

AN ASPECT OF AMERICAN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

The subject given me is *Characteristics of the American Religious Experience*. Because I think such characteristics, as these have been concretely specified and illustrated in Professor Martin Marty's recent book (*The Righteous Empire*, [New York: Dial Press, 1971]) could be neither amplified nor further illuminated by any effort of mine, I have elected to ask, as it were, the 'previous question'. Is it possible so to examine the theater of this madly variegated experience to ascertain why only these characteristics and not others are present in virtually all the religious associations that have been formed on the North American Continent?

The occasion to undertake the reflections that are summarized in this essay was not the question as a wandering query but, as is so often the case among us, a definite teaching assignment. As follows: In the Autumn quarter of 1968 a staff-course, *The American Experience*, was introduced into the curriculum at the Divinity School of my university. The course was required of all students in the professional program, was a double-credit course (i.e., it occupied the space of two normal three hour per week courses), it involved three lectures per week and one long tutorial session—each of these small sections presided over by an advanced graduate student—and was staffed by three members of the faculty.

The genesis of the course lay in the quest of the faculty for a course which would introduce students from many backgrounds, traditions and regions, via a focused attention upon a specific body of data peculiar to American life, to what might be called the 'particularity' of the experiences of their fathers in this place. In our effort to find some order within the plenitude and variety of such experience, we began, not with texts, but with what have been, in our judgement, crucial and pervasive themes in American experience, reflection, articulation. Some of these were: Wilderness and Paradise, the Myth of Innocence, the Machine and the Garden, the Insider and the Outsider, Conflict and Consensus. These themes

having been chosen, texts—historical, political, religious, literary—were assembled under them.

Three members of the faculty, an historian, a specialist in American Studies, and a theologian were appointed as lecturers. A week was given to each theme and the procedure was as follows: on Monday the historian specified what data, events, movements in American experience validated the assumption that *Wilderness and Paradise*, for an instance, was indeed a powerful and enduring theme in the American vision and self-understanding. On Tuesday the lecturer in American studies analyzed important texts to supply both evidence that such a theme had been a crucial one, and substance to indicate the nature of our national reflection about it. The theologian who, poor fellow, could not write his lecture until his colleagues had finished theirs, had then to ask and seek to answer the question—what do the persistence of these themes, and the history of American reflection and action about them, have to say to the entire theological enterprise and to the Christian community in America *now!*—and what clarification might ensue as regards the morphology and the tasks of an American theology.

Biblical studies since Strauss, intersecting with the emergence during roughly the same period of an excruciatingly acute historical consciousness, have constituted for Christian theology a freshly stated and variously nuanced hermeneutical problem. And central to all statements of that problem is the question of how the modalities of time-understanding which characterize the biblical speech and through it all aspects of a western culture are to be reinterpreted. The ancient rubric *eschatology* stands at the center of that problem. The meaning of the term as it will be used in this essay, is as follows: eschatology is the doctrine concerned with the limits and boundaries of our living, in time and existence, toward which at every moment our whole lives tend. In this statement is recollected a central affirmation of the Scriptures that man's life, in solitude and in history, is held within the hand of God; that operating within history, and dramatically at the consummation of history, is the judging and restoring activity of history's God. There is a limit which stands not only at the end of human life as death, but which is built into the structure of human life by virtue of its crea-

turely character. All birth and development, all unfolding and enterprise, all moral vision and achievement are not only enfolded within this limit but receive their urgent character from it. Here is a "given" time, a "given" space, a "given" possibility. Within the boundaries of this "given" there are, to be sure, vast and absolutely crucial possibilities for affirmation or denial, hearing or deafness, decision or stasis—but no elaboration of these possibilities can exhaust the pressure of the eschatological.

Where, therefore, an American theologian is called upon to play the role I was assigned in the course I have described, he cannot escape localizing the problem within American experience. But when he does that, and attends to the data of that experience, he becomes aware that American religion has not been marked by somber eschatological depth. Is it possible to relate that fact with something quite peculiar to American experience?

