

is no reason to expect that the one Church, in its earthly part, would be free from sin; there is every reason to hope that together we should grow in sanctity. The notion that first each denomination must become purified and then we may come together is to be rejected.

C. In conclusion it must be noted that unity is primarily a matter for each local "church" and, indeed, for each individual Christian. Necessarily our minds are now much occupied with the healing of denominational divisions, but it will be as each denomination and each "society" within it grows in the unity about which we have been thinking that each will make a contribution toward the wider unity. Our Methodist emphasis upon fellowship could enable us to make this fact very plain.

If unity is to be found in the small or large group it must exist in the heart of each individual. This is part of the uniqueness of Christian unity that it is a most personal, even private matter. We find unity only in Christ through the Holy Spirit and, though God's purpose is for all mankind, the entrance gate is personal faith. Of each as well as of all it is true—to quote William Temple again—that "The true quality of unity is the consequence of the *doxa*, the glory, which is the quality of life of the new creation in Christ." "When anyone is united to Christ, there is a new world" (II Cor. 5:17 N.E.B.). "You are all one person in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28 N.E.B.).

We must pray and work that we may "attain the unity inherent in our faith and our knowledge of the Son of God" (Eph. 4:13).

11

The Church and Modern Man

F. THOMAS TROTTER

It is very proper that this institute be devoted to the study of the nature of the Church. In that direction we have necessarily delved into the questions of history and doctrine and sought to find those marks of the people of God which ought to be our *raison d'être*.

Implicit in all our discussion have been the persistent, if not always stated, questions: What is the nature of the self-understanding of the modern world? How does the man of the mid-century locate himself in relation to the Church? In what ways does the Church need to frame its witness to God in Christ in order to speak to man's condition? Such questions have been behind most of our papers and all our conversations. Of course, any theologizing today, done without reference to the apologetic imperative, is likely to be mere diletantism.

The observation that we live in a *new* time with immense new problems is commonplace. This period has been described as the "post-Christian era," as "the time of the world come of age," or,

in Romano Guardini's phrase, the "end of the modern world." Modern man, if indeed he may still be called "modern," has become what he is within a few generations. The swiftness of this change in man's self-understanding has left the Church puzzled in its apologetic. The Church often is discovered to be answering questions that have not been asked. While it persists in the undoubtedly important work of mining Christian history and traditions, those very traditions are being called into radical doubt. Classically defined as in "God's image," man finds more understandable an art show entitled the "new images of man"—which displayed a poignantly macabre exhibition of dessicated, emaciated, and haunted forms. This is a form of what Paul Tillich likes to call the "questions" being asked of the Church. I once heard a churchman say to Tillich, in reference to such art, "What are we going to do about this ugly art?" Tillich winced visibly and then replied, "Please, say it is *impoverished*, but don't say it is ugly." Such a question points the Christian conscience to witness, not to judgment. In the light of classical Christian values—or what we may have assumed were values—and in the light of the changing, sometimes violent, new images of man, the Church is called radically to examine its preaching and its life. Ortega y Gasset wrote: "I am compelled to conclude that even the most gifted among us . . . have not the slightest suspicion that the pointer in the compass of western sensibility is veering through at least ninety degrees."¹

I propose, therefore, in this chapter, to do three things: First, I will attempt to describe in admittedly general terms the image of the Church in the modern world, noting something of its style and touching on some of the characterizations of the Church in recent literature; second, I will suggest two types of "religious" responses to the Church in the light of the issues of the mid-century, the movements of "out-flanking" and "attack"; finally, and briefly, I will indicate some of the suggestions advanced by Christian thinkers to cope with the issues of the modern world.

¹ *The Modern Theme*, translated by James Cleugh (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1961), p. 20.

The Image of the Church in the "Age of the Apocalypse"

When we look at our times we cannot but notice the symptom which Emmanuel Mounier has called "the apocalyptic consciousness." This mood fairly permeates Western culture. One has only to turn to the arts—sensitive barometers to man's spiritual condition—to find evidence of the extent of this mood: "Waiting" (Beckett); "the age of vigil" (Scott); "the age of longing" (Koestler); "the seventh seal" (Bergman).

There is abroad a widespread feeling that some cataclysmic event is at hand. Modern man lives under the seemingly permanent threat of nuclear annihilation. He has approached what Jaspers calls "the borders of possibility" beyond which lies catastrophe.

