know of the preciousness of human life, the sacredness that transcends damage and imperfection

Tragic death cannot always be prevented. Accident or disease may kill our children while we stand helpless to do anything. But death in nuclear war is preventable. It can happen only if

we allow it, and if we allow it, we will come for judgment not before the Superior Court of the District of Columbia but before God and the murdered innocents.

It is morally incumbent upon us to defend the children. I have done so at home for 18 years. I did so on September 2nd at the White House, pouring my blood to speak against the death of nuclear weapons and for the life we could have instead — a life of reconciliation and peace. The acts through which I serve life at home are considered exemplary and noble; my nonviolent witness at the White House is considered to be criminal. After more than two years of prayer and the thought which preceded my civil disobedience and after the 76 days I have spent in the DC Jail, I cannot, in all good conscience, see the difference between the two.⁷²

A confessing church in America tomorrow is at first more likely to be grounded in prayer than in any kind of doctrinal renewal, as sorely as the latter may be needed. Prayer is among the church's highest responsibilities and privileges, even from a political standpoint. "Prayer will not lead us away from political thought and action of a modest but definite kind," wrote Karl Barth, "but will rather lead us directly into conflict where we are conscious of our goal."⁷³ Prayer does not mean shoving on God what we are unwilling to tackle ourselves, but it does mean relying wholly on an ethic of witness and faithfulness that resists all anxieties about influence. Influence will be sought and welcomed should it come, but witness and faithfulness will be the overriding goal. Prayer is not a sterile retreat to an enclave beyond secular involvements. It is the first step toward renewing and preserving the church and hence directly and indirectly the world. Knowing, therefore, that prayer without action is empty and that action without prayer is blind, finding joy in the midst of suffering and life in the midst of death, being convinced above all that He who has suffered will conquer and that at his name every knee shall finally bow, perhaps a confessing church tomorrow will find it has been granted not to produce a new confession of its own but to be gathered and sustained by one it has already received: "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death."

⁶⁹For a discussion of the relationship Barth saw between the gospel and progressive politics, see Ulrich Dannemann, *Theologie und Politik im Denken Karl Barths* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1977). See also *Karl Barth and Radical Politics*, ed. by George Hunsinger (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976); and George Hunsinger, "Karl Barth and Liberation Theology," *The Journal of Religion* 63 (July 1983), pp. 247-263. For a brilliant discussion of how Barth's theological anthropology mediates between his theological and political views,

see the unpublished doctoral dissertation by William Werpehowski, "Social Justice, Social Selves: John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* and Christian Ethics," Yale University, 1981, Ch. 1.

⁷⁰See Geraldine Brooks, "Offered Sanctuary: Scores of U.S. Churches Take In Illegal Aliens Fleeing Latin America," *The Wall Street Journal* (June 21, 1984), pp. 1ff.

⁷¹Busch, *Karl Barth*, p. 318.

⁷²Helen Woodson, "Statement of November 15, 1982," *Harvest of Justice, Newsletter of the Gaudete Peace and Justice Center* (December 1982), p. 2. Cf. the document, "Statement on Peace and Justice," adopted by the Sixth Assembly of the World Council of Churches (Vancouver, 1983), which includes these words: "We believe the time has come when the churches must unequivocally declare

that the production and deployment as well as the use of nuclear weapons are a crime against humanity and that such activities must be condemned on ethical and theological grounds ... we believe that Christians should give witness to their unwillingness to participate in any conflict involving weapons of mass destruction or indiscriminate effect."

⁷³Barth, *Letter to Great Britain*, p. 51 (translation revised).

1984: ARE WE THERE?