When, at the turn of the century, Frederick Jackson Turner published his essay *The Frontier in American History*, he inaugurated an epoch in American historiography. He called into question all the previous perspectives from which the events and the patterns of American life had been presented. These perspectives were generally oriented to the European continent and hence saw the peculiar developments of American life and institutions in terms of strange, to be sure, but continuous extensions of European life. American history was colonial history, American politics was a marginal activity in European politics, American economic institutions were modifications of European institutions.¹

That this perspective was inevitable, that it did rough justice to wide areas of American life, and that for two hundred years or so after the first settlements it served to make intelligible many activities on the new continent is not to be disputed; the blunt fact of the existence of a frontier in American history for many decades has been a dominant factor in the development of American self-consciousness.² And inasmuch as any basic Christian affirmation is

¹ For discussion of this and other ideas in American historiography, see J. H. Randall and G. Haines, *Controlling Assumptions in the Practice of American Historians*, Social Science Research Council Bulletin 54, 1946, p. 25.

² One must not overlook the fact that the claim of this hypothesis to be

molded to the vital energies which work upon it in any nation or country, it ought to be possible to gain insight into the fact that classical Christian eschatology is interpreted in present American life in a peculiar way. This insight will be sought in the following enquiry.

A. THE FRONTIER AS THE ILLIMITABLE

The meaning of this designation of one aspect of the frontier can be made clear by contrast. For centuries before the white man established settlements in New England, at the mouth of the Hudson, in the Virginia Tidewater, and in the Carolinas, the living-space of European peoples had been divided among the nations. These borders, to be sure, were in rather frequent flux and large movements of people were in process. But the space was a *given!* The North Sea, the Atlantic Ocean, the Mediterranean, were unrelenting borders. And to the East, the non-European peoples, Mongols, Huns, Turks, later the Russians, constituted an effective barrier. This barrier, indeed, was often penetrated, and European literature from Marco Polo to Hakluyt shimmers with the mystery and possibility of these peoples and lands. But as regards its bearing upon the European spirit, the East did not exercise decisive force.

adequate for all American historiography has been subjected to repeated criticism. Its claim to do justice to the facts of American Church History has been brought under severe criticism, cf. S. Mead, *Religion and Culture in America, Church History*, XXII (Chicago, 1953), p. 41ff.

Mead makes the devastating point that many aspects of frontier religious life and organization were not products of the frontier situation, but that some of the most powerful of them (plans of union, circuit-rider and frontier-preacher forms of the ministry, the establishment of schools, the revolt against Calvinism, the rise of the Missionary Societies, the growth of frontier Utopias, experiments in religious communitarianism) were conceived, developed, and brought to a certain effective phase in the older tide-water states.

Roman Catholic historians and others have pointed out that the Turner thesis does not attend to the non-English settlements and their development: the French in "New France" and at the mouth of the Mississippi, the Spanish missions in the Southwest. It could indeed be claimed that general school textbook history has oversimplified the American story by its Puritan-New England focus, and has paid too little attention to the data that informs Francis Parkman's *The Jesuits in North America in the Seventeenth Century* and his *LaSalle and the Discovery of the Great West*; John Tracy Ellis's *Documents of American Catholic History*; and the many volumes of the Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents.

The situation in North America was completely and profoundly different.³ The early communities which hugged the Eastern shore lived their lives, did their work, and were subtly shaped in their thinking by the fact that what was settled was not what was available. Arching pervasively over the established situation was the knowledge that the "West" stretched out beyond like an illimitable sea. One has only to read the sermons of the early New England divines to remark how often and how eloquently this huge land, unknown in detail, but known to be there, supplied illustrations for those passages in the sermon which required pictorial language to nail down a sermonic point.

The seeming illimitability of the American land was not an isolated factor in the early American consciousness; there is reason

³ A full exposition of the theme here investigated would have to take account of the present situation in Roman Catholic historiography. That task cannot be undertaken here; and my interested but unprofessional reading in church history must qualify any impression I record. But the impression is that although there exists a large body of American Catholic historical investigation of the career of that Church in North America, this investigation has not with deliberate intention pondered that career under specifically theological categories, i.e., asked about the interaction between environment and the development of theological theories. American Roman Catholic historiography is rich in studies of missionary activity, institutional development, educational provisions; it is not so extensive in its investigation of intellectual and cultural history.

