

THE SECTARIAN TEMPTATION: REFLECTIONS ON THEOLOGY, THE CHURCH AND THE UNIVERSITY

I shall state in summary form the thesis of this lecture. It is very tempting in our cultural era to isolate Christian theology and ethics from critical external points of view in order to maintain the uniqueness or historic identity of Christianity. I call this a sectarian temptation, not because it is always associated with classic Anabaptist ecclesiologies, though in part it is, but because the separation of theology from other ways of construing the world in the culture is somewhat similar to the sharp separation of the Christian community from the world that has always characterized sectarianism.

In contemporary theology we have very sophisticated defenses of such a separation. I shall note and explain some of them all too briefly. The effect is that theology becomes a descriptive rather than normative discipline, and ethics becomes fidelity to the ethos of a particular historic community rather than participation in the patterns and processes of interdependence of life.

I shall then compare my account of contemporary proposals with what, to me, are better defended forms of 'confessional' theology in the recent past to show where I think a critical difference lies in contemporary proposals.

Next I shall argue that assumptions underlying new sectarianism in theology are untenable sociologically, philosophically, and theologically. Finally I shall briefly state what readers of my recent work already know, namely what I believe is necessary in theology and ethics, and the risks that are involved.

With this summary of the lecture in mind, I shall now proceed to develop my analysis and argument more fully, regretting that within the time constraints of one lecture it cannot be done with full adequacy.

1.

Christianity is a beleaguered religion. In the secularization of Western culture we have many alternative interpretations or construals of how things really and ultimately are—that is, functional equivalents to theology. We have, even in the West, a variety of moralities many of which are defended by modern ways of interpreting the nature of persons and the nature of morality itself. On the planet at large, as well as within Western countries, historic religious alternatives are practiced by vast numbers of people and new forms of religious life (or secular equivalents to religious life) appear. Religious pluralism is an inexorable fact. In this situation every *aggiornamento* in the Christian community poses threats to its historic uniqueness and identity, and every such move stimulates a conservative re-

action. Pastors engaged in care of their parishioners are informed by theories of psychotherapy and begin to wonder what distinguishes them as Christians from their competitors down the street. Moralists become engaged in practical problems and social policy questions and wonder whether they are being faithful to their Christian commitments. Theologians take account of the learning provided by various nontheological disciplines in the university and are criticized for too much revisionism in their writings. Some lay persons feel that only a dogmatic preservation of "the old time religion" they learned as children provides an authentic basis for their beliefs and lives.

It is understandably tempting, if this brief description is somewhat accurate, to seek a position, theologically and ethically, that at least enables Christians to assert, "Here I stand, I can do no other." To entertain some revision in the received tradition is a threat psychologically to many individuals and sociologically to the community. To counter this threat some historic point gets frozen; it becomes the basis for contemporary faith and life. To waiver from it is a threat. The line between true believers and others becomes a gulf of some depth, no matter how few are the true believers and how many find Christianity to be meaningless if not archaic. Reasons for believing are given, but tend to exclude what was classically the apologetic task of theology and ethics, that is, showing reasons for the plausibility of belief on grounds other than those drawn from within the historic tradition itself. Christian beliefs become subjectively meaningful, but their *truth* is not challenged.

Even secular persons who are cultural conservatives, worried about the drifts that occur in traditional values, speak respectfully only of some historically past form of religion. Vatican II is demeaned because a conservative cultural tradition is weakened; Orthodox Judaism is respected more than Reform Judaism because the reform compromises the marks of identity of a conservative force in culture. (A distinguished colleague of mine at the University of Chicago who was confirmed in a Lutheran Church in Germany does not darken a church door, but he is sure that any alteration in the use of Luther's Catechism is to be ridiculed.)

Sectarianism in theology and ethics becomes a seductive temptation. Religiously and theologically it provides Christians with a clear distinctiveness from others in beliefs; morally it provides distinctiveness in behavior. It ensures a clear identity which frees persons from ambiguity and uncertainty, but it isolates Christianity from taking seriously the wider world of science and culture and limits the participation of Christians in the ambiguities of moral and social life in the patterns of interdependence in the world.