Christopher Lasch

In the year of Orwell, the inevitable question, which has inspired innumerable conferences, panels, and collections and given a spurious air of urgency even to the most banal disquisitions on social trends, is whether our society has begun to resemble the one depicted so memorably in *The Last Man in Europe*, retitled at the last minute *1984*. That this may not be the most useful question we could ask about our society is suggested by the possibility of answering it with equally plausible evidence on either side. Those who answer it in the affirmative point to the "history of the increasing erosion of civil liberties in the United States," in the words of the Orwell calendar designed by Howard Levine and Tim Keefe, which lists important infringements of personal freedom, culled from the history of the last three decades, for every day of the current year. Improvements in electronic surveillance; the advent of computerized data banks; new developments in brainwashing, behavior modification, and biological engineering; the subliminal messages conveyed by mass communications; the increase in public lying; the deterioration of public speech; the growing resort to euphemisms intended as outrageous or inhuman political actions; the bureaucratization of language in general; all these developments appear to justify an Orwellian interpretation of our political drift.

On the other hand, there is an abundance of other evidence that is hard to reconcile with such an interpretation: the sexual revolution; the moral climate of hedonism and permissiveness; the decline of ideological fervor and political militancy; the growing disrespect for all forms of authority; the weakening of national loyalties; the spread of political apathy and cynicism. On the strength of such evidence, we might be justified in concluding that the national state, at least in the more attractive West, will find it increasingly difficult to mobilize a political constituency for any purpose, constructive or murderous. In the United States, Vietnam and Watergate have discredited large public enterprises and left behind them a kind of ideological immunity. It is hard to imagine Americans in the last years of the 20th century throwing themselves into the rituals of collective ideological hysteria described in Orwell's novel, such as the Two Minutes Hate, or losing themselves in mystical adoration of a Leader. It is equally hard to imagine children turning over their parents to the thought police. Not that family loyalties in our society are necessarily strong; but political loyalties are even weaker.

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Not only is it possible to cite a great deal of evidence on both sides of the question — the question raised, for example, by a symposium recently held at the University of Wisconsin, "Has the Orwellian World Arrived?" — but the same evidence can easily point in both directions. The most persuasive evidence in favor of an Orwellian view of the recent past and the near future is the staggering accumulation of deepening social emergencies, on a scale such that only a state equipped with unprecedented powers can hope to bring them under some kind of control. These emergencies, many of them global in scope, include overpopulation, chronic unemployment, the exhaustion of natural resources, shortages of food, pollution of the air and water, ecological devastation, the nuclear arms race, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Deepening crisis, it can be argued, will lead to a vast expansion of state power, perhaps even to the creation of superstates on the Orwellian model. But it can be argued just as plausibly that states will crumble under the weight of these difficulties. Already welfare states in the West appear to be approaching the limit of their ability to provide for those who can no longer provide for themselves. Indeed all the major powers, communist and capitalist alike, face tremendous economic and social burdens in the years ahead. A decline in their ability to dominate lesser nations is both a cause and an effect of domestic difficulties that threaten to tax all their resources. Recent developments in world politics seem to point to the break-up of imperial systems, not to their consolidation. In the years ahead, nationalisms based on ethnic, linguistic, or religious affiliation may prove more durable than loyalties to imperial states that can no longer guarantee minimal security and protection. A new tribalism seems at least as likely as a new form of totalitarianism; and although it might prove no more attractive in the long run, it is hardly the future envisioned by Orwell and other dystopian theorists of the thirties and forties.

In order to get some historical perspective on our own situation, it would be a good idea to remind ourselves of the specific historical circumstances out of which this dystopian speculation emerged. The concept of totalitarianism first took shape, in the late thirties, in the writings of those who had begun to question both the socialist credentials of the Stalinist regime and the Marxist interpretation of fascism as the final stage of capitalist decay. Thanks to the Moscow trials, the Spanish Civil War (in which the Soviet Union helped to abort a democratic revolution led by anarchists), and the Nazi-Soviet pact, Orwell, Arthur Koestler, Franz Borkenau, James Burnham, and other former Marxists had come to see Stalinism as a new form of domination; neither a return to an