Among the works germane to the occasion of this conference are John Tracy Ellis, *Documents of American Catholic History* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1956), *American Catholicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), and *Catholicism in Colonial America* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, Inc., 1956); John H. Kennedy, *Jesuit and Savage in New France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950); Edna Kenton ed., *Black Gown and Redskins* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1956), first published as *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents, 1610-1792*; William Ingraham Kip, *The Early Jesuit Missions in North America* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1846); John A. O'Brien, *The American Martyrs* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1953); Francis Parkman, *The Jesuits in North America in the Seventeenth Century* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1898), and *LaSalle and the Discovery of the Great West*; and Reuben Gold Thwaites, *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, 73 vols. (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers Company, 1896; various volumes).

Two recent works indicate, however, that reflection of a more theological interest, and informed by the particularity of American social fact, is emerging. Cf. Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Experience: An Interpretation of the History of American Catholicism* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1967); and Dorothy Dohen, *Nationalism and American Catholicism* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967).

to venture the judgment that it was the pervasive form of that consciousness. Our literature, the clearest confessional of our national self-consciousness, is permeated through and through with the mood of the vastness of the setting of the American enterprise.

The journals of the Mathers, the Cottons, the Endicotts in New England, the travel diaries of de Crevecoeur, the novels of James Fenimore Cooper and Herman Melville, the essays and public addresses of Ralph Waldo Emerson—all of these breath an air which blows in from the open frontier. The very form of American humor, particularly in the nineteenth century, is revealed by analysis to owe its vitality to this same situation. It is broad rather than witty, obvious and ribald rather than delicate and sly. It depends for its delight, not upon the situations and ambiguities of cultivated folk in the drawing rooms of the city, but upon the exaggerations, the trickeries, the buffooneries and the fantastic human types so richly produced by the conventionless frontier. Mark Twain is America's artist of the ridiculous.

At a more sober and contemplative level one finds that American efforts to articulate the promise and hope of the young nation's role and place in history are informed by the language-shaping vastness of this illimitable land. Several instances will serve to illustrate how the breath and the sweep of the midland prairies, the terrifying distances, the huge lakes and the mighty rivers have imparted to the American dream a boldness of conception and an almost gargantuan excess of rhetoric.

About the middle of the nineteenth century Herman Melville, a New Yorker of Dutch descent, published his greatest novel. In the following passage it is not difficult to feel how the open, frontier character of the American experience is taken as a clue to a moral interpretation of man generally. It is a tribute to the power of this feeling that Melville, who, almost alone among midnineteenth century men of letters in America, pierced through the general moral optimism of the expansive spirit of the time, revealing in powerful fictional characters the ambiguities, the tensions, and the dark depths of evil and delusion—that Melville should have written these sentences. In them is the authentic note, later to come to full expression, that in the nascent American democracy was the solvent

for man's immemorial problems, the answer to his whole dream of freedom and worth:

. . . it is a thing most sorrowful, nay shocking, to expose the fall of valor in the soul. Men may seem detestable as joint stock-companies and nations; knaves, fools, and murderers there may be; men may have mean and meager faces; but man, in the ideal, is so noble and so sparkling, such a grand and glowing creature, that over any ignominious blemish in him all his fellows should run to throw their costliest robes. That immaculate manliness we feel within ourselves, so far within us, that it remains intact though all the outer character seem gone, bleeds with keenest anguish at the spectacle of a valor-ruined man. Nor can piety itself, at such a shameful sight, completely stifle her upbraidings against the permitting stars. But this dignity I treat of, is not the dignity of kings and robes, but that abounding dignity which has no robed investiture. Thou shalt see it shining in the arm that wields a pick or drives a spike, that democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates without end from God; Himself! The great God absolute! The center and circumference of all democracy! His omnipresence, our divine equality!

