

A RESPONSE TO "AMERICAN YOUTH AND THE PROBLEM OF GOD"

The ground rules for this occasion are fairly clear. Michael Novak has given his paper, and we are about to discuss it. Indeed, I can see a certain eagerness to be at it, written on the faces of many of you. And you shall all have your chances, eventually. Meanwhile, as a sort of intermission, I am a reactor, listed as such and given ten minutes while we rearrange our thoughts and gather our questions.

But how does one react to a paper such as this? Does one try to pick it apart, bit by bit, in good old linear style, checking its arithmetic, redoing its sums, thereby calculating gains and losses? Does one simply accept it as an up-to-the-minute, on-the-spot, in-depth report on the state of affairs, public and private, among American youth? Is one, in other words, to react properly by exhibiting the feats and flaws of its arguments, or by testing the accuracy of its descriptions? Perhaps the choice is inappropriate, for the paper seems itself to be a tract or evangelistic homily, proffering some kind of gospel to our situation, with lines for fresh converts forming to the left!

Since the paper itself is more a testimony than an argument or description, permit me a few words of testimony too. When I first read this paper, my initial reaction was one of dazzled appreciation. Michael Novak has an uncommon way with words and images, a sure instinct for the evocative, and he moves easily and helpfully through so many regions of human experience and concern. In a word, he is usually so right. I say my first reaction was one of appreciation. To be perfectly candid, it was one of downright envy. Not mortal envy, to be sure, but envy nonetheless. Again and again I found myself wishing I had thought and written of this or that.

My second reaction, I must admit, was to ask myself why I hadn't. Lack of vision or intelligence, perhaps, limited horizons or too many committee meetings, some other excuses, or all sorts of other evasions of the obvious. Michael Novak is more gifted, yes, and more disciplined too. He is so sure and busy a master of his

craft that a short two years have witnessed the publication of *A Theology for Radical Politics*; *The Experience of Nothingness*; *Politics: Realism and Imagination*; and *Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove*. All four books are worth reading, by the way, and the paper we have just heard is a fitting extension of the inimitable Novakian platform. There are planks from Bernard Lonergan, Paul Tillich, and Reinhold Niebuhr, with fresh supports from Robert Bellah, Peter Berger, and Thomas Luckmann.

Let me speak a moment of Reinhold Niebuhr, since his death was so recent, since Michael Novak wrote so moving a tribute to him recently in *The New York Times*, and since so much of this paper is so close to Niebuhr's own considerable interests. Probably more than anyone else in our century, Reinhold Niebuhr espoused and practiced political theology. He offered living rationale for Christians in politics and for politics in Christians. Though love for God and neighbor were never simple possibilities, they were the distinct but ultimately inseparable demands of the Gospel. Niebuhr's fundamental Christian apologetic was a realistic activism, which rather persistently refused to be stymied and immobilized by moral perplexities or to be catapulted by and into some vague and idolatrous utopianism. He had little good to say of extremists, whether revolutionary or reactionary, of left or right, in piety or in politics. Yet his was not a straight middle course, calmly chosen as the shortest way of faithfulness. He tacked back and forth against the winds, discerning the signs of the times. He was a prophet, trying to speak the word of the Lord, sometimes as judgment and sometimes as mercy, but always addressed to the situation as he discerned it.

Now, after the excursus on Reinhold Niebuhr, I am in a position to share my third and basic reaction to Michael Novak's paper. My problem is really with the first part, where he seems to offer a depiction of the modern American mood. Frankly, I do not know what to make of his analysis. What is he really telling us about contemporary American youth? The signals seem mixed. Take four of Novak's statements, and try to weave them together somehow. He says, "Thus they scarcely know a world in which wisdom is wrested from pain, a world of crucifixion and redemption, a world of profound tragedy." He says, "The consequence is a vast internal empti-

ness. There is no home." And he says, "Abyss calls out to abyss." Yet he also says, "The experiences in which Christianity might take root do not occur. The soil is too thin." Now I confess bewilderment, even after making allowances for rhetorical exuberance. How can abyss call out to abyss in a superficial flatland?

My question, then, is this: Do youth today know their own lives to be relatively satisfying, plagued only by the perennial problems of maturation, identity, sexuality, vocation; are they somehow pathetically torn between some vision of life and its realities, sensitive to hypocrisy yet ready for achievements; or has genuine cultural tragedy overtaken them? More sharply, do contemporary American youth—whatever such a journalistic generalization means—sense human abundance or human abyss as their basic climate? What may be at stake in the answer, obviously, is whether the first word to them should be crucifixion or resurrection, law or gospel, judgment or mercy! Sooner or later some theological *decisions* must be made about the human situation, the Christian message for it, and the right starting point.

Towards the end of his paper, Michael Novak hints that the basic message for our time concerns what he calls "communion." Surely this is helpful, for it moves him beyond the purely political realm, where we all run the danger of "Nixonizing" man. But is reconciliation enough? Perhaps it too, like liberation, is only enabling. For the alienated to be reconciled, for humans to recognize brothers and sisters, offers a fresh possibility of new life together. Reconciliation alone, however, like politics, does not exhaust life's dimensions nor make its horizons infinite.

Let me return to Reinhold Niebuhr. He tried, in his pastorate in Detroit and after, to convert the pious from philanthropy to justice, from personal acts of charity to responsible political action. All the while, he took the piety—with its joys and commitments, worship and devotions—for granted. As I try to discern the signs of the times, it is no longer clear that piety can be taken for granted. Yet I am firmly convinced that authentic humanity always must have an ecstatic dimension. And no reading of human life is finally human even unless it gives some account of the ever mysterious and intricate relations of grace, gratitude, gladness, and generosity which

Christians find focused and conjoined in the Eucharist. And this, surely, we dare no longer take for granted.

All of my reactions come together in a methodological footnote. Michael Novak's paper is titled: "American Youth and the Problem of God: A Theological Reflection." The very title suggests Paul Tillich's method of correlation of message and situation. Correlation works properly from situation to message and from message to situation. It is not clear to me in what way and how far Michael Novak has allowed the Christian message enacted in the Eucharist to illumine the present human situation. Or perhaps I ask too much?

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