older type of autocracy nor the perverted socialism characterized by Trotsky as bureaucratic collectivism but a system of total control that sought to regulate not only the individual's public life but his inner life as well, thereby abolishing the very distinction between the public and private realms and between society and the state. Meanwhile it was becoming increasingly clear that the Nazi regime in Germany could not be understood, as Orwell himself described it as late as 1939, during his brief flirtation with Trotskyism, as a further "development of capitalism" or even as a revival of old-fashioned autocracy. "The terrifying thing about modern dictatorships," Orwell wrote a few weeks later, "is that they are something entirely unprecedented." Not only did they enjoy a good deal of popular support, but their use of terror, culminating in systematic programs of mass murder, seemed to go far beyond anything required by the practical exigencies of gaining and holding power. One of the earliest students of National Socialism, Hermann Rauschning, described Nazism as a "revolution of nihilism," a movement without "fixed political aims" and based only on "impulse." This perception crystallized in the concept of totalitarianism advanced, for example, in *1984*, which depicts a state that exercises total power for its own sake without even the pretense that its power serves the interests of humanity as a whole.

After publishing reports on the Nazi concentration camps by Bruno Bettelheim and Hannah Arendt, Dwight Macdonald wrote in his magazine, *Politics*, early in 1945, that "the extermination of the Jews of Europe was not a means to an end one can accept as even plausibly rational. No military purpose was served by their extermination; the 'racial theory' behind it is scientifically groundless and humanly abhorrent and can only be termed, in the strictest sense of the term, neurotic." A growing fund of information on the Stalinist terror prompted a similar set of conclusions. In Orwell's novel, totalitarian terror no longer serves even the rational objective of intimidating opponents, since it continues to flourish when opposition has been effectively silenced. According to John Strachey, Orwell's novels, *1984* and *Animal Farm*, suggested that communism, often misinterpreted as the "culmination of rationalism," had "lost almost all touch with objective reality and pursued psychopathic social objectives." Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism*, like *1984*, owed its remarkable hold over the postwar mind to the insight that crimes on such a scale as those committed by Stalin and Hitler marked a decisive turning-point in history, "breaking down all standards we know" and signalling the arrival of a world to which the civilization of the past could no longer serve as a guide or even as a reliable moral standard by which to condemn it. Totalitarianism differs from early forms of autocracy, according to Arendt, because it carries to its limit the logic that can dismiss whole categories of people as historically superfluous. Thus the death camp, the ultimate expression of totalitarianism, seeks not so much to expropriate the labor of a captive population as to provide the most vivid demonstration of its dispensability. In her attempt to identify the "burden of our times" — as the book was called when it appeared in England — Arendt repeatedly emphasized the danger that

"political, social, and economic events everywhere are in silent conspiracy with totalitarian instruments devised for making men superfluous."

In a world threatened by unemployment, automation, and overpopulation, her warning remains as important as ever. What no longer seems timely or useful is the insistence that totalitarian regimes are inherently unstable. It thus calls into question a number of the assertions advanced by postwar theorists of totalitarianism. In *1984*, Orwell stressed the totalitarian state's invulnerability to opposition and historical change. He described a ruling party that has brought history to an end. Unlike earlier ruling classes, it cannot be overthrown, not only because it exercises total control over thought but because, as an "adoptive" elite, it no longer rests on the principle of heredity by succession. It doesn't matter whether Brother actually exists, according to Orwell, because "Big Brother is the embodiment of the Party." Like Arendt and others, Orwell underestimated the totalitarian state's dependence on charismatic leadership. In Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia, and Mao's China, there was never any doubt about the existence of Big Brother; nor did totalitarian regimes survive the death of those leaders. Far from serving as the embodiment of the party, all three of these men, moreover, did everything they could to subvert the parties that brought them to power. After the death of Stalin and Mao, the Communist parties of the Soviet Union and China accordingly repudiated the cult of personality, denounced the crimes perpetrated by these men — objectionable precisely because they disrupted the normal operations of the party — and instituted a bureaucratic type of government that no longer relies on mass executions, show trials, and far-flung network of concentration camps. Still autocratic and oppressive, those regimes no longer practice systematic terror; nor do they exercise the kind of total control over every phase of social life that was the hallmark or at least the inspiration of the Stalinist and Maoist movements. Totalitarian movements, it appears, depend not only on heroic leadership and universal terror but on permanent crisis and permanent revolution, conditions impossible to sustain year after year. No government can remain indefinitely indifferent to practical economic necessities, which eventually set limits to the power of totalitarian regimes to redefine reality in accordance with ideology. According to Orwell, the party's ascendancy in Oceania rests in large part on its capacity to obliterate "external reality"; but the reality of food shortages and flagging industrial production eventually intrudes on the delirium of total power and forces a grudging acknowledgment of the real world.