Several decades later another Easterner, Walt Whitman, shattered the reigning forms of poetical expression, and in a flood of tumultuous verse wrought out a voice for America's vague but deep and powerful feeling for her national character and promise. In his poetry place-names and common terms for common products of land and mine and forest are strung into melodious sequences that exercise the force of an incantation. The result is to produce out of the sheer overwhelming rhythm of names that suggest space and scope, richness and distance, the intoxication of the illimitable. That this illimitable forward-leaning vitality foresees concrete achievements and conquests that have been actualized in ways that are less good and unambiguous than Whitman expected, is nothing to the point

Land of coal and iron! land of gold! land of cotton, sugar, rice!
Land of wheat, beef, pork! land of wool and hemp! land of the apple
and the grape!
Land of the pastoral plains, the grass-fields of the world!
Land of those sweet-air'd interminable plateaus!

A second poem from Walt Whitman is instructive in this: that here the generality of the foregoing piece is given concreteness from the actual anecdotal record of the century of the winning of the West, and discloses too, how the irremediable facts of limit, end, death, are burned away in the sheer incandescence of the song of conquest and assertion.

Come my tan-faced children,
Follow well in order, get your weapons ready,
Have you your pistols? have you your sharp-edged axes?
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

Have the elder races halted!
Do they droop and end their lesson, wearied over there beyond the
seas?
We take up the task eternal and the burden and the lesson,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

All the pulses of the world,
Falling as they beat for us, with the Western movement beat,
Holding single or together, steady moving to the front, all for us.
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

They are of us, they are with us,
All for primal needed work, while the followers there in embryo wait
behind,
We are today's procession heading, we the route for travel clearing,
Pioneers, O Pioneers!⁴

It is now thirty-five years since my first extended period of study in Europe. At Heidelberg in the year 1936 there were very few American students, and these few were eagerly invited into close companionship with the German students. University courses in American literature and culture were not then, as they have since become, a common feature of continental universities. The absence of such formal studies did not, however, inhibit the eagerness with which thousands of central European students were devouring and discussing American literature. Invited to participate in one of several such informal groups at Heidelberg I was asked each night we met to read aloud from American novels certain passages which the students were drawn to with what I can only call fasci-

⁴ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York, 1931), p. 23ff.; p. 236ff.

nation. All read English, but very few could speak the language well, and none with sufficient ease to realize the resonance and movement of it.

What American life in open-space has meant to us, in contrast with European life realized in given-space—this became completely clear to me when I reflected upon the particular items from American literature I was asked to read aloud—Melville, his periods rising and falling like the ocean swell beneath which swam Moby Dick, that huge symbol of freedom both benevolent and malicious; Walt Whitman, the intoxicating, line-loosening spaciousness of his rushing verse. And finally, and in the 1930s excitedly, Thomas Wolfe, whose paragraphs about the vastness of the American land under the enormous sky at night, and the great trains plunging through the scattered villages whose few lights rushed past the cars roaring into darkness—the very headlong prose a realization of the difference between the yearning of life for satisfying order as this is sought in the numbered possibilities of an established pattern and as this is sought in the numberless and frightening boundlessness of open space.

B. THE FRONTIER MIND AND TECHNOLOGY

The role of technology in modern American life is better understood if one sees it not only as an application of scientific knowledge, but also as a way of life joyfully cultivated by a people who retain a frontier mentality long after the physical frontier has vanished. There is something particular in the joy and eagerness with which the technization of existence is exercised in America, and every sensitive European visitor remarks it. This particularity is understood when one comes to see that the spirit that conquered a huge land is a spirit continuous with that which today plays with technics like a previous generation made a game out of felling trees, shocking corn and plowing fields.

For the common man in America, the basic physical enquiries which gave birth to technology, and the philosophical ideas which attended its development, are of little concern. Technology for him is rather a stronger and a longer and a more supple arm to conquer a wilderness. His judgment of its "goodness" is pragmatic; his delight

in it is akin to sheer uncritical boyishness. For in technology and its possibility to enhance and expand the forms of life this man sees a new wilderness to conquer, new problems to solve, new frontiers to push back and be exultant over.

