Introduction and Historical Setting

The years in United States history roughly from the end of World War I to the Viet Nam War witnessed disillusionment with Wilsonian idealism, continuing industrial conflicts, continued urbanization, unresolved issues stemming from slavery, attempts to limit immigration, the Great Depression and the New Deal, World War II and its aftermath, and the Cold War.

World War I—that great family spat and continental civil war—took more than wealth and a generation of young men and women; it disillusioned the Europeans of their cherished nineteenth century convictions about human perfectibility and the inevitable progress of societies. Otto Spengler’s *Decline of the West* appeared in 1918 and the views of Nietzsche on the death of God seemed to have been fulfilled in the collapse of traditional values. During this period existentialism was born, as were promising and frightening new political ideologies. Americans in many ways were untouched by this and retained much of their optimism about themselves, but President Wilson’s failures at Versailles and subsequently with the United States Senate nonetheless signaled a sobering of the American psyche.

The real shock came with the Great Depression, starting with the stock market crash in October 1929 and with unemployment reaching twenty-five per cent. In 1932, three years into the depression, Franklin Delano Roosevelt defeated the Republican President Herbert Hoover. FDR instituted the New Deal, with a wide range of reforms and experimentation. Some of his programs (e.g., the National Recovery Act) were declared unconstitutional and his later efforts were frustrated by Southern Democrats in Congress joining with conservative Republicans. In general, however, his programs spurred growth, lowered unemployment, enabled programs in the arts, and restored a measure of confidence.

World War II, with United States participation after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, did much to restore economic stability to the country—and provided for perhaps the first time a sense of national unity. In the process the United States became a major world power, which determined its stance and policies after the war (e.g., participation in the United Nations and the Marshall Plan). At the same time, a post war period of prosperity altered the social makeup of the country, exemplified by the growth of suburbia—and the kind of issues of identity and anxiety that appeared.

Another result of World War II was the Cold War, and involved the Korean War (called “police action”), the nuclear threat, the Berlin Wall, and McCarthyism. The threat of Communism refocused American attention and foreign policy until the demise of the Soviet Union in the early 1990’s.

Many of the phenomena that characterized the period from the Civil War until World War I continued to present problems to be faced. There was the ongoing struggle against (and defense of) the findings and conclusions of Charles Darwin and the teaching of evolution in public schools, highlighted by the Scopes Trial in Tennessee in 1925.

Industrialization had raised issues of fairness in wages and safety in working conditions, and these led to the increased number and size of unions, and to multiple strikes. While these strikes occurred in a wide range of industries and businesses, the more significant were in railroads, mining and the automobile industries. The strikes were often violent and seldom productive for the workers. One issue was the right of labor even to organize—a right won at Ford Motor Company, for example, only in 1940. Certain protections of unions were achieved by the Wagner Act in 1935 (during the New Deal era). Later President Roosevelt said in an address, “The right to bargain collectively is at the bottom of social justice for the worker, as well as the sensible conduct of business affairs. The denial or observance of this right means the difference between despotism and democracy.” It was amended by the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947 (passed over President Truman’s veto).
Other efforts to deal legislatively with the plight of workers were frustrated by the United States Supreme Court, who for thirty years used the theory of “liberty of contract” to rule almost all such laws as unconstitutional under the “due process” clause. This began to change in 1937 when the Court on a 5-4 vote reversed itself. In 1938, Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act, which established a national minimum wage and restricted child labor.

Issues stemming from urbanization continued into this period. In the case of safe housing, local codes continued to be adopted and a federal effort to provide housing was instigated after World War II. One somewhat different aspect of the urban scene was the migration of African Americans to northern cities during World War I and II. By 1970, the end of the so-called “Second Great Migration,” eighty per cent of all African-Americans lived in cities, and nearly fifty per cent lived in the North. In many instances the urban problem became a race problem. There was a major race riot in East St. Louis in 1917, and flurries of urban race riots in 1919 (including Washington, Chicago, Omaha, and Charleston SC), 1967 (Newark and Detroit), and in 1968 (Baltimore, Chicago). The causes varied, but as in the case of East St. Louis, they often involved labor problems.

The plight of former slaves, principally in the South after Reconstruction, was marked by segregation, disenfranchisement, poverty, and intimidation. Lynching in the country totaled 800 in the decade 1900-1909, and 750 the following decade (the new Ku Klux Klan was organized in 1915). Even at the height of the New Deal, it proved impossible to pass anti-lynching legislation. Any relief awaited Supreme Court decisions in the 1950’s and Civil Rights legislation in the 1960’s.

With the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, women nationwide were guaranteed the right to vote. It had been a long struggle, beginning at least as early as the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. Suffrage had been granted piece meal by localities and certain states (mostly western). The right to vote was part of a larger agenda, including the right to own property and access to divorce, and there was some progress in the nineteenth century. But the next and larger steps awaited the activity of the women’s movement during and after the 1960’s. (The Feminine Mystique was published in 1963.)

Women were involved in another historic social and political movement: temperance. Their presence was felt principally through the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, founded in the late 1870’s and active in a number of causes affecting women. A major triumph came in 1919 with the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment, banning the manufacture, sale or transportation of alcoholic beverages. Prohibition followed (through the Volstead Act of 1920), and organized crime flourished and benefited. In 1933 the amendment was the only ever to be repealed.

Immigration, which had swelled the population after the Civil War, continued unabated until 1924, when Congress passed the Immigration Act establishing quotas. The principal issue remained how ethnic or religious groups understood themselves in the American environment. The Germans, for example, had a strong commitment to their language (and to their beer), and these stances—coupled with Germany’s presence in both World Wars—engendered suspicions and resentments. As for the Catholics, there had always been anti-Catholic feeling among the original Protestant majority. But there were other issues: how do various ethnic groups (e.g., Irish, Italians) within American Catholicism relate to one another, and how does Catholic political theory deal with the American experience?—an issue still alive in the Presidential campaign of 1960.

Niebuhr, Niebuhr and Tillich

During the middle fifty years of the twentieth century in the United States, three theologians refined and redefined Protestant liberal theology in the context of the political and cultural issues of the period. They were the two Niebuhr brothers, Reinhold and H. Richard, and Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr’s colleague at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. H. Richard Niebuhr taught at the Yale Divinity School. As we shall see later, they differed significantly, while sharing the legacy of liberal theology and the social gospel.

They were not the best known or most influential religious leaders of this period. There was the liberal Harry Emerson Fosdick of Riverside Church in New York from the late Twenties till 1946 and Norman Vincent Peale of the Marble Collegiate Church in New York (1932-1985), whose 1952 book The Power of Positive Thinking was on the New York Times best seller list for 186 consecutive weeks. In the tradition of revivalism, Billy Graham rose to national prominence in 1949, appearing on the cover of TIME in 1954. In the Thirties the
Roman Catholic priest Father Charles Coughlin was heard by as much as a third of the nation on his weekly radio broadcasts. Beginning in 1951, Bishop Fulton Sheen spoke weekly to thirty million people through his television program “Life is Worth Living.” His TIME cover came in 1952.

In this vein, H. Richard Niebuhr remained only slightly known outside church circles. An achievement of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich is that they were recognized by the larger intellectual community, both political and cultural. Tillich, for example, was asked to lecture at the opening of the new galleries and sculpture garden of the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1964, and Henry Luce asked him to address TIME’s fortieth anniversary party at the Waldorf Astoria the previous year. When he retired from Union in 1955, he was appointed University Professor (with no ties to any department) at Harvard University for seven years. He received prestigious awards from his native Germany after the war. For his part, Reinhold Niebuhr adorned the cover of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary edition of TIME in 1948 (Tillich appeared in 1959). His friends numbered many in the Jewish and secular intelligentsia (including Justice Felix Frankfurter, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Sidney Hook, and Archibald MacLeish). Given that his forte was political analysis, Niebuhr received attention from policy makers and, in the late Forties, he was consulted by the State Department. In 1958 he was a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. Both Presidents Carter and Obama acknowledged their debt to him, and as late as 2005 Schlesinger could write in the New York Times on the need for Niebuhr’s analyses.

All three thought within the context of liberal theology and the Social Gospel. Liberal theology had developed over the previous two centuries in part to free individuals from the strictures of tradition (in line with the Enlightenment). This was achieved largely through historical studies, which demonstrated that scriptures and dogma came into being in relation to specific historical settings and could be considered to be valid only within them. H. Richard Niebuhr, drawing heavily on Harnack and Troeltsch, applied this relativism to the American scene in his Social Sources of Denominationalism, and his continued interest in culture as the context for religion (Christ and Culture and Radical Monotheism and Western Culture).

In their criticism of liberal theology and the Social Gospel, the two Niebuhrs and Tillich did not attempt any return to orthodoxy, though they did mine the historical sources for insights that would speak to their time (this is in part why they were considered “Neo-Orthodox”). They were all influenced by Kierkegaard, the nineteenth century Danish commentator on Christianity. Tillich taught the history of Christian thought at Union, and his lectures show a sympathetic reading of the sources. For example, he was fond of Origen, the third century Alexandrian theologian, for his Christian Platonism. Reinhold Niebuhr, especially in his Nature and Destiny of Man, found in biblical and Christian historical sources aids in his analyses—notably in his reading of Augustine on sin. At the same time, especially H. Richard Niebuhr and Tillich extended the liberal and individual approach to the human situation—Tillich is his continuous application of European existentialism and Niebuhr in his The Responsible Self.

The Social Gospel was liberal in its methods but focused more on social context as a determining factor in enhancing human dignity. It spoke of the Kingdom of God as an earthly possibility. Supported by the new analyses of society by sociologists and economists and renewed interest in the Hebrew prophets, this form of Christian thought and action attempted to address issues raised by urbanization and industrialization since the Civil War. It sought cooperation between owners and labor, safe and humane working conditions, and had a pacifist element. Its goal was social justice, and it assumed its attainability.

It was in chastening and refining these expectations that Reinhold Niebuhr made his greatest and continuing contributions. He claimed, principally in his 1932 book Moral Man and Immoral Society that corporate entities and especially states operate on a morality of self-interest and survival, which almost always is immoral by standards of individual ethics. Corporate interests and the persons therein value power and privilege above justice. For society and states, justice is subservient to survival, and it is naïve to expect otherwise. This insight allowed Niebuhr a basis for a lifelong set of analyses of human nature and political realism. During the Thirties he addressed issues related to management and labor; with World War II and the subsequent Cold War, he turned more to international affairs.

H. Richard Niebuhr responded in a different way. Both liberal theology and the Social Gospel assumed that there were universal definitions of human nature and of human values. For example, “justice” was a transcendent value and could be used to judge specific cultural expressions—as with the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” True Christianity, it followed in this thinking, was singular and capable of judging its manifold
manifestations. Actually, Reinhold Niebuhr operated with this assumption. For him, God represented the love and justice that stood over against all human efforts. For Richard, God was working through human history and human social arrangements to achieve a reality that lay beyond any human understanding. For him, specific human social arrangements or Christian churches do not so much fail as that they are incomplete and unfinished. As Schleiermacher (the great nineteenth century German theologian) had argued, religion is always specific (or “positive”) and not general. Richard was thus interested in the diversity of cultural and religious points of view and institutions—and the problem this posed for monotheism.

Of the three, Paul Tillich brought a European perspective to American liberal theology and the Social Gospel. Europe obviously had a longer intellectual tradition and it had a sense of the tragic that Americans did not have. Tillich’s analyses benefited from this deeper and wider European context in a way the Niebuhrs did not. Where Reinhold could use terms like “paradox” and “irony” in dealing with the political scene, Tillich introduced the category of the “demonic.” Also, though a socialist by conviction, Tillich was most interested in the individual and the plight of the individual. For him, rather than a new theology that liberated the individual, what was called for was something that dealt with the meaningless and the threat of non-being of modern humanity.

All of this we will consider more carefully as we look at each of the thinkers in turn.

Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971)

[Many of his books are in print. A good bit of what follows is dependent on Richard Fox’s excellent biography of Niebuhr. There is a new book (2010) on Niebuhr by Richard Crouter which discusses him in the context of current issues and interpretations.]

Reinhold Niebuhr came to Union Theological Seminary in New York City in 1928 at the age of thirty-six. He would teach Christian ethics there for thirty-two years, retiring in 1960 (a stroke in 1952 had left him weakened). He wrote widely in church and secular periodicals, and published over twenty books, including most famously *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (the Gifford Lectures).

Union Seminary, sitting amidst Barnard College, Columbia University Teachers College (where John Dewey taught), the Jewish Theological Seminary, Juilliard School of Music (which moved to Lincoln Center in 1969), and next to the Riverside Church, was a liberal bastion in Protestant theological education. Originally a Presbyterian seminary, Union became independent and non-denominational following the Presbyterian accusations of heresy of two of its professors Arthur Cushman McGiffert and Charles Augustus Briggs in the late nineteenth century. Under the presidencies of Henry Sloane Coffin (1926-1945) and Henry Pitney van Dusen (1945-1963), both well connected among the socially elite, Union enhanced its standing as a preeminent theological school during the years of Niebuhr’s tenure.