Orwell himself, in the last of his highly ambivalent attempts to come to terms with the work of James Burnham, appeared to admit the likelihood that even the most despotic regimes would eventually have to compromise with reality. In

1946, Orwell reconsidered Burnham's theory of the managerial revolution the light of a second book, *The Machiavellians*, in an essay entitled "Second Thoughts on James Burnham," later reprinted as a pamphlet under the title, "James Burnham and the Managerial Revolution." In this revealing document, which criticizes Burnham for advancing many of the same ideas Orwell himself worked into *1984*, he objects, among other things, to Burnham's implication that "anything can become right or wrong if the dominant class of the moment so wills it." This of course is exactly what happens in Oceania, where "reality exists" . . . "only in the mind of the Party," as O'Brien puts it, and "whatever the Party holds to be truth is truth." In his essay on Burnham, however, Orwell rejects the idea that a ruling class can redefine reality at all." These rules, unspecified by Orwell, presumably include a minimal respect for empirical facts. Failure to observe them, Orwell argues, will sooner or later lead the Stalinist regime, as it had led Hitler, to "disaster." "The huge, invincible, everlasting slave empire of which Burnham appears to dream will not be established, or, if established, will not endure, because slavery is no longer a stable basis for human society."

The general point of this essay is that in spite of his ostensible opposition to totalitarianism, Burnham, like other intellectuals, worships power for its own sake. This is the attitude against which *1984* was intended as a warning. It is the attitude Orwell had in mind when he later wrote, in explaining the intentions behind his last novel, that "totalitarian ideas have taken root in the minds of intellectuals everywhere" and that *1984* had merely "tried to draw these ideas out to their logical consequences." In the 1946 essay on Burnham, Orwell argues that "power worship blurs political judgment" by encouraging the "belief that things will happen more quickly, completely, and catastrophically than they ever do in practice." "Burnham's writings," he complains, "are full of apocalyptic visions. Nations, governments, classes and social systems are constantly described as expanding, contracting, decaying, dissolving, toppling, crashing, crumbling, crystallising, and, in general, behaving in an unstable and melodramatic of historical change, the fact that any epoch always contains a great deal of the last epoch, is never sufficiently allowed for."

Here again, Orwell accused Burnham of the very habits of mind also exemplified in so many ways by *1984*. His novel exercises the same "hypnotic effect on the reader" that Orwell the essayist objected to in Burnham's geopolitical fantasies. It builds up the same "picture of terrifying, irresistible power." The fantasy of total power proved stronger than his critical reservations, partly, no doubt, because fictional form by its very nature leaves more than a hint of the apocalyptic style of thought Orwell correctly identified in Burnham's work but failed to recognize in his own. In the very same passage in which he questions the stability and permanence of totalitarian regimes, Orwell argues that the Stalinist government "will either democratise itself, or it will perish." Like Burnham, he ignores the possibility of an outcome less decisive and "melodramatic": an oligarchical bureaucracy neither democratic nor totalitarian, which suppresses political opposition and free speech without eradicating every vestige of private life or common sense; which responds to internal and international pressures when it has to; which draws heavily on professional expertise and therefore allows professionals a