The images which dominate the writings of the most sensitive commentators of our time are often borrowed from Christian apocalypticism. Samuel Beckett uses specific allusions in his *Waiting for Godot*; Ignazio Silone does also in his *Bread and Wine*. Important films, such as Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* and Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, are modern paraphrases of the revelation of John. While the artist is attracted to the apocalyptic imagery in the biblical materials, however, he makes significant revision. Ironically, the most essential Christian element, the eschatological dimension of hope, is missing. The modest achievement of Beckett's heroes, for example, is simply that "they have kept their appointment." The text for Bergman's apocalypse is Rev. 8:1: "When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about half an hour." Ominous image—the measurable pause before the end!

The late Robinson Jeffers viewed the decline of Christian culture and the rise of modern culture as the prelude to man's doom:

Look, there are two curves in the air: the air
That man's fate breathes: there is the rise and fall
of the Christian culture-complex, that broke
its dawn cloud

Fifteen centuries ago, and now past noon
Drifts to decline; and there's the yet vaster curve, but

mostly in the future, of the age that began at
 Kittyhawk
 Within one's lifetime.—The first of these curves passing
 its noon and the second orient
 All in one's little lifetime make it seem pivotal.
 Truly the time is marked by insane splendors and agonies.
 But watch when the two curves cross: you children
 Not far way down the hawk's-nightmare future: you will
 see monsters.³

We live in a time of "insane splendors and agonies" and wonder
 at what monsters lie in wait down the "hawk's-nightmare future."
 Or, to borrow W. B. Yeats's compelling lines:

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
 Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?⁴

Three Characteristics of Modern Man

There is widespread agreement that modern man—we members
 of the human race who happen to be living in the mid-century—
 is undergoing severe shifts in his self-understanding. He is a prob-
 lem to himself, to his neighbors, and, I am sure, even to God. He
 is certainly a problem to me; because I am not quite sure how
 I proceed with any confidence at all to describe this mythical
 person. Therefore I have chosen simply to describe what it occurs
 to me is a fairly accurate picture of the cross section of American
 man and American religion. I am sure that there will be significant
 modifications from country to country.

1. *My mythical man is a biblical illiterate.*

The enormous publishing successes of the Revised Standard and
 the New English Bibles notwithstanding, most of our contempo-
 raries own Bibles but few read them. As has been pointed out by
 Strawson, the loss of biblical language and imagery creates an im-

³"Diagram." Copyright 1948 by Robinson Jeffers. Reprinted from *The Double Axe and Other Poems* by Robinson Jeffers by permission of Random House, Inc.

⁴"The Second Coming." Used by permission of The Macmillan Company, New York; Macmillan and Company of Canada, Ltd.; Mrs. W. B. Yeats; and A. P. Watt & Son.

poverishment in sacrament and in hymn singing. A whole category
 of humor has arisen around the theme of the confusion and ig-
 norance about the Bible.

This represents a most serious fact in defining our modern man.
 He stands—particularly in America—deaf to the gospel unless it
 is demythologized into the colloquial. An example of his helplessness
 may be seen in this whole matter of "apocalyptic consciousness."

Many Christians find this literary world of apocalyptic images
 a strange one indeed. This is due in part to the widespread dis-
 interest in biblical apocalypticism in the liberal phase of American
 religion, but more generally to the debiblicized nature of modern
 church practice. The average Christian in the U.S.A. normally is
 almost incapable of understanding imaginative biblical literature.
 The source of his religious faith is not necessarily the Bible or tra-
 dition, but a vague sort of self-validating notion of "experience."
 Kathleen Bliss noted that "theologians today are being asked to
 write for an audience which scarcely knows its Bible, and uses, in
 the ordinary traffic of life, a language farther removed from biblical
 concepts than any has been for ages."⁴

An example drawn from Shakespearean criticism may illustrate
 this point. In recent years, critics like G. Wilson Knight of Leeds
 and Roy Battenhouse of Indiana have indicated a substantial case
 for a criticism of Shakespeare based upon Christian myth. General
 reluctance to accept this hypothesis is based upon the inability of
 the modern critic seriously to consider the possibility that there was
 a time when men generally and naturally thought in Christian
 categories. In a recent study of this problem J. A. Bryant wrote:

The average Elizabethan . . . would probably have sat, or stood, through
 a Shakespeare play without noticing the astonishing number of allusions
 to Scripture, Prayer Book, and dogma generally. He would have missed
 them because to him they were commonplace; we miss them because to
 us they are almost completely foreign, and their strangeness seems but a
 part of the general strangeness of an unfamiliar language.⁵

⁴ Evanston Report, *Christian Century* (1954).