It is interesting that the Union Board of Directors was filled with men whose values and commitments were the object of Niebuhr’s critique—men such as Henry Luce. Niebuhr was a Socialist and a member of the Socialist Party from 1929 until 1940. In 1930 he ran for New York State Senate and in 1932 for Congress as a Socialist (unsuccessfully: 2.2 per cent of the vote!). Prior to 1932, his analysis of industrialism called for abolishing private property in major productive industries, as he proposed in his criticism of Ford in 1926 (during his thirteen years as pastor of Bethel Church in Detroit). Actually, Niebuhr was not the first trouble maker the Board had to accept—Niebuhr’s senior colleague in social ethics, Harry F. Ward, was more radical than he was.

There was opposition to Niebuhr’s coming to Union, but it was not from members of the Board. Most faculty members were uneasy about Niebuhr’s lack of academic credentials. He did not have a doctorate. He had a weak education at his denomination’s college (Elmhurst) and seminary (Eden), then a MA from Yale (which, for various reasons, was difficult in obtaining). He had never taught and had no scholarly work. What he had was a reputation, spun out of his many articles of social and political criticism, challenges to Henry Ford in Detroit during a fifteen year urban pastorate there, popularity at student conferences, and prophetic preaching that was both astute and dramatic. President Coffin was intent on having him and secured funds from Sherwood Eddy (Niebuhr actually taught part time at Union and worked part time for Eddy’s *World Tomorrow*). The faculty approved the invitation by one vote.

Coffin’s enthusiasm was not misplaced. Niebuhr attracted, excited and energized students. Richard Fox characterizes his arrival:
Union Seminary’s Gothic Revival towers, built in 1910, stood calmly above the frenzied Manhattan din at Broadway and 120th…The rush and rhythm of the city streets did not unsettle Union’s dim chiseled corridors.

But in September, 1928, the rush and rhythm of Reinhold Niebuhr, associate professor of Christian ethics and philosophy of religion, penetrated the hush. Already a celebrity on the Protestant circuit, he instantly drew circles of students around him. They dogged his steps as he careened through the hallways, they sat wide-eyed in the Common Room after lunch and dinner while he issued rapid-fire commentary on world events, they struggled to record even a small portion of his lectures as his words raced to keep up with his mind. They flocked to chapel to hear him roar and watch him gesticulate: his words rolled down like waters, his ideas like a never-ending stream.

He was a mesmerizing speaker. He was an astute and sophisticated commentator on issues of the moment—in fact, his analyses of political issues were often more intriguing than his efforts of developing a sustained argument.

Niebuhr was politically active, wrote incessantly for religious (principally Christian Century) and secular (Nation, New Leader, New Republic, Atlantic, Harpers) periodicals, and preached on the college chapel circuit every Sunday that he was not speaking in James Chapel at Union.

What was he saying?

*Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932)

In 1932 Niebuhr’s *Moral Man and Immoral Society* was published. Fox (p. 138) says that it “was unquestionably a book of uncommon brilliance.” In some ways it was his most important book: it stated the basic position he had been developing for some time and which became the basis of everything he said in the future. The thesis of the book, as he stated in its opening paragraph, was

> that a sharp distinction must be drawn between the moral and social behavior of individuals and of social groups, national, racial, and economic; and that this distinction justifies and necessitates political policies which a purely individualistic ethic must always find embarrassing. (p. xi)

The reason that social groups, and especially nations, have a different morality is that they have different purposes and responsibilities:

> …a high type of unselfishness, even if it brings ultimate rewards, demands immediate sacrifices. An individual may sacrifice his own interests, either without hope or reward or in the hope of an ultimate compensation. But how is an individual, who is responsible for the interests of his group, to justify the sacrifice of interests other than his own? “It follows,” declares Hugh Cecil, “that all that department of morality which requires an individual to sacrifice his interests to others, everything which falls under the heading of unselfishness, is inappropriate to the action of a state. No one has a right to be unselfish with other people’s interests.” (p. 267)

The working title of the book had been “The Ethics of Social Change,” and this is really Niebuhr’s interest.

Since reason is always, to some degree, the servant of interest in a social situation, social injustice cannot be resolved by moral and rational suasion alone, as the educator and social scientist usually believes. Conflict is inevitable, and in this conflict power must be challenged by power. (p. xv)

Once the basic thesis was established, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* set about to do three things: (1) expose the naiveté of Niebuhr’s fellow liberals, especially “the educator and social scientist,” (2) indicate the uses and limitations of “moral and rational suasion,” and (3) be more explicit about what he meant by “power.”

Along the way, he exhibited wide reading and an astute presentation of a range of topics that flow from his premise. He discusses religion (Chapters III, IX and X), the morality of nations (IV), the ethical attitudes of privileged classes (V) and the proletariat (VI). In every instance, his discussion reveals the complexity of the subject—as between rational justice and political justice, between love and justice, the will-to-live and the will-to-power, and the interrelationship of individual and social morality.
Niebuhr remained a liberal in desiring peace and justice, but he considered most liberals, both secular and religious, unrealistic in their goals and in their methods.

Insofar as this treatise has a polemic interest it is directed against the moralists, both religious and secular, who imagine that the egoism of individuals is being checked by the development of rationality or the growth of religiously inspired goodwill and that nothing but the continuance of this process is necessary to establish social harmony between all the human societies and collectives…They completely disregard the political necessities in the struggle for justice in human society by failing to recognize those elements in man’s collective behavior which belong to the order of nature and can never be brought completely under the dominion of reason or conscience. (p. xii)

What is lacking among all these moralists, whether religious or rational, is an understanding of the brutal character of the behavior of all human collectives, and the power of self-interest and collective egoism in all inter-group relations. Failure to recognize the stubborn resistance of group egoism to all moral and inclusive social objectives inevitably involves them in unrealistic and confused political thought. (p. xx)

(Collective man’s) concern for some centuries to come is not the creation of an ideal society in which there will be uncoerced and perfect peace and justice, but a society in which there will be enough justice, and in which coercion will be sufficiently non-violent to prevent his common enterprise from issuing into complete disaster. That goal will seem too modest for the romanticists; but the romanticists have so little understanding of the perils in which modern society lives, and overestimate the moral resources at the disposal of the collective human enterprise so easily, that any goal regarded as worthy of achievement by them must necessarily be beyond attainment. (p. 22)

In analyzing the uses and limitations of “moral and rational suasion,” Niebuhr was interested in the possibility of what he called “accommodation.” That is, whether in areas of disagreement or conflict between persons and groups, reasonableness can (if allowed to function unencumbered by what John Dewey termed “outworn traditions”) achieve resolution or even justice.

A favorite counsel of social scientists is that of accommodation. If two parties are in conflict, let them, by conferring together, moderate their demands and arrive at a modus Vivendi. (p. xvii)

Niebuhr doubts this possibility:

Wherever men hold unequal power in society, they will strive to maintain it. They will use whatever means are most convenient to that end and will seek to justify them by the most plausible arguments they are able to devise. (p. 34; see extended discussion in Chapters IV and V)

This is not to say that reason has no role in achieving social justice:

The force of reason makes for justice, not only by placing restraints upon the desires of the self in the interest of social harmony, but by judging the claims and assertions of individuals from the perspective of the intelligence of the total community. An irrational society accepts injustice because it does not analyze the pretensions made by the powerful and privileged groups of society. Even that portion of society which suffers most from injustice may hold the power, responsible for it, in reverence. A growing rationality in society destroys the uncritical acceptance of injustice. It may destroy the morale of dominant groups by making them more conscious of the hollowness of their pretensions, so that they will be unable to assert their interests and protect their special privileges with the same degree of self-deception....It may also make those who suffer from injustice more conscious of their rights in society and persuade them to assert their rights more energetically. The resulting social conflict makes for a political rather than rational justice. (pp. 30-31)

Even given that, reason becomes less useful as social organization becomes more complex. And social cohesion always requires coercion, however covert. And coercion, while achieving peace within the group or even between groups, brings with it injustice.

All social co-operation on a larger scale than the most intimate social group requires a measure of coercion. While no state can maintain its unity purely by coercion neither can it preserve itself without
coercion….Ultimately, unity within an organized social group, or within a federation of such groups, is created by the ability of a dominant group to impose its will. (pp. 3-4)

Niebuhr’s fellow Protestant liberals had great difficulty with his claim that all relations between groups (like management and labor), and especially nations, involved conflict and coercion. But they were totally unprepared for his additional claim that the pursuit of peace and social justice often required violence.

The conclusion which has been forced upon us again and again in these pages is that equality, or to be a little more qualified, that equal justice is the most rational ultimate objective for society….a social conflict which aims at greater equality has a moral justification which must be denied to efforts which aim at the perpetuation of privilege….The oppressed…have a higher moral right to challenge their oppressors than these have to maintain their rule by force….The differences between violent and non-violent methods of coercion and resistance are not so absolute that it would be possible to regard violence as a morally impossible instrument of social change. (pp. 234-235,251)

The one error is the belief that violence is a natural and inevitable expression of ill-will, and non-violence of good-will, and that violence is therefore intrinsically evil and non-violence intrinsically good. While such a proposition has a certain measure of validity, or at least plausibility, it is certainly not universally valid. It is less valid in inter-group relations than in individual relations….Once we admit the factor of coercion as ethically justified, though we concede that it is always dangerous, we cannot draw any absolute line of demarcation between violent and non-violent coercion….violence can therefore not be ruled out on a priori grounds.(p. 171-172)

Unpopular as Moral Man was among Protestant and secular liberals, it eventually won the day with them. Its “political realism” for which Niebuhr is known attracted the attention of many social analysts, political leaders, and social reformers. (Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” “Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but, as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups tend to be more immoral than individuals. We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed.”)

Already in the 1928 Presidential election Niebuhr had anticipated his distinction of personal versus societal morality. He wrote in favor of Al Smith, the Democratic candidate, the Roman Catholic mayor of New York who was an advocate for repeal of Prohibition. The Protestant liberal establishment considered the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment the crown jewel of its effort to reform society, and on the whole supported the Republican Herbert Hoover, who supported prohibition but was conservative on labor issues and on Latin America. Niebuhr broke ranks: it was “time for liberal Protestants to put issues of economic justice ahead of issues of personal purity” (Fox, p. 114). Otherwise church liberals “merely proved that the church is still enmeshed in an anachronistic Puritanism which sees the sins of individuals but never the sins of society.”

At the time of Moral Man, Niebuhr’s attention had been on issues of social justice—principally labor-management. But as early as 1927 (in an article in Atlantic) he attacked pacifism, which he had embraced in 1923 and which was another cherished conviction of many Protestant liberals. This turned his attention eventually to international issues. A turning point for Niebuhr and for many of his liberal anti-war colleagues came with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in September of 1931—in the face of solemn non-aggression pacts—and their bombing of civilians in Shanghai the following January. The question became not whether something should be done in response, but what. And any response, even a boycott of Japanese goods, was seen as a form of war to the anti-war group.

Pacifism had a close and more popular relative named isolationism. (Its popularity was manifested in the fact that Wilson in 1916 and FDR in 1940 campaigned on a promise to keep the United States out of the European wars.) In 1940 (with the battle for Britain) Niebuhr and his friends became active in espousing interventionism against the isolationism of the American Socialist Party—from which he resigned—and the liberalism of C. C. Morrison, one of his early boosters and the editor of the influential Christian Century. Behind his varied explanations, Niebuhr was becoming convinced that for his approach to the way social justice is to be pursued, totalitarianism in any form is the enemy—especially a totalitarian state that threatens western democracies. Of democracy he wrote in 1944, in a typical Niebuhrian style, it is “a method of finding proximate solutions to insoluble problems.”
The form this took in 1940 and 1941 was his part in the creation of a new journal called *Christianity and Crisis* and the formation of the Union for Democratic Action (UDA). “The UDA provided a halfway house for anti-Fascists eager to defend Britain and groping for a non-Socialist yet still progressive vantage point on domestic issues” (Fox, p. 200). In January of 1941 he appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to support Roosevelt’s Lend-Lease program. His opposition to totalitarianism carried over after the war in his unrelenting opposition to Stalinist communism. Ironically, his move later to opposing the Vietnam War was torturous given his anti-Communist stance.