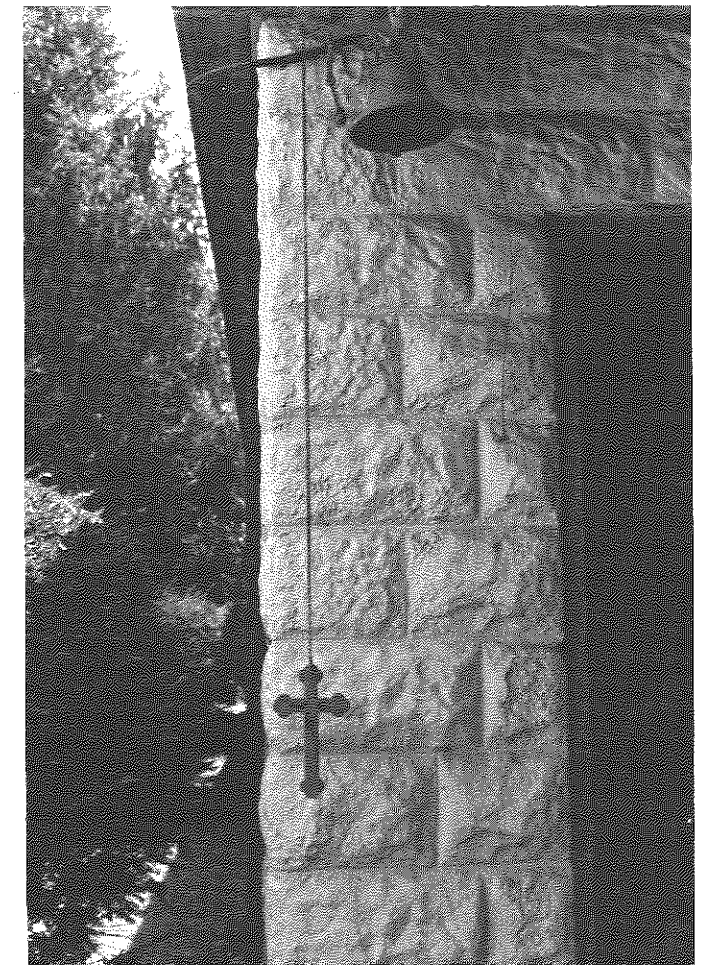
limited autonomy instead of trying to supervise every detail of their work or to abolish the very concept of scientific neutrality; and which maintains itself in power, in short, not through terror and ideological fanaticism but through its control of the political agenda. Influenced by Burnham, and also by Hillaire Belloc's much earlier book, *The Servile State*, Orwell saw totalitarianism as the successor to both capitalism and socialism, while clinging to the faint hope that democratic socialism would nevertheless prevail. In fact, the bureaucratic one-party state appears to coexist indiscriminately with either.

The ambiguities in Orwell's thought, in *1984* in particular, derive from his attempt to address two quite different issues at the same time. One set of issues concerned the emergence of large-scale economic planning, the rise of a new managerial class, and the possibility that this class, led by revolutionary intellectuals, would establish totalitarian regimes based on its monopoly over material production and over the production of knowledge as well. The other set of issues had to do with the crisis of Western culture and the tradition of Protestant individualism. Unfortunately Orwell tended to confuse the question of what was to replace capitalism with the question of what was to replace Christianity. He confused the decline of capitalism with the decline of bourgeois culture — the deeper source, I believe, of his profound misgivings about the course of history in the near future. On several different occasions, he argued that the "basic problem of our time is the decay of belief in personal immortality," or, in another formulation, that the "real problem of our time is to restore the sense of absolute right and wrong when the belief it used to rest on — that is, the belief in personal immortality — has been destroyed." In an essay written in 1940, he wrote that modern man had lost his soul without even missing it, adding that "amputation of the soul isn't just a simple surgical job, like having your appendix out. The wound has a tendency to go septic." The "real problem" of the modern world, accordingly, was how to "restore the religious attitude while accepting death as final." In *Coming Up for Air*, a novel published in 1939, Orwell suggested, in a slightly different vein, that earlier generations were sustained not so much by a belief in personal immortality as by the knowledge that "their way of life would continue." "It's easy enough to die if the things you care about are going to survive," says the protagonist of this book. But death becomes unbearable, he observes, in the face of knowledge that not just "my own particular childhood, but the civilization which I grew up in . . . is now, I suppose, just about at its last kick."