Ironically, it seduces persons whose ecclesiologies were historically defined in part against sectarians. I shall later in this lecture comment on the very influential work in Christian ethics by Stanley Hauerwas; an ideal type of sectarian Christian ethics illumines much of what he writes. At the meetings of the British Society for the Study of Christian Ethics in September last, I found enthusiasm for his work from theologians from the Church of Scotland, the Church of England, and the Roman Catholic Church. I asked that some thought be given to possible incongruities between the ecclesiology that is necessary for the sectarian ethics and the ecclesiologies of these churches. I asked that some thought be given to the

tension between the adherence of these churches to classic creeds on the Incarnation and the Trinity and the very particularistic historicist portrayal of Jesus in Hauerwas. A few days later at the conference on Reinhold Niebuhr at Kings College, London, I received an answer from a Scottish theologian. The sectarian ethic of discipleship is attractive because it made clear a historic confessional basis on which Christian morality could be distinguished from the culture, and how Christians could stand prophetically as Christians on matters of nuclear armaments and the like. Not every view that I put under a fairly large umbrella of the sectarian temptation becomes pacifist in its ethics, but my hypothesis is that assertive theological and moral confessionalism is a temptation offered in many forms.

2.

In contemporary theology we are offered some very sophisticated defenses for a sharp separation between Christian theology and ethics and their secular alternatives. Purely descriptive sectarian theology, on no matter what philosophical or institutional auspices, becomes isolated from the critical currents of the culture which might well call for a restatement and different apologetic defense of Christian theology. In my terms, purely descriptive theology becomes sectarian theology, isolated from other scientific endeavors which can rightly be seen to have implications for it.

One philosophical position that legitimates an isolation of theology has been espoused in Sweden by Anders Nygren and is espoused in the U.S. and Britain by writers whom the philosopher Kai Nielsen calls "Wittgensteinian fideists." D. Z. Phillips in England and Paul Holmer in the United States, in different ways, work from the same position. My reading of this position is as follows. There are various language games in culture: scientific, religious, aesthetic and moral. Among these it is clear that the language of science and the language of religion (including theology) are totally incommensurable. The language of religion is therefore exempt from critical assessment from any scientific perspective; it is free from criticism from all perspectives other than its own. The kind of theology that this sustains, Holmer writes, "seems by definition to be radically expressive, personalistic, confessional, illogical, and disorderly." Proper theological language "is everywhere permeated by an overpowering religious passion."¹ Theology then becomes incorrigible. "The Teachings do not have to change at all, for they are a kind of constant stretching through the ages."² I take it that one either has the correct religious passions or does not have them, and if one has correct ones "expressive, personalistic, confessional, illogical and disorderly" language is appropriate. Holmer stresses as does George Lindbeck (to whom I shall come shortly) that to become religious is to learn a language, and to learn to use that language properly. The incommensurability of scientific and religious language means that the same person and communities will have two very different ways of construing the reality of life in the world side by side. From this perspective of the division of languages one has no bearing upon the other. Theology and the morality of the

¹Paul Holmer, *The Grammar of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 63.

²*Ibid.*, p. 29.

Christian community necessarily become what I have called sectarian.

George Lindbeck has published very recently a book called *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post-Liberal Age*. I quote the final sentence: "Only in some younger theologians does one see the beginnings of a desire to renew in a posttraditional and postliberal mode the ancient practice of *absorbing the universe into the biblical world*. May their tribe increase."³ The basis for the argument that sustains this hope is in some respects similar to his colleague Holmer's. Using the work of the cultural anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, Lindbeck defends what he calls "a cultural-linguistic" view of theology. "Religions are seen as comprehensive interpretive schemes, usually embodied in myths or narratives and heavily ritualized, which structure human experience and understanding of self and world."⁴ "Stated more technically, a religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought."⁵ "Like a culture or language, it is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals."⁵ "One learns how to feel, act, and think *in conformity with a religious tradition*."⁶ The task of doctrine, then, is to maintain a distinctive language or culture, and to socialize persons (perhaps in an almost behavioristic psychological sense) into a particular form of life. It is not to carry on an interaction with other ways of viewing the world with any openness to what these other ways might require as alterations of the religion's own way of construing the world. The "Biblical mode" is not to be tampered with; rather one is to absorb "the universe into the Biblical world." The truth claims of theology are ignored, except insofar as they are *subjectively true* for persons socialized into the Christian culture and language.

