

Faith Negotiating Loyalties

An exploration of South African Christianity
through a reading of the theology
of H. Richard Niebuhr

by Stephen William Martin

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Abstract

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The context of this thesis is Christian faith in South Africa and the question of loyalties in the new, post-apartheid state. It carries out its investigation in two parts. Part one examines Christian faith and loyalty during the first nation-building exercise following the South African War, positing the creation and contestation of three Christianities corresponding to three nationalisms: South African nationalism, Afrikaner nationalism and African nationalism. Each of these nationalisms imagined South Africa in a certain way, and shaped faith accordingly. Hence the idea of South African Christianity gives way to contesting and contested Christianities, in the same way as nationalism gives way to nationalisms. Faith also emerged in tension with and in criticism of these loyalties.

Part two reads H. Richard Niebuhr in South Africa. Three kinds of faith in his writings which are distinguishable in the examination of loyalties in South Africa are set forth: social faith, radical faith and reconstructing faith. The emergence of these understandings of faith in his writings is chronicled by examining five of his major writings: *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, *The Kingdom of God in America*, *The Meaning of Revelation*, *Christ and Culture*, and *Faith on Earth*. Reference is also made to *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, as well as several important transitional works in the 1930s. The interplay between radical faith and social faith is brought out, as is the idea of reconstructing faith which emerges in the 1950s.

Reconstructing faith provides the link again with South Africa, and this is made apparent in an extended conclusion to chapter nine which is also a resume of the exposition of Niebuhr's works, and in the conclusion to the thesis. The self and the society is not the unity that Niebuhr held, but rather is constituted by hybridities and suspended in a web of loyalties. The message for faith in a post-apartheid South Africa that this reading suggests is the importance of negotiating covenants which allow for crossings, hybridities and contestations. Hence the title of this thesis: faith negotiating loyalties.



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Finally I wish to pay tribute to my Belfast family, engaged, perhaps unwittingly and unwillingly, in the contestation and negotiation of a new Irish identity—and to the South African Beyers Naudé, who is near completion of his course as an Afrikaner and an African. In the spirit of keeping things open, I am dedicating this thesis to them.

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Southern Crossings

Points of departure

Does faith-loyalty make a difference in a world, a society, or a self constituted by contested loyalties? This thesis, which is a response to this question, was written in South Africa during a time when the problem of national loyalties has exploded in other parts of the world. The further “Balkanisation” of the Balkans has taken place, with national loyalties (and religious loyalties as well) being expressed not simply in flags and anthems and the kitsch of patriotism, but in xenophobia and ethnic cleansing. Ethnic loyalties in Rwanda and now Kosovo define whether one is entitled to live in a particular state—a repudiation of the nation-state and its ideal of “civic nationalism”, of loyalty to “ideas” and “ideals” rather than to a tribe. We live, more and more, in a world where hyphens are banished. I have watched, now from a great distance, my “adopted” country of Canada vote-in a separatist-nationalist opposition party, the agenda of which is to bring in an ethnically pure state. But I have also watched the place of my birth and early formation, Northern Ireland, move to reconciliation across perhaps the most notorious sectarian-religious divide in the world. As the possibility of a common “African” identity emerges here, so the possibility of a common “Irish” identity and loyalty—something anathema to my “loyalist” ancestors who have long resisted any such thing—emerges there.¹ In both cases, hyphens are affirmed, not repressed. But they are affirmed by something greater than their sum: a commonality won in struggle and pain.

To be loyal is to be faithful; loyalties may be defined as states of faithfulness to an object, cause or person. Loyalties are of many kinds: political, ideological, faith community (including denominational), ethnic and class. Sports teams, companies and soft drink brands can be objects of loyalty. In fact, almost anything in creation can become an object of loyalty—penultimate or ultimate. Loyalties provide, in turn, identities—things which name the self in its uniqueness, but also name its relation to others. Life is woven together as a matrix of loyalties or “networks of faith”, to use

¹ I was able to see this when visiting, for the first time in over thirty years, the place of my birth in June 1998.

an expression of H. Richard Niebuhr.² So is the self. Apart from the integrity of faith the self, Niebuhr thought, was merely a “bundle of functions”.³

Is faith loyalty merely “one of many” loyalties, alongside party or national loyalty? Or is it produced as a mere epiphenomenon, giving an air of sacrality to loyalties which are based in material or other concerns? Or is it something that negotiates, from a transcendental reference-point, other loyalties? It claims to do the latter. Where does faith loyalty, *ultimate* loyalty (loyalty, that is, to an ultimate) stand in relation to the hyphens, the crossings, the contested loyalties, that make us who we are? Is faith loyalty perhaps also hyphenated, or hybrid? This question stands behind the investigation of this thesis.

South Africa is an important place to be in examining the nature of loyalty and loyalties—a place where they have been contested and where they still are contested. It is a place full of surprises in this regard. For instance, I had been aware in watching South Africa from a distant vantagepoint that Christianity had been mobilised both for oppressive and for liberating purposes, for loyalty and disloyalty. But I was surprised to come to South Africa and see denominational loyalties that had originated in an entirely different context also being mobilised. Indeed the Christianity I encountered in South Africa was different to my expectations, as was the South Africa within which that Christianity was practised.

In many ways the way Christianity has taken shape in South Africa is different from that in Canada or North America. At the TRC hearings into the role of faith communities under apartheid, faith communities apologised for confusing loyalties and made commitments to the building of a new nation. The apologising stance was not new to me—various Canadian churches had apologised for the cultural imperialism that had decimated native Canadian cultures. What was new was the idea, coming from a government-appointed body, that Christian churches could have anything to do with nation building, or that churches would be invited to help construct a new, national loyalty. As I explored historical documents in the course of my research, I learned that several times in the past churches had been called upon to build “national awareness”, to legitimate government policy or, alternatively, to give account of acts of “disloyalty”. I also learned to think, not in terms of Christianity and national-

² Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper & Row 1960), 68.

³ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism*, 30.

ism, but of Christianities and nationalisms—so strong were the differences among them. This has created profound theological problems for me, as will become evident in the course of this thesis.

These issues and interests, personal, theoretical and political, stand as important reasons for my pilgrimage to South Africa. “Seeing differently” was my goal. Whether this has in fact happened in the course of my travels and investigations will only be addressed in the conclusion of this thesis. The emergence of a new Christianity, drawing on the prophetic legacy of the past and engaged within a changing context, was my intuition, something I looked for but, I must confess, failed to find. That this particular quest turned out to be naïve is neither here nor there. For I have discovered not only rich crossings within South African Christianity (or Christianities), but also I have learned to affirm my own crossings, my own hyphens.

I arrived in South Africa to start work on this thesis in April 1993, three days after the assassination of Chris Hani, leader of the South African Communist Party and a popular struggle leader. As I was recovering from my jet lag, a few blocks away in the centre of Cape Town the anger of people about the assassination was being expressed violently. And yet that too was a bridge being crossed. Within a year, the first democratic elections in South Africa’s history were held.

My first three months in the country were spent in an ethos of tension and hope, as negotiations at the World Trade Centre in Johannesburg began in earnest. Other negotiations were taking place at that time, particularly with regard to new South African identities. In June of that year, two meetings were held. In Parow, the heart of conservative Afrikanerdom in Cape Town, the ANC was holding a meeting which took place in Afrikaans and introduced an Afrikaans version of Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika, the hymn which had become a struggle anthem sung by Christians, Muslims and Atheists alike. It featured among its speakers Wilhelm Verwoerd, grandson of the architect of Grand Apartheid, Hendrick Verwoerd. Across town in the City Hall, the centre of English-speaking Cape Town, the *Afrikanerweerstandsbeweging*, led by Eugene TerreBlanche, was also holding a rally, calling for a new resistance to the negotiations process, but itself renegotiating and contesting afresh Afrikaner identity in so doing. Both meetings had Christian profiles. Though many of its leaders would not consider themselves Christian, the continued use of Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika—“God Bless Af-

rica”—as its anthem reflects the ANC’s heritage in mission Christianity.⁴ The AWB, at the extreme of Afrikaner nationalism, invoked Christianity over against communism as its defining ideology. It was not unique in doing this. Afrikaner nationalism was self-consciously Christian. The state at that time also considered itself to be “Christian”, as indicated in the Preamble to the Tricameral Constitution—although the AWB could accuse its representatives of being disloyal, even traitors to the *volk*.⁵

This was but the beginning of a journey into South Africa in transition, into my topic and into my own story. The time and space of the writing of this thesis has also been the time and space of South Africa’s transformation from pariah to celebrity, from racialised state to inclusive democracy, from its self-description as “the light of Christianity and civilisation in Africa”⁶ to a beacon of hope for the world. It crosses two elections, two inaugurations, and three State Presidents; and the debate around, formation and sitting of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as well as the completion of the Commission’s Final Report. It is located between the massacre of people at worship at St James Church in July 1993 and the joyous celebration of a peaceful elections at St George’s Cathedral less than a year later.

The writing of this thesis has taken place within the institutional space of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town. In particular, two projects have informed its exploration of loyalties and faith in South Africa. The first is the Social History Project of the Research Institute on Christianity in South Africa, under the direction of Profs. John de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio. It was in the course of researching, retrieving and cataloguing primary documents, that many of my notions about Christianity in South Africa were challenged and debunked. The second project was my involvement in the drafting, under the direction of de Gruchy and Prof. James Cochrane, of the report on the Faith Community Hearings for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

⁴ The old Union of South Africa’s anthem was “God Save the King/Queen”. Here God was invoked to bless a distant monarch. The Republic of South Africa, established in 1961, had as its anthem “*Die Stem*”, which did not invoke God at all, but rather pledged allegiance to “South Africa”. The significance of the nationalisms these anthems point to is given in part one.

⁵ On the Tricameral Constitution, see Jonathan Draper, “Humble Submission to Almighty God’ and its Biblical Foundation: Contextual Exegesis of Romans 13:1-7”, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 63 (June 1988), 30-8. Roelf Meyer, the National Party’s chief negotiator during the talks with the ANC and other parties, was called “traitor” by members of the Afrikaner right during a Parliamentary debate. Such use of “loyalty” language expressed well what was at stake during the negotiations.

⁶ South Africa is represented as such by the inscription on the lamp of civilisation in the *Voor-trekkeermonument* in Pretoria.

These two projects link together past and present, the plural and ambiguous heritage of Christianity in South Africa, its hybrid origins and manifold possibilities. They have been the sites for my own struggle to understand the question of faith and loyalty as a sojourner in South Africa. But there is another strand to this investigation, a strand which makes up the bulk of the thesis: a reading of the theology of H. Richard Niebuhr in the light of my basic questions.

Encountering Niebuhr

Encountering Niebuhr in South Africa

A number of options lay open to me for my investigations. One was to take a particular theme, such as the idea of “the nation”, and identify it as a site of contesting loyalties across time. Another was to investigate an historical period, taking note of how loyalties developed and interacted during that period. A third was to take a particular contestation of identity, such as Afrikaner identity, and examine its shifts in terms of loyalty to the new dispensation.

With these options before me, I began to hear a name in discussions about the transition and especially the role of the past in reconstructing the nation and renewing trust: H. Richard Niebuhr. Niebuhr had reflected on similar kinds of issues. What would it mean to read him in a different time and place, in *this* context, at *this* time? I believed that the resonances and the dissonances produced would deepen my investigations.

While I had read Niebuhr’s most well-known book, *Christ and Culture*, before coming to South Africa, being in South Africa made its central theme of negotiating cultural life in faithfulness come alive. I also began to read Niebuhr’s other writings. They became my companions as I investigated South African Christianity. Reading *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* while studying the role of the English-speaking churches in building white unity after the South African War and their transformation into denominations replicating the power dynamics of the South African society; *The Meaning of Revelation*, with its reflections on memory and reconciling the past, while the negotiations for the TRC were undergoing and theologians were beginning to write about it; *Radical Monotheism* and *Christ and Culture*, with their criticism of easy identifications between Christianity and culture, while the idea of nation-building and the role of the Church in it; and *Faith on Earth*, with its powerful images of recon-

structuring loyalties in a broken and distrustful society, all gave Niebuhr's writing new life and meaning. Niebuhr's writings helped to make sense of some, though not all, of that which I was encountering. However, the challenges of South Africa also posed questions for Niebuhr's formulations. And I began to find theological categories for relating it all to the more existential issues I came to South Africa with. Indeed, those issues found fresh *articulation* in my reading of H. Richard Niebuhr in South Africa.

This contextual reading is thus at the same time an exercise in critical self-reflection, a mapping of my journey here.

Niebuhr in North America: a brief sketch

The Christian Century devoted its 2 April 1997 issue to three "Theologians for the twenty-first century": Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth and H. Richard Niebuhr.⁷ In his contribution, Douglas Ottati noted that Niebuhr's legacy lives on in at least three very different strands of contemporary theology:⁸ Gordon Kaufmann's "theological imagination",⁹ the "Yale School" of Hans Frei and George Lindbeck,¹⁰ and the theocentric ethics of James Gustafson.¹¹ It says something about the significance, not so much of the constructive proposals of Niebuhr, but of the way he taught his stu-

⁷ Gary Dorrien, "The 'Postmodern' Barth? The Word of God as True Myth", *The Christian Century*, 2 April 1997, 338-42; John W. de Gruchy, "Bonhoeffer's Legacy: A New Generation", 343-45; Douglas F. Ottati, "God and Ourselves: The Witness of H. Richard Niebuhr", 346-49.

⁸ Ottati, "God and Ourselves", 348-49.

⁹ Kaufman's emphasis derives from Niebuhr's discussion in chapter three of *The Meaning of Revelation*, entitled "Reasons of the Heart", where Niebuhr speaks of images or symbols that pull the plural experiences of life together. See also chapter three below. For a representative work of Kaufman's, see *The Theological Imagination* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981). Niebuhr's interest in symbols was renewed in his last works. See "Metaphors and Morals", in *The Responsible Self* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 149-60; "Reformation: Continuing Imperative", *The Christian Century*, 2 March 1960, 248-251; "Toward New Symbols" (1961), in *Theology, History, Culture: Major Unpublished Writings*. William Stacy Johnson, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press), 19-33. It is notable that one of the leading contemporary exponents of "metaphorical theology", Salle McFague, was Niebuhr's graduate Research Assistant at Yale during his last year.

¹⁰ Ottati notes the "realistic narrative" theology of Hans W. Frei and George Lindbeck as representative. See Frei's *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) and Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984). Perhaps we might say, following the previous note, that this strand follows the second chapter in *The Meaning of Revelation*, entitled "The Story of Our Life". See chapter three below. See also Gary Comstock, "Telling the Whole Story? American Narrative Theology after H. Richard Niebuhr", in *Religion and Philosophy in the United States of America* (Essen: Verlag Die Blaue Eule, 1987), 125-52.

¹¹ For a representative work, see *Ethics in a Theocentric Perspective* 2 Vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981-84). See also Gustafson's introduction to *The Responsible Self* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 6-41. This "theocentric" strand can also be traced to *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: MacMillan, 1941). See chapter four of that work. Gustafson's work shows strongest affinity with Niebuhr's idea of Radical Monotheism. See also chapters eight and nine below.

dents to do theology as engagement, that there is such a legacy. It also says something about the importance and the fecundity of his thought.

Some thirty-five years after Niebuhr's death, major works concerning him continue to appear. The year 1996 saw the release of three important works relating to H. Richard Niebuhr. In the first, a collection of previously unpublished writings entitled *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, Culture*, Niebuhr's legacy is made available in a number of powerful, "occasional" papers, sermons and lectures. An unpublished manuscript entitled "Types of Christian Ethics" was also the basis for a reassessment of Niebuhr's most well known work, *Christ and Culture*, written by John Howard Yoder, Diane Yeager and Glen H. Stassen. *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* not only aimed to subject Niebuhr's little-criticised classic to scrutiny,¹² but to carry forward his agenda of transformation into a new day. Finally, R. Melvin Keiser, a former student of Niebuhr's, published a monograph entitled, *Roots of Relational Ethics*, which examined Niebuhr's theological development from liberal idealism to what Keiser termed "relational realism". This was presented as the basis for an alternative to deontological and teleological approaches to Christian ethics.

These works were but the latest additions to an already comparatively large literature on H. Richard Niebuhr's theology. Mostly overshadowed during his lifetime by his older brother Reinhold, H. Richard Niebuhr is now emerging as an important theologian for the next century—even some thirty-five years after his death. But these facts alone do not justify his presence in this thesis.

Who was H. Richard Niebuhr? And why is he an important dialogue partner for this thesis?

H. Richard Niebuhr was born to German immigrant parents in Wright City Missouri, in 1893. His father, Gustaf Niebuhr, was a minister in the Evangelical Synod church, although at that time local people would have referred to him simply as "the German minister".¹³ Indeed, central to the factors influencing his early

¹² "The set of reflections collected here", the authors write in the preface, "is designed to open up the long-delayed conversation about the defensibility and reliability of this value-laden typological portrait... which has, for forty years now shaped the theological consciousness of rising generations of students." Glen Stassen, Diane Yeager and John Howard Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 10.

¹³ Jon Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr: A Lifetime of Reflections on Church and World* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), 4. The identification of nationality and denomination is, of course, not confined to the United States. It is perhaps worth noting that well into the 1920s, the Church of the Province of Southern Africa was referred to as "the English Church".

thought was Niebuhr's involvement in the Evangelical Synod—an immigrant church with both Calvinist and Lutheran strains.¹⁴ An illuminating biographical work by Jon Diefenthaler, which draws upon writings, papers and letters of the young Niebuhr, confirms a close relationship between his “church background and response to the world of his day”.¹⁵

Louis W. Goebel says of the Evangelical Synod that it “from the beginning desired to be known as a united and uniting fellowship.” Yet at least until the outbreak of the First World War “a strong desire to preserve and transmit the Synod's ‘German-ness’ tended to check those impulses”.¹⁶ It was not until 1925 that the Church dropped the word “German” from its title. The war was also a watershed for the young H. Richard Niebuhr: torn between loyalties to Germany and to the Allied cause, he eventually cast his lot for the latter and even registered as a chaplain when the US entered the war in 1917.¹⁷

Internal conflicts intensified, however, when he entered Eden Theological Seminary, which at the time was where the Synod's ministers were trained. Joining the faculty in 1919, he registered for a degree at Washington University in Saint Louis, eventually completing a thesis entitled “The Problem of the Individual in Richard Dehmel”. Diefenthaler suggests Dehmel's struggle—that of a German poet trying “to transcend the finite realm and identify with the World Spirit.... paralleled Niebuhr's battle against parochialism in his church.”¹⁸ Niebuhr remained ecumenically involved in church organisations for the rest of his life, participating in the negotiations which would eventually bring about the institutional union called “The United Church of Christ”. In 1943-44, he played a major role in helping formulate a position paper on the War, on behalf of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America.¹⁹ And in the mid-1950s, he led an inquiry into theological education in the United States and Canada, which issued in a report edited with James Gustafson and Daniel

¹⁴ While working on *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, Niebuhr was directing the negotiations between his church and the German Reformed church, negotiations which would bear fruit in their union in 1934 under the name “Evangelical and Reformed Church”. The ecumenical character of this church bore fruit again in 1957 when it united with the Congregational Christian Churches to form “the United Church of Christ”. Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, ix-x, 3.

¹⁵ Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, xii. See also William Chrystal, “The Young H. Richard Niebuhr”, *Theology Today* 38 (1981).

¹⁶ Quoted in Diefenthaler *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 3. This strand is picked up again in chapter four.

¹⁷ Diefenthaler *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 9.

¹⁸ Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 7.

Day Williams published as *The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry*.²⁰ But as involved in structures as he remained, Niebuhr always remained suspicious of identifying the Church, and even radical faith, with any particular institution.

After completing his graduate studies, Niebuhr went to Yale University to study under one of the foremost liberal theologians of the day, Douglas Clyde Macintosh. At Yale Niebuhr continued to search out a location, this time theologically as well as culturally. Completing a thesis on “Ernest Troeltsch’s Philosophy of Religion” in 1924, Niebuhr set the tone for a theology that would interact with European currents of thought, yet with a distinctively American style and agenda. At the time of writing *Social Sources*, his first book, Troeltsch’s seminal *The Social Teachings of the Christian Church* had yet to be translated into English. Indeed, *Social Sources* might be seen as a “reading” of Troeltsch’s magnum opus into the American context. The contextualisation of German theology also characterised Niebuhr’s reading of that other great pole in his thought: Karl Barth. Troeltsch’s historical relativism and Barth’s relentless invoking of the sovereign God inscribe Niebuhr’s theology with what Libertus Hoedemaker has called *the* problematic of American religion: the relation between sovereignty and pluralism.²¹

But if Niebuhr’s theology is so inscribed, why should he be of interest in South Africa? A number of features of his theology suggest why.

The first is the peculiar character of Niebuhr’s prophetic thrust.²² From his early work, rooted in the Social Gospel, to his later elaboration of radical faith, Niebuhr’s was a theology critical of the false absolutisations of culture. And yet it was also a theology culturally sensitive and redemptive in focus. Christian faith, Niebuhr held, does not destroy all rival loyalties, but rather saves them by relativising them in terms of a final loyalty to the God of creation and history. Culture is not negated but affirmed through conversion or transformation. Characteristic of South Africa’s tran-

¹⁹ “A Christian Interpretation of War”, in *H. Richard Niebuhr*, ed. Johnson, 159-73. But see William Stacy Johnson, “Introduction”, 221n.68-69, in the same volume. Niebuhr’s name was not included in the final report of the Calhoun Commission.

²⁰ (New York: Harper & Row, 1956).

²¹ We shall examine these and other influences in more detail, as well as the further development and maturing of Niebuhr’s theology in chapters four to six below.

²² The term “prophetic” admits of many definitions. In the South African context, Albert Nolan speaks of it in terms of reading the signs of the times in terms of the contemporary activity of God and then responding in turn. See Albert Nolan, “Prophetic Theology”, in *Doing Theology in Context*, ed. John W. de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio (Cape Town; Maryknoll: David Philip; Orbis Books, 1994), 216.

sition is the redemption of the old and its transformation through reincorporating it in a new context, often laying former antagonists alongside each other. The old symbols are not negated, but opened up in new ways through new loyalties.²³

A second feature of Niebuhr's theology is its relational focus. Christian faith for him does not separate but integrates. It does so with loyalties. But this is redemptive because in integrating loyalties, it unifies communities. For Niebuhr, "the self dwells in a world sustained by multiple, tacit relations."²⁴ The human person is *homo dialogicus*.²⁵ Such a relational focus is appropriate for any theology to engage in post-apartheid South Africa, especially as ideas of relational personhood, previously repressed by colonialism and capitalist individualism, are now celebrated in concepts such as *ubuntu*.²⁶ The idea that "a person is a person in relation to others", a hallmark of the renaissance of African philosophy, resonates well with statements such as "to be a self in the presence of other selves is not a derivative experience, but primordial."²⁷ It may well be that Niebuhr's preoccupation with relativising and deabsolutising endangers relationality, even to the point of separating self from historical particularity.²⁸ Yet there is little question that the dominant note sounded by his theology is a relational one.

Coming to terms with a complex reality such as post-apartheid South Africa requires a careful attention to its many dimensions. Indeed, a reaction against provincialism in scholarship is a feature of contemporary South African social science. In addition to its relational orientation, Niebuhr's theology also freely adventured across disciplinary boundaries. Niebuhr was a renowned interpreter of the history of Christianity, taking both social and narrative historical angles.²⁹ He offered, in his last work published before his death, an important cultural-historical interpretation of the re-

²³ A powerful example of this was the 1995 Rugby World Cup. For many South Africans, Rugby is a symbol of white oppression, a motor of self-assertion against the world. Rugby was transformed into an inclusive symbol during the tournament, as President Mandela wore the Springbok jersey previously reserved for whites only. See William Johnson Everett, "Seals and Springboks: Theological Reflections on Constitutionalism and South African Culture", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 101 (July 1998), 71-80.

²⁴ R. Melvin Keiser, *Recovering the Personal: Religious Language and the Post-Critical Quest of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), xvii.

²⁵ Niebuhr, *Responsible Self*, 160.

²⁶ See Augustine Schutte, *Philosophy for Africa* (Cape Town: Snail Press, 1995).

²⁷ Niebuhr, *Responsible Self*, 71.

²⁸ See chapter nine below.

²⁹ Hans Frei makes the interesting point that Niebuhr was a rare species: someone who moved from social history to narrative history or history of ideas. Usually the evolution is the other way around. "History, Church and Nation", 6.

religious roots of western civilisation.³⁰ He was among the first to take sociology seriously for theology,³¹ and also made a significant contribution to a theologically attuned sociology in his *Meaning of Revelation*.³² And yet while adventuring thus, Niebuhr never forgot where his disciplinary home was.

H. Richard Niebuhr's quest for location crossed other kinds of boundaries as well. While primarily a theologian, he was a keen observer of cultural and historical life. Indeed, his historical works, including the classic *Kingdom of God in America* and *Christ and Culture*, as well as *Social Sources*, are primarily attempts to find orientation in the present through an interpretation of the past. He never pretended to be the kind of "objective" and "disinterested" historian praised by the academy of his day, but rather saw history, like theology, as the telling of "our" story. As wide-ranging as they are, Niebuhr's works form a richly textured whole. *The Meaning of Revelation*, perhaps his most "theological" work, can also be taken as a basis for his approach to history. Even in his more "ethical" works, such as the noted "war articles" and the posthumously published *Responsible Self*, telling "the story of our life" and understanding "what has happened to us" is the key theme for discerning "fitting" action in the present context. At the time of his death in July 1962 at the age of 69, Niebuhr was planning a theological ethics—a work that many have speculated on the construction of from unpublished manuscripts, lectures and seminar notes.³³ A Niebuhrian ethics,³⁴ however, is inseparable from his assertions concerning the sovereignty of God and radical faith.

From the more formal features of his theology, we move to content. Here adventurousness and boundary crossing was also characteristic. Niebuhr's was a restless quest for social and theological location—not unlike that of the nineteenth-century immigrants to America he wrote of in *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929). In chapter eight of that work, he characterises them as caught between twin drives to assert a distinctive identity, especially in competition with other immigrants, and to assimilate or americanise. But set over against both of these drives was a third: to be "Christian". When authentic, this meant to transcend both the particularities of "German-ness" and of "American-ness", to be, in the words of a later work, "immi-

³⁰ *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960).

³¹ *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (Gloucester MA: Peter Smith, 1987 [orig. 1929]).

³² See William R. Garrett, "Toward a Sociological Theology", in *Religious Sociology: Interfaces and Boundaries*, ed. William H. Swatos Jr. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1987), 41-55.

³³ See especially Keiser, *Roots of Relational Ethics*.

grants into the empire of God which extends over all the world and learn to remember the history of that empire, that is, of men in all times and places as our history.³⁵ Alas, for Niebuhr, “being Christian” was more often than not tied-up with “being German” (in Lutheranism) or “being Dutch” (in the Dutch or Christian Reformed Church), with the church as much a cultural centre representing “the old country” as a centre where loyalty to the Transcendent was nurtured. This was the point of departure for his theological wrestles—a point which marks the intersection between the passion behind this thesis, Niebuhr and South Africa in transition and transformation.

The challenge of reading Niebuhr in South Africa

Reading H. Richard Niebuhr in South Africa is a challenge. In my reading of the writings of Niebuhr,³⁶ I have only come across one specific reference to South Africa: in *The Responsible Self*.³⁷ Indeed, Niebuhr did not often venture reflections beyond the context of Christianity and the United States.³⁸ This scarcity creates a problem—but also offers an invitation. The problem is the lack of extant examples of Niebuhr explicitly relating his theology to the South African situation.³⁹ Nor do we have any evidence before us that Niebuhr knew the South African situation in any kind of depth; nor if he did, what he thought of it, beyond his drawing of parallels between it and the situation in the U.S. of the time. The fact that he saw South Africa in the same light as he saw the racial problems in America at the outset of the civil

³⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, that is.

³⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), 85.

³⁶ See the bibliography. I was not able to obtain a complete set of Niebuhr’s published writings, nor to examine his private papers which are stored at Andover-Harvard Divinity school. I have read, however, the major theological works of Niebuhr, as well as his most important occasional pieces. I have judged “major” and “most important” by the weight given them in the secondary literature, as well as their relevance to the topic.

³⁷ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 99. The passage reads as follows: “We have many illustrations in contemporary history of defensive social ethics. In the destructive interaction of castes or race groups in the United States and in South Africa, we must take into account that beyond all loyalty to law and beyond all idealism there is operative in the minds of the defensive group a deep fear of coming destruction.” The Robertson Lectures, from which *The Responsible Self* was put together, were given in the northern Spring of 1960—and perhaps Niebuhr had the atrocities of the March 1960 Sharpeville shootings in mind.

³⁸ In the early 1930s, during and after his visit to Europe, Niebuhr wrote a series of short articles for the *Evangelical Herald* on Christianity and issues there. I was not able to obtain any of these articles in South Africa. Other articles include “Nationalism, Socialism and Christianity”, *The World Tomorrow* 16 (August 1933), 469-470; “Can German and American Christians Understand Each Other?” *Christian Century* 47 (23 July 1930), 914-6.

³⁹ By contrast see Stephen de Gruchy’s dissertation on Reinhold Niebuhr, especially pp. 310-26, where he lists a number of writings by Reinhold on South Africa. “Not Liberation but Justice: An Analysis of Reinhold Niebuhr’s Understanding of Human Destiny in the Light of the Atonement”, diss. University of the Western Cape, 1992.

rights movement might allow us to link him to South Africa through the issue of racism. But Niebuhr, despite his undoubted contribution to theological ethics, and his powerful chapter on "The Color Line" in *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, is not known for his commentary on concrete social issues.⁴⁰ Indeed, a number of his former students have observed that when pressed for an opinion on key social and political issues, Niebuhr would decline comment, saying he would "leave that to Reinie".⁴¹

The paucity of references is also, however, an invitation. Niebuhr, while recognising relativity in his theology and unlike his brother confining his reflections to the church and American society, also made universal and categorical statements. Such statements, particularly about the relation between the social forces and the institutional churches, the integrating power of formative faith, the perennial problem of Christ and culture, the motif of radical monotheism and western culture, and the universal structure of human faith, invite wider application and testing. They are packages waiting to be opened-up to new contexts.

So much for Niebuhr's relation to South Africa. But what of South Africa's relation to Niebuhr?

The 1989 Conference of the Theological Society of South Africa took as its theme, "Christ and Culture". However, only two of the papers related directly to Niebuhr.⁴² While there has been little serious interaction with Niebuhr's theology,⁴³ his ideas have been appropriated in an *ad hoc* fashion. A certain passage in *The Meaning of Revelation*, quoted by Dirkie Smit in a "tentative", preliminary exploration of the theological foundations for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,⁴⁴ provides an example:

Where common memory is lacking, where men do not share in the same past, there can be no real community, and where community is to be formed common memory must be created... the measure of our distance from each other and our groups can be taken by noting the divergence, the separateness

⁴⁰ See however his "The Churches and the Color Line" in *Social Sources*, ch. 9.

⁴¹ Beverley Harrison, quoted in Keiser, *Roots of Relational Ethics*, 157-8. "Reinie" was his brother, Reinhold Niebuhr.

⁴² These papers, by James Cochrane and Dirkie Smit, are discussed below.

⁴³ A dissertation search, conducted in May, 1999, of theses written in South Africa dating from 1956 revealed eight theses written on Reinhold Niebuhr; none on H. Richard.

⁴⁴ "A Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Tentative Theological and Ethical Reflections", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 90 (March, 1995), 4.

and the lack of sympathy in our social memories. Conversely, the measure of our unity is the extent of our common memory.⁴⁵

For Smit, this passage points to “the Christian tradition of remembering”. The context of the passage, however, is about historical Christian divisions. Smit’s construction of the passage⁴⁶ has been re-cited by two people associated with the Commission, both of whom have theological backgrounds: Director of Research, Charles Villa-Vicencio⁴⁷ and Deputy Chair, Alex Boraine.⁴⁸ For Villa-Vicencio and Boraine, the passage invokes Niebuhr’s name as support for a kind of nation-building project, and for the importance of common memory in that project. In the process of doing this, they translate the passage from being about the resolution of historical Christian divisions to addressing the divided past of apartheid. Niebuhr himself might well have seen such a nation-building project as theologically dubious.⁴⁹

Such *à la carte* approaches run the risk of taking Niebuhr piece-meal, as well as understanding (in the case of the typologies) his categories in narrow ways and using them merely rhetorically. Niebuhr’s theology has its own dynamic and development, and his ideas were engaged in their own struggle. This struggle (or struggles) is far from irrelevant to our purposes. Types also, while by nature professing general applicability, have grounding in particular concerns. Both the *Christ and Culture* and the *Radical Monotheism* henotheist, polytheist and radical monotheist types were formulated in a highly polarised world, at the height of the Cold War and to address what Niebuhr saw as the great crisis of western civilisation. Moreover, categories and types

⁴⁵ *Meaning of Revelation*, 84, 88.

⁴⁶ I put things this way because neither Villa-Vicencio nor Boraine show any evidence in their respective articles of having read Niebuhr’s original.

⁴⁷ “Telling One Another Stories: Towards a Theology of Reconciliation”, *Many Cultures, One Nation: Festschrift for Beyers Naudé*, ed. Charles Villa-Vicencio and Carl Niehaus (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1995), 106.

⁴⁸ In a fragment of an unpublished paper handed out to the block seminar on Religion and Public Policy, Department of Religious Studies, University of Cape Town, 24-26 August, 1998.

⁴⁹ Niebuhr would especially have taken exception to Villa-Vicencio’s assertion that nation-building can be done through some kind of social engineering. See “The Quest for a National Identity: Can the Religion Debate Assist?” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 86 (March), 31. I do not want to deal with this question now. Suffice to say that for Niebuhr, the basis for a nation along the lines envisioned in TRC discourse is a basis in *external* rather than *internal* history. I am not accusing Villa-Vicencio and Boraine of mis-reading Niebuhr (or Smit’s reading of Niebuhr), but rather illustrating the problem of a piece-meal approach. If Niebuhr is to be read in this way (and it would be a reading “against the grain” for him), grappling with his more universalistic works, such as *Radical Monotheism* needs to be done.

are part of a network of references *within* a series of texts.⁵⁰ That is their primary location.

Two further examples of reading Niebuhr in South Africa attend more to Niebuhr's context, while relating Niebuhr's works more broadly. The first, by James Cochrane,⁵¹ uses Niebuhr to open up a larger debate about the role of culture and Christian practice in South Africa in the late 1980s.⁵² Careful to avoid anachronism, he takes pains to locate Niebuhr in a different time: "then". While he makes references to some of Niebuhr's other works, Cochrane's main concern (as indicated by the title) is with *Christ and Culture*. Writing "then", Niebuhr worked in an "existentialist and theistic mode" which saw basically a range of options, each in principle equal, from which Christians could choose in the practice of their faith. Niebuhr's concern, writes Cochrane, is to harmonise differences amongst Christians. Niebuhr can do this because he held the monotheistic belief that all Christians believed in the same One. But "now" (and "here" in South Africa) Christians believe in different gods. The context is one of polytheism, rather than monotheism. Cochrane's bottom line seems to be that Christ and culture ought to be understood "now" (which was actually, from our point of view in 1999, a "then"—a time shortly before the beginning of the negotiations to end apartheid) as a conflict within historical situations between truth and its corruption, between oppression and liberation. The church is one site of that conflict.

While we live in a "now" different to that in his article, Cochrane's reading of Niebuhr is suggestive and provocative, and I will return to it in the discussions of Niebuhr below. At times, however, Niebuhr becomes too much a point of departure for Cochrane's own agenda. Were Niebuhr alive today, Cochrane suggests, he would be "sorely tempted" take up the kind of agenda Cochrane saw, at least at the time, as appropriate to the context. He would have abandoned the use of "types" in favour of tracing "the history of Christ and culture by means of a concrete investigation of the political and economic bases of the representatives of Christianity in order to uncover their way of relating theory and practice". His ethics then would have resembled "the contemporary studies of the history of the poor, of the rebels, of the stream of resis-

⁵⁰ For example, it is important to understand the meaning of the Christ of Culture type as crossing his discussion of henotheism in *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*.

⁵¹ "Christ and Culture: Then and Now", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 71 (June 1990), 3-17.

⁵² "Christ and Culture", 3.

tance theologies in the Church...”⁵³ Little is given on which to base this assertion—except for changing trends in theology “from the existentialist and theist to the eschatological mode”. From these, we are led to believe, the other changes would, apparently, logically follow. There is no indication of spatial distance—i.e. that “being here” makes a difference as opposed to “being there”, in America.

Another reading of Niebuhr in South Africa, published within the same year, and in the same socio-political context as Cochrane’s, is that of Dirkie Smit.⁵⁴ Here we have the opposite approach. Gone is Cochrane’s urgency to find a tool to use for interpreting the struggle and reflecting on transforming praxis. Smit’s reading of Niebuhr is more an exposition of the main themes of Niebuhr’s theology than a reading “in context.” The point of departure is the need to clarify Niebuhr’s view of the relationship between Christian or church activity and the transformation of culture, so that Niebuhr’s approach to the problem is rightly understood.⁵⁵ Although South African issues lurk in the background, Smit carefully exegetes Niebuhr’s theology in its historical development, pausing only in the middle to allude to Niebuhr’s one reference to South Africa.⁵⁶ The need for freedom from destructive interpretations and defensive ethics—the point that Niebuhr in that reference is using South Africa to illustrate—can be met by a more “Niebuhrian” idea of revelation as the relativisation of all interpretations and idolatrous boundaries. With the exception of his final section, Smit’s reading of Niebuhr, however, could just as well have been set in North America. While a useful summation of the contours of Niebuhr’s thought, there is little of the flavour of South African debates in the actual exposition he provides.⁵⁷



Two points have been established at this stage. First, that Niebuhr is an appropriate theologian to interact with in South Africa. Second, that while Niebuhr has been read previously in South Africa, the complex texture of his theology has yet to be adequately taken into account.

⁵³ “Christ and Culture”, 7-8.

⁵⁴ “Theology and the Transformation of Culture: Niebuhr Revisited”, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 72 (September 1990).

⁵⁵ “Theology and the Transformation of Culture”, 9.

⁵⁶ “Theology and the Transformation of Culture”, 13.

⁵⁷ Smit acknowledges that in an earlier version of the paper he had provided more concrete applications. Unfortunately, he was unable to supply me with a copy of this version when I contacted him in June, 1999.

This thesis offers a reading of Niebuhr in South Africa, and a reading of South Africa through Niebuhr's theology, in terms of the particular problematic of faith and loyalties. Contextual readings of first world theologians are not uncommon in South Africa. Indeed, if South African theology has made a contribution to the theological *ecumene*, it is through its contextual appropriation of classical texts, traditions, doctrines and persons,⁵⁸ woven together within its own political, social and cultural dynamics.⁵⁹ Such contextual appropriation gives new meaning to these texts, traditions, doctrines and persons through extending a web of meaning, creating new links and even tensions.

The declaration of one's location is usually an important component of such appropriations, as well as a statement of the interests of the author. The present thesis is different from these in its being written by someone coming from outside the South African context, with a particular texture to his story.⁶⁰ The web of meaning then has different tensions, making different links. This is why this introduction began with the equivalent of a "declaration of location" and why the conclusion ends with a personal reflection. This is not simply to introduce a note of subjectivity into the harmonics of the thesis, but rather to develop an important melodic line that is part of the *raison d'être* for the exercise.

What remains now is to give an overview of the chapters.

The structure of this thesis

Since loyalties are many and contexts are complex, this thesis will begin by examining one particular kind of loyalty in South Africa, one especially appropriate during the period of which the thesis was produced: national loyalty or nationalism. Why this is appropriate has already been indicated. What is meant by the term will be described in the prologue to part one.

⁵⁸ See David Tracy *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Seabury, 1981).

⁵⁹ For example, Karl Barth (e.g. Charles Villa-Vicencio, ed, *On Reading Karl Barth in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), Dietrich Bonhoeffer (e.g. John W. de Gruchy, *Bonhoeffer and South Africa: Theologies in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984); H. Russel Botman, "Discipleship as Transformation", diss. University of the Western Cape, 1992) and Reinhold Niebuhr (e.g. S. de Gruchy, "Not Liberation but Justice").

⁶⁰ This is why I tried to avoid in my introductory remarks above what Mark Kline Taylor calls an "official declaration of location"—e.g. "white", "male", "Christian". See *Remembering Esperanza: A Cultural-Political Theology for North American Praxis* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 16. Rather I was, in his terms, marking the space from which this text is written.

Part one constitutes a first attempt to come to terms with South African Christianity in light of the problem of loyalties and faith. It examines three nationalisms that emerged during the first nation-building exercise in South Africa after the South African War: South African nationalism, Afrikaner nationalism and African nationalism. These are examined in chapters one, two and three, respectively. Each of these nationalisms imagined South Africa in a certain way, and shaped faith accordingly. Hence the idea of South African Christianity, which was the original object of investigation, gives way to contesting and contested Christianities, in the same way as nationalism gives way to nationalisms. Faith also emerged in tension with and in criticism of these loyalties. The complex and tensile twistings and crossings of faith and nationalisms provide the first strand of this thesis.

Part two reads H. Richard Niebuhr in South Africa. Chapter four provides another strand, linking Niebuhr with his own context and with South Africa through the idea of culture-protestantism. In the chapters that follow, three kinds of faith in his writings which are distinguishable in the examination of loyalties in South Africa are set forth: social faith, radical faith and reconstructing faith.

Chapter five examines *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* as Niebuhr's first attempt to come to terms with American Christianity and its entanglements. In the process of doing this, Niebuhr puts forth two understandings of faith. First, faith is something produced within the dynamics of social forces and used as a legitimisation of them. Second, faith is a radical ideal echoed faintly in history but nonetheless providing a goal for society to strive after in the present. These are located in a tension that is part of the fabric of Christianity in history. This was demonstrated to be inadequate in his later work. Chapter six describes the change that took place in Niebuhr's theology in the 1930s as the idea of a radical ideal gives way to the realism of radical faith and a sovereign God who judges the many loyalties as idolatry. Alongside "radical faith" is "social faith", toward which Niebuhr is ambivalent. Chapter seven describes two ways in which Niebuhr relates these. In *The Kingdom of God in America*, radical faith is destabilising and regenerative faith, while social faith is stabilising, degenerative and stagnating faith. In *The Meaning of Revelation*, radical faith and social faith are related in a duality of histories, "inside" and "outside", with the former converting and transforming the latter.

Readings of *Christ and Culture* and *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* form the basis for chapter eight. Here the dynamics of radical and social faith are read into the sweep of history, and especially the cultural history of the West, through two series of types. *Christ and Culture* culminates with the conversionist type, similar to the activity of radical faith; while in *Radical Monotheism* the culminative type is radical monotheism which transforms the many loyalties into loyalty to the One beyond the many. Both these works were written during the post-war reconstruction period, as was the last work to be dealt with in this thesis, *Faith on Earth*, which is examined in chapter nine. The dynamics of radical and social faith are sublimated in *Faith on Earth*, with the idea of reconstructing faith taking centre stage. Reconstructing faith provides a structural account of “human faith”—faith which reflects the covenantal structure of reality, and without which human existence is impossible. But it also loses something of the dynamic process of making and unmaking that the interplay of radical and social faith expresses.

Reconstructing faith provides the link again with South Africa. The conclusion recalls the ways in which this reading of H. Richard Niebuhr in South Africa illumines the question of loyalties, their formation and relation to faith. But that to Niebuhr’s reflections on loyalties must be added the dimensions of *contestation* and *negotiation*, both between and within different loyalties. The self and the society, in consequence, are not the unities that Niebuhr held, but rather are constituted by hybridities and suspended in a web of loyalties. Niebuhr’s message for faith in a post-apartheid South Africa is to negotiate covenants which allow for crossings, hybridities and contestations. Hence the title of this thesis: faith negotiating loyalties.

Part One:

Exploring South
African Christianity

Faith, Nationalism and Loyalty in South Africa

Commissions and Christianities

On November 16 1997, representatives from some twenty-five different faith communities gathered together in East London, summoned by a government-appointed commission.¹ For three days faith communities were in the dock, giving account of past loyalties and engaging in a contestation and renegotiation of loyalties for the future. Could they disentangle themselves from their ambiguous past without themselves unravelling? What threads would they contribute to weaving the fabric of a new society based on a common loyalty?

This was not the first time that faith communities, in the form of Christian churches and ecumenical organisations, were summoned by a South African government to give account. This happened on at least three other occasions at critical moments in the history of the country. In 1903, shortly after the end of the South African war, the Lagden Commission gathered representatives from especially mission churches, including both black and white ministers, to decide on the question of policy toward black South Africans.² This was a pan-South African Commission, even before there was a single, unified South African state. It called black and white witnesses, though only whites were Commissioners: settler, mission and “Ethiopian” church leaders, and “a contemporary ‘who’s who’ of leading missionaries”.³ The

¹ For an account, see Research Institute on Christianity in South Africa, “Faith Communities and Apartheid: The RICSAs Report”, in *Faith Communities Face the Truth: South African Faith Communities and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, ed. James Cochrane, John de Gruchy and Stephen Martin (Cape Town; Athens: David Philip; Ohio University Press, 1999), 15-77.

² The question of terminology remains live in South African academics and culture. While there are important rhetorical subtleties in the use of the term “black” or “African”, and they have become markers of identity particularly since the Black Consciousness Movement in the sixties and onward, this chapter shall use the terms interchangeably. The same is true for “European” and “white”. Were this chapter to be written on a later period, these terms would take on different meaning, particularly with whites identifying themselves with Africa and the term black coming to mean “oppressed non-whites”. The question of “African Christianity”, at the close of the century, can no longer be confined to historically black churches. It is a challenge facing the Anglican Church of the Province and the Methodist church as much as the Zion Christian Church or the black Reformed Presbyterian Church.

³ John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity and the Modernisation of South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2000), ch. 2. As this work is in press at the time of writing, references will be given to chapters only. The same will hold for Charles Villa-Vicencio and Robin Petersen, *Christianity and the Colonisation of South Africa* (Cape Town; Grand Rapids: David Philip; Eerdmans, 2000).

Commission covered a spectrum of issues, including education, traditional law and leaders, independent churches and a variety of socio-economic matters. Headed by Sir Godfrey Lagden, Commissioner for Native Affairs in the Crown Colony and son-in-law of the Bishop of Pretoria, the Commission aimed not so much at developing a policy framework in terms of rights, but of marshalling Christianity to ensure black co-operation in the transformation of South Africa into an industrial state.⁴ The underlying assumption was that Christianity was a tool ensuring loyalty not sedition.⁵

In 1923 another Commission was appointed to investigate the question of independent churches and their loyalties. Called "The Native Churches Commission", this Commission while not summoning a wide representation from mission Christianity, drew upon representatives again to decide policy in light of the perceived "disloyalty" of black South Africans. In the dock were ideas and ideals of "African for the Africans"—a more radical nationalism that was blamed for the massacre of 183 members of the Israelite church at Bulhoek in 1921. The Commission, while appointed to investigate "disturbing influences among natives" did not condemn "race consciousness" wholesale, but rather sought to direct it to supporting the interests of the state.

The matter has been one of great difficulty because on the one hand there is the general reluctance of the State to interfere in religious matters, while on the other there is the duty of the Government to endeavour to check the spread of doctrines and practices which might be harmful to the community.⁶

By the 1980s, however, the state had no reluctance in interfering in "religious matters", nor was its strategy any longer the benign one of "directing" black aspirations, but rather actively repressing those aspirations and the churches that stood for them. In 1983, as the apartheid state was entering its "total strategy" phase,⁷ the Eloff

⁴ For this reading of the Lagden Commission, see James R. Cochrane, *Servants of Power: The Role of English-Speaking Churches, 1903-1930* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987), 59-61. He concludes that the Commission played "a strong though not uniform role in defining segregation policies (largely already in practice) and controls over African labour supplies." Cochrane, *Servants of Power*, 61.

⁵ See de Gruchy, *Christianity and the Modernisation of South Africa*, ch. 3.

⁶ "The Origin and Extent of Native Separatist Churches", *Report of Native Churches Commission* (Cape Town: Cape Times Ltd, Government Printers, 1925), 18.

⁷ "Total Strategy" was a term coined by the P. W. Botha government in the 1980s to address what it considered a "total onslaught" on the part of white South Africa's enemies—an onslaught that affected all institutions of society, including the churches, as well as creating "unrest" in so-called "black" areas. One was either a friend or an enemy of the state. There were no grey areas. Total Strategy aimed at a kind of "evangelisation" of the institutions of society, including especially the business sector, as well as putting a reformist face on apartheid. But it also involved a

Commission⁸ into the activities of South African Council of Churches, a direct descendant of the missionary movement, was set up.⁹ The atmosphere was much more antagonistic. At stake was the identity of South Africa as a “Christian state”.¹⁰ The churches (some of them anyway) were in the dock, accused of disloyalty. If the first Commission concerned mission Christianity, and the second African Christianity, the Eloff concerned an ecumenical Christianity that embraced both. This Christianity was criticised for its engagement of the state—something which now was considered outside its proper bounds.¹¹ Like the other two Commissions (and indeed the Truth Commission), it was Christians examining other Christians. The major difference in the Truth Commission, of course, was that it was mostly black Christians—many with strong backgrounds in missions—that were *behind* the dais, while a spectrum of Christianities was in the dock. Indeed, it might not be going too far to say that it was *Christianity*, as well as other faith traditions, that was itself in the dock.

This thesis is not a study of Commissions, however. Nor is it an historical account of church-state relations in twentieth century South Africa. It is interested in

brutal crackdown on dissent in the townships. With reference to the SACC, it included not only the Eloff Commission, but also involved setting up alternative ecumenical organisations, such as the Western Cape Province Council of Churches. See Michael Worsnip, “Low Intensity Conflict and the South African Church”, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 69 (December 1989), 82-94. For a concise account of “total strategy”, see Nigel Worden, *The Making of Modern South Africa: Conquest, Segregation and Apartheid* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1994), 122-6.

⁸ C. F. Eloff (Chair), *Report of the Commission of Inquiry Into the South African Council of Churches*, Government Commission Report (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1983).

⁹ The forerunner of the SACC was the Christian Council of South Africa, which in turn grew out of the General Missionary Conferences.

¹⁰ This is indicated best in the debate in Parliament over the Report of the Commission which took place on 27 February, 1984, in particular in an exchange between Alex Boraine and the minister of Law and Order. Boraine’s assertion that South Africa was not a Christian state was seen as seditious and dangerous. See the debate on “The Report of the Inquiry into the South African Council of Churches”, 27 Feb. 1984, in *Republic of South Africa House of Assembly Debates (Hansard)*, Fourth Session—Seventh Parliament, 27 Feb. to 2 March, 1984 (Cape Town: Government Printers, 1984), 1814.

¹¹ In a 1985 article, Charles Villa-Vicencio reads the Eloff Commission together with the 1981 Steyn Commission, which dealt with mass media. While the former offered a pietistic theology which banishes “church” from the affairs of the state, the latter offered a patriotic theology which provided legitimisation for the state. Villa-Vicencio observes an important shift in the nature of the legitimisation of the apartheid state between these two Commissions. And yet, despite their seemingly contradictory conclusions, both were calculated to bring the churches into line with the direction of the state, and to ensure the loyalty of their members to it. Both were concerned with guaranteeing national unity by bringing theology into “the service of the state”. While urging the separation of church and state, the Eloff Commission nevertheless recommended that the state control funding for the South African Council of Churches, in order that the Council be assured to pursue only “spiritual” matters. “Theology in the Service of the State: The Steyn and Eloff Commissions”, in *Resistance and Hope: South African Essays in Honour of Beyers Naudé*, Charles Villa-Vicencio and John W. de Gruchy, eds. (Cape Town: David Philip; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 112-125. See also Charles Villa-Vicencio, *Trapped in Apartheid: A Socio-Theological History of the English-Speaking Churches* (Maryknoll; Cape Town: Orbis Press; David Philip Publishers, 1988), 140-2.

these particular Commissions inasmuch as each represents a crossing, a site of struggle, a place where negotiation and renegotiation of loyalties was taking place. This struggle represented a crossing of loyalties, not only between church and nation, but also within church and within nation. It was as much a crossing of Christianities as it was of ideologies and loyalties. Understanding the contextualisation of Christianity in South Africa as a crossing, “weaving” or “braiding-together”, we may speak of a certain “weaving together” of Christianity and nation building. The question is: is there any “free play” in the tightly woven relation between Christianity and nationalism, between faith loyalty and national loyalty? Is entanglement inevitable? And once disentangled, is there any such thing as a “faith community” left?

The relation between Christianity and nation building is complex in South Africa, and presents scenes both familiar and strange to the *voyageur*. Familiar in that nowhere is Christianity found abstracted from other loyalties, and often is marshalled to support one nationalism or another;¹² strange in the interaction of nationalisms in the one tradition—and sometimes in one church. Within South African Christianity there have been *contesting and contested* nationalisms. We will summarise them as “South African”, “African” and “Afrikaner” nationalisms—though as indicated they were themselves each *under negotiation*. Each was made up of its own particular web of factors: material, symbolic, ideological. Together they represented alternative ways of understanding or *imagining* “South Africa”.

But within the nation, or the different imaginings of nation, there were also different ways of understanding Christianity and its role in nation building. Sometimes the Christian church¹³ was the spiritual centre or “soul” of society (which in turn was the “body”). As the spiritual centre, it could be seen either as being responsible for the legitimisation of society and its direction, or as being responsible for the re-direction of society according to a set of norms which society may or may not also have recognised. This strand remains implicit in South African public discourse, and indeed was behind the Truth Commission’s call to the churches and other faith communities to become involved in the process of reconstruction. It also lies behind re-

¹² This has been so pervasive historically that H. Richard Niebuhr could make the statement that, from its inception, “everywhere Protestant Christianity, consciously or unconsciously, adopted the principles of nationalism and identified itself with a particularist culture.” *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1987 [orig. 1929]), 122. See chapter two below.

¹³ Unless otherwise indicated, in this discussion “church” and Christianity will be used synonymously. This is in part to accommodate the sources which tend to conflate the two. Christianity,

cent statements from Government on the role of faith communities in reconstructing the moral fibre of the nation.¹⁴ At other times the church was seen as one institution amongst many which had an important contribution to make, but had no more special responsibility than trade unions or peoples' organisations.¹⁵ Here, the church and faith communities are seen as part of a broader "civil society". Still at other times there was a flavour of discourse which saw the church as an institution which was of interest only to some, and had no place either blessing or cursing society. We say "flavour", because while the South African state seemed to be embracing secularising forces in the 1980s, its "Christian national" identity remained. When national security was pushed, the apartheid state was ultimately (and we are concerned in religion with ultimates) engaged in a contest between the forces of Christianity and those of "godless communism".¹⁶

There were more sites that could also be mentioned. The Cottesloe Consultation of the World Council of Churches, for example, was also a place where church and state constructed and challenged loyalties.¹⁷ These four stand out, however, because they were initiatives of the South African state, rather than the church,¹⁸ and encapsulate different ways in which Christianity in South Africa was contextualised.

This chapter wants to open these "ways" up by identifying three contested and contesting nationalisms, each claiming a certain primordiality but each generated in the context of the interplay of forces after the South African war. Each also involved Christianity, both as a resource and as a legitimising overlay. Each not only contested

of course, is always more than the institutional church, and some of the most significant Christian activity in South African history has taken place in sites other than that of the church.

¹⁴ For example, the Moral Summit, attended by religious leaders and government representatives, that took place in October, 1998. For a report, see "Mandela Calls for Moral Renewal" at <http://www.mg.co.za/mg/za/archive/98oct/22octam-news.html#moral>.

¹⁵ Except perhaps the fact that its constituency was larger or that the legitimisation of apartheid was based partly in theology—but then these were strategic concerns. Had, say a trade union a constituency as large as the churches, or if trade unionism was used as a legitimising ideology by the state (as absurd as that sounds) then, according to this kind of view, trade unions would have had special responsibility.

¹⁶ This is borne out by the way right wing Christian groups were involved in state activities up to the end of the 1980s. See Roger A. Arendse, "Right Wing Christian Groups", in *Faith Communities Face the Truth: South African Faith Communities and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, ed. James Cochrane, John de Gruchy and Stephen Martin (Cape Town; Athens: David Philip; Ohio University Press, 1999), 91-100; Research Institute on Christianity in South Africa, "Faith Communities and Apartheid", 44, 66.

¹⁷ See John W. de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids; Cape Town: Eerdmans; David Philip, 1986 [orig. 1979]), 62ff; Colleen Ryan, *Beyers Naudé: Pilgrimage of Faith* (Cape Town; Grand Rapids: David Philip; Eerdmans, 1990), 53-72.

the identity of the “nation”, but also of the stake Christianity had in building the nation. While it is necessary to provide background detail, as well as to project ahead the implications of these nationalisms and Christianities, the discussion will concern primarily the period 1902 to 1936—South Africa’s first nation-building project.

Thinking about nationalism and nationalisms

Before we begin our account of nationalisms and Christianities in South Africa, it will be helpful to clarify the debate around the meaning of the terms “nation” and “nationalism”.