It was this line of speculation about modern culture and religion, as much as a reading of political trends, that underlay Orwell's fear that the "autonomous individual is going to be stamped out of existence," as he put it in the 1940 essay, "Inside the Whale." This idea recurs again and again in Orwell's essays and letters, sometimes in connection with an analysis of totalitarianism, sometimes in discussions of religion, literature, and the growing split between the critical culture of intellectuals and the culture of everyday common sense, still living on the borrowed capital of Protestantism, in a

"world of absolute good and evil from which the intellectuals have long since escaped." The conjunction of these three themes — totalitarianism, the decline of the autonomous individual, and the crisis of Protestant culture — suggests that totalitarianism served Orwell, at times anyway, as a shorthand term for the collapse of liberal individualism and the moral crisis of Western culture. It suggests also that *1984*, written when Orwell himself was dying of tuberculosis, derives its emotional power not from the political analysis Orwell borrowed from Burnham but from its dramatization of a world in which death has become unbearable because of the fear that future generations will take no interest in our affairs. This fear of a meaningless death reaches its climax in the brutal remark with which O'Brien destroys Winston Smith's last hope and the last shred of his resistance to the totalitarian state: "You must stop imagining that posterity will vindicate you, Winston. Posterity will never hear of you. You will be lifted clean out from the stream of history." In the immediate context, O'Brien's threat provides further proof of the party's power to rewrite history at its pleasure and to obliterate the past. In view of Orwell's persistent concern with the problem of what was to replace the Christian belief in immortality, however, we are justified in reading the passage in a somewhat different light, as a reflection on modern life in general, on a culture that undermines not only the belief in personal immortality but the vicarious immortality formerly available to those who shared a common culture that lived on after their death. Orwell's underlying theme, it appears — the theme that runs all through this later work and connects *1984* to the letters and essays leading up to it — is not so much the police state as the collapse of selfhood, not so much the externally imposed constraints that stifle selfhood as the attenuation of the inner resources that once nourished it.

Bertrand Russell predicted in his book *Marriage and Morals*, written in the twenties, that the decline of the family and the replacement of the father by the welfare state would encourage a "certain triviality in all personal relations" and "make it far more difficult to take an interest in anything after one's own death." Many other developments have contributed to the same result: the weakening of the sense of a common public life, the emergence of a therapeutic morality that takes one day at a time and seeks to avoid looking too far into the past, and the triumph of consumerism, which fills our world with disposable goods deliberately designed to be thrown away after a few weeks or months or years of use. It is above all modern consumer culture that makes it hard for us to take an interest in the future, by conveying to us at every turn the implicit message that the future will bear no resemblance to the past and by urging us, moreover, to squander our natural resources and the energy supplies without any reference to the needs of future generations. Some observers maintain, of course, that these developments have made men and women "strong enough, mature enough, awake enough, to face death without mediation, and therefore to embrace life without