⁵ *Hippolyta's View* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1961), p. 15.

2. *My mythical modern man's religion is essentially sentimentalism.*

Religious sentimentalism, or "religiosity" as Vahanian has called it, is a deeply seated trend in modern American religion. It takes a variety of forms, but most generally it is characterized by an accent on emotional validation and a suspicion of the dogmatic or traditional. Particularly prevalent expressions of this syndrome include the blasphemous "names" for God such as "the man upstairs," "my friend," "the ever-loving doll," or simply "He." Recently in America a popular song was widely admired, the lyrics of which were "Faith, hope, and charity, That's how to live successfully." The mass popularity of Werner Sallman's "Head of Christ" measures this sentimentalism. John Dixon, a prominent Methodist art critic, has described this portrait as one of an "un-sexed matinee idol dressed in a department store nightgown." A further expression of this mood in American life has been the phenomenon called "piety on the Potomac." The surest way to rile tempers in politics today is to suggest that sentimental religious slogans and other pious gymnastics have no place in either politics or religion.

The sources of religiosity are deep in recent Western history. As has been suggested earlier in this volume, the emphasis of Wesley on "inward religion" became, in the nineteenth century, an emphasis on "the religion of inwardness." As Karl Barth and Paul Tillich have both carefully suggested in relation to the problem of Schleiermacher's famous definition of religion, the nineteenth century generally chose to accent the subjective rather than the objective side of his formula. The transcendent otherness of God was swallowed up in pious feelings about God. One of the ironies of the current evangelistic efforts of Billy Graham, vast though the operation may be, is the fact that his message is, by and large, proclaimed in the language of the recent past. Nostalgia is the prime ingredient in religiosity. This spills over into a whole nexus of outworn ideologies, including moral, social, and political views, so that in contemporary American life the specter of an extremist right in politics has openly challenged the easy accommodations of the

Church's gospel to the world. This is done in the name of religion and seems only further to convince the cultured despisers on the left that the Church is outmoded in the twentieth century.

3. *My mythical modern man is a specialist, a technician, and he sees religion as having but limited relevance and hegemony in life.*

One of the fruits of overspecialization in the modern world is the gradual withering away of the Church's authority in the world. This trend, more like a mass movement in the last generation, has produced both universal acceptance of an infinite clamor of truth claims, on the one hand, and strangely myopic vision on the other. Ortega has called the modern man *Naturmensch*—he has contempt for tradition and principles and he adopts a "primitive" attitude toward anything outside his "field." Specialization continues. Universities find increasingly and mutually exclusive departments neither speaking to nor understanding each other.

While specialization brings primitive attitudes in most areas, it also brings men the kind of assurance that comes from authority and knowledge in a specialization and the abdication of responsibility and knowledgeability in other sectors. With notable exceptions, scientists producing the fearful nuclear weapons of our time assume that moral dilemmas involved are the problems of theologians and politicians. Karl Jaspers, in his notable study, *Man in the Modern Age*, wrote:

In the false clarity which is created by the consciousness of technique and of man's life as the consciousness of the production of all things, the true inwardness of the indubitably unconditioned is lost. Religion as the historical basis of human existence has become, so to say, invisible. . . . Religious faith actively held by individuals grows continually rarer.*

The World's View of the Church

Amos Wilder's suggestion in his important little book *Theology and Modern Literature* is that the modern writer often attacks the

* Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1933, p. 152. Used by permission of Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd.

desiccated character of the Church's religiosity from the point of view of the prophetic insights of gospel itself. The term "vestigial moralities" does not imply ethics alone, but that region of a society's life where morals, values, manners, and, above all, taste overlap. Wilder wrote:

The greatest handicaps to creative social behavior are rigidity and obtuseness. In religious groups these are often encouraged by moral dogma and habit. In this area, the agnostic today, as over against the church, is not only emancipated and indifferent; he is caustic, if not vituperative.⁷

Rigidity and obtuseness encouraged by moral dogma and habit—a description that is more often accurate than we like to feel. This provides a fertile field for an attack upon the Church in modern literature, ranging all the way from the debunking and serio-comic to the sophisticated and literate. This tendency is so general as to be an almost permanent formula in modern literature. As such it represents an immense barrier to effective communication of the gospel, on the one hand, and acceptance within the church of the prophetic warnings of modern literature, on the other.