Niebuhr continued to write, in almost editorial fashion, on political issues and always in historical context. Richard Crouer (p. 5) notes that the Niebuhr papers in the Library of Congress require sixty-seven boxes. His books include *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (1930); *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study of Ethics and Politics* (1932); *Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1935); *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (1937); *Christianity and Power Politics* (1940), *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (1941, 1943); *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944); *Faith and History* (1949); *The Irony of American History* (1952); *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (1953); *The Self and the Dramas of History* (1955); *Pious and Secular America* (1958); and his last major book *The Structure of Nations and Empires* (1959), written while he was a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton.

Many consider his 1952 book *The Irony of American History*, to be among his best and most pertinent. It was the last book he wrote before his debilitating strokes in the winter and spring of 1952. It was re-issued in 2008, with an introduction by Andrew J. Bacevich, discussing Niebuhr’s relevance on Bush’s foreign policy. Bacevich writes (pp. ix, x),

Niebuhr warned that what he called in this book, “our dreams of managing history—dreams borne of a peculiar combination of arrogance, hypocrisy, and self delusion…the persistent sin of American Exceptionalism, the indecipherability of history; the false allure of simple solutions; and, finally, the imperative of appreciating the limits of power.

*The Irony of American History* (1952)

Irony was written during the years when Niebuhr, having moved beyond the domestic issues which occasioned *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, issues having to do primarily with the conflict between management and labor, was focusing on the conflict with communism, and of two global superpowers armed with nuclear weapons. His preoccupation with the inevitability of conflict and the evil of communist tyranny, by the way, led him carelessly to portray many liberals as “fellow travelers”—characterizations for which he later had to apologize in print (see, for example. Fox, pp. 253ff.).

Niebuhr had long noted the ambiguous and the paradoxical nature of human nature and actions. In appraising the situation the United States found itself in after World War II, “irony” provided him with an exceptionally useful tool for interpreting the experience of the American people. In delineating it from the “pathetic” and the “tragic,” he characterizes the “ironic” in this way:

We frequently speak of “tragic” aspects of contemporary history; and also call attention to a “pathetic” element in our present historical situation. My effort to distinguish “ironic” elements in our history from tragic and pathetic ones, does not imply the denial of tragic and pathetic aspects in our contemporary experience. It does rest upon the conviction that the ironic elements are more revealing. He three elements might be distinguished as follows: (a) Pathos arises from fortuitous cross purposes and confusions in life for which no reason can be given, or guilt ascribed. Suffering caused by purely natural evil is the clearest instance of the purely pathetic. (b) The tragic element in a human situation is constituted of conscious choices of evil for the sake of good. If men or nations do evil in a good cause; if they cover themselves with guilt in order to fulfill some high responsibility; or if they sacrifice some high value for the sake of a higher or equal one they make a tragic choice. Thus the necessity of using the threat of atomic destruction as an instrument for the preservation of peace is a tragic element in our contemporary situation. Tragedy elicits admiration as well as pity because it combines nobility with guilt. (c) Irony consists of apparently fortuitous incongruities in life which are discovered, upon closer examination, to be not merely fortuitous. Incongruity as such is merely comic. It illicits laughter. The element of comedy is never
completely eliminated from irony. But irony is something more than comedy. A comic situation is proved to be an ironic one if a hidden relation is discovered in the incongruity. If virtue becomes vice through some defect in the virtue; if strength becomes weakness because of the vanity to which the strength may prompt the mighty man or nation; if security is transmuted into insecurity because too much reliance is placed upon it; if wisdom becomes folly because it does not know its own limits—in all such cases the situation is ironic. The ironic situation is distinguished from a pathetic one by the fact that a person involved in it bears some responsibility for it. It is differentiated from tragedy by the fact that the responsibility is related to an unconscious weakness rather than a conscious resolution. (Irony, pp. xxiii-xxiv)

For example, the picture of America as drawn by both the Jeffersonians and the New England Calvinists as a place and people of innocence, freed from the complexities of European history to pursue a new beginning for humanity, when compared with America as a super power enmeshed in international responsibilities with a nuclear arsenal, may be incongruous to the point of amusement, if not laughter and even ridicule. But it is also ironical when one realizes that an element of naiveté in the original image contributed to the inevitable guilt of being a nation among nations, and it is America’s pretensions of innocence that contribute to ever greater incongruities. (Irony, Chapters I and II)

…the Christian faith tends to make the ironic view of human evil in history the normative one. Its conception of redemption from evil carries it beyond the limits of irony, but its interpretation of the nature of evil in human history is consistently ironic. This consistency is achieved on the basis of the belief that the whole drama of human history is under the scrutiny of a divine judge who laughs at human pretensions without being hostile to human aspirations. The laughter at the pretensions is the divine judgment. The judgment is transmuted into mercy if it results in abating the pretensions and in prompting men to a contrite recognition of the vanity of their imagination. (Irony, p. 155)

Other American aspirations and pretensions—for example, the pursuit of happiness and mastery over history—are examined ironically by Niebuhr. In the case of communism, considerations with which the book is all but overwhelmed, Niebuhr discusses the “double irony” of communism starting with similar premises as the Americans, but seeing them develop in more tyrannical ways. “…the evils against which we contend are frequently the fruit of illusions which are similar to our own…” (Irony, p. 16)

The Nature and Destiny of Man (1941; 1943)

Niebuhr often insisted that he was not a theologian, but “a teacher of ethics.” (In fact, his interests were in social ethics, not the individual.) Indeed, many of the intellectual elite who admired his ability at political and social analysis, had no use for religion or theology (a group of them called themselves “atheists for Niebuhr”) and wondered why he used so much Christian language in his works. But Niebuhr maintained that the Christian understanding of such things as human nature and history was more profound and helpful than alternative views. This was particularly true in his magnum opus, The Nature and Destiny of Man (published from his 1938-1940 Gifford Lectures in two volumes in 1941 and 1943, and re-issued in 1996), which he subtitled A Christian Interpretation.

There are many ways of approaching this large and impressive work. It is not a work of theology: Niebuhr is not interested in the question of the existence of God or the nature of God. What he has to say about God (as creator and redeemer, for example) is a way of talking about the human dilemma.

The general revelation of personal human experience, the sense of being confronted with a “wholly other” at the edge of human consciousness, contains three elements….The first is the sense reverence for a majesty and of dependence upon an ultimate source of being. The second is the sense of moral obligation laid upon one from beyond oneself and of moral unworthiness before a judge. The third…is the longing for forgiveness. The second element in personal religion, the experience of judgment, gains support from the prophetic-Biblical concept of judgment in history. (Nature, pp. 133-134)

There are, in Volume I, only two brief discussions of the significance of Christ. The work is, as the title announces, about human nature and destiny (the opening sentence is “Man has always been his own most vexing problem’’) and the Christian interpretation of human nature and destiny.
Niebuhr is intent to give some definition to the Christian view, and to compare it with others—in recent centuries, for example, rationalism and its critic romanticism. Within the Christian tradition, he drew heavily on Paul (and especially Romans 7) and was more enamored with its Hebraic than with its Greek (Platonic, Hellenistic) forms. This is because the Hebraic is more concerned with problems of social justice and human pretension within history. It is within this realm that sin is inevitable (the way he understands the doctrine of original sin as espoused by Augustine), not so much as specific acts but as self-interest, and especially by corporate bodies.

The real evil in the human situation, according to the prophetic interpretation, lies in man’s unwillingness to recognize and acknowledge the weakness, finiteness and dependence of his position, in his inclination to grasp after a power and a security which transcend the possibilities of human existence, and in his effort to pretend a virtue and knowledge which are beyond the limits of mere creatures….Sin is thus the unwillingness of man to acknowledge his creatureliness and dependence upon God and his effort to make his own life independent and secure. (*Nature*, pp. 137-138)

Following Kierkegaard, he saw sin as rooted in anxiety, which in turn stems from human nature being paradoxically “both free and bound…limited and limitless” (*Nature*, p. 182).

Reinhold Niebuhr is most often spoken of as a prophet (as he was characterized by the Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel at Niebuhr’s memorial service). By this is meant that he was like the Hebrew prophets, such as Amos, who addressed specific historical situations and mainly matters of social justice. This is a good portrayal, but he went beyond the Biblical prophets and the Social Gospel. He sought to expose the dangerous pretensions of all human effort, even the most praiseworthy, and to assert the ambiguities of history, to deny that the meaning of history can be found within history. In exposing these illusions, Niebuhr wanted to create a more realistic state of mind by which forms of proximate justice could be achieved. He closes the second volume:

Thus wisdom about our destiny is dependent upon a humble recognition of the limits of our knowledge and our power….in which faith completes our ignorance without pretending to possess its certainties as knowledge; and in which contrition mitigates our pride without destroying our hope. (*Destiny*, p. 321)

**H. Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962)**

[Most of his books are in print, and there have been a number of books about his thought. To my knowledge, there is no book length biography of H. Richard Niebuhr. He was a private person, though self-reflective, as his letters to his brother show.]

H. Richard Niebuhr taught ethics at Yale Divinity School from 1931 until his death in 1962. He was the younger brother by two years of Reinhold Niebuhr (if Reinhold Niebuhr is “Niebuhr,” what shall we call H. Richard?), and was a close friend and astute critic of his more famous brother. As we shall see, they differed.

The younger Niebuhr is often considered the more academic of the two. (He came to the Divinity School with his Ph.D. in hand, after all!) By all accounts, he was at his best in the classroom, carefully working on problems. He was disinclined to publish (his son said after his death “my father always feared once he put his ideas in print, the possibility of reinterpreting and rethinking them in the classroom would vanish…a finished piece of business, a part of the past rather than a lively, appreciative, and critical response to the present”).

Even so, he was the author of eight books. The first, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929) established his reputation and paved the way for his appointment to Yale. A companion volume, *The Kingdom of God in America* was published in 1937. Others included *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941), *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (1956) and *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (1960). The two books for which he is best known are *Christ and Culture* (1951) and *The Responsible Self* (1962, published posthumously).
The issue that haunted H. Richard Niebuhr and runs pretty much through all his work is relativism—that values vary according to their historical or sociological setting. This differed from the view held by, for example, Protestant liberal theology, which had assumed that there were universal ethical values (following Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*). Or that at a minimum there was an “essence of Christianity” (the title of Harnack’s influential 1900 book, *Das Wesen des Christentums*) or a Biblical point of view. Niebuhr comments,

...as there is no single Biblical language there is also no single Biblical cosmology or psychology. (*Christ and Culture*, p. 104)

Relativism also challenged the claim of universal values and a normative Christianity. This challenge was especially pertinent to the American scene, where a heightened individualism stood against conformity, and ethnic communities resisted assimilation.

It was historical studies of religious movements and texts that first claimed that “beliefs” were created in response to specific historical issues and within specific historical settings, and were relative to them. Eventually even the Christian Gospels could be distinguished from one another by the historical issues they sought to answer. The Christianity of Thomas Aquinas could be distinguished from that of Martin Luther by the times in which they thought. And so on.

Later sociological and cultural studies came to similar conclusions—that even within a particular historical setting there could be a variety of value systems, and that the differences could be explained in terms of cultural or economic realities. This was later to become known as the “sociology of knowledge.” An example was the work of the sociologist Max Weber, especially his highly influential work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904-1905; English 1930). Ernst Troeltsch, Weber’s friend and seminal thinker, followed a similar tack in *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (1912; English 1931). It was Troeltsch who influenced H. Richard Niebuhr, and it was on Troeltsch that he wrote his doctoral dissertation.

Niebuhr adopted the approach of the social sciences in his first book, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929). At the time there was an embarrassment about what was perceived as the divisions within the Christian community, and a hunger for church unity. Niebuhr saw the effort to distinguish churches primarily by reference to their doctrine and to approach the problem of church unity from a purely theological point of view as fruitless. He turned from theology to history, sociology, and ethics for a more satisfactory account of denominational differences and a more significant approach to the question of union. The chapter headings reflected this: The Ethical Failure of the Divided Church; The Churches of the Disinherited; The Churches of the Middle Class; Nationalism and the Churches; Sectionalism and Denominationalism in America; The Churches of the Immigrants; Denominationalism and the Color Line; and Ways to Unity.

*Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (1960)

Once he was at Yale teaching ethics, Niebuhr worked on the question of why individuals and groups differed in how they thought and how they acted. He saw a key in understanding that they were characterized by trust and loyalty—that they trusted something for their value and were loyal to a cause. The two together he designated as faith.