That simple and uncritical acclaim should surround the advance of technology in America is evidence of the spirit that has never had to come to terms with boundaries, limits, ends. When one county was settled and the best land taken up, American history records that the new waves of people pushing up from the East went through to the next county. There, when once the trees were felled, the land cleared, was an abundance of rich earth for man's taking. That land is now cut up into organized states; and most of it is settled. The farther ocean has been reached. But the promise of technology itself is seen in the American mind as a new "illimitable" that evokes from this people a response whose inward character is identical with the response of their fathers. A "new frontier" has come into view, and the excitement and the challenge of it is similarly greeted. That a triumphant technology can correct the environmental disorders to which it has so largely contributed is an assumption that has the status of a secular heresy.

C. ESCHATOLOGY, TIME, AND SPACE

In October, 1954, Professor Sidney Mead published a brief and brilliant essay entitled *The American People: Their Space, Time, and Religion*.⁵ The purpose of the essay is stated in the first paragraph: ". . . to suggest that, in the shaping of the American mind and spirit, space has thus far overshadowed time in formative significance and to suggest some of the implications of this insight . . ." The essay begins with the recollection of de Crevecoeur who, in 1872, asked the question that has not ceased to trouble all thoughtful men in this place: "What then is the American, the new man?" Crevecoeur not only saw that American man was a "new man"; he saw that what was new about him was not separable from the startling experience of space as this penetrated the immigrants from the closed and tight spaces of the old world.

⁵ *The Journal of Religion*. Vol. XXXIV, #4 (University of Chicago Press).

The formative power of the vast and seeming-illimitable space that had been available to the American man during the formative years of his nation's life can only be rightly felt when this existence-in-space is seen over against that existence-in-time which was the old life-setting of those who came to these shores. They had been, without exception, ". . . a people hemmed in, confined within the spatial boundaries set by geography and by the closely related boundaries set by tradition and custom. Within such boundaries, and impressed by the regular passing of one generation after another within the confines of familiar places, they tended to find what freedom they could for the human mind and spirit within the context of time—time as duration, as the endless flow and flux of events. . . ."

In the new world the power of the twin forces of space and time was reversed; here it was space that constituted the field of pragmatic operations, the matrix of personal and familial and vocational decisions, the very particular American voluntary organization for practical ends—so necessary for a few in the hostile and lonely environment of the frontier. The "new birth of freedom" that a later American president was to celebrate was not a "concept"; it was a reality arising out of the condition of life-in-open-space meeting earthly, personal material needs. The ". . . unconfined movement in space—while concurrently the time ties were tattered or broken by the breaking of the continuity of the regular passing of one generation after another in one place" is the fundamental motif of that entire strain in American literature which is most authentically indigenous.

From Mr. Mead's abundant documentation of this time-space reversal as formative of the American mind and spirit we can select only a little. Particularly telling is the doublet from Stephen Vincent Benet's *Western Star*. The poem images forth the piled-up occasions of crisis, the unrelenting struggle of the little communities of the edge between the forest and the sea, the pathos of death as it struck the very young and the very old—and puts into language something of the men, forbidden time-reflection, in the perilous present by the hurtling exigencies of physical fact. The poem tells of a wagon-train moving west across the high plains in winter. A

stop was made on a bitter cold day so that a small pathetic grave could be dug in the frozen ground for the burial of a little child. The doublet reads—

There is no time to grieve now, there is no time—
There is only time for labor in the cold.

Mead's essay also alludes to the cultivated man from New England, Francis Parkman, who, in order to study the Indians, undertook the terrifying privations of the Oregon Trail. Mr. Mead adjudges an entry in Parkman's Journal on a day when hunting for food he shot an antelope, to be a statement of positive parable-like significance.

When I stood by his side the antelope turned his expiring eye upward. It was like a beautiful woman's dark and bright. "Fortunate that I am in a hurry," thought I; "I might be troubled by remorse, if I had time for it!"