It is difficult to see how one can make any critique of the tradition, internal or external. Interestingly, I think Lindbeck does not give us a powerful doctrine of the revelation of God in the Scriptures; one is left with the impression that the task of doctrine is to maintain an aspect of culture called Christianity. This, in my terms, becomes sectarian, and also defensive. Doctrine becomes ideology. It isolates theology from any correction by other modes of construing reality. Like Holmer, Lindbeck says that "Theology should therefore resist the clamor of the religiously interested public for what is currently fashionable and immediately intelligible. It should instead prepare for a future when continuing dechristianization will make greater Christian authenticity communally possible."⁷ I agree that theology ought not to succumb to the immediately fashionable, but am alarmed by the denigration of the intelligible. It seems that the future of Christianity lies, for Lindbeck, in being a cognitively dissonant sectarian movement; its identity and authenticity demand this.

³George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Post-Liberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), p. 135. Italics added.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 35. Emphasis added.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 134.

Scholars in the sociology of knowledge have contributed to what I harshly call a kind of sectarian tribalism in Christian theology and ethics. Their intentions, I take it, are descriptive and analytical; they attempt to show how the "social location" of scholars affects the ways in which they interpret reality. *The Social Construction of Reality* by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman popularized and generalized the work of persons like Karl Mannheim and Robert Merton, and became important for theologians. Insofar as sociology of knowledge is a descriptive and analytical discipline its findings can be read as quite critical of knowledge claims made in any field of investigation, theology, sociology, or even the natural sciences. They are all socially relative. What is ironic to me is the following: rather than taking such interpretations as a challenge to the generality of truth claims in theology, as warnings about the limitations of such claims, and therefore as a matter for intellectual anxiety, some theologians accept these views as a basis for doing normative theology. If theology is the result of a social construction grounded in a historically relative community, then (it seems to me) many theologians say, "So be it." Proceed with confidence that the Christian community is a cultural linguistic community and, to repeat a counsel of Lindbeck's, absorb the universe into the biblical world. Historical relativism, rather than being something to worry about, to attempt to qualify, becomes a positive basis for virtually denying any corrigibility of theology on the part of other ways of construing the world. Theology becomes not concerned with its object, God, but rather with the perpetuation of an ideology. A critical scholarly investigation, sociology of knowledge, becomes a backing or warrant for sectarianism in theology.

Hermeneutics is another contributor to the possibility of sectarianism in theology. My reading, which is not thorough, of contemporary proposals is that the term is now used not only with texts, but also for the interpretation of experience or any aspect of reality. I am uncomfortable with this expansion of the use of the term. Here I confine myself to the ways in which hermeneutics can be used to reinforce sectarian tendencies in theology and ethics. The theories I know something about are quite formal; they are applicable to any sort of texts: biblical, theological, literary, and so forth. The possibility of sectarianism comes in the choice of the text to be interpreted; that is, one can have rigorous principles for interpreting a text without asking whether the text, for example, in theology, refers to anything beyond itself. My point is that if theology asks first the question of the authority or truth value of a text for theology, it has to make that judgment on other grounds than hermeneutical theory. If it simply adopts a text, even the Bible, without addressing what justifies the text as worthy of interpretation, the interpretation is open to sectarianism. Hermeneutics can become a method for purely descriptive theology, making a fideism. The Bible can become the only text for the life of the Church, and the question of its authority and limits of authority for theology can be bypassed. Theological hermeneutics is like Proteus; its specific outcomes take different forms depending upon what text and who is engaged in the task of interpretation. This charge is not equally applicable to all hermeneutics in theology; my colleague David Tracy in *The Analogical Imagination* makes an argument for what constitutes what he calls a "classic" text based on human experience and the Christian tradition. His notion rules out some texts as theologically relevant although I find his choices of what to include in the modern period to be a bit quix-

otic. My point again is this: the acceptance of a text, even the Bible, as that which is to be interpreted, can constrict the task of theology so that it avoids critical interaction with other "texts," that, is other ways of interpreting how things really and ultimately are.