The "debunking" school of literary attack on the Church is the most obvious and least effective criticism. The most famous practitioner of this form of criticism was probably Sinclair Lewis. His scathing attack upon the Church was unrelieved. One has only to read *Elmer Gantry* to be reminded that debunking, indeed, was Lewis' forte. Describing his hero, Lewis wrote that Gantry "never said anything important, and he always said it sonorously. He could make 'good morning' seem profound as Kant, welcoming as a brass band, and uplifting as a cathedral organ." Lewis' attack was precise and measured to prick the conscience of any who seriously pondered the problem of the communication of the gospel. Describing Gantry's Sunday school background, Lewis noted that Gantry "had, in fact, got everything from church and Sunday school except, perhaps, any longing whatever for decency and kind-

⁷ Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958, p. 115.

ness and reason." In one respect this is a *prophetic* protest against the vestigial morality and religiosity of the American culture religion. To that extent it is honest and hard hitting. On the other hand, Lewis was unmerciful in his protest. There is no hope, no grace. One has only to compare the novel itself with Richard Brooks's exciting adaptation of it in the film. Brooks added sympathy to the negative witness of Lewis and made it a much more powerful human story, but the symbol of "Gantryism" is forever with us.

An obscure, but typical, debunker of the same period was Herbert Asbury, a distant relative of Bishop Asbury, one of the founding fathers of The Methodist Church. Asbury wrote a lighthearted but devastating book entitled *Up from Methodism*. He had become so embittered with the vestigial morality of his Southern Methodist background that he produced this book which now seems a bit intemperate. We must remember, however, that it was written in the decade of the Darrow-Bryan debates on evolution, the temperance movement, H. L. Mencken, and Elmer Gantry. Typical of Asbury's style is this passage:

[The Preacher] made it quite clear, out of his profound knowledge of the wishes of the Almighty, that God did not want little boys and girls to have a good time. Quite the contrary. God wanted them to do exactly what the Preacher told them to do; He wanted them to accept the Preacher as their guide and their philosopher and to believe everything they were told, without fretting him with unanswerable and therefore blasphemous questions. He wanted the little boys and girls to spend most of their time praying to Him to "gimme this and gimme that," and the rest of it being little gentlemen and little ladies, solemn and subdued, speaking only when spoken to and answering promptly when called. God told the Preacher, who relayed the message on to me very impressively, that it was a sin to play marbles on Sunday, or to play for keeps at any time; that it was a sin to roll hoops on the sidewalk in front of the church or rattle a stick against the picket fence in front of the parsonage. Everything that I wanted to do, everything that seemed to hold any promise of fun or excitement, was a sin.⁸

⁸ New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1926, pp. 69-70.

William Faulkner explored exhaustively the theme of the vestigial morality. One might even venture the suggestion that the fall of the Compson family and the rise of the Snopes family, the collapse of the old order and its moralities and the rise of a new order and its amoralties, represents an imaginative statement of the moral ambiguities of our time. Quentin in *The Sound and the Fury* is a good example of this problem. Wilder wrote:

We see the meager and irremediably injured early years of the children, the prenatal history, as it were, of later giant traumas and obsessions; the inculcation of social and racial distortions; the inbreeding of desiccated, feudal-Christian survivals in the son Quentin.⁹

The Sound and the Fury is set in the framework of Easter week, 1928. Faulkner, apparently, set his novel directly in the middle of the central theme of Christian faith, the resurrection. Easter for the Compson family is measured simply by the fact that the Negro servants have been allowed to attend church that day and, therefore, the Sunday dinner will be modest and cold. Easter equals "cold cuts" for the Compsons.

In Faulkner's Snopes family trilogy we see his view that the desiccated morality of "religious" people is so conditioned by selfish and pre-Christian motivation that any transcendence is problematic. Indeed the gospel itself becomes the basis for a new tyranny.