The oldest accounts of the “nation” tended to define it in primordialist terms.¹⁹ That is, a nation is a community which exists prior to the agency of any of its members. A nation is something, in other words, that people are “born into”. Nationalism is rooted in the particular history of a community which in turn gives that community legitimacy and mission. Afrikaner nationalism as rooted in the narrative of the Great Trek, which in turn expressed a pre-enlightenment “Calvinism”, is an example of primordialism in South Africa. This explains “the national character”, and is used by both insiders and outsiders to construct an identity.²⁰ This idea is assented to popularly and almost unquestioned, including as an “explanation” of the anomaly of Afrikaner nationalism by English-speaking South Africans. The history of a nation unfolds within pre-determined boundaries. The corollary is that all other nations are “narrated” in this way; all have their own stories, their own histories. This is a normal part of being human.²¹ Indeed, the national narrative precedes or creates the conditions for a particular way of being human in the world.

¹⁸ Although of course the weaving of Christianity into society is so tight that the commissions were in no way “secular”. In fact, in the case of the Truth Commission, Christians played a prominent role in its conception and implementation.

¹⁹ For an attempt to recover the legitimacy of primordial discourses, see John Sharp, “Should we Condemn all Primordial Discourses?” Unpublished paper, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cape Town, 1993.

²⁰ Indeed, Andre du Toit has shown how the connection between Calvinism and Afrikaner identity was actually constructed within the “othering” discourse of English missionaries such as David Livingstone. “No Chosen People: The Myth of the Calvinist Origins of Afrikaner Nationalism and Racial Ideology”, *American Historical Review* 88: 1 (1983), 920-52. See chapter two below on Afrikaner nationalism.

²¹ Not all theories make this claim, however. Those who make a distinction between “civic” (which they usually favour) and “ethnic” nationalism claim not to engage in meta-narrative discourse. It is more authentically human to be an “individual” who can freely enter into civic covenants as a matter of choice, not as an outworking of pre-determined ethnic sentiment. On this view it is ethnic nationalists that are the primordialists.

Primordialist theories have been challenged by instrumentalist theories, which argue that nationalism is a means to an end, usually aimed at a mass of people but engineered by a special interest group for its own material benefit.²² Not all writers go to the extreme of Eric Hobsbawm, who claims that nationalism produces the nation, rather than vice-versa. But instrumentalists all argue that there are other factors prior to nationalism, particularly class and material relations. Instrumentalist theories have also particularly been taken up by writers proposing that nationalism is a peculiarly modern phenomenon.

Until fairly recently, the literature on nationalism has been dominated by trying to articulate the different relations between the nation, modernity and capitalism. Marx claimed that nationalism was a bourgeois concern, belonging to the age of capitalism and soon to be supplanted by class-consciousness.²³ But nationalism has not disappeared into history. Its persistence has continued as an "anomaly".²⁴ "[T]he end of the era of nationalism', so long prophesied, is not remotely in sight. Indeed, nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time."²⁵

One of the most sophisticated versions of the thesis that nationalism is produced by material shifts in and around modernity is Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*.

²² In this view, nationalism is "a convenient myth to mobilize challenges to authority" Thomas A. Koelble, "Towards a Theory of Nationalism: Culture, Structure and Choice Analyses Revisited", *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 1:4 (Winter 1995), 78. As examples, Koelble offers Ernest Gellner and Eric Hobsbawm. See Hobsbawm's *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Hobsbawm is more interested in the phenomenon of *nationalism* than in establishing the nature and boundaries of the *nation* as an entity.

²³ Montserrat Guibernau, *Nationalisms: The Nation-State and Nationalism in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 13f. This is not to say that Marx did not hold that nationalism could not be a motor of social change, as he certainly did in the case of the Irish. Guibernau, *Nationalisms*, 17.

²⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised edition (London and New York: Verso, 1991 [orig. 1982]), 3-4.

²⁵ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 3. The same could be said for what Anthony D. Smith has termed, in oxymoronic irony, "The ethnic revival in the modern world". See *The Ethnic Revival in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). A more tragic irony is evident in the statement of Leroy Vail, who expresses the failed hope of some in Africa who thought that "social would provide the material base for a pan-ethnic class consciousness that would transcend, if not negate, cultural differences. Africa would be a continent of new Yugoslavias." "Introduction: Ethnicity in Southern African History", in Leroy Vail, ed., *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa* (Berkeley; London: University of California; James Currey Ltd., 1987), 2. Since Vail wrote this, Africa has indeed become a continent of new Yugoslavias, even as Yugoslavia itself has degenerated into ethnic cleansings.

Anderson's point of departure is the human need to create meaning-systems in the face of death by forging links "fraternity, power and time".²⁶ In pre-modern contexts, a sacred language linked communities together by relating them to a "superterrestrial order of power".²⁷ This explains "the great solidities of Christendom, the Islamic Ummah, and the rest."²⁸ The nation, as an alternative way of linking fraternity, power and time, arose with the breakdown of the medieval period. Two factors in particular exemplify the cultural shift which led to modern nationalisms: the encounter between different cultures constructed the other not as "heretical", as previously, but as a different team on the same field. Second, the rise of the printing press coincided with the spread of vernacular languages and the downfall of Latin. "The sacred communities integrated by old sacred languages were gradually fragmented, pluralized and territorialized."²⁹ Language was fixed in being reduced to printed form. Publications could create a community of "fellow readers". The world could be mapped in terms of languages, with none able to make an absolute claim on the sacred.³⁰ In turn, the fixity of language gave the speakers the illusion of primordality. They saw themselves as being linked not only to other speakers in space, but in time. All this, however, only created the conditions for the appropriation of the idea of "nation." The model of nation was yet to come.

Perhaps ironically, national awareness in Anderson's account was created in the hybridity of the European outside of Europe or, conversely, of the colonial functionary moving between imperial centre and periphery. The idea of "nationality" was then imported back into Europe. The model of "the nation" was created, not in Europe, but in the Americas and particularly in the United States. "Out of the American welter came these imagined realities: nation-states, republican institutions, common citizenships, popular sovereignty, national flags and anthems etc., and the liquidation of their conceptual opposites: dynastic empires, monarchical institutions, absolutisms, subjecthoods, inherited nobilities, serfdoms, ghettos, and so forth."³¹ By the nineteenth century, America was *the* model of the independent national state.

²⁶ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 9f.

²⁷ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 13.

²⁸ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 36.

²⁹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 19.

³⁰ Not to say that they didn't try to make such a claim, however. Anderson's point is that there was no longer a shared language with which to grasp the sacred.

³¹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 81.

Once created, the idea of nation could be used in different ways. Official nationalisms arose when dynastic rulers realised that popular sentiment and a unified popular language “threatened them with exclusion from, or marginalization in, popular imagined communities”.³² The monarch was now “first among equals”, and had a representative function. In the case of the German Kaiser, the monarch could *betray* his fellow Germans—something previously inconceivable.³³ Nationalism could also be appropriated by the colonised as a means of self-assertion and resistance.

While his idea that the model of the nation was produced in diaspora and then imported back into Europe is not unproblematic,³⁴ Anderson’s presentation of nationalism provides important theoretical and historical points of departure for our treatment of nationalism. Most important are the idea of the nation as an imagined community, as a narrated identity/continuity across space and time, and the idea of nationalism as a particular way of creating meaning. That such communities are constructed and contingent ways of negotiating human existence in the world, rather than predetermined containers for the identities of people, is generally accepted in scholarship.

In the 1990s, the question of nationalism has been extended by those who see it in more anthropological terms, as “boundary creation and maintenance”,³⁵ especially as a way of dealing with otherness. In this view, it serves the need to create identity through differentiation and as the reconfiguration of boundaries predicated on larger, geopolitical shifts.³⁶ These more recent studies have challenged the reliance on language and print capitalism as determinants of nationalism, as well as the strict modernity of the idea of nation. They see language as only one site of mobilisation

³² Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 109-10.

³³ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 85.

³⁴ Adrian Hastings has recently criticised Anderson’s idea of America as model nation, as well as the “astonishing claim that the English nation was only emerging at the heart of its empire in the later years of the nineteenth century.” *The Construction of Nationhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 6. Hastings holds that England, not America, was the model for the nation, and that its origins are medieval, not modern. This debate about the origins of the idea of the nation need not concern us here. It will become evident as we look at “nation” and “nationalism” in South Africa that, while important political terms, they mean different things within different paradigms. When, say in the 1930s, an Afrikaner nationalist and a white English-speaking South African spoke of “the nation”, they would have meant two entirely different entities—a people defined by distinctive language and history, and a modern constitutional state, respectively. Even today, the idea of the nation remains contested. Hence the models and origins of “the nation” are relative to the particular understanding of the term in view.

³⁵ Daniele Conversi, “Reassessing Current Theories of Nationalism: Nationalism as Boundary Maintenance and Creation”, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 1:1 (Spring 1995), 73-85.

³⁶ Kathryn A. Manzo, *Creating Boundaries: The Politics of Race and Class* (Boulder; London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996); Guibernau, *Nationalisms*, 49-50.

for nationalism. In Kathryn A. Manzo's work, the term has a special relation with the ideas of "nation" and "alien" and how they are constructed. For her, "[n]ationalism involves a number of dispersed practices through which boundaries are created and maintained. Nationalism is a scriptural performance, one that constitutes national identity in response to alien difference."³⁷

Following Hobbes's description in *Leviathan*, where the obedient citizen is the rational individual, the state the "mortal God" and everyone else "strangely foreign",³⁸ Manzo goes on to account for how in modern contexts the badge of citizenship is identified—and the marker of difference. She argues that science has been mobilised in the classification of "cultural markers of difference" which stand for both race and culture.³⁹ We shall see this especially in our account of colonial nationalism and Afrikaner nationalism in South Africa, where the terms "culture" and "race" were both given scientific authority in establishing and legitimating segregation and later apartheid. These terms, Manzo would say, are always mobilised in constructing the self, as well as the other.

Thomas A. Koelble has taken a similar approach to Manzo, arguing that nationalism is "fundamentally about the question of 'who am I/we'; a question of identification and ideology with reference to an 'other'."⁴⁰ The question "who am I?"/"Who are We?" is among the most fundamental of human questions.⁴¹ All nationalisms offer ways of construing "we-ness". Often they enclose other ways of constructing boundaries, including those of the faith community. They may even offer a rival to faith communities, or alternatively find themselves under threat by a different transcendent loyalty which cannot be tied to national borders. The connection between nationalism and religion is a particularly interesting one. Nationalism in Anderson's account is a displacement of religion after the desacralisation of a universal, sacred language. In Manzo's and Koelble's accounts, nationalism is itself a kind of religion, with heroes, sacred scriptures and myths of origin not only of the particular

³⁷ Manzo, *Creating boundaries*, 38.

³⁸ Manzo, *Creating boundaries*, 46.

³⁹ Manzo, *Creating boundaries*, 51-2, citing David Theo Goldberg, "Modernity, Race and Morality", *Cultural Critique* (Spring 1993), 210.

⁴⁰ Koelble, "Towards a Theory of Nationalism", 84.

⁴¹ Brian Walsh and J. Richard Middleton identify four fundamental questions that all world-views must answer: Who am I? Where am I? What's the problem? and What's the solution? *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World-View* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 35. Their question "Who am I?" is however only one side of the coin. "Who is the Other?" is the other side, and often links with the "What's the matter?" question.

nation but of all that is “not-nation”. Nationalism is something people both kill and die “in the name of”.

While sympathetic to the nation-as-religion idea, this thesis will rather look at the relations between developing nationalisms and established religions. It will see nationalism as fundamentally about constructing the “we” in South Africa during the period 1903-1936. It argues that the various constructions of the “we” were not only constructions of the “other” but also ways of imagining “South Africa”.



Two points need to be made at the outset of this account. First, a complete historical account of the nationalisms and Christianities under consideration is outside the scope of this thesis. This is not primarily an historical study, and more properly historical and detailed studies are referred to in the notes. The three chapters that follow are intended to present sufficient raw material for digestion in the course of the thesis.

Second, we also need to take note of the way that the South African past in general and the period under consideration in particular remains itself contested.⁴² It could be argued that seeing South African history as shaped by a clash of nationalisms, rather than an outworking of material forces simply reflects the orientation of liberal historians, especially the contributors to *The Oxford History of South Africa*.

Two responses: first, this thesis recognises that the clash of nationalisms is not simply a matter of competing ideas and ideals, but takes place within an interplay of forces, material and other. The chief characteristic of nationalism, as stated above, is found in the construction of boundaries in a contest for power and recognition. In South Africa, where capitalism has constituted, in theological terms, its chief idol, material forces and interests cannot be ignored. At the same time, nationalism cannot simply be reduced to material concerns. Second, liberal historians tend to see state-making as an *alternative* to nationalism, identifying the latter with ethnic and tribal mobilisation. Hence liberal South Africans have sought, by and large, to see themselves above the contest of nationalisms, just as liberal Christians have sought to press for a “third way” in between what they perceive as radical and intractable posi-

⁴² Christopher Saunders has provided a useful guide to the relevant debates in his survey of South African history entitled *The Making of the South African Past* (Cape Town: David Philip,

tions. Unlike liberal historians, however, this thesis views the state-making of 1902-1910 and onward as also a kind of nationalism, contesting with Afrikaner and African nationalisms.⁴³

Within a relatively short time—and especially during the 1903-1910 period—South Africa developed from a diverse region with numerous groups existing in the same geographical space to “a unified and distinctively capitalist nation... which was an integral part of the British Empire, was ruled by whites and had firmly entrenched colonial and settler interests”.⁴⁴ But all this happened while the idea of “being South African” was under construction and contestation. South Africa was being imagined in radically different ways. Each way of imagining South Africa had, as we shall see, an important relation to a plurality of Christianities, and vice versa. To these nationalisms and Christianities we now turn.

1988). An older work by Harrison Wright is also useful. *The Burden of the Past* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1977).

⁴³ See for instance the structure of the *Oxford History* volume 2, where the only nationalisms treated are Afrikaner and African nationalisms.

⁴⁴ Worden, *The Making of Modern South Africa*, 5.

South African Nationalism

It has been said of English-speaking South Africans that they have one foot in Europe and the other in Africa, that for them there are always “boats in the harbor”, waiting to take them home.¹ This is largely an unfair characterisation, though the ambiguity of being English and South African has occasioned some creative reflection.² Alan Paton, aware of this question, identified something he called “South Africanism”, something which does not yet exist in political form, though “it flourishes in hearts such as mine.”³ South Africanism is based on two things. The first is a letting go of British nationalism, a process which he thinks began in the aftermath of the South African War but was stalled in moments of crisis.⁴ The second is the idea that such a South Africanism transcends “aggressive and competing nationalisms”, by holding that “there are values that transcend the values of nationalism... to be a son or a daughter of God is more fundamental than to be an Afrikaner or a Zulu or an Englishman.”⁵ This chapter explores a kind of nationalism that is indeed “South African nationalism”, but which is also of a genre called “colonial nationalism” which gives it a distinctively British flavour. Like Paton’s call for South Africanism, it developed in dialectical relation to Afrikaner nationalism.⁶ But it also tried to base its call to unity on Christianity, although it had a definite idea of what “a son or a daughter of God” looked like. Nevertheless, in its ambiguity it also displayed formative dimensions which constituted an important strand in African resistance.

Colonial Nationalism: the one and the many

When does a settler become a citizen?⁷ When does a colony become a country? Contained in the words “colony”, “settler” and “citizen” is a debate about iden-

¹ Richard John Neuhaus, *Dispensations: The Future of South Africa as South Africans See it* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 68.

² See John de Gruchy, “A Euro-African Theologian Looks at his Ancestral Home”, in *A Distant View: On the Making of Europe*, ed. Jürgen Wiersma (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1997).

³ Alan Paton, “A Short History of British Nationalism in South Africa”, in *Church and Nationalism in South Africa*, ed. Theo Sundermeier, (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1975), 45.

⁴ Paton, “British Nationalism”, 48.

⁵ Paton, “British Nationalism”, 54-55.

⁶ Paton, “British Nationalism”, 48.

⁷ Mahmood Mamdani, “When does a Settler become a Native?” Inaugural Lecture, University of Cape Town, 13 May 1998.

tity, loyalty and centredness which relates to the process of contextualisation of Christianity and its role—if it has a role—in nation-building.

The first “nation-building” movement in South Africa can be located in the wider context of changes in the nature of British colonialism after the Victorian age. Colonial identities were changing throughout the world, as people were calling themselves “Canadian”, “Australian, and “South African”. Settlers were becoming, if not “natives”, then homesteaders. The Edwardian journalist Richard Jebb termed these new identities “colonial nationalisms”.⁸ Colonial nationalisms arose in the transformation of domains from commercial enterprises to “nation-states”, creating a new kind of creole: a native who was not a native, and yet not a European either.⁹

This process did not happen in isolation. Indeed it reflected similar processes elsewhere. It is important to note the wider geopolitical transformations within which colonial nationalisms were developing, colonial identities changing and new nationalisms arising. While Eddy and Schreuder challenge the idea that the period after the end of the South African War and the death of Victoria was a period of decline for Britain, and hence that new identities were rising because of that decline. They demonstrate nevertheless that it was certainly a period of great change. Britain was adjusting itself to new world realities. Edwardian Britain was in economic crisis, having become more materially dependent on the colonies. With its balance of trade perennially in deficit, the Motherland was more and more dependent on taking wealth from its colonies to feed its industry. Additionally, the threat of invasion created a crisis of security, with the London *Daily Standard* invoking the image of “Imperial Rome when the Barbarians were thundering at the frontiers”.¹⁰ World outrage about atrocities in the South African War had created a crisis of legitimacy, with British pretensions of “civilisation” under serious question.

For their part, the Dominions were developing “a new and broadly assertive force of national consciousness... often indeed focused on their own closer unification movements”.¹¹ There was a need for a new basis for loyalties—a basis which could serve British interests at home but which could also create and legitimise the

⁸ See John Eddy and Deryck Schreuder, “The Edwardian Empire in Transformation and Decline”, in *The Rise of Colonial Nationalism*, ed. John Eddy and Deryck Schreuder (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1988), 19-62.

⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised edition (London and New York: Verso, 1991 [orig. 1982]), 91-3.

¹⁰ Cited in Eddy and Schreuder, “Edwardian Empire”, 29.

unification movements in the colonies. The concept “colonial nationalism” helps us understand this basis.

The term “colonial nationalism” was coined by Richard Jebb,¹² a journalist who travelled extensively in Canada, South Africa and Australia. As much perhaps creating the concept as reporting on it, he nevertheless captured a trend that was going on in the various colonies. Colonial nationalism not only ensured loyalty to the Empire on the part of the new nations, but also secured that unity in part by imagining each “nation” after the image of the Empire.¹³ The Empire was in turn recreated after the image of the colony. Hence the idea of a “Greater Britain” was promulgated through loyal institutions, including schools and churches.¹⁴

Despite the lack of a more “formal” kind of imperial union, this idea of a “greater Britain” grew, particularly under the encouragement of various organs and institutions (including churches). “The core ideology of these new nascent nations overseas,” observe Eddy and Schreuder, “contained... a fair dose of social Darwinism and Anglo-Saxon ethnocentrism, which set the colonist apart from the indigenous people, and which also set them apart from other Europeans overseas as subjects of the monarchy, filled with the pride of empire.”¹⁵ They constituted “a particular constellation of European settlements, which were both essentially new societies, yet also ‘forever old England’.”¹⁶

Imperial unity was therefore a plural phenomenon. “Quite different views of an evolving empire found their focus centring on the contentious relationship of a revitalised British imperialism to the crop of ‘new nations’ now coming to constitute the Dominions”, observe Eddy and Schreuder.¹⁷ But so were ideas of unity in the new nations. Some claimed that race provided unity; others that economics did. Regardless, these new nations were the first “post-industrial” states—which means that they are quite different from the US, where a very different kind of nationalism had taken

¹¹ Eddy and Schreuder, “Edwardian Empire”, 20.

¹² Richard Jebb, *Studies in Colonial Nationalism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1905).

¹³ Eddy and Schreuder, “Edwardian Empire”, 55.

¹⁴ In South Africa’s case, education was seen as an important site for the putting down of rival nationalisms, especially Afrikaner nationalism. The role of churches vis-à-vis the creation of an idea of “Greater Britain” is a key theme in this chapter.

¹⁵ Eddy and Schreuder, “Edwardian Empire”, 31.

¹⁶ Eddy and Schreuder, “Edwardian Empire”, 56.

¹⁷ Eddy and Schreuder, “Edwardian Empire”, 40.

root.¹⁸ Organic unity existed as a unity of spirit within a structured *imperium*. And yet each “dominion” existed not simply as a part of a greater whole, but as a whole in itself, with its own economic and industrial order. “Local” identities developed local forms of unity. In many ways these were like local churches within a much larger and diverse *ecumene*.

These ideological changes constitute another important contextual factor in the rise, not only of colonial nationalism in South Africa, but of African nationalism. For African nationalism and African Christianity were caught in tension between two strands of British liberalism—nineteenth century ideas of equal rights based on a common humanity and twentieth century ideas which spoke of progress through industrialisation and the spread of capitalism. Both strands crossed in the form of African and colonial nationalism, yet utilised similar language.¹⁹

In sum, the geopolitical context represented a number of crossings: of material changes, international crises and ideological shifts. These strands wove a context for the emergence of colonial nationalisms—and South African nationalism. The context also was set for the (re)emergence of local nationalisms, including Afrikaner nationalism which we will examine below.²⁰

The rise of South African Nationalism

South Africa was imagined in a way related to the imaging of a wider *imperium*. More narrowly, the way colonial nationalism developed in South Africa was also as a response to, as well as a condition for, rising Afrikaner and African nationalisms, South Africa’s own “forces of chaos” at its boundaries. The “local” context, with contending and contesting nationalisms (rather than a convergence into a single na-

¹⁸ “The American experience was both a troubling model [for the Victorians] and not exactly ap-
posite as an enlightening projection. Nineteenth century imperial regions of settlement.... were
essentially products in their state-making of a new, post-industrial age of capital, laissez faire and
bourgeois democracy.” Eddy and Schreuder, “Edwardian Empire”, 56.

¹⁹ For example, the phrase “equal rights for all men south of the Zambezi”, apparently coined by
the industrialist Cecil John Rhodes, could be a political slogan motivating African nationalism.
But in the hands of capitalist colonial nationalists (including Rhodes himself—insofar as it is not
anachronistic to call him a “colonial nationalist”), it actually meant equal rights for all *white* men
south of the Zambezi. See de Gruchy, *Christianity and the Modernisation of South Africa*, ch. 2.

²⁰ African nationalism was also asserted as a response to colonial nationalism, although it’s ori-
gins in some ways run parallel to colonial nationalism, or even predate it. Indeed, its origins as
we shall see can be traced to the mid-nineteenth century. See chapter three below.

tionalism), made the movement toward an all-embracing South African nationalism a unique *species* within the colonial nationalist *genus*.²¹

While a concept like colonial nationalism may illuminate similarities, important differences must also be recognised. Deryck Schreuder suggests three qualifications that must be made in comparing South Africa to other places where colonies were becoming nations according to the pattern suggested by Richard Jebb.²² The first is found in the fact that South Africa's political culture and ethnic makeup was pluralistic, rather than singular. "Demographic patterns of settlement", writes Schreuder, "had come to reflect distinct ethnic divisions on the land itself". Perhaps this may also be said of Canada, with its concentration of French-speakers in Quebec. Second, unlike other places where colonial nationalism had taken root, "the majority of the European inhabitants were not British in origin or even in outlook". Third, "the majority of the Queen's subjects were indigenous peoples of Africa". The creation of a loyalty that tied all subjects and interests together would be a tremendous challenge.

Each of these qualifications relates to the rise of different nationalisms in South Africa, and the difficulty of asserting a South African unity which would embrace the (powerful) minority rather than the majority. The settlement patterns of which Schreuder speaks meant that regional loyalties were strongly entrenched, and merged neatly with ethnic loyalties.²³ Indeed the criss-crossing of loyalties, with geographical, ethnic, class and religious strands, was very difficult to negotiate. Cape Afrikaners in particular were caught between British power on the one hand and their cousins in the interior on the other—something we shall discuss in the section on Afrikaner nationalism.

The fact that the majority in South Africa were not Europeans was not a major consideration in terms of widening political unity, for it was not considered that

²¹ Speaking of "South African nationalism", does not thereby negate the point that Marks and Trapido make: that while something called "South Africanism" has existed throughout the twentieth century, English-speaking South Africans base identity "on far more diffuse notions of racial and political identity." Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido, "Introduction: The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth-Century South Africa", in *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth-Century South Africa*, ed. Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido (London and New York: Longmans, 1987), 2-3. Their statement that nationalism was an "alien and unnecessary ideology" to English-speaking South Africans, refers to a particular kind of nationalism, represented by late-nineteenth century European nationalism. What this present chapter calls "colonial nationalism" is a somewhat different form of nationalism.

²² Deryck Schreuder, "Colonial Nationalism and 'Tribal Nationalism': Making the White South African State, 1899-1910", in Eddy and Schreuder, ed. *Rise of Colonial Nationalism*, 193.

²³ We will discuss this more under the idea of "ethnic mobilisation" below.

the South African “nation” would need to embrace these black “nations”. However their presence and growing economic and political power made the need for a white bulwark all the more strongly felt.

Ostensibly the South African War, like the U.S. Civil War, was fought over the rights of black people. This, of course, is but one interpretation that also functioned as the chief legitimisation for both the British imperial and the U.S. Union forces.²⁴ Other interpretations have been offered, particularly the need for a national unity that placed South Africa’s considerable mineral wealth in the hands of the Empire. Ensuring the loyalty of all (white) citizens was then the problem, as was the need to ensure a steady supply of cheap labour. A white South African nationalism, which used terms like “child races” for blacks and “upliftment” for white actions towards blacks, served the need greatly. A peace which secured trade routes between the seaport of Cape Town and the mines of the interior could also be strengthened by a symbolic sense of oneness. The War—and the settlement and Union that followed in 1902 and 1910 respectively—therefore formed an important component for the securing of British interests in southern Africa.

Taking the “moral high ground” of claiming to fight for the rights of Africans in legitimising the War meant that Britain’s material interests could remain masked. And indeed Africans pledged loyalty to the empire which claimed to act for their benefit. But while the ideological self-understanding of colonial nationalism presented its idea of “nation” as based not on tribal or ethnic unity, but rather on a common loyalty to the empire, racialism and ethnocentrism were very much a part of it. Ironically, what was purportedly a nationalism founded on a transformation of the many loyalties with reference to an inclusive one became one of many contested nationalisms in South Africa. What Schreuder called “Anglo-Saxon ethnocentrism” and “the pride of Empire” went alongside a progressivism which hid ideas of white pride behind dogmas of human evolution. In the name of progressivism it was held that Africans were not yet ready for rights of citizenship. Progressivism merged with “scien-

²⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr also disputed the idea that the U.S. Civil War was fought simply over the moral issue of rights for blacks. He acknowledges that for some this may have been true. But the larger material dynamics brought about by the invention of the cotton gin (much in the same way as the advent of deep-level mining did in South Africa), Niebuhr points out, provided a stronger reason for the need for cheap black labour in the U.S. In the meantime, “the Northern condemnation of slavery was made possible by the whole economic development of the states north of the Mason and Dixon line, with their small farms and diversified crops, their commercial and industrial interests”. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1987 [orig. 1929]), 189.

tific racism” as the ideological basis for the unity of whites (even the old enemies of Briton and Dutch) over against blacks.²⁵

Even here, Africans continued to press for recognition of their loyalty to the sovereignty of the British monarch, to the point of fighting and dying in a War thousands of miles away. But it was to a Britain which no longer existed in the nineteenth century sense—an ostensibly “moral” and “civilising” power—that they pledged allegiance. African nationalism emerged not counterpoised against Britain, but seeing itself as part of “the benevolent empire”.²⁶ That of course would change. Nevertheless it was Britain that rejected Africans, not the other way around.

Colonial nationalism held Afrikaner nationalism in derision as well, but for different reasons. Where Africans were simply not yet ready for the responsibilities of full citizenship, Afrikaner nationalists were retrogressive, caught up in a backward tribalism. Ethnic nationalisms were, in Shreuder’s terms, “the little Gauls to [Jebb’s] greater Rome.”²⁷ In both cases, the criticism concerned relation to a time-scale. Those outside the ambit of colonial nationalism were either “backward”, going the wrong way, or had yet to “catch up”. Colonial nationalism, for its part, identified itself as being on “the cutting edge” of history. Understood in this way, segregation was a replacing of Africans into bounded spaces where a different timeline operated, where Africans could develop “in their own time”.

Its resistance to African and Afrikaner tribalism masked colonial nationalism’s own tribalism. Ironically, this was a South African nationalism more exclusive than its rhetoric could admit. Always in danger of destabilisation, of de-centring, it needed a constant centring. It got this from two branches, in the main: “scientific racism” and English-speaking, liberal Christianity.²⁸ Scientific racism was an attempt to shift focus

²⁵ On “scientific racism” see Saul Dubow, “Race, Civilisation and Culture: The Elaboration of Segregationist Discourse in the Inter-War Years”, in *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism*, ed. Marks and Trapido, 71-94.

²⁶ Richard Elphick, “The Benevolent Empire and the Social Gospel: Missionaries and South African Christians in the Age of Segregation”, in *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social and Cultural History*, ed. Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport (Cape Town; Oxford: David Philip; James Currey, 1997), 347-69. On African nationalism, see chapter three below.

²⁷ Schreuder, “Colonial nationalism and ‘tribal nationalism’”, 194. Other examples similar to Afrikaner nationalism included Quebec nationalism in Canada and Celtic nationalism in Ireland.

²⁸ The colonial churches—or the churches of the British empire that came with immigrants—are usually classified under the label “the English-speaking churches”. This refers specifically to the Anglican (Church of the Province of Southern Africa), Methodist (Methodist Church of Southern Africa), Presbyterian (Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa) and Congregational (United Congregational Church of Southern Africa) churches which are of settler or settler-mission origin. For major studies of the English-speaking churches considered as a group, see James Cochrane,

from ethnic identity to “race”, while simultaneously trying to maintain a nationalism that transcended race. Scientific racism will appear again in our account, but in the context of English-speaking or colonial Christianity.

Colonial Christianity

Andrew Walls has demonstrated that, for imperialist Christianity, the 1880s were a watershed. Previously, “ideas of British chosenness had to do with insularity”. As it approached the twentieth century, the idea of chosenness became associated with “Empire”. The sea changed from a “bulwark for defence” to “a path for Britain to the ends of the earth”.²⁹ Until the high imperial period, Britain’s mission, and the natural effect of its influence, was to civilise. But those civilised “were nonetheless regarded as responsible beings”. Later, under the influence of social Darwinist dogma, they were regarded as “child races” that would have to be firmly but gently “tutored”.³⁰

Parallels can be drawn between the career of colonial nationalism and the English-speaking churches. The period of the rise of colonial nationalism in South Africa was also a period of consolidation for English-speaking Christianity. To understand this process, it is important to understand the two main sources of white Christianity in South Africa.

The mythology of Afrikanerdom notwithstanding, it is inaccurate to typify the first settlers in South Africa as infused with a sense of Christian mission. The Dutch Reformed Church did however send ministers to the Colony from as early as 1665 and, as Jonathan Gertsner has pointed out, Reformed Christianity played an impor-

Servants of Power: The Role of English-Speaking Churches, 1902-1930 (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1987) and Charles Villa-Vicencio, *Trapped in Apartheid: A Socio-Theological Study of the English-Speaking Churches* (Cape Town; Maryknoll: David Philip; Orbis Books, 1988). These churches are distinguished from mission churches, such as the Reformed and Evangelical Presbyterian churches, as well as churches of African origin. These other churches will be discussed briefly in chapter three.

The term “English-speaking churches” is a potentially misleading, however. The majority of the members of these churches are not English-speaking. John de Gruchy suggests the term “Churches of British Origin” as a substitute. “The Chastening of the English-speaking Churches in South Africa”, Paper Given at the Conference on Race, Ethnicity, and Reconciliation, University of the Western Cape, 14-16 January 1999. This thesis will stay with the term “English-speaking churches” because of its commonness in the literature.

²⁹ “Carrying the White Man’s Burden: Some British Views of National Vocation in the Imperial Era”, in *Mary are Chosen: Divine Election and Western Nationalism*, eds. W. R. Hutchison and H. Lehmann (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 37-38.

³⁰ Walls, “White Man’s Burden”, 39.

tant role in shaping the culture and identity of the early settlers.³¹ Far from impelling them to take the Christian message to the indigenous people, however, Christianity functioned as a way of differentiating “settlers” from “natives”. Settler Christianity, which supported what we might call a “mobile, diasporic identity” rather than a “grounded” identity, located in a particular land and history, developed as a distinctive genre of Christianity from this point. It served to maintain the symbolic world of the settlers, to give them a familiar stage on which to act. As de Gruchy puts it,

The settler churches existed to serve their constituencies in a new geographical environment. This meant, in effect, helping settlers cope with and adapt to their new and rather alien location by providing the necessary pastoral care, as well as a community of familiar symbols, rituals and values.³²

The first missionary to South Africa was the Moravian George Schmidt, who came to the Cape Colony in 1737, but was soon forced to leave by the VOC authorities. In the meantime a worldwide missionary movement was developing in Europe and North America, made possible not only by opening sea-lanes but also by Enlightenment ideology.³³ Here Christianity provided the basis for a link between Europeans and indigenous people, rather than an identity marker drawing a line of distinction. Mission Christianity arrived in the eastern Cape in 1799, shortly before a new wave of settlers—this time from England—were to come to the same area in the early nineteenth century.³⁴ These settlers brought churches with them as well.

³¹ Jonathan N. Gertsner, “A Christian Monopoly: The Reformed Church and Colonial Society Under Dutch Rule”, in *Christianity in South Africa*, ed. Elphick and Davenport, 16-30. See chapter two below on Afrikaner Christianity.

³² John W. de Gruchy, “Settler Christianity”, in *Living Faiths in South Africa*, ed. Martin Prozesky and John W. de Gruchy (Cape Town: David Philip, 1995), 29. Perhaps it is worth observing that what Dirkie Smit has termed “different symbolic universes” to a large extent continue to exist amongst South Africans. (Cited in John W. de Gruchy, “Christian Witness and the Transformation of a Culture in Transition”, in *Christ and Context*, eds. Hilary Regan and Alan J. Torrance (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1993), 146.) Christianity, far from bridging these different symbolic universes has actually exacerbated their divisiveness. Symbols have been contested, “stolen back and forth”, as David Chidester, following Kenneth Burke, puts it. See Chidester, “Religious Studies as Political Practice”, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 58 (March 1987), 14f. See also his *Shots in the Streets: Religion and Violence in South Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1992). A sub-argument in this chapter is that this has happened through various “Christianities” proliferating in South Africa and that this discloses the ambiguity of “contextualisation”.

³³ See David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 274ff.

³⁴ On mission Christianity, see Charles Villa-Vicencio and Robin Peterson, *Christianity and the Colonisation of South Africa* (Cape Town; Grand Rapids: David Philip; Eerdmans, 2000). Charles Villa-Vicencio, “Mission Christianity”, in *Living Faiths in South Africa*, ed. Martin Prozesky and John de Gruchy (Cape Town: David Philip, 1995), 45-71; David Chidester, *Religions of South Africa* (London: Routledge, 1992), 35-73.

While on the one hand, the settler churches provided “familiar symbols, rituals and values”, the main concern of the missionaries, on the other hand, “was the evangelisation of the ‘heathen’,” and their transformation into ‘civilised persons’.”³⁵ Put another way, settler Christianity was “transplanted” from Europe, and thus was part of Europeans (especially the British) in diaspora attempting to create a facsimile or representation of “home”. Mission Christianity, however, was concerned with the “translation” of Christianity into a new context—though it is certainly true that some of their converts took this more seriously than they. This is not to say that mission Christianity had no implication in the colonisation of South Africa. To the contrary. Nor is it to say that there was not a certain amount of translation happening in settler churches. Indeed, a facsimile is but a representation of the original, sketched from memory, constructed using local materials. But the contextualisation was for different reasons and served different purposes. That said, perhaps de Gruchy puts it too strongly when he says that “settler Christianity developed on the sub-continent alongside of, but without any meaningful relation to, mission Christianity.”³⁶ A “meaningful relation” may be many different things—including merging, rivalry, or the ongoing contestation of a tradition. The relation between settlers and missionaries—and their churches—was at best uneasy, at worst constructed as a web of mutual suspicion.

The distinction between settler and mission Christianity is helpful in explaining the different ways Christianity wound itself in, and bound itself to, its different contexts in the nineteenth century. By the late nineteenth century, South African denominations were beginning to consolidate their structures in light of the new situation.³⁷ This new situation included the emergence of South Africa as a growing industrial place, and the entire infrastructure that this required. It set up economic links between frontier and settlement, and rural and urban centres.³⁸

³⁵ de Gruchy, “Settler Christianity”, 29; Leon de Kock, *Civilising Barbarians: Missionary Narrative and African Textual Response* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1996).

³⁶ de Gruchy, “Settler Christianity”, 28.

³⁷ See John W. de Gruchy, “Grappling with a Colonial Heritage: The English-Speaking Churches under Imperialism and Apartheid”, in *Christianity in South Africa*, ed. Elphick and Davenport, 156-7. The term “consolidation” is difficult. In a way it reminds one of the first-year philosophy problem of how many hairs on a person’s face it takes before we say he (or she) has a beard. Some denominations, such as the Wesleyan Methodists and Congregationalists were in continual evolution through the period under consideration. By the term I mean to suggest a certain degree of stability and a shape which made it possible to speak, for instance, of “The CPSA” rather than Anglican parishes and congregations.

³⁸ On the material aspects of the Union and their relation to the English-speaking churches, see Cochrane, *Servants of Power*, 55-97.

The English-speaking churches began to take shape as a number of peculiar streams converged and diverged. Pan-South African denominations such as the Presbyterian Church of South Africa (1900) were created as frontier missions and mission churches began to unite with the settler churches.³⁹ The distinction which had obtained in South African Christianity for the past hundred years began to fade.⁴⁰ A new distinction, between “African” and “European” Christianity⁴¹ was emerging.⁴² The various denominations in South Africa were being shaped in the light of the new national situation. They were also beginning to play a role in the shaping of the new situation as they lent their support to South African political consolidation.⁴³

While Congregationalists would wait until 1967 before forming a United Church, the Evangelical Voluntary Union came into being in 1860 and former LMS church groups and settler churches united in 1877.⁴⁴ Like the Presbyterians and Congregationalists, Methodists were active in missions on the frontier. They also had formed congregations and were especially strong in the Eastern Cape among the 1820 settlers. Even before immigrants from Britain flocked to the Witwatersrand at the close of the nineteenth century, Methodism had gained a foothold in the Transvaal through black Wesleyan preachers. With marked settler and mission traditions, con-

³⁹ No substantive history of the Presbyterian Church of Southern Africa has been published. Jack Dalziel has produced a mimeographed account of Presbyterianism up until the creation of the PCSA, entitled “A History of Presbyterianism in South Africa to 1897”. A copy of this document is currently held in the RICSA archives, University of Cape Town.

⁴⁰ This is not to say that mission Christianity disappeared. Indeed it continued to exist in African churches such as the Bantu and Tsonga Presbyterian churches.

⁴¹ African and European Christianities, it must be reiterated, were contested internally as well as interacting with each other.

⁴² For an example of the debate from the pages of *The Christian Express*, the leading South African missionary organ, see E. Jacottet, “Separate Churches” (July 1907) and Brownlee J. Ross, “African Type of Christianity” (April, 1908), both reprinted in *Outlook on a Century*, ed. Francis Wilson and Dominique Perrot (Lovedale: Lovedale Press/SPRO-CAS, 1968), 378-89. For Jacottet, the emergence of an African type of Christianity was a matter of historical precedent: “Christianity only succeeded in its work of conquest by assimilating the spirit of the races it had to convert, and *in being in its turn assimilated with it*. National churches, in spite of all the efforts of the Roman see, were practically formed in all [Christianised European] countries.” (379, emphasis added) For Ross, assimilation into European Christianity was part of upliftment from a “barbarous” state, far removed from pre-Christian Europeans. Adding a normative perspective to the term “African” (that equated it with “uncivilised”), Ross said that an “African type of Christianity” was a *non-sequator*. “Anglo-Saxon and Bantu are both in South Africa and are both to remain; the march of events, which are the mills of God, is already grinding them into one people.” (387-8) This was an important debate with wider-reaching implications. Was Christianity “one” or “many”. If the latter, how could it be said to provide a transcendent basis for society?

⁴³ For a more detailed overview, see Rodney Davenport, “Settlement, Conquest, and Theological Controversy: The Churches of Nineteenth-Century European Immigrants”, in *Christianity in South Africa*, ed. Elphick and Davenport, 51-67 and de Gruchy, “Grappling with a Colonial Heritage”, 155-72.

solidation however was a long process, beginning with the formation of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in 1882 and culminating with the formation of the Methodist Church of South Africa in 1931.⁴⁵

The English-speaking churches, while united in ethnic origin and in their loyalty to the Empire,⁴⁶ nevertheless replicated the same ecclesiastical divisions as existed in Britain, not only between denominations over matters of dogma and polity, but between free churches and the established church. Even though it could not call itself an established church, and even after the passing of the Voluntary Act in 1875, Anglicanism remained the church of the colonial establishment in the Cape. Even so, it was only under the ministry of Robert Gray, the first Archbishop of Cape Town, that the Anglican Church (CPSA) developed from its rather modest roots of hiring space in the Groot Kerk in Cape Town in the early nineteenth century, to “a well-organised, predominantly settler church in South Africa.”⁴⁷ The first synod of the CPSA was held in 1870. With the consolidation of the church symbolised by this first synod, the geographical, political and ecclesial boundaries came to co-exist. Referred to sometimes simply as “the English church”, the CPSA established a practice of importing its leaders from Britain, even while the church was attempting to root itself in African soil. It would be a century before a South African-born Archbishop would be appointed.⁴⁸

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, therefore, churches “planted” in South Africa were becoming South African churches. In the meantime, the space reserved for churches was being renegotiated. Following the de Mist Church Order in 1804, the monopoly of the Dutch Reformed Church⁴⁹ at the Cape had been replaced by a recognition of religious tolerance and diversity, although it was also recognised

⁴⁴ The standard history of Congregationalism in South Africa is D. Roy Briggs and Joseph Wing, *The Harvest and the Hope: The Story of Congregationalism in Southern Africa* (Johannesburg: UCCSA, 1970).

⁴⁵ For a history of Methodism in South Africa, but before the formation of the MCSA, see William Eveleigh, *The Story of a Century, 1823-1923* (Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House, 1923). For an alternative account from a Black perspective, see Daryl M. Balia, *Black Methodists and White Supremacy in South Africa* (Durban: Madiba Publications, 1991).

⁴⁶ de Gruchy, “The English-speaking Churches”, 156.

⁴⁷ de Gruchy, “Settler Christianity”, 33.

⁴⁸ Bill Burnett was the first South African Archbishop of Cape Town, appointed in 1974. Desmond Tutu became the first black South African Archbishop of Cape Town in 1986.

⁴⁹ The Dutch Reformed Churches shall be the subject of further study in the next chapter. The dynamics there were not a matter of consolidating into “denomination” alongside other denominations (as we have described the English-speaking churches), but of a developing *Volkskerk* which united churches divided along geographical lines. Other churches, such as the Lutheran

that religion, functioning normally, was legitimate only insofar as it supported the state.⁵⁰ Religious tolerance and dissent was not an acceptable excuse for political disloyalty.⁵¹ Indeed the limits of tolerance were precisely here. This theme would be sounded through the history of the South African state—at least until 1994.

For their part, the English-speaking churches also recognised a coincidence of interests between their growth and that of the South African nation. Nothing demonstrates this more than the enthusiasm they expressed for the British in the South African War. Even taking the jingoism that usually accompanies war into account, their support for imperial policy was marked. A tract entitled “The Voice of the Churches”, published by the South African Vigilance Committee in 1900 and addressed to the “home” churches of the various English-speaking denominations,⁵² provides several examples of this. The Baptist Union, for instance, claimed that “the interests of the Kingdom of Christ, especially in relation to the Native races of this Continent, are intimately associated with the success of the British arms, and with such development and extension of civilisation as invariably accompany British rule wherever it obtains.” For the Anglican Archbishop William West-Jones, “the cause of freedom, righteousness, and progress, as well as of justice of the native races depend[ed] upon the establishment of British rule throughout South Africa.” The Congregation Union of Natal said that “in British administration lies the only hope of uniting the various States of South Africa, and of the permanent peace and prosperity of the whole country.” The Union continued on the need to no longer have “two Republics in South Africa”, deeming it “of vital and transcendent importance that Gov-

and Roman Catholic churches, could be discussed. The interest of this chapter is however confined to the protestant English-speaking churches.

⁵⁰ The debate over the virtues of religion and religious pluralism is evident in *The Voluntary Debate*, Transcript of Parliamentary Debate (Cape Town: Saul Solomon, 1859). On the Voluntary Act, which was passed finally in 1875, see Edna Bradlow, “Saul Solomon, Cape Liberalism and the Voluntary Movement in the 19th Century”, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, September 1987, 28-45.

⁵¹ For more on nineteenth century settler churches, see Davenport, “Settlement, Conquest, Controversy”.

⁵² While the word “home” may indicate that these churches still had strong identity ties to Britain, the fact that they had to justify the actions of the imperial forces reflects growing antipathy for British involvement in fighting the Boers, especially in the non-conformist churches, as well as the accusation that the South African churches could be identified as “prodigal” children. The Dutch Reformed Churches of the Transvaal and Free State also addressed the churches in Britain, making their appeal the basis of a “Christian” rather than denominational solidarity. See “An appeal of the Transvaal and Free State Churches: To the Various Christian Churches in Great-Britain and Ireland”, originally published in *De Hervormer*, 15 May 1900. Extract published in *Boustouwæ vir Kerkgeskiedenis van die Nederduits-Gereformeerde Kerk in die Transgariëp*, ed. G. B. A. Gerdener (Cape Town: Nasionale Pers, 1930), 771-2.

ernment on British lines should be established in every State of South Africa, under one flag, as in Canada and Australia.”⁵³

Interestingly enough, support for the British in the South African War was mixed overseas. But clearly the colonial nationalist ideal, albeit in seed form, had become the defining ideology of the English-speaking churches.

As well as convergences, there were also divergences within Christianity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Missionary strategy held the importance of self-governing, self-propagating and self-supporting “native” churches, while for their part many black leaders wished to develop their own churches. Semi-autonomous “mission” denominations were created out of the older mission churches that had not joined the new consolidated denominations. “Ethiopian” churches broke away from the European-led churches, though they retained an affiliation with the European traditions. Along with Zionist churches, which looked to a Christianity beyond and before Europe, they formed alternative, African Initiated Churches.⁵⁴ This process accelerated as Africans become more politically marginalised in the nation-building programme that began with the Treaty of Vereeniging in 1902.

In sum, it was during this period of South African nation building that the English-speaking churches were developing beyond being merely daughters of British parents. They were “South Africanising”. But it was a long time before they would begin to Africanise—despite the fact that they were becoming largely black churches, though with white leadership. By the early twentieth century, the English-speaking churches mirrored the larger society and the South African nationalism that was coming to dominate.

Spiritual and racial unity: linking church and nation

Perhaps it may be concluded that the uniting of the South African nation and the consolidation of the South African churches were parallel movements. But this thesis wants to claim more: namely that each movement saw the other as in some way integral to its identity and ascendancy. This comes through particularly in their understanding of unity.

⁵³ *The Voice of the Churches—In Support of the Imperial Policy* (Cape Town: The South African Vigilance Committee, 1900), 3, 5, 14.

⁵⁴ See chapter three below. A different kind of divergence was taking place between the English-speaking and Dutch Reformed churches in the Cape. This is explored in chapter two.

The dream of a unified South African nation was a considerable challenge to implement. It certainly was not aided by the ambiguous discourses of race and nationhood emerging out of Victorian and Edwardian societies. Discourses of “race” and “nationhood” tended to be conflated during that time. As Shula Marks has noted, “until the 1930s in South Africa the racial question for whites referred to the conflict between Boer and Briton, while among Africans too, the word seems to have referred to what we would now term ethnic or tribal difference.”⁵⁵ Indeed it seems that a claim of racial superiority was not simply a “white” thing, but more specifically an “English” thing which produced “a certain ambiguity in relations between the settlers themselves.”⁵⁶ This included “a growing tendency to see the non-English settlers.... as members of an ‘inferior race’”—certainly not surprising if one considers that the talk of unity between British and Dutch was initiated mainly by the British, and motivated primarily by the need to protect their interests. The creation of a South African nation within the new political and economic boundaries—even an exclusively *white* nation—would be very difficult given these dynamics.

Churches tended to echo this racist discourse. Within church leadership, English and “Dutch” were spoken of in racist terms, as also were “natives”. For example in 1900, during the South African War, Rev. Lewis Grout noted that there were three races living in South Africa: “English, Dutch and Natives.”⁵⁷ And the idea of three different races was not confined to English-speaking churches. Grout made reference to a letter written that year by ten Dutch Reformed ministers which spoke of “two white races” living in the region at the time.

As South African nationalism gained momentum, however, and as various “race theories” developed alongside practices of segregation—which it must be remembered were integral to South African nation-building—the perceived racial makeup of the nation changed. By 1926, the Anglican missionary A. W. Lee could write of “*two* interdependent races” in South Africa—this time “white” and “black”.⁵⁸ There had been, he noted, a growth in “national consciousness”—apparently refer-

⁵⁵ Shula Marks, “The Tradition of Non-Racism in South Africa”, The Eleanor Rathbone Lecture, March 8th, 1994, University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg, 1994), 3.

⁵⁶ Marks and Trapido, “The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism”, 7.

⁵⁷ Lewis Grout, A Critique on Bishop Hartzell’s Great Lecture on “The Briton and the Boer” (Brattleboro, VT: Phoenix Job Printing House, 1900), 11. Grout was a missionary with the American Board in Zululand. This paper was intended to dispel propaganda about Boers coming from English missionaries.

⁵⁸ “The Clash of Colour”, Address to the Natal Missionary Conference, 7 July 1926. Pamphlet (American Board Mission, 1926), 3. Italics added.

ring to both white and black nationalisms.⁵⁹ It would appear that with this was also a re-configuration of racial and national identities. Imagining a South African national identity transcended the particularities “Boer” and “Briton”, though not that of “white”. Even former Afrikaner leaders such as Jan Smuts and Louis Botha had become colonial nationalists—to whom the appellation “joiner” and “traitor” would be applied. But not all whites living in South Africa identified with the South African nationalism promoted by the *Het Volk* leadership of Smuts and Botha. This was a matter of concern both to politicians and English-speaking church leaders.

South Africa after the Act of Union was a modern liberal state that encouraged the practice of religions insofar as these promoted its idea of good citizenship. It created and protected a space for “denominations”, without favouring one over the others. But leaders such as Jan Smuts also saw an important relation between the unity of white South Africa and the union of churches—particularly the “English” and “Dutch” churches. According to Richard Jebb, Smuts himself was concerned about denominationalism and its implications for nation building.⁶⁰ Smuts called for “a national council of churches, speaking with one voice on matters that concerned them here and to ensure the country’s Christian progress as a nation.”⁶¹

Given the relations between Christianity and nationalism in South Africa from the time of the landing of the first settlers, and the relations between English and Dutch since the Cape changed hands in 1806, it would be surprising if the dream of a South African national union had no implications for the two most politically powerful settler churches, the NGK and CPSA. Christianity had a crucial, positive role to play in nation building, if not to unite institutionally the two denominations, then to provide a “spiritual basis” for national unity. Correspondence had already been entered into between the two churches, initiated by Robert Gray.⁶² Le Feuvre is correct

⁵⁹ Again here national and racial consciousness here seem to be the same.

⁶⁰ Schreuder, “Colonial nationalism and tribal nationalism”, 198.

⁶¹ Report in *Church Chronicle*, 1 November 1934, 347. The Christian Council was formed two years later, but with only two of the four DRC synods participating. Their stay on the Council would be short. The dream of a single white-led Christianity was passing.

⁶² See *The Unity of Christendom. A Correspondence Relative to Union Between the English and Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa.*, collected letters (Cape Town, 1871). See also Philip Le Feuvre, “Cultural and Theological Factors Influencing Relations Between the Nederduiste Gerformeerde Kerk and the Anglican Church (of the Province of South Africa) in the Cape Colony 1806-1910”, Ph.D. dissertation (University of Cape Town, 1980). The initiative was one of the first acts of the newly constituted Church of the Province. The ideal of a DRC-CPSA unity and its nation-building potential is a recurrent theme in the Anglican official literature to the 1930s, when the DRC’s captivity to Afrikaner nationalism made it seem more and more remote. A draft docu-

in claiming that after 1870 the time had passed for serious talk of uniting the NGK and CPSA.⁶³ At the same time, it is not insignificant to note that the fervour associated with the Act of Union led the *Chronicle* to suggest that the time had once again come to enter discussions about such unification. This illustrates how closely tied the two kinds of union were, at least within Anglican consciousness. Beyond an institutional unity, however, was something more “spiritual”, or “internal” as seen by the *Church Chronicle* as “making the unity real”—by which of course was meant “real” within the consciousnesses of whites.⁶⁴ As Union approached, the Anglican Synod of 14 October 1909 envisioned British and Dutch “each bringing and contributing what they are and have to the forming of one people,⁶⁵ and together to work out their salvation.”⁶⁶ This meant British and Dutch churches working closer together for an inner union which would mean the extension of God’s Kingdom,⁶⁷ “uniting in a still closer union the peoples of this land.”⁶⁸

This dream of a united South Africa within a British Empire, which was tied to a united church representing a transcendent kingdom, remained for some time. Later, the debate changed to reflect the dispute over ties to the Empire, and Afrikaner nationalists began to agitate for South Africa’s separation and its reconstitution as an independent Republic.⁶⁹ At that time, Bishop of Bloemfontein Walter Carey countered by terming the two “allied cultures” with spiritual ties to each other and to the Empire. The English-speaking ecclesiastical press also countered, defending South Africa’s remaining united to that larger whole: the British Empire.⁷⁰ To identify oneself with “South Africa” was to identify with the Empire or a “Greater Britain”.

ment, entitled “Christian National Life in South Africa”, was produced and circulated in 1930 and 1931. For the document and various responses, see Stallard Papers, CPSA Archives, Wits.

⁶³ Le Feuvre, “Cultural and Theological Factors”.

⁶⁴ *The Church Chronicle*, 26 May 1910. Here is a mark of colonial nationalism, which recognises a diversity of institutions but united in “one spirit”, controlled by one loyalty. The idea of church as “soul” in society means that the church provides the basis for that one spirit, as the rest of this paragraph makes clear.

⁶⁵ It is interesting to note that within the editorials of the *Chronicle* consulted during the researching of this thesis, this implication is not drawn with reference to black Christians: i.e., that the ecumenical relations in the churches could also provide a basis for black-white unity.

⁶⁶ See the report in *Cape Times* 14 October 1909. Salvation is an interesting term to use, though it is not clear what it means here.

⁶⁷ *Church Chronicle* 26 May 1926.

⁶⁸ *Church Chronicle* 16 May 1910.

⁶⁹ This happened in May 1961, but only 13 years after the Afrikaner National Party came to power. Perhaps this demonstrates that colonial nationalism, while ultimately not prevailing, had been entrenched to a certain degree.

⁷⁰ Walter Carey (Archbishop of Bloemfontein), “Dutch and British in South Africa: An Appeal to the British Section” (Bloemfontein: Nasional Pers, n.d.), 2. See also “Union vs. Separatism”, *The Church Chronicle* 26 June 1924. For an opinion from a prominent Dutch Reformed Church repre-

Social Christianity and the benevolent empire

While the characterisation of “nothing harsh or rigorous” applied by Charles Villa-Vicencio to them aptly describes the ethos of the English-speaking churches for much of the century,⁷¹ it is important to identify a socially active and occasionally prophetic dimension to their life. Their mission heritage, which often led struggles against the imposition of unjust colonial laws, the “non-conformist conscience” inherited from their English forebears, and the legacy of colonialist messianism which saw the “civilising” calling of Britain as hand in hand with “Christianising”, converged in what has been called “the Cape liberal tradition”.⁷² Central to this tradition was the advocacy of a limited franchise, extended to property-owning black and coloured men. Without denying the class interests which crossed this strand, the franchise was seen as an important step in the idea of “upliftment” for blacks, and the political extension of a recognition already given in their churches.

It may not be too much to claim that liberalism is inconceivable in South Africa apart from the formative influence of Christianity. Richard Elphick has observed that white, English-speaking liberals—an “extraordinarily high proportion” of which “were intimately related to churches and missions”⁷³—based their understanding of Christianity on a “benevolent empire” with strong ties to Britain as analogy.⁷⁴ This idea of “benevolent empire”, paralleling the American Social Gospel’s idea of “beloved community”,⁷⁵ projected a realm of socially active religious and social institutions. The many schools and hospitals set up by missions especially form part of the legacy of liberal Christianity⁷⁶ in South Africa. For example, African education began

sentative speaking of the Empire with admiration, see the translation of a *Kerkbode* article in *Church Chronicle* 1 January 1931, 2. This was, however, very much a minority view. In the next chapter we shall see that more and more the Empire was being identified as “Anti-Christ” within the DRC.

⁷¹ *Trapped in Apartheid*, 13-41.

⁷² For an historical account, see Rodney Davenport, “The Cape Liberal Tradition to 1910”, in *Democratic Liberalism in South Africa: Its History and Prospect* ed. Jeffrey Butler, Richard Elphick and David Welsh (Middletown CT and Cape Town: Wesleyan University Press and David Philip Publishers, 1987), 21-34. An alternative account of Cape liberalism, examining its class basis, may be found in Stanley Trapido, “The Friends of the Natives: Merchants, Peasants and the Political and Ideological Structure of Liberalism at the Cape”, in *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa*, ed. Shula Marks and Anthony Atmore (London: Longmans), 247-74. Trapido argues that it was industrialisation which put an end to Cape liberalism. The tradition continued, however, as a resource until the 1930s, particularly for African nationalists. See chapter three below.