It is for reasons like this that I think what is called "narrative theology," something Lindbeck and many others applaud, is also in the end sectarian theology. Stanley Hauerwas, whose impact in Christian ethics in North America and the United Kingdom is considerable, is an example of this theology as it is expressed in ethics. The general shape of his work is this: we grow up in communities in which we share the narratives, the stories of the community. This, I would agree, is partially true in a descriptive sense. The narratives and our participating in the community, in his case the "Church" (very abstractly), give shape to our characters. Our characters are expressed in our deeds and actions. Further, the narratives of the community give shape to the way in which we interpret life in the world. So far this is a description. A turn to the normative takes place. Since we belong to the Christian community its narratives *ought* to shape the lives of its members. In Hauerwas's case, for example, this means that Christian morality is not based on a concern to be responsible participants in the ambiguities of public choices. It is rather based on its fidelity of the biblical narratives, and particularly to the gospel narratives. Thus the principal criterion for judging Christian behavior is its conformity to the stories of Jesus.⁸ For Hauerwas this means, for example, that Christian morality must be pacifist because he reads the gospel narratives as pacifist. In this example, we have wedded a way of doing theology—narratives—to an ecclesiology—classically sectarian—and to an ethic which is also classically sectarian.

Among the things that get omitted are the doctrine of creation as in any way a basis for ethics. And if creation is important in theology and ethics contemporary ways of knowing nature are important. Fidelity to the narratives becomes virtually self-justifying in the sectarian temptation and both theology and ethics become incorrigible by anything outside of the community itself.

3.

Now I want to make some sketchy comparisons between what I judge to be sectarian tendencies and some theology of the recent past that was often called "confessional," and thus by implication also possibly sectarian in tendency. I must be brief, and cannot document my comparisons here. The main point is this: the confessional theologies of Barth and the Niebuhr brothers in America were given strong *theological* justifications for being confessional. I do not find those kinds of justification as strongly in some current writings.

One justification, that for Barth's theology, was a strong and well-defended view of Scripture as the Word of God, of the divine authorization of the covenant and the community given in the Bible, and of Christ as the revelation of the God

⁸Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983). My generalization is drawn from the argument of this book and other of his writings.

who is for man. The theology had strong and widespread implications for ethics. Of course, Barth shared this view of the Word of God with Luther and Calvin and many other theologians. My impression is that the "sectarian" theologies currently promulgated do not back their claims with such a doctrine of biblical revelation. Lindbeck, for example, does not argue (though he may believe it—I do not know) that the cultural-linguistic community that bears the Christian doctrinal language was an especially chosen community by God through whose cultural-linguistic system God makes himself known to humankind. A powerful defense of biblical revelation could provide a backing for such theological proposals that I would find respectable even if I did not fully agree with it. Without such a backing theology seems to become the task of preservation of a tradition for the sake of preserving a tradition.

Whether the Niebuhr brothers were "confessional," or in what sense, is a matter that can be discussed. They certainly were more biblical theologians than they were speculative philosophical theologians. Each in a different way justified his use of the biblical themes on the basis of what they revealed about human life and the conditions of human life. Reinhold Niebuhr, for example, over and over argues that what he calls myths from the biblical material had extraordinary revelatory power—revealing the truth about life itself in the human community. There was a dialectic in his thought between biblical materials and human experience; the biblical materials, for example, the account of the fall, illumined the reality of human experience and the reality in turn confirmed the truth of the myth or the doctrine. Put crudely, the biblical material was extraordinarily useful because of what it helped to disclose about the human situation—a basis for hope, a need for mercy, and a wariness of human corruption.

H. Richard Niebuhr, in his classic little book *The Meaning of Revelation* is one of the American sources for so-called narrative theology. But the biblical material for him was worthy of being called revelation because of the way in which it could make sense of the meaning of human life and provide an interpretation of the world in which we live in the light of its stories and its articulated beliefs that was confirmed in part by experience. What was known in a historically relative way was God, and thus ethics became the task of interpreting God's actions in the world—not the preservation of an ethos or fidelity to tradition. Theology was not self-justifying, but its truth and value was, as with his brother, confirmed in human experience.