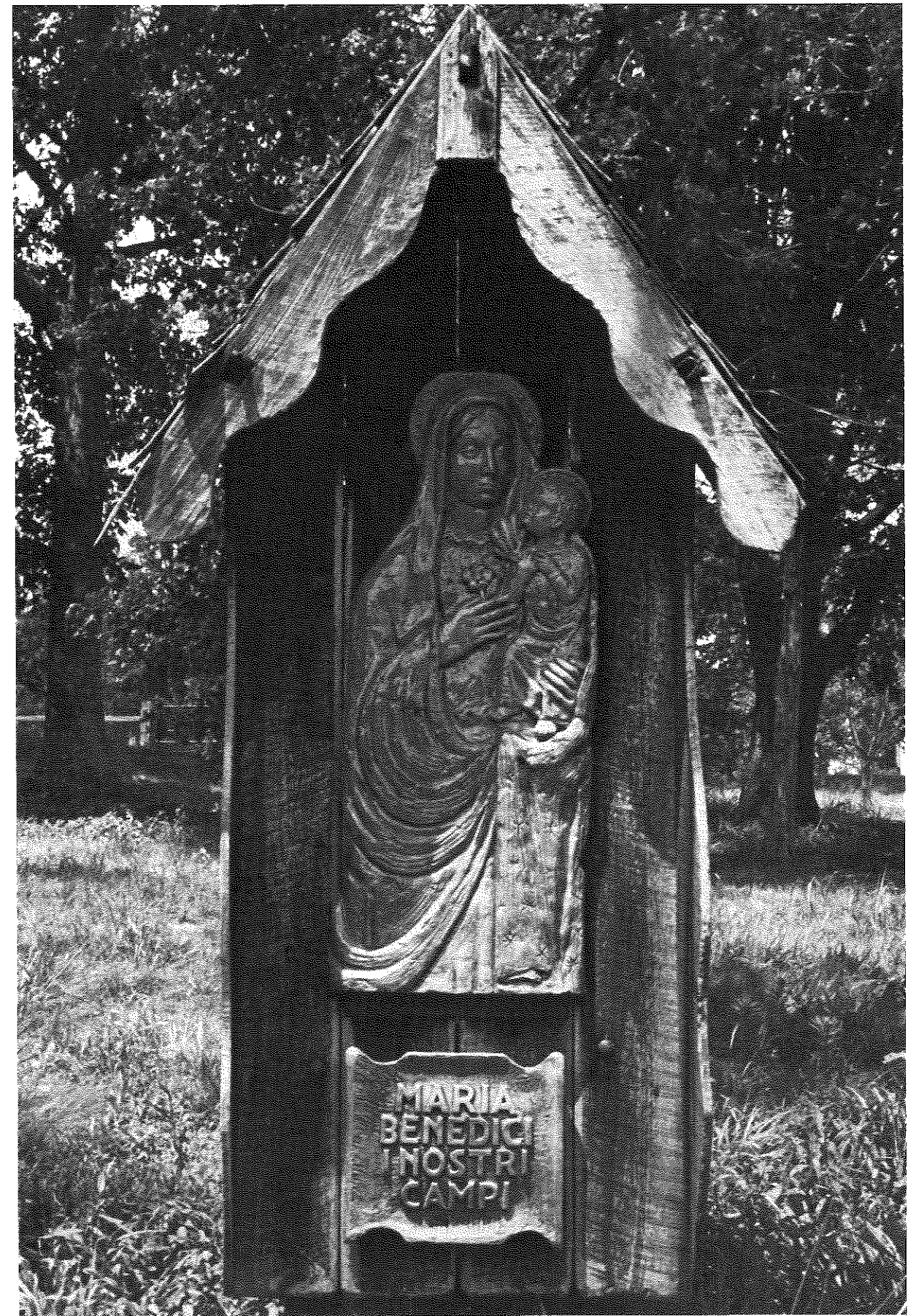
reserve." According to Terrence Des Pres, this is the lesson of the concentration camps, which have taught us the "sustaining power which life itself provides when all else has been stripped away." Others have argued more convincingly, however, that modern men and women find it more difficult than ever to confront the reality of death, hoping instead, as Lewis Mumford once put it, that "science's steady advances in hygiene and medicine might postpone further and further that unpleasant occasion." In 1940, Mumford reported a conversation with a liberal opponent of American intervention in the European war who told him that he could not support a political decision that might lead to war and thereby bring about the death of other human beings. "When I objected that the failure to make such a decision in the existing international situation would certainly lead to the less fruitful death of these same human beings six months or six years hence, he confessed that for him any extra time spared for the private enjoyment of life seemed that much gained." This man had "ceased to live in a meaningful world," Mumford concluded. "For a meaningful world is one that holds a future that extends beyond the incomplete personal life of the individual; so that a life sacrificed at the right moment is a life well spent, while a life too carefully hoarded, too ignominiously preserved, is a life utterly wasted."