...we may undertake to describe a fundamental personal attitude which, whether we call it faith or give it some other name, is apparently universal and general enough to be widely recognized. This is the attitude and action of confidence in, and fidelity to, certain realities as the source of value and objects of loyalty....it involves reference to the value that attaches to the self and to the value toward which the self is directed. On the one hand it is trust in that which gives value to the self; on the other hand it is loyalty to what the self values. (*Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, p. 16)

That which the person or group values by trust and loyalty he called “centers of value,” which was what he meant by the word “god.”
We are concerned now with faith as dependence on a value-center and as loyalty to a cause. Hence when we speak of “gods” we mean the gods of faith, namely, such value-centers and causes. (Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, p. 24)

He identified three types of trust and loyalty: radical monotheism, henotheism and polytheism. By radical monotheism, Niebuhr meant trust in and loyalty to the “One beyond all the many,” which dethrones all absolutes short of the principle of being itself. At the same time it reverences every relative existent. Its two great mottoes are “I am the Lord Thy God; thou shalt have no other gods before me” and “Whatever is, is good.” (Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, p. 37)

Radical monotheism is always in conflict with polytheism (“a pluralism that has many objects of devotion”) and henotheism (“a social faith that has one object, which is, however, only one among many”). The most obvious example of henotheism is nationalism, but includes any focus of devotion—country, family, profession. In the latter case, he writes:

They move simply and uncritically from service of the lares and penates of the home to devotion to the public welfare, to participation in the worship of established religion, to nurture of the arts….What is valuable in the self is not its being in wholeness or selfhood but the activities, the knowing, creating, loving, worshipping, and directing that issue from it. It has become a bundle of functions….So also the society is an assemblage of associations devoted to many partial interests, held together in meaningful unity by no common derivation from a value-center and by no loyalty to a common cause. (Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, pp. 30-31)

In the book cited, Niebuhr discussed how each of the types of faith—radical monotheism, henotheism, and polytheism—is present in western religion, political community, and western science. In each case, all are present, but there is a move toward radical monotheism in each. Interestingly, he saw science as exhibiting all three, but perhaps showing greatest promise of moving toward radical monotheism.

More positively radical faith in the One seems present to the theological point of view in the confidence with which pure science seems to approach anything and everything in the world as potentially meaningful. It does not assert explicitly nor does it imply, as universal religion and ethics do, that whatever is, is good. But in its domain it appears to move with the confidence that whatever is, is worthy of attention. Like pure religion pure science seems to care for “widows and orphans”—for bereaved and abandoned facts, for processes and experiences that have lost meaning because they did not fit into an accepted framework of interpretation. Whatever is, in the world of being and becoming, is worthy of inquiry not because of its intrinsic worth nor yet because it is part of some familiar pattern of meanings, but because it is, because in its existence it participates in being and is related to the universal and the unitary. (Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, p. 87)

Radical Monotheism and Western Culture grew out of the 1957 Montgomery Lectures at the University of Nebraska, a state and secular institution. The lectures exposed a dilemma Niebuhr faced throughout his career. He was attempting to discuss dimensions of western culture, such as political community and science. But he was doing it as a theologian, since it was from that perspective and not another that he saw things. Indeed, this was at the heart of his relativistic thought—“all knowledge is conditioned by the standpoint of the knower” (The Meaning of Revelation (1941), p. 7, cited by Jerry A. Irish, The Religious Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr, p. 31).

Not only did he see things from the point of view of a theologian; he operated within the perspective of being a Christian. He wrestles with this in the Introduction to The Responsible Self, published after his death in 1962.

I call myself a Christian though there are those who challenge my right to that name, either because they require a Christian to maintain some one of various sets of beliefs that I do not hold or because they require him to live up to some one of various sets of moral standards, including those of my own conscience, to which I do not conform. I call myself a Christian simply because I also am a follower of Jesus Christ, though I travel at a great distance from him not only in time, but in the spirit of my traveling; because I
believe that my way of thinking about life, myself, my human companions and our destiny has been so modified by his presence in our history that I cannot get away from his influence; and also because I do not want to get away from it; above all I call myself a Christian because my relation to God has been, so far as I can see, deeply conditioned by this presence of Jesus Christ in my history and our history. In one sense I call myself a Christian in the same way that I call myself a twentieth century man. To be a Christian is simply part of my fate....But I call myself a Christian more because I have accepted this fateful fact and because I identify myself with what I understand to be the cause of Jesus Christ....The word, Christian, therefore defines my point of view and my perspective. (The Responsible Self, pp. 43-44)

The object of the inquiry is not, as in the case of Christian ethics, simply the Christian life but rather human moral life in general.... my concern here is with the understanding of our human life from a Christian point of view and neither with the understanding of the Christian life from some other point of view (such as that of social adjustment or adaptation to nature) nor with the understanding of Christian life only, from a Christian point of view. (The Responsible Self, p. 45)

Christ and Culture (1951)

The book in which he most pointedly attempts to understand what it means to view the world from a Christian perspective is Christ and Culture (1951). These lectures were delivered significantly at a seminary (Austin Presbyterian), and here Niebuhr is thinking and speaking within the world of the church. He can assume that theological language needs no justification. This actually makes it strange reading for those outside that circle. But even given that, Christ and Culture is easier to read than his other books, and has been his most popular.

In it he does not utilize the various traditions within Christianity or the denominations in their relation to culture. Rather, he sets up several typologies to suggest different ways in which various historical Christians interpreted Christ in relation to culture—“Christ Against Culture,” “The Christ of Culture,” “Christ Above Culture,” “Christ and Culture in Paradox,” and “Christ the Transformer of Culture.” In using these historical examples, by the way, Niebuhr provides an introduction to the rich variety within Christianity, not chronologically but within the distinctive types he is discussing.

His approach to each of the types is to describe it along with historical examples, then indicate its value and its shortcomings. As an example, the first type discussed is “Christ Against Culture” (I think it could be “Christ as an Alternative to Culture”), which “uncompromisingly affirms the sole authority of Christ over the Christian and resolutely rejects culture’s claims to loyalty” (p. 45). The examples include I John in the New Testament (“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in him” [I John 2.15; Christ and Culture, p. 48]). The second century Christian writers include many examples; the most strident of which is Tertullian (e.g., “we have no pressing inducement to take part in your public meetings; nor is there aught more entirely foreign to us than affairs of state” [Apology xxxviii, Christ and Culture, p. 54]). His modern example is Leo Tolstoy, whom he quotes extensively and about whom he comments at some length. Tolstoy:

The revolutionaries say, “The government organization is bad in this or that respect; it must be destroyed and replaced by this or that.” But a Christian says: “I know nothing about the governmental organization, or in how far it is good or bad, and for the same reason I do not want to support it.” All the state obligations are against the conscience of a Christian: the oath of allegiance, taxes, law proceedings and military service. (“The Kingdom of God is Within You,” Works, XX, pp. 275 ff., Christ and Culture, pp. 60-61)

Niebuhr indicates the values and shortcomings of the “Christ Against Culture” type in a section called “A Necessary and Inadequate Position.” Its strength lies in the fact that its adherents, more than any other, “have expressed in their actions what they said in words” (p. 66), and that they had an impact on the larger church and on society, however unintended. For example,

Monasticism eventually became one of the great conservers and transmitters of cultural tradition; it trained many of the great ecclesiastical and political leaders of society; it strengthened the institutions from which its founders had withdrawn. Protestant sectarians made important contributions to political customs and traditions, such as those which guarantee religious liberty to all members of society. (p. 67)
Finally,

...the radically Christian answer to the problem of culture...needs to be given...for its own sake, and because without it other Christian groups lose their balance....Where this is lacking, Christian faith quickly degenerates into a utilitarian device for the attainment of personal prosperity or public peace; and some imagined idol called by his name takes the place of Jesus Christ the Lord. (p. 68)

Their major shortcoming lay in the naiveté with which they claimed they could exist without culture—“the possibility of sole dependence on Jesus Christ to the exclusion of culture” (p.69). But there is also a serious theological problem: “the relation of Jesus Christ to the Creator of nature and Governor of history...” (p. 80). Niebuhr closes with an insight that will become central to his overall thesis:

...radical Christianity, important as one movement in the church, cannot itself exist without the counterweight of other types of Christianity. (p.82)

The second type is “The Christ of Culture” approach (these, by the way, come closest to the position of liberal Protestant theology). They

...feel no great tension between church and world, the social laws and the Gospel, the workings of divine grace and human effort, the ethics of salvation and the ethics of social conservation or progress. On the one hand they interpret culture through Christ, regarding those elements in it as most important which are most accordant with his work and person; on the other hand they understand Christ through culture, selecting from his teaching and action as well as from the Christian doctrine about him such points as seem to agree with what is best in civilization. (p. 83)

Niebuhr points to the Christian Gnostics as example of early accommodation to culture, and Abélard in medieval Christian civilization. But he spends most of his commentary on the modern era-- on John Locke (The Reasonableness of Christianity [1695]), Immanuel Kant (Religion Within the Limits of Reason [1793], and Thomas Jefferson, among others—and especially on what has come to be called “cultural Protestantism,” typified by Albrecht Ritschl. Ritschl, a lesser known but highly influential nineteenth century theologian, stayed much closer to the New Testament and Christian doctrine than, for example, Locke and Kant, but his focus was (following Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason) on ethics and the need for forgiveness.

As for the value of the “Christ of culture” approach, “One cannot doubt that the acculturation of Jesus Christ has contributed greatly in history to the extension of his power over men.” (p. 103)

If in ancient times men were impressed by the constancy of Christians who refused to yield to popular and official demand to custom, they were also attracted by the harmony of the Christian message with the moral and religious philosophy of their best teachers, and by the agreement of Christian conduct with that of their exemplary heroes. (p. 103)

The Christ-of-culture position appears...to make effective the universal meaning of the gospel, and the truth that Jesus is the savior, not of a selected little band of saints, but of the world. (p. 105)

A major criticism is that its answers “show a consistent tendency to distort the figure of the New Testament Jesus...always something that seems to agree with the interests or the needs of their time...” (p. 109)—that “culture is so various that the Christ of culture becomes a chameleon” (p. 107).

Niebuhr considers these two types --which he calls “radical” and “cultural”--the extremes: one considers the culture in which it lives a contaminant to be avoided; the other embraces the best in culture as being expressed by Jesus Christ. The other three types he calls the church of the center, and classifies them “synthesists,” “dualists,” and “conversionists.”

The great majority movement in Christianity, which we may call the church of the center, has refused to take either the position of the anticultural radicals or that of the accommodators of Christ to culture....the
Christians of the center do not constitute one ordered group...There are at least three distinguishable families among them...We have named them synthesists, dualists, and conversionists... (pp117, 119f.)

What Niebuhr calls the synthesists he discusses as “Christ Above Culture.” They bring Christ and culture together in a distinctive way. They honor culture (nature and history) because it is created by God, but they see Christ as the essential addition to or completion of culture. Christ and culture are combined (as against the radical Christians); the distinction between Christ and culture is maintained (as against the accommodators).

There is in the synthesist’s view a gap between Christ and culture that accommodation Christianity never takes seriously enough, and that radicalism does not try to overcome. (p 121)

The principle examples Niebuhr gives are Clement of Alexandria (c 150-c 215) and Thomas Aquinas (c 1225-1274), the preeminent Roman Catholic theologian. As for Clement:

A Christian, in Clement’s view, must then be a good man in accordance with the standard of good culture...But this is by no means the whole of the Christian life. There is a stage of existence beyond the morally respectable life of the church-goer. Christ invites men to attain, and promises them the realization of a perfection even greater than that of the passionless wise man. It is a life of love of God for His own sake, without desire of reward or fear of punishment; a life of spontaneous goodness in which neighbors and enemies are served in response to divine love; a life in freedom, being beyond the law. (p. 127)

Thomas Aquinas describes a similar combination, which he delineates as “natural” and “supernatural,” and which he discusses with great care.

Though the cultivation of such good habits of action is man’s responsibility, yet even in this sphere he is not on his own; for he is constantly being assisted and directed by the gracious God, who mediates His help through the great social institutions of family, state, and church. But now there is set before him through the gospel the other happiness “exceeding the nature of man, whereunto man can arrive only by a divine virtue involving a certain participation in the Deity....Hence there must be superadded to man by the gift of God certain principles, whereby he may be put on the way to supernatural happiness, even as he is directed to his connatural end by natural principles, yet not without divine aid” (Thomas, Summa Theologica, II-I, Q. ii, art. VIII). (p. 132).

The value of the synthesist’s approach, according to Niebuhr, is that it takes seriously the need for human effort and institutions within culture and history, and that it has been a mediator “of Greek wisdom and Roman law to modern culture” (p. 144). One criticism lies at precisely this point: there is the danger of attributing too much value to human institutions and values which are always historically relative (“...to absolutizing what is relative, the reduction of the infinite to a finite form, and the materialization of the dynamic. [p. 145]). The major objection is that this approach does “…not in fact face up to the radical evil present in all human work.” (p. 148)

It is the dualist approach (“Christ and Culture in Paradox”) that takes sin seriously. Niebuhr says that the dualist does not start with human beings and their errors, and then turn to God; rather they start with God, whose grace is the context for what is meant by sin. Sin is actually the rejection of grace, which is always prior.