Perhaps the disclosive power of the particular historical material, the fact that it was justified by its fruits, appears to some contemporaries to be moving away from a properly confessional stance; it appears to be apologetic. This is certainly the case with Stanley Hauerwas, who has argued that any effort to move beyond the particularistic historical tradition (as defined, in the end by him) either to justify it or to criticize and possibly alter it, is a move to what he calls "universalism." But apart from either a powerfully defended doctrine of revelation in the Bible and its accounts, as the particular history in which God chose to reveal himself, or apart from some confirmation of the revelatory power of the biblical material in human experience and what it discloses about life in the world, sectarian theologies become defensive efforts to sustain the historical identity of the Christian tradition virtually for its own sake. Ironically the sectarian position ends up

not doing what it intends, namely, provide a critical religious vision of reality that can aggressively interact with other ways of construing the world. The marginalization of Christian faith is accepted and even praised; other confessional positions would hardly affirm this.

4.

In this section of the lecture I will indicate what I think are sociological, philosophical, and theological assumptions made by the new sectarians, and why I think these assumptions are incorrect.

Theologians who succumb to the sectarian temptation assume, *sociologically*, that the Church or the Christian community is socially and culturally isolable from the wider society and culture of which it is a part. They assume that there is, or can be, a kind of Christian tribe living in a kind of ghetto whose members are (or can be) shaped in their inner dispositions, their religious passions and their moral outlooks almost exclusively by the biblical or Christian language or narratives.

This assumption has always been false in the history of Christianity. Theology was shaped by the Hellenistic culture of the early Church; if the primitive Christian community had found its cultural home in India its theology and ethics would have been affected by Hinduism and Buddhism, and its history would have become very different from what it is. If Lindbeck's counsel to absorb the universe into the Biblical world is taken seriously, it perhaps follows earlier views of absorbing ideas of the universe into Christian thought—Platonic, Aristotelian, Kantian. But we live in a time when culture provides a different view of the universe, and just as previous views could not be absorbed without tension (if not contradiction) so contemporary ones cannot be absorbed without some possible revision of the "Biblical world."

Theologians or laity, people belonging to the churches and people educated in universities (or even people who read the science sections of the newspapers or watch television), are exposed to and share in alternative ways of construing the world and the place of human life in it—alternatives to the biblical narratives. Indeed, it is clear that these alternatives provide for many people a more adequate way of construing life, backed by theories and evidences which are strongly defended. And theologians and church people do find incongruities between certain historic claims of the Church and contemporary understandings.

I illustrate with an anecdote. Several years ago I was asked to meet with a denominational group that was writing a statement on "Death and Dying." The first part of the statement was on "Biblical background and basis." I noted that the section ignored a Biblical view that death was caused by the sin of Adam and Eve. I was told that it was not clear from the Bible whether that death was physical, or whether it was spiritual. I cited historic theologians, including Luther, who thought it was physical. Then I was told that the whole notion would have to be demythologized in the light of modern knowledge. I suggested that this group had two alternatives; either to say honestly that it no longer believed the tradition or try to demythologize the tradition so the laity would understand why they engage in such work. My point is this: In modern culture few persons with average education any

longer believe that biological death is caused by the sins of Adam and Eve, including few who write theology or participate in the Church. A persuasive alternative way of explaining why we die exists. Neither theologians nor people in the churches can avoid it. The tradition, on this point, simply has to be revised because Christian theology and Christian churches are informed by the culture of which they are parts.

Sectarians might admit that the Christian community does not live in a cultural ghetto, but go on to propose that there are double, triple, or quadruple truths which are incommensurable with each other. Christians live in separable communities each with its own language. This seems to me to create problems of moral and intellectual integrity for Christians; they would have to interpret and explain the same events in different ways as they left the doors of the Church and went home to read the newspapers, the scientific journals, or watch television. Theologically Christianity becomes a modern and trivial form of gnosticism.

Sectarian tendencies in theology falsely assume that a cultural-linguistic community with a particular history and set of narratives is, can be, or ought to be isolated from the society and culture of which it is a part. Theologians in universities who succumb to the temptation have no right to accuse their colleagues in other fields of being excessively specialized, in-bred, and dogmatic if their own work is not open to correction and rethinking in the light of other disciplines which investigate life (life which is also construed theologically) from other perspectives. The sociological assumption of sectarian theology is at least weak if not false; to suppose that in our time the Christian community could become a tribal culture isolated from others is certainly false. Any normative proposals for theology that fail to address the weakness of errors of the sociological assumption are bound for frustration and eventual failure. Indeed, because of the power that other institutions in society and culture have to furnish symbols and constructs that interpret the same reality that Christian faith and theology does, the parish and congregational life of churches necessarily has to take these matters into account as it seeks to educate and form persons in Christian faith and life.