⁷³ “Mission Christianity and Inter-War Liberalism”, in *Democratic Liberalism in South Africa*, ed. Butler, Elphick and Welsh, 66.

⁷⁴ See above on colonial nationalism.

⁷⁵ See chapter four below.

⁷⁶ I will term what Elphick calls the “liberal-Christian synthesis” simply “liberal Christianity”. “Mission Christianity”, 79.

in mission schools. In 1928 the “vast majority of African pupils in southern Africa” still were in mission or mission-related institutions. Missionaries were the first to take African culture seriously, while students of African cultures in “secular” institutions, such as the anthropologist Monica Wilson,⁷⁷ had connections to mission Christianity.⁷⁸

While Europe and North America were undergoing de-Christianisation, the opposite process was taking place in Africa after WWI. The social gospel was a Christian response by which American churches sought to “counter the social ills created by industrialization, as well as to shore up their own declining public influence.” Elphick argues that Christians in South Africa “selectively appropriated” social gospel ideas and themes, more for the former reason than the latter.⁷⁹

Elphick notes that the presence of American Board Missionaries such as Herbert Goodenough and Frederik Bridgman in the social movement signalled the importance of the American social gospel influence in South Africa.⁸⁰ But a strong socialist impulse also came from Britain which issued in the transformation, for instance, of Church of Scotland evangelistic programmes into welfare agencies. This stood alongside the influence of the ideals of Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee on “upliftment” through education—“a distinctly American application of the Social Gospel to the problems of race and rural poverty.”⁸¹ Washington, unlike his rival W. E. B. du Bois, eschewed political activism, which made his different from the class mobilisation approach and clashed with a more radical tradition emerging in the 1920s. African leaders who stood within the liberal tradition, such as D. D. T. Jabavu, were profoundly influenced by the ideals of Washington.⁸² However, in their own

⁷⁷ See her *Reaction to Conquest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), published under the name Monica Hunter. Wilson, of course, would go on to co-edit *The Oxford History of South Africa* with Leonard Thompson. A feature of the *Oxford History*, as pointed out by Christopher Saunders, is its attention to African culture and its agency in the history of South Africa. *The Making of the South African Past* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1988), 155.

⁷⁸ Elphick, “Mission Christianity”, 69.

⁷⁹ Elphick, “The Benevolent Empire and the Social Gospel: Missionaries and South African Christians in the Age of Segregation”, in *Christianity in South Africa*, ed. Elphick and Davenport, 348.

⁸⁰ “Woe unto me”, Bridgman is reported to have said, “if I preach not the gospel of social, as well as individual regeneration.” Elphick, “Christians in the Age of Segregation”, 352.

⁸¹ Elphick, “Christians in the Age of Segregation”, 355.

⁸² See Catherine Higgs, *The Ghost of Equality: The Public Lives of D. D. T. Jabavu* (Cape Town; Athens, OH: David Philip; Mayibuye Books and Ohio University Press, 1997), esp. 23-7. Jabavu is mentioned again in chapter three below. Other influences came from America which were held as more radical and less acceptable to white social Christians. These were especially associated with African Initiated Church movements such as the American Methodist Episcopal Church. See also chapter three below.

country even moderates like Washington were treated with a certain delicacy by American Christian leaders. Unlike in South Africa, where social Christianity promoted black-white co-operation and action on racial questions, in America “the leaders of the reformist Social Gospel kept a blind spot and a silent voice on the subject.”⁸³ Poor whites were of more concern to them. While in some ways they were more radical than South African social Christians, in others the social gospellers were more conservative.

Social Christianity was not confined to the English-speaking churches. The Dutch Reformed Church, especially its missionaries such as Andrew Murray and Johannes du Plessis, also stood within Cape liberalism. Indeed it was the suppression of this liberal strand in the DRC, through a clever conflation of demonising political and doctrinal liberalism, that marked a key point in its movement towards being an exclusively Afrikaner-nationalist church.⁸⁴ The targeting of liberals in their church by Afrikaner nationalists underscores the connections between liberalism and South African nationalism.

The social power and influence of liberal Christianity reached its height in the interwar period, with the Joint Council Movement—something with which the DRC was also involved at an early stage⁸⁵—and with representatives such as Loram and Roberts sitting on the Native Affairs Commission.⁸⁶ But tensions began to appear, due to its “cautious vantage point... which compromised a semiautonomous but vulnerable establishment with roots in the most troubled sectors of South African society.”⁸⁷ Its ideal of harmony based on “a goal beyond earthly relativities”,⁸⁸ was soon to be replaced by a new liberal ideal of self-interest and competition, and an emerging

⁸³ Martin Marty, *The Noise of Conflict: Modern American Religion Vol. 2* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 99.

⁸⁴ See de Gruchy, *Christianity and the Modernisation of South Africa*, ch. 4. See also chapter two below.

⁸⁵ J. W. Horton points out that “the Joint Council Movement, with its offshoot the South African Institute of Race Relations, was probably the most important vehicle between the two World Wars for keeping alive the old ideal of a common South Africanism on a liberal basis, built-up through joint action by all races working together.” “SA’s Joint Councils: Black-White Co-operation between the two World Wars”, *South African Historical Journal* 4 (Nov 1972), 29. He observes that, particularly “in the smaller centres, were it not for the clergy, Joint Councils could scarcely have existed.” In the 1920s, all white denominations, including the DRC, had links. (31)

⁸⁶ Elphick, “Mission Christianity”, 70.

⁸⁷ Elphick, “Mission Christianity”, 73.

⁸⁸ J. H. Oldham, *The Race Problem* (London SCM: 1924), 6.

debate with an economic school which saw South African society “in terms of production, acquisition, and exploitation.”⁸⁹

Nevertheless, the legacy of social Christianity in South Africa remains important for this study. It represents one site in which the three Christianities considered in this first part crossed. Its legacy is also part of the legacy of Christianity in South Africa—in all its ambiguity. Not only is it an example of a socially formative Christianity, but sounding it alongside its American counterpart produces interesting harmonies and dissonances relevant for reading the theology of H. Richard Niebuhr in South Africa.⁹⁰



This chapter has begun to examine faith and loyalties in South Africa, in particular English-speaking Christianity and South African nationalism during the period under consideration. This Christianity legitimated a particular imagining of the South African nation—as a colonial nationalist state with a white citizenry. It paralleled and supported the creation of a “South African” identity marked by a process whereby settlers became not “natives” but “citizens”.⁹¹ In the meantime those “natives” who had certain limited citizenship were, in the same process, disenfranchised. Christianity was held forth as providing the “soul” of this imagined “South Africa”, the inner unity and coherence of its white people, and the limit or boundary to black aspirations.

But English-speaking Christianity was ambiguous and contested within itself. Along with its support of the establishment, there was also a strand which was active in the so-called “upliftment” of Africans, continuing traditions latent from the nineteenth century.

If colonial nationalism emerged in a time of transition, as settlers were becoming natives, so English-speaking Christianity emerged at the intersection of two worlds: Europe and Africa and of two ways of being Christian: settler and mission. It also emerged as two kinds of liberalism clashed, and embraced both progressive and regressive factions among whites. Both supported a way of imagining South Africa with whites in the lead, only too aware that the identity of South Africa was far from

⁸⁹ Elphick, “Mission Christianity”, 78, quoting Edgar Brookes, *South African Pilgrimage*, 166.

⁹⁰ The social gospel in America and Niebuhr’s relation to it will be explored in chapters four and five below.

⁹¹ Mamdani, “When does a Settler Become a Native?”

settled. More nationalisms contested its nature, its boundaries, its centre and its identifications. To another of these the next chapter turns: Afrikaner nationalism.

Afrikaner Nationalism

Whereas colonial nationalism speaks of an identity self-consciously “constructed”, identity within Afrikaner nationalism is self-consciously “given”;¹ whereas the former is based, at least professedly, in fluid and inclusive categories like “citizenship”, the latter is based in static categories of blood-line. Colonial nationalism is related or connected to a family of nationalisms, each local but centred outside of their locality (in the empire); Afrikaner nationalism is local and centred in a specific place, and specific piece of land. And yet both of these contested the same space at the same time in the early part of the twentieth century—and both spawned and were supported by Christianities specific to them.

Afrikaner Nationalism: myth and mobilisation

The word “Afrikaner” is a curious term—a word, in a language itself hybrid, which speaks both of Africa and not of Africa. Its origins are contested—having been used to differentiate its people from mere “settlers”, and yet to preserve the identity of a European diaspora, the “guardians of the lamp of civilisation” in “darkest Africa”. It was used to denote a loyalty different from that of whites (and even Afrikaans-speakers) who tied themselves to a South Africa imagined as part of “Greater Britain”.

While some people who called themselves “Afrikaners” have been involved in resisting oppression,² the term “Afrikaner nationalism” is almost synonymous around

¹ “Given” both in the sense of being something one is born with but especially in the sense of being something not created by humans but “given” by God.

² Prominent examples include Beyers Naudé, Carl Niehaus and Bram Fisher. Each of these were self consciously Afrikaner, but were able to relativise this identity and mobilise it in a different political direction. In the case of the first two, through a commitment to Christianity. In the case of the latter, through communism. See Ryan, *Beyers Naudé: Pilgrimage of Faith* (Cape Town; Grand Rapids: David Philip; Eerdmans, 1990); Carl Niehaus, *Om te veg vir Hoop* (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1993); Stephen Clingman, *Bram Fischer: Afrikaner Revolutionary* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1998). These are but three examples which challenge the stereotype which reduces Afrikaner identity to a particular political praxis, as well as the homogeneous identity constructed in Afrikaner nationalism. For a more detailed study, see Joha Louw-Potgeiter, *Afrikaner Dissidents: A Social-Psychological Study of Identity and Dissent* (Philadelphia: Multi-lingual Matters, 1988). For theological reflection on the phenomenon, see Jaap Durand, “Afrikaner Piety and Dissent”, in *Resistance and Hope*, ed. Villa-Vicencio and de Gruchy, 39-51; Willem Saayman, “Rebels and Prophets: Afrikaners Against the System”, in *Resistance and Hope*, ed. Villa-Vicencio and de Gruchy, 52-60. We will return to Naudé’s example in the conclusion below.

the world with the term “apartheid”. This identification runs the risk of being anachronistic, as well as letting colonial nationalism off the hook. For apartheid was at least a merging of the progressivist ideology of South African nationalism with the construction of boundaries of Afrikaner nationalism, if not a direct result of the segregation policies of the early part of the century. But our interest is not to revisit the debates about the origins of apartheid.³ It is to try to understand something of the way nationalisms arose and contested each other with South African history, and the way they shaped, and were shaped by, various Christianities.

Approaching Afrikaner nationalism is daunting. It is shrouded in mythology: its own, which is well-known,⁴ but also that of colonial nationalism by which it is partially constituted.⁵ Reflection on Afrikaner nationalism is rarely if ever “detached”, and often forms part of a larger rhetorical enterprise. That is to say, reflection on Afrikaner nationalism is done either apologetically, or “in the name of” some other nationalism, or in repudiation of all nationalism. Its origins have been explained variously:⁶ in terms of anachronistic Puritanism,⁷ Calvinism⁸ or neo-Calvinism.⁹ More recently Donald Akenson has signalled the ancient Hebrew covenant as providing the pattern for the emergence of Afrikaner nationalism.¹⁰ Each of these captures aspects of Afrikaner nationalism at best, but lacks total explanatory power of the phenomenon. At worst (and this goes especially for the popular “white tribe of Africa” accounts¹¹), they risk remythologising Afrikaner nationalism, even falling into a roman-

³ See the essays in William Beinart and Saul Dubow, *Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth Century South Africa* (London: Routledge, 1995).

⁴ A macabre example of the way Afrikaner historians were expected to replicate this mythology is the tarring and feathering of the academic historian Floris van Jaarsveld by members of the *Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging* in 1979, after a lecture in which he questioned aspects of the Voortrekker myth. See David Harrison, *The White Tribe of Africa: South Africa in Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 18.

⁵ This is another way in which colonial nationalism has helped construct Afrikaner nationalism. Andre du Toit goes as far as to argue that the “chosen people” motif in Afrikaner nationalism is partially an invention of English missionaries, a curious way in which colonial Christianity is implicated in the inventing of a different, contradictory nationalism. “Puritans in Africa? Afrikaner ‘Calvinism’ and Kuyperian Neo-Calvinism in Late Nineteenth-Century South Africa”, *Comparative Studies in History and Society* (1985).

⁶ For a helpful survey, see Heribert Adam, “Perspectives in the Literature: A Critical Evaluation”, in Heribert Adam and Herman Giliomee, *The Rise and crisis of Afrikaner Power* (Cape Town: David Philip 1979), 16-60.

⁷ W. A. de Klerk, *The Puritans in Africa* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975).

⁸ T. Dunbar Moodie, “Sociological Aspects of Nationalism in South Africa”, *Church and Nationalism in South Africa*, ed. Theo Sundermeier (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1975), 40-44.

⁹ Irving Hexham, *The Irony of Apartheid: The Struggle for National Independence of Afrikaner Calvinism Against British Imperialism* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellon Press, 1981).

¹⁰ Donald Harmon Akenson, *God’s Peoples: Covenant and Land in South Africa, Israel and Ulster* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1991).

¹¹ See David Harrison’s *The White Tribe of Africa*.

ticising of it. Nationalisms—even that variety that spawned apartheid—can be very seductive.

Ideas that Afrikaner nationalism was present in seed form from the beginning and only needed the right conditions to be “awakened”¹² are now thoroughly debunked in scholarly discourse.¹³ A new set of problems has arisen. Explanations of Afrikaner nationalism have to account for the fact that, even at the end of the nineteenth century, there were only Afrikaner nationalisms, local attempts to construct an Afrikaner ethnic identity, rather than a single pan-Afrikaner nationalism.¹⁴ The term “Afrikaner” was not used in the same way within these different nationalisms. They also have to account for the fact that Afrikaner nationalism, unlike African nationalism, was not class-based. Afrikaner nationalism embraced different classes in a single ethnicity.¹⁵ All this said, within ten years of the South African War, there was a developing pan-Afrikaner nationalism that crossed class and regional lines.

The best way of accounting for Afrikaner nationalism is through employing the term “ethnic mobilisation”.¹⁶ This term, employed in the work of Herman Giliomee and others,¹⁷ is more helpful than talk of “primal origins” or “awakenings” or

¹² Floris van Jaarsveld, *The Awakening of Afrikaner Nationalism* (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1961). Afrikaner nationality, for van Jaarsveld, was not constructed but “realized” in stages. Hence the metaphor of “awakening”.

¹³ See Leonard Thompson, *The Political Mythology of Apartheid* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) and Jay Naidoo, *Tracking down Historical Myths* (Johannesburg: A. D. Donker, 1989). Both works go to the opposite extreme from essentialism. Naidoo’s work especially engages in debunking “myth” in the vulgar sense of “legend”, but misses the larger point of how myth, in the sense of “founding story”, functions in the construction of a worldview. Thompson’s is more nuanced, granting the socially constructive nature of myth. Yet he also claims that myth “must” meet scientific and historical, as well as utilitarian, criteria in order to be legitimate. Thompson, *Political Mythology*, ch. 1. The question is, whose criteria and legitimate for whom?

¹⁴ Mottie Tamarkin, “Nationalism or ‘Tribalism’: The Evolution of Cape Afrikaner Ethnic Consciousness in the Late Nineteenth Century”, *Nations and Nationalism* (1995), 221-42; Hermann Giliomee, “The Beginnings of Afrikaner Ethnic Consciousness, 1870-1915”, in *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, ed. Leroy Vail (Berkeley; London: University of California; James Currey Ltd., 1987), 21-54.

¹⁵ While it would be wrong to reduce African nationalism to simply a middle-class movement, there was a strong sense in its early period (before the links with the SA Communist Party developed) of distinction from (and mission toward) so-called “tribal Africans”. Relations between class and other determinants of identity are complex with reference to African nationalism. In 1928 the Communist Party actually affirmed nationalism, calling for an African republic as prelude to agrarian revolution. See Colin Bundy, “Land and Liberation: Popular Rural Protests and the National Liberation Movements in South Africa, 1920-1960”, in *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth Century South Africa*, eds. Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido (London: Longmans, 1987), 254-85.

¹⁶ For a helpful theoretical analysis of the concepts “ethnicity” and “ethnic mobilisation”, particularly as applied to South Africa, see Gerhard Maré, *Brothers Born of Warrior Blood: Politics and Ethnicity in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1992), 6-50.

¹⁷ See Giliomee, “Beginnings of Afrikaner Consciousness”; Heribert Adam, “Ethnic Mobilization and the Politics of Patronage”, in Adam and Giliomee, *The Rise and Crisis of Afrikaner Power*, 61ff.;

stable essences, for it speaks of ethnicity as a “project”, a facilitator of action. Dialectically, in its facilitation of action ethnicity legitimates and recreates itself. Ethnic mobilisation speaks of human agency and responsiveness in creating identity. It is usually spoken of in terms of the mobilisation of *political* action—“political” being understood in terms of the negotiation and contestation of power within a larger society. Thus mobilised, ethnicity—which as a concept need not be applied to political entities¹⁸—becomes an actor in the political and economic spheres.¹⁹

The term ethnic mobilisation also addresses the danger of reducing ethnicity to a function or expression of class relations which are held to be more fundamental. At the same time, while ethnicity is not reducible to class, class and material relations form an important dimension of the context within which ethnicity develops.²⁰ Likewise, ethnicity is not reducible to culture. While part of ethnic mobilisation is the use of culture as a resource, key to mobilisation is the invocation of a sacred history. This may develop, as Dunbar Moodie has shown in the case of Afrikaner nationalism, relatively late, looking back to a highly mythologised golden age which “levels” historical differences, as we shall see below.²¹ A myth of origins provides another context of meaning, another history, which makes the “past-present”, which activates and shapes memory. Some writers speak of a civil religion in this regard—a civil religion that may posit a rival transcendent to the accepted religious identity. In the case of Afrikaner nationalism, Afrikaner civil religion drew upon specific biblical narratives and theological ideas; but it also provided a text *alongside* the Bible.²²

Heribert Adam defines ethnic mobilisation as “the process by which mere particularistic interests become a common cause.”²³ Class, local and religious diversities are levelled or relativised,²⁴ while institutions are redirected to serve the purpose

Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Revival in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

¹⁸ And as a corollary, it is possible to envision an ethnicity with different political allegiances among its members. Maré, *Brothers Born of Warrior Blood*, 43.

¹⁹ Maré, *Brothers Born of Warrior Blood*, 43.

²⁰ Maré, *Brothers Born of Warrior Blood*, 40.

²¹ See Moodie, *Rise of Afrikanerdom*.

²² The *Gedenkboek* commemorating the centenary celebrations of the Great Trek was described by *Die Burger* as “the New Testament of Afrikanerdom.... it deserves a place on the household altar beside the family Bible. For if the Bible shaped the Afrikaner people, then the *Gedenkboek* reveals that product in its deepest being...” Quoted in Moodie, *Rise of Afrikanerdom*, 11.

²³ Heribert Adam, “Ethnic Mobilization and the Politics of Patronage”, 61.

²⁴ Levelling, of course, is not the same as relativising. Sometimes differences continue to be allowed to exist, but are rendered “safe” by a more primal loyalty. In the case of Inkatha, the South African Zulu so-called “cultural movement”, for example, religious differences are potentially divisive. As Maré points out, the Zulu sacred past predates the arrival of Christianity, yet

of the unity of the ethnic group. Thus from the late nineteenth century, a gradual process of "Afrikanerising" certain banks, media companies, universities and other institutions took place, together with a purging of perceived "foreign" elements in them.²⁵ The Dutch Reformed Church in the Cape was included in this—its ecumenical relations with other regional denominations giving way to a transregional loyalty and a struggle against British evangelical influences.²⁶ Financial assets became redistributed along ethnic lines.²⁷ Even language becomes a site of struggle and purification, ready for its deployment in creating a new "indigenous" literature.

Politicised ethnicity is not necessarily nationalist, however. It is possible to have a multi-ethnic nationalism. Indeed, this is the norm for the vast number of nationalisms in the world, where nationalism is "the supra-ethnic collectivity that binds people together who would otherwise find their greatest sense of belonging in ethnic groups, religious groups, productive units and, so on."²⁸ Neither does ethnic nationalism require a state, although ethnic nationalism may make use of the features of the "model" of the nation-state identified by Anderson:²⁹ flags, national anthems, citizenship, ideas of popular sovereignty and so forth.

In the case of Afrikaner nationalism, an ethnic nationalism dwelled within a developing nation-state. But those boundaries were always tested and contested. Nationalisms are not discrete ideas generated primordially, as we have shown. Neither are they developed in isolation from other such constructions.³⁰ Colonial nationalism provided the ideological context for the emergence of Afrikaner nationalism; Afrikaner nationalism was the "other" of colonial nationalism. Colonial nationalists saw it as retrogressive and primitive. As Gerhard Maré points out, it was this negative construction of Afrikaners by the English during and especially after the South African

the chief "culture broker" of Inkatha, Mangosuthu Buthelezi is an Anglican lay minister. Hence religious particularity does not play the same role as in Afrikaner nationalism. Maré, *Brothers Born of Warrior Blood*, 29-30. Any religious differences are *relative* to the more important boundary between "Zulu" and "other". The idea of relativising is crucial for this thesis, and will be examined in the work of H. Richard Niebuhr in chapter four below.

²⁵ On this process, see Giliomee, "Beginnings of Afrikaner Consciousness", 30-1; 41-5.

²⁶ See below. The best example of this is the heresy trial of the Missiologist Johannes du Plessis. See John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity and the Modernisation of South Africa* (Cape Town; Grand Rapids: David Philip; Eerdmans, 2000), ch. 4.

²⁷ Giliomee, "Beginnings of Afrikaner Consciousness", 43.

²⁸ Maré, *Brothers born of warrior blood*, 43.

²⁹ See above.

³⁰ For an account of the "portability" of the idea of nation, see Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 80-2.

war that provided the boundaries around which Afrikaner identity was mobilised.³¹ Here was a later generation of settlers criticising an earlier generation of settlers for “going native”, for embracing “tribalism”. The implication was that they were too far removed from civilisation, and perhaps also masked a fear that remaining here would leave the British settlers to a similar fate. Afrikaner nationalism was also mobilised in response to a colonial nationalism that saw Afrikaners as one of the many in a new political and economic arrangement and, more importantly, had the power to insist that Afrikaner identity be relativised by an absolutist state which formed part of Greater Britain. Afrikaners existed in an English world, as labourers in English mines. Other faultlines, such as European origin (which Afrikaners shared with the British), class (which poorer Afrikaners shared with African labourers) and regional allegiances became suppressed.³²

How did Afrikaner nationalism develop, and what did it develop from?

Afrikaners trace their ancestry to the original Dutch settlers who assimilated French, Scots and Germans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Afrikaner origins are therefore heterogeneous ethnically—and possibly racially as well.³³ Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Dutch-speaking settlers scattered themselves throughout the land. While Boers (“farmers”—though later the term would take on ideological meaning) had been moving away from the Western Cape region for some time,³⁴ it was the proclamation of Ordinance 50, which abolished slavery, that led to the celebrated breakaway in 1836 which would become known as the Great Trek. The Great Trek, far from being a moment of divine revelation, was a moment of dissent and disunity that created a fissure within the Dutch and later Afrikaners community that would take a century to heal.

Whatever the religious motives later imputed to the Trekkers, it is fairly clear that economic concerns played an important role, as the Ordinance threatened “the

³¹ Maré, *Brothers Born of Warrior Blood*, 22.

³² It is important to note that other possibilities for understanding Afrikanerdom were suppressed in the process of mobilisation. We mention some of these below. Bram Fischer's Afrikaner identity, Clingman writes, “was bred in the bone”, but wanted to fulfil that identity in “the larger context of South African belonging”. *Bram Fischer*, 286. The same could be said for Naudé. See Charles Villa-Vicencio, “An Afrikaner of the Afrikaners”, in Charles Villa-Vicencio and Carl Niehaus, eds., *Marry Cultures, One Nation: A Festschrift for Beyers Naudé* (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1995), 17-19.

³³ Intermarrying between settlers and free black women was known to have taken place, particularly in the cities. Nigel Worden, Elizabeth van Heynengen and Vivian Bickford-Smith, *Cape Town: The Making of a City* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1998), 56.

³⁴ The first Boer Republic was set up in Swellendam in 1799.

feudal relationship which characterised established boer labour practices.”³⁵ When the British annexed Natal in 1843, the Trekkers moved into the interior, to what would later become known as the Transvaal. The establishment of the Boer republics soon followed: the South African Republic was set up in 1852 and the Orange Free State in 1854.

Were the citizens of the Boer republics known as “Afrikaners”? This is difficult to answer. The term “Afrikaner” was invoked by T. F. Burgers to refer to someone (Dutch) from the Transvaal and not outside. There was a relatively strong Transvaal patriotism which rallied around Afrikaner symbols at times of British aggression.³⁶ But class divisions were also strong, with a growing gap between the rich and the poor, or *bywoners*.

Meanwhile identities were also being contested in the Cape. As early as 1857, the newspaper *De Zuid Afrikaan* foresaw “the gradual amalgamation of the Dutch and the English nationality which will, however, take many years”. Nationality was however contentious and the *Zuid Afrikaan* encouraged more co-operation and less talk of nationality.³⁷ Both Herman Giliomee³⁸ and Mottie Tamarkin³⁹ observe that there is little evidence of an ethnic consciousness amongst Cape Afrikaners before the 1870s—and when such a consciousness arose it seemed to be produced as a response to Anglicisation policies. It would seem that “gradual amalgamation” should not be on British terms alone. Nevertheless, even at this stage the term “Afrikaner” was used in the Cape in different ways. Some, such as S. J. du Toit and his *Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners* used it to refer to ethnic identity.⁴⁰ Others, such as Jan Hofmeyer, used the term inclusively to refer to those sharing a common loyalty to white South Africa.

The Afrikaner Bond, forerunner of the *Broederbond*, was a cultural-political organisation of Cape Afrikaners. The Bond held seats in the Cape Legislature. Tamarkin demonstrates that, at crucial moments when it could have stated its desire for Afri-

³⁵ Charles Villa-Vicencio and Robin M. Petersen, *Christianity and the Colonisation of South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2000), ch. 5.

³⁶ Worden, *The Making of Modern South Africa*, 89.

³⁷ Quoted in Giliomee, “Beginning of Afrikaner Consciousness”, 29. The paper article is dated 21 May 1857.

³⁸ Giliomee, “Beginning of Afrikaner Consciousness”.

³⁹ Tamarkin, “Nationalism or ‘Tribalism’”.

⁴⁰ Du Toit pioneered the first Afrikaans language movement in the Cape, while the inclusivists (including the *Zuid Afrikaan*) preferred Dutch. Interestingly before the language movement took flight, English was becoming more and more common as a language of worship in DRC churches. See J. A. Loubser, *The Apartheid Bible: A Critical Review of Racial Theology in South Africa* (Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman, 1987), 15.

kaner self-determination, the Bond reiterated its loyalty to Britain.⁴¹ Favouring an inclusive and voluntary, rather than ethnically based understanding of what an Afrikaner was, it proposed as early as 1887 that “Colonists of the two great nationalities which exist here ... form in the long term a truly South African nation.” (*Zuid Afrikaan*, 16 July 1887) Even the *Patriot*, which represented “the ethno-republican element in the Bond”, talked of one South African *Volk*.⁴²

We are presented then with an inchoate identity, fragmented also among regional and class lines. But the faultlines were beginning to show in the regional identity of Cape Afrikaners. For example, on the eve of the South African War, representatives of the Cape DRC would appeal to Lord Milner to prevent the conflict “[a]s proclaimers of the Gospel of Peace, as representatives of a Church which is united in belief, language, membership and blood ties with the citizens of the Transvaal, [and] as loyal subjects of our beloved Queen”.⁴³ Identities were ready for renegotiation and mobilisation.

Ethnic mobilisation—which saw the creation of separate economic, political and educational institutions, as well as the promotion of the Afrikaans language—took place as a response to the imperial unification after the South African War. This ethnic mobilisation aimed at convincing white Afrikaans speakers that regardless of class or profession, they shared something—an identification—with “Afrikaners” more primordial than what they shared with others. The South African War galvanised Afrikaner identity, while the assertion of imperial unity in the new colonial nationalism gave it purchase. The geographically, economically and politically united South Africa after the treaty of Vereeniging, and new trade and transport links, made it possible to overcome regional differences. Major boundaries now consisted of “joiners” over against “bittereinders”; the true Afrikaners were the truly loyal. And that loyalty

⁴¹ Tamarkin, “Nationalism or ‘Tribalism’”, 229.

⁴² Tamarkin, “Nationalism or ‘Tribalism’”, 232-33. The date of the *Patriot* article is 25 May 1888. This tradition of identifying “Afrikaner” racially rather than ethnically would continue into the twentieth century. Dunbar Moodie has argued that the nationalism of J. B. M. Hertzog, Prime minister and leader of the National Party, “rested on two principles: the insistence that the civic sentiments of white South Africans place ‘South Africa first’ and a pluralist two stream notion of linguistic and cultural division within this civic unity... Consistently Hertzog included in his definition of Afrikaner those English-speakers who chose to ‘place South Africa first’.” Hertzog’s nationalism therefore defined “Afrikaner” in terms of a racialised citizenship. Moodie speculates that he “might ultimately have extended his ideal of civic unity combined with ethnic diversity to include non-white South Africans also.” Moodie, “Sociological Aspects”, 41. But that is only speculation.

⁴³ Letter from J. H. Hofmeyer et al to Milner, 30 June 1899, published in *De Kerkbode* 10 August 1899, 495-6.

was to the *volk* over against the region, the class or the company. However, fissures remained. It was in the hands of the Dutch Reformed Church—ironically which had condemned the Trek—to help provide the fabric of Afrikaner unity.

Afrikaner Christianity

If Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid are seen as virtually synonymous by people in the outside world, then the Dutch Reformed Church and Afrikaner nationalism are as well. This *identification* beyond *entanglement* is unfair in many ways, as the heterogeneity within the DRC,⁴⁴ as well as the role of dissident Afrikaners,⁴⁵ needs to be acknowledged. The DRC is made up of several strands: doctrinal, ethnic and ideological. Its leaders have been evangelical and modernist, pietist and neo-Calvinist, nationalist and liberal. One of its best known and internationally renowned ministers, Andrew Murray, was British.⁴⁶ For most of its existence it has been divided along regional lines, having only unified its synods in 1961. The fact that the DRC existed across the class, ideological and regional divisions amongst Afrikaners has made it a key institution for ethnic mobilisation. It participated in this mobilisation by representing itself as having a special relation to the Afrikaner people, eventually embracing, in popular consciousness if not officially, the idea of a *volkskerk*.

While it is not the place of this section to chronicle in detail the history of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, it is important to note the convergence from an early stage of Christian identity and membership in the DRC. Indeed it was only the DRC that was tolerated at the Cape during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁴⁷ Moreover, not only was there an identification between Christian and Dutch Reformed identities, but also between “settler” and “Christian” identities. This

⁴⁴ Here the shorthand “DRC” will refer to the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid Afrika. As will be discussed below, the DRC is the largest of three Afrikaans Reformed churches, the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk, the Gereformeerde Kerke, and the Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk. The terms “Afrikaner Christianity” or “the Afrikaans churches” will refer to these three churches inclusively.

⁴⁵ See note 2 above.

⁴⁶ Writing in 1919, Murray’s biographer, Johannes du Plessis, would characterise him as “a South African Patriot”, reflecting a prescience of the contests over Afrikaner and Dutch Reformed identity du Plessis would face in the coming decades. J. du Plessis, *The Life of Andrew Murray of South Africa* (London: Marshall Brothers, 1919), esp. 431-4 on Murray’s clash with D. F. Malan, who would later become the first Prime Minister of Apartheid South Africa.

⁴⁷ On religion at the Cape in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, see Villa-Vicencio and Petersen, *Christianity and the Colonisation of South Africa*, ch. 2; David Chidester, *Religions of South Africa* (London: Routledge, 1992), 149-50.

identification was recognised not only by Europeans, but also by the Khoikhoi and Xhosa people that first encountered them.⁴⁸

Here we have a particular instance of settler Christianity, as described earlier in this chapter. The religious identity of the first Dutch settlers was perhaps even more extreme than that of the English settlers of the nineteenth century. The Dutch settlers were not simply looking for “familiar symbols” to provide points of reference and links with the old country, but ways of differentiating themselves from indigenous people—many of whom they employed as slaves. If the group identity of the settlers was formed by the understanding of an exclusive social-religious covenant, then their relation to leaders, even the functionaries of the Company, was as subjects to “the Lord’s anointed”.⁴⁹

The thread established here can be followed through the history of the DRC in the Cape, especially to the famous 1857 Synod decision which formed the sacramental basis for “Church apartheid”. While not present in an ethnic form, “settler identity” was considered a determinant of “Christian identity”. But there were other threads criss-crossing the church: most particularly Reformed piety, which emphasised the centrality of personal conversion, and theological liberalism, which challenged the exclusion of other churches but also the uniqueness of Christianity. Doing this in the philosophical context of Europe (where one was either a Christian or an atheist, but could still be considered a good citizen regardless of which) was one thing; on the frontier of South Africa, it was another. For the basis of settler unity in a strange and hostile environment was thereby undermined. To this we shall return.

While the identity of “the Lord’s anointed” would change, the history of the DRC in the Cape is generally one of loyalty to whatever government was in power, whether that government was centred in London or Amsterdam. This is why it condemned the Trek. The 1837 Synod reminded members that they were “to be subject

⁴⁸ For an account of this identification in the early history of the Cape Colony, see Jonathan N. Gertsner, *The Thousand Generation Covenant* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990) and “A Christian Monopoly: The Reformed Church and Colonial Society Under Dutch Rule”, in *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social and Cultural History*, ed. Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport (Cape Town; London: David Philip; James Currey, 1997), 16-30. Gertsner argues that the idea of “the thousand generation covenant” assured virtually all Europeans that they were “Christian” as a matter of birthright rather than by personal conversion. This idea was pushed further at the Cape, where “Christians” appeared as an ethnic group rather than simply as a religious designation. Gertsner, “Reformed Church Under Dutch Rule”, 27. Indigenous people were identified with the “heathen” of the Bible (23).

⁴⁹ Gertsner, “Reformed Church Under Dutch Rule”, 29.

to those whom God has appointed as rulers over them.”⁵⁰ The Trekkers, for their part, seem to have had no special tie to the DRC, appointing Methodist James Archbell and later Daniel Lindley of the American Board Mission to minister the sacraments to them.⁵¹ It was only in 1842 that the DRC sent missionaries to establish churches in the Transvaal. And even here it was greeted with derision from those that remembered its previous actions and suspected its present loyalties. After the Transvaal received political independence, the Ned. Hervormde Kerk (NHK) was set up in 1853—a church whose loyalty was indicated in its being established as the state church in the Republic’s *Grondwet*.⁵²

Modelled after the churches in some of the then contemporary German states, the NHK’s fostering of a Transvaal nationalism made it the first sign of a *volkskerk* in South Africa.⁵³ The attempt to make it into a *state* church however met with resistance from other churches, including the Gereformeerde Kerk (GK). In the 1860s a civil war broke out, resulting in its disestablishment. The NHK was forced to re-envision itself as “one church among many” in the South African Republic.⁵⁴

The GK rose from a small community of farmers on the fringes of the Transvaal. Founded in 1859 by Ds Dirk Postma, it shared similar patriotic sentiments to the NHK,⁵⁵ but eschewed the latter’s theological modernism. In turn, the GK saw the DRC, which by then was establishing itself in the Transvaal, as infected with Scottish

⁵⁰ Quoted in David Bosch, “The Fragmentation of Afrikanerdom and the Afrikaner Churches”, in *Resistance and Hope*, ed. Villa-Vicencio and de Gruchy, 63.

⁵¹ The significance of the sacraments, a badge of membership in the settler community, ought not be downplayed. Hence it was highly significant that when in 1840 the Presbytery of Graaf-Reinet gave a certain Rev. Taylor permission to contact the trekkers outside the Cape’s boundaries, they also forbade him to administer the sacraments or to confirm new members. Gertsner, “Reformed Church Under Dutch Rule”, 27; Bosch, “Fragmentation of Afrikanerdom”, 63-4.

⁵² B. Spoelstra, a theologian from the Gereformeerde Kerk, claims that the idea of a state church was imported by the British to the Cape after their take-over at the turn of the 19th century. See “Denominationalism in the Afrikaans-Speaking Churches”, in *Denominationalism* ed. W. S. Vorster (Pretoria: UNISA, 1982), 25-26.

⁵³ Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe, however note that in the Transorangia of the late 19th century the *volkskerk* idea was widespread and beyond Afrikaner churches, including African and German Christianities. “The Spread of Christianity Among Whites and Blacks in Transorangia”, in *Christianity in South Africa* ed. Elphick and Davenport, 133. While this may be the case on a cultural level, it is nonetheless important to point out that the idea is difficult to defend theologically within the neo-Calvinist dogma of the Gereformeerde Kerk. Indeed, as Thom has argued, the Kuyperians were unique among the nineteenth century Dutch in rejecting the idea of a national church. “Between Priestly Identification and Prophetic Confrontation: The Roots of the Volkskerk in Afrikaner History”, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 18:2 (1992), 150. Contra Davenport, “Settlement, Conquest, Controversy”, 61.

⁵⁴ Hexham and Poewe, “Christianity in Transorangia”, 125.

⁵⁵ Charles Villa-Vicencio and Robin Peterson, *Christianity and the Colonisation of South Africa* (Cape Town; Grand Rapids: David Philip; Eerdmans, 2000).

pietism.⁵⁶ Strongly influenced by the politics and spirituality of the Dutch statesman and theologian Abraham Kuyper, and were suspicious of *vdkskerk* idea. Nevertheless, the GK would play an important role in facilitating Christian nationalist politics in the early twentieth century, as well as making a significant contribution to the philosophical foundations of apartheid.

Afrikaner Christianity—as well as the DRC itself—therefore has multiple sources.⁵⁷ And within each of these sources are different theological, cultural and even national traditions.⁵⁸ The DRC, for example, was not only met with a certain kind of denominationalism *outside* its boundaries, but also differences within. Besides doctrinal divisions (over modernism) the geographical divisions mentioned in the previous section also affected it. An initial attempt in 1862 to unite the Cape with Orange Free State and Transvaal churches stumbled against the evangelicalism of the Cape church and the perception that its loyalties were suspect, willing as it was to work with English ministers in a British-controlled colony. Doubtless the memory of the Great Trek, where the Cape church had declared its support for the colonial government, was still fresh. The suspicion of the Free State and Transvaal churches was also raised by the attempt of Cape liberals to wrest control from evangelicals in the so-called “Burgers case”.⁵⁹ For its part, the Cape church preferred to identify its ecu-

⁵⁶ de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, revised edition (Cape Town; Grand Rapids: David Philip; Eerdmans, 1986 [orig. 1979]), 20-21. The Division between true and false religion for Postma was that of “Calvin as opposed to ‘the modern bastard liberalism and Anti-Christian Methodism’”. These false religions had been introduced to South Africa by the scheming British who imported liberal Scottish ministers into the Dutch Reformed Church and so threatened to undermine the Afrikaner people from within.” Hexham, *Irony of Apartheid*, 50. λ

⁵⁷ There was also heterogeneity within the conservative Gereformeerde Kerk, and these strands are hidden under its orthodox blanket. Hexham and Poewe, speak of secret consultations with traditional healers and the use of herbs and traditional medicines by Doppers. “Christianity in Transorangia”, 122-25.

⁵⁸ Hexham and Poewe show how the divisions between the three Afrikaner churches in the Transvaal were primarily along family and clan lines, with little intermarriage. And within each tradition there were “sub-clans”, divided along doctrinal or orthodox practice lines. Persons who transgressed these boundaries, Hexham and Poewe continue, often ended up leaving for the larger urban centres. “Christianity in Transorangia”, 123.

⁵⁹ See Davenport, “Settlement, Conquest, Controversy”, 60. for an account of the court case which prohibited representatives from outside the Cape from Cape synods. Earlier, H. H. Loedloff, an elder in Malmesbury in the middle of the nineteenth century, argued that the boundaries of the church should coincide with those of the state—a idea that reflects, in David Bosch’s view, “the philosophy of the established church.” For this reason, he argued against minister from outside the Cape’s boundaries being members of its Synod. Bosch, “Fragmentation of Afrikanerdom”, 64.

menical partners as the other churches in the Cape, particularly the CPSA,⁶⁰ evidencing stronger regional than denominational or ethnic ties.

Nationalism, loyalty and church unity

Reminiscent of the “soul in society” idea of the liberal English-speaking churches, the idea of a church as centre of the community is also a feature of the interface between Afrikaner nationalism and Afrikaner Christianity. And just as Smuts pushed for church unity as a way of ensuring political stability in the Union of South Africa, so Krüger, Pretorius and Joubert, the three Transvaal leaders, did for a union of Afrikaner churches in the wake of the first war of independence in 1881. The move had been broadly successful, though some churches did not join the process.⁶¹ But after the South African War, the talk was of pan-Afrikaner nationalism, and the church was not the parochial NHK but the DRC.

A merging of Afrikaner Christianity with nationalism developed as Afrikaner leaders began to see a certain religiousness at the heart of nationalism. National loyalty became a religious duty.⁶² “Any situation or context, therefore, in which [Afrikaners] were seen to be under threat was to be interpreted as a threat to religion as well.”⁶³ Voices calling for loyalty to the people as a religious duty, echoing the first Afrikaans language movement discussed above, began to come from the Cape DRC.

While characteristically the Cape DRC had continued to pledge loyalty to the state after the war, the 1915 Afrikaner rebellion was a watershed. While it took place over the question of whether South Africa should send troops to Europe to support Britain against Germany, the real question concerned where South Africa’s true loyalties lay.⁶⁴ While the resolution of the Church was to urge the general principle of obedience to authority, and eschewed “as far as possible” involvement in party politics, it

⁶⁰ David J. Bosch, “The Roots and Fruits of Afrikaner Civil Religion”, in *New Faces of Africa: Essays in Honour of Ben Marais*, ed. J. W. Hofmeyer and W. S. Vorster (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 1984), 23.

⁶¹ Bosch, “Fragmentation of Afrikanerdom”, 64-5.

⁶² As T. B. Muller stated in a speech at the Taal Monument in 1913, “It is a religious duty to be a nationalist”, and to be disloyal to one’s nation is a religious sin. “Die Geloofsbelydenis Van ’n Nasionalist!” Lecture at Afrikaanse Taal Monument (Stellenbosch: Afrikaanse Taal Vereniging, 10 October, 1913).

⁶³ Johann Kinghorn, “Modernization and Apartheid: The Afrikaner Churches”, in *Christianity in South Africa*, ed. Elphick and Davenport, 141.

⁶⁴ Even so the response of the church was cautious. See Council of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Zuid Afrika, “Response to the 1914-15 Rebellion”, in Charles Villa-Vicencio, ed., *Between Christ and Caesar: Classic and Contemporary Texts on Church and State* (Grand Rapids; Cape Town: Eerdmans; David Philip, 1986), 207-8.

also claimed that the DRC, “apart from its general calling as a Christian Church, has also received from God a more specific calling with regard to the Dutch-speaking Afrikaner people... to be a national Church.”⁶⁵ Voices started to urge church unity, the unity of the *volk*, and the unity of political affiliation as being of a piece. Theological heresy and political dogma became enmeshed. A mythology developed which saw “our church”, meaning the pan-South African DRC rather than the more regional GK and NHK, as always having been with us. The DRC’s original disavowal of the Great Trek was long forgotten.⁶⁶

Currents of ecclesial unity began to swell as ethnic mobilisation intensified and mobility across geographical boundaries became easier. By 1911, the Cape Synod had expressed willingness to see the rights of its coloured members denied for the sake of unity with the Transvaal and Free State churches. Although it claimed that “the act of 1911 merely recognised the status quo”, the fact that the Cape church acquiesced to the restriction of the rights of its Coloured members for the sake of union was indicative of a general shift within the Cape church. Liberals within the Cape DRC were aware that “the old Grondwet of the Transvaal... repudiate[d] ‘*gedijkstelling*,’ or equality between whites and blacks, and the Constitution of the Free State admit[ted] only white persons to citizenship”.⁶⁷ The fact that it invoked a nationalism older than that which was being actively promoted by the Act of political Union demonstrated that it saw a different unity as more fundamental.⁶⁸

This did not mean that ecumenical currents were only operating within and between Synods of the DRC. The DRC still had a strong identity as one church among many in South Africa up to the 1920s. Indeed, as indicated above, the Cape and Transvaal Synods joined the Christian Council in 1936, though both would soon

⁶⁵ Council of the NGK, “Response to the Rebellion”, 208.

⁶⁶ Here we have an interesting instance of the thesis of Ernest Renan: “Forgetting... is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation.” “What is a Nation?” trans. Martin Thom, in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London and New York: Routledge, 1991 [orig. 1882]), 11.

⁶⁷ Johannes Du Plessis, et al, *The Dutch Reformed Church and the Native Problem*, pamphlet (n.p., 1921), 7.

⁶⁸ In a bizarre reversal of the normal church-state relations, some members of the Cape Church petitioned Parliament to circumvent opposition to the bill. Anglicans looked upon this with some interest. According to a report in *The Church Chronicle*, supporters of unity “came to Parliament and [said], in effect: “Tie our hands, and please tie them as tightly as possible, that we may not ourselves be able to unloose them, and may meet any future application for an alteration of the rule with an absolute ‘Non possumus,’ when the law of the land has made the rule, and we have no power to change it.” “Editorial Notes”, *Church Chronicle*, 2 March, 1911, 75.

withdraw.⁶⁹ Neither did its concern for an Afrikaner unity which endangered the national unity programmes of political leaders mean that it was unconcerned about interfacing with the state. To the contrary—and quite ironically—the DRC was engaged in initiating in the 1920s a series of conferences bringing leaders together from all ends of the political spectrum, including African nationalist leaders. The stated aim of the first European-Bantu Conference in 1923 was “to become better acquainted and, from a Christian perspective, to discuss the interests of Europeans, coloureds and natives whom God has brought together in this country.”⁷⁰ But the conference was also an important indicator of the identity—or at least one strand of that identity—of the DRC. According to the report-back given to the Raad der Kerken in 1925, “It was singularly fitting that this largest and most important unofficial conference on native affairs ever held in South Africa, should be called by the oldest and largest Church which has the greatest claim to be called South African.”⁷¹ It however went on to say that “while we were united in a shared Christianity, each race should find its own particular calling according to its abilities and in its own environment.”⁷²

At its Bloemfontein conference in 1926 the Federated DR Churches made a number of recommendations to government, largely in response to Hertzog’s so-called “Native Bills. Based on “Christian principles”,⁷³ it formulated recommendations in the areas of education, political representation, land and economics. This demonstrates along with the European and Bantu conference reports a surprising concreteness (regardless of the particular slant of the content) with regard to policy

⁶⁹ Elfriede Strassberger, *Ecumenism in South Africa 1936-1960 with Special Reference to the Mission of the Church* (Johannesburg: South African Council of Churches, 1974 [orig. 1971]), 157ff.

⁷⁰ H. S. Bosman, A. F. Louw and P. G. J. Meiring, “Report of the Commission on the Native Conference”, in *Handelingen Van de Negende Vergadering Van de Raad der Ned. Geref. Kerken in Zuid Afrika* (11 June, 1925), 41.

⁷¹ Bosman, Louw and Meiring, “Report on the Native Conference”, 43.

⁷² Bosman, Louw and Meiring, “Report on the Native Conference”, 42.

⁷³ “Certain broad principles were expressed and formed the basis of each proposed solution to the native question, namely: (a) The native is made in God’s image just as we are, and therefore has rights as a person, and even more so as a Christian, which cannot be denied to him; (b) no solution of this question has any hope of succeeding if it is not carried out in the spirit of Christianity and according to Christian principles; (c) The Christian principles which have to be applied in particular are justice, generosity, mutual respect and sympathy, patience and tact; (d) the question is so multi-faceted and complex that it cannot be solved quickly and finally: the solution can only be found piecemeal and gradually; (e) while we continue to look for the solution, we must continue to strive to encourage better relationships between blacks and whites, and to create such an atmosphere which will make it quicker and easier to find the solution.” J. du Plessis, et. al., “Report of the Commission Regarding the Native Problem”, in *Handelingen van de Tiende Vergadering van de Raad der Ned. Geref. Kerken in Zuid Afrika* (March 1927), 52-53.

proposals.⁷⁴ This was not a church afraid or ideologically unwilling to cross a political boundary. The DRC of the 1970s and 1980s, which drew a rigid line between what the church could and could not speak out on was yet to come into being.⁷⁵

Church and people: the *volkskerk*

While the English-speaking churches were being transformed into denominations,⁷⁶ the Dutch Reformed Church was being transformed into a *volkskerk* obsessed with an inward, though not necessary a strict institutional, unity. The emergence of the idea of a *volkskerk* was a gradual process, however, and indeed something about which the DRC was always *theologically* ambivalent.⁷⁷ The relation between church (especially the DRC) and people is historically complex. We have seen how religion and sacraments were important in constructing early Dutch settler identity. But by 1850 the DRC was beginning to hold services in English and was coming under the influence of British evangelicalism. Even by the 1920s—and in spite of its own rhetoric—the DRC still had a long way to go in fully identifying itself as a *volkskerk*.⁷⁸ Moodie locates the origins of the *volkskerk* idea in the dualism of evangelical pietism, rather than Kuyperian Calvinism.⁷⁹ The key idea, for him, is the establishing of the *volk* as a kind of transcendental which exists above the contestations of state, party politics, and even institutional church.⁸⁰ It is this transcendental that serves as norm for state, party and church.⁸¹

⁷⁴ Though curiously delegates “did not feel called to comment on the subject of House of Assembly representation of natives, nor on the Coloured Persons Rights Bill.”

⁷⁵ What is interesting about these proposals is how similar they sound to the sentiments of the former mission churches. There is not yet any of the signs of the neo-Kuyperianism that would characterise later political thinking of the DRC.

⁷⁶ See above.

⁷⁷ The *volkskerk* idea was more a “popular” religious idea than one carefully worked out and defended by theologians or enshrined in official dogma. John de Gruchy, in a seminar discussion, “Popular Christianity and Denominational Identity” course, University of Cape Town, Department of Religious Studies, August 1996.

⁷⁸ For nineteenth century precedents, see Thom, “Roots of the Volkskerk”.

⁷⁹ Moodie, *Rise of Afrikanerdom*, 72. Cf. Durand, “Piety and Dissent”; Saayman, “Rebels and Prophets”—both of whom present the Kuyperian and evangelical traditions as together supporting the idea of a *volkskerk*.

⁸⁰ Dan O’Meara terms this a distinction between *Kultuurpolitiek* and *partypolitiek*, which the Afrikaner Broederbond, a secret society of cultural entrepreneurs, was able to exploit in directing “mass campaigns on cultural issues”. The apex of this was the Centenary of the Great Trek celebrations of 1938. *Volkskapitalisme: Class, Capital and Ideology in the Development of Afrikaner Nationalism* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983), 76. Cf. Albert Grundlingh and Hilary Sapire, “From Feverish Festival to Repetitive Ritual? The Changing Fortunes of Great Trek Mythology in an Industrializing South Africa, 1938-1988”. *South African Historical Journal* 21 (1989), 19-37.

⁸¹ cf. Nico Diederichs, who during the 1940s claimed that the love of a nation was “super-temporal” and existed prior to all other identities. Democracy is not simply the will of the majority but mirrors the totality of the nation. Bosch, “Afrikaner Civil Religion”, 31.

This may make the idea of a *volkskerk* sound somewhat abstract. But Durand points out that “the *volkskerk* idea was much more than a merely theoretical identification of church and people. It took concrete shape in the church’s concern for the plight of the Afrikaner after the war, and its efforts to combat poverty.”⁸² This poverty was a result of massive changes in the world of Afrikaners, which before the 1920s had largely been the world of the farm or rural settlement. Kinghorn says that, while urbanisation of Afrikaners was present before the Great Depression, “within a generation the social profile of the Afrikaner community changed, as Afrikaners lost the freedom of the countryside, along with their self-image of independence and liberty.” This shift was accompanied by tremendous hardship, “with one out of three Afrikaners living in severe deprivation.”⁸³ Faced with such a situation, the church had to choose to whom it would be loyal.

While motivated by poverty and evangelical concern for the poor, this concern did not however extend outside the Afrikaner people. There was no sense in which the church could treat “the native question” and the “poor white question” on an ethical par, even though formally they were similar.⁸⁴ Neither was there evidence of a class solidarity that linked the two “questions” in a single praxis. As the plight of poor Afrikaners came to the fore, the purpose of Dutch Reformed missions changed from saving souls to “enlisting the nationality of a people and rais[ing] it to a unique and native Christendom.”⁸⁵

While loyalty was strictly a matter for one’s own people, the concept of “the people” as transcendental was not just applied to Afrikaners, but to Africans as well. A 1921 article summarises a talk by J. B. M. Hertzog, leader of the National Party, this way:

We are therefore of the opinion that the natives’ claim for equal rights is absurd and illusive; but we are prepared to offer them equal opportunities. This means that they should have every opportunity to develop according to their national inclinations, opportunities to achieve their national ideals, if these are pervaded and elevated by the spirit of Christianity.

82 Durand, “Piety and Dissent”, 43.

83 Kinghorn, “Modernization and Apartheid: The Afrikaner Churches”, 139.

84 It is also obvious that the problems of the poor whites and urban blacks were interwoven Kinghorn, “Modernization and Apartheid”, 140, although Afrikaners did not mobilise along class lines and across race barriers.

85 *Koers in die Krisis* 1: 126-7, quoted in Moodie, *Rise of Afrikanerdom*, 68.

Notable are the terms “national inclination” and “national ideals”. The writer goes on to speak about similarities between Hertzog’s view and that of the Federated DR Churches with regard to “the native question”. “However”,

just as we should never be tempted to use this problem to create rivalry between the Church and political parties to ensure the exclusive love and support of the natives, in the same way this matter should not be turned into a party question by the political parties. Whoever does that would show himself to be an enemy of the fatherland. ... The native question, like the poor white question, should be elevated above party politics. Again we request, even beg, our politicians to resist the temptation to gain political advantages from this very serious matter. After all, the fatherland means much more than the interests of any political party.⁸⁶

Christianity therefore not only “elevates national ideals”, but infused with Christianity the “fatherland” transcends party politics and possibly even church policy.⁸⁷ This idea of “infusing a national spirit” with Christianity would transform DRC mission policy.

This “infusion” creates a problem, however. Gerhard Maré has pointed out the paradox of a missionary religion such as Christianity becoming a social faith, mobilised as a set of symbols which identify a particular group which also at the same time identifies itself according to blood ties or physical characteristics. This has happened throughout history, whether in the identification of states or, as in the case here, of ethnicities as “Christian”.

Ethnicity does not set out to win converts. It excludes those who do not belong by virtue of their having a different “past”, belonging to another history.⁸⁸ A person is “Afrikaner” by birthright, but Christian by profession. And yet it is not conceivable within the particular construction of Afrikaner ethnicity during our period of discussion that one could be a non-Christian Afrikaner.⁸⁹ In the case of Afrikaner Christianity, as pointed out by Moodie, Paul Krüger’s distinction between the “inward”, individual calling to be a Christian and the “outward”, corporate calling to

⁸⁶ *De Kerkbode* 20 October 1921, 1223f. | 6

⁸⁷ Also interesting is the gendered nature of the metaphors “fatherland” and “mother church”.

⁸⁸ Maré, *Brothers Born of Warrior Blood*, 16.

⁸⁹ Irving Hexham demonstrates this thesis with reference to Hertzog, whose favour amongst conservatives led one to say that he was a “true Christian”, even though Hertzog himself was a self-declared agnostic. *The Irony of Apartheid* (Toronto: Edwin Mellon, 1981), 182, 176. Hexham sums up: “Afrikaners were Christians; therefore, it was assumed that Afrikaner politics were Christian politics if they had a nationalist spirit. Because Hertzog stood for Afrikaner Nationalism he was regarded as an advocate of Christian politics.” (184). On Hertzog’s nationalism, see above.

ethnic identification and loyalty to the *wolk* unsuccessfully attempted to hold the two identities together.⁹⁰ The distinction was difficult to maintain—especially in conflict situations with other nationalisms, such as the South African War. And yet even after Afrikaner Christian nationalism had collapsed the internal into the external calling, the Dutch Reformed Church continued to identify missions as important. In mission terms, says Maré, the paradox was resolved in the proliferation of mission churches concerned with raising “national ideals”.⁹¹ But the DRC was moving beyond its identity simply as a people’s church. And soon it would be the state, infused with the worldview of Christian nationalism, that would dedicate itself to the elevation of national ideas. The word for that was “apartheid”.



David Bosch has argued that the DRC has in its history alternated between being a church of the establishment and a church of the people.⁹² We have seen how the church started out in the Cape Colony as the church of the establishment, even when the Cape changed hands. It adopted English as a medium of worship in the 1850s, though that would not last. It was ambivalent about supporting its ethnic brothers and sisters in other parts of the region if that meant disloyalty to the ruling authorities. Likewise in the Boer Republics, Afrikaner Christianity, this time in the form of the NHK, was the church of the establishment.