The American man has always been short of time! And not time only in the sense of hours to do things in, but time rather as the mordant awareness of passingness, of the somber music of man's enormous journey in historical time, of time the solvent, time the re-presenter, time the transformer, time the dark mystery, of time as that absolute matrix of mutability in which the common events of birth, unfolding, accomplishment, and death were, for our devout fathers, in some sense both enobled and made meaningful by the sonorities of the old Psalm.

Lord, Thou has been our dwelling place in all generations.
Thou turnest man to destruction and sayest, Return, ye children of men. For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night.

But the American man, short on time, has been long on space! And whoever would understand America's past in order to deepen his wisdom as he envisions her future must measure the consequences of this—that space has overshadowed time in the formation of all the ideas most cherished by the American mind and spirit.

It is useful to observe, as many have, that the general concept of freedom has, in America, been spatialized. We find it difficult

to think of the actual exercise of freedom in terms that do not suggest unhampered movement in space. Professor Mead, again, supplies the trenchant paragraph:

. . . this concept (freedom) has always had for Americans a primary dimension of space. The pioneer felt "free" so long as he felt that he could move on when he could see the smoke from a neighbor's cabin or hear the sound of his neighbor's rifle—just as his descendant, the modern city dweller, feels "free" so long as he feels that he can move away from the undesirable location or neighbors to the suburbs, to the country home in Connecticut. The trailer-house hitched to an automobile is as fitting a symbol of the American's concept of freedom today as once were the saddlebags, the rifle and the ax. The Civil War, the center of American history, can be seen as an attempt to exercise this freedom of flight from an undesirable alliance that had almost as much appeal in the North as in the South. And one evidence of the genius of the gaunt, brooding man in the White House was his seeing that, in the long run, this was an inadequate conception of freedom, and his reminder that the mystic chords of memory that bound the Union of these people together could not be stifled by the simple expedient of dividing themselves along a geographical line.

Of the authenticity of the insight represented in the preceding description of the powerful effect upon the American nation of its physical setting for now almost three hundred and fifty years, and of the importance of that insight for our common future there can, I think, be no doubt. The final and crucial task of this paper is to ask after the sufficiency of such a way of feeling, thinking, planning, acting for the future of our society, and ponder what tasks are laid upon the theologian by the continuing momentum of this "spacious" historical scene.

The terms of the issue are quite clear; they might be stated in this way: can a mentality and spirit nurtured upon the availability of open-space even envision, much less attack, the tasks that now confront us? Can the indubitable spiritual energies called forth and shaped by a frontier circumstance be informed, disciplined, reformed, and released for a future whose setting is a radically different one? Operations in new space make appropriate and effective

a manner of public order that is pragmatic; can operations in a closely-woven, ecologically-integrated, and delicate structure be rightly guided by the same cast of mind? Is the institutionalization of pragmatism an adequate public philosophy for circumstances which in a thousand large and small particulars are new? Can the spirit that won a continent sustain a national society?

The answer, in my judgment, is clearly no. But the structure of spirit which in the new situation must, in St. Paul's phrase, constitute the "spirit of our minds" must now be explicated as over against that structure of spirit which has until now been most determinative of our nation. To that we address ourselves in these last pages.

Man lives in space and time. These dimensions of his actual existence are profound spiritual symbols, and reflection upon them as they penetrate and fructify the critical intelligence bestows both cognitive sensibility and power. Just as life-in-space is at one phase of a people's life educative for the achievement of right order so, too, the reality of life-in-time is in a later phase educative to right order. The maturation of societies in space may, at a certain phase of unfolding, be so dramatic a fact that the society can ignore, set aside, or in the exuberance of its expansion repudiate the lurking and ultimately unavoidable requirements placed upon man by that other dimension of historical reality, life-in-time. Space offers options that may be realized by moving; time stands as a symbol for that historical accomplishment of order which is achieved by decisions made where one is. Space may operate to confront issues by flight; time is the symbol of that boundedness within which the less dramatic, tougher, but ultimately more human society is attempted by the discipline of the spirit, the perception of human values and decisions proper to such values. The new time-consciousness makes demands of us that are in clear opposition to the popularly celebrated momentum of our history—a less aggressive notion of maturity, a tenderer and more complex notion of order, a more intellectual concept of discipline, and ecologically imbedded idea of choice.