The sociological assumption also breaks on the rocks of the fact that Christians do (and ought to) participate in their professions, their political communities and other aspects of the social order. Their moral lives are not confined to some Christian community; they take place where choices have to be made that are not only moral but economic, political, medical, and so forth. If the test of the morality of Christians becomes its conformity to some version of the imitation of Christ, or some fidelity to the meaning of Biblical narratives, either Christians are put into positions of intense inner conflict or they must withdraw from participation in any structures which would presumably compromise their fidelity to Jesus. Again, this is not a novel problem in the history of Christianity; it is, however, intensified if theologically sectarian ethics demand withdrawal from participation in controverted moral and political situations during a cultural period when the destiny of life in the world is determined by secular centers of power. While the Anabaptist vision of Christian morality can be seductively appealing because it provides clear lines of distinction between Christ and culture, Church and world, it can also lead to isolation of Christians from participation in critical ambiguous choices in professional and public life. Even descriptively the sociological assumption of this

is false. Christians, whether they choose to or not, are members of, and make choices in, other social communities.

The *philosophical* assumptions made by sectarian theologies are no doubt different for different authors. My remarks on this are general, but I believe pertain rather widely. For some authors, I think it is assumed that the ways of knowing religiously and theologically are radically distinct from other ways of knowing. No doubt there *are* differences; for example, religious knowing quite properly assumes a condition of piety if not faith, a readiness to move from that which is rationally established to acknowledgment of the divine reality. The logic of religious discourse is not the same as the logic of scientific discourse. But some sectarian theologies, insofar as they insist upon the view that Christianity is a separate cultural linguistic enterprise, and even more when they insist that the intent of this enterprise is to stimulate and shape subjective attitudes, isolate religious knowing from any effects of other ways of knowing. It would seem to stress excessively the distinctions between faith as subjective assent to positively given "truths" on the one hand and rational activity which is open to questions of the adequacy of the truths assented to on the other. To correct this assumption is not to claim that, for example, scientific ways of knowing can replace religious ways, or that there is an imperialism of science over theology and other areas of knowledge. But it is to claim that the rational activity of the religious community overlaps with and has similarities to the rational activities of other communities and therefore is subject to correction and revision by other ways of knowing.

In addition to the assumption of a radically different way of knowing, some sectarian theologies seem also to assume that the object of knowledge—God—is so unrelated to other objects of knowledge that there are no indications of God's reality from nature, human experience, and so forth. Of course it is the case that God is not an object like other objects, that God is not like the structure of a gene, and so forth. But if God is the source of how things really and ultimately are, if God is the sustainer and even destroyer of aspects of life in the world, if God is the determiner of the destiny of things, then whatever one says about how God is related to the world demands theological attention to ways in which nature, history and culture are interpreted and understood by investigations appropriate to them. Put boldly, if God is sovereign over all things then knowledge of nature, and so forth, as informed by investigations proper to nature, have to be taken into account in order to say something about God. God is not nature without remainder, but the historic doctrine of creation certainly affirms that God orders life through nature. Thus knowledge of nature contributes to, but does not finally determine, what can be said about God. Sectarian assumptions seem to deny or underestimate this.

What I have briefly said about philosophical assumptions in some sectarian tendencies in theology has already been based on what might be a *theological* assumption, namely, that God is known *only* in and through history, and particularly the history of the Biblical people culminating in the events of Christ and their effects. Insofar as this describes an assumption it ignores a great deal of the Biblical witness itself. In Christian sectarian form God becomes a Christian God for Christian people; to put it most pejoratively, God is assumed to be the tribal God of a minority of the earth's population. Or, if God is not a tribal God there is only one

community in the world that has access to knowledge of God because God has revealed himself only in the life of that community. Or still another possible assumption, and worse from my perspective than the other two, Christian theology and ethics really are not concerned so much about God as they are about maintaining fidelity to the biblical narratives about Jesus, or about maintaining the "Biblical view" as a historical vocation that demands fidelity without further external justification, or idolatrously maintaining a historic social identity.