. . . ours [is] a town established and decreed by people neither Catholics nor Protestants nor even atheists but incorrigible nonconformists, nonconformists not just to everybody else but to each other in mutual accord; a nonconformism defended and preserved by descendants whose ancestors hadn't quitted home and security for a wilderness in which to find freedom of thought as they claimed and oh yes, believed, but to find freedom in which to be incorrigible and unreconstructible Baptists and Methodists; not to escape from tyranny as they claimed and believed, but to establish one.¹⁰

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 120.

¹⁰ *The Town* (New York: Random House, 1957), p. 307.

A button-down collar expression of the same theme is to be found in J. D. Salinger's writings. Recent studies indicate that Salinger is very likely the most popular single writer with American college students today, if not with certain high-school parent groups. His *Catcher in the Rye* has enjoyed phenomenal success since publication. Holden Caulfield, confused and neurotic though he is, is able to point accurately at the soft spots in conventional piety and vestigial religion in our time.

Salinger is at his critical best in *Franny and Zooey* when he has Zooey express himself on the "flabbiness" of much modern religion. He takes the form of criticizing the sentimental amalgam of Jesus and Buddha and Saint Francis. Franny represents the type of confused modern religiosity which is uneasy in the atmosphere of vestigial morality and reacts by being emancipated; e.g., reading Buddhism and other exotic literature, on the one hand, but, on the other, being desperately confused about the earthy and commonplace arena of grace—namely, the place where men live and work and play. In a striking passage, Zooey tells Franny that her search for religious authenticity is sentimental.

Another approach found in the criticism of religion in modern literature is the expression of the apparent loss of confidence in traditional religious practices in themselves. Graham Greene's characters while nominally and even active Roman Catholics, often express the *ennui* and disinterestedness of a nonbeliever. Querry, for example, when asked by Rycker what he prays for when he prays, replies, "I ask for a teddy bear." Albert Camus' characters work out their salvation totally outside the context of the Church. T. S. Eliot, often thought of as the spokesman for a Christian criticism in modern literature, shares this judgment that the rites of faith now seem problematic. Celia, in *The Cocktail Party*, is embarrassed to discuss theological matters because for her family religion simply did not exist:

Well, my bringing up was pretty conventional—
I had always been taught to disbelieve in sin.

Oh, I don't mean that it was ever mentioned!
But anything wrong, from our point of view
Was either bad form, or was psychological.¹¹

Possibly the most consistent attack in modern literature upon the formal and moribund character of religion is to be found in the writings of Franz Kafka, in particular in his short story entitled "At Our Synagogue" and in such allusions as the famous Cathedral scene in *The Trial*. Joseph K., a bank clerk, has been asked to show a visitor the city's cathedral. He wonders why he was chosen for the task. Then he recalls that sometime earlier, although he is no longer associated with the movement, he had been an active member in The Society for the Preservation of Ancient Monuments.

One of the most sophisticated of these expressions of disenchantment with Christian institutions is to be found in Wallace Stevens' poem "Sunday Morning." He pictures a woman sitting on the veranda of her home on Sunday morning, dreamingly recalling religious images of ages of faith.

Complacencies of the peignoir, and the late
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
And the green freedom of a cockatoo
Upon a rug, mingle to dissipate
The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.
She dreams a little, and she feels the dark
Encroachment of that old catastrophe,
As a calm darkens among water-lights.
The pungent oranges and bright green wings
Seem things in some procession of the dead,
Winding across wide water, without sound.
The day is like wide water, without sound,
Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet
Over the seas, to silent Palestine,
Dominion of the blood and sepulcher.¹²

¹¹ Used by permission of Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., and Faber and Faber, Ltd.

¹² From *Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.). Used by permission of the publisher.

The dressing gown, the late coffee and pungent oranges, and the dissipation of the holy hush of ancient sacrifice—these things symbolize the loss of roots in the Christian tradition for many of the most sensitive men and women in our time.

Two Possible Responses

Modern man has assumed two stances with regard to the classical Christian tradition. He has, on the one hand, simply "outflanked" that tradition and created what amounts to a new and secular faith. On the other hand, he has "attacked" the tradition and sought to reconstruct meaningful human existence on the ruins of classical Christianity.