No dualist has found it easy to arrive at this starting point. Each is quick to point out that he was on the wrong road until he was stopped and turned around in his tracks by another will than his own. The knowledge of the grace of God was not given him, and he does not believe it is given to any, as a self-evident truth of reason—as certain cultural Christians, the Deists, for instance, believe. What these regard as the sin to be forgiven and as grace that forgives are far removed from the depths and heights of wickedness and goodness revealed in the cross of Christ. The faith in grace and the correlate knowledge of sin that come through the cross are of another order from that of easy acceptance of kindliness in the deity and of moral error in mankind of which those speak who have never faced up to the horror of a world in which men blaspheme and try to destroy the very image of Truth and Goodness, God himself. (pp. 150-151)

The dualist sees the Christian living in a paradox:
He is under the law; and yet not under law but grace; he is sinner and yet righteous; he believes, as a doubter; he has assurance of salvation, yet walks along the knife-edge of insecurity. In Christ all things are new, yet everything remains as it was from the beginning. God has revealed Himself in Christ, but hidden Himself in His revelation; the believer knows the One in whom he has believed, yet walks by faith, not by sight. (p.157)

The Christian, according to the dualist view, lives in two worlds simultaneously—not one or the other (the radical view) and not one fulfilling the other (the synthesist view).

Niebuhr uses principally Paul and Luther to exemplify this type. Of Paul he says:

…Paul is a dualist. His two ethics are not contradictory, but neither do they form two parts of one closely knit system. They cannot do so, for …they represent strategies on two different fronts—the front of the divine-human encounter, and the front of the struggle with sin and the powers of darkness. The one is the ethics of Christians as they yield to the overwhelming mercy of God; the other has in view His inclusive wrath against all unrighteousness… The two elements in Paul are by no means of equal importance. His heart and mind are all devoted to the ethics of the kingdom and eternal life. Only the necessities of the moment, while the new life remains hidden and disorder reappears in the churches themselves, wring from him the laws, admonitions, and counsels of a Christian cultural ethics. (pp. 166f)

Luther’s dualism took two forms: (1) his idea of “two kingdoms,” and (2) the relationship of outward acts and their inner basis. On the first he quotes Luther:

“There are two kingdoms, one the kingdom of God, the other the kingdom of the world….God’s kingdom is a kingdom of grace and mercy…but the kingdom of the world is a kingdom of wrath and severity” (p. 171)

The Christian lives in both kingdoms—in the first, the Christian’s trust in Christ produces a love that “serves one’s neighbor willingly and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, of praise or blame, of gain or loss” (Luther, On Christian Liberty); in the second, God has provided the civil authority to provide social order where trust and love are absent and sin remains.

On the second form, the relationship of outward acts and their inner basis, Niebuhr writes:

We may say, then, that the dualism in Luther’s solution of the Christ-and-culture problem was the dualism of The “How” and the “What” of conduct. From Christ we receive the knowledge and freedom to do faithfully and lovingly what culture teaches and requires us to do. (p. 175)

The value of the dualist approach, according to Niebuhr, is the degree to which it

…mirrors the actual struggles of the Christian who lives “lives between the times,” and who in the midst of his conflict in the time of grace cannot presume to live by the ethics of that time of glory for which he ardently hopes. It is a report of experience rather than a plan of campaign. (p. 185)

In addition, the dualists have taken “into account the dynamic character of God, man, grace, and sin” (p.185). The “vices” of dualism, as most commonly voiced, are that it “tends to lead Christians into antinomianism and into cultural conservativism” (p 187).

The last type of the “church of the center” that Niebuhr discusses is the “conversionists” (in the chapter “Christ the Transformer of Culture”). His major examples are the Gospel of John, Augustine (354-430), and a British theologian and Christian socialist F.D. Maurice (1805-1872). He likes this type because the examples he cites have the most realistic yet affirmative evaluation of human nature and culture. For this type, nature and culture are good; the only problem is they are misdirected and need to be redirected—hence, “conversion” and “transformation.” The misdirection is toward the self or the partial in preference to God or the Whole.
In presenting each type Niebuhr’s practice is to compare and contrast it with the others, as a way of clarifying it. Here is an example:

The conversionists’ understanding of the relations of Christ and culture is most closely akin to dualism, but it also has affinities with the other great Christian attitudes….The men who offer what we are calling the conversionist answer to the problem of Christ and culture evidently belong to the great central tradition of the church. Though they hold fast to the radical distinction between God’s work in Christ and man’s work in culture, they do not take the road of exclusive Christianity into isolation from civilization, or reject its institutions with Tolstoyan bitterness….In their Christology they are like the synthesists and the dualists; they refer to the Redeemer more than to the giver of a new law, and to the God whom men encounter more than to the representative of the best spiritual resources in humanity. (p. 190)

In their understanding of sin the conversionists are more like dualists than synthesists. They note that it is deeply rooted in the human soul, that it pervades all man’s work, and that there are no gradations of corruption, however various its symptoms. Hence they also discern how all cultural work in which men promote their own glory, whether individually or socially, whether as members of the nation or of humanity, lies under the judgment of God—who does not seek His own profit. Yet they believe also that such culture is under God’s sovereign rule, and that Christians must carry on cultural work in obedience to the Lord. (p. 191)

Niebuhr notes that what “distinguishes conversionists from dualists is their more positive and hopeful attitude toward culture” (p. 191)—specifically in three ways: on the importance of creation, the nature of man’s fall from created goodness, and the nature of history. On the last way,

For the conversionist, history is the story of God’s mighty deeds and of man’s responses to them. He lives somewhat less, “between the times” and somewhat more in the divine “Now” than do his brother Christians….does not live so much in expectation of a final ending of the world of creation and culture as in an awareness of the Lord to transform all things by lifting them up to himself. His imagery is spatial and not temporal… (p 195)

And so it goes, with each type: a description of the type, historical examples, and an evaluation (both its value and it shortcomings).

Some have suggested that Niebuhr shows a preference for the last type (“Christ as Transformer of Culture”), and that may be the case. The order in which the types are discussed and the fact that he is far less critical of the last type suggest it. Still, the issue of right and wrong (or of correct and incorrect) does not arise. Each type is valuable, but none is complete in itself. The impression is that each points beyond itself while not denying itself—that each is beckoned by its specific inadequacies to the “One beyond the many,” while retaining its value within it. In any case, this understanding serves our purposes better.

There is something else. These types are not alternatives; they are related to one another, inform one another, and in the final analysis could not exist without one another. This insight is reflected in Niebuhr’s introduction and in his concluding chapter. This awareness of relationalism led Niebuhr to muse in a 1960 Christian Century article (two years before his death) that “historical relationalism” might be a more adequate phrase than “historical relativism” (Jerry A. Irish, The Religious Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr, p. 35). It was an insight that expressed the core of his thought, and runs through The Responsible Self, to which we now turn.

The Responsible Self (1963)

Niebuhr had long realized that there are a great variety of selves and groups belonging to what he called the One beyond all the many, and that each had relative value. And that (at their best) they respected, honored, or at least tolerated each other. Gradually he came to realize that they are also related to one another.

He developed what he meant by relationalism in the Robertson Lectures at the University of Glasgow in 1960. These lectures were published as The Responsible Self in 1963 after his death the previous year. He begins by delineating three symbols or concepts by which the self attempts to know itself and to decide what it is to do:
“man-the-maker,” “man-the-citizen,” and (the type he is developing) “man-the-answerer.” It is the third, “man-the-answerer,” that has to do with being “responsible,” by which Niebuhr means “able to respond.”

The first two ways of thinking about the self—as “man-the-maker” or “man-the-citizen”—have been the most common over time. The most common symbol, according to Niebuhr,

…has been that of the maker, the fashioner. What is man like in all his actions? The suggestion readily comes to him that he is like an artificer who constructs things according to an idea and for the sake of an end. (p. 48)

The image of man-the-maker who, acting for an end, gives shape to things is, of course, refined and criticized in the course of its long use, by idealists and utilitarians, hedonists and self-realizationists. But it remains a dominant image. And it has a wide range of applicability in life. Purposiveness and humanity do seem to go together. Everyone…knows what it is to act with a purpose or a desired future state of affairs in mind, and knows also how important it is to inquire into the fitness of the steps taken moment by moment in his movement toward the desired goal. In most affairs of life we employ this practical ends-and-means reasoning and ask about our purposes….We are in all our working on selves—our own selves or our companions—technicians, artisans, craftsmen, artists. (pp. 49-50, 51)

The second image is of man-the-citizen, living under law. The artist is, at least to some extent, in control over her or his material.

Man-the-maker can reject material which does not fit his purposes. It is not so when the material is ourselves in our individual and in our social nature…We are with respect to those things not as an artist is to his material but as the ruler of a city is to its citizens. (pp. 51-52)

Niebuhr points out that even those who pursue some realization, do so under laws—intellectual pursuits, for example, are done “done under laws of logic or of scientific methods”; in the political realm, “what man does is not to seek the ends of order, peace, prosperity, and welfare but to do so under the rule of justice” (p. 53).

There have been many disputes concerning one of these symbols over against the other, as to which is primary and which secondary. Do laws, for example, have to be justified as to whether and to what extent they contribute to the attainment of a desired end? Or are goals subordinate to laws, which need to be obeyed for themselves without reference to outcome? This continuing dispute is, at least in part, what drives Niebuhr to conclude:

In this situation the rise of the new symbolism of responsibility is important. It represents an alternative or an additional way of conceiving and defining this existence of ours that is the material of our own actions. What is implicit in the idea of responsibility is the image of man-the-answerer, man engaged in dialogue, man acting in response to action upon him…now we think of all our actions as having the pattern of what we do when we answer another who addresses us. (p. 56)

The use of this image in the field of ethics is not yet considerable. When the word, responsibility, is used of the self as agent, as doer, it is usually translated with the aid of the older images as meaning direction toward goals or as ability to be moved by respect for law. Yet the understanding of ourselves as responsive beings, who in all our actions answer to action upon us in accordance with our interpretation of such action, is a fruitful conception, which brings into view aspects of our self-defining conduct that are obscured when the older images are exclusively employed. (p. 57)

He summarizes the differences between the three images of self:

In summary of the foregoing argument we may say that purposiveness seeks to answer the question: “What shall I do?” by raising as prior the question: “What is my goal, ideal, or telos?” Deontology tries to answer the moral query by asking, first of all: “What is the law and what is the first law of my life?” Responsibility, however, proceeds in every moment of decision and choice to inquire: “What is going on?” If we use value terms, then the differences among the three approaches may be indicated by the terms, the good, the right, and the fitting; for teleology is concerned always with the highest good to which it
Niebuhr further analyzes “responsibility” as including four components: (1) response itself to an action upon us; (2) interpretation of the action upon us; (3) accountability (“anticipation of answers to our answers”); and (4) social solidarity.

(1) The first element in the theory of responsibility is the idea of response. All action, we now say, including what we rather indeterminately call moral action, is response to action upon us. (p. 61)

(2) We do not, however, call it the action of a self or moral action unless it is response to interpreted action upon us. All actions that go on within the sphere of our bodies...are doubtless also reactions, but they do not fall within the domain of self-actions if they are not accompanied and infused, as it were, with interpretation....We cannot understand international events, nor can we act upon each other as nations, without constantly interpreting the meaning of each other’s actions....When we think of relations of managers and employees we do not simply ask about the ends each group is consciously pursuing nor about the self-regulated laws they are obeying but about the way they are responding to each other’s actions in accordance with their interpretations. (pp. 61-62)

(3) A third element is accountability...Responsibility lies in the agent who stays with his action, who accepts the consequences in the form of reactions and looks forward in a present deed to the continued interaction. (pp. 63-64)

(4) …social solidarity. Our action is responsible, it appears, when it is response to action upon us in a continuing discourse or interaction among beings forming a continuing society. (p. 65)

He summarizes what he means by “The Meaning of Responsibility” (Chapter I):

The idea or pattern of responsibility, then, may summarily and abstractly be defined as the idea of an agent’s action as response to an action upon him in accordance with his interpretation of the latter action and with his expectation of response to his response; and all of this in a continuing community of agents. (p. 65)

Niebuhr expands his idea of responsibility in four subsequent chapters. He discusses how the theory “responsibility” gives us a new understanding of (1) “society” (“the social character of all human life”) in Chapter 2, “Responsibility in Society”; of (2) time and history in Chapter 3; (3) the self as “absolutely dependent in its existence, completely contingent, inexplicably present in its here-ness and now-ness (“Responsibility in Absolute Dependence,” Chapter 4) and (4) of the meaning of sin and salvation (Chapter 5). In each he compares the implications of the theory of responsibility with those of “man-the-maker” and “man-the-citizen.”