The effect of such theological assumptions is sectarian. The sectarianism is particularly problematic in a historic time when technology brings not only various historic religions but also secular equivalents to theologies into intensive interaction. I do not believe that some agreement about the nature of God on the part of theologians of various faiths would provide a practical ground for a cooperative world culture; religions are rooted and expressed in particular cultures. Thus I am not as enthused as some are about finding a common theology as a result of interreligious conferences about God. I do, however, believe that historic theologies, including Christian, if they are speaking about the ultimate power and orderer of life in the world, must be open to revision and correction in the face of alternative views—views from other historic religions and the secular functional equivalents to theology.

In the realm of the moral, the theological sectarianism is particularly pernicious, as I have suggested above. Faithful witness to Jesus is not a sufficient theological and moral basis for addressing the moral and social problems of the twentieth century. The theologian addressing many issues—nuclear, social justice, ecology, and so forth—must do so as an outcome of a theology that develops God's relations to all aspects of life in the world, and develops those relations in terms which are not exclusively Christian in a sectarian form. Jesus is not God.

5.

CONCLUSION

What Lindbeck describes as a hope to me is a perilous fate, namely, that Christianity will find greater authenticity by becoming more sectarian. I have called sectarianism a temptation in theology, the Church and morality. It is a very seductive tempter. It can provide various forms of security. If being purely descriptive and historical in theology makes it scientific, then one has the security of being a scientist. If religion is passionate subjectivity and not related to anything objective such as the reality of a sovereign Deity, then whatever induces and nourishes those passions is free from critical scrutiny by other perspectives on life. If it is meaningful, one does not worry about whether it is true. If Christianity is simply a cultural linguistic community one can govern one's subjectivity by its meanings, learn its language and how to use it, and have a strong sense of identity with the Christian tribe, distinguished from the other tribes around. One can have the same advantages that there are to being a German instead of a Frenchman, or vice versa.

It is a temptation because it legitimates a withdrawal of Christianity from its larger cultural environs at least to the extent that the truth or adequacy of Christianity is not subjected to critical scrutiny by other disciplines, other forces in the culture. To use Douglas Ottati's term, the sectarian temptation preserves the his-

toric integrity of Christianity. It may do that, however, at the cost of making Christianity *unintelligible* in a world in which fewer and fewer persons are formed to the "Christian language."⁹ It is seductive because it can provide reasons for not engaging in the fray of intellectual life, not engaging in the ambiguities of political and moral life. One only bears *witness* to a historic tradition, and the mark of authenticity is that of fidelity to the tradition. It becomes even more seductive if one is persuaded as Lindbeck is, that "continuing dechristianization will make greater Christian authenticity communally possible." (This reminds me of some passages in Luther where the number and vehemence of his enemies is adduced as a justification for the rightness of his position.)

I can use Ottati's too simple distinction between integrity and intelligibility to bring this lecture to a conclusion. Sectarianism preserves the identity of Christianity but at great cost to its intelligibility and to its participation in universities, politics and cultural life.

Readers of my recent work, and certainly critics of it, know what hearers of this lecture know, namely, that I find succumbing to the sectarian temptation to be pernicious. But the alternative to it is not without its risks. That is, a risk to the particularistic historic identity of the Christian religious tradition and the community. I cannot undertake a defense now of those risks; I have done so in too many printed pages already. I can only be assertive, and not justificatory, here. It is God with whom humankind has to reckon; God who is the source of all life, whose powers have brought it into being, sustain it, bear down upon it, create conditions of possibility within it and will determine its ultimate destiny. Theology has to be open to all the sources that help us to construe God's relations to the world; ethics has to deal with the interdependence of *all* things in relation to God. This, for me, necessarily relativizes the significance of the Christian tradition, though it is the tradition in which our theologies develop. God is the God of Christians, but God is not a Christian God for Christians only.

I close this academic lecture with a biblical verse which to me, as it did to my teacher from the eighteenth century, Jonathan Edwards, sums up the subject matter of theology and the spirit in which it should be done: "To the King of all ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever" (II Tim. 1:18).

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⁹Douglas F. Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology* (Washington: University Press of America, 1982) especially pp. 171-98.