We live today in a curiously insubstantial world, A world of images and abstractions in which organized expertise has replaced practical experience and images of things have become more vivid than things themselves. The changing meaning of identity, as recently explained by Philip Gleason in the *Journal of American History*, illuminates the dependence of the sense of selfhood on a solid and durable man-made environment that antedates and outlives the individual. As used in common speech, "identity" still retains its former connotation of sameness and continuity: "the sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances; the condition or fact of remaining the same person throughout the various phases of existence; continuity of personality." In the 1950's, however, the term came to be used by psychiatrists and sociologists to refer to a fluid, protean, and problematical self, "socially bestowed and socially sustained," in the words of Peter L. Berger, and defined either by the social roles an individual performs, the "reference group" to which he belongs, or, on the other hand, by the deliberate management of impressions or "presentation of self," in Erving Goffman's phrase. The psycho-social meaning of identity, which has itself passed into common usage, weakens or eliminates altogether the association between identity and "continuity of the personality." It also excludes the possibility that identity is defined largely through a person's actions and the public record of those actions. In its new meaning, the term registers the waning of the old sense of a life as a life-history or narrative — a way of understanding identity that depended on the belief in a durable public world, reassuring in its solidity, which outlasts an individual life and passes some sort of judgment on it. Note that the older meaning of identity refers both to persons and to things. Both have lost their solidity in modern society, their definiteness and continuity. Identity has become uncertain and problematical not because people no longer occupy fixed social stations — a commonplace explanation that unthinkingly incorporates the modern equation of identity and social role — but because they no longer inhabit a world that exists independently of themselves and that survives their own passing.

It is significant that two of the early theorists of totalitarianism, Arendt and Orwell himself, regarded this insubstantiality of the external world, this unreality of the future, as an important source of the crisis of Western culture. "The things of the world," Arendt wrote in *The Human Condition*, "have the function of stabilizing human life, and their objectivity lies in the fact that ... men, their everchanging nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table." Orwell's reflections on this subject revolve around the concept of common sense, to which he gives a double meaning. Common sense is the experience we have in common, and it embodies the common people's empirical knowledge of things rather than the abstractions invented by intellectuals. For Orwell and Arendt, totalitarianism represents the final triumph of ideological abstractions over common sense. Here again, however, the danger of confusing the collapse of an older sense of selfhood with totalitarianism is that it diverts our

attention from the inner history of selfhood to the external history of political systems, from the gradual erosion of individual autonomy to an apocalyptic transformation of the political order. It diverts our attention from the possibility that the sense of self is being weakened, in the West, not by the suppression of political freedom but by the inner logic of modern culture, working itself out in ways so far from melodramatic and apocalyptic that they tend to escape notice altogether. The imagery of totalitarianism hides more than it reveals. It encourages us to ask whether the welfare state shows signs of turning into a political state, when we might better ask whether political freedom any longer has meaning if it serves only to make possible the "private enjoyment of life." Philip Roth has aptly remarked of the contrast between Eastern Europe and the West, "In the West everything matters." If this puts the contrast too sharply, it still alerts us to the danger that individual autonomy, as Orwell called it somewhat misleadingly — that is, the capacity for moral judgment and self-regulation, the capacity for self-sacrifice, the willingness to accept the consequences of one's actions — can be weakened as effectively by the empty freedom of consumerism as by dictatorship and regimentation.

I do not mean to minimize the importance of political freedom or the forces that threaten it. But political freedom itself rests on a sense of selfhood that is growing more and more difficult to sustain. The conclusion prompted both by a review of the early theory of totalitarianism and by a consideration of recent cultural developments is that consumerism and the new sense of selfhood encouraged by consumerism are more pressing issues in 1984, at least in the West, than the future of political freedom. The greatest danger we face is not so much the decline or collapse of political freedom as the gradual weakening of its cultural and psychological foundations. The situation is not Orwellian in the usual sense, and a focus on 1984, the year and the novel, does very little to clarify it unless it helps to recall some of the underlying preoccupations behind the early theory of totalitarianism: the collective crossing of a hitherto unapproachable moral barrier, signified by the death camps; the decline of the guilty conscience; the collapse of a public world; the amputation of the soul. It was Orwell's insight into the slow death of the spirit, not his apocalyptic fantasy of total terror, that marked him as a prophet; and we can best commemorate him by addressing ourselves to the work of moral and spiritual renewal instead of diverting ourselves with the prospect, at once terrifying and titillating, of unlimited political power.



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