As for a new meaning for “society,” Niebuhr draws on the insights of social psychology (he refers to George Horton Cooley, George Herbert Mead, and Henry Stack Sullivan—but especially Mead, who taught at the University of Chicago, 1894-1931). He also appeals to the ideas of Martin Buber (“the I that is known and active in I-Thou dialectic and the I in the I-It interaction), who in turn was anticipated by S. T. Coleridge and Ludwig Feuerbach.

Now, however, there has come into view a new aspect of our self-existence and with it a possibility of new emphasis in practical self-definition. Without obscuring the fact that the self exists as a rational being in the presence of ideas, or exists as moral being in the presence of mores and laws this view holds in the center of attention the fundamentally social character of selfhood. To be a self in the presence of other selves is not a derivative experience but primordial. To be able to say that I am I is not an inference from the statement that I think thoughts nor from the statement that I have a law-acknowledging conscience. It is, rather, the acknowledgment of my existence as the counterpart of another self....the self is fundamentally social, in the sense that it is a being which knows itself in relation to other selves but exists as self only in that relation. (p. 71)
The interaction of selves occurs in communities as distinct from contract societies.

The fundamental form of human association, it is seen, is not that contract society into which men enter as atomic individuals, making partial commitments to each other for the sake of gaining limited common ends or of maintaining certain laws; it is rather the face-to-face community in which unlimited commitments are the rule and in which every aspect of every self’s existence is conditioned by membership in the interpersonal group. (p. 73)

Since the self knows itself and acts within community, it knows itself and acts by the way it interprets actions upon itself within a context marked by larger patterns in which there is a constancy on which the self depends.

[The self] lives in responsive relations to Thou’s who on the one hand display constancy in their actions toward the self, and on the other live in constant response relations to other Thou’s and It’s. I can respond to the action of the other, or anticipate his reaction to my action, only as I interpret his movements directed toward me. I respond to his action not as an isolated event but as action in context, as part of a larger pattern…a constancy on which I have learned to depend…a constancy which is presented, if nowhere else, at least in the constant meanings of a common language. The self is never a mere I-Thou self but an I-You self, responding to a Thou that is a member of an inter-acting community. (pp. 77-78)

So the social self exists in responses neither to atomic other beings nor to a generalized other [Adam Smith] or impartial spectator [George Herbert Mead] but to others who as Thou’s are members of a group in whose interactions constancies are present in such a way that the self can interpret present and anticipate future action upon it. (p. 78)

Niebuhr (as usual!) goes further. He introduces the idea of the “triadic form of our life.” The interactions of the self with Thou’s and the You in a relatively predictable society include not only the Thou’s and the You, but “that to which Thou’s and the You respond” (p. 79). Every encounter is about something, distinguished from the I, Thou, and You.

This encounter of I and Thou takes place, as it were, always in the presence of a third, from which I and Thou are distinguished and to which they also respond. (p 79)

He gives two general categories for what he calls the third party. The first is “nature,” by which he means “that large world of events and agencies that we regard as impersonal” (p. 79). The second is a cause, as in the claim by the philosopher Josiah Royce (Harvard, 1882-1916), that the self “comes to selfhood by committing himself to a cause” (p. 83). Further, Niebuhr claims that for the monotheistic believer

…a life of responses to actions which is always qualified by our interpretation of these actions as taking place in a universe, and by further understanding that there will be a response to our actions by representatives of universal community. (p. 87)

…the process of self-transcendence or of reference to the third beyond each third does not come to rest until the total community of being has been involved. (p. 87)

When this monotheistic believer tries to understand his own life, he finds that it is a life lived less under universal law and less in pursuit of a universal ideal than a life of responsibility in universal community. (p. 89)

All of this occurs in time and history. These categories are of less importance to man-the-maker and man-the-citizen, though there are some ways in which they are important. For example, man-the-maker can have five-year plans and ideas of infinite progress. But time and history have even less importance for man as obedient to law. He cites Kant, “the most consistent representative of this way of defining and ruling the self”: “when the law of our intelligible existence (the moral law) is in question, reason recognizes no distinction in time” (p. 91). For the responsive and responsible self, however, time and history are inherent; it is time-full--and as memory and anticipation.
For the time-full self the past and the future are not the no-longer and the not-yet; they are extensions of the present. They are the still-present and the already-present. (p. 93)

…the self existing always in a now is one that knows itself as having been and as going into existence and into encounter. (p.93)

As memory, we interpret all actions upon us with “attitudes of trust and suspicion, accumulated in [our] biographical and historical past…not, in the first place, of its own encounters but of a society…” (p. 96). As anticipation of the future, we can have a range of responses--but

Those observers of our condition do not seem far wrong who say that for the most part if not universally we respond to present occasions in anxiety, as men whose ultimate future holds only encounter with death in one of its many forms ….Our actual ethics, personal and social, is to a large extent analyzable as defense ethics or as ethics of survival….With our ethics of self-defense or survival we come to each particular occasion with the understanding that the world is full of enemies though it contains some friends. Hence we respond to all actions upon us with an evaluatory scheme: beings are either good or evil… (pp. 98-99)

Here is the dilemma: “Tradition and memory on the one hand and on the other…an inescapable conviction about the death-dealing character of that total environment” (p. 100) appear to negate any idea of freedom in the present. Niebuhr answers,

The question of freedom arises in this connection as the question of the self’s ability to change its past and its future and to achieve or receive a new understanding of its ultimate historical context. If these two modifications are possible, then reinterpretation of present action upon the self must result, and a new kind of reaction, a response that fits into another lifetime and another history, can and will take place. (p. 101)

The task is reinterpretation-- of our past (as, perhaps, in enlightened forms of revisionist history or, in the case of our personal past, such things as analytical psychology) and of our future. In the latter case our metahistory plays an important part—is it a story of recurring cycles or infinite progress? Is it a life-giving or a death-dealing history, in which we fit our actions?

…the central work of revising our mythology of death into a history of life goes on and with it the redefining for us of what is fitting response in a lifetime and a history surrounded by eternal life, as well as by the universal society of being. (p. 107)

In positing such things as “eternal life” as the context of time and history, and “universal society of being” as the context for social interaction, Niebuhr is venturing into religious concepts. He acknowledges as much:

In both cases something that we may call the religious element in our responses has come into view, meaning by the word, religion, in this connection man’s relation to what is ultimate for him—his ultimate society, his ultimate history. (p. 109)

He goes further in the last two chapters.

In “Responsibility in Absolute Dependence,” he investigates the absolute contingency of the self, and the self’s attitude as either trust or distrust.

This element [“religion”] is brought more radically to our attention when we consider a third feature of our existence as selves who act, react, and interact, always as interpreting agents. The self that knows itself in encounter with others, finds itself to be absolutely dependent for its existence, completely contingent, inexplicably present in here-ness and now-ness. (p. 109)

There are many ways to explain how a given biological entity comes into being, but not the existence of the self; and in like manner, for example, how a given mind has come to think the way it does.
And yet after all this has been done two things remain uninterpreted: the radical action by which I was cast into this particular historical process, so that my interpretations and responses are directed toward particular challenges—in my case the challenges of the Christian religion; and the action by which I am. The category of fate, as Karl Heim called it, comes to my attention in the fact that I have no way of beginning religiously outside my history, in abstraction from my society. Jesus Christ is my fate in Heim’s words, whether I accept or reject him. If I respond to the giveness of my historic religion with the answer of atheism, I shall still be a Christian atheist. (pp. 111-112)

This is an occasion for faith, as Niebuhr understands the term:

…not as meaning some set of beliefs that must take the place of knowledge until knowledge is possible. The aspect of faith we have in mind is simply that trust or distrust which is said by some psychologists to be the basic element in the development of personality in a child’s first year and to which theologians, notably Luther, have pointed as the fundamental element in religion. Faith is an attitude of the self in its existence toward all the existences that surround it, as beings to be relied upon or to be suspected. It is the attitude that appears in all the wariness and confidence of life as it moves about among the living. It is fundamentally trust or distrust in being itself. (p. 118)

In distrust of the radical action by which I am, by which my society is, by which this world is, I must find my center of valuation in myself, in my nation, or in my church, or in my science, or in humanity, or in life. Good and evil in this view mean what is good for me and bad for me; or good and evil for my nation, or good and evil for one of these finite causes, such as mankind, or life, or reason. But should it happen that confidence is given to me in the power by which all things are and by which I am; should I learn in the depths of my existence to praise the creative source, then I shall understand and see that, whatever is, is good… (p. 124-125)

Niebuhr concludes, in the last chapter (“Responsibility in Sin and Salvation”), to indicate how the idea of responsibility gives redefinition to the ideas of sin and redemption. He notes that the commanding metaphor has been man-the-citizen, living over against the law. The self considered in this concept is called to be obedient, but is disobedient. Salvation is deliverance from punishment and into a new life of obedience:

Salvation is the justification of the transgressor, his acquittal before the universal court despite his guilt. Its condition is repentance interpreted as acknowledgment of guilt and sorrow and perhaps the substitutionary punishment of another, the Christ. The life of the redeemed is conceived often as life under a new law or higher law or, more adequately, as life lived in obedience to an inner law, inscribed upon the heart. The standard terms of theology all reflect the presence to the mind of legal imagery, justification by faith, substitutionary atonement, the righteousness of God, etc. (p. 130)

This, by the way, is the normal way of thinking in most of Christianity, but especially in the West, both in Roman Catholicism and Protestantism.

It is not the only way. There is an understanding of sin and salvation that is consonant with the symbol of man-the-maker. Here sin is hamartia, missing the mark.

Sin is not quite so much lawbreaking as vice; it is the perverse direction of the drives in man, or of his will in general, toward ends not proper to him….the consequence of…sin is understood as loss and confusion, rather than as guilt….Salvation is the restoration of the goal that had been lost and so also the healing of the diseased powers. (p. 133).

From the point of view of responsibility, sin is distrust in the One beyond the many and salvation is deliverance from that deep distrust to trust.

Our pleasure-seeking and our self-seeking, our passionate devotion to limited causes that involved us in conflict with others equally passionate in their restricted loyalties—all these have roots in our understanding that there is an ultimate power with which we deal but that is against us, desiring the death not only of the transgressor but also the righteous, not only the vicious but also of the virtuous. Hence all
our righteousness in loyalty to finite societies or causes has been infected with anxiety, defensiveness, and hidden rebellion against the One.

This is the body of death, this network of interactions ruled by the fear of God the enemy....For salvation now appears to us as deliverance from that deep distrust of the One in all the many that causes us to interpret everything that happens to us as issuing ultimately from animosity or as happening in the realm of destruction. Redemption appears as the liberty to interpret in trust all that happens as contained within an intention and a total activity that includes death within the realm of life, that destroys only to re-establish and make new....we begin to understand all that happens to us and to which we react as occurring in a final context of life-giving rather than death-dealing, as occurring in a universal teleology of resurrection rather than a universal teleology of entombment....an interaction moving always toward universal, eternal life.

The ethics of death is replaced by the ethics of life, of the open future, of the open society. (Pp.142-143)

Paul Tillich (1886-1965)

[Most of his writings are in print. Unfortunately, the excellent biography by Wilhelm and Marion Pauck is not, but is available as a used book (Amazon, Alibris, etc. This is also true of The Thought of Paul Tillich, edited by James Luther Adams and others.)

Paul Tillich began teaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York City in 1933. The new Nazi regime in Germany had removed him from his professorship at Frankfurt, and he came to America mainly under the good offices of Reinhold Niebuhr (his “savior,” he liked to say). When he retired from Union in 1955, he was appointed University Professor at Harvard, a position he held for seven years, after which he taught at the University of Chicago until his death.

He wrote eighteen books, in addition to two books of sermons and three volumes of his Systematic Theology. The first book to gain an American audience was The Protestant Era (1948), published when Tillich was sixty-two. His most popular books (excepting perhaps his sermons) are The Courage to Be (1952) and Dynamics of Faith (1957).

Some wag might well say that in the case of the two Niebuhrs and Paul Tillich, all three spoke German and two of them spoke English.

The Niebuhr brothers were brought up in a German-speaking community and church (the German Evangelical Synod), and used their German to visit Germany and read German scholarship. When Tillich arrived in the United States, he was forty seven years old and knew no English; to the end of his life he mispronounced English and spoke with a heavy German accent that left many of his listeners bewildered. The Paucks (The Life of Paul Tillich, p. 144) list a few examples: “waykwoomb” for “vacuum,” “crucification” for “crucifixion,” “salvated” for “saved,” “sacred word” for “sacred void,” “stinjes” for “stings.”

But even when they understood his English, many were baffled by his ideas. An example was the comment by the distinguished philosopher G. E. Moore, on hearing Tillich’s paper on existentialism, “Now really, Mr. Tillich, I don’t think I have been able to understand a single sentence of your paper” (cited by Marion Pauck, Paul Tillich, p. 313, note 96).