Outflanking God

Franklin Baumer, in his provocative book *Religion and the Rise of Scepticism*, locates the origins of the modern secular faith in the work of the Enlightenment. Because of the obvious penalties imposed on theologians who dared to suggest radical revisions of the orthodox dogma, the sensitive and imaginative thinkers developed the convenient device of "outflanking" and, thereby, relegating Christian categories to irrelevancy. Kant's achievement, "religion within the bounds of pure reason," is generally a perfect expression of the program of the development of rationalism "around" Christianity. This was to lead to the development of the triumph of science in the nineteenth century. Baumer notes that the *Summa Theologica* was to the thirteenth century as the *Encyclopedia of the Arts, Sciences, and Crafts* was to the eighteenth century. The tendency of the rationalistic movement in religion in the seventeenth century and onward was to make "religion" (the first commandment) supplemental to "ethics" (the second commandment).¹³

Inevitably a "utopian" spirit begins to dominate the rationalistic thrust. Rational society, for Condorcet is to be

an asylum in which the memory of his persecutors does not follow him, an asylum in which, living in imagination with mankind re-established in

¹³ Cf. Baumer (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1960), p. 59.

its rights and in its true nature, he can forget mankind corrupted and tormented by greed, fear, envy. It is in this asylum that he truly lives with his fellows, in a *heaven* which his reason has created, and which his love of humanity embellishes with the purest joys.¹⁴

One cannot overlook the enormous strides made by civilization during this period of rational and scientific progress. In the perspective of time, however, we see how much it cost man in human terms. I need not dwell on the widely documented phenomena of the development of this movement. Let it suffice to indicate that the culmination of this movement has not been a free man but a slave man. As Tillich, Guardini, Jaspers, and others are pointing out, the utopian tradition has tended to create a man who is not autonomous, but dominated by technology and rational abstraction. This has led to the successive shocks of the twentieth century which have badly jolted modern man out of his complacency regarding his own ability to cope with existence. Jaspers has the most incisive description of the feeling of "terrible impotence" that has been the legacy of rationalism in our time. With the loss of transcendence, man's hopes are anchored in the possibility of earthly fulfillment and perfection. But since his finitude requires that his powers of intervention and control are ultimately limited, he cannot hope to control events decisively. Jaspers wrote:

One inspired with a religious conviction that man was naught in the face of Transcendence was unperturbed by changing events. Changes were the outcome of God's will, and were not felt to clash with other conceivable possibilities. Today, however, the price which aims at universal understanding, and the arrogance of one who regards himself as master of the world and therefore wants to mould it to his liking, knock at all doors, while their frustration arouses a feeling of terrible impotence.¹⁵

Destroying God

A later reaction to the utopian mood of secular religious faith is "nihilism," the peculiar form of faith which seeks to attack Chris-

¹⁴ *Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*, translated by Carl Becker, pp. 150-51. Quoted in Baumer, *ibid.*, p. 75.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 3.

tianity rather than outflank it. As Kant's dictum, "religion within the bounds of pure reason" may serve as the description of the former movement, the French revolutionary slogan, "erase the infamy," will serve to describe the attack.

The growing dominance of this type of religious thinking in the twentieth century is directly related to the collapse of the values and hopes of the 19th century. Heine is the first modern voice in this form of thinking, but it is the enigmatic German Nietzsche to whom we turn for the fullest expression of the mood. For Nietzsche God is dead. Nietzsche had the kind of honesty that hit hard at the very center of faith itself. For Nietzsche the skeptical tradition had moved into a new phase which was both qualitatively and quantitatively different from previous phases. In this phase the intellectual classes did not seek merely to convict the Christian God with weapons of reason, but, as Baumer noted, "They drew their knives and assassinated God himself."¹⁶ It is no coincidence that writers of our generation have turned to Nietzsche as the author and prophet of the hard times in which we find ourselves. In the beautiful passage in *The Joyful Wisdom* Nietzsche wrote:

We ourselves, readers of riddles, born soothsayers, who wait as it were on the mountain-tops, somewhere between yesterday and tomorrow and contradictorily harnessed between the two, we the premature firstborn of the century to come, who should already have perceived the shadows that will envelop Europe, why do we await the rise of this black tide without any real interest, even without fear or anxiety for ourselves.¹⁷

God died for Nietzsche, not primarily because the concept was useless, but that what man called God was not worthy of God. In a pregnant passage in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* Nietzsche expressed his anger and frustration with the intellectual and religious posture of the nineteenth century: "I have moved out of the house of the learned and slammed the door behind me. For too long my

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 129.