The spirit of the man who looks out upon the future in space, and the spirit of the man who looks inward upon the issues of right order for human life in space and time—this difference is too eloquent for abstraction. Contrast with Walt Whitman's space-singing

verse, to which I alluded a few moments ago, another American song of a generation later.

The low sandy beach and the thin scrub pine,
The wide reach of a bay and the long sky line,—
O, I am far from home

The salt, salt smell of the thick sea-air,
And the smooth round stones that the ebb-tides wear,—
When will the good ship come?

The wretched stumps all charred and burned,
And the deep soft rut where the cartwheel turned,—
Why is the world so old?

The lapping wave and the broad gray sky.
Where the cawing crows and the slow gulls fly.—
Where are the dead untold?

The thin slant willows by the flooded bog,
The huge stranded hulk and the floating log,—
Sorrow with life began!

And among the dark pines, and along the flat shore,
O the wind, and the wind, forevermore,—
What will become of man?⁶

The American epic has come, such a contrast would powerfully suggest, to a crisis in the very spirit of our minds. We have, while solving some problems, ignored others. We have fashioned a society and an industrial order at a cost, and the bill is due and payable. The magnificence of our endowment has been cleverly used and appallingly abused. The accumulated garbage of the achievement has befouled the air, polluted the water, scarred the land, besmirched the beautiful, clogged and confused our living space, so managed all human placement and means of movement as to convenience us as consumers and insult us as persons.

The character of a people's life-experience in a particular place profoundly influences their permeability to the eschatological reality, proclaimed by biblical faith and catholic tradition, that life in historical time has problems that cannot be confronted and promises that cannot be fulfilled by sheer movement in space. And precisely

⁶ George Santayana, *Poems*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923).

that is the innermost content of this moment's mood in our national life. We are puzzled, bewildered, and annoyed by new requirements for which old reactions are useless. The problems of the city are not soluble by flight; the problem of poverty is apparently not soluble in human terms within the pattern of an economic system whose very successes have become deepeningly unjust, the problem of education is not soluble by present provisions that do not recognize the damage done to human beings by past facts of deprivation. What is tragic and frightening about this moment is that its enormous possibility for a better, more humane, richer, fuller-dimensional future for American life is most often interpreted in negative terms. A riot fired by intolerable conditions that persist by sheer stasis when wealth is available to correct them is interpreted simply as a breakdown of law and order! It is that; but the human breakdown is deeper and holier; it is a cry whose substance is older than law and whose passion is for order congruent with human need.

This essay is a kind of modest tribute to the late Reinhold Niebuhr. His intellectual style was formed and his data gathered before Bultmann summarized and applied to theological foundations the long story of the Christ-deed as an eschatological redemption; before Heidegger, Moltmann and Metz brought to the reality of hope and to the concept of being the fresh time-modalities from which they cannot hereafter be diverted. But to an acuteness of perception that anticipated these works, and a sophistication about the problems of the ethical within the realm of public order that has no equal in American theology, he fused a way of witnessing to the power of the reality of grace, given and received within historical actuality.

With steady clarity and force he spoke of the grace of God as illuminating both the demonic forms that pride takes in a nation's spirit, and the eschatological character of all human efforts which, when acknowledged, beget an understanding of justice and order that is more appropriate to the historical dynamism of the human than traditional natural law ethics afford. To the formulation of a theology of *grace and order*, precisely in a time when the reigning law and order mentality is disclosing both the limits of its perceptual acuity and its practical effectiveness, American theological

energies must be systematically devoted. There are evidences that the events of the moment are readying the national mind for a belated encounter with what an earlier and simpler generation called ". . . the promise and hope of American life." The realities of limit and boundary, the ambiguity of all historical achievement within the world as-nature, the spirit-educative forces that operate when one cannot move horizontally in space but must come to terms with life where one is and must remain—these forces have been a-gathering, and amidst these American theology must find its particular task.

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