Tillich himself was aware of the difficulty of his theological language and could rise to humor about it....when we were preparing essays in The Protestant Era for publication, I could not fully understand the intended meaning of several paragraphs of his text. When I consulted him about the problem, he looked at the passages for some time and then said, “I haven’t the slightest idea what I intended there. Leave them out.” (James Luther Adams, Introduction, The Thought of Paul Tillich, pp.7-8)

Part of the reason for difficulty was that Tillich was educated and taught in German universities, and was steeped in the western philosophical tradition, the very ideas American thinkers were trying to get beyond. He was, for example, interested in ontology or the study of being, whereas American thinkers were focused on pragmatism and ethics. And he brought with him an understanding of existentialism and the unsettling of European culture that gave it birth—a little too dark and pessimistic for the American mind.
Tillich used terms—inventing some, adapting others—like *theonomy*, *Kairos*, *demonic*, *boundary*, *the Protestant principle*, *ultimate concern*, *being-itself*, *God beyond God*, *the unconditional*, *correlation*, *nonbeing*, *meaninglessness*, *anxiety*, all of which were vital components of his thought. These and other terms mystified many and some became part of continuing debate. Even to words that were fairly familiar, he would give specific and unfamiliar meanings.

*The Courage to Be*

It was the threat to the individual (though expressed culturally) of emptiness and meaninglessness that captured Tillich’s attention. It is what Tillich means by anxiety in this statement:

Sociological analyses of the president period have pointed to the importance of anxiety as a group phenomenon. Literature and art have made anxiety a main theme of their creations, in content as well as in style. The effect of this has been an awakening of at least the educated groups to an awareness of their own anxiety, and permeation of the public consciousness by ideas and symbols of anxiety. Today it is almost a truism to call our time an “age of anxiety.” This holds equally for America and Europe. (p. 35)

The threat of emptiness and meaninglessness is a form of anxiety, one form of three which he analyzes in his most popular book, *The Courage to Be*.

Anxiety is a precise term as Tillich uses it. It is “the state in which a being is aware of its possible nonbeing” (p 35).

…anxiety is the existential awareness of nonbeing. “Existential” in this sentence means that it is not the abstract knowledge of nonbeing which produces anxiety but the awareness that nonbeing is a part of one’s own being. It is not the realization of universal transitoriness, nor even the death of others, but the impression of these events on the always latent awareness of our own having to die that produces anxiety. Anxiety is finitude, experiences as one’s own finitude. This is the natural anxiety of man as man, and in some way of all living things. (pp. 35-36)

“Existential anxiety” is inherent to existence, and is distinguishable from fear, which has an object:

Fear, as opposed to anxiety has a definite object (as most authors agree), which can be faced, analyzed, attached, endured. One can act upon it, and in acting upon it participate in it—even if in the form of struggle. In this way one can take it into one’s self-affirmation….But this is not so with anxiety, because anxiety has no object, or rather, in a paradoxical phrase, is the negation of every object. (p. 36)

Actually, while the two are distinguishable, they are not separate. They are interdependent. For example, the anxious subject is always driven to establish objects of fear.

Anxiety strives to become fear, because fear can be met by courage… But ultimately the attempts to transform anxiety into fear are vain. The basic anxiety, the anxiety of a finite being about the threat of nonbeing, cannot be eliminated. It belongs to existence itself. (p. 39)

The other two forms of existential anxiety, besides the awareness of meaninglessness and emptiness, are fate and death, and guilt and condemnation.

The awareness of this threefold threat is anxiety appearing in three forms, that of fate and death (briefly, the anxiety of death), that of emptiness and loss of meaning (briefly, the anxiety of meaninglessness), that of guilt and condemnation (briefly, the anxiety of condemnation). In all three forms anxiety is existential in the sense that it belongs to existence as such and not to an abnormal state of mind as in neurotic (and psychotic) anxiety. (p. 41)

Tillich identifies three periods in the history of Western civilization that correlate with the three forms of anxiety. In each period one of the forms is foremost, but the other two are present.
The distinction of the three types of anxiety is supported by the history of Western civilization. We find that at the end of ancient civilization ontic anxiety is predominant, at the end of the Middle Ages moral anxiety, and at the end of the modern period spiritual anxiety. But in spite of the predominance of one type the others are also present and effective. (p. 57)

Courage is the word Tillich uses to denote the response, in its many forms, to anxiety. It is essentially “self-affirmation ‘in spite of,’ that is in spite of that which tends to prevent the self from affirming itself” (p.32).

Courage is the self-affirmation of being in spite of the fact of nonbeing. It is the act of the individual self in taking the anxiety of nonbeing upon itself by affirming itself either as part of an embracing whole or in its individual selfhood. Courage always includes a risk, it is always threatened by nonbeing, whether the risk of losing oneself and becoming a thing within the whole of things or of losing one’s world in an empty self-relatedness. Courage needs the power of being, a power transcending the nonbeing which is experienced in the anxiety of fate and death, which is present in the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness, which is effective in the anxiety of guilt and condemnation. The courage which takes this threefold anxiety into itself must be rooted in a power of being that is greater than the power of oneself and the power of one’s world. Neither self-affirmation as a part nor self affirmation as oneself is beyond the manifold threat of nonbeing. (p. 155)

Tillich examines at some length how courage responds to anxiety as predominantly present in the modern period in the form of emptiness and meaninglessness, both as “being a part” and as individualism. In the former (“being a part”) he looks at collectivism and neo-collectivism—notably in fascism, Nazism, and communism; and “democratic conformism” in its several forms (Chapter 4). As for individualism, he surveys “Romantic and Naturalistic Forms of the Courage to Be Oneself” and—with a great deal of attention—Existentialism. (In his presentation of Existentialism, he focuses on “the Courage of Despair,” discussing contemporary art and literature.) (Chapter 5) Each of these represents a loss of the other—the self is lost in being a part; the world is lost in individualism.

In presenting courage that will unite both forms—as “being a part” and as individualism—by transcending them, Tillich discusses the courage to accept acceptance. “…one accepts oneself as accepted in spite of one’s despair about the meaning of this acceptance” (p. 176).

That which grants acceptance is not the God of theism, but the “God above God.” The God of theism is inadequate to the threat of nonbeing.

The God of theological theism is a being beside others and as such a part of the whole of reality. He certainly is considered its most important part, but as a part and therefore as subjected to the structure of the whole. He is supposed to be beyond ontological elements and categories which constitute reality. But every statement subjects him to them. He is seen as a self which has a world, as an ego which is related to a thou, as a cause which is separated from its effect, as having a definite space and an endless time. He is a being, not being-itself….God appears as an invisible tyrant, the being in contrast with whom all other beings are without freedom and subjectivity….He becomes the model of everything against which Existentialism revolted. This is the God Nietzsche said had to be killed because nobody can tolerate being made into a mere object of absolute knowledge and absolute control. (pp. 184-185)

It is being-itself that is the God above the God of theism. “It is the power of being-itself that accepts and gives the courage to be” (p. 185)

Acceptance of acceptance is an act of courage, but more than an act —it is best described as faith.

…I do not think either mystical union or personal encounter fulfills the idea of faith. Certainly there is faith in the elevation of the soul above the finite to the infinite, leading to its union with the ground of being. But more than this is included in the concept of faith. And there is faith in the personal encounter with the personal God. But more than this is included in the concept of faith. Faith is the state of being grasped by the power of being-itself. (p. 172)

Tillich developed and is best known in theological circles for what he called the “method of correlation.”
The term “correlation” may be used in three ways. It can designate the correspondence of different series of data, as in statistical charts; it can designate the logical interdependence of concepts, as in polar relations; and it can designate the real interdependence of things or events in structural wholes. If the term is used in theology, all three meanings have important applications. There is a correlation in the sense of correspondence between religious symbols and that which is symbolized by them. There is a correlation in the logical sense between concepts denoting the human and those denoting the divine. There is a correlation in the factual sense between man’s ultimate concern and that about which he is ultimately concerned. (Systematic Theology, I, p. 60)

The most common and discussed use of the method of correlation was in relating questions rising from the human situation with answers given by the Christian tradition.

The Christian message provides the answers to the questions implied in human existence. These answers are contained in the revelatory events on which Christianity is based… Their content cannot be derived from the questions, that is, from an analysis of human existence. They are “spoken” to human existence from beyond it. Otherwise they would not be answers, for the question is human existence itself. But the relation is more involved than this, since it is correlation. There is a mutual dependence between question and answer. (Systematic Theology, I, p. 64)

It was the idea of correlation that informed Tillich’s understanding (in The Courage to Be) of “anxiety,” “courage,” “nonbeing,” and “being-itself.” These are correlated realities. They are not identical with, but are necessary for one another. For example, anxiety and courage are interrelated and dependent on one another, and both are related responses to the threat of nonbeing. In turn, nonbeing can only be a threat because of being-itself, which contains within it nonbeing.

Dynamics of Faith (1957)

In this context, Tillich set about to redefine “faith.” This was important for him because the term “confuses, misleads, creates alternately skepticism and fanaticism, intellectual resistance and emotional surrender, rejection of genuine religion and subjection to substitutes.” Taking a different tack from his definition of faith in The Courage to Be (“Faith is the state of being grasped by the power of being-itself”), he described faith as “ultimate concern,” and as inherent in human nature. All persons are concerned, and the only question is about the quality of the concern (is it ultimate?) and the ultimacy of that about which one is concerned. Put another way: is the object of concern worthy of the level of concern held by the person? As for the idea of correlation, this means there is no prior reality (no God) about which one has faith. There is only a reality (God) that is appropriate for ultimate concern, and there is no ultimate concern (faith) without an appropriate object. It is an important dimension of Tillich’s thought that the concern being expressed and that about which concern is expressed are related to one another essentially, even though it is important to distinguish them. As Tillich loved to say, subject and object are transcended.

The term “ultimate concern” unites the subjective and the objective side of the act of faith—the *fides qua creditur* (the faith through which one believes) and the *fides quae creditur* (the faith which is believed). The first is the classical term for the centered act of personality, the ultimate concern. The second is the classical term for that toward which the act is directed, the ultimate itself, expressed in symbols of the divine. This distinction is very important, but not ultimately so, for the one side cannot be without the other. There is no faith without a content toward which it is directed. There is always something meant in the act of faith. And there is no way of having the content of faith except in the act of faith. All speaking about divine matters which is not done in the state of ultimate concern is meaningless. (Dynamics of Faith, p. 10)

The first thing Tillich wanted to achieve was to show the difference between concern and *ultimate* concern, from the point of view of the one concerned.

Faith is the state of being ultimately concerned. The content matters infinitely for the life of the believer, but it does not matter for the formal definition of faith. And this is the first step we have to make in order to understand the dynamics of faith. (p. 4)
For Tillich faith is “an act of the total personality.” As such, it is centered. That means it “happens at the center of the personality and includes all its elements.” It involves the “rational structure of man’s personality,” but is not identical with it. As an act of the total personality, faith “transcends both the drives of the non-rational unconscious and the structures of the rational conscious. This aspect of faith (“as an act of the total personality”) also involves “emotion and will,” but again is not identical with them. All three are present, related, and distinguished. (This discussion is on pp. 4-8—and is continued in Chapter II.)

What about the “concern” that is the object of “ultimate concern”? “Man is driven toward faith by his awareness of the infinite to which he belongs, but which he does not own like a possession.” “The unconditional concern which is faith is the concern about the unconditional … the passion for the infinite” (p. 9)

In this way we have turned from the subjective meaning of faith as a centered act of the personality to its objective meaning, to what is meant in the act of faith. It would not help at this point in our analysis to call that which is meant in the act of faith “god” or “a god.” For at this step we ask: What in the idea of God constitutes divinity? The answer is: It is the element of the unconditional and of ultimacy. (pp. 9-10)

What about those objects of concern that claim ultimate concern without being appropriate to it (Tillich tends to cite such things as “success” and the “nation”—the latter largely because of claims of totalitarian states in his lifetime)?