After the South African War, however, and in the face of Empire, the church of the establishment became a church of the people—though people defined in a narrow sense. As a church of the people, it gave an institutional religious legitimisation and shape to Afrikaner nationalism. As Bosch points out, under apartheid the DRC would again become the church of the establishment—only this time without ceasing to be the church of the people.⁹³ Now the DRC was no longer simply the protector of

⁹⁰ Moodie, *Rise of Afrikanerdom*, 22ff.

⁹¹ Maré, *Brothers Born of Warrior Blood*, 16. Of course, the *sendingkerk* in the Cape, established in 1881, predates twentieth century ethnic mobilisation and segregation in the DR churches dates at least as far back as the fateful 1857 Synod decision to exclude coloured members from communion with whites. See Chris Loff, “The History of a Heresy”, in *Apartheid is a Heresy*, ed. John de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 10-23. This however is more related to the role of the church in supporting settler identity (see above) than with any theological or philosophical understanding of allowing coloured people their own “Christian nationalism”. By the time the *Ned. Geref. Kerk in Afrika* was established in the 1920s, the idea of creating or promoting “local” nationalisms was a part of mission church policy.

⁹² Bosch, “Fragmentation of Afrikanerdom”.

⁹³ As an aside here, I would wish to say that the position of the DRC (or any other church) vis-à-vis the state was not an inevitable outcome. The threads connecting the nineteenth century Cape DRC, the ecumenically and mission oriented church of J. du Plessis, the *volkskerk* of D. F. Malan

the interests of the *volk*, but of Christian civilisation in Africa. This is important to acknowledge, as it meant the circle of loyalty becoming wider again. And yet this widening was perhaps a mask: for even Africans considered friendly to state policy still confronted racial barriers in the church. Much as it may have had more inclusivist pretensions, Afrikaner Christian nationalism never really migrated beyond the social faith of the *volk*.

and the “Church of Apartheid” are not straight, but tangled, woven with other threads, stretching and pulling, ravelling and unravelling.

African Nationalism

To this point two nationalisms have been encountered: South African and Afrikaner. The way these both shaped and were shaped by distinctive Christianities, located in religious institutions, has been demonstrated. While South African nationalism and Afrikaner nationalism were battling it out in the historically white denominations and churches, another kind of nationalism was appearing. Like colonial nationalism, it sought to bridge ethnic and tribal divides through the positing of a unity that transcended such differences. Like Afrikaner nationalism it was a mass movement that, while rooted in a middle class, aimed at mobilising across regional, class and historical divides. Also like Afrikaner nationalism it was rooted in primordiality, in the recovery of a lost past. Yet unlike both, its basis was in and with those rapidly losing what little political and economic power they had. And unlike both, the church was the most significant platform of site for its development.

African Nationalism: mission and politics

Following Clifford Geertz, T. Dunbar Moodie has identified two currents in nationalism as “primordial loyalties” and “civic sentiments”. “Primordial loyalties are committed to communities within the state whether kinship, racial, religious or cultural groups—they are thus ethnic loyalties. Civic sentiments, on the other hand, imply a sense of patriotic loyalty to an already existing state. In the latter case citizenship and national sentiments cohere, but in the former the franchise becomes an arena for struggle between different ethnic claimants for state power regardless of the precise definition of ethnicity.”¹ In our study, Afrikaner nationalism is an example of the first and South African nationalism of the second. But there is another nationalism, based on a common, imagined *civitas*, defined with reference to a larger “African” identity and based in Christian “civilising” discourse, but also involved in a struggle for political enfranchisement.

What is called “African nationalism” generally refers not to an “African [political] nation” (as South African nationalism did) nor to an exclusive African “group”

(as Afrikaner nationalism did) but to political mobilisation across tribal and ethnic boundaries. It is generally held that African nationalism finds its roots in the class mobilisation amongst African converts and the interethnic ferment especially of nineteenth century mission stations which brought Africans of different tribal origins together. Although in its mature form it embraced a pan-African vision, its precursors included more local movements of African self-assertion and resistance, including the Xhosa nationalism of the early nineteenth century leaders Nxele and Ntsikana² and, later in the century, of Tiyo Soga.³

Writing about the eastern Cape, Janet Hodgson has argued that the relation between Christianity and the Xhosa people can be traced in three stages.⁴ The first is characterised by an open frontier, with a “mutual borrowing across the cultural divide”. Symbols were shared back and forth between missionaries and Xhosa. The Christian message was translated into African terms. It is during this stage that Ntsikana, whose memory would come to symbolise Xhosa and African Christianity a century later, embraced Christianity. After 1820, white settlers arrived in the eastern Cape on mass. Mission stations were established and the frontier was closed. During this second period, Christianity became a social norm while African culture was seen as evil. The particular variety of Christianity was a virtual replica of that which the missionaries practised. Missionaries set up educational institutions, most notably Lovedale (1840). The educational ideal was to “civilise barbarians”, who would later themselves participate in the “civilising” process.⁵ The “High Imperial era”, which Hodgson dates from the 1860s, saw white dominance pervasive in many areas of life, “African people began a concerted attempt to liberate their indigenous symbols from an alienated past and to integrate them with an African understanding of Christianity.”⁶

¹ T. D. Moodie, “Sociological Aspects of Nationalism in South Africa”, in *Church and Nationalism in South Africa*, Theo Sundermeier ed. (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1975), 40.

² There is, of course, great difference between these two figures and they represent two paradigmatic responses to colonialism and Christianity. We cannot dwell on them here, but see Janet Hodgson, “A Battle for Sacred Power: Christian Beginnings Among the Xhosa”, in *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social and Cultural History*, ed. Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport (Cape Town; London: David Philip; James Currey, 1997), 68-73. Hodgson provides a concise account against the backdrop not only of colonialism but of the origins of a “Xhosa” identity.

³ For example, see Soga’s classic article, “What is the destiny of the Kaffir race?” *The King Williams Town Gazette, Kaffraria Banner*, 11 May 1865, reprinted in Donovan Williams, ed. *The Journal and Selected Writings of the Rev. Tiyo Soga* (Cape Town: A. A. Balkema, 1983), 178-82.

⁴ Hodgson, “Christian Beginnings Among the Xhosa”, 68.

⁵ de Kock, *Civilising barbarians*.

⁶ Hodgson, “Christian Beginnings Among the Xhosa”, 68.

With the opening of educational institutions, especially Lovedale in 1840, “the formation of an educated black elite began in earnest”.⁷ Called the “School People” amongst the Xhosa and the *amaKholwa* amongst the Zulu, this elite formed an important part of missionary strategy.⁸ The idea was to train people who could evangelise other Africans. But missionaries also saw it as part of their calling to “enlighten” Africans. This was reflected in the fact that the educational curriculum was a replica of that which would have been offered to a European child. African cultural practices were discouraged, and time divided along the lines of the working day.⁹

Believing that the best way of promoting mass conversions was to convert the local leaders, missionaries placed themselves near chiefs. For their part, chiefs found it convenient to allow mission stations to be established near their domain, as missionaries were useful “go-betweens” with colonial authorities. In fact, however, mission stations tended to attract outcasts, marginalised Africans: “outcasts, misfits, political refugees, the physically disabled and aged, those fleeing violence, or settler demands, or a ruler’s wrath, or unwelcome marriage, or accusations of witchcraft.”¹⁰ Perhaps the most prominent of the marginalised to live on the mission stations in the eastern Cape were the Mfengu, refugees from the upheavals caused by Zulu mobilisation under Shaka in the early part of the century.¹¹

Growing up in these “melting pots”, Africans “were no longer Sotho or Zulu, Qwabe or Cele. They were simply African Christians and as such had reasons for adopting new patterns of life which derived from more than Christian doctrine or missionary behavior.”¹² This made them ripe for Europeanisation as well.

This rising middle-class saw themselves in the mirror of Europe. As Etherington says, “faced with an apparent choice between an African and a European identity, the first *Kholwa* tended toward the European because the ethnically diverse black Christians had no traditional African identity to which they might cling.”¹³

⁷ Hodgson, “Christian Beginnings Among the Xhosa”, 80.

⁸ On the “School People”, see R. Hunt Davis, “School, Blanket and Settler: Elijah Makiwane and the Leadership of the Cape School Community”, *African Affairs* 78 (1979). On the *Kholwa*, see Norman Etherington, “The Rise of the Kholwa in Southeast Africa: African Christian Communities in Natal, Pondoland and Zululand, 1835-1880”, Dissertation. Yale University, 1971.

⁹ Hodgson, “Christian Beginnings Among the Xhosa”, 74.

¹⁰ Hodgson, “Christian Beginnings Among the Xhosa”, 76.

¹¹ On the Mfengu, or “Fingoes”, see R. A. Moyer, “A History of the Mfengu of the Eastern Cape, 1815-65”, diss, University of London, 1976.

¹² Norman Etherington, “Mission Station Melting Pots as a Factor in the Rise of South African Black Nationalism”, *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 9:4 (1976), 600.

¹³ Etherington, “Mission Station Melting Pots”, 603.

Davis observes of them, “instead of becoming an established bourgeoisie unencumbered by their identity as Africans, they evolved as the most prominent element of an increasingly western-oriented community that faced a steady erosion of its political power, its economic well-being and its social standing due to its subordinate position in a white-dominated settler society.”¹⁴ Into the twentieth century, missionised Africans like D. D. T. Jabavu would still identify themselves with European standards and norms, typified in what is known as the Cape liberal tradition.¹⁵ This created a double strangeness: first vis-à-vis “tribalised” Africans and second vis-à-vis white settlers. And yet growing marginalisation during the high imperial era, which dates from the 1860s and coincides with the beginnings of industrialisation, meant that many others began to look to Africa afresh for an identity.

What might be termed “proto-nationalism” was a mixture of ethnic and Africanist sentiment. Tiyo Soga typifies this stage of the development of African nationalism, particularly in his promotion of the Xhosa language.¹⁶ His father, known as “old Soga”, was an activist and disciple of Ntsikana who, in Hodgson’s view, represents a transitional figure “seeking to integrate an independent peasant movement with a new-found nationalism. Ntsikana provided the integrating symbols.”¹⁷ This Xhosa nationalism would continue as a strand in Eastern Cape cultural nationalism. Rival nationalisms existed, alongside rising African Christianities.¹⁸ This included the Thembu nationalism of Nehemiah Tile, who sought to “establish” his Thembu church along the lines of the Church of England, with the Thembu paramount as head.¹⁹ In the case of the Xhosa and Mfengu, whose communities overlapped, both “sought to incorporate religious symbols into what become competing civil religions.”²⁰ While Mfengu nationalism grew, Ntsikana’s Great Hymn became a Xhosa national anthem. For the Mfengu it was the milkwood tree where the threefold vow

¹⁴ Davis, “School, Blanket and Settler”, 31.

¹⁵ Jabavu’s life exemplified the triumph and tragedy of nineteenth century-based liberal African Nationalism, as well as a life between two worlds. Catherine Higgs’ excellent biography of Jabavu captures well this sense of “in-between-ness”. *The Ghost of Equality: The Public Lives of D. D. T. Jabavu of South Africa* (Cape Town; Ohio: David Philip; Mayibuye Books; Ohio University Press, 1997).

¹⁶ Even though African nationalism was polyglot, Soga held that a distinctive language was a key component in a “nation’s” self-awareness. De Gruchy, *Christianity and the Modernisation of South Africa*, ch. 1.

¹⁷ Hodgson, “Christian Beginnings Among the Xhosa”, 78.

¹⁸ We discuss African Christianities in chapter three.

¹⁹ See Christopher C. Saunders, “Tile and the Thembu Church: Politics and Independency on the Cape Eastern Frontier in the Late Nineteenth Century”, *Journal of African History* 11:4 (1970), 553-70.

²⁰ Hodgson, “Christian Beginnings Among the Xhosa”, 86.

took place that became a sacred site by 1907.²¹ As the Act of Union came into force, the need for a more inclusive African nationalism was seen. Xhosa nationalists “saw Christianity as an integrating force in developing a supra-ethnic African nationalism. Ntsikana became a saint for all Africans.”²²

This supra-ethnic strand came to classic expression much earlier, in Tiyo Soga’s 1866 essay, “What is the Destiny of the Kaffir Race?” Looking beyond the borders of the eastern Cape, beyond Xhosa ethnicity, even beyond Africa to the Diaspora, Soga could write:

Africa was of God given to the race of Ham. I find the Negro from the days of the old Assyrians downwards, keeping his “individuality” and “distinctiveness,” amid the wreck of empires, and the revolution of ages. I find him keeping his place among the nations, and keeping his home and country. I find him opposed by nation after nation and driven from his home. I find him enslaved—exposed to the vices and the brandy of the white man. I find him in this condition for many a day—in the West Indian Islands, in Northern and Southern America, and in the South American Colonies of Spain and Portugal. I find him exposed to all these disasters, and yet living—multiplying “and never extinct.” Yea, I find him now as the prevalence of Christian and philanthropic opinions of the right of man obtains among civilized nations, returning unmanacled to the land of his forefathers, taking back with him the civilization and the Christianity of those nations. (See the Negro Republic of Liberia). I find the Negro in the present struggle in America looking forward—though still with chains in his hands and with chains on his feet—yet look-

²¹ Hodgson, “Christian Beginnings Among the Xhosa”, 86. The threefold vow was taken in the presence of Methodist missionary John Ayliff in 1835. The pledge, as summarised by D. D. T. Jabavu, was “to be truthful to God and support to missionaries... be truthful to the British King and government”, and “to educate their children.” *I Nkulungwane yama Mfengu*, quoted in Higgs, *Ghost of equality*, 8.

²² Hodgson, “Christian Beginnings Among the Xhosa”, 86-87. St Ntsikana’s Order of True Africans, a Masonic-type society, was formed in Johannesburg in the late 1920s by M. D. Mveli Skota, who was then General Secretary of the ANC. Significantly, given political rivalries between African nationalists and the Black labour movement, it also featured involvement of the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union in its leadership. In the 1930s it was renamed “The Order of Africa.” While appropriated as part of a tradition which celebrated a broader Africanism, Ntsikana remained an important figure for Xhosa religious and cultural identity. The Order of St Ntsikana was formed in 1912. James Calata was its President while he was Secretary General of the ANC in the late 1930s. Alan Gregor Cobby, “The ‘African National Church’: Self-determination and Political Struggle Among Black Christians in South Africa to 1948”, *Church History* 60: 3 (September 1991), 362.

ing forward to the dawn of a better day for himself and all his sable brethren in Africa.”²³

This remarkable text not only expresses a vision crossing national boundaries, but crossing time back to biblical themes in the invocation of Ethiopia (a quote from Psalm 68: 31) and forward to the eschaton. The symbol of Ethiopia would prove a recurrent theme in African Christianity. And yet Soga’s vision finds its hope in a less-than-radical liberal, “philanthropic” Christianity. John Dube expressed a similar vision some twenty years prior to his role in founding the African National Congress:

Oh! How I long for that day, when the darkness and gloom shall have passed away, because the “Sun of Righteousness has risen with healing in His hand.” This shall be the dawning of a brighter day for the people of Africa. Christianity will usher in a new civilization, and the “Dark Continent” will be transformed into a land of commerce and Christian institutions. Then shall Africa take her place as a nation among the nations: then shall her sons and daughters sing aloud: “Let us arise and shine, for our light has come. The glory of the Lord has risen upon us.” May the day speedily come when “Ethiopia shall stretch out her hands unto God.”²⁴

For Dube, however, the “new civilisation” that Christianity was to usher in meant a rejection of traditionalism. Addressing “the chiefs and gentlemen of the South African Native Congress” early in 1912, he gave the slogan: “Onward! Upward! Into the higher places of civilisation and Christianity—not backwards to the slums of darkness nor downwards into the abyss of antiquated tribal systems.”²⁵ Here was a motif borrowed from the Christianity of the colonial establishment—forward, through progress to the millennium. It was a far more ambitious vision than Soga’s simple “looking forward to a better day”.²⁶

African Nationalism, liberalism and Christianity

We should not be surprised at echoes of white colonial Christianity in the soundings of early African nationalists such as Dube. As African political organisa-

²³ Soga, “What is the destiny of the Kaffir Race?”, 180-81.

²⁴ Dube, “A Talk Upon My Native Land”, (n.p. 1892), 68-69.

²⁵ Quoted in Peter Walshe, *The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 38.

²⁶ Read in the context of the 1920s segregation debates, where government tried to exploit the tribal system in order to keep Africans under control, and in even later uses of ethnicity and tribalism in justifying the boundaries of so-called bantustans, however, Dube’s statement reads as radical and subversive.

tions developed in the early part of the century, they tended to be conservative, acting within the constitutional framework of the day. Rather than mobilising the masses for revolution, the school elite, as Davis puts it, “sought to mitigate individual transgressions of the system under which they lived. And it was only the school people, especially the elite, who could possibly benefit from this system.”²⁷ Etherington agrees with this assessment, saying that “By supporting a nationalism which favored the obliteration of cultural distinctions among Africans and sought political progress along British Parliamentary lines, they were supporting a cause which they were best qualified to lead and whose triumph alone could ensure the perpetuation of their fragile status as an African elite.”²⁸ While this identification of their material interests is undeniably true, it is also undeniably true that the faith commitments of the early nationalist leaders are visible in their political praxis. Indeed, as we shall identify the meaning of formative faith in our fourth chapter.

Their claims of loyalty to Great Britain reinforce this picture of early Nationalist leaders as conservative. These claims were expressed over and over again in the period between the end of the South African War and the Act of Union. An appeal for repatriation of African refugees to Milner was prefaced this way: “Much as our people have suffered through the late war, their confidence in the justice of that war made them all the more willing to bear the hardships imposed on them in common with the Mother Country.”²⁹ The other side of Africans’ loyalty to Britain was an expectation that Britain would “do its duty”. John Dube wrote of “the white man’s burden” in taking responsibility for clothing, feeding and educating “these black-skinned Zulu people”.³⁰ A 1902 editorial, looking with apprehension toward Vereeniging, expressed strong faith in “British justice”—and an appeal for Britain to practice what it preached: “We do not hanker after social equality with the white man. ... All we claim is our just ones; we ask for our political recognition as loyal British subjects. ... Under the Union Jack every person is his neighbour’s political equal. There are certain

²⁷ Davis, “School, Blanket and Settler”, 30.

²⁸ Etherington, “Mission Station Melting Pots”, 605.

²⁹ “Questions Affecting the Natives and Coloured People Resident in British South Africa”, Statement by the Executive of the South African Native Congress (1903?), in *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882-1964*, Vol. 1, Thomas Karis and Gwendolyn Carter, eds (Stanford: University of California Press, 1972), 18.

³⁰ Dube, “The Zulu’s Appeal for Light and England’s Duty”, (n.p. 1909). Dube himself was of Zulu origin.

regulations for which one should qualify before his legal status is recognised as such; to this qualification race or colour is no bar, and we hope, in the near future... sex.”³¹

Appeals to the British authorities were not unheard of in the nineteenth century. When Thembuland was divided into magisterial districts, Nehemiah Tile invoked the Crown to challenge the colonial administrators, appealing to one power to relativise another.³² But as Union approached, and the limited political power some Africans enjoyed in the Cape was placed in question, the appeals gained urgency. Delegations from the Cape visited Britain. As noted earlier in this chapter, their appeals fell on deaf ears. While faith in British justice was not shaken,³³ it was time for a new kind of mobilisation.

It is perhaps ironic that the South African Native National Congress only organised itself after Union. As pan-Afrikaner nationalism became possible through the breakdown of geographical boundaries and new transport routes, so African nationalism was able to mobilise across the country, especially reaching the “melting pots” of the industrial centres.³⁴ It was significant that the Congress was formed outside the Cape, in Bloemfontein. It was also significant that its formation was marked by a “lusty rendition” of Tiyo Soga’s Xhosa hymn, “Fulfil thy promise, God of truth”.³⁵

While the Cape liberal tradition and ideals of British justice were important symbolic resources for early African nationalism, it is Christianity that formed its heart. “[A]lthough treated with increasing skepticism in educated circles”, writes Walsh, Christianity “remained the predominant influence in the lives of important leading Africans. Supporting the ideals of human brotherhood, it was seen by such individuals to have clear social implications, to require justice and equality of opportunity

³¹ “Equal Rights”, Editorial, *Koranta Ea Becoana and Bechuana’s Gazette*, Matlhaco, 13 September, 1902, 5. The reference to gender is remarkable, evidencing a sense of a justice that transcended even the most taken-for-granted distinction in white and black society.

³² Saunders, “Tile and the Thembu Church”, 561.

³³ “I feel assured that, if we approach this inherently religious and magnanimous British people in respectful and reasonable manner, they will not refuse us a hearing, and will not refuse us our rights. Indeed they it is who have taught us to seek and to strive; we follow but their example.” “From Mr Dube’s Presidential Address to the South African Native Congress”, *The Christian Express*, 1 March 1912.

³⁴ Both industrial centres such as Kimberley and frontier-based Mission Stations have been described as “melting pots”. On Kimberley, see the excursus in John W. de Gruchy, *Christianity and the Modernisation of South Africa* (Cape Town; Grand Rapids: David Philip; Eerdmans, 2000), ch. 1. See also Etherington, “Mission Station Melting Pots”. The idea of “melting pot” is especially important for our discussion in chapter two of the emergence of a common American Christian identity which sublates the contestation of boundaries on the part of immigrants. See H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (Gloucester, MA.: Peter Smith, 1987 [orig. 1929]), ch. 8 and chapter five below.

for all men, and it remained the moral norm to which educated Africans tended automatically to appeal."³⁶ When all courts of appeal had been exhausted, including British justice, there was a higher court. As Z. R. Mahabane wrote in announcing a Day of Humiliation and Prayer:

[T]he recent Queenstown Congress felt that the black man had exhausted all constitutional methods of claiming his rights, and that the time had come when before any drastic measures could be resorted to, the Bantu peoples should appeal to the very highest tribunal of all, the "righteous Judge of all the earth", and we are persuaded He will do right. Our people must, however, not be deceived. The day of deliverance shall not come in a day although come it must one day or another, yet it may take years to arrive. But let us rest assured that the day of reckoning will come, sooner or later, in one way or another, as it did to Russia and Germany.

This was not a passive Christianity, however, but an active and activist one. Mahabane continued: "We may have to travel a long, thorny, or bloody road, like the Israelites in their historic march from the Egyptian oppression to the land of promise, before we attain our ideal of freedom. But this is no reason why we should not begin now to work hard towards the great objective."³⁷

Mahabane's "appeal to the Highest Judge" was combined with a reassertion of African identity:

Africa expects that every one of her sons and daughters, every man and woman, shall do his or her duty in the great struggle for the emancipation of the sons and daughters of the soil from this modern Egypt of oppression which boasts of a Christian civilization. Has the time not arrived when the prophecy should be fulfilled? "Ethiopia shall stretch out her hands unto God." When our united prayer has ascended into heaven as the united cry of an oppressed, down-trodden and despised people, it is then the Voice of God will be heard thundering from the burning bush of this ruthless and brutal oppression: "Behold, the cry of the children of Ham is come unto me, and I have also seen the oppression wherewith their 'taskmasters' oppress them. (Exodus iii.9)."

³⁵ Tom Lodge, "Organised Black Political Resistance (1912-1950)" *Reality* 13 (2 March 1981), 16.

³⁶ Walshe, *Rise of African Nationalism*, 197.

³⁷ "The Day Of Humiliation And Prayer", Statement of The South African National Native Congress, Delivered on November 21, 1922, taken from *The Good Fight: Speeches of Z. R. Mahabane*, ed. G. M. Carter and S. W. Johns (Evanston: Northwestern University, n.d.), 31-33.

The images of “the children of Ham” and Ethiopia, of pan-African unity and biblical heritage, return again.

However, Christianity offered more than a moral norm, a justice beyond all justice. It was “a social cohesive which transcended tribalism and offered an ultimate goal of inter-racial harmony based on the brotherhood of man.”³⁸ John Dube could appeal to the whites of Natal on this basis: that through Christianity Africans “feel that we have interests in common, and are one with the white people.”³⁹ While English-speaking Christians were speaking of “making the unity more real” between the white citizens of South Africa through a common Christian faith, African nationalist leaders were mobilising Christianity to speak of a unity that transcended race. Z. R. Mahabane argued that “As the British crown had been a symbol for inter-racial unity within the Empire, so [Mahabane] argued, a universal acknowledgement of Christ as common Lord and King would break down the social, spiritual and intellectual barriers between the races.”⁴⁰

This was ultimately naïve. As Walshe points out, in the view of the Christian ANC leaders, “Christian ethics had but one clear social implication.... the churches were expected to be in the vanguard of public opinion leading society away from racial discrimination to a colour-blind equality of opportunity.”⁴¹ Of course, as we saw above, there were other churches, and other Christianities, that saw things differently. The DRC argued its “Christian” position as well—that social progress was to found in “race-pride” not “non-racialism”.⁴² Liberal or social Christians were unable to disentangle themselves from reliance on the state as an institution of “the benevolent empire” which, with patience, would make everything come right. The position of the churches became more and more one of support for this state, something which intensified as communism became more and more a menace, rivalling nationalism.

There was ambiguity at the very heart of Christianity’s plurality.⁴³

³⁸ Walshe, *Rise of African Nationalism*, 158.

³⁹ *Report of the South African Native Affairs Commission*, 967-8.

⁴⁰ Walshe, *Rise of African Nationalism*, 159.

⁴¹ Walshe, *Rise of African Nationalism*, 160.

⁴² Walshe, *Rise of African Nationalism*, 160.

⁴³ For theological reflection on this point, see David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), especially ch. 1.

African Christianity and nationalist assertion

To this point we have been discussing a fairly undifferentiated Christianity within African nationalism. The fact that African nationalists, whether critical of Christianity as a white man's religion or affirming its utility as providing a moral centre for political reform, tended to speak of Christianity rather homogeneously perhaps underscores this point. The Christianity that was held to by African nationalists was also in the process of becoming.

“African Christianity” is a complex and heterogeneous phenomenon. It was a paradoxical statement, saying that Christianity provided social glue, since it was so contested even within the African nationalist movement. Generated in the contest between mission, settler and independent Christianities, African Christianity took three main institutional forms. The first was an extension of the mission congregations started by missionaries but placed into black hands when mission and settler Christianity began to merge into the denominational forms present today. Here power was not completely in the hands of black leaders, and missionaries continued to hold on to property especially. This is not to say that Africans did not continue to worship in the older English-speaking denominations. Indeed, Africans make up the majority of the membership of the English-speaking churches. But it is only recently in most of these churches that Africans have been in positions of power. And it is the agency of power, “working for ourselves and responsible for what we do”,⁴⁴ that was the driving motive behind African nationalism.

The goal of Christian missions, according to the “three selfs” doctrine of Henry Venn (1796-1873), was to establish self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating congregations.⁴⁵ In the case of South Africa, this was often stated as mission policy. Yet missionaries doggedly held on to power and, most important, to land. Many African Christians left mission churches to form self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating congregations, but not under the control of whites. These churches were religious “liberated zones”, where African clergy were in charge of African churches, working among African people. It was only after the process of consolidation within denominations was well under way, and with awareness of the dan-

⁴⁴ Testimony of Mpambani Mzimba, *Report of the South African Native Affairs Commission, 1903-5*, 4 vols (Cape Town: Cape Times Limited, Government Printers, 1904-5), 2:793.

⁴⁵ Bosch, *Transforming mission*, 341.

ger of this phenomenon called "Ethiopianism", that missionaries finally began to hand over power.⁴⁶

The Bantu Presbyterian Church, one of the first mission churches to gain independence, was formed in 1923. It grew out of the independent Presbytery of Kafraria, which retained its connections with the Free Church of Scotland but eschewed union with the multi-racial but white-led Presbyterian Church of South Africa. The Bantu Presbyterian Church was formed as a transitional institution which it was thought would eventually reunite with the PCSA. An African minister in the new church, J. H. Soga, however, was ambivalent about reunion. This may have had something to do with the unequal power relations that would have prevailed in the PCSA, despite an influx of African members. He may also have been hoping for a union with other African churches, in a united African Christian Church.⁴⁷

The so-called "Ethiopian Churches"—churches which broke away from mission congregations, forming separate denominations which nonetheless resembled in doctrine if not in ethos the churches from which they seceded—make up the second strand of African Christianity. These were the first independent churches and to an extent the practice of missions to create African-led churches was a response to independent churches.

Independent churches exemplify the appropriation of Christianity by Africans. While the mission churches rejected white supremacy in the church, independent churches rejected white Christianity. Africans were able to do perhaps what whites were not: to separate Christianity from white power and to mobilise it in a different direction. Ethiopianism was a protest movement, "a direct expression of resistance against the missionaries, white settlers, and the colonial government."⁴⁸ While according to Pretorius and Jafta there were about twenty different groups at the turn of the twentieth century, the tradition of independent Christianity goes back to Ntsikana, as noted above. We also saw how the Ntsikana tradition, dating from the first decades of the nineteenth century, could be mobilised in the construction of a Xhosa

⁴⁶ Even that was not without controversy. See David Burchell, "A History of the Lovedale Missionary Institution 1890-1930", M.A. Thesis, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 1979, ch. 6.

⁴⁷ This is suggested by Burchell, "History of Lovedale", 165. See below.

⁴⁸ Hennie Pretorius and Lizo Jafta, "'A Branch Springs Out': African Initiated Churches", in *Christianity in South Africa*, ed. Elphick and Davenport, 213.

civil religion.⁴⁹ But the first Ethiopian church only arose in 1884, with the Thembu church. Led by Nehemiah Tile, a former Wesleyan preacher, this church would be anomalous amongst the Ethiopian churches in that it “looked back to the days of independent chiefly rule, rather than looking forward to equal participation in a common society.”⁵⁰ The church did not survive the death of its founder. But others arose afterward. In 1891, an Anglican named Khanyani Napo started a church simply called “the African Church” in Pretoria. The following year another Wesleyan, Mangena Mokone, resigned his church and started “the Ethiopian Church”. The success and spread of this church across South Africa provided the independent church movement with the name “Ethiopianism”.⁵¹

James Mata Dwane joined the Ethiopian Church in 1896, the same year the Church became affiliated with the African American Episcopal Church.⁵² Dwane would travel to the United States, during which time he became disillusioned with the AME church, particularly over its claim to be in the apostolic succession.⁵³ The importance of establishing links which transcended the time of European Christianity, that is, a more original Christianity, is an important theme in African Christianity. We will see another example of this below in the naming of Zionist churches. He resigned in 1899 and eventually began a new order in the Church of the Province entitled, the Order of Ethiopia. In 1898, Rev. Mpambani Mzimba broke away from the Lovedale congregation to form the Presbyterian Church of Africa.⁵⁴

Examples could be multiplied. Indeed, it seems that once the process started, it gained speed and strength. While the actual reasons for each secession or new church may have varied, a common theme was the felt need to develop a Christianity outside the direction of whites. While as we noted Ethiopian leaders were able to dif-

⁴⁹ Chidester also mentions the Uzondelelo movement in Natal and the community of Mafolofolo in the northern Transvaal, led by Johannes Dinkwanyane as movements parallel to Ntsikane's. *Religions of South Africa*, 114.

⁵⁰ Saunders, “Tile and the Thembu Church”, 569. We could also mention in this connection the Bapedi Lutheran Church, started in 1889 by Johannes Winter.

⁵¹ When questioned about Ethiopianism by the Lagden Commission, James Stewart said that the movement started “with Dwane in the Cape Colony; and at the same time, or even earlier, with one or two men in the North of the Transvaal, namely, Makone and Gabashane.” He makes no mention of Tile. *SANAC Minutes of Evidence* Vol. 4: 905.

⁵² See James Campbell, *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), for an account of their relation.

⁵³ See Campbell, *Songs of Zion*, 216-22 on Dwane's secession.

⁵⁴ On the Mzimba secession, see Burchell, *A History of the Lovedale Missionary Institution*, ch. 5.

ferentiate between Christianity and white domination,⁵⁵ opposing the latter by re-appropriating the former, their rejection of white Christianity was taken as rebellion by colonial officials and church people alike. James Stewart, for instance, told the Lagden Commission that all Ethiopian movements, “may be described in one word as anti-white. Of this I think there can be little doubt. One should not judge uncharitably, but the tree is known by its fruit - and this Ethiopian tree has produced some very bad fruit.”⁵⁶ Perhaps this reflects as much a particular understanding of Christianity and the powers that be as it expresses a misunderstanding of African Christianity.

The government of Natal explained its refusal to recognise independent churches as expressing “its strong disapproval of the Ethiopian movement, and to maintain the ascendancy and dominance of European Churches, being satisfied that it is neither in the interests of the Colony nor of the natives thereof that natives at the present time, or indeed for many years to come, should be free of European control either in matters ecclesiastical or educational.”⁵⁷ In spite of this, Ethiopian leaders took great pains to argue for their loyalty to the government of the day.⁵⁸ “The black races are too conscious of their dependence upon the white missionaries, and of their obligations towards the British race, and the benefits to be derived by their presence in the general control and guidance of the civil and religious affairs of the country to harbour foolish notions of political ascendancy. The idea is too palpably absurd to carry weight with well-informed minds, and tends to obscure the real issues and to injure the people as a class.”⁵⁹

Why should white leaders have felt challenged politically by Ethiopian churches? One possible reason is that these were institutions which were not subject to the management of the colonial state. They represented a site of beyond the limits of colonial control. But perhaps a more important reason was that Ethiopian churches looked to a sacred centre outside of South Africa, indeed outside of the

⁵⁵ “It is my firm belief that we can be Christianised without necessarily being Europeanised.... The Christian religion has not come to Africa to abrogate Bantu traditions and customs but to give them their completion.” R. V. S. Thema, a member of the ANC writing in 1926, quoted in Cobby, “African National Church”, 358.

⁵⁶ Testimony of James Stewart, in *SANAC Minutes of Evidence* Vol. 4 (1904), 906.

⁵⁷ Letter from Arthur E. Hedgeland to the Secretary, American Zulu Mission, 11 July 1906. NAB A608: American Board Mission A 5/65 -- OF 1906-7

⁵⁸ See Johann Claasen, “Independents made Dependent: African Independent Churches and Government Recognition”, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 91 (June 1995), 15-34.

⁵⁹ “Questions Affecting the Native and Coloured Peoples”, 18.

British Empire. The symbol of Ethiopia was one such centre. Another was America—perhaps accounting for why the AME church was treated with such suspicion by the Lagden Commission.⁶⁰

The rise of the ANC, with its national platform for political activity, contributed to the waning of the Ethiopian movement, as did the creation of self-supporting African mission churches and the rise of more radical Zion churches. Moreover, by 1926, “whites regarded secular not religious forces as principle threats to their domination.... fears of Ethiopianist intrigue were replaced by fears of plots against white supremacy by the international labour movement and by the powerful African labour organization, the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union.”⁶¹

The third form of African Christianity is commonly called “Zionism”. Its origins are usually traced to the work of John Alexander Dowie, who began a church in Zion City Illinois that spread to South Africa in 1897, Pieter le Roux, who broke away from the Dowie church in 1902, and Daniel Bryant in 1904. These multi-racial churches beget self-supporting communities, called “Zion Cities”. Zion cities were important centres for African solidarity in the inter-war years as segregation took root. They also were of great concern to government officials, particularly in their occupation of land and profession of founding “a new society”. Unlike Ethiopianism, which retained the doctrinal distinctives of the European churches, Zionism represented a break. Zionist churches mobilised traditional practices in their worship, and identified themselves with a more “original” Christianity than that of the Protestant denominations, as indicated in names such as “Apostolic Nazareth Jerusalem Corinthians Church in Zion”. It also rejected the political practices of the ANC and other nationalist organisations, sometimes establishing links with traditional authorities. The Ibandla lamaNazaretha, for instance, self-consciously appropriated Zulu traditions, while the Ibandla lika Krestu reflected Xhosa traditions. But more commonly, churches transcended tribal and sometimes regional boundaries. The most well known example of this is the Zion Christian Church, founded by Bishop Engenas Legkanyane in 1925. The ZCC would become known for its overtures to political

⁶⁰ Campbell’s fascinating study shows how the AME functioned both as *conduit*, through which ideas, styles, languages flowed between the US and SA and *mirror* in which each reflected the other. Campbell, *Songs of Zion*, xii-xiii. The church was a resource for the construction of identities, again outside the influence of colonial control. On America as sacred space in South Africa, see David Chidester, “A Big Wind Blew up During the Night” in *American Sacred Space* eds Edward Tabor Linenthal and David Chidester (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 262-312.

leaders in the 1980s and 1990s, professing an ecclesially- rather than nationalistically-based transcendence of party politics.⁶²

African unity and ecclesial diversity

The proliferation of new churches raised the spectre of denominationalism at missionary conferences in first decades of the twentieth century. Denominationalism exacerbated the existing divisions among Africans, and undermined evangelisation.⁶³ It was therefore of concern to both religious and political leaders.⁶⁴ Missionaries often spoke of an African penchant for denominationalism, schism or sectarianism. “The native”, said H. D. Goodenough of the American Zulu Mission, “tends to be a denominationalist first and a Christian second.”⁶⁵ Even modern writers like Leo Kuper have tied this to different kinds of tribalism, as if denominationalism merely replicates tribalism.⁶⁶ “Being tribal”, in this view, becomes almost a constituent part of “being African”, whether one is speaking of African nationalism or African Christianity. But this penchant is also explainable in terms of social upheaval and destabilisation, and the mobilisation of differences among Europeans as a resource in opposing colonial hegemony. African denominationalism has its “social sources”, as does the American variety we shall encounter in the next chapter. It was a situation of the re-alignment and re-negotiation of loyalties that provides the context of African denominationalism, just as the establishment of white power resulted in a stabilisation of the memberships of English-speaking churches. But denominationalism, while explainable in social terms, was still a tremendous challenge for African nationalism.

⁶¹ Pretorius and Jafta, “A Branch Springs Out”, 219.

⁶² On the political praxis of the ZCC at the Truth Commission hearings, see Robin Petersen, “The AICs and the TRC”, in *Facing the Truth: South African Faith Communities and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, ed. James Cochrane, John de Gruchy and Stephen Martin (Cape Town; Athens: David Philip; Ohio University Press, 1999), 114-25.

⁶³ This was due in large part to the comity arrangements which reserved certain geographical locations, and hence the tribal groups within their bounds, for particular missions and churches. While protecting different missions from competition amongst themselves, it actually exacerbated tribal differences by making them also “religious” differences. For accounts of missionary comity, see F. J. Briscoe, “Mission Co-Operation”, *Report of the Proceedings of the Second General Missionary Conference for South Africa* (Johannesburg: Argus, 1904), 39f.; “Resolutions Adopted by the Conference: Church Comity”, *Report of Second GMCSA*, 125f.

⁶⁴ “The black man makes the fatal mistake of thinking that if he is an Anglican, he has nothing to do with anything suggested by a Wesleyan, and the Wesleyan also thinks so, and so does the Presbyterian.” Sol Mvumbe, quoted in Cobby, “African National Church”, 357. The quote goes on to observe that this is contrary to the whites, who are able to present a united national front across different church denominations.

⁶⁵ “Discussion on ‘European and Native Churches’”, *Report of the Proceedings of the Third General Missionary Conference for South Africa* (Cape Town: Townsend, Taylor and Snashall, 1909), 91.

⁶⁶ “African Nationalism in South Africa, 1910-1964”, in Monica Wilson, and Leonard Thompson, eds. *The Oxford History of South Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 2: 436ff.

To take one example: both African nationalists and African liberals supported the establishment of Fort Hare College, an important plank in African mobilisation. But when a site was initially suggested across the river from Lovedale, “the SANC feared that [it] would be a white-controlled, Presbyterian college.”⁶⁷ When the College was established, it was named a “Christian College”, though it had “denominational” hostels. As Higgs says, somewhat ironically, “[I]t was this careful attention to sectarian interests that allowed the College’s promoters to portray the South African Native College as a nonsectarian institution.”⁶⁸

Denominational diversity within African Christianity was of thus of great concern to African National Congress leaders. In its Charter of 1919, the ANC recognised the problem of denominationalism in opposing it in one of its articles.⁶⁹ The importance of unified African Christianity was always present in ANC discourse. But this was underscored during the 1930s, when faced with a growing communist influence among African workers the ANC was looking for a way to structure African unity on a national basis. Here was an African version of the “soul in society” idea governing white church relations. In 1931, Pixley ka Seme set up talks about unifying the larger independent churches into a single church. This would suspend even historical theological and polity differences, including the question of baptism. ANC President Rev. James Calata, who saw it as divisive, mooted the plan.

Doubtless his reaction had to do with the fact that the plan involved only the African Initiated Churches, and would have marginalised Africans in the English-speaking denominations including Calata’s own CPSA. But Calata was not opposed to the idea of an African church in full communion with the CPSA!⁷⁰ Indeed, this was what James Mata Dwane seems to have had in mind when he formed the Order of Ethiopia: the creation of a national church through a merging of African Christianity and the church catholic.⁷¹ However, the CPSA opposed Calata’s idea as being politically motivated and ecclesiologically dubious, bringing “the colour bar” into the church. Nevertheless, Calata’s idea did awaken the hierarchy to the frustrations felt by African members, who had yet to see a Bishop of colour in their ranks.⁷²

⁶⁷ Higgs, *The Ghost of Equality*, 33-4.

⁶⁸ Higgs, *The Ghost of Equality*, 34.

⁶⁹ de Gruchy, *Christianity and the Modernisation of South Africa*, ch. 3.

⁷⁰ Cobley, “African National Church”, 366.

⁷¹ Cobley, “African National Church”, 360. Hence we may understand the importance of the Apostolicity of the CPSA for Dwane.

⁷² Cobley, “African National Church”, 368.

The idea of a single African church “around which the shattered social structures of the African community could be rebuilt” was revived again in 1939. It also came to naught.⁷³

But denominational boundaries continued to provide important markers for African identity—even within African nationalists. Thus African Presbyterians in the eastern Cape could be found in one of three different kinds of churches: the white-controlled Presbyterian Church of South(ern) Africa, the former mission church (the Bantu, later Reformed Presbyterian Church) and the so-called “Ethiopian” Presbyterian Church of Africa. Doctrinal and polity differences were and are negligible. And yet the historical differences in origin created distinct identities which continue to the present. Relations between the three strands⁷⁴ were not always cordial and it is arguable that relations between the white-controlled, Pan-South African Presbyterian Church of South Africa and the other English-speaking churches were better than those with other Presbyterian churches, particularly the black-controlled and more local Bantu and Tsonga churches.⁷⁵

African nationalism and African Christianity were positioned between the ideals of a single national church—the Christendom ideal—and denominationalism. Both movements were in tension with each other and with state authorities. Each could represent an assertion of identity more complex than simply the adherence to a tradition. Each was a response within a situation of marginality. African Christianity, no less than the others examined in chapters one and two, was a site for the mobilisation of loyalties.

⁷³ Walshe, *Rise of African Nationalism*, 252-4. While we are moving beyond our limits, it is perhaps worth noting that a third attempt to form a single African church was made by D. D. T. Jabavu in 1942. His idea was inspired by the example of Black Christianity in the U.S.: one church as centre of a cluster of black institutions. Higgs, *Ghost of Equality*, 74; D. D. T. Jabavu, *An African Independent Church: A Plea for Its Establishment*, pamphlet (Lovedale, 1942). Jabavu's initiative included the Order of Ethiopia, the Bantu Presbyterian and the Bantu Baptist Churches, but excluded the Ethiopian churches, something “symptomatic of his political conservatism.” Copley, “African National Church”, 365.

⁷⁴ We could perhaps speak of a fourth strand of Presbyterianism: that of Presbyterian ministers ministering to and eventually joining Dutch Reformed congregations, including George Thom (the first Presbyterian minister in Cape Town) and the well-known devotional writer and evangelist Andrew Murray.

⁷⁵ Presbyterianism is a microcosm of South African society, or a window into the contestation of South African Christianities and nationalisms. A more detailed study would have to develop the reasons why Presbyterianism unravelled into three separate strands while the Anglican church (at least after the Colenso affair) held itself together and even attracted former separatists such as James Mata Dwane.

The different strands in a tradition like Presbyterianism—mission, settler and independent—and the different nationalisms present demonstrates how a tradition can be a contested site, itself a particular crossing of nationalisms and Christianities. Moreover it demonstrates a particular way Christianity is contextualised in South Africa—its strandedness and entanglement with the forces latent in this “place”. However, more than a passive receptor, it was also formative and involved. As Christianity became “stranded”, it began to realise that it could no longer identify with Europe. This was true in the case of all the Christianities examined in this first part. The process was slow to take root in English-speaking and Afrikaans churches, and indeed in the case of the latter it is a matter of some debate as to whether the process was even put exactly in this way. Afrikaner Christianity became indigenised in its identification with a particular people both European and non-European, for whom Africa was home.

The South Africanising of Christianity in the English-speaking churches is now, in the New South Africa, giving way to debates about “Africanisation”,⁷⁶ even while Alan Paton’s dream of a single South African nationalism is under negotiation. Christian identity is as much part of the problem as part of the solution. This much is clear from our first three chapters.

⁷⁶ See for example, Luke Lungile Pato, “Anglicanism and Africanisation: The Legacy of Robert Gray”, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 101 (July 1998), 49-57, and the response by Malinge Njeza in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 102 (November 1998), 41-43. The exclusive nature of this debate (i.e. that there is one centre and it must either be Afro- or Euro- hyphenated) can be restrictive and reflects latent “soul in society” ideas. See chapter nine below for a meditation on “centredness”.

Reflection and Transition

Three nationalisms took shape in the aftermath of the South African War: colonial, Afrikaner and African. These three nationalisms arose in the context of a renegotiation of loyalties in an attempt at nation building in 1910. Parallel to these three nationalisms were three Christianities: English-speaking, Afrikaner and African.

In colonial Christianity, churches that, at the time of Union and in the decades immediately following, reflected the demographics and power relations in the larger society: with a growing majority of African members but with power entrenched in the hands of whites. The harmonious functioning of these churches was thought to provide a basis for spiritual unity not present in the socially engineered colonial nationalism.

While the English-speaking churches replicated the denominational identities of their European parent churches, Afrikaner Christianity imported a new kind of institution to South Africa called a *volkskerk* which, far from providing a basis for unity created by constitutional means, reflected a more primordial unity based on blood ties and ethnicity. While colonial churches occupied a certain space and treated each other as relative equals, paralleling to some extent American denominations, Afrikaner Christianity, at least we should say “pan-Afrikaner Christianity”, was centred in one institution: the DRC.¹ This would remain until Afrikanerdom began to fragment in the 1970s and 1980s, when the political division (of the breakaway Conservative Party) was mirrored by the breakaway Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk.²

In African Christianity, there was not one model (such as the “denomination” or the “*volkskerk*”) predominating, but several: including the mission church, the “Ethiopian” church and the Zionist or Zion City church. Each of these was ecclesiologically different, but hearkened back (at least in the case of the first two) to a

¹ Although it must be said that the pentecostalist Apostolic Faith Mission church and its less political breakaway Pinkster Protestantse Kerk also featured a strong Afrikaner nationalist component.

² The APK broke away following the publication of the DRC's *Church and Society* document in 1986. On the fragmentation of Afrikanerdom, see Jaap Durand, “Afrikaner Piety and Dissent”, in *Resistance and Hope*, ed. Charles Villa-Vicencio and John W. de Gruchy (Cape Town; Grand Rapids: David Philip; Eerdmans, 1985), 39-51. It is perhaps not coincidental that by this time, the apartheid state had taken onto itself the mantle of being the defender of “Christian civilisation” in Africa. Thus the unity of the DRC became less identifiable with the unity of the *volk* and thus less crucial to the buttressing of apartheid.

heritage of liberalism and missionary Christianity. It is difficult to typify where these churches stood in relation to the state, since Africans were stripped of political power, until the advent of the so-called “homelands”, and even then this was a power under the directives of the apartheid regime. There, something like state churches would be present, as the United Methodist Church in the former Transkei which counterpoised itself to the English-speaking, though overwhelmingly African, Methodist Church of Southern Africa, with ties beyond the geographical boundaries of the pseudo-state. While it takes us well beyond our period of interest, the United Methodist Church points to two other broad trends in African Christianity: the first, a return to tribally- or regionally-based churches, sometimes masked as “denominations”; the second, to a desire to create a single, non-denominational African church which would function to African nationalism the same way the English-speaking churches did to South African nationalism. This was the vision of African nationalists like Pixley ka Seme and African liberals like D. D. T. Jabavu and harkens back to the vision of some of the missionaries. Paradoxically other leaders such as James Calata rejected this idea in part because it would only exacerbate denominationalism. It is a vision not spoken of in the present day. Perhaps this is because the struggle to Africanise Christianity “across the board” is now the site of struggle, just as the political struggle is to Africanise (or *South* Africanise) the broader society.

These Christianities are, therefore, more than simple parallels to the nationalisms. They are deeply connected. Each saw itself as representing the soul of a nation, its unifying focus. This “soul” had different ways of embodying itself institutionally. Sometimes the body was the nation, at other times it was the institutional church as a privileged part of the nation, alongside other institutions. In each case, the “spiritual” unity of the nation or people and the spiritual unity of the church were implicated in each other. To challenge one was to challenge the other. Conversely, as the later Eloff Commission shows, if one was a site of struggle, so was the other.

There were other Christianities on the margins, as well as other religions during the period of the emergence of South African, Afrikaner and African nationalisms, notably Catholicism, Islam and Judaism. For reasons of space these have not been dealt with in the chapters above. However the contestation of loyalties formed the dynamics within which they also emerged and were sustained. Each was suspected by the state because it represented a sacred centre outside the geographical bounds of South Africa and the symbolic world of the British Empire. The antipathy of the state

was similar to that shown forms of African nationalism that represented a pan-African vision, and especially ties with African-Americans in the United States. A brief reflection on them is in order.

Islam existed at the boundaries of Europe, with Reformation discourse making reference to the menace of "the Turk". Its original adherents were brought to the Cape by the Dutch East India Company from the Indonesian archipelago as slaves or political prisoners. Later immigrations from India, consisting of merchants and traders, brought a different class dynamic to South African Islam. Though themselves displaying regional, ethnic and class differences, the loyalties of Muslims have been suspect in the mind of the South African state insofar as they all have looked to a different sacred centre (Mecca) and negotiated loyalties in terms of a solidarity transcending the bounds of the state and the Empire.³ For their part, not living in an Islamic state meant living in "a house of war", although Islamic leaders recommended acceptance of this condition and even entered strategic alliances with state and nationalist forces.⁴

While it was attractive to free blacks much earlier, Islam made inroads beyond the Malay and Coloured communities of the Cape toward the end of the nineteenth century, becoming a live option for Africans disenchanted with Christianity and a concern for missionaries.⁵ In this way it differed from Judaism, which remained entrenched in the white community—although many of its adherents were from poorer parts of Europe and non-English-speaking Jews would be subject to more discrimi-

³ In the eighteenth century, Islam was illegal and its practices punishable by death. The Maetsuycker Edict tolerated Islam at a private but not a public level. See A. Rashid Omar, "An Islamic Experience of Religious Freedom in the South African Context", in J. Killian ed., *Religious Freedom in South Africa* (Pretoria: UNISA, 1994), 74-5.

⁴ Chidester, *Religions of South Africa*, 166. In the early twentieth century, Islam had been able to form alliances, such as the Cape Malay Association (CMA). Some of its leaders responded positively to the call of Hertzog for non-white support of the National Party in the Cape. The organisation also "strongly supported", D. F. Malan, who promised Malays "'an enhanced status' similar to that of the 'coloureds', a pledge on which the Nationalists reneged when they took power in 1948." Moosa, "Islam in South Africa", 142.

⁵ The African nationalist leader James Thaele claimed that white intransigence was leading many Africans to turn to Islam. "Christianity, Basis of Native Policy?", *The Workers' Herald*, 21 December 1923, quoted in Thomas Karis and Gwendolyn Carter, *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882-1964* (Stanford: University of California Press, 1972), 214f. The Sixth General Missionary Conference in 1925 devoted much attention to the way African interest in Islam was representing a hindrance to evangelisation. See the articles of Samuel M. Zwemmer in *The Evangelisation of South Africa: The Report of the Sixth General Missionary Conference of South Africa*, Johannesburg, 30 June to 3 July, 1925 (Cape Town: Nasionale Pers, 1925).

natory legislation than any other “white” group.⁶ Judaism, like Islam, also looked to another centre and another solidarity outside the state and the Empire. Though certainly not all South African Jews were Zionists, “Jewry” in its diverse origins represented a community which could not readily be confined within acceptable boundaries.⁷ Even with the “upliftment” of its poorer members, it remained a community within a (white) community.

Roman Catholicism encountered resistance from the Protestant Dutch and British authorities from the outset. While in ethos and in the broad political loyalties of its members it resembled the English-speaking churches, its loyalty to Rome made its final allegiances suspect, including during the period of the formation of nationalisms. *Roomse gevaar* (Roman danger) followed close behind *swart gevaar* (black danger) and *rooi gevaar* (communist danger) in the mind of the state.⁸ The establishment of the Apostolic Delegation to South Africa in 1922, the first step toward bringing South African Catholicism under the direct control of the papacy, brought anti-Catholic sentiment to a head.⁹ This reflected long-standing suspicions of Catholics in Europe, and especially England that had little (though not nothing) to do with doctrine. “[Catholics’] opinions of *Purgatory* or *Transubstantiation* would never cause their *Allegiance* to be suspected”, wrote the Earl of Caledon in 1685, “if those opinions were not instances of their dependence on another Jurisdiction foreign, and inconsistent with their duty to the *King*, and destruction to the *peace* of the *Kingdom*”.¹⁰ The Earl concluded that these opinions could ignite “a deadly passion”, “a fire strong enough to consume the house”.¹¹ Perhaps it is for this reason that Afrikaner nationalists in

⁶ See Milton Shain, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in South Africa* (University Press of Virginia, 1994). For a concise history and topography of Judaism in South Africa, see Jocelyn Hellig, “The Jewish Community in South Africa”, in Prozesky and de Gruchy, *Living faiths*, 155-176.

⁷ Addressing the launch of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies in 1903, Lord Milner said that the “prize” of British citizenship was open to “acceptable” Jews from Western Europe, but not from Eastern Europe, at least as long as the latter continued in “the lifestyles associated with Russia, Poland or Lithuania”. That “lifestyle” included Jewish nationalist sympathies and affiliations with the labour movements. Chidester, *Religions of South Africa*, 177-8. Like the mobilisation of Afrikaner nationalists in uplifting poor whites, Jewish community formation aimed at integrating this poorer community into the whole. This adds some complexity—and an important class dimension—to our account of the boundaries of Empire. We are, however, unable to develop it further.

⁸ Roman Catholic Church, Submission to the TRC. Available at <http://www.ricsa.org.za/trc>.

⁹ See the editorials under the heading “Het Roomse Gevaar”, *De Kerkbode* 9 May 1923, 23 May 1923 and 28 November, 1923. Also John W. de Gruchy, “Catholics in a Calvinist Country”, in *Catholics in an Apartheid Society*, ed. Andrew Prior (Cape Town: David Philip 1982), 74f.

¹⁰ Quoted in William T. Cavanaugh, “A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House: The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State”, *Modern Theology* 11:4 (October 1995), 407-8.

¹¹ Cavanaugh, “A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House”, 407.

the 1930s saw Catholicism as posing “a greater danger than fascism or dictatorship”.¹² As with Jews and Muslims, dependence on “another jurisdiction foreign” challenged the centre within South African political and ecclesial space.

The inclusion of Catholicism, Judaism and Islam at the 1997 TRC faith hearings demonstrates a new, polycentric way of negotiating faith in South Africa. While the idea of a Christian basis for the nation is still present in some people—across the colour and class spectrum—it no longer represents a dominant discourse, merged with that of the state. Likewise the Christendom idea of a single church as centre or “soul” of society has virtually disappeared.

Nevertheless, the three nationalisms and three Christianities considered in these first three chapters suggest something of the complexity and texture of Christian faith in South Africa. They have provided sufficient material to weave H. Richard Niebuhr into, and raise further issues concerning the nature and contestation of loyalties in South Africa, both past and present.

¹² Chidester, *Religions of South Africa*, 158. Chidester also points out that Catholic Schools would become a direct rival to Christian national education in the 1950s, and an object of strict repression.

Part Two:

Reading H. Richard
Niebuhr

Culture Protestantism

Putting Niebuhr in Context

Having raised the nature of the nationalisms and Christianities that have contested South Africa, it is now time to turn to H. Richard Niebuhr. The first of his works to be examined is *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, for it was there that he began to think about Christianity and its involvement in the making and unmaking of loyalties. This work needs however to be set in context, which is what this chapter will do. Setting *Social Sources* in context will provide the point of entry to the other chapters that follow.

There are three main theological strands in *Social Sources*: American liberal Protestantism and the Social Gospel, the German “culture protestantism” of Adolph von Harnack and the theological quest to balance the absolute and the relative of Ernst Troeltsch. The idea that lies behind them all is the idea of “culture Protestantism”. The idea of culture Protestantism, further, suggests a bridge between the American context of Niebuhr’s day and the South African context as represented in the first three chapters.

Culture-protestantism in America

We will portray the American culture-protestantism of Niebuhr’s day under three headings: liberal Christianity, Social Gospel vision, and the rise of realism.