¹⁷ New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, Inc., 1960, p. 343.

soul sat hungrily at their table; unlike them, I was not trained to consider awareness as easy as cracking nuts."¹⁸

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke is the literary prophet of Nietzsche. In Rilke, and to a certain extent in his predecessor Hölderlin, we see the "religious" reconstruction of self-awareness after the destruction of God by Nietzsche. But the program is distinctively different from that of the rationalists. The Romantic movement in England and the Aufklärung in Germany represent literary movements expressive of the rationalistic temper of the time. It is no coincidence, for example, that Shelley found his mythic prototype in Prometheus, the defiant one, the one who brought fire and technic to man. Rilke, following in the wake of Nietzsche, finds his mythic prototype in Orpheus, the singer of songs in hell. Whereas Shelley was the social visionary, leading man in ever-greater triumphs over ignorance and injustice, Rilke more modestly proposed to lift man by the sheer power of poetry itself. God is dead; justice is improbable; only immanence remains. In one of his letters, Rilke noted that "God is no longer sayable; and his attributes fly back into creation."

The Church's Reaction

These then are two options for the definition of modern man. He may be utopian, post-Christian, rationalist, or he may choose to be nihilistic, post-Christian, existentialist. The irony of the case is that each is possible of a "religious" statement. There can be little question about the authority in the world of Julian Huxley's *Religion Without Revelation*, on the one hand, or Camus' *The Rebel*, on the other. They are influential and informed religious statements. That they pose a desperate challenge to traditional Christianity is not to be denied, and to that challenge and response we must now turn.

The irony of the Church's dilemma is to be seen in the fact that while the Church has thought that its cultural destiny lay more

¹⁸ New York: Boni and Liveright, Inc., 1917, p. 145.

obviously with the cultural affirmers—in the tradition of the Enlightenment—it is with the irrationalists, the existentialist critics, that the most vital religious thrusts may be seen in our time. While both the rationalists and the irrationalists have rejected classical Christian theological positions, they continue to operate more or less within the framework of an ethical system established by Christianity. Thus you find the ethical absolutism and perfectionism of Lord Russell on the one hand, and the moral rigorism of Camus on the other. Henri Peyre of Yale has noted that the French existentialists are really Jansenists—even, in Peyre's phrase, "Sunday school teachers turned inside out." The vigor with which Lord Russell speaks out on the moral aspects of nuclear testing and Camus or Koestler on capital punishment is an indication of the moral stance of these positions. If God is dead, then any sense and meaning in human community or personal existence must become a human responsibility. Therefore, in Camus a deeply compelling humanism presents itself to modern Western man who has despaired of traditional concepts of God and man. The same is true with the rationalist, who is humanistic moralist because rational categories may provide the structure for moral behavior, indeed they must if revelation is irrelevant.

Just as the modern artist must draw upon biblical allusion and apocalyptic symbol to communicate a criticism of Christianity in our time, so also must the moralist draw heavily upon the vested humanistic traditions of Christian history. The point at which the Church is often oblivious to the extent of the post-Christian mood of our culture is its inability to challenge the atheist to acknowledge his Christian roots, on the one hand, and its failure often to affirm moral leadership in the cultural crisis on the other. We in The Methodist Church in North America feel this most painfully when we realize that such secular institutions as education, professional athletics, and the military establishment have often acted with more dispatch and with more decisiveness in the matter of racial exclusion than has The Methodist Church. The tragedy is that the Church is generally responsible for both conditions. Its

ethic makes inevitable the reconstruction of human society without regard to race, and the preaching of the Church insures the ultimate triumph of this ideal. On the other hand, the Church as institution in a segregated society acts with more conservative response and finds itself being judged by its own ideal.

In the MESTA study, Professor Schilling has noted the fact that Methodist people generally see little correlation between their beliefs as Methodist Christians and motivation and guidance for positive social living.¹⁹ This disparity between profession and confession is one of the most serious drawbacks in the image of the Church in the modern world. C. E. M. Joad, the colorful English critic of Christianity and later a convert to it, once remarked that "the Anglican Church [is] a piece of machinery which continues to function in order to produce a commodity which nobody wants, through sheer inability to stop."²⁰ My personal judgment is that The Methodist Church is in grave danger of this very problem. On a variety of fronts, our churches are committed to no struggles. We are being outflanked by the secular moralist; we are being challenged by the imaginative artists; we are being confounded by the biblical and Christian traditions which we are in danger of no longer being able to identify.