This character of faith [“the ultimate of the act of faith and the ultimate that is meant in the act of faith are one and the same”] gives an additional criterion for distinguishing true from false ultimacy. The finite which claims infinity without having it (as, e.g., a nation or success) is not able to transcend the subject-object scheme. It remains an object which the believer looks at as a subject…. The more idolatrous a faith the less it is able to overcome the cleavage between subject and object. For that is the difference between subject and object. In true faith the ultimate concern is about the truly ultimate; while in idolatrous faith preliminary, finite realities are elevated to the rank of ultimacy. The inescapable consequence of idolatrous faith is “existential disappointment,” a disappointment that penetrates into the very existence of man! (pp. 11-12)

A similar point is made in his discussion of the “holy”:

What concerns one ultimately becomes holy. The awareness of the holy is awareness of the presence of the divine, namely of the content of our ultimate concern…. It is a presence which remains mysterious in spite of its appearance, and it exercises both an attraction and a repulsive function on those who encounter it … The reason for these two effects of the holy are obvious if we see the relation of the experience of the holy to the experience of ultimate concern. The human heart seeks the infinite because that is where the finite wants to rest. In the infinite it sees its own fulfillment…. On the other hand, if ultimacy is manifest and exercises its fascinating attraction, one realizes at the same time the infinite distance of the finite from the infinite and, consequently, the negative judgment over any finite attempts to reach the infinite. (p. 15)

All the same, the infinite or the ultimate is expressed through symbols—must be, Tillich says—because symbolic language alone is able to express the ultimate. Symbols point to something ultimate, but are not ultimate. They cannot be mistaken for the reality to which they point, otherwise they become idolatrous symbols of ultimate concern. Tillich makes six general observations about symbols (pp. 41-43):

(1) Symbols and signs are similar in that they both point beyond themselves to something else, but signs do not participate in the reality to which they point, while symbols do. “Signs can be replaced for reasons of expediency or convention, while symbols cannot.
(2) A symbol participates in that to which it points. The flag, for example, participates in the power and dignity of a country.
(3) A symbol (the example given are poems and pictures) “opens up levels of reality which are otherwise closed to us.”
(4) It also unlocks dimensions and elements of our soul which correspond to the dimensions and elements of reality.
Symbols cannot be produced intentionally—“They grow out of the individual or collective unconscious…” They grow and die.

In this connection Tillich discusses the significance of myths—“symbols of faith combined in stories about divine-human encounters” (p. 49). Some of these are “natural myths” “in which repetitive processes, such as the seasons, are understood in their ultimate meaning”; some are “historical myths”, as when a divine power acts in history with a people. It is in this section that Tillich tackles the criticism of religious myth:

The radical criticism of the myth is due to the fact that the primitive mythological consciousness resists the attempt to interpret the myth of myth. It is afraid of every act of demythologization. It believes that the broken myth is deprived of its truth and of its convincing power. Those who live in an unbroken mythological world feel safe and certain. They resist, often fanatically, any attempt to introduce an element of uncertainty by “breaking the myth,” namely making conscious its symbolic character. Such resistance is supported by authoritarian systems, religious or political, in order to give security to the people under their control and unchallenged power to those who exercise the control. The resistance against demythologization expresses itself as “literalism” (p. 51)

Tillich presents two “types of faith,” which he calls “ontological” and “moral.” The first is primarily sacramental in nature:

Faith sees in a concrete piece of reality the ultimate ground and meaning of all reality. No piece of reality is excluded from the possibility of becoming a bearer of the holy…such a piece of reality has, as the traditional word says, “sacramental” character…

Faith, in the sacramental type of religion, is not belief that something is holy and other things are not. It is the state of being grasped by the holy through a special medium. (p. 58)

The other is the moral. It is characterized by the idea of the law, expressed differently through its juristic form (as in Talmudic Judaism and in Islam), conventional form (as in Confucianist China), and the ethical type (represented by the Jewish prophets). “The social laws transcend the ritual element and produce a holiness of “what ought to be.” (Discussed in pp. 65-69)

Tillich discusses the “truth of faith” in Chapter 5. If faith is ultimate concern, it cannot be in conflict with reason. If reason is more than technical reason, and includes language, the search for knowledge, and such, it cannot be in conflict with faith.

If faith were the opposite of reason, it would tend to dehumanize man….A faith which destroys reason destroys itself and the humanity of man. For only a being who has the structure of reason is able to be ultimately concerned, to distinguish ultimate and preliminary concerns, to understand the unconditional commands of the ethical imperative, and be aware of the holy. All this is valid only if the second meaning of reason is presupposed: reason as the meaningful structure of mind and reality; and not the first meaning: reason as a technical tool.

Reason is the precondition of faith; faith is the act in which reason reaches ecstatically beyond itself. (pp. 75-76)

This distinction allows Tillich to cast the ongoing conflict of faith and reason in a different light:

…it must be acknowledged that man is in a state of estrangement from his true nature. Thus the use of his reason and the character of his faith are not what they essentially are and, therefore, ought to be. This leads to the actual conflicts between a distorted use of reason and an idolatrous faith. (p. 78)

In expanding this discussion to the relation of faith and science, Tillich gives a very good description of science:

Science tries to describe and explain the structures and relations in the universe, in so far as they can be tested by experiment and calculated in quantitative terms. The truth of a scientific statement is the adequacy of the description of the structural laws which determine reality, and it is the verification of this description by experimental repetitions. Every scientific truth is preliminary and subject to changes both in
grasping reality and in expressing it adequately. This element of uncertainty does not diminish the truth value of a tested and verified scientific assertion. It only prevents scientific dogmatism and absolutism. (p. 81)

He notes that there is no basis for conflict, since scientific truth and the truth of faith “do not belong to the same dimension of meaning.” “Science has no right and no power to interfere with faith and faith has no power to interfere with science.” [I don’t know why Tillich doesn’t follow his earlier statement about faith being the state in which reason reaches beyond itself to say that in ultimate concern science continues to reach beyond itself.]

It is a little more complicated with the truth of faith and historical truth, partly because there is more of a tension between the data found and the questions asked.

…history does not only tell a series of facts. It also tries to understand these facts in their origins, their relations, their meanings. History describes, explains, and understands. And understanding presupposes participation. This is the difference between historical and scientific truth. In historical truth the interpreting subject is involved; in scientific truth it is detached….faith can and must interpret the meaning of the facts from the point of view of man’s ultimate concern. In doing so it transfers historical truth into the dimension of the truth of faith. (p. 86)

Actually a similar phenomenon can be observed in the case of science:

…even in the scientific view of reality an element of faith is effective. Scientists rightly try to prevent these elements of faith and philosophical truth from interfering with their actual research. This is possible to a great extent; but even the most protected experiment is not absolutely” pure”—pure in the sense of the exclusion of interfering factors such as the observer, and as the interest which determines the kind of question asked of nature in an experiment. (p. 93)

When Tillich turns to a discussion of the truth of faith and philosophical truth, he followed what he did in discussing reason: he gave “philosophy” a limited meaning—what he called “prephilosophical”:

In this sense philosophy is the attempt to answer the most general questions about the nature of reality and human existence….Philosophy tries to find universal categories in which being is experienced.

If such a notion of philosophy is presupposed, the relation of philosophical truth to the truth of faith can be determined. Philosophical truth is truth about the structure of being; the truth of faith is truth about one’s ultimate concern….Philosophical truth consists in true concepts concerning the ultimate; the truth of faith consists in true symbols concerning the ultimate. (pp. 90-91)

The criterion for the truth of faith does not come from outside of faith as ultimate concern, but from within.

…It has, as the concept of concern itself, two sides, a subjective and an objective side. The truth of faith must be considered from both sides. From the subjective side one must say that faith is true if it adequately expresses an ultimate concern. From the objective side one must say that faith is true if its content is the really ultimate….

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The other criterion of the truth of a symbol of faith is that it expresses the ultimate truth which is really ultimate. In other words, that it is not idolatrous….That symbol is most adequate which expresses not only the ultimate but also its own lack of ultimacy….

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…The same criterion is valid with respect to the whole history of religion and culture. The criterion contains a Yes—it does not reject any truth of faith in whatever form it may appear in the history of faith—and it contains a No—it does not accept any truth of faith as ultimate except the one that no man possesses it….identical with the Protestant principle. (pp.96-98)
POSTSCRIPT: NIEBUHR, NIEBUHR AND TILLICH

So how do we compare these thinkers who redefined liberal Protestant thought in the period between the end of World War I and the Vietnam War?

They were all liberals, theologically and politically. What that meant theologically is that they embraced historical critical studies of the Bible and Christian thought—that the various books of the Bible and the various writings of the Christian tradition were the products of differing historical situations. Moreover, they agreed with the claim that Christianity is this-worldly rather than other-worldly.

They differed in their approaches to the human situation as expressed in the United States from 1917 to the Viet Nam War. Reinhold Niebuhr was the most active politically and most of his writing addresses political issues. He sought to redirect the Social Gospel in ways to make Christian social ethics less naïve, better informed, and hopefully more effective. Richard Niebuhr wrote mainly for the church and seminary worlds, and attempted to deal with pluralism and relativism. Paul Tillich was more psychologically oriented than the other two, and wrote mainly about the worlds of alienation and anxiety, drawing on existentialism, depth psychology and cultural expressions in art and literature.

There are a number of ways in which the theology of H. Richard Niebuhr and that of Tillich seem similar. Niebuhr speaks of God as the One Beyond and In the Many; Tillich talks of the God above the God of Theism and as the “ground of being.” The difference seems to be that Niebuhr’s language suggests a reality that is inclusive, whereas Tillich’s alludes more to the depth of reality. In speaking about faith, Niebuhr defined it in terms of trust and loyalty; Tillich as ultimate concern (in some ways a narrower definition). While before Tillich came to America Niebuhr translated Tillich’s *The Religious Situation*, which was the first introduction of his thought to the English-speaking world, and both belonged to a theological study group, there seems to have been no interaction between them. There are only three references to H. Richard Niebuhr in the Paucks’ careful and thorough biography of Tillich.

The relation of Reinhold Niebuhr to Tillich is more complicated. Their theological interests differed—Niebuhr was focused on ethics and especially social ethics; Tillich on the plight of the individual in a world of anxiety, and the ideas about being that lay behind it. Niebuhr admired Tillich’s thought while disagreeing with it as being too “Greek” and ontological. Niebuhr had been instrumental in bringing Tillich to America, and they were close friends and co-workers during the thirties. But eventually their relationship cooled. Part of this was their theological differences (Niebuhr liked to compare himself to Augustine, while identifying Tillich with the early Christian Platonist Origen). Part was Niebuhr’s rejection of Tillich’s sexual lifestyle. Part was that Tillich star began to rise and Niebuhr’s was setting—Volume I of Tillich’s *Systematic Theology* appeared in 1951 (to wide acclaim) and *The Courage to Be* in 1952; Niebuhr’s stroke occurred in 1952, after which his productivity was limited.

The two Niebuhr brothers shared a close personal relationship, as revealed by Richard’s letters to Reinhold (he burned the letters from Reinhold along with all his other correspondence late in his life). They shared
disillusionment with the naïve optimism of liberalism, but with different conclusions. Reinhold retained a commitment to social justice, understood God as the standard against which human efforts are judged, and sought a wiser appraisal of politics and culture. Richard despaired of all human effort, and thought of God as acting in history in ways that confounded human understanding. He thought that Reinhold had remained a liberal in his commitment to informed ethical action. They actually had one published interchange in which their differences were aired. It appeared in 1932 in *Christian Century*, and was occasioned by the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and Richard’s article “The Grace of Doing Nothing.” Fox (*Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 134) summarizes Richard’s understanding of their differences this way:

For Reinhold, God was outside history and history itself was “no more than tragedy.” For [Richard] God “is always in history….He is the rock against which we beat in vain, that which bruises us and overwhelms us when we seek to impose our wishes, contrary to His, upon Him.” The job of Christians was not to “qualify” the brutalities of life with “a homeopathic dose of Christian ‘love,’” but to repent of their sins, forgive the sins of others, and have faith that in the end God would bring fulfillment out of tragedy…. Despite his fulminations against sentimental liberalism, against complacent faith in the redemptive character of human goodwill, Reinhold remained a thoroughgoing liberal. His God did not act in history. His faith was built not upon abandoning himself to God’s will but upon the old liberal dream of transforming society. [Richard’s] position was carefully constructed as an alternative to his brother’s. It was one means by which he could construct an adult identity beyond the reach of his brother’s ever lengthening shadow.

Fairly quickly they were rendered irrelevant by changes in American life. For example, the social activism represented by the Civil Rights Movement and the Women’s Movement had little place for the sophisticated analyses of Reinhold Niebuhr (though one can mark the claim by Martin Luther King, Jr., that it was Niebuhr and not Gandhi who most influenced him). Liberation Theology, Black Theology, and Feminist Theology found few resources in the Niehubs and Tillich (though Mary Daly, one of the great feminist theorists, saw Tillich as the only relevant theologian for her work). Tillich suffered the fate of existentialism and depth psychology, both of which lost their grip on the American imagination. Harvey Cox in his 1965 best-selling *The Secular City* insinuated that Tillich’s preoccupation with meaningless was a middle class luxury, unrelated to what was happening in the larger culture.

What about their continuing influence? Well, their books are still in print, half a century after their deaths (H. Richard Niebuhr died in 1962; Tillich in 1965; Reinhold Niebuhr in 1971). Their students have been among the most distinguished academics in the country. Their approaches and central ideas are part of common parlance. Reinhold Niebuhr has reappeared, thanks to President Obama’s praise, David Brook’s repeated attention, and articles by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.