Liberal Christianity

American liberalism in the nineteenth century, claims Sidney E. Ahlstrom, was not a “vague tendency” or “state of mind” but rather a “structured movement” with “a fairly definite doctrinal content.”¹ This content included, he goes on, a general optimism about human nature, an idea that sin is ignorance and education is redemptive, the centrality of ethics, an anti-institutionalism (especially a view that doctrinal de-

¹ Sidney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 779.

bates and the denominationalism that followed are anti-progressive), a preference for Jesus over Paul, and a subordination of the authority of the Bible to norms derived from outside of it. In relation to these basic ideas, “orthodox” dogma was reinterpreted.

Liberalism has, however, also been understood as a worldview cohering around the philosophical orientations of evolutionary monism and idealism.² Both of these orientations were derived in large part from the legacy of nineteenth century romanticism and neo-Hegelianism. But as H. Berkhof among others has noted, Americans transform everything they receive from Old World traditions—especially along pragmatic lines.³ While we would eschew the essentialism of speaking of a collective “American mind”, Berkhof’s further comment is worth keeping in mind for this whole study:

The American mind has little time or inclination for theoretical problems and reflections. The question of ‘truth’ which is so important in Europe has to take a back seat to a concern for ‘efficiency’ in the United States. The typical focus is not on tradition, nor is it directed, speculatively or meditatively, toward what is ‘above,’ but toward plans for the future; its concern is with progress and renewal.⁴

Evading pure speculation, “the American evasion of philosophy” readily converts philosophy into social dogma.⁵ In their monism and idealism, liberals reinterpreted Christianity in terms of the kind of society they wanted to create. These transformations lay behind liberal Christianity’s understanding not only of particular doctrines, but also of the very nature of doctrine. As much as the liberal worldview was expressed doctrinally—in dogmas about human nature, ethics and sin—it was also incarnate culturally, historically⁶ and socially.

² Gary Dorrien also interprets what he calls “social Christianity” (embracing liberal and Social Gospel traditions) in terms of evolutionary monism and idealism. *Soul in Society: The Making and Renewal of Social Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 21-90.

³ Hendrikus Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years of Theology: Report of a Personal Journey*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 256.

⁴ Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years of Theology*, 257.

⁵ See Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

⁶ That is, in an interpretation of history—an interpretation that Niebuhr tried to counter in *The Kingdom of God in America*. See chapter six below. On liberal protestantism (particularly in European sociology, but not without applicability here) as metanarrative, see John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell 1990), 92-98.

Three cautions must be heeded as we approach this section. First, care must be exercised in identifying movements such as evolutionary monism and idealism with underlying worldview. As Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton argue, worldviews are always pre-philosophical.⁷ They provide a basic orientation in the world, interpreting and shaping experience in terms of a fundamental story or myth. Monism and idealism are philosophical articulations of the dominant cultural worldview in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But worldviews are also articulated or enacted in remaking the world according their particular way of seeing.⁸ Similarly, in understanding liberal Christianity, we must not isolate its doctrinal content (in terms of Christian symbols and dogma) from the worldview it both supported and which gave it legitimacy. Both elements—dogma and worldview—fed into the ethos of American culture-protestantism in late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Finally, we must not pretend any kind of exhaustiveness. This is not a thesis on American culture-protestantism and we are interested only in providing a “text” to counterpoise to Niebuhr’s.

Progress and national mission

In our discussion of colonial, African and Afrikaner nationalisms, one commonality concerned the place of narrative and mission and their relation to the construction of national identity. Each saw itself as in some way blessed of God and called to remake society in terms of its vision of the world. American nationalism has also always taken mission as point of departure. While the early Puritans spoke of “a city set on a hill”, by the twentieth century that city had become seen as the cutting edge of historical processes, and a call to spread a modern gospel abroad.

The early twentieth century liberals placed their culture in a grand narrative which held that reality is on the move, and heading somewhere which was better.⁹ America had a special part to play in the unfolding of history. America had a mission to witness to its form of democracy to the rest of the world.¹⁰ American ideas of vocation climaxed at the turn of the twentieth century as the waters of Manifest Des-

⁷ *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World-View* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), esp. chs. 2 and 11.

⁸ On the is-ought character of worldviews, see Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 126-7.

⁹ On these themes, see also Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 183-4 and chapter seven below.

Note: The old worldviews have changed - a new narrative was replaced.

tiny—American sovereignty in the hemisphere—were being tested.¹¹ Church and culture were united in a sense of mission. Their interests were one.

In the war against Spain in Central America, as Ahlstrom points out, “the churches reflected the American consensus.”¹² But the Christianity of that time was not simply a mirror passively imaging a consensus. It proactively promoted and re-imagined Americanism, converting “the war into a crusade” and “rationaliz[ing] imperialism as a missionary obligation.” “Never have patriotism, imperialism, and the religion of American Protestants stood in such fervent coalescence as during the McKinley-Roosevelt era”, Ahlstrom concludes.¹³ Later, during the First World War, it was the liberal Shailer Mathews who argued for the “substantial identity” of religion and patriotism: “Only where the spirit of democracy is working is there creative religious thinking. Only there is the union of patriotism and the religion of tomorrow.”¹⁴ Nationalism even drove a wedge between the German-born Social Gospel pioneer, Walter Rauschenbusch and the cultural-liberal consensus over the question of U.S. involvement in the War.¹⁵

In the First World War we see the processes of American imperialism crystallising, but also making complex the question of the immigrant communities, particularly the German community. For while the Baptist Walter Rauschenbusch was engaged in trying to theologially transcend both sides of the war, other German-Americans like Reinhold Niebuhr declared themselves forthrightly for the allied cause. This was all the more controversial a posture in the light of the German loyal-

¹⁰ See James H. Moorhead, “The American Israel: Protestant Tribalism and Universal Mission”, in *Mary Are Chosen: Divine Election and Western Nationalism*, ed. William R. Hutchison and Hartmut Lehmann (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 145-66.

¹¹ Niebuhr, in *The Kingdom of God in America*, saw this as a perversion of “the coming kingdom”: “It was secularized by being detached from its context of faith in the sovereignty and the experience of grace. ... It was nationalized, being used to support the feeling of national superiority and of manifest destiny. It was confused with the progress of industrialism and capitalism.” *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 151.

¹² Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 879-80.

¹³ There is a large body of literature on American imperialism. See Moorhead, “The American Israel”, for an introduction.

¹⁴ Quoted in Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 891.

¹⁵ Rauschenbusch was a pacifist who saw the contending imperialisms in Europe and the social crisis in American cities as of a piece. The next step for the Social Gospel would therefore consist in its internationalisation. Social Christianity needed to address not only poverty and unemployment, but also “nationalism, militarism, imperialism, and global interdependence.” Dorrien, *Soul in Society*, 53. Needless to say, this message did not fit well with the wartime climate in the US.

ties asserted in his German-speaking *Deutschen Evangelischen Synode von Nord-Amerika*, or Evangelical Synod.¹⁶

The Synod was a site demonstrating the contested loyalties of German-born immigrants and second generation German-Americans. While there was little in the way of out and out support of the German cause, many older members of the church were cautiously neutral, or at least concerned to counter distortions in the popular media.¹⁷ There were also overly enthusiastic declarations of loyalty to the allied cause, in tension with the liberal idea of America's moral superiority and the need to assert it on a world stage.¹⁸ But the Synod could not resist the drawing power of the cultural liberal consensus and eventually merged into the denominational melting pot.¹⁹ While it was 1927 before the name "German" was dropped from the Synod's official title, by early 1918 it was dropped from the official newspaper of the denomination.

The environment of patriotism and the jingoism that usually accompanies wartime²⁰ accelerated the process of assimilation and placed an "either-or" before Christians in the culturally marginal churches, such as the German Evangelical Synod. The divided loyalties of the older, German-born members by a new, American-born generation. The "American Christianity" of which H. Richard Niebuhr would write about in *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* made the coalescence of religion and ethnic identity merely a transitional stage in the translation of immigrant communities.²¹ It was inevitable that new loyalties would gain ascendancy.²²

Part of the social significance of liberalism, then, was in this centrifugal coalescence of patriotism, imperialism and Protestant religion that drew all sectors of society together. Whether morally or culturally based, it created a consensus that shaped religious institutions to it, and asserted a loyalty that provided a litmus test for all

¹⁶ Though it is important to recognise that Rauschenbusch's theological basis for neutrality, rooted as it was in a Social Gospel critique of idolatry, was different from those members of the Evangelical Synod that would have stood for neutrality out of a socially-shaped fear of assertion. One might say that the latter were paralysed by their hyphens. On the Synod and the First World War, see William Chrystal, "Reinhold Niebuhr and the First World War", in *Protestantism and Social Christianity*, ed. Martin E. Marty, Modern American Protestantism and Its World, vol. 6 (Munich: K. G. Saur, 1992 [orig.1977]), 194-207. Indeed, according to Chrystal, German-speaking Americans were termed "hyphens". "Reinhold Niebuhr and the First World War", 196.

¹⁷ Chrystal, "Reinhold Niebuhr", 196.

¹⁸ According to Chrystal, Reinhold Niebuhr supported the allied forces in terms of a loyalty that transcended the imperial forces battling in the war.

¹⁹ See *Social Sources*, 220.

²⁰ For South African examples, see chapter one above.

²¹ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 222-3.

²² We will return to this in chapter five below.

other loyalties—particularly those of suspicious “others”. It is not for nothing that Niebuhr would use liberal theology to typify the “Christ of culture” stand.²³

Idealism and the immanent God

Kenneth Cauthen captures what is referred to in the term “idealism” when he notes that “The idea of dynamic, unitary world in which Spirit is gradually infusing nature with meaning and value is fundamental to the modern understanding of reality.”²⁴ Idealism placed more stress on the world-historical *idea* working itself out within Christianity, especially in moral terms, than on the historical (or historically debatable) events held by orthodox Christians as defining Christianity as unique over against contending religions or ideologies. This made liberals different from fundamentalists. Fundamentalists also insisted that the essence of Christianity was to be found in a set of unchanging ideas. However, they defined these ideas as classical doctrines rather than ethical precepts. While its monism eschewed strictly dividing the world into material and spiritual components, liberalism’s idealism viewed the material as an instrument for the expression of the spiritual. This also issued forth in a personalism, with “a world of persons with a Supreme Person at the head” and nature as “the flowing expression and means of communication of these personal beings.”²⁵

One idealist whose name will figure in our discussion of Niebuhr’s work below is Josiah Royce (1855-1916). Royce, who was invited to Harvard University by William James and ended his career teaching there, is one of the most important early twentieth century American philosophers. His form of idealism, called “Absolute idealism”, demonstrates the way Christianity was incorporated into philosophical thinking, but also the way philosophical thinking was mobilised to address cultural problems.

Absolute idealism differs from individual idealism in that it starts with the claim that humans are incapable of perceiving wholes. Rather, we experience only fragments. The question is, how do we apprehend the unity of the world, the whole

²³ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1951), 91-101. We should, however, not confine this “cultural” Christianity to liberal Christianity. Conservative Christianity was equally patriotic and also formed part of the consensus of which we speak. We limit this analysis here, however, because we are interested in setting H. Richard Niebuhr’s work in context, rather than presenting a cultural history of religion in the United States.

²⁴ Quoted in Libertus A. Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1970), 8.

²⁵ Borden P. Bowne, “Personalism”, in *Modern American Protestantism*, ed. William R. Hutchison (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1968 [orig.1908]), 87.

that is greater than individual experience? Royce posits a telescoping series of higher unities, each incorporating the previous series.²⁶ The highest unity is religious unity—not in the sense of an institution or denomination, or even of a particular faith, but in the sense of a “superhuman wider consciousness”.²⁷ For Royce, religion is “the interpretation both of the eternal and of the spirit of loyalty through emotion, and through a fitting activity of the imagination.”²⁸ Through religious symbols, he held, we are allowed to see the unity of the world.²⁹

Religious unity is characterised by the term “loyalty” and expressed in “brotherhoods”, where “each one is an example of the unity of the spirit.” The collective referent of all these loyalties is “loyalty to the cause of all causes”, the final, world-embracing “world will”.³⁰ Religious communities express this world will in human acts. The “visible church” is one such community, as mentioned already, but only one. It is part of an “invisible church” consisting of “all who have sought for salvation through loyalty”. “To the higher religious life of mankind the life of the visible church stands related as part to whole”.³¹

Is loyalty to *any* cause valid? How does one distinguish between good and bad causes? While Royce was aware of this problem,³² the specific norm he operated by was the honouring of other causes; i.e. the recognition that *your* cause was not *the* cause. Even here, latitude could be given as long as sincerity was present.³³ This reflects what seems to be almost a quintessentially American problematic: how to affirm smaller wholes that point to a bigger whole, while still honouring the integrity of the smaller wholes. At the same time, the bigger whole must not be reduced to a mere “collective”. A transcendent dimension must be affirmed.

²⁶ When Royce speaks of loyalties he also speaks of each level incorporating and transcending the loyalties of the previous levels.

²⁷ Josiah Royce, “The Unity of the Spirit and the Invisible Church”, in *Theology in America: The Major Protestant Voices from Liberalism to Neo-Orthodoxy*, ed. Sidney E. Ahlstrom (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968 [orig.1912]), 470.

²⁸ Josiah Royce, *The Philosophy of Loyalty* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995 [orig.1908]), 175.

²⁹ Royce, *The philosophy of loyalty*, 184.

³⁰ Royce, “The Unity of the Spirit”, 473-4.

³¹ Royce, “The Unity of the Spirit”, 478-9.

³² See Royce, *The philosophy of loyalty*, ch. 1.

³³ Royce, “The Unity of the Spirit”, 481. “Do you serve with all your heart, and soul, and mind, and strength, a cause that is superhuman and indeed divine? This is the question which all have to answer who are to enter this the most spiritual of all human brotherhoods.” Royce, “The Unity of the Spirit”, 487. See also his version of the Kantian categorical imperative: “So serve your cause that if possible through your service everybody whom you influence shall be rendered a more devoted servant of his own cause, and thereby the cause of all the causes—the unity of the loyal.” Royce, “The Unity of the Spirit”, 488.

For Royce, not only do the many point to the one, but also “the one demands the many”. The realm of the finite includes “endlessly various temperaments, capacities and sorts and conditions of men.” There is no true, visible unity and to profess this is sectarianism. Interestingly Royce does not speak in this context of *denominationalism*, since American (denominational) Christianity has always delighted in its diversity.³⁴

In Royce, the American problematic of “sovereignty and pluralism” which Hoedemaker says stands behind H. Richard Niebuhr’s theology is well expressed.³⁵ And yet there was ambivalence towards denominational “pluralism” when sovereignty was asserted, particularly on an international stage. This points to a more complex relation between institutional Christianity and national unity in America.

National and ecclesial unity

The unity of Christianity was considered vitally important for national unity, and the spectre of denominationalism and sectarianism in the church was therefore not simply a doctrinal problem, but a political one too. The unifying focus of liberal Christianity was tied to a vision of progress that saw the doctrinal divisions of the past as anachronisms the church needed to overcome. Even President Wilson, whom liberals saw as one of their own and not unlike Prime Minister Jan Smuts,³⁶ echoed this sentiment. Christianity and its unity was vitally important, he said in a 1915 address to the Federal Council of Churches, not because it was “a valid body of conceptions regarding God and man, but because it is a vital body of conceptions which can be translated into life for us.”³⁷ This, Dorrien goes on to explain, “was the triumphant voice of liberal Protestantism. What was crucial to Christianity was not valid doctrine, but vital living. Christian America had a mission not only to save the world for democracy, but to redeem the world with Christ’s spirit.”³⁸

But the unity of religion and culture went beyond simple patriotism. Despite liberal Christianity’s blatant support for US imperialism, it also had an important ecumenical-international undercurrent that occasionally bubbled to the surface. A concern for unity at home and the church’s role in fomenting it also reached out to a

³⁴ Royce, “The Unity of the Spirit”, 489.

³⁵ Hoedemaker, *The theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 1.

³⁶ See chapter one above.

³⁷ In Dorrien, *Soul in Society*, 54-55.

³⁸ Dorrien, *Soul in Society*, 55.

world unity and an ecumenical church. “Wilson’s campaign for an American role in the League of Nations was a quintessentially liberal protestant cause.”³⁹ This ought not to be surprising. After all, as much as the United States might have a key role to play in the spreading of its message, central to the liberal creed was human progress. Efforts were afoot in the mid-1920s to start an Interchurch World Movement, a religious counterpart to the League of Nations, with what William Adams Brown called “the vision of a united church uniting a divided world”.⁴⁰ Indeed the 1925 Stockholm Conference was termed by Niebuhr “a second Christian International”.⁴¹ Unfortunately, the post-war resurgence of denominationalism and a failure to get more conservative churches on board led to its collapse.

Social gospel vision

The personalism that issued from the idea of God as Supreme Person accounts for the strong emphasis on individuality in liberal Christianity as ethical norm.⁴² The value of the person was supreme, although there were differences as to how that value worked itself out in relation to the imperative to create meaningful social existence. Niebuhr always held these two tenets together, though his 1922 formulation captures the spirit of the times especially well: “The value of the individual is the value of personality.” The evils of the world can be summarised as “insofar as they violate the principle of the kingdom of God, they show themselves in rampant individualism; insofar as they are denials of the supreme value of the individual, they appear as the suppression of personality.”⁴³

In a helpful survey, Gary Dorrien envisions American Christian liberalism and the Social Gospel as two wings of “social Christianity”.⁴⁴ Yet his analysis is careful not to place them too closely together. While it was generally true that most advocates of the Social Gospel were liberals, not all liberals were advocates of the Social

³⁹ Dorrien, *Soul in Society*, 59.

⁴² Quoted in Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 897.

⁴¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Grace of Doing Nothing”, *The Christian Century*, 23 March 1932, 379.

⁴² See also the discussion of Troeltsch below.

⁴³ H. Richard Niebuhr, “Christianity and the Social Problem”, *Theological Magazine of the Evangelical Synod of North America* 50 (1922), 281. Niebuhr wrote this in a article which in part aimed to introduce his readers (of the *Magazin für Evangelicalische Theologie und Kirche*) to a more socially-aware Christianity. It captures the ideals of a Social Gospel in decline in the early twenties.

⁴⁴ Dorrien, *Soul in Society*. See also Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 100, 102ff., where both liberalism and the Social Gospel in terms of the “Christ of culture” type.

Gospel.⁴⁵ As they developed, especially as typified in the figures of Mathews and Rauschenbusch, liberalism took a more moralistic and middle-class character, claiming that as individuals changed so would society. Like South African liberal Christians such as Edgar Brookes and Alan Paton, it appealed not for the changing of structures, but the changing of minds. With changed minds would come a changed society.

The Social Gospel became more and more orientated to a Christianised socialism, with labour as its constituency. This led, in part, to the marginalisation of figures like Rauschenbusch from the religious mainstream.⁴⁶ In terms of Niebuhr's statement above, we might be tempted to say that liberalism more and more came to represent "rampant individualism" while the Social Gospel "the suppression of personality". Niebuhr himself would have wished to see the Social Gospel in more positive terms, as he himself put it, as nothing more than the Gospel of Jesus. And the suppression of individuality was not by "socialists", but by capital which denied the "fundamental law of life" which is that "the end of life is social".⁴⁷ Rauschenbusch also held to a kind of social evolutionism, although "the unregenerate portion of society"—the economy—seemed the exception. And, as we shall see, this "evolution" was by no means inevitable.

In the Social Gospel, we see yet another example of the pragmatic orientation of American Christianity. While arguably the foundations of the Social Gospel are evangelical, despite the "liberal evolutionist" label assigned to one of its pioneers, Washington Gladden,⁴⁸ Glenn C. Altschuler has put forth the idea that Rauschenbusch himself transcended the evangelical/liberal divide. Rauschenbusch did this, not by offering a new theological synthesis, but in a prior ethical commitment to social transformation to which theological content was subject. Indeed, as Altschuler notes, Rauschenbusch was notoriously inconsistent in his biblical hermeneutics. He could

⁴⁵ In this way the American social gospel is similar to and different from the analogous movement in South Africa. While the term "liberal" embraced a similar spectrum in both contexts, in South Africa there were other traditions also mobilising for social change, and mobilising different Christianities. Other such movements were not absent in America, though they existed on a much smaller scale.

⁴⁶ See Glenn C. Altschuler, "Walter Rauschenbusch: Theology, the Church, and the Social Gospel", in *Protestantism and Social Christianity*, ed. Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Protestantism and Its World*, vol. 6 (Munich: K. G. Saur, 1992 [orig. 1979]), 140.

⁴⁷ Niebuhr, "Christianity and the Social Problem", 281.

⁴⁸ "How evangelical Gladden's conception of the coming kingdom was, how much of his hope was based on the success of Christ's coming, appears in his address 'Where is the Kingdom of God?': 'This Kingdom that we find, here on the earth, steadily widening its borders and strengthening its dominion; growing as the dawn grows toward the perfect day that is not yet;...'" Nie-

take a conservative—even literalist—approach, or a radical, relativising approach depending on the passage under consideration.⁴⁹

Like his liberal contemporaries, Rauschenbusch claimed to be returning to the “original” gospel, which was also the “essential” gospel. He never held that he was preaching a new message, but “the oldest gospel of all” which the church had forgotten. The “substance” of the Social Gospel was “the Hebrew faith which Jesus himself held.”⁵⁰ Like the liberals of his day he made a sharp distinction between the dogmas (the faith of Christendom) and the practice of Christianity: “What would Jesus have said to the symbol of Chalcedon or the Athanasian Creed if they had been read to him?”⁵¹ His view of sin expressed that characteristic of what Niebuhr would later call the churches of the dispossessed: a concern with structural evil rather than the personal failure of middle-class religion.⁵² Likewise redemption is seen in social rather than personal and individual terms.

The key idea for the Social Gospel as proclaimed by Rauschenbusch is undoubtedly the Kingdom of God. For Rauschenbusch “the essence of Christianity was not a theory of atonement or even the ‘Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man’ (Harnack). It was the spiritual reality of the kingdom taught by Christ and inaugurated by his resurrection.”⁵³ Indeed it was the discovery of this idea that revolutionised his understanding of Christianity and its social relevance. But the kingdom of God was also related to the process of evolution: “Translate the evolutionary theories into religious faith,” he told the YMCA in 1913, “and you have the doctrine of the kingdom of God.”⁵⁴ The progress of the kingdom of God as human progress was not

buhr continues, “That Rauschenbusch was also largely dependent upon the evangelical tradition is becoming increasingly evident.” *The Kingdom of God in America*, 161-2.

⁴⁹ Altschuler, “Walter Rauschenbusch”, 138. At the same time, Rauschenbusch did not devalue doctrine. “The Social Gospel needs a theology to make it effective; but theology needs the Social Gospel to vitalize it.” Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 1. Again, though, note the prominent place of “effectiveness” as justification.

⁵⁰ Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 24.

⁵¹ Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 25.

⁵² See Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 86-6. For the churches of the middle-class, social righteousness is “the righteousness of a society of discreet selves” rather than “the construction of a divine kingdom”. It is however interesting that Rauschenbusch—himself not a member of the working class though in solidarity with it—should develop such an idea.

⁵³ Dorrien, *Soul in Society*, 27.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years of Theology*, 263. As Hutchison points out, this is a notable feature of American social Christianity: that it marshals all resources, even science, to buttress its program. Science confirms theological assertions of God’s presence in social activity. For English social Christianity, science is a threat which must be accounted for apologetically. “The Americanness of the Social Gospel: An Enquiry in Comparative History” [orig.1979], in *Protestantism and Social Christianity*, ed. Marty, 104f.

thereby made inevitable.⁵⁵ People had to work in order to bring the kingdom to realization in every era and institution. In his own time, this meant not only recovering the teaching of Jesus on the kingdom, but also to work with the Social Movement, “infusing the power of religion with social efforts”.⁵⁶ The shorthand term he used for this was “Christianizing the social order”.

This gave Rauschenbusch’s theology an outward orientation. Perhaps not surprisingly Rauschenbusch’s view of the church was subordinate to that of the Kingdom: “The church grows old; the Kingdom is ever young. The Church is a perpetuation of the past; the Kingdom is the power of the coming age. Unless the Church is vitalized by the ever nascent forces of the Kingdom within her, she deadens instead of begetting.”⁵⁷ But what does “Christianizing the social order” mean? “To Christianize was to promote a politics of common morality,” the language “Christianize” was better for pragmatic reasons: it connected better with people. “Christian moral language was not only more powerful and compelling than its secularized alternatives; in the West, it was also the source of those alternatives.”⁵⁸

The Social Gospel provides a good example of culture-Protestantism—albeit perhaps paradoxically—in a prophetic mode.⁵⁹ Certainly this is so for Niebuhr in his later understanding.⁶⁰ That Rauschenbusch’s theology does not qualify for “Christ transforms culture” status (and F. D. Maurice’s does) is probably due in Niebuhr’s estimation to the mutual influence of the “Christ” (or Christianity) and “culture” poles on each other.⁶¹ In his doctoral dissertation *The Background of the Social Gospel in America*, W. A. Visser’t Hooft noted that “The social gospel... is more than an application of Christian principles to society; it is also an application of social principles to Christianity; or to put it shortly, it is a form of interpenetration of religious and social

⁵⁵ “History laughs at the optimistic illusion that ‘nothing can stand in the way of human progress.’” Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, extracted in Winthrop S. Hudson, ed., *Walter Rauschenbusch: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist, 1984 [orig.1907]), 145. This “optimistic illusion” was held by liberal Christians.

⁵⁶ Dorrien, *Soul in Society*, 30.

⁵⁷ Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 129-30.

⁵⁸ Dorrien, *Soul in Society*, 42. cf. Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 269.

⁵⁹ The paradox is in the representation of something close to a “civil religion”, which images and structures a broad consensus, as “prophetic”. The classic essay on the topic is Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America”, in *Beyond Belief* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

⁶⁰ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 100, 112.

⁶¹ In other words, as much as Christ transforms culture, so does culture transform Christ.

thought.”⁶² Rauschenbusch’s call for co-operation with progressive forces and working within the labour movement exemplifies this in practice.⁶³

The Social Gospel could not survive the deaths of Rauschenbusch and Glad-den in 1918. Perhaps this was due to the fact that their charismatic leadership was too important. Or perhaps the world was simply a different place at the close of The Great War. Certainly the identity of the Social Gospel was becoming contested. Rauschenbusch, who held that the War and the social crisis stemmed from the same roots in his view and neither would be eradicated by violence, was strongly opposed to intervention. However, others heralded America’s entry as a “triumph for social gospel idealism”.⁶⁴ Nevertheless the legacy of the Social Gospel survived well into the twenties and thirties.⁶⁵ This was a legacy that *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* drew upon, and that Niebuhr’s further work would criticise strongly.

The crisis of liberalism and the rise of realism

The post war ferment also brought new challenges to liberal Christianity. No longer could it assume the high moral ground and expect that ground to be uncontested. And the victory of Prohibition only exacerbated a general weariness of moral crusades. In Dorrien’s words,

Prewar liberal Christianity was a world-embracing missionary faith.... Liberal Protestantism after the war became less self-confident.... It preached to a society that increasingly rejected its world-changing idealism and resented its moralism.... In response, liberal church leaders.... sought less to transform society than to defend their faith; they became more concerned with Christianizing modernity than with Christianizing the social order.⁶⁶

⁶² Quoted in Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years of Theology*, 260-1.

⁶³ Interestingly enough in 1921 Niebuhr himself, while recognizing the “religious” element in labour’s struggle and the need for the church to find common ground with it, never went as far as to say that the church should cooperate with its demonstrations. The church represented rather a third way which represented the ideals of the labour movement while eschewing its coercive practices. See “The Alliance Between Labor and Religion”, *Theological Magazine of the Evangelical Synod of North America* 49 (1921), 203.

⁶⁴ Dorrien, *Soul in Society*, 52-53.

⁶⁵ Its death was finally heralded by Niebuhr in “The Kingdom of God in the Social Gospel and in Barthianism”, where he calls Barth “the legitimate heir of the Social Gospel.” cf. *Social Sources*, 275-6.

⁶⁶ Dorrien, *Soul in Society*, 59.

It was in this climate that a new movement arose within liberal Christianity, apologetically focussed. It was called “empirical theology” and pioneered by Douglas Clyde Macintosh of Yale—H. Richard Niebuhr’s doctoral thesis supervisor.

In contradiction to the earlier liberalism’s idealism, which for him made God too readily “little more than the ultimate sanction of a particular way of life”,⁶⁷ Macintosh turned his attention to the “real” as the referent of religious experience. Macintosh held God to be a proper object of theological study, rather than simply a postulate of religious experience (or a psychological necessity).⁶⁸ Indeed the reality of the latter is the presupposition of the former. In his 1931 work, *The Pilgrimage of Faith in the World of Modern Thought*, Macintosh could write boldly:

As a result of acting intelligently on the hypothesis of the existence of a God great enough and good enough to justify our absolute self-surrender and confident, appropriating faith, there comes a religious experience of spiritual uplift and emancipation in which, as a complex of many psychological elements, there can be intuited empirically, or perceived, the operation of a Factor which we evaluate and interpret as divine, because of its absolute religious and spiritual value. It is here then, and not in traditional creeds or sacred books as such, that we find revelation.⁶⁹

Macintosh developed a model that took both the reality of God and human experience seriously. While he would come to differ strongly with his teacher, especially with Macintosh’s “co-joining of divine power and human interest”,⁷⁰ Niebuhr’s theology strove to honour this orientation of his teacher. Henry Nelson Wieman, who lectured at the University of Chicago and was a student of Alfred North Whitehead, was less subtle in his critique of liberal idealism. His argument is not unreminiscent of Albert Schweitzer’s assessment of the Quest for the Historical Jesus:

The popular way of depicting God runs something like this: We couldn’t believe in a God who wasn’t this and that. Then we proceed to portray God as an ideal being—ideal in the sense that he satisfied most completely the cherished dreams of the speaker. Manifestly this is mere myth-making. The actual

⁶⁷ Lonnie D. Kliever, *H. Richard Niebuhr* (Waco: Word Books, 1977), 31.

⁶⁸ Something well illustrated in the title of Niebuhr’s 1927 article, “Theology and Psychology: A Sterile Union”, *Christian Century* 44 (1927), 47-8.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 906. Niebuhr would later place his former teacher along with Ritschl, Harnack and Rauschenbusch in the culture-protestant camp, exemplifying “the Christ of culture” type. *Christ and Culture*, 101.

God is a fact like a stone wall or a toothache.... The chances are that God in fact is very far from pleasing.⁷¹

For Wieman, God is a fact that humans must adjust to. And religion is the name for that “adjustment”.⁷² This did not mean that “religious realism” as it was called abandoned the sphere of social analysis.⁷³ For Wieman, this Factor (or “fact”) is also “the divine source, the creative good” which is set over against “the false order of domination”.⁷⁴ It was therefore the basis for social analysis with reference to theology that changed, not the imperative.

It is interesting to look briefly back to South Africa. Richard Elphick points out that South African liberalism never experienced the chastening of religious realism as happened in the US. Its analysis of social problems remained naively idealistic, based on concepts of “reasonableness” and co-operation. Behind economic and other social forces stood “a world of moral values”, and it was on this that their critique of government policy was based. Long after Africans had begun to abandon it as a motor of social change, liberal Christianity continued to offer its version of the Christian gospel as a principle of social harmony.⁷⁵ Perhaps this was due to the insulation of South Africa’s liberal Christians from the ravages of depression and the disillusionment that accompanied it. Theological realism found no purchase in South Africa.⁷⁶

Niebuhr’s liberal credentials were sound—at least up until 1929. “Practically, if not theoretically,” he wrote, “we accept the judgment today that our definitions of God’s nature are conditioned by our need of Him... we apprehend those characteristics of the nature of God best which most adequately answer to the particular needs

⁷² Kliever, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 31. On the Niebuhrs and Macintosh, see S. Mark Heim, “Prodigal Sons: D. C. Macintosh and the Brothers Niebuhr”, *Journal of Religion* 65 (July 1985), 336-58.

⁷¹ In “An Aspect of the Idea of God in Recent Thought”, Niebuhr cites H. G. Wells, for whom God is not “a trick of words, no Infinite; God is as real as a bayonet thrust; a personality who reveals Himself as the Captain of Humility [*sic* Humanity?], the Invisible King. . . who leads mankind thru [*sic*] a dark jungle to a great conquest.” *Theological Magazine of the Evangelical Synod of North America* 48 (1920), 43. The difference between this and a Christian idea, says Niebuhr, centres in the symbol of crucifixion.

⁷² Henry N. Wieman, “The Wrestle of Religion with Truth”, in *Modern American Protestantism*, ed. William R. Hutchison (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1968 [orig.1927]), 184-5. It is perhaps worth noting that Yale’s empirical theology and Chicago’s leaning toward process theology in the 1920s were complimentary sides of late liberalism.

⁷³ H. Richard Niebuhr, “Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century”, in *Religious Realism*, ed. D. C. Macintosh (New York: MacMillan, 1931), 413-28.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Hoedemaker, *The theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 9.

⁷⁵ “Mission Christianity and Inter-War Liberalism”, in *Democratic Liberalism in South Africa: Its History and Prospect* ed. Jeffrey Butler, Richard Elphick and David Welsh (Middletown CT and Cape Town: Wesleyan University Press and David Philip Publishers, 1987), 79.

of our life.”⁷⁷ These particular needs are, however, cast by Niebuhr more in Social Gospel than middle-class liberal terms. Presently society is less concerned with personal sin and guilt and more concerned with “the capriciousness of life in dealing out pain and suffering without regard to desert or merit.”⁷⁸ This issues forth in trends toward a pluralism that denied logical and organic unity—something with which Niebuhr was not comfortable. Therefore, the two needs evident to Niebuhr (at least in 1920) were “making the world rational” and “making it a liveable home for man”.⁷⁹ The “aspects” of God, then, that fit the climate are God’s finitude—God as part not whole—(in which we join God in struggling against evil) and God as a “world mind in the process of development”.⁸⁰

Soon after the publication of *Social Sources*, Niebuhr would also cast his lot in with theological realism, although in so doing he would actually abandon liberalism. We will return to theological realism in chapter six. But whether understood within an idealist or realist framework, Nicholls’ argument holds: liberalism’s God remained immanent and processive, a finite being corresponding to and providing a basis for the US federal polity.⁸¹ This was a perfect God for American culture-protestantism.

There was another form of culture-protestantism, though: in Germany. The literature coming from there also influenced Niebuhr.

Culture-protestantism in Germany

Adolf von Harnack

We start with Adolph von Harnack, who in the words of Martin Rumscheidt represented “liberal theology at its height”.⁸² Unlike the social monist variety prominent in the U.S. context, however, Harnack’s liberalism was shot through with dualism, no doubt owing to his Lutheran heritage. This is especially evident in his understanding of the relation of the church to society. He also wrote in a context where Christianity was clearly on the decline, especially among the working class.

⁷⁶ Elphick goes on to point out that Reinhold Niebuhr was hardly mentioned in the literature of the 1930s.

⁷⁷ Niebuhr, “An Aspect of the Idea of God”, 39.

⁷⁸ Niebuhr, “An Aspect of the Idea of God”, 42.

⁷⁹ Niebuhr, “An Aspect of the Idea of God”, 39.

⁸⁰ Niebuhr, “An Aspect of the Idea of God”, 41-42.

⁸¹ David Nicholls, *Diety and Domination: Images of God and the State in Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London: Routledge, 1989), 131-57.

⁸² Martin Rumscheidt, “Introduction: Harnack’s Liberalism in Theology”, in *Adolf von Harnack: Liberal Theology at Its Height*, ed. Martin Rumscheidt (London: Collins, 1989), 9-41.

While the lively dialogue between Christianity and its social context (especially the industrialism of the early part of the twentieth century) in the U.S. found ready expression in Social Christianity, the idea of a Social Gospel was not unheard of in German liberalism. For Harnack, however, the Social Gospel is an *implication* of the original gospel, rather than the original itself. The principle of continuity between the New Testament time and the present is the “kernel” of love—a love defined as centred on the individual person. While it is not all that can be said about the matter, the essence of Christian preaching remains “a firm consolatory faith, able to triumph over all the troubles of life.”⁸³ Unlike the American Social Gospellers, Harnack held that Christian preaching is aimed at individuals, not at institutions. “[T]he Kingdom of God,” he wrote, “must be built upon the foundation, not of institutions, but of individuals in whom God dwells and who are glad to live for their fellow men.”⁸⁴ “In the end it is only personal love that really counts. Institutions and charitable organizations touch but the fringe of the matter.”⁸⁵ Indeed, when churches fail in their mission, it is not because of the power of rival social institutions, but “lack of faith and love” that express the common interest Christians share. This is in sharp distinction to Niebuhr’s view of social institutions and the power they had in shaping religion, as we shall see. Harnack’s liberal theology is not however without implication for social action. The church is a “brotherhood” or fellowship and so affirms sociality. “Next to the preaching of the gospel, the reconstruction of congregational life is the chief evangelical-social task before the evangelical Church.” It is an outworking of the principle of love of neighbour that leads Christians to act on their behalf. And yet the congregation is made up of individuals.

Liberal theology therefore can provide important motivation and even a foundation for social action. But can liberal theology also provide a basis for cultural unity? Certainly Harnack held that “culture” (spoken of in glowing terms as “civilization”) ought to be affirmed by Christians and that the church should encourage cultural involvements. The church should also act to compensate for the effects of social progress—especially wherein “the development of free and independent personali-

⁸³ Adolf von Harnack, “Essays on the Social Gospel”, in Rumscheidt ed., *Adolf von Harnack*, 280. Christian piety is a way of relativising the struggles of existence. Harnack’s message found a more ready audience among American liberals than it would among Social Gospel reformers. Altschuler, “Walter Rauschenbusch”, 139.

⁸⁴ Harnack, “Essays on the Social Gospel”, 275.

⁸⁵ Harnack, “Essays on the Social Gospel”, 282.

ties” is hindered. Harnack, like the American Social Gospellers, was only too aware that the growth of “civilization”, though inevitably triumphant, was a painful one.

Altschuler points out that, probably due to the negative experience Europeans had of the involvement of religion in “secular” affairs, Harnack was suspicious of anything which seemed to give scriptural warrant to social movements.⁸⁶ In this way he also differed from Rauschenbusch, for whom scripture gave clear directives for social action. But the church can assist culture by being true to its nature as church. Like Niebuhr in *Social Sources*, Harnack thought that congregations could be, as it were, exemplary communities, “in which all distinctions of high and low, rich and poor are swept away, and class differences count for nothing; in fact just such institutions as we have special need of at the present time.”⁸⁷ There seems however no sense in which the church stands over against or in prophetic relation to the culture of his day. Moreover, in spite of his affirmation of a classless ideal church, Paul Tillich is right in asserting that this kind of theology serves “to fortify the strong development of the bourgeois personality.”⁸⁸ The church interacts with culture. But the “culture” that the church interacts with is “middle-class” culture.

The liberalism of Harnack joined the Social Gospel of Rauschenbusch as two formative influences on the young H. Richard Niebuhr. And yet Niebuhr was also unsatisfied with the bourgeois and parochial nature of their writings. As Kliever points out, Niebuhr would, in contrast to liberalism, soon come to realise that an inadequate theology—especially the doctrine of God—was the reason behind an impotent ethics.

Ernst Troeltsch

Troeltsch also grappled with the relation between Christianity and culture. His understanding of culture was wider, however. He was concerned with “western” rather than simply German middle-class culture. Troeltsch was especially concerned about the declining influence of Christianity amongst workers and its comfortable location amongst the bourgeoisie. For Troeltsch, Christianity and western culture are inseparably woven together, and it is difficult to conceive of the one apart from the other.

⁸⁶ Altschuler, “Walter Rauschenbusch”, 138-9.

⁸⁷ Harnack, “Essays on the Social Gospel”, 283.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Nicholls, *Diety and Domination*, 84.

The question “whither Christianity?” was at the fore of Troeltsch’s work. Along with this was the question, “whither ‘civilisation’?”⁸⁹ His answers to those questions encapsulated the height and decline of liberal theology. At one time, Troeltsch attempted to interpret Christianity as the culmination or convergence point of human religious tendencies, just as the ethics of Jesus was the highest point in the ethical development of humankind. Toward the end of his life, however, Troeltsch would come to see the values he sought to ground (and the religion he sought to commend) as those of one civilisation among many. As Hendrikus Berkhof puts it, he was confronted with the fact that “even his central value of personality lacked universal human validity but was typical for one culture”.⁹⁰ His search for the Absolute ended in failure.

Troeltsch’s work at its basis was an attempt to understand the history of the development of what he termed “religious consciousness” and especially as it came to expression in Christianity, in Europe and in the modern era.⁹¹ At the same time, convinced that Christianity was “the sole really religious force in the West”, Troeltsch aimed to gain “an insight into the intellectual and religious situation of the present day, from which the significance and possibilities of development possessed by Christianity might be deduced.”⁹² The methodological tensions between the “personal, subjective” commitment to Christianity and to the historical study of it as one religion among many expressed the two sides of Troeltsch’s thought which were uncovered by Niebuhr in his doctoral dissertation:⁹³ the quest for the absolute and the intellectual commitment to pluralism.⁹⁴

Troeltsch was among the scholars who formed “the history of religions school”. Christianity is “one among many” religions, rather than “a blueprint for the Kingdom of God to be realized on earth”.⁹⁵ The quest of this school, as James Luther

⁸⁹ It need not be added that for “civilization” may be read “European culture”. In an introductory essay to the fourth volume of his *Gesammelte Schriften*, published in 1922 (the year before his death), he spoke of turning to the development of “an activist philosophy of history”, which was “rooted in the analysis of what it meant to be European.” “My Books”, in *Religion in History*, ed. and trans. James Luther Adams and Walter F. Bense (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991 [orig. 1922]), 375.

⁹⁰ Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years of Theology*, 157.

⁹¹ Troeltsch, “My Books”, 368.

⁹² Ernst Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress: The Significance of Protestantism for the Rise of the Modern World* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986 [orig. 1912]), 13.

⁹³ H. Richard Niebuhr, “Ernst Troeltsch’s Philosophy of Religion”, diss (Yale, 1924).

⁹⁴ See also our discussion of Josiah Royce above.

⁹⁵ This is how Troeltsch encapsulated the understanding of Christianity of his teacher Albrecht Ritschl. “My Books”, 368.

Adams puts it, “was not for final truth but for analogies and differences between the world religions.”⁹⁶ This quest for analogies issued forth in a general philosophy of religion wherein, in the words of Adams

Everything historical.... is seen as related to other events and perspectives. In this sense historical thinking leads to an ‘unlimited relativism’ that portrays every structure as an individual and special form of the generally human.... Yet no place is left for absolute rational truths and ideals that are the same everywhere. Moreover, everything in the past must find an analogy to the present if it is to be accepted as plausible.⁹⁷

Nor is it possible to hold one historical event as determinative—something that H. Richard Niebuhr would take strong exception to in *The Meaning of Revelation*.⁹⁸

While this would seem to define Christianity right out of the culturally relevant picture, for Troeltsch it was a simple matter of recognising that this was the environment within which Christianity had to function.⁹⁹ Christianity could not exist without relating itself to historical research. Nor could it ignore social elements in its makeup—elements that also made it like other historical and societal phenomena. While his sense of the distinctiveness of Christianity among other religions eroded towards the end of his life, he never gave up trying to assert the importance of Christianity and commending it to its cultured European despisers.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ James Luther Adams, “Introduction”, in Adams, ed., *Religion in History*, 2.

⁹⁷ Adams, “Introduction”, 5.

⁹⁸ Troeltsch himself understood revelation as “intensified faith” (*Glaubigkeit*) that surpasses average measure and radiates its power”. “Faith” (1910), in Adams, ed., *Religion in History*, 124. Revelation refers to that founding event wherein the religious imagination is engaged in producing a new and higher *mythos*. This subjectivist view of revelation, which suggests it differs from ordinary human knowledge by degree not kind, fits well with Troeltsch’s view of human history—a view which Niebuhr would place on the “external” side of events (see chapter four below). The story of our life, on the other hand, provides a basis for a different account of history—one that has coherence in the ordering of life through a key symbol or story (*mythos*). Here the imagination is also engaged, but to a different end. We shall examine this further later on.

⁹⁹ Troeltsch was, however, careful to avoid reducing Christianity (or religion) to social and historical factors. In his neo-Kantian phase, he coined the phrase “religious *a priori*”, which pointed to a certain relation between the finite and the infinite, between rationality and spirituality, which gave religion its own character. See “On the Question of the Religious A-Priori” (1909), in Adams, ed., *Religion in History*, 33-45. In *Protestantism and Progress* he puts it more sociologically than philosophically: claiming that “religious forces really only proceed from religious motives” (89). And so, after spending nearly eighty pages demonstrating how Protestantism is *not* directly responsible for modernity in terms of its structures (economic and political) and social institutions, he then says that Protestantism is directly responsible for helping to shape “the modern religious spirit” (92). This “spirit” is different from the “social”, and is not reducible to social factors.

¹⁰⁰ For instance, Hans Frei notes that as Troeltsch’s typology placed Buddhism and Hinduism within the “mystical” category, and as he thought them “fully as spiritual and humane as Christianity and therefore have on this basis the same claim to absolute validity.” “The Theological

The Schleiermachian agenda of his “personal and subjective side” shows itself in a 1910 article on “The Possibility of a Liberal Christianity”. In this article, Troeltsch questioned whether a Christianity was possible which could speak to modernity while retaining the prophetic-Christian idea of God. He answered that question in the affirmative by trying to show how the ideals of liberalism could be reconciled with Christianity. Modernity’s monism, with its emphasis on words like “unity”, “rationality” and “law” was spiritually unsatisfying and needed a personalism to bring together “all impulses and strivings for a spiritual content of life transcending the flux of life.”¹⁰¹ Indeed, Troeltsch ended his classic historical survey of the social teachings of the churches with an argument for the continuing validity of Christianity based on its metaphysical grounding of personalism.¹⁰²

The particularity of Christianity, represented in the person of Jesus Christ, was a more difficult issue. Troeltsch’s historicism, the modern context Christianity had to come to terms with, could no longer give Jesus a unique place in history. Doubtless, however, Jesus was the paradigmatic figure for Europeans. Moreover Christianity occupied a central place in European culture. Recognising these as historical facts rather than timeless truths allowed Troeltsch to maintain the particularity of Christianity “for us”, as it were.

Both Christianity and humanism, at least as Troeltsch interpreted them, saw morality as of central importance. And yet the former grounded morality in a transcendental realm and the latter immanently. Even these are reconcilable, however, once the continuance of moral development beyond death is granted as a logical follow-on. Interestingly, it is in an effort to avoid relativism that Troeltsch urges humanists to consider a transcendent basis for morality. Liberal Christianity here is a “bridge builder”, a mediator. The antinomies of “individualism, community and cultus” are overcome in the realisation that the stress on individualism of modernity creates a thirst for communities and institutions. Moreover, even socialism needs a *cultus*. While the institutional shape of Christianity will conform to the transformations in the modern world, its end is not yet at hand. Indeed he even ends on a realist note: that the present time is no different *vis-à-vis* the presence of God than any other time,

Background of H. Richard Niebuhr”, in *Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, ed. Paul Ramsay (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 58.

¹⁰¹ Ernst Troeltsch, “On the Possibility of a Liberal Christianity” (1910), in Adams, ed., *Religion in History*, 344-47.

¹⁰² Troeltsch, *Social Teachings*.

and therefore that faithfulness to God ought to be the watchword for Christians, not concern about saving the faith.¹⁰³

While all this was influential in shaping Niebuhr's own broad theological agenda, it is one work by Troeltsch that casts its long shadow on *Social Sources*.

Around the same time as the "Liberal Christianity" essay, Troeltsch was pressed by his political responsibilities to the study of sociology and there he discovered Max Weber. Here his question became: "To what extent are the appearance, the development, the modification and the modern impasse of Christianity socially determined, and to what extent is Christianity itself an active sociological principle?" Reflecting back on this period in 1922, he noted how, to this point, studies of the history of Christianity had been "under the spell of Harnack's *History of Dogma*."¹⁰⁴ But Troeltsch's work changed as he struggled to translate this question into "a history of the culture of the Christian church". Although he saw this as *paralleling* Harnack's, he also wrote that "no one who had grasped this problem [of the relation of Christianity and society] could any longer think of the history of Christianity in terms of the history of dogma or the history of ideas." Originally intended as a review of "a miserable book" by an obscure writer named Nathusius entitled *The Social Task of the Evangelical Church*, this cultural history became the classic *Social Teachings of the Christian Church*. *Social Teachings* was to influence many, not least H. Richard Niebuhr (who worked from the German text), and shape the way sociologists and theologians would think of the interface of Christianity and cultural practices for the rest of the century.¹⁰⁵

Although Niebuhr still had a way to grow, Troeltsch sharpened the question of the relation between God and human history beyond liberal idealism, and beyond the kind of God projected by American culture-protestantism which so easily identified God's cause with cultural ideals.¹⁰⁶ Lonnie Kliever highlights two key points in this regard. First, Troeltsch's relativism "furnished a point of leverage against all uncritical identifications of the cause of God with the causes of man." Second,

¹⁰³ Troeltsch, "On the Possibility of a Liberal Christianity", 359.

¹⁰⁴ Troeltsch, "My Books", 372.

¹⁰⁵ And not of course always with compliments. Scholars in the Anabaptist tradition especially have taken the church-sect divide to task. See for instance John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1972), 110-17; Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 36-48. With specific reference to Niebuhr, see Charles Scriven, *Theology and the Transformation of Culture: Christian Social Ethics after H. Richard Niebuhr* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1988), esp. ch. 2.

“Troeltsch’s realism, which located religion in experiences and expressions of human value, suggested the way to distinguish between God’s cause and the causes of man without completely severing them.”¹⁰⁷ While *Social Sources* would display Niebuhr’s debt to Troeltsch’s sociological categories, it is particularly in Niebuhr’s later work that these influences come to bear.¹⁰⁸

There was much else in Troeltsch to influence the young H. Richard Niebuhr.¹⁰⁹ The ideas of the location of Christianity in civilisation (culture) and the idea of a spiritual core to the political body are all prevalent in *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*.

Crossing contexts

We have spent the first part of this chapter outlining the career of culture-Protestantism in the United States and Germany. Our treatment of Harnack and Troeltsch was not to deny that Niebuhr’s primary context was the US, but rather to place Niebuhr’s theological hyphens in context. The fact that he began his academic career with a master’s thesis on a German poet and that he wrote his doctorate on a great German philosopher of religion demonstrates moving between of thought worlds.¹¹⁰ This is not to say that these are the only “hyphens” relevant to Niebuhr. These are, however, the most relevant to the study we are about to undertake.

But before we begin to examine Niebuhr’s work in detail, it will be helpful to relate the two contexts—the American and the German—through the eyes of a German “theological tourist” who visited the US in the 1930s.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ See above.

¹⁰⁷ Kliever, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 30.

¹⁰⁸ See chapters eight and nine below.

¹⁰⁹ Perhaps it is worth noting that at the time *Social Sources* was published, Troeltsch’s *Social Teachings of the Christian Churches* had yet to be translated. It is also worth noting as H. Berkhof points out that *The Social Teaching of the Christian Church* belongs to “the later”, post-historicist Troeltsch. Like Niebuhr, Troeltsch “saw Christianity as ethical power, as the only moral power able to save a tired and disoriented European culture.” *Two Hundred Years of Theology*, 160. Berkhof points out that “Troeltsch, with his all-embracing historicism, both occupied and fascinated Niebuhr throughout his life.” And like Troeltsch, Berkhof sees Niebuhr as a “sociologically oriented cultural historian.” *Two Hundred Years of Theology*, 271.

¹¹⁰ Niebuhr’s 1917 Masters thesis, completed in the Department of Germanics at Washington University, St. Louis, was entitled, “The Problem of the Individual in Richard Dehmel”. We have briefly discussed the themes of this work in the Introduction above. For Niebuhr as trying to synthesise German and American theological emphases, see Kliever, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 30-35.

¹¹¹ Niebuhr was himself visiting Germany at the same time as Bonhoeffer was in the US on his first trip.

In 1930-31, a “brash, twenty-four-year-old post-doctoral student” Dietrich Bonhoeffer visited Union Theological Seminary in New York. Reporting back to his church in Berlin, Bonhoeffer wrote that “the theological education [of Reinhold Niebuhr and Harry Ward and their students] is virtually nil” and that “the theological atmosphere at Union was directly ‘accelerating the process of the secularization of Christianity in America.’”¹¹² Eight years later, Bonhoeffer returned with a more positive appreciation.¹¹³ Entitled “Protestant without Reformation”,¹¹⁴ his 1939 report evidences a more nuanced and insightful treatment of American Christianity. We pause to consider it here as a helpful summary of themes in this chapter, for it helps encapsulate themes in both contexts.

Bonhoeffer starts with two warnings: first, it is fallacious to attribute the strangeness of another Christianity “to the peculiarities of its geographical, national, or social setting”. He says this is a function of “uncommitted observation” of a type of Christianity, rather than concern with the truth of Christianity.¹¹⁵ The second warning is the fallacy of ahistoricism—perhaps the opposite extreme. Bonhoeffer’s later analysis of American Christianity displays sensitivity to these issues, if not a lack of specificity about the German-ness of this “observer”.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the first strange thing that confronted Bonhoeffer about American Christianity was its lack of a centralised “church”, much less a theological idea of “church” beyond the churches. What the observer saw, wrote Bonhoeffer, was “denominations”.¹¹⁶ The denomination was a curious idea for Bonhoeffer. It was neither fully theological nor merely sociological, but rather a way of locat-

¹¹² Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 125. Bonhoeffer took it upon himself to present Barth’s theology to John Baillie’s seminar (“The Theology of Crisis and its Attitude Toward Philosophy and Science” (1930), in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ*, ed. John W. De Gruchy (London: Collins, 1987), 85-97. See especially his rather condescending introductory comments [86]). This first engagement reflected a wide-spread European stereotyping of American Christianity. See Hutchison, “The Americanness of the Social Gospel”, 99-100.

¹¹³ In 1939, Reinhold Niebuhr was now “the sharpest critic of contemporary American Protestantism and the present social order” though still lacking a Christology. Bonhoeffer, “Protestantism Without Reformation” (1939), in de Gruchy, ed., *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 215.

¹¹⁴ Bonhoeffer, “Protestantism Without Reformation”, 196-216.

¹¹⁵ Bonhoeffer, “Protestantism Without Reformation”, 196. In other words, Christianity as it takes shape in a different context cannot be reduced to an effect of historical, cultural and other forces.

¹¹⁶ The first paragraph under the heading, “The unity of the church and the denominations” (197), seems to display an acquaintance with *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* in its movement from frontier-settlement sectionalism through north-south division to the color bar in American Christianity. This names three of the four distinctive sources of American Christianity. Interestingly, Bonhoeffer does not mention the churches of the immigrants (the fourth distinctive source) at this point, but later devotes a section to them.

ing Christian churches on a historical grid. Neither wholly a European “state church” nor a “free church”,¹¹⁷ the denomination occupies a space different to that of the state. It therefore neither co-operates with the state nor does it present a challenge to the state. Indeed, in America the state “has its boundaries at the churches” and the idea of a “secular” state is a guarantee of that space for the churches rather than a victory for secularising forces—as it might be seen in a European context.¹¹⁸

The unity of the churches, which in Europe functions as an *a priori*, is a matter of sanctification in America.¹¹⁹ Plurality is point of departure for American Christianity. It is a strength, rather than a sign of apostasy. Unity comes about in “action and organization”, rather than in subordination to a particular creed.¹²⁰ Bonhoeffer saw this both as strength and weakness, and claimed that European Christianity could both learn from and correct the emphases in American Christianity.¹²¹

Bonhoeffer noted that while for American Christianity, “the creed is not the constituent mark of the denomination... for the churches of the Reformation it is the sole matter of any ecumenical importance. In America, culture, the liturgy, community life and organization occupy the same position as the creed in Germany.”¹²² Indeed, Bonhoeffer would later put the point even more strongly: “the denominations of America are not to be understood primarily from their theology, but from their practical work in the community and their public effectiveness.”¹²³

Paired with the strange idea of the denomination was the idea of “Protestantism”. This may sound strange, coming from a German theologian: “America is the only country in which the concept of ‘Protestantism’ has gained significance and reality in church history.”¹²⁴ Indeed Bonhoeffer presents “American Christianity”, “denominationalism” and “Protestantism” as descriptive of the same phenomenon. The

¹¹⁷ Typically for Bonhoeffer the denomination ruled out the idea of a “confessing church”, or at least one denomination or group calling itself thus, as this would presuppose a truth claim above the other denominations, contravening the unspoken peace between them. “Protestantism Without Reformation”, 199.

¹¹⁸ Bonhoeffer, “Protestantism Without Reformation”, 207. Although he later acknowledges the problem of the incursion of the state on religion in the matter of “religionless” state schools. “Protestantism Without Reformation”, 210.

¹¹⁹ Bonhoeffer, “Protestantism Without Reformation”, 200.

¹²⁰ Bonhoeffer, “Protestantism Without Reformation”, 201.

¹²¹ Rather unsanctified is the division of the church between black and white. This particular division Bonhoeffer saw as of grave concern.

¹²² Bonhoeffer, “Protestantism Without Reformation”, 202. These observations confirm what we said on page 103.

¹²³ Bonhoeffer, “Protestantism Without Reformation”, 213.

¹²⁴ Bonhoeffer, “Protestantism Without Reformation”, 203.

idea of Protestantism comes especially into view when considering America as a place of religious refuge—something which, no doubt, reflected Bonhoeffer's own attitude towards America. This common idea of America as refuge relativises credal differences, for it was credal persecution that motivated many Europeans to escape to America. Participating in the common task or, as Niebuhr would put it, "experiment",¹²⁵ meant leaving such concerns behind. Tolerance, then, goes along with American Christianity. But here also the notion of truth in confession is placed in question. The shunning of the question of truth makes American Christianity "Protestantism" without Reformation.