What Is the Church to Do?

Several suggestions have been advanced as a program for the Church in this so-called post-Christian era. They are, however, fragmentary and tentative. For example, Paul Tillich suggested in his Terry Lectures at Yale in 1951 that we need to look for the "God beyond God." He has given us tantalizingly little help in this definition, but we might say that Tillich's whole apologetic method points us toward an answer. He is interested in correlating man's existential questions with the answers of the Christian faith. As I understand this method, it intends to answer the *real* ques-

¹⁹ *Methodism and Society in Theological Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960), III, 169.

²⁰ *Guide to Modern Wickedness* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1939), p. 61.

tions rather than hypothetical ones. In this system, Tillich has made a very great contribution to the Church's apologetic. In America, his interest in and support of the psychoanalytic movement and its relation to the Christian faith has been immensely helpful.

Another currently vogue response is that suggested by some fragments from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He wrote:

The attack by Christian apologetic upon the adulthood of the world I consider to be in the first place pointless, in the second ignoble, and in the third un-Christian. Pointless, because it looks to me like an attempt to put grown-up man back into adolescence, i.e. to make him dependent on things on which he is not in fact dependent any more, thrusting him back into the midst of problems which are in fact not problems for him any more. Ignoble, because this amounts to an effort to exploit the weakness of man for purposes alien to him and not freely subscribed to by him. Un-Christian, because Christ himself is being substituted one particular stage in the religiousness of man, i.e. human law.²¹

"Religionless Christianity," divestment of institutional order and traditional modes of operation, is apparently Bonhoeffer's suggestion. He asks the very serious question whether this new man needs the Church as institution at all. Experiments like the famous, ill-fated worker priest movement in France illustrate such experimentation.

Both Bonhoeffer and Tillich, and indeed all other serious statements in this matter, ask the basic question: "Was not the God that died merely an inadequate and incomplete statement of the God that is, and is not the institution of the Church too much involved in the dead God and in desperate need of the God that is?" At this point it occurs to me that the Methodist people have a real contribution to make. We must, as a Church, insist upon the primacy of those things which make us a people of God—scripture, sacrament, preaching—but we must also be free from any hesitation or reluctance to prevent us from wrestling with the

²¹ *Prisoner for God: Letters and Papers from Prison*, June 8, 1944 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1953), p. 147.

problems and challenges to the world about us, even the problem of religious language. Wesley created a new language with his hymns!

Wesley was a kind of eighteenth-century Bonhoeffer. He combined scriptural holiness with prudential judgment regarding the Church's program. Rather than agonize over the peculiar ambiguities we find ourselves in—as a denomination—we should rejoice, for Methodism—to borrow Bonhoeffer's famous phrase—was at the "centre of the village" and not on the "borders" where human powers give out. What was of divine institution was *essential*. All else was *prudential*. The class meeting, the bands, lay preachers, open-air preaching, even the ordination of Coke—these were imaginative and correct responses to the human and social situation in the eighteenth century. In his *Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, Wesley describes an ecumenical emphasis—one evening a month he allotted to the reading of accounts "of the work God is carrying on in the earth . . . , not among us alone, but among those of various opinions and denominations."

Methodism is uniquely blessed, by our founder's style, in that it may, through its emphasis on the essentials of faith, speak to the permanent condition of man as man. Through its style, its prudential experimentation with the methods of evangelism, it may be able to speak to that which is the peculiar self-understanding of man in our time.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baumer, Franklin. *Religion and the Rise of Skepticism*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1960.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Prisoner for God: Letters and Papers from Prison*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1954.
- Elmen, Paul. *The Restoration of Meaning in Contemporary Life*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1958.
- Guardini, Romano. *The End of the Modern World*. Translated by Joseph Theman and Herbert Burke. London: Sheed & Ward, Ltd., 1956.
- Jaspers, Karl. *Man in the Modern Age*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1957.

Jenkins, Daniel. *Beyond Religion*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962.

Smith, Ronald Gregor. *The New Man*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956.

Thieliche, Helmut. *Nihilism: Its Origin and Nature with Christian Answer*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1961.

Vahanian, Gabriel. *The Death of God*. New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1961.