Bonhoeffer ends with the provocative statement, "God has granted American Christianity no Reformation".¹²⁶ As we enter the theological world of H. Richard Niebuhr, we will see a quest for Reformation as "Continuing Imperative",¹²⁷ rather than as a single event in America's historical memory. But at this early stage, we meet a younger H. Richard Niebuhr who wishes to mobilise the critical theology and sociology of Ernst Troeltsch,¹²⁸ the German academic, for the reformation of the American churches. He wished to do this for the sake of a Social Gospel resonating with a Christian ethics that would have gained the assent both of Rauschenbusch and Harnack. The next chapter turns to this first attempt to come to terms with American Christianity, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*.

¹²⁵ See "The Problem of Constructive Protestantism", chapter one of *The Kingdom of God in America*.

¹²⁶ Bonhoeffer, "Protestantism Without Reformation", 215.

¹²⁷ Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative".

¹²⁸ James Fowler notes that as Niebuhr appropriated Troeltsch's theories in the cause of the reformation of the churches in America, the challenge was to do this while taking into account the "culture-bound religious ethos" in America. *To See the Kingdom: The Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973), 37.

Entangling Faith

Reading The Social Sources of Denominationalism

While *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* has been termed a classic,¹ it is in many ways atypical within Niebuhr's corpus. Niebuhr himself took distance from it methodologically in his next major work, *The Kingdom of God in America*. Its explicit statements on socio-economic issues demonstrate a clear Social Gospel influence. And its calls for a Christianity that would legitimatise itself by producing social harmony sharply contrast with his "realist" writings of five years later. In his autobiographical reflections published near the end of his life,² Niebuhr would place *Social Sources* as before his becoming grasped by the sovereignty of God. Indeed his later work, as concerned as it is with theological ethics, displays little concern with denominationalism, which he once characterised as "the ethical failure of the divided church". And yet a consideration of *Social Sources* remains an important task in understanding Niebuhr's interpretation of American Christianity. It represents his first attempt to come to terms with the shape of Christianity in America. It also represents some of his most powerful and concrete social-ethical criticisms of the role of religion in legitimising the broader cultural ethos. While in the end it is better at stating the question than offering answers, it also pushed social Christianity to its limit and cleared the way for a radically new approach through the idea of radical faith.

¹ *Social Sources* and *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937) have become known as "great histories of American Protestantism, destined to stand as classics in American historiography." Harry S. Stout, "The Historical Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr", in *The Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr*, ed. Ronald F. Thiemann (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 83. While recognising its "penetrating analysis", the index of the volume *Faith and Ethics*, presented to Niebuhr by his students and colleagues at Yale, contains but four references to *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, three of those within footnotes. *Social Sources* fairs better in more recent works on Niebuhr. See e.g. Harry Stout, "The Historical Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr", 83-87 and Jon Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr: A Lifetime of Reflections on the Church and the World* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1986), ch. 1. In fact, William R. Hutchison notes that while its thesis was obvious to historians and sociologists of religion, its novelty to theologians continues to be borne out in its remaining on seminary required reading lists today. "Response to Harry Stout", in *The Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr*, ed. Thiemann, 104. This is a remarkable thing to note about a debut work. Indeed *Social Sources* was more than simply a debut work; it reflected a theological agenda which would impress itself on the rest of Niebuhr's career.

² H. Richard Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative", *The Christian Century*, 2 March 1960, 248-51.

The divided church

Concern for the unity of the church and the implications of a divided church for the life of the nation was a key motif sounded by liberal leaders in the 1920s, as intimated in chapter four. Protestants could hold forth the promise of a unity of spirit and structure with the 1925 Stockholm and 1927 Faith and Order Conferences as anticipation. And yet in spite of this—and in the face of denominational mergers which were heralded as victories for faith—denominational splits showed no signs of slowing.³ The scandal of church division was prominent on the mainstream agenda, therefore, at the time of the publication of *Social Sources* in 1929.

Niebuhr thought that analyses of the problem of disunity were however flawed. The immediate burden of *Social Sources*, as suggested in its Preface, arose from a course Niebuhr had taught in “Symbolics”:

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 appeared to [the author] to be a procedure so artificial and fruitless that he found himself compelled to turn from theology to history, sociology and ethics for a more satisfying account of denominational differences and a more significant approach to the question of union.⁴

It was the moral and theological imperative to union that motivated Niebuhr to write the book. Such union could not however be achieved until the non-theological nature of divisions in the church was unmasked; or, in more Marxist language, the superstructure pulled back and the material base exposed. The solution to the problem of disunity typified in denominationalism is therefore not to be found in suspending those credal differences that separate Presbyterians from Methodists or Baptists from Congregationalists, nor in a kind of lowest common denominator ecumenism.

Niebuhr saw the divided church as a scandal, yet took an unusual approach in claiming that the “names” for its divisions (which had to do with doctrinal, ethical or polity distinctives) were epiphenomenal, glossing over the social forces that gave rise to them. More than glossing over, however, tying such social divisions to the Christian faith gave them an air of sacrality. For Niebuhr, as for most liberal protestants,

³ According to one survey, the number of denominations grew from 186 at the end of the 19th century to 212 by 1926. *The U.S. Looks at its Churches* (1926), cited in Martin E. Marty, *The Noise of Conflict: Modern American Religion* Vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 32.

this was a scandal that not only compromised its message of love and tolerance, but prevented the church from functioning properly in society.

Niebuhr's stated ideal in *Social Sources* was that of "a harmonious, interacting society, serving one end in diverse manners."⁵ Church unity ultimately serves that ideal. Indeed, the normative function of Christianity in society was to provide a principle of cultural synthesis. Within the human community Christianity's task was to allow for the integration of the various nations and classes making up "civilisation". This was an outworking of the "soul in society" idea dominant in American Christianity.⁶ Yet it was still an idealistically constructed principle, one which was not itself an agent or actor within the empirical world, but rather one which would inspire action on the part of human beings. It is the identity of this principle, and its relation to the particularities and diversities of life that would concern Niebuhr for the rest of his writings.

Niebuhr starts by acknowledging how easy it is for churches to compromise the ideal presented in the gospels with the actual conditions under which they live.⁷ The incorporation of Christianity into society always results in compromise. But it is no less evil for its inevitability.⁸ Compromise blunts the criticism of the church, especially when it is considered that "the organization that is loudest in its praise of brotherhood and most critical of race and class discriminations in other spheres is the most disunited group of all".⁹ The same creed is confessed in divided churches.¹⁰ The church mouths the interests of the dominant in society, sometimes going as far as to be "a mere appendage of the state".¹¹

Contrary to "the orthodox interpretation of denominationalism"¹² it is not ideas or doctrine (or ethics or polity) that are responsible for this state of affairs (though Niebuhr is careful not to reduce doctrinal differences to rationalisations of

⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1987 [orig. 1929]), vii.

⁵ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 266.

⁶ Gary J. Dorrien, *Soul in Society: The Making and Renewal of Social Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

⁷ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 1.

⁸ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 3.

⁹ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 9.

¹⁰ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 11.

¹¹ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 10.

¹² Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 12, 14.

unstated agendas.¹³ Niebuhr summarises quickly the sociology of religious institutions of Weber and Troeltsch, which offers an alternative. Working within the US context, and taking note of its particular dynamics, Niebuhr constructs an additional type—the denomination—to place alongside church and sect. He adds this to his more dynamic account of the relation between the institutional types and society.¹⁴ Historically, the types refer to changing institutions and the reflection of changing contexts. The same institution can be church in one context and sect or denomination in another.

Nevertheless, rather than see denominations in America as examples of what Darrell Wratten has termed “contextual innovation”,¹⁵ Niebuhr sees them as examples of confusing loyalties. His indictment is therefore that “Christian” morality, under denominationalism, falls away, replaced by an ethics of nation or class. Denominations become “the religious spokesmen of the special non-religious groups with which they are allied.”¹⁶

Excursus: the categories of Social Sources

Before continuing with our discussion of the argument of *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, it will be useful to introduce some of Niebuhr’s more important terms used therein.

“DENOMINATIONALISM” AND “DENOMINATION”. While most historians that followed him have based their understanding of American religion on the denomination as the American “type” of Christianity,¹⁷ whether Niebuhr consistently recognised this (i.e. that the denomination is a “type” just as church and sect are) in *Social Sources* is a matter open to some question.¹⁸ And the subtle distinction between “denominations” and “denominationalism”—the existence of the former being set up to prevent the latter—which has been made by some scholars (e.g. by Hudson) is difficult to trace within Niebuhr’s work. The very existence of denominations, for him, signals the problem of denominationalism.

¹³ Although see p. 21 where “Doctrines and practices change with the mutations of social structure, not vice versa”.

¹⁴ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 21ff.

¹⁵ Darrell Wratten, “Buddhism in South Africa: From Textual Imagination to Contextual Innovation”, diss (University of Cape Town, 1995).

¹⁶ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 25.

¹⁷ Stout, “The Historical Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr”, 86.

¹⁸ He does call the “American denomination” “that peculiar institution” in *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 177.

Trying to identify with precision what Niebuhr means by “denomination” and “denominationalism” is a difficult task. The ways in which Niebuhr uses these terms are confusing to the careful reader of *Social Sources*. And it is not simply because he uses a specific institutional type (the denomination) to sum up “the ethical problem of the divided church.” “Denominations, churches and sects,” he writes, are three distinct “sociological groups whose principle of differentiation is to be sought in their conformity to the order of social classes and castes.”¹⁹ This would seem to be in accord with orthodox sociological treatments, particularly those of Weber and Troeltsch, which associate churches with institutions legitimating society, sects with institutions dissenting from society and denominations as institutions existing in a peaceful relation to society, though in their own sphere.²⁰ But in general, while he consistently distinguishes churches and sects (his debt to Weber and Troeltsch),²¹ Niebuhr sometimes uses the terms “sect” and “denomination” interchangeably.²² Likewise “church” and “denomination” are also used as synonyms,²³ and so are “denomination” and “denominationalism”.²⁴ Both “denominationalism” and “the denominations” are accused of capitulating to caste.²⁵

“CHURCH” AND “WORLD”. Niebuhr’s overarching theological and ethical interest presents the divided church as betrayal of the Christian gospel. This is especially evident in his theological use of the terms “church” and “world” in dealing with the sociological phenomenon of denominationalism. In its theological usage, world may have the meaning of the present order (“love not the world”), or creation (“God so loved the world”).²⁶ But when “world” (in the former sense) is tied to society as such, then plurality always and everywhere means compromise. Even the rise of sects, acknowl-

¹⁹ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 25.

²⁰ “Society” refers to the dominant voice or ethos (see chapter four). It must be granted that generalisations about society are dangerous, and often drown marginal voices.

²¹ For Troeltsch, church and sect are “independent sociological types of Christian thought.” That is, a sect is not an underdeveloped church; neither, one would assume, is a church a corrupted and compromised sect. Both stem from the logic of the Gospel. *Social Teachings*, 338.

The typology of church, sect and denomination has been translated by theologian William Johnson Everett as communal, institutional and associational ecclesiologies. The first (communal) is not found in Niebuhr’s treatment, though his discussion of the way religious communities become ways of preserving tradition in diaspora, particularly when the community speaks a different language than English, is a possible analogy. See *Social Sources*, 223. The institutional corresponds roughly to “church” and the associational to “denomination”. Like Niebuhr, Everett also talks about how one type can slide into another. *Religion, Federalism and the Struggle for Public Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), esp. 151f.

²² e.g. Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 106-7.

²³ e.g. Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 24-25.

²⁴ e.g. Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 110.

²⁵ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 6, 10.

²⁶ See *Christ and Culture*, 47ff., 196-206 for Niebuhr’s own account of these Johannine terms.

edged by Niebuhr as having a prophetic-critical function vis-à-vis established institutions, is at the end of the day merely “a phase of denominational history”.²⁷

Although empirically they always embody certain loyalties, perhaps friendly to Christianity, perhaps hostile, social forces and factors can be spoken of benignly, simply as “culture” or “class” or “ethnicity”, without necessarily implying which.²⁸ Likewise Niebuhr’s problematic identification of transcendence with unity over against immanence identified with plurality affects his analysis. No doubt in response to the culture-Protestantism which immanentised the gospel to the point of domestication, he privileges transcendence over immanence. But in his analysis of denominationalism, he reigns the social forces on to the side of “plurality”, hammering away at the church’s unity. Niebuhr is not always opposed to diversity, and in the last chapter of *Social Sources* he speaks of religion not erasing diversity, but providing harmony. Nonetheless his overall scheme makes the attainment of such harmony between forces difficult to imagine.

This association of plurality with “society” and unity with “gospel” was something that would continue to characterise his work through *Christ and Culture* and *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*—the latter also trying to negotiate unity in diversity with mixed results.

“THE SOCIAL FORCES”. The term “world” conceived theologically is a unity, though sociologically it represents a plurality of forces. The term “social forces” is the sociological analogue of “world”. What does this quasi-mythological term mean?

Popular in the first two decades of the century, the term “social forces” certainly would have been in vogue when Niebuhr was studying sociology at Washington University in the early twenties.²⁹ Niebuhr in *Social Sources* seems to use the word generally for factors fuelling denominationalism.³⁰ These forces are termed by Niebuhr “secular” and the church must stand above them, or else it will be controlled by them. As long as social forces control the church, all its attempts at unity will result in in-

²⁷ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 21.

²⁸ To identify oneself as “middle-class, white and male” says nothing about fundamental loyalty, but rather that upon which and within which fundamental loyalties will come to bear.

²⁹ On the problem of the concept “social forces” within sociology, see Ernest Becker, *The Structure of Evil* (New York: The Free Press, 1968), 88-92. Becker claims that the concept lost its status after it was considered “unscientific”, especially with the ascendancy of positivism in the social sciences.

³⁰ The divisive nature of the “social forces” differentiates Niebuhr’s from earlier liberalism, such as that of Mathews’ *Church and the Changing Order* (1907). For Mathews, at least of this period, the social forces were progressive forces. See Dorrien, *Soul in Society*, 35.

creasing disunity.³¹ It is subjection to these forces that creates a foundation for ethical, polity and doctrinal differences within and between churches³²—though the relationship is not simply one-way.³³ The social forces create plurality³⁴ within the church through the introduction of alternate, non-transcendent loyalties—loyalties named “racial”, “class” (or “caste”³⁵), “national” or “sectional”. These loyalties are presented by Niebuhr as internally plural (i.e. one class against another in e.g. “the war of the rich against the poor”) but not set in competition (i.e. class against race). The status of religion as an independent social force or one of “the social forces” is hard to identify in *Social Sources*. Perhaps this has to do with Christianity’s dual nature—in but not of the world.³⁶

“FAITH” AND “RELIGION”. What about “faith” and “religion” as social sources? It is difficult to ascertain a clear way that Niebuhr deals with these terms. Theoretically, Niebuhr wants to criticise a kind of faith and religion that are produced by social forces. He does not think that it is good that any kind of faith and religion are effects of social forces. Yet he is unwilling to see faith and religion as potentially *themselves* among the social forces.

The terms are used in many different ways in *Social Sources*. He uses them in regional terms, as when he speaks of “the religion of the urban, commercial East”;³⁷ more broadly in terms of general types based in specific social contexts, such as “urban and rural religion”;³⁸ in class locations, such as “middle class” and “the religion of the

³¹ Niebuhr thought that it had been the failure of “the divided church” to provide leadership to the poor that resulted in the secularisation of the working class in his day. *Social Sources*, 32. Hence we might also say that these forces, unchecked, are “secularising” as well. Niebuhr’s supreme example of this is Wesley whose orientation remained entrenched in the middle-classes and hence left the dispossessed to the mercy of secularising forces. See *Social Sources*, 67f.

³² Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 13-17.

³³ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 14.

³⁴ But note also his envisioning of a synthetic culture, where “various interests and separate nations and classes will be integrated into a harmonious, interacting society, serving one end in diverse manners”. *Social Sources*, 266. This seems to give class and national division a status denied elsewhere in the book. Niebuhr’s precise understanding of plurality is difficult to pin down in this early period, and we must wait for his more mature reflections, especially in *Christ and Culture*, for clarification.

³⁵ “Caste” is a term also used by Weber in his *Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963 [orig.1922]), 80ff.

³⁶ Though religion is a factor in the development of sectarianism (especially in the case of the religion of the disinherited) and is placed *alongside* other social factors, it is not numbered *among* them. Religion, says Niebuhr is the force of the stream, but social forces confine or dam it up. Religion is the motive, the social forces provide its structure. *Social Sources*, 27. Looking back he writes of the account in *Social Sources*, “Though the sociological approach helped to explain why the religious stream flowed in these particular channels it did not account for the force of the stream itself; while it seemed relevant enough to the institutionalized churches it did not explain the Christian movement which produced these churches....” *The Kingdom of God in America*, ix.

³⁷ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 140.

³⁸ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 185.

landed gentry”.³⁹ There are the “religious” and “religiously” poor,⁴⁰ whose religion is also given a qualitative description as “emotional, empirical religion”.⁴¹ In his treatment of middle class religion, Niebuhr parses it out in terms of doctrine, ethics and polity. Religion is also spoken of in functional terms: as “giving sanction” to a particular, class-based ethics,⁴² or supporting master-slave relations.⁴³ Sometimes specific traditions, such as Calvinism, are named as religion, while at other times Niebuhr speaks of how Calvinism fosters a certain kind of religion in particular social contexts.⁴⁴ Arminianism, usually thought of as the theological rival of Calvinism, can produce the same kind of religion given similar conditions.

From this we can conclude that for Niebuhr particular kinds of religion are produced by and within particular contexts. These contexts are defined according to social forces. When “religion” does act, it always does so in concert with one of the social forces, or to give expression to or legitimate. When religion does criticise, as in the religion of the dispossessed, it does so as a response to social forces. While their distinction would become crucial in later works such as *Radical Monotheism*, “faith” and “religion” are virtually synonymous in *Social Sources*. But it is in one description of faith—frontier faith—that we find something approaching a definition we can generalise from. Niebuhr characterises frontier faith as “a common pattern of religious life and a common religious symbolism”. We can say two things about this formulation. First, the subordination of “religion” to “faith” anticipates the distinction between the two made in *Radical Monotheism*.⁴⁵ Second, the idea of faith as pattern will become very important for Niebuhr, particularly in *The Kingdom of God in America*.

Niebuhr also speaks of a striving after “the sources of effective faith” (33) a longing on the part of the religiously dispossessed after something more original, but which is substituted for within the church by “ritual, pageantry, and... authoritative doctrine”. *These* sources are not the material forces he calls “the social sources of denominationalism”, but rather constitute a possibility for faith that exists alongside the actuality of faith, which for him is always compromised. *This* “faith” seems to be what

³⁹ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 89.

⁴⁰ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 144. It is not clear whether these are poor people who are religious (as opposed to poor people who are not religious) or people whose marginal existence is expressed in a marginal religion, or people who are marginalised because of their religion. This ambiguity, as we shall below, creates an opening for re-reading *Social Sources* in South Africa.

⁴¹ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 262.

⁴² Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 86.

⁴³ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 252-3.

⁴⁴ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 145.

⁴⁵ In *Radical Monotheism*, faith exists in a transforming relationship to “religion”. Religion is an institution or set of institutions which exist alongside other institutions of society and is no closer to the sacred than any of the others. See *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 56-63 and chapter nine below.

Niebuhr has in mind in the last chapter when he speaks of the religion of the Gospels. It is a religion which he wishes to present as normative not only for the poor, but for all culture. However Niebuhr does not adequately account for how this faith appears in history. It is more a substratum or a possibility that exists beyond historical actuality.

Naming the forces

Having now pointed out some of the difficulties in his exploration of what he called denominationalism, and what he means by “social forces”, it is time to turn to its sources as Niebuhr sets them forth. They appear, it would seem, in a glance at the chapter headings: “The Churches (note not “Sects”—again imprecision) of the Disinherited” (two chapters), “The Churches of the Middle-Class”, “Nationalism and the Churches”, “Sectionalism and Denominationalism in America” (two chapters), “The Churches of the Immigrants” and “Denominationalism and the Color Line”. Besides the immediately striking (in light of the discussion of terms above) point that Niebuhr uses the term “churches” of European divisions (and of European immigrants) and “denominationalism” when speaking of the same thing in the U.S., three other matters of interest can be seen here. First, economic considerations occupy a prominent place with three chapters devoted explicitly to the issue of class. Second, the book is divided neatly into two main geographical contexts: the European and American, with four chapters each. Third, the categories utilised refer both to social stratifications (class, race and perhaps nation) and to dynamic processes (the migration across frontiers of sectionalism and the border crossing of immigrants, and relations between old and new communities—East/North to West/South and successive waves of immigrants both to established American communities and to each other).⁴⁶ Indeed, in the case of sectionalism and, as Niebuhr himself (26) recognises the immigrants, a number of sources interact such as specific social-psychological conditions (especially of the frontier), politics, culture, language, class and race.

Having established his agenda, Niebuhr goes on to describe, in the next eight chapters, the social forces to which denominationalism answers. He divides his concerns neatly between Europe (chapters two to five) and America (chapters six to nine), although the fact that Christianity was transplanted from Europe to America means that the overlap is inevitable in his analysis.

⁴⁶ Sectionalism also refers to the distinction between rural and urban. *Social Sources*, 181-187..

Class and nation: European Christianity

Niebuhr's first social force is class. This is "first" in the sense of priority as well as argument, for "the divisions of the church have been occasioned more frequently by the direct and indirect operation of economic factors than by the influence of any other major interest".⁴⁷ It is also "first" in a more primal sense, as "Christianity began as a sect of the poor"⁴⁸—and thus the sects of the "disinherited" which have appeared throughout history are closer to the ideal than other groups. Religion is more authentic under the conditions of the poor because of its "unconditional faith in a divine revelation, the naivete of a complete surrender, and the intransigence of certitude".⁴⁹

The first historical groups that Niebuhr deals with are those that arose in response to the Reformation—which Niebuhr takes as "the religion of the middle classes and the nobility".⁵⁰ The Anabaptists had a shape similar to the sects that would follow them: voluntary membership, adult baptism of the converted and a democratic polity. An unrelenting ethical demand also characterised such movements. But whether the Anabaptists in Germany or the Puritans or Quakers in England, persecution prevented the sects of the disinherited from gaining a larger hold in Christianity, and also prevented their continuance.⁵¹ Unable to escape the demands of their context, they too became "churches".

Meanwhile, the voices of dissent continued in newer generations. Only with each movement, the social critique is more blunted and the lot of the constituents less severe. This is in part because Methodism, to take the example of "the last great movement of the disinherited in Christendom",⁵² was shaped by social forces other than simply material. Methodism was "the religious aspect of that great revolutionary movement of the eighteenth century which placed the individual at the center of things and so profoundly influenced all institutions."⁵³ Indeed Methodism, in Niebuhr's view, was a mixture of middle and upper class leadership and lower class (but

⁴⁷ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 26.

⁴⁸ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 32.

⁴⁹ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 29.

⁵⁰ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 34.

⁵¹ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 39, 45, 53.

⁵² Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 72.

⁵³ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 65. The term "religious aspect" implies that methodism was also a kind of culture-Protestantism in a time of contestation and cultural change. See the discussion on "religion" in the excursus above.

not only lower class) constituency.⁵⁴ It was hailed for its moderate social emphasis on education and emancipation. For Niebuhr, this is the beginning of a progression wherein the church, in the sense of “Christianity”, gradually loses the poor to secularisation. His phrase “the loss of social idealism”,⁵⁵ captures the demise of social Christianity in his day.

Niebuhr presents the churches of the middle class as more complex in their wovenness in context than those of the disinherited. “Political and cultural interests combine with economic desires in various ways”.⁵⁶ However, despite this complexity and diversity, the pattern of middle-class religion is fairly constant, for Niebuhr. Personal salvation rather than social redemption, personal merit rather than fate, and “practical rationalism” in religion are some characteristics Niebuhr names.⁵⁷ The righteousness by faith of the disinherited becomes the righteousness by law of the middle class.⁵⁸ “Bourgeois faith” was fated, however, to be taken over by the bourgeois, with the “faith” element disappearing. Even Jonathan Edwards, who would be the hero of Niebuhr’s next major work, *The Kingdom of God in America*, “with his great system of God-centered faith” represents the beginning of a line of degeneration into “the gospel of self help”.⁵⁹

The second set of social forces alongside class Niebuhr calls “ethnic and national”. Many of the denominations in America, Niebuhr points out, display in their very names their European national and ethnic origins.⁶⁰ Many others disguise their origins, but they are there nonetheless. When Niebuhr talks about the coincidence of nationalism and church groups, however, he is careful to distinguish a political from an ethnic understanding. While southern Europeans are more likely to be Catholic than Protestant, it does not follow that this is because of something in their ethnic makeup or physical traits.⁶¹ Nationalism is something which belongs to culture rather than nature.⁶²

⁵⁴ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 59-62.

⁵⁵ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 74.

⁵⁶ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 80.

⁵⁷ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 81-83.

⁵⁸ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 85.

⁵⁹ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 104-5.

⁶⁰ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 107.

⁶¹ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 110.

⁶² In terms of the understandings of nationalism discussed in part one of this thesis, Niebuhr would not be a primordialist. Indeed he is sensitive to the constructed and changing nature of nationalisms. Moreover he distinguishes between nationalism as a cultural and as a political principle, assigning historical priority to the former. *Social Sources*, 119. However, when he speaks of

The prevalence of nationalism in Christianity is traceable back almost to the beginning of Christianity, as the teaching of Jesus gave way to “the religious formulation of prevailing social ideals”.⁶³ When the “universal” empire began to break up, so did the “universal” church and universal culture. Greek patriotism, for example, and Orthodox theology became synonymous.⁶⁴ Similarly when modern nation-states arose after the Middle Ages (with its common language, and culture) fell apart, national churches also arose. These national churches predated the churches of the Reformation, although Niebuhr is able to say that “everywhere Protestant Christianity, consciously or unconsciously, adopted the principles of nationalism and identified itself with a particularist culture.”⁶⁵

When Niebuhr talks about *nationalism*, he does so with reference to a particular cultural way of being. This is similar to the idea of nationalism developed in Part One above. However, when he talks about nationalism and Christianity, he does so usually in terms of states and state churches. Nationalistic Christianity—or state churches—like the churches of the poor and the middle class is identifiable by commonalities of doctrine, ethics and polity. Its institutionalism (vs. the voluntarism of the sects) is coordinate with its being an arm of the state, likewise is the emphasis on uniformity in liturgy and creeds—which themselves frequently were born of church-state unity.⁶⁶ Christian ethics becomes individual ethics, with the domain of social ethics reserved for the state. However, nationalist churches also become victims, with their doctrinal differences that have been occasioned by national issues. Again the “common Christian ideal”,⁶⁷ which should unite across boundaries eludes.

Niebuhr’s criticism could be expressed toward much of what was shown as the different nationalisms in South Africa in Part One. However, only South African nationalism, during the period under consideration, was a nation-*state*. The fact that South Africa had rejected the principle of establishing a particular church or churches in 1875 did not do away with a certain nostalgia, particularly amongst Anglicans. Yet the idea of “the reunion of Christendom” had a more “spiritual” thrust than a move to place an institution in a special relation to the state. The idea was to cement loyalty

nationalism and Christianity, what he seems to have in mind is the phenomenon of state churches, implying that nation, church and state are coincident. *Social Sources*, 125f. This as we saw in part one is not necessarily true.

⁶³ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 112.

⁶⁴ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 113.

⁶⁵ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 122.

⁶⁶ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 127.

to the state on the part of white citizens, and to use that as the basis of a common nationhood.

African nationalism was also loyal to a political structure, but one which transcended the South African state—the British monarch. This loyalty was not a matter of compromise, however, but a matter of relativising the power of an increasing oppressive polity. Even loyalty to the monarch was relativised by the higher principles of Christianity—African nationalism was able to differentiate between loyalty to the British Empire and to the principles underlying that loyalty. The call for an “African national church” was motivated not by the need to consolidate power, but as a basis for mobilisation.

Afrikaner nationalism, like African nationalism, was not invested in state power during the period of investigation. However, Afrikaner nationalism was represented within what was then considered legitimate political structures. Its loyalty was also to a principle higher than politics: the *volk*. Ironically it was Afrikaner nationalism which came closest to establishing a particular church, as a *volkskerk* and then as a *de facto* state church. Of the three nationalisms, only African nationalism saw Christianity as a uniting force across the most prevalent boundary of the time: race.

Niebuhr’s category of “nationalistic Christianity” is difficult to apply within a South African context. It is therefore only partly true that “The kingdoms of this world became the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ, but only by subdividing the latter along the boundaries of the former and by accommodating the rule of the divine Sovereign to the peculiar needs of his various mundane retainers.”⁶⁸

The first four chapters of *Social Sources* have highlighted the sources of church disunity in Europe. He now turns to America, where he will spend the next four chapters. While he acknowledges that “the primary social sources of American denominationalism are to be sought in the European history of the churches which have immigrated to the new world”,⁶⁹ Niebuhr observes that the new situation brought new lines of division, especially sectionalism (industrial north vs. agricultural south and settlement vs. frontier), immigration and racialism. While Christianity was “transplanted” to America (and in this way all churches were churches of the immigrants),

⁶⁷ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 132.

⁶⁸ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 134.

⁶⁹ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 135.

where Niebuhr is heading is towards developing an idea of “American Christianity”, which has its own particular characteristics, and yet which is equally far from the ideal as the European variety.

Identity and assimilation: toward American Christianity

What is denoted by “sectionalism” is actually a complex of cultural, political and economic factors and forces. Life on the frontier, with its individualism and instability produced entirely new denominations, while the settlement stuck to European forms. Drawing heavily on the study of the frontier by Frederick Jackson Turner, Niebuhr traces how the religion of the disinherited was reproduced in great measure on the frontier.⁷⁰ Life was harsh, characterised by “constant crisis”. Survival was uncertain.⁷¹ Revivalism was a common form of church meeting, conducted by itinerant preachers. Likewise the distance from the theological training of the east meant that an emphasis on lay leadership was strong. In these gatherings, particular denominational identities did not seem to matter: the hymns and the symbols were the same; the style of conversions, were according to the same pattern,⁷² which Niebuhr termed “frontier faith”. Interestingly even theological systems as different as Calvinism and Arminianism could be accommodated within frontier faith, being adapted to the conditions there.⁷³ On the other hand, traditions which had frontier and settlement branches (such as Presbyterianism) could experience tremendous strife and disunity—even to the point of schism. Niebuhr traces two examples of this: Congregationalism⁷⁴ and Presbyterianism.⁷⁵

Boundaries shift, however. A frontier town eventually becomes a city of its own. Even frontier faith, with its spontaneity and lay-nature, became formalised as the frontier boundaries shifted. Revivals “became part of a new ritual, which called forth the more or less traditional response of conversion.”⁷⁶ The distinction between rural and urban takes over from frontier and settlement—a distinction (and conflict) which continues in Niebuhr’s day.⁷⁷ In the settlement as well, denominations, classes

⁷⁰ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 141.

⁷¹ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 181.

⁷² Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 179.

⁷³ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 145.

⁷⁴ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 145-54.

⁷⁵ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 154-64.

⁷⁶ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 170.

⁷⁷ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 184ff.

and political parties “showed a considerable amount of correlation”.⁷⁸ Baptist independency and a political commitment to state sovereignty and Methodist centralism with political republicanism are two examples Niebuhr gives.⁷⁹

If the east-west divisions are characterised by complexity of factors, Niebuhr is careful to present north-south divisions in terms of economic factors primarily. Perhaps this is to correct a perception that it was moral differences that stood behind different attitudes to slavery. Notwithstanding the voices in the North which defended slavery, and those in the South which opposed it, “the economic forces [the need for cheap labour] had their way.” Eventually culture consolidated in the south around the need to defend its institution, and the idealisation of “southern culture” was born.⁸⁰ Denominational divisions (sometimes within the same church, as for example the Presbyterian) soon followed—with political loyalties being conflated with doctrinal and ecclesial orthodoxies.

The chapter on immigration displays the greatest amount of complexity. For here Niebuhr re-presents the European national- and class-specific churches, which have been formed within a particular context, loosened (and often trying to escape) from that context and woven into another. The new context had a complexity of forces (which Niebuhr summarises under the term “Americanization”), most importantly democracy and the availability of free land in the “secular” sphere, and the separation of church and state in the “religious”.⁸¹ Immigration automatically “disestablished” pre-established churches, which then had to develop alternative models of governance, eventually developing “a new, common American church-type”.⁸² They also had to rethink their relation to the state in light of separation of church and state—something which has made them, at least in Niebuhr’s mind—less likely to baptise the actions of the state than the sects of Europe which came escaping persecution.⁸³

In all this, Niebuhr identifies two important and contradictory tendencies in the churches of the immigrants. The first is the tendency to pattern themselves after the churches established in America (and sometimes this means the *same* church but

⁷⁸ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 175.

⁷⁹ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 178.

⁸⁰ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 190.

⁸¹ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 200-1.

⁸² Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 206-7, 211.

⁸³ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 210.

established by an earlier generation), that is *accommodation*. The second is *differentiation*, or asserting distinctiveness.⁸⁴

Churches are important cultural centres, places of contact with the old world, where strands of continuity can be maintained—even to the point, claims Niebuhr, where “many an immigrant church became more a racial and cultural than a religious institution”.⁸⁵ They differentiate themselves over against the dominant culture, but also other immigrant churches and even previous generations of immigrants from their own country and church. Accommodation is the norm, however, for Niebuhr. The loyalties of a second generation are different than those of the first, which has the memory of Europe and its conflicts still in its mind.⁸⁶ When a new generation of Dutch immigrants, for example, met a previous generation which had established themselves, they found not the “Dutch Reformed Church” but the “Reformed Church in America”, which used the same hymns as the other American churches. Not finding a home there, the new immigrants themselves went on to form the “True Dutch Reformed Church”—which would eventually also lose its national particularity—becoming “The Christian Reformed Church”. Of this example Niebuhr quips, “By such changes of name a great many internal changes are implied.”⁸⁷ Niebuhr identifies the same dynamics in Lutheranism, with the struggle to maintain distinctions between German and Scandinavian churches. Here, as in Scottish and Irish Presbyterianism, churches multiplied (differentiation) but eventually began to amalgamate as American national consciousness overcame that of the old country.⁸⁸ The adoption of a common polity, hymnody and language (English) has made them fall into line as “denominations”.

Full circle: the marginality of race

The last of the social sources that Niebuhr names is race. And yet, Niebuhr goes on, “the schisms of the future are more likely to be racial schisms than economic

⁸⁴ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 205.

⁸⁵ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 223.

⁸⁶ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 229. Doctrinal differentiation is more likely to characterise a second generation, and characterises an ongoing quest for ecclesial identity in a situation of cultural assimilation. *Social Sources*, 230ff.

⁸⁷ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 214. A South African instance is the former “Bantu” and “Tsonga” Presbyterian churches being renamed, eventually, the “Reformed” and “Evangelical” Presbyterian churches, respectively.

⁸⁸ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 219.

or even national divisions of the church.”⁸⁹ This is not simply an American problem, he goes on, but the importation of Christianity to Africa and Asia makes it a world problem.

The immigrants described above, and African Americans were the two groups among all those living on the margins of the American national identity for which Niebuhr had special regard. One explanation of this ties-in with our discussion of culture-protestantism and concerns the Englishness of American nationalism. Adrian Hastings has argued that from the beginning New England was both a continuation and a critique of old England. The American English were more homogeneous than the old English, with similar religious identities and language.⁹⁰ While the language question is very important—something which Niebuhr himself points out in noting the way the churches of the immigrants struggle with the question of translating their liturgy and hymnody into the new tongue—America’s origins were less homogeneous than Hastings allows. The Dutch background of what became New York and Pennsylvania cannot be underplayed. And yet it is difficult to disagree with the idea of a fairly homogeneous core—at least up to Niebuhr’s time—to American culture. While it would be fairly easy to assimilate other Europeans—even those of different class backgrounds—into this core, African Americans bore the marks of their difference on their bodies. The visibility of their different racial and class locations, representing suspicious loyalties, meant they would remain outsiders. This was true in the church as much as any other institution, so much so that Niebuhr could say that racial discrimination, unlike class or other markings, was so prevalent that it required no doctrinal legitimisation.⁹¹

Niebuhr’s account of “the color line” and African American strategies of resistance is deeply insightful and echoes some of what was said about African nationalism. He identifies four ways the race issue has been dealt with in American churches: complete fellowship on an equal basis; segregated congregations, with separate sections for blacks, or a separate black congregation (though under control of the white minister); and completely different organisations.⁹²

⁸⁹ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 239.

⁹⁰ *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 74.

⁹¹ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 236.

⁹² Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 254-5.

Blacks had been in America since the early seventeenth century. For the most part, prior to the US Civil War, black and white had worshipped in the same churches, even though the Master-slave relations were unchallenged. This was not simply a matter of Christian charity, however, and “the church relationship was on the most part designed to enlist the forces of religion in the task of preserving the civil relationship between masters and slaves.”⁹³ The development of independent organisations (run by blacks for blacks) was dangerous in the minds of whites, as Negro churches had been meeting places for “revolutionaries”.⁹⁴ This was similar to the response of whites in South Africa to black independency in churches. Segregation in the sense of completely different organisations, in this way, was even a necessary step in the self-assertion of black Christians, in both contexts.

While he acknowledges these strategic differences among American blacks with reference to Christianity, he does not discuss schism *within* African American churches. This is difficult to do in South Africa, where denominationalism has been an important factor in mobilising within and across boundaries of class, language and tribe, as chapter three pointed out.

African American churches, in Niebuhr’s analysis, represent an American version of the churches of the disinherited, with their “emotional, empirical religion”.⁹⁵ His analysis, which began with “the churches of the disinherited” in Europe, has therefore come full circle. And yet, unlike the churches of the disinherited in Europe, he holds out little hope for the American black churches leaving the margins. “[T]he color line has been drawn so incisively by the church itself”.⁹⁶ Shifting locations runs up against its limits in racialism, which a later writer would call “America’s original sin” (Jim Wallis).

Niebuhr ends his analysis of the social sources of denominationalism by reflecting, specifically with reference to race, that “something more than a sociological cure seems necessary for the healing of this wound in the body of Christ.”⁹⁷ The last words contain the important phrase “cry of repentance”. In the last chapter, which answers the indictment of the first, he struggles to find this way beyond a “sociological” cure. He looks beyond the church’s denominational “aspect”, its being “one so-

⁹³ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 252-3.

⁹⁴ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 248, 250.

⁹⁵ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 262.

⁹⁶ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 263.

cial institution alongside of many others”, something “conditioned” rather than a “conditioner”.⁹⁸ But before doing this he reasserts the cultural importance of Christianity.

The social ideal of Christianity⁹⁹

Niebuhr has prepared a large canvas for portraying the role of the church. With the memory of the Great War in mind, the need of the world is for a “synthesis of culture” with the integration of races, nations and classes. Such an integration requires “a common spiritual end”,¹⁰⁰ “a common worldview and a common ethics”,¹⁰¹ and “a common loyalty”.¹⁰² The body of civilisation needs the soul of religion.¹⁰³

But what of this religion which, given its historical position, must be Christianity? Niebuhr surveyed three versions of the Christianity of his day. First, there is a move to unification on an institutional level, which parallels the cultural shift from heterogeneity to homogeneity, or the ascendancy of the “melting pot.” This however runs against the grain of the social fabric, which produces at the same time new kinds of plurality. Until the Christian ideal controls the social forces, any church unity is likely to create more diversity.¹⁰⁴ In the meantime the only option is to balance the need to adjust to the culture with refusal to uncritically adopt the ethics of the culture.¹⁰⁵ In our terms, this means to weave itself into the culture while eschewing the overall direction of that culture. But this is not adequate, and leaves Niebuhr with a paradox: while adjustment is necessary for survival, “the church which seeks universality by means of such adjustment sacrifices its claims to universality.”¹⁰⁶ This merely “sociological cure”, is not the ideal Christianity Niebuhr seeks, but only an interim version.

⁹⁷ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 263.

⁹⁸ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 264-5.

⁹⁹ In this last section, Niebuhr emulates Troeltsch's *Social Teachings* in three ways. First, he identifies the need for a religious spirit to infuse culture in order to save culture from its pluralising forces. Second, he agrees that the only religion appropriate is Christianity, even repeating what Troeltsch said about Eastern religions being inappropriate. cf. Troeltsch, *Social Teachings*, 14. Third, Christianity provides an ideal for culture. In Troeltsch's case, the ideal is Personality (1005). This is Christianity's answer to its cultured despisers, for Troeltsch, and American social activists, for Niebuhr. On Troeltsch, see chapter four above.

¹⁰⁰ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 267.

¹⁰¹ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 266.

¹⁰² Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 268.

¹⁰³ cf. Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 264.

¹⁰⁴ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 271-2.

¹⁰⁵ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 274.

¹⁰⁶ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 274.

A second kind of Christianity that Niebuhr sees is the transcendental version of crisis theology. He calls this (in contradistinction to “denominational” or sociological Christianity), “theological Christianity”.¹⁰⁷ Theological Christianity calls into question all ethics, Christian or societal, and claims that the only hope is in “a radical, cosmic revolution” which will destroy the present order and substitute an entirely new one.¹⁰⁸ The problem with this, says Niebuhr, is the relation between the ideal and “the cosmic fact”. Dealing with the present world is inescapable, and so is the need for shades of grey (“the more good”) rather than black and white in making decisions. “Theological” Christianity is no more capable of curing than the “sociological” variety.

The required ideal, for Niebuhr, is “doubtless” contained in a third kind of Christianity: the Christianity of the gospels. This kind reveals “the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of men” in the life of Christ, setting before people the *summum bonum* of the eternal harmony of love. Thus Niebuhr, addressing a Troeltschean problematic, retreats to an invocation of Harnackean social Christianity.¹⁰⁹ But at the same time, as his analysis has shown, the more marginal the Christianity, the closer it is to the ideal.¹¹⁰ Niebuhr specifically mentions new versions of Christianity emerging in other lands, “among the masses of men betrayed into useless toil and murderous warfare by the ethics of the world”.¹¹¹ This gospel ideal will “provide material for the creative synthesis of human culture and for the organic integration of mankind into a functional whole.”¹¹²

Only a church which “has transcended the divisions of the world and has adjusted itself, not to the local interests and needs of classes, races, or nations but to the common interests of mankind and to the constitution of the unrealized Kingdom of God” can proclaim such an ideal.¹¹³ Only such a church can bridge the gap between cultures and transcend human divisions. Is this not, however, simply another sect that Niebuhr describes? He does not think so. What he describes “has always existed as a

¹⁰⁷ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 278.

¹⁰⁸ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 276.

¹⁰⁹ Although the language (“love”) is Harnack’s and the Social Gospel’s, the form of the argument is Troeltsch’s.

¹¹⁰ Of course, we could add that the more marginal the Christianity, the further away it is from its role as sacred centre of “civilisation”.

¹¹¹ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 279. This is one of the few references Niebuhr makes to Christianity outside of the west.

¹¹² Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 280.

¹¹³ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 280.

church within the churches.”¹¹⁴ He begins to hint at an alternative history, almost an *inner* history, of Christianity. He uses words like “savor” and “spirit” to describe the relation between his ideal Christianity and the institutions. And yet there is also a “savor” of desperation about this retreat into Harnackean liberalism.

Perhaps surprisingly, H. Richard Niebuhr had little to say about denominationalism in his later writings. As already indicated, *The Kingdom of God in America* is in many ways the opposite side of *Social Sources*—though it would be inaccurate to say that the one completes what is lacking in the other. Both are products of a struggle to locate American Christianity and its problems, but with different theological and historical paradigms. In the *Meaning of Revelation* there is a strong sense that denominations belong to the out-side of the Christian community: the body as opposed to the spirit.¹¹⁵ Denominationalism would then be an instance of a part being substituted for the whole. In *Radical Monotheism* two implied references to denominationalism see it as an example of polytheism in the case of a sect or henotheism applied to Christianity.¹¹⁶ His only mature reflection on denominationalism takes place in *The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry*. Here he does refer to the denomination as “that peculiar order of American church organization”.¹¹⁷ Denominationalism represents a pluralism paralleling in some ways political pluralism, although the context of ministry and church life is the universal church as a whole, within which denominations express its “variety and unity”.¹¹⁸ The idea of denominationalism as an ethical failure is gone.

But denominationalism is not the primary concern of this thesis, nor even of this chapter. Nor is it interested in criticising the merits of Niebuhr’s account of denominationalism from a sociological point of view. While Niebuhr took care to use sociological works correctly, his real concerns were not strictly about the sociology of Christianity. Rather this chapter—and indeed, we would argue, *Social Sources*—is about entanglements, about the relation between Christian faith and the social forces that ensnare it in compromise. To that theme we now return.

¹¹⁴ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 282.

¹¹⁵ “[E]very part of disunited Christendom interprets its past through an image of itself and holds fast without repentance to that image”. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), 87.

¹¹⁶ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism*, 25, 58.

¹¹⁷ Niebuhr, Daniel Day Williams and James Gustafson, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry: Reflections on the Aims of Theological Education* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 6.

¹¹⁸ Niebuhr, Williams and Gustafson, *The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry*, 8, 17, 23.

Reflection: entanglements

We have seen how at the end of *Social Sources* Niebuhr invokes the spirit of Harnack and of the American Social Gospel, speaking of an “ideal” Christianity which embodies a principle of unity that transcends social divisions: the Christianity of the gospels. This is the Christianity that is incarnated in the sects of the poor of which he has spoken. Niebuhr conceives Christians—presumably not the poor, however, but liberals in American churches of his day—working as weavers to bring about harmony motivated by this ideal. “The way to the organic, active peace of brotherhood leads through the hearts of peacemakers who will knit together... the shorn and tangled fibers of human aspirations, faiths, and hopes, who will transcend the fears and dangers of an adventure of trust.”¹¹⁹ The ideal is a guideline for this “knitting”, straight and symmetrical, which is not itself a part of the garment to be fashioned.

The church shares this ideal with its society, as we saw in our treatment of culture-protestantism and its role as conductor in the quest for harmony. But where exactly do we look to find this ideal? “The hope of gathering into one church in common loyalty to a common Master, a common doctrine and a common ethics the rich and the poor, the black and yellow and white, the educated and the naïve, remains the great ideal which alone can represent the true character of Christianity.”¹²⁰ Niebuhr realised that overcoming divisions within the church is a matter of coming to terms with the entanglements between Christianity and nationalism, classism, racism and so forth. But even coming to terms with these is not sufficient. For beneath all the different entanglements is a Master Entanglement. And this cannot be overcome without the removal of Christianity from the world.

In an article written about the same time as *Social Sources*, Niebuhr notes that, paradoxically, given the present situation the fulfilment of this ideal in the church could mean nothing other than the creation of another sect. Niebuhr had acknowledged this in *Social Sources*, though this time (i.e. in the article) he does not retreat into the three types of Christianity solution. It is a paradox for *all* Christianity. The realisation of this ideal in anything other than a universal context (and there is no such thing as a universal context) actually perpetuates the problem of denominationalism,

¹¹⁹ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 284.

¹²⁰ Niebuhr, “Churches That Might Unite”, *The Christian Century*, 21 February 1929, 260.

creating yet another division. Not only this, but its particular context constrains the church.

How can it preach effectively the doctrine of brotherhood between classes, nations and races until it practices that doctrine itself, but—and here is the most baffling aspect of our problem—how can it practice that doctrine until brotherhood between classes, races and nations has been established?¹²¹

The church strains against its limits. It can only show the way to unity if it frees itself from its context. This is precisely the thing it cannot do, as borne out in Niebuhr's critique of escapist Christianity.¹²²

Perhaps more theologically, Niebuhr writes at the outset of *Social Sources*, that “the very essence of Christianity lies in the tension which it presupposes or creates between the worlds of nature and of spirit, and in its resolution of that conflict by means of justifying faith.”¹²³ We have seen that tension displayed in his division between the denominational body (which must compromise with the world) and the spirit of the ideal. Christianity demands the impossible, “in the world but not of the world”. Compromise is inevitable, and “at the end, if not at the beginning, of every effort to incorporate Christianity”. And so “the Christian cannot escape the necessity of seeking the last source of righteousness and the world in a divine aggression,¹²⁴ in a justification that is by faith.”¹²⁵ Perhaps not all compromises are created equal (he says, after all, that denominationalism is “a compromise made far too lightly”¹²⁶), but all are inevitable consequences of living in the world. At the end of the day, Christians are driven by this paradox into the arms of God. But is this adequate to address the social needs Niebuhr wanted to address, or even to reflect the social (rather than individual or existential) nature of faith?¹²⁷

¹²¹ Niebuhr, “Churches That Might Unite”, 261.

¹²² See Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 275ff.

¹²³ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 4.

¹²⁴ This is not the last time Niebuhr would express this sentiment, reminiscent of the idea of “muscular Christianity” popular during the twenties. But later (as in *The Kingdom of God in America*) the divine aggression would be located *in* not *beyond* the world.

¹²⁵ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 5.

¹²⁶ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 6.

¹²⁷ As Keiser points out, Niebuhr's theological anthropology at this stage reflects a liberal social ethics. While the idea of the social self is not absent from Niebuhr's thought (and indeed characterises the ethos of the churches of the dispossessed), the idea here is that society as a whole consists of individuals who are now called upon to sacrifice their individual selves and expand their individuality into their “better selves”. *Roots of Relational Ethics: Responsibility in Origin and Maturity in H. Richard Niebuhr* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 6. cf. Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 284.

If this Master Entanglement cannot be overcome, then the question is really one of damage limitation. This is not a satisfactory solution for a religion that proclaims repentance as a complete reorientation of loyalties.

It might seem from the above that *Social Sources* leaves us tied-up in knots. This would, however, disparage its prophetic thrust. For the work makes a powerful claim about the way Christianity is woven into its context, and about its hyphens. And yet that claim is held in ambivalence. For Niebuhr, hyphens mean compromise, not strategic alliances made for the sake of the integrity of the Christian gospel in a broken world. Christianity is for him really not *woven* into its context—it is too different in spirit. Rather, Christianity is *tangled-up* with its context.

Christianity, Niebuhr thinks, should be simple, not complex—beyond all hyphens. It should transcend all particularist conditions, while eschewing a despairing transcendentalism.

The Social Sources of Denominationalism, acknowledged a multiplicity of interests (class, race, national) which made up the denominational identities contesting Christianity in the US. This is inevitable, given the nature of reality which for Niebuhr is always caught up in the struggle between unity and diversity, particularity and universality, the ideal and the real. For him, this made Christianity not contextual, but compromised. Yet this was always how Christianity was to be—even while its true calling was to hold forth an ideal which existed beyond particularity which would unify human activity, to represent the universal in the guise of the particular, and to locate itself amongst the forces of divisiveness. Christians are entangled in the actualities of the world. Their loyalties negotiate faith.

The Social Sources of Denominationalism offers one possibility for reading Christianity in South Africa—as a history of compromise with the forces of colonialism and resistance, reflecting rather than challenging its context(s), as a victim (or even a co-conspirator) of conditioning factors rather than an agent. This kind of reading is difficult to dispute, given what we have said in the previous chapter about the way Christianity legitimated its context by mirroring it. It also fits well with the culture-protestantisms we identified in South Africa, lending credence to Niebuhr's observation that "everywhere Protestant Christianity, consciously or unconsciously, adopted

the principles of nationalism and identified itself with a particularist culture”,¹²⁸ extending this also to South Africa.

We might be tempted to stop here. It seems that *Social Sources* has put its finger on the problem—even with its somewhat outdated mythology of “social forces” and despite its own internal inconsistencies. It would seem self-evident that Christianity in South Africa has in the same way compromised with its society.

But this claim leaves no room for manoeuvring, no room to breathe. The garment of context is tightly fitting. But there *are* a few threads dangling, including the thread of faith. Niebuhr makes scant reference to it as an agentive force. He usually treats it as a minor thread overshadowed by the larger threads of class and nation. Faith, or religion, is sometimes identified with “doctrinal particularities”, or denominational identities.¹²⁹ Sometimes (usually) faith is an effect of social forces, or rather their sacralisation (as when dogma, polity and ethics lend an air of legitimacy to middle-class existence). But there is also the faith of the poor, which is not reducible to legitimisation of their social status. To the contrary. This is a thread that runs against the grain, which threatens to undo the very fabric of society. This, as we saw above, was termed by Niebuhr, “unconditional faith in a divine revelation, the naivete of a complete surrender and the intransigence of certitude”.¹³⁰ “Unconditional faith” is a faith that transcends the conditioning of the social forces as (it is implied) is “divine revelation”. Yet it does this in a community shaped in the midst of the social forces. Perhaps the (naïve) faith of the poor is a thread that releases theological possibility from the oppressive prison of mere sociological actuality. And not only the socio-economically poor. In the case of Niebuhr’s treatment of race, the marginality was more than that of the *economically* disenfranchised—although he tied it to a notion of “prejudice” which is too psychologically oriented.¹³¹ There the faith of the marginalised was recognised as socially dangerous—at least potentially.



We could (perhaps going beyond Niebuhr yet in the spirit of Niebuhr) extend beyond the socio-economic sphere to “the marginalised” in other ways. The faith of the mar-

¹²⁸ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 122.

¹²⁹ See the excursus above.

¹³⁰ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 29.

¹³¹ That is to say, racial distinction is not merely class-based. This is also evident from our discussion of African nationalism in chapter three.

ginal sounds a dissonance, the wrong note in the harmonious c[h]ord (so much for Niebuhr's ideal!). This thread of faith could be the occasion for a reweaving of the whole garment. But something more is needed: an appropriate view or experience of God, not merely as a principle of harmony (which can only lead to a "more of the same" conservatism) but as the one who unravels (and sometimes tears) and calls us to reweave our garments; and a view of faith at the nexus of loyalties, rather than the margins. This is an experience which, in Niebuhr's journey and theology, can only come through radical disorientation, dislocation, conversion. At the other side is radical faith. To radical faith the next chapter turns.

Radical Faith

Niebuhr and American Christianity in Transition

The previous chapter described an entangled faith which was tied-up with legitimising social forces and perpetuating conflict. It also presented Niebuhr's ideal for a faith that pointed to the hope of transcendent unity. It is in the conflict of these two faiths that Niebuhr's interpretation of American Christianity is located. With a new understanding of faith, neither as entangled nor as transcendent, comes a new understanding of American Christianity. This new understanding develops two categories for faith: social faith and radical faith. The culmination of Niebuhr's new interpretation of American Christianity through his new understanding of faith comes in *The Kingdom of God in America* and its implications for the loyalties in community in *The Meaning of Revelation*. These two works will be examined in chapter seven. The present chapter discusses the groundwork for these in the early 1930s. It identifies the connection between the conviction of the sovereignty of God, radical faith and religious realism in terms of the reorientation of his theology. Starting with his new interpretation of his own context, it proceeds to show how his own interpretation of the role of faith in the formation of culture takes shape.

From orientation to disorientation

The Social Sources of Denominationalism identified historical and empirical faith as a reflection of plural social forces, such as nationality, race, ethnic origin and class. This faith, expressed in the polity, dogma and ethics of churches, sects and denominations, was criticised as granting legitimacy to social divisions. The sacred institutions that bear the marks of the social forces, in turn, grant these forces a sense of permanence. *Social Sources* set this against a normative view of Christianity which saw its task as holding forth an ideal to society, expressed in the church. The faith he thought normative was to point beyond contested loyalties and pluralities to social harmony. The faith that Niebuhr actually found in his historical study is therefore a faith that is a compromise with the many and a turning away from the transcendent ideal.

In the 1930s, a new strand appears in H. Richard Niebuhr's work: radical faith. It is a faith no longer reactive, nor a simple reflection of more primal material forces. Neither is it a faith that simply invoked an ideal beyond the social forces. Radical faith is a faith that goes to the root (*radix*) of human selfhood and its relations to the other loyalties compelling its attention. It is a faith both radical in the sense of having primacy amongst the other shaping forces and in the sense of rooting human selfhood in the Transcendent. The appearance of this thread would re-weave all Niebuhr's theology. It would reorient his vision not to an ideal *beyond* history, but to the real disclosed *in* history.

Central to Niebuhr's change is his new vision of God: a God no longer created after and relative to human and cultural needs but the One that both relativises, judges and re-affirms those needs in what he would term "permanent revolution". The location of this God in American history transforms not only Niebuhr's assessment of human faith but also his critical apprehension of the function and role of religion in culture. This allows him to take up afresh the topic of American Christianity, introduced in the chapter on "immigrant Christianity" in *Social Sources*. What he had criticised as "ethical compromise" is now affirmed as "constructive Protestantism". Radical faith—which functions both as Niebuhr's point of departure and the topic of his study—enables him to see differently. Indeed, the change in vision in his writings exemplifies his own theological understanding of faith.

Changing vision

The Social Sources of Denominationalism envisioned a Christianity straining at the limits, being sustained by the hope of a loyalty which transcended the forces holding it in suspension. Radical faith begins with the new apprehension of God in Niebuhr's writings of the early 1930s. It is generally agreed among Niebuhr scholars that the gulf between his earlier work, epitomised in *Social Sources*, and his mature work, may be accounted for by a change in his view of God.¹ For Fowler, this change is charac-

¹ e.g. R. Melvin Keiser, *Roots of Relational Ethics: Responsibility in Origin and Maturity in H. Richard Niebuhr* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), passim, but especially 23-40; Douglas F. Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology* (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1982), 24ff; James W. Fowler, *To See the Kingdom: The Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1973), 57ff.

The thirties was such a time of "conversion" for many theologians. *The Christian Century's* "How I Changed My Mind" series was first published in 1939 and contains a number of such testimonials. Niebuhr himself, in his "Reformation: Continuing Imperative" article published two years before his death in 1962, identified a change in his thinking during the early 30s in the ar-

terised by an effort “to conceive a new synthesis that would adequately emphasise the priority and independence of God in relation to all other dependent being, but which at the same time could give expression to the decisive involvement of God in time and in human experience.”² This development, for Fowler, is basically complete by 1937. Niebuhr himself identified the challenge for theology as locating “the places where the eternal breaks into our time”, but also “discovering and defining the sort of life, individual and social, in which the present may realize its relation to the eternal”.³

Scholars agree that this new view of God and God’s relation to “dependent being” can be termed “realism”.⁴ Indeed while Barth and Tillich used realism to emphasise the otherness of God, for Niebuhr realism distinguishes God from the values and aspirations of humankind but also affirms the interrelationship between God and God’s world.⁵ We have already explored in brief the realism expressed in the empirical theology of Niebuhr’s mentor at Yale, D. C. Macintosh. The conviction of the sovereignty of God now allows Niebuhr to go beyond the liberalism of Macintosh, who defined God relative to values, to embrace a God who is, as he would later say, the source of all value.⁶ Indeed, this God is the source of all being: the God of reality.

“Realism” parallels a key idea in the development of Niebuhr’s idea of faith negotiating loyalties: “radical faith”. As William Stacy Johnson puts it, “What Niebuhr in the 1930s called ‘radical faith’ or in the 1950s ‘radical monotheism,’ was the belief that selves encounter God in all events, and that reality should be encountered and transformed according to the purposes of God.”⁷ Put this way, the change from the idealist God invoked for the sake of cultural synthesis in *Social Sources* and in his ear-

eas of moral obligation, the nature of sin and the sovereignty of God. *The Christian Century*, 2 March 1960, 248.

² Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 57.

³ H. Richard Niebuhr, “Theology in a Time of Disillusionment” (1931), in *Theology, History, Culture: Major Unpublished Writings*, ed. William Stacy Johnson (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1996), 115. Thus at the beginning of this period Niebuhr defined the very problem that was the point of departure for *The Kingdom of God in America*: the problem of constructive Protestantism. See H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 17ff.

⁴ The term “realism” enters Niebuhr’s theological vocabulary in a 1931 article entitled “Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century”. “Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century”, in *Religious Realism*, ed. D. C. Macintosh (New York: MacMillan, 1931), 413-28. Keiser, however, claims that “realism” only characterises the initial stage of Niebuhr’s conversion to a relational view of God—a change which takes place toward the end of 1929 but which is unfolded gradually over the rest of Niebuhr’s career. Keiser, *Roots of Relational Ethics*, 26, 38.

⁵ Keiser, *Roots of Relational Ethics*, 25.

⁶ Niebuhr, “Reformation: Continuing Imperative”, 248.

⁷ William Stacy Johnson, “Introduction”, *Theology, History and Culture*, ed. Johnson, xv.

lier work is stark. There Niebuhr is unapologetic that "our definitions of God's nature are conditioned by our need of Him."⁸ Here it is God who acts in and through history—regardless of what humans want or need.⁹

Disillusionment

This reorientation of Niebuhr's faith comes on the heels of a profound cultural "disorientation",¹⁰ which also marks the distance between the optimistic spirit of the "roaring twenties" and the pessimistic spirit of the "dirty thirties". Indeed, the distance between these two can be measured in terms of the illusions of progress and a profound disillusionment that followed in the wake of the end of that dream. This disillusionment both created a crisis of loyalties, especially those that were locked into a vision which saw inevitable progress as the outcome of human culture. But it also opened up the possibility of a realignment of loyalties through a new faith in the Transcendent which shone through the cracks in the old world-view. This was underlined by Niebuhr's first visit to Germany.

Shifting locations

Although Niebuhr's identity was of an American with German roots, and he had been profoundly influenced by German theology and philosophy, it was 1930 before he visited the country of his ancestors. What did this mean for him? Niebuhr wrote to his brother Reinhold shortly before embarking that Germany for him repre-

⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, "An Aspect of the Idea of God in Recent Thought", *Theological Magazine of the Evangelical Synod of North America* 48 (1920), 39.

⁹ Keiser implies a much more dramatic conversion than the evidence suggests. Fowler has shown that the "conversion" of Niebuhr is as much a matter of faith development as it is radical, once-off change. Indeed overtures to the themes of Niebuhr's realism are sounded in his work in the 1920s. See Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*. If Keiser is right in saying that "Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic" signals Niebuhr's "conversion", we still need to account for how, just a few months before, *Social Sources* was published, still shot through with liberal idealism. Perhaps Fowler's suggestion that Niebuhr was working on *Social Sources* from his arrival at Elmhurst in 1927, that while working on it his ideas were changing, and so that he had to get *Social Sources* out of the way before he could fully explore the new direction, helps explain it. This would certainly account also for the fact that "Niebuhr [seems] unsatisfied with this blend of Troeltschean analysis and Social Gospel rhetoric even as he writes it." Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 45-6. His critique of psychologising religion in his 1927 article, "Psychology and Theology: A Sterile Union", wants to "attend to the real object of religious consciousness" (cited Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 47; c.f. Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 195). This is a realist, rather than an idealist, formulation. We are inclined to agree with Fowler that there is an important current of continuity in his writings from *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* through to the last work he lived to see published, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*. At the same time, there is a definite change as the strands of his theology are rewoven into new patterns. The new threads do not create an entirely new garment, they rather realign and reconfigure the threads of the old.

¹⁰ The categories "orientation", "disorientation" and "reorientation" are derived from Walter Brueggemann's work, especially *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

sented “a chance to get out of my provincialism”¹¹—an interesting statement in light of the fact that his “provincialism” was as the President of the mostly German Elmhurst College! What he actually saw on this visit was the ashes of the culture Protestantism of Harnack and Troeltsch, but also a new and ominous faith arising from there. He witnessed firsthand not only the growing association of the church with the German and later the Nazi cause, but also the devastating consequences of war and its aftermath that provided a ferment for the national self-assertion soon to come. Germany also exposed him firsthand to the disastrous consequences of confusing national loyalties and loyalty to the Kingdom of God. Indeed, his new view of God demanded a new understanding of the nature of loyalties and their negotiation.¹² His experience in Germany underscored the ambiguity of the “righteous cause” and perhaps accounts for his poignant statements both on the Manchurian crisis of 1932 and during the Second World War.¹³ No war is “just”. No cause is pure. All motives are mixed.

Niebuhr was still on the boat in New York Harbor when a letter was handed to him, inviting him to a post at Yale University Divinity School. Leaving the parochial (“provincial”) environment of Elmhurst upon leaving the U.S. for Europe and then returning to the interdenominational environment of Yale symbolises and encapsulates the changes to come in Niebuhr’s theology during the 1930s.¹⁴ His theology also began to be characterised by a change of location of another kind. While his most explicit reflection on “the point of view” would not come until *The Meaning of Revelation* in 1941, from the early thirties, Niebuhr was speaking of faith in terms of

¹¹ Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 122.

¹² See especially H. Richard Niebuhr, “Nationalism, Socialism and Christianity”, *The World Tomorrow* 16 (1933), 469-70. Jon Diefenthaler points out that Niebuhr was especially disturbed by the impact that the Treaty of Versailles had on humiliated Germany, and the way it had inadvertently created the conditions under which Hitler and the Nazis could arise. *H. Richard Niebuhr: A Lifetime of Reflections on the Church and the World* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1986), 29. We noticed similar things happening in the ferment after the South African War that gave rise to Afrikaner ethnic mobilisation.

¹³ H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Grace of Doing Nothing”, *The Christian Century*, 23 March 1932, 378-80; H. Richard Niebuhr, “A Communication: The Only Way Into the Kingdom of Heaven”, *The Christian Century*, 6 April 1932, 447; H. Richard Niebuhr, “A Christian Interpretation of War” (1943), in Johnson, ed., *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 159-73.

¹⁴ Fox claims that Niebuhr also began to go by his “American” middle name, Richard (rather than his “German” first name, Helmut) once at Yale. *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 144. Perhaps this is true in his personal correspondence to Reinhold, to which Fox makes reference. His earliest articles, written for the *Theological Magazine of the Evangelical Synod* are signed “H. Niebuhr”, but by the late twenties his “academic” name was “H. Richard Niebuhr”. From November 1929 at least, he published articles in the *Theological Magazine* under the name “H. R. Niebuhr”. Nevertheless, as Martin Marty says, “Niebuhr was never quite so at home as were many of his colleagues who were of the original-stock heritage represented by Yale.” *The Noise of Conflict*, 317.

location. Perhaps “change” of location is too strong, however. Perhaps it is better to speak of a stronger awareness of location, of its defensibility in an academic setting which allowed for a plurality of locations from which to view the world.

Niebuhr’s experience in Germany also introduced him to new currents in German theology, especially the work of Paul Tillich, whom he called “the most promising of the new generation of German theologians”.¹⁵ The tone for the decade was set out in Niebuhr’s first major public lecture at Yale, entitled “Theology in a Time of Disillusionment”.¹⁶ The “disillusionment” to which Niebuhr pointed was not simply the result of historical events such as the War and the Depression. It was the result of a longer-standing cultural mood that had been changing for some time. But its intensity made it like “a conversion” which now “arrives at its apparently sudden revelation”.¹⁷ This conversion is driven home by Niebuhr as a radical overturning: “Our social system, its war, its poverty, all its brutal carelessness of life and finer values, no longer appears as a betrayal of our hopes but as our betrayal of God. It is not we then who have been betrayed, but we who have betrayed”.¹⁸

Niebuhr offers a sophisticated cultural analysis of the situation, but unlike in *Social Sources* he does not use the language of plural “social forces”. While class factors are noted, especially the predominance of the middle-classes as “rulers of the cultural process”,¹⁹ it is what he later would call culture’s unitary “religious sense of orientation” that is under examination.²⁰ Disillusionment was the result of “misplaced faith” noted especially by the novelists and poets,²¹ but also psychologists and philosophers. Theological analysis of this mood has followed rather than led here.²² The focus of this disillusionment is faith in human possibility and goodness—a theme that would receive systematic treatment in “Man the Sinner” four years later. While Niebuhr does not state it explicitly, he strongly implies that theology and church, especially liberal

¹⁵ Niebuhr, “Theology in a Time of Disillusionment”, 111.

¹⁶ “Theology in a Time of Disillusionment” was given as the Yale Alumni Lecture in 1931.

¹⁷ Niebuhr, “Theology in a Time of Disillusionment”, 103.

¹⁸ Niebuhr, “Theology in a Time of Disillusionment”, 114. Compare the account of conversion in *The Meaning of Revelation*’s final chapter, “The Deity of God”.

¹⁹ Niebuhr, “Theology in a Time of Disillusionment”, 104, also 106.

²⁰ Niebuhr, “Faith, Works and Social Salvation”, *Religion in Life* 1:3 (Summer 1932), 426.

²¹ Niebuhr, “Theology in a Time of Disillusionment”, 105.

²² In this way the lecture is structured similarly to Tillich’s *Die religiöse Lage der Gegenwart*, which we may safely assume Niebuhr was then busy translating. The English translation was published the following year.

theology as captive to the middle-classes,²³ were part of the problem itself rather than helping in its analysis. Holding the new dogma “that replaced trust in God and love of man with trust in man and the love of God”, they proclaimed a theologised version of evolutionary theory, that “the immanent God was realizing himself in the processes of culture”.²⁴ This was clearly an indictment of the culture-Protestantism that had formed the backdrop to Niebuhr’s early work.

How is a “theology of disillusionment” characterised? Such a theology is no longer an adaptation to intellectual currents but “a theology which is forced by a change in the cultural outlook to turn away from the changing, transient flux of things to the permanent and abiding”.²⁵ While Niebuhr is still too much of a Troeltschean to hold that this theology is closer to the Absolute than the theology of a time of comforts, a theology of disillusionment is weighted more toward the universal than the particular, and reflects more upon “common human experience” than its predecessors.²⁶ The character of the particular pointing to the universal is a strand of continuity with *Social Sources*, but takes on renewed importance in Niebuhr’s realism.

It is the rediscovery of the Absolute that is the urgent need for theology, as Niebuhr sees it. Turning away from “the passing flux of things” means turning away from “God [as] the epitome of our values, God the divine ideal, to the permanent ground in things, to the unconditioned source of being and meaning”.²⁷ This recovery of the Absolute provides a grounding for the relativising forces now present in culture—forces which look upon human experience in different times and places with new appreciation.²⁸ It is, we might say, a loosening-up of the context, an Absolute (insoluble) which does not result in complete dissolution (disillusion).

Not surprisingly the dominant characteristic of the emerging theology as Niebuhr presents it is an emphasis on transcendence. Niebuhr had, as we saw in chapter five, previously been suspicious of such an emphasis. He said it was socially irresponsible and impotent for curing Christianity’s “sociological” ills.²⁹ His own version of transcendence in *Social Sources* was as an ideal of unity for society to strive towards.

²³ Niebuhr, “Theology in a Time of Disillusionment”, 110. cf. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1987 [orig.1929]), 77-105.

²⁴ Niebuhr, “Theology in a Time of Disillusionment”, 104, 106.

²⁵ Niebuhr, “Theology in a Time of Disillusionment”, 103.

²⁶ Niebuhr, “Theology in a Time of Disillusionment”, 103, 112.

²⁷ Note the Tillichian language. See Niebuhr, “Translator’s Introduction” to Paul Tillich, *The Religious Situation* (New York: Henry Holt, 1932), esp. 11-16.

²⁸ Niebuhr, “Theology in a Time of Disillusionment”, 110-11.

But Niebuhr's new understanding of transcendence is, somewhat paradoxically, couched in terms of immanence. It means a new understanding of time, that all times are equally relative to each other, that no one time is closer to the eternal. But positively this means that "the theology of disillusionment becomes a theology of the present moment, individually and socially." This theology has a task of pointing out "the places where the eternal breaks into our time", and the responsibility of "discovering and defining the sort of life, individual and social, in which the present may realize its relation to the eternal".³⁰ "Barthianism" highlighted "the Kingdom of God as absolute demand", yet it denied that the presence of that kingdom could ever take on cultural (and culturally relevant) flesh.³¹ A theology of disillusionment, however, leads to "ever more urgent effort to realize the eternal will of God, as we must see it from the relative point of view of the present moment, in some form of social and personal justice which will carry within it, as immanent, a revelation of the God who yet remains transcendent, which will be adequate to our own situation, but which will contain the absolute demand".³² This is nothing other than "The Problem of Constructive Protestantism" that forms the point of departure for Niebuhr's analysis of the career of Christianity in American culture in *The Kingdom of God in America*.

"Theology in a Time of Disillusionment" can be read as a second conclusion to *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, both in the sense of being a better epitaph to culture-Protestantism than he was able to imagine two years earlier, and in the sense of bringing what remained of his idealism in that work to an end. There simply was no going back. The time for adapting religion to the ideals of culture was gone. Culture needed rather to adapt to the God which had wrecked its own religion.³³ "Theology in a Time of Disillusionment" is therefore also the introduction to his theological output of the 1930s, and the founding document of "radical faith". "Theology in a Time of Disillusionment" thus provides an important bridge between Niebuhr's earlier and later works.

²⁹ See chapter five above.

³⁰ Niebuhr, "Theology in a Time of Disillusionment", 115.

³¹ Niebuhr, "Theology in a Time of Disillusionment", 115. This of course restates the critique of Barth in *Social Sources*.

³² Niebuhr, "Theology in a Time of Disillusionment", 116.

³³ The change to realism is not yet radical, though. Both humanism and liberal religion were guilty not of adapting themselves to human needs, but of failing "to unite with the strong forces of human need and yearning which alone make a theology capable of directing as well as expressing the religion of the human heart." Niebuhr, "Theology in a Time of Disillusionment", 111. While the idea of "directing" signifies a placing of theology over against idealism, the invocation of "religion of the human heart" still has a liberal ring to it.

“Theology in a Time of Disillusionment” thus provides an important bridge between Niebuhr’s earlier and later works. Besides the challenge to discover or recover a constructive Protestantism realising the Kingdom of God in each epoch, the themes presented here that he picks up on throughout the thirties include understanding cultural existence as a unity which is religiously orientated, the nature of sin as disloyalty (“it is we who have betrayed”) and the shaping power of capitalism and nationalism. We will return to these themes and their development later in the chapter.

Challenging culture-protestantism

It is clear from “Theology in a Time of Disillusionment” that Niebuhr continues to view theology and religion as a passive indicator of cultural moods, as reflecting the social climate. But Niebuhr is not happy with this state of affairs, and thinks that religion should also actively give direction to cultural life. Religion can only do this when it disentangles itself from other loyalties, recovering its confidence in itself as an independent power, as a culture-forming agency.³⁴

Niebuhr’s theological analysis of culture is reminiscent of the theology of culture of Paul Tillich. Cultural life, for Niebuhr as for Tillich, is characterised by a fundamental loyalty, a basic direction, a unity. But Niebuhr does not use the abstract “substance” language of Tillich. Rather, he identifies this fundamental loyalty as a particular “strategy” for living.³⁵ Such a strategy need not take religio-institutional form. The two dominant “strategies” for living in depression America were social planning and liberalism: the former characterised by faith in reason, the careful coordination of means and ends, and the control or exclusion of spontaneous factors; the latter with faith in “unrational processes”.³⁶ The form that these take is displayed in the tactics each employs to bring about social change.

³⁴ This normative role for religion was precisely what Niebuhr did not see in *Social Sources*. The independence of the church is a strong theme during the early and mid thirties, as Diefenthaler has shown. The easy identification of Christianity with other loyalties, such as class and race, which *Social Sources* noted, is now vigorously opposed. The task of the church is to recover its nature as a *religious* institution. Perhaps here he is not far from *Social Sources*.

³⁵ Niebuhr, “Faith, Works and Social Salvation”, 426.

³⁶ Niebuhr, “Faith, Works and Social Salvation”, 427. In this article, H. Richard claimed that liberalism had evolved into a creed that trusted human self-interest to bring about social salvation—a barb undoubtedly aimed at Reinhold whom H. Richard often accused of not having completely let go of liberalism.

This may seem to be another example of Niebuhr paralleling Marxist analysis, which also saw the processes of culture as an outcome of one world-historical process. But Niebuhr at the same time as he approaches a history and analysis of culture as religiously orientated pulls back. There are other social forces that are as important as class or religious loyalties. In the thirties these are especially capitalism and nationalism, and Niebuhr relates them to religious and material forces through the early and mid-thirties.³⁷ These other forces “may become allies or foes in the religious or class struggle.”³⁸ That is to say, they may be directed for or against the struggle. In and of themselves they are neither good nor evil. But they must be taken into account and not reduced to “idols” (in the case of a religious analysis) or dupes of capitalism (in the case of a class analysis).

“Religion, class loyalties, national loyalties are strictly different things which may be associated in various ways.”³⁹ But it is clear that for Niebuhr, when Christianity and other loyalties are aligned, it is the religious that ought to give direction, not the other way around. That this is the case is a function of the kind of God Christians normatively worship. It also points to the strategy or praxis Niebuhr thinks appropriate to a time of disillusionment.

What is the relation between radical faith and the disorientation of “a time of disillusionment”? Does radical faith *require* disillusionment? Is radical faith perhaps *founded* on disillusionment? Or is radical faith a *symptom* of disillusionment? These are important questions that will stand behind the rest of this chapter, though addressing them fully would take us beyond the scope of this thesis. Radical faith is critical faith, that is, faith that issues forth in critique of the social faiths that have characterised culture. It is a faith that criticises the particular alignment of loyalties that characterise the spirit, the *elan vital* of a culture. But it is also a faith that reassesses the previous commitments of the person who is shaped by it. Perhaps no better illustration of this can be offered than Niebuhr’s own changing commitment to the Social Gospel.

³⁷ Compare “Nationalism, Socialism and Christianity” and *The Church Against the World*. Niebuhr’s contributions to the latter, entitled “The Question of the Church” and “Towards the Independence of the Church”, are reprinted in *Theology in America: The Major Protestant Voices from Puritanism to Neo-Orthodoxy*, ed. Sidney E. Ahlstrom (Indianapolis; New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967 [orig. 1935]).

³⁸ Niebuhr, “Nationalism, Socialism and Christianity”, 469.

³⁹ Niebuhr, “Nationalism, Socialism and Christianity”, 470.

Revisiting the social gospel

The Social Gospel, so important to Niebuhr's earlier understanding of the meaning of Christianity in culture, largely lost its theological foundation with the erosion of liberal theology. Its ideals, however, received new impetus with Roosevelt's coming to power in 1932 and the New Deal that followed. This was the time when social Christianity was experimenting with "realism"⁴⁰ as a replacement for idealistic liberalism, with Reinhold Niebuhr taking the lead.⁴¹ An emerging new understanding of the Social Gospel is evident in H. Richard Niebuhr's thought in two articles which at the same time show the changing influence of Karl Barth on Niebuhr who now begins to temper his critique of Barthianism.

In "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus", a paper presented to the American Theological Society in April 1933, Niebuhr compared the Social Gospel and "the mind of Jesus"—that is, the Jesus that he saw disclosed in the New Testament. The significance of this paper is to be found not only in its being "Niebuhr's first substantive effort to interpret the faith of Jesus and the God of Jesus' faith".⁴² It is in its constituting an early attempt to relate the declining Social Gospel and Barthianism, beyond seeing them simply as symptomatic of the poverty of Christianity (as he did in *Social Sources*). It therefore bears examination here.

What Niebuhr criticised most in the Social Gospel was its reduction of God to "value" or moral terms, therefore making Christian symbols the means to a pre-determined end. The Social Gospel had a "Jesus" (c.f. *Christ and Culture*'s image of the portrait gallery)—a moralist whose God was an "ethical" rather than a "cosmic" deity.⁴³ His faith was, in fact, "both a symbolic representation of the [moral] ideal and a convenient, though on the whole unimportant, ally in the struggle for the ideal".⁴⁴ Over against this was the Jesus Niebuhr saw in the New Testament, "a God-centered,

⁴⁰ For Niebuhr's own survey, see "Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century", 413-28.

⁴¹ See Dorrien, *Soul in Society*. Ahlstrom goes as far as to say this: "Given the immensely practical bent of American Protestantism and the staggering policy questions of the Roosevelt era, one may wonder if the degree to which American Neo-orthodoxy's history is enmeshed with the biography of Reinhold Niebuhr does not prove that a revision of the Social Gospel was the primary purpose of the movement." *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 942-43.

⁴² Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 81.

⁴³ H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus", Paper presented at The American Theological Society, New York, 21 April 1933, published in *Journal of Religious Ethics*, Spring 1988, 117.

⁴⁴ Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus", 119.

apocalyptic, revolutionary strategist”⁴⁵ for whom “the laws of God are not the laws of moral perfection but the laws of reality”.⁴⁶ Over against the moral evolutionist, Niebuhr’s Jesus is focussed on the interruptions rather than the continuities in history. The “end” of Jesus’ message is not the telos all strive toward but the eschaton “which puts an end to striving”.⁴⁷

But the Social Gospel was not far from the Kingdom of God,⁴⁸ for Niebuhr, and certainly he preferred its immanent God to Barthianism’s hyper-transcendent God. Passivism was the inevitable outcome of Barthianism,⁴⁹ which “could have no Social Gospel because its God not only transcends every self, but... history itself”.⁵⁰ While the virtue of Barthian theology was “that it has rediscovered the religious significance of the void”,⁵¹ at the same time it has

succumbed to the temptation of pessimism to the extent [that it has] delivered the whole world... into the hands of the devil, requiring of the individual... that he bear the burden of injustice, as its agent or its patient, and look for relief only to the eternal miracle of the Word which can never really become flesh in an evil world.⁵²

Later in the 1930s, Niebuhr would gradually gain appreciation for Barthian theology, even going as far as to call Barth “the legitimate heir of the Social Gospel”.⁵³ Key to this change is an appreciation of the dialectical nature of Barth’s theology and especially the discovery of the affirmation in its negation. In a paper presented in the mid-thirties (though the precise year is not certain) entitled “The Kingdom of God in the Social Gospel and in Barthianism,” Niebuhr revised his critique of

⁴⁵ Niebuhr, “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus”, 119.

⁴⁶ Niebuhr, “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus”, 123.

⁴⁷ Niebuhr, “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus”, 122.

⁴⁸ The term “Kingdom of God” was a central image used by Rauschebusch, and its readaptation by Niebuhr in the 1930s must be seen as an attempt to renew the Social Gospel. In *The Kingdom of God in America* Niebuhr would differentiate it. He saw the Kingdom of God in America as the master image of sovereignty dating to the 17th century, alongside the Kingdom of Christ and the Coming Kingdom. The latter term became the contextualisation of the Kingdom of God in the Social Gospel.

⁴⁹ Interestingly this was Reinhold Niebuhr’s critique of his brother’s stance on the Manchurian crisis (“Must we do nothing?”)—and all the more interesting in the light of the possibility suggested by Yeager that H. Richard never published “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus” because of its strong criticism of his brother’s latent liberalism. See Diane Yeager, “Introduction to The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus”, *Journal of Religious Ethics*, Spring 1988, 110.

⁵⁰ Niebuhr, “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus”, 126.

⁵¹ Niebuhr, “Theology in a Time of Disillusionment”, 113.

⁵² Niebuhr, “Theology in a Time of Disillusionment”, 115.

⁵³ H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Kingdom of God and Eschatology in the Social Gospel and in Barthianism” (undated), in Johnson, ed., *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 122. One wonders who Niebuhr might have thought the “illegitimate heirs” were.

Barth. The Barthian idea of the Kingdom of God is first negative—“the radical ‘No’ which God utters in response to man’s petition ‘let my kingdom of liberty, fraternity, and equality come’.”⁵⁴ The real question of the Kingdom of God in the Social Gospel and Barthianism is “the relation of human action to divine action in human history”. The positive side of the doctrine of the Kingdom of God for Barth is that “God stopping man’s teleology is God pursuing his own teleology”.⁵⁵ Barth understood Christian action “not as parallel to divine action in the common striving after a common telos, but as response to the divine activity which precedes, accompanies and awaits human action in history”.⁵⁶ God as the one “from whom and to whom and in whom all things are an act”,⁵⁷ the foundational theme we noted above, is now seen by Niebuhr as a better theological framework for the Social Gospel. It is not utopian, but nonetheless strives for obedience in response to the God who is now.

Thus H. Richard Niebuhr sought to reinterpret the social Christianity that so characterised his own early thought, a concern that Diane Yeager has shown extended throughout this period.⁵⁸ It is significant to note that both articles here end by understanding the fundamental issues around the Social Gospel—a heritage of activism—as being the nature of divine and human agency in history, and its practical implications. This was the message of Jesus “the revolutionary strategist”, and the Social Gospel that was in his mind.

Rauschenbusch wrote his *Theology for the Social Gospel* as an appeal for a theology “to make [the Social Gospel] effective” but also as a call for “the revitalisation of theology through the Social Gospel.”⁵⁹ Now, some seventeen years after Rauschenbusch’s death, Niebuhr claims that Barth’s theology—the very “theological Christianity” that was antithetical to renewal of the social mission of the church in *Social Sources*—could help put the Social Gospel on a new basis. This would free it from the idealism which had entrapped it during the 1920s and, with idealism’s crisis during the Depression, pulled it down.

Rauschenbusch, as noted in chapter four above, wanted the Social Gospel to become a true world-view; that is, it should move beyond a critique of American so-

⁵⁴ Niebuhr, “Kingdom of God in the Social Gospel”, 120.

⁵⁵ Niebuhr, “Kingdom of God in the Social Gospel”, 121.

⁵⁶ Niebuhr, “Kingdom of God in the Social Gospel”, 121.

⁵⁷ Niebuhr, “Kingdom of God in the Social Gospel”, 122. This is against the liberal idea of Christian action as seeking after the eternal.

⁵⁸ Diane M. Yeager, “Editor’s Introduction”, 109.

cial ills and address the realm of international relations. Niebuhr, while not referring specifically to the Social Gospel, effectively takes this new theological basis, focused on the nature of divine action, and constructs a new view of human action and agency that has world implications. This is demonstrated in a classic discussion with his brother Reinhold over Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1932 and the American response to it.

Rethinking historical action and mission

Published in 1932, Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* was in Sidney Ahlstrom's words, "his single most important book and probably the most disruptive religio-ethical bombshell of domestic construction to be dropped during the entire interwar period".⁶⁰ Holding that absolutism had to give way to pragmatism in social ethics, Reinhold Niebuhr ridiculed the idea that humans would willingly act for the interests of others. Self-interest was the governing factor in human morality and it was "stupid" to rely on ideas of love to ground social ethics.⁶¹ Justice is the norm for social and international relations, and given the predominance of self-interest in human affairs it is impossible to achieve justice apart from some form of coercion. With regard to Manchuria, then, America had to use means to resist and stop Japan's invasion.

Reinhold represented an American Christianity "chomping at the bit" to get involved in international affairs. It was not necessarily representative of all Christians, as many had had their fill of American internationalism during the War. Nor was it necessarily a call for military intervention. Arising from frustration at watching helplessly a nation being "crucified" (as H. Richard put it), it was a call to "do something", to act.

H. Richard responded to this ethos⁶² by reflecting on "doing nothing" in the light of his new understanding of divine action. It was wrong to argue that unless humans did something within a situation that nothing would be done. Indeed there is an active process within history that human assertiveness opposes. Self-assertiveness,

⁵⁹ Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 1.

⁶⁰ Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 941.

⁶¹ Gary Dorrien points out that "stupid" was Reinhold Niebuhr's favourite word in describing liberals. Note this would also have been a retroactive critique of the last chapter of *Social Sources*, where H. Richard speaks of love as ethical basis for common action. *Soul in Society*, 92.

⁶² H. Richard's article preceded Reinhold's "Must we do Nothing", though it is not apparent that he did not have Reinhold in mind.

even in the name of Christian principles, is self-deceptive. “If Americans were to plunge into the Manchurian crisis,” comments Jon Diefenthaler, “they were likely to fool themselves into self-righteousness”. H. Richard’s strategy of detachment, on the other hand, “might lead them to repent of the imperialistic greed that was still motivating so much of their foreign policy.” To Reinhold’s response that intervention was not a matter of saving the world but limiting strife, thus “amending repentance”, his surrejoinder argues that “his brother’s way could only produce a never-ending jungle of assertions and counter-assertions that would keep the world on the brink of war.”⁶³ H. Richard wrote to Reinhold that he thought “an activism which stresses immediate results is the cancer of our modern life. It is betraying us constantly into interfering with events.... trying to wriggle out of an impossible situation.... We want to be saviors of civilization and simply bring down new destruction.”⁶⁴

Like in *Social Sources*, H. Richard Niebuhr saw a kind of Christianity present not in a specific institutional form (or forum) but as a minority tradition within the dominant tradition. “Radical Christianity”, as he termed it in “The Grace of Doing Nothing”, did not join in the nationalist cries for intervention, nor in the protectionist cries of the conservatives, but rather prepared itself for the future. Like communism, it held forth a set of loyalties that transcended national boundaries and the strife they caused. But unlike communism, it also transcended class boundaries. This movement was only in the beginning stages, and “there is no such Christian international today because radical Christianity has not yet arrived at a program and a philosophy of history, but... little cells are forming.”⁶⁵

Does this mean that radical faith is passive, or reactive? No. If we take the term “grace” in “The Grace of Doing Nothing”, and relate it to the same term in *The Meaning of Revelation*, we can see that it was an article of faith for Niebuhr that humans were justified by grace, and that grace specifically referred to the avoidance of justifying oneself in the eyes of others.⁶⁶ The only standard or norm that the action of Christians could be judged according to is that of the kingdom of God. Indeed, the kingdom of God is the *context* of all action—and not only that of Christians.⁶⁷

⁶³ Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 44.

⁶⁴ Letter quoted in Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 145-6.

⁶⁵ Niebuhr, “The Grace of Doing Nothing”, 379.

⁶⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941), x. He termed this “self-righteousness”.

⁶⁷ See chapter seven below.

H. Richard Niebuhr observed that as long as the Church chose its sphere of action as “the world” on the terms of the latter, it could never see the kingdom of God. History, in the “world’s” terms is a clash of interests, and the only harmony that can come out of it “is the harmony imposed by the rule of the strong or a parallelogram of social forces, whether we think of the interclass structure or the international world.”⁶⁸ There is a divine, creative process manifesting itself in the world, and self-assertion is in opposition to it. So are the ideals that humans strive toward.⁶⁹ Even the society of love—the “beloved community” of the Social Gospel—cannot be spoken of as an ideal but as “an ‘emergent,’ a potentiality in our situation which remains unrealized as long as we try to impose our pattern, our wishes, upon the divine creative process.”⁷⁰

Sin, selfhood and the coming of the kingdom

The idea that religion is pervasive in culture (as well as one among many social forces and factors) has its compliment and its strategic outworking in an idea of God. This idea of God is one side of the analytical equation emerging in Niebuhr’s theology in the thirties. Its relation to social ethics was spelled out above in our exposition of “The Grace of Doing Nothing”. The other side is a new idea of sin as disloyalty. Both of these display the influence of so-called neo-orthodox theology,⁷¹ though the legacy of Troeltsch remains. They also signal a contextual reappropriation of the American theologian Jonathan Edwards. Niebuhr’s retrieval of Edwards coincides with a growing positive appreciation for the American Christianity he disparaged as short of the transcendent in *Social Sources*.⁷²

Arguing that “the tactics of living is related to the strategy of life”, Niebuhr condemns liberalism for misplacing its confidence, having turned from faith in “un-rational processes” to trusting human self-interest.⁷³ Niebuhr’s debt to Troeltsch is evident in his acknowledgement that this kind of liberalism places its trust in divine

⁶⁸ Niebuhr, “A Communication”, 447. cf. *Social Sources*.

⁶⁹ H. Richard did not deny the existence of ideals, only “their efficacy in influencing action.” (quoted in Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 145.).

⁷⁰ Niebuhr, “A Communication”, 447.

⁷¹ See the discussion of Niebuhr’s relation to Barth above.

⁷² Interestingly enough, in *Social Sources* what he calls “man-centered, lift-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps doctrine of New Thought and Christian Science” is a result of a degenerative line that begins with Edwards’ system of God-centred faith, and typifies “the accommodation of the faith to bourgeois psychology”. Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 104.

⁷³ Niebuhr, “Faith, Works and Social Salvation”, 426, 427, 429.

agency. But it has been supplanted by a new liberalism characterised by trust in human self-interest.⁷⁴

Niebuhr, as we saw earlier, is interested during the early thirties, in the appropriation of Marxist language to make theological points. The equivalent of Marxism's understanding of material forces is Niebuhr's realist view of God. Here is a force which is operative in and through human agency, negative as well as positive, and sometimes works in spite of cherished ideals as well as within them. This God is not reducible to the calculus of the natural "hereditary" religion expressed by the social planners.⁷⁵ God in fact is like Troeltsch's "irrational factor" operating in history. God is "the structure in things".⁷⁶ God's kingdom comes not as an outcome of human activism. Rather, it comes "inevitably" and "whether we shall see it or not depends on our recognition of its presence and of our acceptance of the only kind of life that will enable us to enter it: the life of repentance and forgiveness."⁷⁷

We mentioned earlier the idea that for Niebuhr the Kingdom of God is an "emergent". The use of the term "emergent" brings to mind the influence, even at this early stage, of the social psychology of George Herbert Mead.⁷⁸ For Mead, emergence is spontaneity, newness in the world, which is contrasted with what he terms "the universality of determination"⁷⁹ or the conditions to which things are subject. These conditions were also emergents which have now stabilised. In referring to the Kingdom of God as an emergent, Niebuhr means that it is not subject to the conditions laid by humans,⁸⁰ nor can it be controlled or programmed. Niebuhr is therefore careful to place the Kingdom of God in the world but beyond the spheres of human control. At the same time, it does not simply emerge in a "religious" sphere but at the grounds of human life.

⁷⁴ Niebuhr recognises a similar same shift in liberalism in America to that noted in chapter one in South Africa.

⁷⁵ This is the first mention of natural religion in Niebuhr's writings (going by the name of hereditary religion). It is a religion based on salvation by works rather than by grace. Compare "The Grace of Doing Nothing".

⁷⁶ Niebuhr, "A Communication", 447.

⁷⁷ Niebuhr, "A Communication", 447.

⁷⁸ For Niebuhr's relation to Mead's thought, see William Garratt, "The Sociological Theory of H. Richard Niebuhr, in *Religious Sociology: Interfaces and Boundaries* ed. William H. Swatos Jr. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1987), 41-55.

⁷⁹ George Herbert Mead, *The Philosophy of the Present* (Chicago: Open Court Pub. Co., 1932), 14.

⁸⁰ Though for Mead "everything that is taking takes place under necessary conditions", at the same time, "these conditions, while necessary, do not determine in its full reality that which emerges." *Philosophy of the Present*, 16. We shall encounter Mead again later in this thesis. Niebuhr is undoubtedly making a selective use of Mead at this stage: the Kingdom of God in Niebuhr's

Niebuhr's own statement that the *Kingdom of God in America* came out of an immersion in "the sources"—American theological writings—is noteworthy. Indeed it is the attempt to remain faithful to the sources while theologically and constructively reflecting on the themes emerging from them, in light of his own agenda, that constitutes the genius of the work.

Its merits as history or the accuracy of its historical interpretation are less important to this thesis than the ways it extends the development of radical faith.² Like *Social Sources*, the thrust of the analysis is a response to contemporary Christianity's rootlessness and forgetfulness. In the manner of a Hebrew prophet recalling "the mighty acts of God" in Israel's founding narratives for the sake of present orientation (not mere "information"), his analysis mobilises historical and theological resources to help American Christianity find its way again.

A new understanding of American Christianity

What then has happened to the sociological approach of *Social Sources*? In part we have answered this question already in tracing his "conversion". But now we can also add Niebuhr's own appraisal. He voiced two main criticisms: methodological and prescriptive. In *Social Sources* he had analysed sociologically how "religious energies were dammed up, confined to narrow channels, split into parallel streams, by the non-religious distinctions and classifications of Christians."³ Indeed, were "spiritual energies" allowed free rein, they would have 'washed over' the distinctions reinforced within denominational Christianity.⁴ Using the same metaphor in *Kingdom of God*, he says that "Though the sociological approach helped to explain why the religious stream flowed in these particular channels it did not account for the force of the stream itself."⁵ Indeed all such approaches are "unsatisfactory as a complete explana-

² For a historian's evaluation of *The Kingdom of God in America*, see Robert S. Michaelson, "The Kingdom of God in America and the Task of the Church", in *Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, ed. Paul Ramsay (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 268-290. See also church historian Martin Marty's introduction to the 1988 reprint. Marty writes, that *The Kingdom of God in America* "remains the classic reflection on the Protestant roots and ethos pluralist America and its religions." Introduction to *The Kingdom of God in America* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), vii. Marty goes as far as to say that *Kingdom of God* and Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Irony of American History* are companion pieces. "Taken together, the two works give telling interpretations of American life for those theologically informed or not, for those who favor religious meaning or not." (xvi)

³ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 27-28.

⁴ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 27.

⁵ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937), ix.

tion.”⁶ While it accounted for the institutionally diverse character of American denominations, it was methodologically incapable of noticing the unitary movement that produced them. It was, in the well-known terms Niebuhr would later develop in *The Meaning of Revelation*, an external rather than an internal view of American Christianity.⁷

Undoubtedly there is more than a methodological shift between *Kingdom of God* and *Social Sources*. Indeed, we have tried to show above that a fundamental change in Niebuhr’s idea of God and God’s relation to history accounts for the transformation in his work from the early 1930s onward. This is perhaps more evident in Niebuhr’s later critique of his prescriptions in *Social Sources*: “the only answer I was able to give to the problem of Christian disunity was in the form of a new appeal to good will to overcome stubborn social divisions and to incarnate the ideal of Jesus. This appeal seemed, upon critical reflection, to be wholly inadequate.”⁸ The idea of “good will”, a Kantian idea prominent in liberalism, belies the existence of a God whose will is worked out in the unfolding of history in favour of the sovereignty of human disposition.⁹ To the contrary, “the ideal must be looked for in the real, not imported from without.”¹⁰ In some ways Niebuhr was saying this in claiming that only Christianity (not some ‘alien’) creed, as the synthesis of the religious character of the West (Troeltsch) could be an agent of transformation. But here the force is more ontological: the movement that Christianity represents is rooted in the God who is both structure and directing force in the world, the Absolute beyond the relative, the One in the many. This God is the source Niebuhr was questing for—the source of the force of formative, radical faith.

While the idea of an “American Christianity”, with its own character, is held forth in *Social Sources*, it is quickly condemned as a limited, nationalistic version of Christianity. What Niebuhr refers to as “American Christianity” in *Kingdom of God* resembles the “frontier faith” discussed in *Social Sources*: a version of the faith that de-

⁶ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 12.

⁷ Although see p. xi, where he acknowledges that external histories have shown “a unity in our religion [note the pronoun!] which was hidden to the internal view.” Also in *The Church Against the World* he acknowledges the value of appraisals of the church from a point of view outside it. “The Question of the Church”, reprinted in *Theology in America: The Major Protestant Voices from Puritanism to Neo-Orthodoxy*, ed. Sidney E. Ahlstrom (Indianapolis; New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967 [orig. 1935]), 594-5.

⁸ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, x.

⁹ This idea of the “good will” is also the antithesis of Edwards’ idea of the ambiguous (or even corrupted) will he embraced in the 1930s.

¹⁰ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 14.

stabilises and restabilises social life, dramatising life on the frontier.¹¹ Likewise the institution/movement dynamic, so characteristic of *Kingdom of God's* interpretation of Christianity, is also present in *Social Sources'* suspicion of institutions. Indeed, a statement like “Christianity... must be understood as a movement rather than as an institution or series of institutions. It is gospel rather than law, it is more dynamic than static”, calls to mind the law-gospel antithesis in *Social Sources* that results in the master entanglement. But the relation is now more historical: “Institutionalized Christianity... is only a halting place between Christian movements... Since its goal is the infinite and eternal God, only movement or life directed toward the ever transcendent can express its meaning.”¹² The cycle of radical faith, as will be demonstrated, is one of generation, degeneration and regeneration. When radical faith degenerates, it becomes hardened into social faith until a revitalising movement gets it going again.

What is Niebuhr really doing in *The Kingdom of God in America*? Is he writing another account of Christianity in the United States? No. In spite of having written historical interpretative works widely respected by historians of Christianity in America, Niebuhr eschewed any identification of himself as a historian.¹³ He saw himself giving “a theological interpretation of history”. In an address to the American Historical Society in 1955, he said,

I do not envisage so much the course of human events in their larger or smaller connections as I do historical work—the resurrection, the re-enactment, the understanding of these events in their small and large “Gestalten” by the historian, be he academic or literary. Hence I do not ask directly about the role of the past or of my personal or social recollection of things past in my work as a theologian. I am concerned rather with the present activity that makes the human past its object, with history as present re-creation and re-enactment.¹⁴

¹¹ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 135-64.

¹² *Kingdom of God*, xiv.

¹³ The renowned American church historian William Hutchison speaks of going to study with Niebuhr at Yale in the early 1950s, only to be told with characteristic humanity by Niebuhr that he was not a historian. Niebuhr eventually gave in and offered Hutchison a guided reading course which provided the foundation for his future work as a historian of American Christianity. Niebuhr was a keen reader of historical literature, and had a large collection of works relating to the American Civil War, something with which he was fascinated. “Response to Harry Stout”, in *The Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr*, ed. Ronald F. Thiemann, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 101-06.

¹⁴ “A Theologian’s Interpretation of History”, in Johnson ed., *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, Culture*, 78.

Niebuhr would have placed most academic history outside the community of faith. Even in *Social Sources* (as much as that work depended on social science for its analysis) he had a theological-ethical purpose.

But while located “inside history”, as “our” story, he is wary of engaging in creating a henotheistic myth of “the American Kingdom of God”, as might appear from the title. Indeed this is something that Niebuhr takes distance from, accusing such ideas of the “universalization of the particular”, when what he wants to analyse is the “individualization of a universal idea”.¹⁵ This in fact was the very essence of the nationalist sentiment which had arisen in the wake of the demise of radical faith. This point shall be developed below. The Kingdom of God is a dynamic norm coming to expression in American Christianity, but American Christianity is in turn subject to and judged by that norm.

The realist note is sounded not only in the theology favoured in the analysis, nor in the particular view of history espoused, but also by the method itself. James Fowler highlights the importance of what seems at first glance to be a personal aside in Niebuhr’s cryptic phrase “the theology has grown out of the history as much as the history has grown out of the theology.”¹⁶ This Fowler explains can mean one of three things: (1) that the study is simply an attempt to be true to the sources; (2) that the study is “a powerful expression of Niebuhr’s conviction that history—not as account but as process—is the realization of the rule of God.... American theology, at its best, arose out of discernment of God’s active presence in that history, and, as faithful response to it, became a dialectical force in the process of the kingdom”; (3) that the statement is autobiographical in the sense that Niebuhr’s grasp of the Kingdom of God in his own faith knowledge allowed him to see the motif more clearly within the sources, and in turn this faith knowledge was strengthened by an acquaintance with the sources.¹⁷ This is possible because both he and the American theologians grasping at the Kingdom of God were trying to understand the same thing in their midst. Hence Fowler’s third possibility takes in the first and the second. This is a helpful way of understanding the work, which also demonstrates the prevalence of realism as the warp and woof of Niebuhr’s approach to history and the writing of it.

¹⁵ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 9.

¹⁶ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, xiii.

¹⁷ Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 112.

Niebuhr reinterpreted “America” as “an experiment in constructive protestantism”. Here there is a confluence of Barth and Tillich located within the historical dialectic of American Christianity. In light of “the apprehension of God’s nearness, immediacy and primacy”—a Barthian concern—the problem arises of how to move from criticism to reconstruction.¹⁸ Specifically, how can a political theory be developed when one’s theology says that power belongs only to God? How could a system of principles for social construction be provided when the immediacy of God belies a clear apprehension of the end that these principles would serve?¹⁹ At the same time, it is impossible to live without the management of power and principles for living. This dilemma reflects Tillich’s critique of the “dialectical theology”—i.e. that it isn’t “dialectic” enough—but also calls to mind Niebuhr’s own idea expressed in *Social Sources* that while Christians are called to transcend “worldly” social categories, living in the world makes them—and therefore compromise—unavoidable. This is not, however, considered a limitation, but a driving motif behind formative Christianity.

In *Social Sources*, such compromises went by the names of (pluralistic) “denominations” and also (henotheistic) social faiths such as “frontier faith” and “American Christianity”—each of which fell short of incarnating the ideal. What is genuinely new in *The Kingdom of God in America* is the identification of “American Christianity” not as effect of social forces, but as a force of its own, sometimes alongside the other forces but at other times a centring influence behind them. American Christianity (or “American faith”—he uses both terms interchangeably) is analysed systematically and historically under the categories “the sovereignty of God”, “the Kingdom of Christ” and “the coming kingdom”. These are analogous to the cardinal virtues of Christian community of “faith”, “love” and “hope”, respectively.

The dynamic unfolding of radical faith

Radical faith is displayed in American Christianity systematically and historically. Systematically, American Christianity displays a triadic structure, with each element anticipating or anticipated by the others. Yet the structure is never really balanced, with a different element predominating at different times. While it is possible that one element can overshadow the others to distort the whole picture, as long as all three are present, we have (in Niebuhr’s view) American Christianity.

¹⁸ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 27.

¹⁹ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 31.

Historically, American Christianity unfolds over three periods, each with one element at the fore: In the pre-revolutionary period the dominant metaphor is the sovereignty of God, in the eighteenth century it is the Kingdom of Christ, and in the nineteenth century the coming kingdom.

Early American Protestants “believed in the kingdom of God”, though Niebuhr is careful to say that this was far from “the society of peace and concord” associated with the term in his day. Rather, the kingdom was “the living reality of God’s present rule, not only in human spirits, but in the world of nature and of human history.”²⁰ Loyalty to the kingdom was the very condition of survival in the New World. Before they were anything else, these early Americans were “loyalists” to the government of God.²¹ It was this that provided their underlying unity, and was expressed in their attempts to build a society under this government. While the covenant under which they lived expressed itself in Christian Constitutionalism, constitutions were no substitute for covenant. Institutions were inescapable, but “life under the rule of God meant directed movement rather than safe dwelling in unchangeable institutions.”²² This principle also applied to the church, which was not the institutional centre or soul of society, but “the ecclesia which has been called out of the pluralism and temporalism of the world to loyalty to the supreme reality and the only good”.²³ Called out, however, under the sovereignty of God did not mean “escape”.²⁴ Since God was the God of reality, it meant a movement back into the world. Finally, the principle of loyalty to the “directed movement” of life under God was a limitation of power, a relativisation of other spheres besides the ecclesiastical, including the political, the economic and the personal.²⁵

And yet the kingdom of God could also become an “order of regimentation and fear”,²⁶ or the deistic “rule of an absentee monarch”.²⁷ The idea of “the kingdom of Christ”, anticipated in Puritanism came to expression in the Great Awakening which responded to the rise of rationalism in the secular enlightenment and “a stale

²⁰ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 51.

²¹ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 56.

²² Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 66.

²³ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 67.

²⁴ Contrast the idea of a “called out” community in the Christ against culture type. See chapter eight below.

²⁵ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 75ff.

²⁶ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 90.

²⁷ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 135.

institutional religion".²⁸ This was a fresh incarnation of radical faith. Revivalists "apprehended the truth of the gospel as not one truth among many but as the fundamental truth that made a profound difference."²⁹ If faith was the dominant note of the kingdom of God, love was the dominant note of the kingdom of Christ. What is the proper object of love? For Niebuhr's eighteenth century American Christians, most notably Jonathan Edwards,³⁰ it is particular loves and loyalties which create human strife and hence the destructive contradictions of love—e.g. that love of one's country leads to war. Only through loving "the ultimate Being who is man's true good" can other loyalties be realised.³¹ The way to do this has been opened up in Jesus Christ.³²

The third note, hope, is a historicisation of the Puritan quest for the renewal of the world through the eschatological action of the eternal. This motif was carried forth in the preaching of the revivalists through the preaching of the last judgement. But Puritan hope tended to be incarnated in individual salvation more than a common destiny.³³ Here the crisis was future and of concern to the individual soul. The Quakers also proclaimed a coming kingdom, although Niebuhr points out that they "were inclined to bring the future revolution into the present, and to say that the kingdom had come to those whom the spirit of Christ had taken possession."³⁴ Each of these imperfect realisations was characterised by one thing: a slackening of tension.

The idea of the coming kingdom as Niebuhr sees it is expressed paradigmatically in the preaching of Edwards, who saw the kingdom as hastening towards humans, rather than humans striving to realise it. It was "a state of worthless existence"³⁵ that constitutes one pole of the existential possibility which human life is suspended between. But the other pole is promise, of "God [making] possible what was impossible for men."³⁶ Millenarian expectation, so much a part of "American faith", arises within this complex of symbols, rather than from rationalism or political idealism.³⁷ The coming kingdom was, unlike the Puritan hope, corporate, a "Christian

²⁸ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 107f., 111.

²⁹ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 108.

³⁰ See chapter six above.

³¹ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 115.

³² Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 115.

³³ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 130. There were exceptions. See pp. 130-2.

³⁴ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 134.

³⁵ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 139.

³⁶ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 143.

³⁷ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 143.

revolution” which “would appear in the whole common life, in science, art, agriculture, industry, church and state.”³⁸ What is the role of the church? “To prepare men for crisis and promise by proclaiming to them the gospel of repentance and faith.”³⁹ But the precarious tension was difficult to maintain. People either looked to a heaven beyond history or undertook their political and other activities without reference to the sovereign God. A moralism, “which seeks the kingdom on earth by means other than repentance and faith”⁴⁰ took root, even amongst social reform movements. Most distressingly, the coming kingdom was “nationalized, being used to support the national superiority and manifest destiny.”⁴¹

American Christianity thus unfolds through a series of crises and resolutions (or institutionalisations), in a dialectic of protestantism and catholicism (where the former refers to “movement” and the latter to “institution”). It is however important to register that Barth’s note of “permanent revolution” sounds continually, and that reformation is not located in a single period in history but is part of Christianity’s inner dynamic. Protestants like Cotton Mather can be “catholic” in their fondness for moral codes while Catholics, such as the Franciscans in the medieval world, can display a protestant concern for a transformation of encrusted forms.⁴² *The Kingdom of God in America* is Protestant in this sense.

But as it unfolds, American Christianity as a whole is subject to degeneration, with the sense of crisis that comes with the urgency and opportunity to “press into” the Kingdom dissipating. Thus “the sovereignty of God was institutionalized in laws, the kingdom of Christ in denominations and means of grace [and] the coming kingdom and the hope of its coming... into a moral sanction or belief in progress.”⁴³ “Institutionalization and secularization” happen as a gradual process extending through the whole dynamic. The church becomes official “protector” of the social mores of a “Christianized society.” Even revivals serve this end.⁴⁴ The church begins to shape itself to culture, all the while trying to conserve the essence of the original move-

³⁸ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 148.

³⁹ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 149. Niebuhr arrives in his analysis at the present-day, even though he is speaking of the Great Awakening! Compare the comments on *The Church Against the World* in chapter six above.

⁴⁰ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 158.

⁴¹ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 151. See chapter four above on the American sense of mission.

⁴² See also Paul Tillich, “The Formative Power of Protestantism”, in *The Protestant Era* (New York: Scribners, 1958), 206ff.

⁴³ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 182.

⁴⁴ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 181.

tional theological ideas. It constitutes a prolegomena to Niebuhr's theology, albeit one written fairly late in his career.

The thesis of *The Meaning of Revelation* is as follows: Revelation is what happens when an event in the life history of a community becomes paradigmatic for interpreting and making sense of all life, giving unity to life, the self and community. This thesis unfolds in four stages, each of which depends upon and deepens the idea of radical faith. The work begins with confession, both in the sense of a telling of "what happened" and in the sense of a confession of sin. The confession of radical faith is in terms of "our" story, something that is not reducible to propositions but discloses the real presence of God in that story. Its rationality is therefore not in terms of "pure" but of "practical" reason, and its means of operation is to make sense of life through symbols. Finally, the effects of radical faith are captured in the phrase "permanent revolution", the transformation of all life, including religion. We take these up in turn.

Point of view

One of the characteristic features of Niebuhr's theological ethics, as Dirkie Smit rightly points out, is that the fundamental question is not "what shall I do", but "What is going on?"⁵⁵ This is an expression of his theological realism, concerning which we have already spoken. There is an action prior to all the actions that take place by persons. We are all born into communities and socio-political contexts which set forth conditions for our actions, even as our actions contribute to or transform those conditions. But there is an action even prior to creaturely action: the action of God. "What is God doing?" is then the question. God's action takes place in human actions, but human actions—wittingly or not—are also responses to what God is doing.

Hence Niebuhr's first article of faith⁵⁶ concerns the act of God. It is to this act that humans can only respond. Christians are to respond in the presence of their fel-

⁵⁵ Dirkie J. Smit, "Theology and the Transformation of Culture: Niebuhr Revisited", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 72 (September 1990), 9. See *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 60, 63.

⁵⁶ Richard R. Niebuhr gives an important entry from his father's journal:

He jotted down several propositions partly summarizing 'the main motifs' of his theological thinking. Among these are (1) 'Confessionalism is the proper method in theology. We must report what happened to us and not pretend to have a system that starts at rock-bottom.' To this he added, (2) 'God is pure act. He is living, creating, judging, redeeming now'; (3) 'Life is togetherness. Being with something & somebody. Rationalism, idealism, realism are abstractions. Life & mind are interchangeable'; and (4) 'Christian life is constant response to God.' To these maxims he added the following musings: 'These

Niebuhr's approach is predominantly integrative. It also links faith negotiating loyalties to the idea of an integral self, as well as the role of faith in integrating the various strands of society and culture. It also has important outworkings in Niebuhr's view of God and God's relation to the world. Faith pacifies, we might say, other loyalties. Whether that is not also problematic will have to wait for the next chapters.

Radical faith in community

The Kingdom of God in America established the presence of radical faith in history. The implications of radical faith for theology are drawn out in *The Meaning of Revelation*. There the main lines of radical faith are developed into an explicitly theological discourse. *The Meaning of Revelation* was also written in a different historical context: the currents of nationalism that Niebuhr had alluded to in the 1930s had come to fruition in another world war. And the debate about American involvement in that war was raging.

But *The Meaning of Revelation* remains a theological work; perhaps Niebuhr's greatest. While it is a relatively slim volume (especially compared to some of the tomes produced by theologians on the continent), its argument is dense and multi-layered. Besides suggesting a new account of revelation, one that moves between Barth and Troeltsch, and a new point of departure for theology, it is an attempt to defend and to give theological grounding for historical relativism. If the book is his greatest theological work, then one of its chapters, "The Story of our Life" has become a classic in its own right, becoming a point of departure for much contemporary narrative theology. This chapter has, with good or bad effect, been read in isolation from the rest of the book, not to mention Niebuhr's broader work.⁵²

Radical faith makes both *The Kingdom of God in America* and *The Meaning of Revelation* theological works.⁵³ *The Kingdom of God in America* puts radical faith in a narrative or even meta-narrative context. *The Meaning of Revelation* provides the framework by which "American Christianity" is placed in the context of the universal "empire of God".⁵⁴ *The Meaning of Revelation* locates radical faith in terms of more tradi-

⁵² "The Story of Our Life" was published in a collection entitled *Why Narrative?* eds. Stanley Hauerwas & L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 21-44. Its use in theological reflection on the TRC in South Africa has been noted in the Introduction to this thesis.

⁵³ As argued above, radical faith sees no disjuncture between the God disclosed in history and the God of the theologians; and indeed goes a step further by arguing that out of history (read a certain way) comes theology and out of theology, history.

⁵⁴ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 85.

ence of the Christian revolution”.⁵⁰ While early liberals held to a realist idea of the presence of God in history, their idealist successors “defined God as the object of Religion”, rather than as ruler of history, thereby establishing “continuity between God and man by adjusting God to man.”⁵¹ Inevitably such “adjustment” could only identify Christianity with whatever the going cause or loyalty was. Religion has value because it can help society enshrine *its* values. It is at this point that the concerns of *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* merge with *The Church Against the World*, not through a material critique of social forces, but through a theological critique of idolatry.

The Kingdom of God in America is therefore a turning point for Niebuhr’s theology. It represents the transformation and re-integration of his earlier concerns in *Social Sources* within the reorientation which the 1930s brought on in his theology generally. It also represented the integration of his three main continental influences of Barth, Tillich and Troeltsch in a creative synthesis with American Christianity (especially in the figure of Jonathan Edwards) and its concerns for sovereignty and pluralism. Moreover, *Kingdom of God* anticipates Niebuhr’s more systematic work, especially in *The Meaning of Revelation* and *Radical Monotheism in Western Culture*, with his historical-theological concerns. But finally and perhaps most importantly for this thesis, *Kingdom of God* articulates for the first time a vision of God which creates the possibility of an integration of loyalties, and displays the activity of this God in history.

Summary: kingdom of God as historical context

If “context” is the kingdom of God (that is, if the kingdom of God is the context of all human activity), and “the point of view”, or “location” whereby this context is grasped is a “faith” point of view, then we have faith as a quasi-transcendental whereby the “real” is apprehended, if only relatively. How faith negotiates loyalties while transcending them is still not clear; nor is it clear how faith can be seen as a kind of loyalty while also functioning to relativise other loyalties, at least in Niebuhr’s way of looking at things. At the same time, these tensions remain in Niebuhr’s theology not as contradictions, but as interpretative possibilities which can be mobilised to address a number of issues in his context.

⁵⁰ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 197.

⁵¹ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 189, 192.

ment.⁴⁵ But this conservation is impossible: “by the substitution of the static for the dynamic institutions deny what they wish to affirm and become the antithesis to their own thesis.”⁴⁶ This happens to a certain extent within each period, but it is clear that Niebuhr saw his as an especially degenerative time.

The entropy of faith was also an important dimension of Niebuhr’s analysis in *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*—that time as decline in concern for the downcast in society. There, denominational Christianity was a product of a series of renewal movements, each of which lessening the sense of the need for renewal in favour of middle-class religion.

The norm within American Christianity is not, therefore, any particular institutionalized form of faith. Neither “protestantism” in the historical sense nor “denominationalism” captures the meaning of American Christianity. The fluidity of the ideas of “protestantism” or “catholicism”, as Niebuhr uses them, has already been noted. Denominationalism is part of the larger problem of institutionalisation, where an “order” has confused itself with its cause and become defensive rather than aggressive.⁴⁷ The norm is rather radical faith struggling with social faith, or “prophetic” and yet “constructive protestantism” struggling with “culture protestantism”. This struggle is the grid by which Niebuhr analyses Christianity in America. For instance, the debate within his own day between “evangelicals” and “liberals” was to be understood in terms not of particular doctrinal or ethical convictions, but of dynamic, aggressive culture-forming Christianity verses static, passive, culture-reflecting Christianity. “Dynamic liberalism” is akin to “dynamic evangelicalism”. “The conflict was not between ideas but rather between dead tradition, no matter what its content, and the living tradition.”⁴⁸

While liberalism may be represented on the radical faith side, the liberalism of social Christianity⁴⁹ was singled out for special criticism of its ideas. It was especially censured for its loss of the idea of a transcendent God, the idea of a coming kingdom being divorced from “reliance on the divine initiative and separated from the experi-

⁴⁵ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 168.

⁴⁶ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 169.

⁴⁷ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 177. On defensiveness, which for Niebuhr is a sign of the abandonment of grace in favour of law, see *The Meaning of Revelation*, x.

⁴⁸ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 188-89.

⁴⁹ See chapter four above.

low humans by recounting “what happened to us”. This is important as a point of departure for Niebuhr’s account of the doctrine of revelation in *The Meaning of Revelation*. Rather than the lengthy prolegomena about the possibility of theological knowledge and its relation to philosophical knowledge which began most works on revelation, Niebuhr begins with testimony. This is important for both cultural and theological reasons.

It is important for cultural reasons in that it runs counter to the idea that Christianity has an obligation to “commend” itself before its culture—a direct criticism of culture-protestantism and an implicit self-criticism of *Social Sources*. Culture-protestantism defines Christianity as “an auxiliary of civilization”, something which reiterates and deepens a similar point made in *The Church Against the World*. Indeed, this urge for Christians “to consider themselves first of all members of national and cultural societies rather than of the church” is pervasive historically.⁵⁷ It is “to abandon the standpoint of Christian faith and to take up another point of view”⁵⁸—not just an epistemological problem but an ethical one.

It is important for theological reasons because faith is “a first certainty”⁵⁹—something argued-from rather than argued-to. The particular “first certainty” of which Niebuhr speaks is not common to all human beings, although his analysis in “Man the Sinner” indicates that all human beings have some kind of first certainty. The first certainty of which Niebuhr speaks is rooted in the particular point of view of a particular community—albeit a community that transcends other human boundaries such as race, class and nationality. The point of view of which Niebuhr speaks is then both formal and material. It is formal as a “faith” point of view rather than, for example, a “sociological” or “economic” point of view. It is material as a *Christian* faith point of view rather than, for example, a “black”, a “middle-class” or an “American” point of view. The point of view is, to use the terms we introduced earlier in this chapter, both structural and directional. It refers to a communal/institutional context and a normative orientation or vision of the world as it ought to be.

Does starting from a particular “point of view” mean the abandonment of objectivity? Niebuhr does not think so. In fact, in the midst of one of the greatest

seem to be the main ideas. But how can I get them together, in one system? What is the starting point? It must be God as pure act, but in that case how [to] bring in the rest?

“Preface”, in *H. Richard Niebuhr*, Johnson, ed., ix.

⁵⁷ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 24.

⁵⁸ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 24.

⁵⁹ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 101-2.

conflicts of the twentieth century, Niebuhr could argue that such a point of view grants what is striven for in the discourse of “objectivity” not because it stands in mid-air, but because it is freed from selfish or self-centred interests.⁶⁰ Indeed it is not insignificant, given the nature of the geopolitical conflict raging as he wrote *The Meaning of Revelation*, that he would say that self-defence is a “prevalent form of error”—particularly one from which theology and ethics must be freed.⁶¹ Objectivity is only possible when the context of responding to God—God’s act as context—is recognised. To “confess” is to recognise that context.

The opposite of self-defence, or, as he put it in “The Grace of Doing Nothing”, of “assertion and counter-assertion” is confession. By this word Niebuhr does not mean the great historical confessions or creeds of the Christian faith. He uses the word in a two-fold sense. First, confession is the appropriate mode of theological proclamation to the world—of testimony of the God who has acted, is acting and will continue to act. The confession of Jesus as Lord, as the one through which God’s act is revealed, is paradigmatic here, as we shall see below. Second, *and at the same time*, confession is “of sin and misery before God”. “Religious response to revelation is made quite as much in confession of sin as in confession of faith.”⁶² Confession, we might say, has two objects: other humans and God.

This relation between confession of faith and confession of sin is reminiscent of Niebuhr’s understanding of sin in terms of idolatry. For if Jesus is confessed as Lord, then the other “lords” of other “points of view” are deabsolutised. To confess Jesus as Lord historically, however, is to confess that we have (and continue to have) a tendency to make the penultimate ultimate, to confuse creature and creator, to see the act of one of the many as absolute. It is a modality of repentance—and an appropriate point of departure for a theologian so influenced by Jonathan Edwards and who has now embraced American Christianity. Radical faith is a telling of “what happened” to us.

But which “us”? It is not a “human” or “universal” point of view of which Niebuhr speaks. This would deny historical relativity and would be henotheism in disguise.⁶³ We have said that he means a point of view both in structural (i.e. a “faith” point of view) and directional (i.e. a “Christian” faith point of view) terms. But each

⁶⁰ Niebuhr, “A Christian Interpretation of War”, 159.

⁶¹ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, x. As *The Meaning of Revelation* was being written, debate was raging about America’s involvement in the Second World War.

⁶² Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 30.

of us stands in many places at the same time. And each place in which we stand grants a different point of view. How does the singular “point of view” (standpoint) relate to the many points of view (standpoints) not only held amongst humans, but within each human person? How do the many communities in which the “we” (or various “we’s”) is constructed relate?

The story of our life

Alasdair MacIntyre has demonstrated that the question “of what story or stories am I a part” is foundational for a Christian ethics.⁶⁴ In *The Meaning of Revelation* the priority of story goes also with the idea of “first certainty” and “point of view”. This first certainty is historical, and hence can be expressed in narrative. Indeed, Niebuhr goes a step further: it is *necessarily* expressed in narrative—just as speaking about faith must be expressed in confessional form. The absolute on which this certainty relies cannot be grasped in concepts, but only be pointed to through narrative. In Niebuhr’s oft-quoted phrase, “We are in history as the fish is in water and what we mean by the revelation of God can be indicated only as we point through the medium in which we live.”⁶⁵ History mediates our lives. “Pointing through it” to what lies beyond means telling a story—*our* story.⁶⁶ Telling a story, in turn, is an act of confession (“pointing”).

But as already noted in the previous section, we are part of many stories, and the life of each one of us itself tells many stories. Perhaps this is why Niebuhr calls the idea of “common history” shared by all humans to be “strangely unhistorical”.⁶⁷ But does this not invoke and legitimate a “brawl of communal histories”?⁶⁸ After all, nations tell stories about themselves—as we showed in Part One with regard to nationalisms in South Africa and in chapter four with regard to Niebuhr’s America. These stories are told in the face of other, rival accounts which contest the same space. How does this unitary “us” deal with the pluralities outside? And what of the commonality of the relative “us” in “the story of our life”? How do race, class and national differences within this “us” relate to its commonality?

⁶³ On henotheism, see chapter eight below.

⁶⁴ *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 216. For a theological ethics based on this idea, see Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

⁶⁵ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 36.

⁶⁶ Note that Niebuhr says “the story of our *life*”, rather than the story (or stories) of our *lives*.

⁶⁷ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 32.

⁶⁸ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 80.

Inside and outside

Rather than set “history” (particularities) over against “nature” (universality), Niebuhr proceeds in a “somewhat Kantian” fashion,⁶⁹ invoking Kant’s distinction between “pure” and “practical” reason,⁷⁰ suggesting two qualitatively different kinds of history: internal and external, or history as “lived” and as “seen”.⁷¹ This is only “somewhat” Kantian because, as Kliever points out, Niebuhr slackens Kant’s dualism, “reconceiving them as distinctive features of an integral rational imagination.”⁷²

In so splitting history Niebuhr does not mean to make a distinction into two histories in the sense of a particularistic *heilsgeschichte* or “sacred history” (our community) versus a “secular history” (all other communities).⁷³ Nor does Niebuhr mean to say that there are two different kinds of historical objects or events, the one belonging to internal history and the other to external history. Rather, internal and external history are two *sides* of each event or object, displaying unity and plurality, respectively. Every object, every event, can be looked at from “internal” or “external” points of view. The internal point of view, however, is only available to participants. This is, of course, another way of stating what the preamble to *The Kingdom of God in America* did. In discerning the operation of radical faith in American Christianity, Niebuhr did not wish to preclude other methods of analysis, particularly those centring on the class factors he himself had highlighted in *Social Sources*. Making this distinction in *The Meaning of Revelation* is similarly an attempt to honour the relativities of human experience and the uniqueness and irreducibility of formative, radical faith.

Splitting history up in this way precipitates a number of other important distinctions. For example, Niebuhr points to different views of time, value and knowledge depending upon whether internal or external history is in view.⁷⁴ Time can be seen as a flow of potentiality and actuality, with past, present and future in a dynamic relation. Or time can be seen as “serial”, as the succession of one event by another, linked causally. Value can be seen as “worth for selves”, or it can be seen as “valency or strength”. Communities can be seen as organisations of interests, drives or beliefs, or as “the participation of each living self in a common memory and common hope”. In each of these pairs the difference consists in the *context* of interpretation—that is,

⁶⁹ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 1.

⁷⁰ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 54.

⁷¹ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 44ff.

⁷² Lonnie D. Kliever, *H. Richard Niebuhr* (Waco: Word Books, 1977), 75.

⁷³ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 55.

the “point of view” from which interpretation of the thing is taking place—rather than different things that are being interpreted.

The history that refers to “the story of our life” is a history lived rather than seen (hence its affiliation to practical rather than pure reason). “Lived” history unifies rather than divides. It points to the “universal, absolute, independent source and goal of existence” rather than “particularity, finiteness... arbitrariness.” “Lived” history speaks of a context which is “personal”, rather than a context of things. It speaks of persons as responding agents rather than as twisted and tossed about by different and contrary forces. History as “seen” by detached viewers speaks of movements and interests, and is characterised by a search for an “efficient factor” amongst complexes of ideas. Internal history speaks of selves, whereas external history speaks of bodies. Internal history is normative history; external history is descriptive history.⁷⁵

Recalling the way Niebuhr used some words as synonymous with unity and others as synonymous with plurality in *Social Sources*,⁷⁶ we may similarly chart “unity” and “plurality” words as he expresses the distinction between internal and external history in *The Meaning of Revelation*:

Internal (in-side)	External (out-side)
Unity. History viewed in terms of “God’s Act”. All human acts are response.	Diversity. Historical activities as many, causality as multiple.
“The story of our life”.	“Sectional histories”.
Movement/community. “Participation of selves in a common memory and a common hope”. ⁷⁷	Institution. Individuals as complexes of factors; societies as organisations of interests, drives, beliefs. Natural world as common.
Aggressive	Passive
Seeing-with	Looking at
The poet as model	The scientist as model
Gospel	Law
Whole	part
History	Histories
Invisible church	Visible church
Practical (historical) reason	Pure (metaphysical) reason
Confessional	Apologetic
Self	Body
Participatory	Non-participatory
Personal motives	Impersonal processes
Value as qualitative. “Worth for selves”, relevance to their destiny.	Value as quantitative. “Effectiveness”, “valence”, “strength”.

⁷⁴ For what follows, see Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 49-52.

⁷⁵ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 47-49. This particular distinction would not hold, for Niebuhr. Indeed there is a strong descriptive element in confession, as already noted.

⁷⁶ It will be recalled that for Niebuhr, the term “social forces” refers to a plurality that creates more plurality. The social forces create divisions. When he speaks of the “world” sociologically, he uses it as synonymous with “social forces”. When he uses it theologically, it means the total direction of the world against the ideal.

⁷⁷ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 52.

Life-time. Time as stream of consciousness. Past-present-future as organic whole.	Space-time. Time as series of discrete points. Past as no longer, future as not yet.
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While these are dyadic, they are not dualistic. They are two sides of the same object, not different objects in different realms. What unifies the elements in each row of the table is the fact that each may reasonably and coherently be attributed of the same object, yet the one is not reducible to the other. Symbolising them is the Chalcedonian doctrine of the two natures of Christ: the historical person who was born, was subjected to cultural and social forces, and died like all historical persons, and the Christ whose death and resurrection stands as the inaugural event of Christian community.⁷⁸ Behind them all is the transcendental God, the one “for whom, from whom and in whom all things are an act”.⁷⁹ This God does not act simply in internal history, as a dualism would hold, but in all history. God’s act is in some way prior to the distinction between internal and external history. The way God’s act is characterised in each differs radically, however, as we shall see.⁸⁰ Moreover there remains a privileging of internal over external categories, in spite of Niebuhr’s attempt to honour both.⁸¹

Here there is an important connection with what Niebuhr said in *The Kingdom of God in America* about the essence of Edwards’ theory of being and value.⁸² Internally, we relate to our neighbours in covenant, as selves, rather than as a collection of discrete interests. But this is predicated on radical faith in a sovereign God who “as the universal, the eternal, the fountain and center of all being is [our] true good.” We are thus enabled to love our neighbours “not insofar as these are persons, lives, minds, but because they are creatures of God and sacred by relation to the ultimate Being who is also man’s true good.”⁸³

Niebuhr’s account remains open to the criticism that what he sees as God’s doing as the all-embracing context of life is *merely* a matter of the perspective of *his*

⁷⁸ On symbols and revelation, see below.

⁷⁹ “The Kingdom of God in the Social Gospel and in Karl Barth”, in *Theology, History, Culture*, ed. Johnson, 122.

⁸⁰ Fowler puts the point this way: “We will not find God in particular things or events; these are the actions of men, of groups, or of occurrences in the natural processes. God’s doing is the total context.” *To see the kingdom*, 196.

⁸¹ This holds particularly for God’s unity. As Kliever puts it, “the God revealed in Jesus Christ has the integrity of a faithful person rather than the unity of a fixed order.” *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 103. God’s unity is therefore described analogously to the unity of internal history. This has important critical implications when God is also described as “absolute personality”, rather than as “faithful person”, as we shall see in chapter nine.

⁸² See above.

⁸³ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 115.

community, of “seeing-as”. The German-nationalist discourse of “blood and soil”—or the Afrikaner Nationalist version of “race and *volk*”—would have no less legitimacy, at least in terms of Niebuhr’s model, if it remained on an epistemological level.

But Niebuhr makes a stronger claim. What he describes as God’s activity is a disclosure of the very “pattern” of the world. It is as this kind of pattern that the world is unified. Niebuhr often talks about unity as dynamic *pattern*, rather than static structure.⁸⁴ This is evident early on in his analysis of American Christianity in *Kingdom of God* as he contrasted it with that of *Social Sources*.⁸⁵ The unity, or pattern, of American Christianity (that is, the pattern which *disclosed* the existence of such a thing as “American Christianity”—and American history) is not one imposed by the observer, as in an idealist formulation, but as already noted as the pattern which suggested itself to Niebuhr from the documents he consulted.⁸⁶

The idea of explicating a “pattern” in history, *for* history, was as we also saw the idea behind *Kingdom of God*’s threefold pattern of “sovereignty of God”, “Kingdom of Christ” and “coming Kingdom”. That these are more than mere heuristic devices is evident in Niebuhr’s preface there, which states that “the history has grown out of the theology as much as the theology has grown out of the history.”⁸⁷ His 1951 work, *Christ and Culture*, also proposes a “pattern” for historical answers to the “perennial problem” of the relation between Christians and society.⁸⁸ In his preface, Niebuhr states that, following Troeltsch, he has sought “*logos* in *mythos*, reason in history, essence in existence.”⁸⁹ And he professes to have done this, like Troeltsch, by eschewing any forcing of “the multiformity and individuality of men and movements in Christian history” into “prefashioned, conceptual molds.”⁹⁰ Put in *The Meaning of Revelation*’s terms, the pattern explicated by the theologian in *Christ and Culture* is a

⁸⁴ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 80f.

⁸⁵ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, ix.

⁸⁶ Compare Troeltsch’s “Logos and Mythos”, *Religion in History*, ed. and trans. James Luther Adams and Walter F. Bense (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991 [orig. 1913]), 46-72.

⁸⁷ See below.

⁸⁸ See chapter eight below.

⁸⁹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1951), xii.

⁹⁰ Niebuhr indicates his difference from Troeltsch in asserting that “this relative history of finite men and movements is under the governance of the absolute God.” Perhaps this is an attempt, ten years on, to get back to discerning the divine Pattern so central to the argument of *Meaning of Revelation*, in a book (with a different agenda) that looks at “the church’s dual wrestle” with its Lord and the culture it is intertwined with.

confessional re-telling of “the story of our life”, echoing the pattern of God’s relation to the world.⁹¹

Such a patterned unity grants the possibility not of prediction or control, but of *intelligibility*.⁹² The kind of unity of which Niebuhr speaks is one that “makes sense” of life. It pulls the fragments of experience together. But this is from the inside, as a “dramatic” unity/pattern, not a conceptual/cognitive pattern.⁹³ In other words, unity is literally not “conceivable”, in the sense of being graspable with purely rational concepts. There is no such thing as an order to which all human beings can appeal; though the world does display a certain structure which may be discerned through scientific activity.⁹⁴ Any such appeal to abstract order is rejected as “metaphysics” by Niebuhr.⁹⁵ On the other hand, this does not mean that revelation is “irrational”, but rather that it is of a different kind of rationality: practical rationality, or “making sense” of experience.

Order and community in South Africa

At this point it may be helpful to pause to consider what this discussion of categories might mean for the present study. When I arrived in South Africa in 1993, I was already a member of many different communities, with many different identities reflecting many loyalties. In short, my identity was hyphenated. I considered, however, that the transcendental point of connection between the hyphens was “Christian”. As such, I should have experienced myself as an insider in my worship community. But as I have experienced Christianity in South Africa—and I do not simply mean in my “detached” (as Niebuhr’s model would see them) historical studies but in

⁹¹ This is not to say that there are not important differences of nuance between these three works. Hans Frei notes two tendencies in modern theology with regard to history: abstractive and personal. In *The Meaning of Revelation*, Niebuhr makes them run parallel to each other, but they never actually meet. He suggests this is because of the more methodological interests of *The Meaning of Revelation*. “When [Niebuhr] actually writes history”, Frei observes, “his method seems to be rather different. One notes in *The Kingdom of God in America* the appropriation of sociological insights to theological categories instead of a sharp dichotomy”. But the best example is *Christ and Culture*, which methodologically reminds Frei of Wilhelm Dilthey, where “abstractive and purely ‘objective’ thought is but the handmaid of a more profound and unitive relation between the events and their interpreter.” “The Theological Background of H. Richard Niebuhr”, in Ramsay, ed. *Faith and Ethics*, 30.

⁹² Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 83.

⁹³ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 52.

⁹⁴ See Charles Taylor’s discussion of interiority and order in *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1989), esp. 127-142.

⁹⁵ This is an important way in which Niebuhr’s theology of culture differs from that of Paul Tillich, who sought to ground his in an abstract metaphysic rather than a pragmatic sociology. For Niebuhr, Tillich’s reliance on metaphysics denied the historical nature of reason. See his review of the first volume of Tillich’s *Systematic theology*, *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 7:1 (1951), 49.

participating in a local parish community—I have experienced even my “Christian” identity as insider-outsider. I share something in common with South African Christians that South African non-Christians do not share. Yet there is much that I do not share with South African Christians that they may share in common with Muslim, Hindu or even atheist South Africans. My hyphens remain exposed. The history of Christianity in South Africa is not a history that I can “fit myself into” easily, although there are parallels with how Christianity has functioned in other “external” contexts. What I considered, wittingly or not, to be a transcendental grounding for my hyphens now seems ground-less, or at best ambiguous. Put another way, and here *I* speak confessionally, the relativising power of what I worshipped as absolute has been greatly challenged.

The Christianity of which Niebuhr wrote in *The Kingdom of God in America* and even *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* was relatively monolithic.⁹⁶ It was not involved in the contestation, stabilisation and destabilisation of fundamental loyalties in the same way as Christianity in South Africa was—and is. Perhaps there was ambivalence amongst the churches of the immigrants toward involvement in society. But older nationalisms were only feeble attempts to resist the inevitable drawing-in to the American melting pot. In South Africa, nationalisms and Christianities continue to contest each other. Perhaps writing in this context might have changed his perception of the possibilities of a community transcending the “brawl” of communal histories, or at least he might have seen contestation as less inherently negative.⁹⁷

Imagination

While he privileges internal over external history, Niebuhr is careful not to equate internal history as such with revelation. Only the historical events—that is, the events that live in the memory of the community—which supply the images through which God’s activity is apprehended are revelatory. These images, exercised in human *imagination*, allow the fragments of history to be gathered together into one picture. Whenever we wish to understand a whole, we necessarily do in terms of a part. Looking through an image makes sense of the world. The presence of a master image or images at the heart of communities is a feature of all human communities.

⁹⁶ Whether American Christianity was in fact as monolithic as someone who read Niebuhr without any exposure to American Christianity would think, is immaterial for our purposes.

However, there are “evil” imaginations and “good” imaginations. Evil imagination is not discerned by its use of certain images, but rather in terms of its effects. Evil imaginations represent the whole through “inept patterns”. They are exclusive rather than “inclusive”,⁹⁸ and present “a world of confused agencies”.⁹⁹ Niebuhr illustrates his point with reference to a contemporary example: the “chosen race” idea. Here the “I” (or “we”) is all that acts, and never the “thou”. The other only exists as a mirror for the self or the “we”.¹⁰⁰ Here “a brawl of communal histories”—provides an apt description of a world at war.

“We explain ourselves by ourselves or by means of the picture we have made of ourselves.”¹⁰¹ But by means of this kind of action, continues Niebuhr, “we succeed more in obscuring than in illuminating what we are doing.”¹⁰² Are evil imaginations “evil”, however, because they do not work, because they do not succeed in presenting a unified world? Or are they evil because of the very real oppression that comes with denying the participative personhood of the other?¹⁰³ Again this question raises its head. Niebuhr is not clear about this, though even if he answered yes to the former, he would no doubt say that the real evil of war and violence is a consequence of, is rooted in, the failure to present a unified world.

Good imaginings are also discerned by their effects. The past—and here he refers specifically to the Christian church—is “potentially a single epic”,¹⁰⁴ which holds the possibility of interpreting and integrating all the fragments, of tying up the loose ends, of resolving the dissonances. New connections are made, and with the same events placed in a new context they are given meaning—or they take on a different meaning.¹⁰⁵ “There is no part of the past that can be ignored or regarded as beyond

⁹⁷ Niebuhr of course also recognised that most of the nations of Europe who were fighting in the World Wars were professedly Christian. But as national communities, Christianity was subordinate to them.

⁹⁸ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 87.

⁹⁹ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 74.

¹⁰⁰ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 74. Here we can see in proto-form polytheism and henotheism respectively. These are key categories in *Radical Monotheism*. See chapter eight below.

¹⁰¹ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 90. Perhaps in this way the TRC as account and confession is a picture of South Africa, painted by South Africans. It has also an apologetic function: to account for the evil of the past to those who have suffered.

¹⁰² Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 90.

¹⁰³ This kind of question is perhaps raised because of “the American evasion of philosophy” which also characterises Niebuhr’s writing; that is, an eschewing of abstract principles in favour of that which builds up the community. Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

¹⁰⁴ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 82.

¹⁰⁵ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 81.

the possibility of redemption from meaninglessness,"¹⁰⁶ That which is repressed in, for example "national histories"—the untold stories, the things that do not make it into the official chronicle—are exposed but also redeemed by being relativised by a larger narrative. Again we are back at the connection between revelation and confession, for "every social history, not least that of the church, when recollected in the light of revelation, becomes a confession of sin."¹⁰⁷ "So in mankind, national histories testify to actual animosities while common memories indicate true peace."¹⁰⁸ All humans, potentially, can adopt this narrative as their own; all humans, potentially, qualify as immigrants beyond their provincial boundaries into "the empire of God".

But beyond the question of national histories is the question of the history of Christianity and its diverse traditions. This is not a new problem for Niebuhr, as evident from *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. But his way of addressing it is new. Previously he set up a paradoxical relation between the need to be in the world but to hold forth an ideal beyond the world. It was in allegiance to this transcendental ideal that the unity of the church consists. But this ideal was also to be commended to society. Indeed, it was the ideal of the church *and* society together.

In *The Meaning of Revelation*, his critique of denominationalism is no longer a matter of how the church compromises with its context—in our terms, with how it is entangled in its context. Rather he speaks of how "every part of disunited Christendom interprets its past through an image of itself and holds fast without repentance to that image."¹⁰⁹ "Without repentance" is an important phrase, for it is in the de-centring activity of repentance that evil imaginations are given up. Niebuhr is speaking of an analogy with reference to the church with what he has spoken of with reference to "community". Niebuhr calls not for the publication of a transcendental ideal but for a public remembrance of the whole past (of the whole church) and an appropriation of the alienated parts.¹¹⁰ And so "the adoption of John Wesley into their own history by Anglicans, of Calvin and Zwingli by Lutherans and Woolman by Orthodox Protestants is not only a necessary prelude to union; it is union."¹¹¹ The place of the transcendental ideal which provides unity is now taken by "the story of our life". This

¹⁰⁶ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 82.

¹⁰⁷ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 84.

¹⁰⁸ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 88.

¹⁰⁹ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 87.

¹¹⁰ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 83, cf. 87.

¹¹¹ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 87.

is not an “out there” transcendental. Rather, it is one continually under construction as it is appropriated, as more of life is woven together into it.¹¹²

What is at the centre of the story, normatively (and here Niebuhr is speaking of the Christian story), is not the self. The self has been de-centred through repentance. Nor is it a particular community identifiable by “external” criteria, such as a particular polity or set of creeds or practices. Rather it is the image of the cross of Christ. Through the image of the cross a pattern is evident in the midst of confusion: “how by an infinite suffering of the eternal victim we are condemned and forgiven at the same time; how an infinite loyalty refuses to abandon us either to evil or to nothingness.”¹¹³ This is not simply a matter creating the possibility of the unity of the Christian church and the histories of its members.¹¹⁴ “In Jesus Christ, Christians recall and appropriate as their own all that *men* have done and suffered *in the one human world* where there are neither Jews nor Greeks, neither Orientals nor Occidentals.”¹¹⁵ Christians are also, in this view, following Christ in taking the pain of the world into their community.

“For the Christian community,” Kliever writes, “Jesus Christ is the ‘Rosetta Stone’ for unlocking and interpreting all the strange signs and sounds of its past, present and future.”¹¹⁶ This may however be fine for Christians. But what of those who identify themselves outside the imagery of Christianity? Is it not possible that images other than the cross may accomplish the same end, disclose the same absolute beyond the relative? At this point a fundamental tension surfaces in Niebuhr’s theology: a tension between giving account of *Christian* faith (which, after all, is all he says can be done in the mode of confession) and a giving account of that faith in terms of a more generally applicable phenomenology of communal existence. Put in terms of the interest of this chapter, if Niebuhr is giving Christian faith as an instance of how faith arises in *any* community, is he then still speaking of “radical faith”?¹¹⁷ Where now is

¹¹² This is what Niebuhr means by his use of the term “progressive revelation”. Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 97-100. Progressive revelation is progressive unification and progressive clarification. This is a dialectical movement, however, not an expressive of the modern ideology of progressivism. And Jesus Christ remains at the centre of the movement, and will not be supplanted by later figures or movements.

¹¹³ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 91.

¹¹⁴ Not that this wouldn’t be an important accomplishment—especially in a country like South Africa, where over two-thirds of the population identify themselves as “Christians”.

¹¹⁵ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 88. Emphasis added.

¹¹⁶ Kliever, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 104.

¹¹⁷ This problem was noted in the introduction, especially with reference to the way theological advocates of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission have, perhaps dubiously, used

the distinction between radical faith and social faith? And where does *Christian* faith fit in?

This question could be illustrated by looking back to the account of nationalisms in South Africa given in Part One of this thesis. There it was evident that there were different ways that South Africa was imagined and imaged in various nationalisms—ways that fit well with what Niebuhr speaks of in his reflections on community. And yet each of these ways drew upon Christianity as a resource in buttressing a vision which was contested by the other nationalisms—which also used Christianity as a resource. And the claims and counter-claims about “use” or “abuse” of Christian symbols and images—including the cross—served not to challenge peoples’ own nationalist claims, but (with some exceptions) actually strengthened and fortified nationalist boundaries. This being the case, radical faith has been rare in South Africa—, as it has been rare in other countries as well. Social faith is the norm. The symbols of which Niebuhr speaks have not exhibited the same power in this context as he saw in America.

At a later stage, we will see Niebuhr loosen the ties between Christianity and “radical faith”. Social faith, in the form of henotheism, and radical faith, in the form of radical monotheism, will become alike possibilities for Christianity.¹¹⁸ Christianity, like other western religions, will be under the demand of transformation issued through radical faith. At this stage, and Niebuhr’s eschewals of apologetics notwithstanding, we are inclined to agree with Kliever who interprets Niebuhr as saying that the Christian community

appeals to Jesus Christ and his history and faith for reasons that go beyond the pragmatic effectiveness and social utility of stories about him. Christian faith appeals to the events surrounding Jesus Christ because these events called and call forth a new understanding of human existence and human relationships under God by transforming “natural faith” into “radical faith.”

It is to this transformation that we now turn.

Niebuhr’s ideas expressed in *The Meaning of Revelation* to develop a model of nation-building through truth-telling and memory inclusion. Hence the discussion here is important for the overall aims of this thesis.

¹¹⁸ See chapter eight below.

Permanent revolution

Revelation transforms everything. And its transformational engagement is permanent. Niebuhr's word for this, borrowed from the discourse of 1930s socialism, is "permanent revolution". In *Christ and Culture*, he uses the term "conversion" of the same process. Following his approach to history, where no object or event is inherently sacred or revelatory but becomes so when placed in the context of the sovereignty of God, nothing is exempt from the scope of transformation and conversion.

Radical faith is not a new superstructure added to human existence by divine intervention. While there are discontinuities between them, for Niebuhr there is an important continuity between radical, natural and social faith. Nor is radical faith a "higher" form of faith which has developed from the "lower" stages of animal and social faith during the evolutionary process. Social faith continues to be evident in the world, and Niebuhr gives no indication that it will one day cease and radical faith will be the rule. Rather, radical faith is social or natural faith (or religion) transformed.

Does radical faith have a definite content that distinguishes it from "untransformed" faiths? Or is it simply a transformational *process*? This again invokes the question of Christian particularity in Niebuhr's formulation. For Niebuhr, radical faith—or perhaps more properly the revelation which radicalises faith—does have a definite content insofar as a particular kind of God is disclosed. The disclosure of God is the disclosure of a person. God as person, in turn, transforms the *idea* of God in terms of God's unity, power and goodness. Why these three things? Because they are the three functions of a god, or of a functional god, of which he speaks in the earlier chapters: *unity*, because a god must bring coherence and meaning to diverse life-experiences; *power*, because such a god must be able to compel loyalty; *goodness*, because such a god must be worthy of human loyalty.

But before we can accuse Niebuhr of engaging in natural theology, or in positing a god which is a mere logical correlate of human needs, he speaks of the activity of the true God in transforming these concepts.

The first conceptual transformation is from a God of necessary unity (God of reason), "the one beyond the many", to a God "who acts in and through all things, not as the unconditioned, but as the conditioner".¹¹⁹ This is a unity not of established

¹¹⁹ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 133. As we will point out in the next chapter, this is an idea which seems to be challenged by the idea of radical monotheism. The difference is in the point

order but of “life aspiring toward and impelled by infinite purpose”. Its goal is not “integration” but “integrity”.

The second conceptual transformation is from a power which constrains human rebelliousness to a power manifest in the powerlessness of Jesus Christ; from a power manifested in death to a power manifested in triumph over death; from a sovereignty exercised in thrones to a sovereignty exercised in crosses (note the plural). It is particularly with reference to this point that Niebuhr says that “we must rethink all our ideas about deity.”¹²⁰

The third conceptual transformation is from the abstract necessity of loyalty and value (goodness), from the seeking of “a good to love”, to being met by a good that loves us. Permanent revolution overturns structures and opens them up to new possibilities. This includes “faith”. Revelation is therefore not the elimination of natural religion, but its overturning. Natural and revealed religion are not mutually exclusive principles.¹²¹ “This conversion and permanent revolution of our human religion through Jesus Christ is what we mean by revelation.... Through our history a compulsion has been placed upon us and a new beginning offered us which we cannot evade.”¹²² This “new beginning” is the origin of radical faith.

The third transformation brings out perhaps the central feature of all transformation by revelation: an overturning of the given (whether religion, law or morality) which is simultaneously affirmation, negation and re-affirmation (to use the categorisation of Langdon Gilkey). The categorisations of the biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann, orientation, disorientation and reorientation,¹²³ carry the same idea.

Indeed, it is possible to trace out the account of this and the previous chapters in these terms: H. Richard Niebuhr experienced a great change in the 1930s. He does not indicate precisely when and where this change took place, but it is evident by comparing formulations from his writings before and after 1929-30. At the same time, Niebuhr experienced the larger social and religious context as one of disillusionment

of departure: what has happened to us. When we looked for unity, Niebuhr says, God met us, not as “Jupiter beyond the lesser gods but as the enemy of these, who revealed in our efforts to find him through them a worship of idols and demons.” Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 133. Niebuhr’s later formulation of God in radical monotheism resembles Jupiter: the one beyond the many in whom the many are one.

¹²⁰ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 136.

¹²¹ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 1.

¹²² Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 139.

and made this the theme of his inaugural lecture at Yale University. As traced out carefully in the work of James Fowler, the conviction of the sovereignty of God, along with religious realism and radical faith, result in reorientation of Niebuhr's theology with a positive and constructive understanding of Christianity in society by the late 1930s. At the same time, Niebuhr was able to consolidate his interpretation of American Christianity, identifying what he considered its genius less than a decade after pronouncing it a moral failure. There would be transformations yet to come—reformation is “a continuing imperative”,¹²⁴ as well as reorientations that would stagnate into conservative orientations again.

Reflection: the meaning of radical faith

The Kingdom of God in America begins to answer the call sounded in *The Church Against the World* for a theology that is a theory of the Christian revolution. In it is offered a presentation of such a theory in the form of an historical account. *The Meaning of Revelation* offers a more systematic account. There are differences, however. *The Meaning of Revelation* is more Christological in orientation, at least in its first three chapters, with its relating of inside and outside by the analogy of the two natures of Christ in Christian community. *The Kingdom of God in America* is more theocentric, with its strong emphasis on sovereignty and its quasi-trinitarian triads¹²⁵ which work out radical faith in history. While *The Meaning of Revelation* works out radical faith with a spatial metaphor (“inside” and “outside”), *The Kingdom of God in America* describes radical faith dominantly in temporal terms.¹²⁶ But both works see the relation between radical and social faith as one of continuous transformation and conversion, the first in movements of stability and instability, the second in a movement of inside transforming outside, and therefore the whole.

Social faith resembles the faith described in *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, passively reflecting rather than actively engaging loyalties. This is especially evident in the methodological shift in *The Kingdom of God in America*, but also in Niebuhr's descriptions of the functioning of faith during times of stability and instability. It is also evident in the duality of inside and outside developed in *The Meaning of Reve-*

¹²³ Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), esp. 19-23.

¹²⁴ Niebuhr, “Reformation: Continuing Imperative”.

¹²⁵ See the excursus on the trinity in chapter nine.

¹²⁶ The spatial image is present in *Kingdom of God* in the movement/institution relation, which parallels the inside/outside relation in *Meaning of Revelation*.

lation. Radical faith is a development from the ideal faith or Christianity of the Gospels Niebuhr spoke of at the end of *Social Sources*. However, unlike in the analysis of *Social Sources* it is not related to particular concrete actualities but is rather a possibility within them.

Humans are sites where many loyalties cross and contest. Niebuhr puts this point in terms of rival gods, vying for central status. Radical faith provides a point to which the other loyalties are relative. The other loyalties can also take the form of faith. When the former is the case, it is an expression of the sovereign one relativising the many. When the latter is the case, it is an expression of idolatry. In order for faith to be truly radical, it must have a transcendental depth. However, it is questionable whether this does not abstract faith from its crossings, placing it beyond contestation. Niebuhr's treatment of faith does not deny its historicity so much as redefining that historicity as of a different order from that of class, nation, ideology and so forth.

The contextual problematic identified in chapter five, which resigns itself to inevitable compromise, has given way to the duality of inside and outside. "Context" is identified as "the kingdom of God" or "the story of our life". This makes a difference in the way that the plural particularities identified in *Social Sources* are integrated. The theological problematic—the paradox (of the Master Entanglement)—is loosened. It now becomes a matter of integrating other loyalties by faith. Indeed, it is a matter of moving beyond integration to integrity, to an integral self and community. The ethical problematic now concerns this integrity. Getting integrity is not a task for Christians but a matter of Christians opening themselves up to ongoing transformation.



Two unresolved themes lead us now into the final two chapters of this thesis.

First, the relation between social and radical faith, whether considered temporally or spatially, is captured in the term "transformation". It is curious that Niebuhr confines his talk of transformation to the realm of ideas of deity. We wonder, with Lonnie Kliever, precisely what it is that is transformed, beyond concepts of God. It would appear that Niebuhr is still working on an epistemological level. It is *perspective* that is changed or transformed.¹²⁷ Related to this problem is another. Transformation

¹²⁷ Kliever, *H. Richard Niebuhr*.

turns things “inside-out”, so that institutions and ideas become opened up to a newly directed spirituality at their root. But is there anything more specific that can be said about transformation? How does such a formal account help evaluate the ethical normativity and contextual appropriateness of particular practices or even particular Christianities? We shall return to this theme in the next chapter.

Second, it was relatively easy for Niebuhr to speak of a “we” in the America of 1937 and 1941 with reference both to the community of faith and the nation. As Hans Frei has pointed out, there was a virtual “*lingua franca* between the mainline churches and responsible establishment leaders”.¹²⁸ Constructing or reconstructing a “we” did not face the same challenges as in South Africa, even though a Christian *lingua franca* has existed alongside the contestation of Christianities and nationalisms. The centre, or soul, of society was well-defined in Christian terms, as chapter four demonstrated. Different points of view could be more easily reconciled. While this assertion is dubious in contemporary America, it is even more so in crossing into South Africa, where the ideal of unity through the transformation of the metaphor of integration into integrity reaches its limits and gives way to metaphors of *negotiation* and *contestation*—even within the same faith tradition and sometimes even the same community. A common Christian language, while placing certain limitations on the nature of the conflict, has not produced unity. But contestation does not necessarily mean the anarchy of “the brawl of communal histories”. Contestation and plurality can be generative—and even regenerative. We return to this in chapter nine.

¹²⁸ Frei, “History, Church, and Nation”, 4.

Faith Engaging Culture

Reading Christ and Culture

Niebuhr's understanding of faith and loyalties continued to develop in what is perhaps his best known work, *Christ and Culture*. This work looks back to the agenda bequeathed Niebuhr by Troeltsch, and therefore to the historical role of Christianity discussed in *Social Sources of Denominationalism*. But it also looks at the historical relation between Christianity and culture through the eyes of radical faith, as did *The Kingdom of God in America*. It differs from the latter work however in taking a broader perspective: looking at Christianity in Western culture. In *Christ and Culture* we see an interplay of what we have identified as radical faith and social faith, not in the unfolding of a single tradition, but of "the perennial problem" faced by Christians everywhere.

Christ and Culture identifies Christians as living a tensile existence between two authority claims. This existence is tensile because life is a calling to covenant, to incarnate faithfulness in history, yet to fulfil obligations to culture. The Christian can abandon neither of these loyalties, and must negotiate them carefully in order to honour the calling of a radical faith which also issues forth in a call for the transformation of "the kingdoms of the world" into "the kingdom of God." This was perhaps an appropriate move for one whose longing to escape "provincialism" ironically issued forth in an exploration of the universal kingdom of God in the particular traditions of American Christianity. And doubtless it merged with the growing world-context of American life. But it really was nothing more than a fresh taking up of Troeltsch's agenda to renew western culture at its spiritual roots. The five classic types identified in *Christ and Culture* were five configurations that the negotiation of these two sources of authority had exhibited historically. Far more than descriptive, however: Niebuhr offered a normative account of how faith and cultural loyalties *should* be negotiated in terms of his model of transformation developed in the *Meaning of Revelation*, of which we have already spoken. The proper relation between "Christ" and "culture" is a transformative one, paralleling the relation between radical and social faith.

Faith engaging culture

Western culture in crisis

“A many sided debate about the relations between Christianity and civilization is being carried on in our time.”¹ So begins *Christ and Culture*. “Our time” was the post-war world. America was changing, emerging on the global stage as a superpower. The other superpower, the Soviet Union, not only held a different ideology, but also was atheist while America’s identity was “Christian”. Global polarisation between “light” and “darkness” brought global tension. If the early thirties was “a time of disillusionment”, the early fifties was “a time of fears.”² At the same time, religion was undergoing a revival, especially as the communist menace became more strongly defined in cultural discourse. It was during this period, as Jon Diefenthaler reminds us, that the words “under God” were added to the phrase “one nation” in the pledge of allegiance. “In God we trust” was introduced as the motto on the currency,³ and generally church involvement was seen as a badge of faithfulness to the American ideal.

The “debate” therefore took place in a context of realigning loyalties. New allies were formed, and nationalism could bring even Christians together with secularists, while those professing the faith were not exempt from suspicions if their rhetoric was not in tune with the patriotism of the times. This debate transcends sectarian, denominational and even religious barriers, reconfiguring the relation between norm and culture. Niebuhr’s conviction was that the debate was not new, but rather was a new form of a “perennial” debate, occasioned by the very nature of Christianity and culture. Indeed, the question lies at the very heart of the presence of the kingdom of God and of Christ in history.⁴ It is in fact not the problem of Christianity and culture, but rather a problem *for* Christianity inasmuch as Christians must hold different allegiances together in proper relation.⁵

More specifically, the problem is a result of the character of Christian loyalty to God and its inevitable clash with the social gods of culture.⁶ Indeed, characterising culture is a particular way of negotiating loyalties, a particular configuration of loyal-

¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1951), 1.

² See “The Gospel for a Time of Fears” was the title of a lecture series Niebuhr gave in 1950 at Howard University.

³ Jon Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr: A Lifetime of Reflections on the Church and the World* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1986), 75f.

⁴ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 2.

⁵ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 11.

⁶ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 8.

ties which takes one of the many and makes it absolute. We saw in chapter six that Niebuhr called this “social faith”. In the fifties, he calls it “henotheism”. Henotheism is a “form of faith” which he suggests is “the historically and biographically primitive form”.⁷ It may anticipate, in “broken form”, radical monotheism, or it may break down into “polytheism” or pluralism. While nationalism is its most prevalent form,⁸ henotheism is also found in ideologies, such as “Marxism”, as well as in religious communities. “Civilization” itself may constitute a henotheism, if it is taken for the whole of reality. Looking at the post-war world, Niebuhr could therefore interpret it as a clash of henotheisms. Put in the terms of *The Meaning of Revelation*, it was an instance of natural religion in need of transformation.

The danger of henotheism is that it can easily degenerate into polytheism. Polytheism is a consequence of “broken faith”,⁹ of a profound loss of confidence in God or the gods. It acknowledges only multiple centres, without the ability or means to choose one over the other.¹⁰ The breakdown of unity that polytheism represents, for Niebuhr, has profound personal and social consequences. The self is reduced to externalities, to a “bundle of functions tied together by the body and the brain”.¹¹ Society becomes “an assemblage of associations, devoted to many partial interests and held together in a meaningful unity by no common derivation from a value center and no loyalty to an inclusive cause.”¹² An assemblage of associations is no society, just as a bundle of functions is no self. The implication is stark: what western culture in its crisis of faith faces is the possibility of the void.

But henotheism is also the possibility of a third form of faith: radical monotheism. We shall say more about this important category below. For now, it is sufficient to say that radical monotheism places loyalty not in any creature or being, but in the principle of being itself.¹³ Radical monotheism is a universal form of faith which is anticipated in “higher” forms of henotheism, such as valuing the principle of love. But it criticises all henotheism as well—including the higher forms. Christianity, then, is itself in a tensile relation with culture. But it is so only insofar as it incarnates radi-

⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 25.

⁸ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism*, 27.

⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry Into the Structure of Human Faith*, ed. Richard R. Niebuhr (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1989), 63ff.

¹⁰ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism*, 28.

¹¹ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism*, 30.

¹² Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism*, 30-1.

¹³ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism*, 32.

cal monotheism. Christianity can also be heno- or even polytheistic. Conversely, monotheism need not take on Christian form. We shall return to this point.

Terms of engagement

Monotheism therefore calls *all* divinities into question, even to the point of challenging “Christian culture”.¹⁴ Even taken-for-granted values like “democracy” are subject to the relativising critique of radical monotheism.¹⁵ Monotheism is a challenge to all bipartisan or bipolar thinking, whether in the first or in the twentieth century. Social unity or harmony is not, finally, a good to be held undialectically. Radical faith challenges social unity. Indeed it seems on Niebuhr’s reading of the history of western civilisation that there is a certain necessary antagonism between Christ and culture. Christ cannot be made to “serve” culture. Therefore Christ is a threat to culture’s totalising thrust.

What is meant by the term “Christ”? Niebuhr recognises that there is a plurality of portraits of Christ. Yet there is “a fundamental unity which is supplied by the fact that the Jesus Christ to whom men are related in such different ways is a definite character and person whose teachings, actions and sufferings are of one piece.”¹⁶ This means that “Christ” is a term that connotes a functional unity. The term cannot legitimately be used as shorthand for one particular value among or even above others, such as love, or even for a noble example to follow—the essence of liberal Christianity. But the unity of “Christ” is not a metaphysical or ontological unity. The key to understanding the unity of “Christ” is to see it as pointing away from *all* values and virtues to the One who judges all and affirms all.

This explains in large part for Niebuhr why there is such an antagonism between Christ and culture: Christ “points away from all that is conditioned to the Unconditioned.”¹⁷ But there is also a positive side to “Christ”: in Christ the movement of God towards humans and of humans toward God is embodied. Christ not only points away from the many to the One; he bears the good tidings of the One to the many. His perfect humanity is also his divine Sonship.¹⁸ If however we take Niebuhr’s final chapter in *The Meaning of Revelation* into account, it is only antagonism that “cul-

¹⁴ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism*, 49ff.

¹⁵ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 4. C.f. *Radical Monotheism*.

¹⁶ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 12.

¹⁷ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 28.

¹⁸ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 28-9.

ture” can feel towards “Christ”: only those who have had their social faith overturned by the manifestation of the deity of God can see this more positive side of Christ.

If the word “Christ” denotes a unity for Niebuhr, the word “culture” denotes plurality. Here again we are on familiar ground. In *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, the Christian ideal was a unity beyond the many social forces that created plurality and disharmony. In *The Meaning of Revelation* plurality is placed on the out-side of things—but this plurality was something to be transformed by revelation into a unity. Hence culture already starts off at a disadvantage in Niebuhr’s exposition. Inasmuch as it is a plurality, it is un-transformed. Its version of unity—and humans are driven to seek unity—can only come about through coercion and violence.

While culture connotes plurality, for Niebuhr, it is also a “totality” word. While he uses the word culture specifically of “western culture”, in his outlining of “the perennial problem” he eschews definitions of culture that exclude religion and state.¹⁹ Rather, culture embraces all human activity—including the cultic activity of religion.²⁰ Drawing on the work of the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, Niebuhr understands culture as,

¹⁹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 31.

²⁰ Wendy Griswold has delineated the two dominant ways of thinking about culture in terms of disciplines. She says that the use of the term in the humanities commonly refers to “the best that has been thought and known”, while in the social sciences it has referred to a “complex whole” incorporating symbols, morals, customs, values and beliefs. Both these approaches, she continues, are rooted in the nineteenth century’s coming to terms with the nature of society.

The romantic movement, especially in the writings of the Poet-philosopher Matthew Arnold, saw culture as serving a salvific, humanising function in relation to encroaching industrial “civilization”. Culture represents the beauty and wisdom of the artist over against the smoke-stack ugliness of the industrialist. Max Weber, ironically a social scientist, posited culture as a realm of meaning over against the anomie of science. In his view, as in those of the romanticists, culture is fragile, always under the threat of the forces of “civilization”.

In contrast to the romanticists, whom Griswold identifies with the “humanities” approach, social scientists emphasise a relation of harmony between culture and society. Influential here is Herder’s view of culture as the “way of life of a people”. In its inception, then, this way of understanding culture preferred to speak of “cultures” rather than “culture”. And so both major sociological schools in recent days emphasise a “close fit” between culture and society. For functionalists, culture directs the values embodied in institutions and structures. For Marxists, the movement is the other way: social structure as base directs the cultural superstructure. Wendy Griswold, *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1994), 3ff.

What Griswold has identified as the social-scientific approach to culture is non-evaluative—that is, it is not interested in talking about “superior” versus “inferior” cultures (although the way social science has been used in South Africa would certainly be counterfactual)—emphasising harmony and durability rather than conflict and fragility. Moreover its methodology sees culture as accessible to empirical methods of investigation rather than being sacred and inefable—close to religious in nature. It was this latter approach to the phenomenon of culture that H. Richard Niebuhr was indebted to, as indicated by his reliance on Malinowski for his definition given above. The privileging of “harmony” is also a limitation in a South African context. See below.

that total process of human activity and that total result of such activity to which now the name “culture”, now the name “civilization” is applied in common speech. Culture is the “artificial secondary environment” which man superimposes on the natural. It comprises language, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values. This “social heritage”, this “reality sui generis”, which the New Testament writers frequently had in mind when they spoke of “the world”, which is represented in many forms but to which Christians like other men are inevitably subject, is what we mean when we speak of culture.²¹

A number of things could be said about this definition. First, it is important to note the equation of “culture” with “civilization.” Nowhere does he carefully differentiate between “culture”, “civilization”, and “society”. Yet he does make a distinction here, and elsewhere, between “culture” and “nature”. Nature is what culture imposes itself on, and yet there is no way to experience nature except by means of culture.²² Recalling the structure-direction terminology introduced in chapter six, we can also see that this definition speaks of culture in both structural (“language, beliefs, customs, social organization”) and directional (“total process”) terms. “World” includes the structural entities and institutions with which all humans as humans engage. But it is also a synonym for the totality of life gone wrong. This ambiguity is replicated in the fact that Niebuhr invokes the understanding of the “world” in the Gospel of John to illustrate “culture” in “Christ the transformer of culture” type,²³ and the understanding of the world in the First Epistle of John, to illustrate culture in the “Christ against culture” type. The Gospel of John speaks of “world” more in structural terms (“God so loved the world”), referring to what is to be redeemed. The epistles speak of it more in directional terms (“Love not the world”), referring to a certain religious character (in this case the idolatrous faith of loyalty to Caesar) which redemption negates.

Niebuhr provides his own commentary on this definition, extrapolating three elements: culture is social; is a human achievement; and is concerned with values. The latter element is further divided: that values are oriented toward an end, or a good; that that good is predominantly that of “the good of man”;²⁴ that culture both incarnates values temporally and materially, and is concerned with their conserva-

²¹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 32.

²² Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 39.

²³ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 196-206.

²⁴ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 34, 35.

tion;²⁵ and that culture's values are plural—held together in a “tolerable conflict”.²⁶ In this way, culture is a site of the negotiation of loyalties, but also a false (in Niebuhr's view) unity under which they are brought.

Hence Niebuhr presents two sources of authority, each heteronomous to the other—at least as appears in history. There is yet another complexity: while “Christ leads men away from the temporality and pluralism of culture”, and culture's concern for conservatism leads it to reject Christ, Christ himself is also a product of a particular culture. “Christ” and “culture” do not name a simple polarity. Moreover, culture, not some other realm above or parallel to it, is the sphere of the engagement of faith for Christ and Christians. This is how he understands the tension within which Christian faith operates. Niebuhr's classic types are historical configurations of the problem. They are typical answers “that recur so often in different eras and societies that they seem to be less the product of historical conditioning than of the nature of the problem itself and the meaning of its terms.”²⁷ They are abstracted examples of what he later calls “a living, all permeating faith.”²⁸ As historical configurations, there is no one “right” answer. The best that one can say of a type is that one may be a “symbol of the ultimate answer”.²⁹ The “ultimate answer”, of course, is beyond our historically relative grasp. And yet, as has been often pointed out, Niebuhr sets up his argument so as to highlight his own position, something which follows from his own previous work.³⁰ This answer is not simply the “best” available, but rather is the most appropriate for “a time of fears”.

Typical answers

We will return to the five types especially as relating to South African Christianity, in our conclusion. For now we give only a brief account of them and hint at what might come later. We also suggest their relation to the account in *Social Sources* and what they mean for the idea of radical faith.

²⁵ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 36-38.

²⁶ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 38.

²⁷ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 40.

²⁸ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 141.

²⁹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 142.

³⁰ See e.g. John Howard Yoder, “How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned”, in Glen Stassen, Diane Yeager and John Howard Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 41-42.

The extremes

Niebuhr begins his sketch of the historical configurations of loyalties by naming the two extreme types, “Christ of culture” and “Christ against culture”. He utilises the term “opposition” in characterising the configuration of the two sources of authority in the first type, also known as “Christ against culture”.³¹ Another word he uses is “withdrawing”.³² Loyalty to Christ means rejection of culture and a drawing away from it into the church.³³ The “world” is the total society outside of the church, but also “a realm under the power of evil”.³⁴ This power of evil is manifest particularly in idolatry, although all things “societal” are tainted by it.³⁵ The Christian belongs to a new society, with a radical discontinuity between it and the outside society.

Put in the structure and direction terms introduced in chapter six, the oppositionalists locate sin and redemption in different structures: the former in institutions of culture and the latter in the church or in “Christ”. Church, however, may be understood in directional terms as meaning “the one true church” as opposed to “the false church”, which belongs to the world.

The Christ against culture type has a strong affinity for the “sect” highlighted by Troeltsch and of course by Niebuhr in *Social Sources*. And yet he goes beyond rooting the type in social class by highlighting the Russian author Tolstoy and the North African theologian Tertullian as exemplars. Indeed his account of Tolstoy seems to locate the type in a certain existential posture, rather than as a function of social forces.³⁶ Another difference with *Social Sources* is a loosening of the association of a certain polity, ethics and dogma with a particular type.³⁷ While he highlighted the apocalypticism of the sects of the poor in *Social Sources*,³⁸ he now says that it matters not whether oppositionalist Christians think in apocalyptic or mystical terms. Nor

³¹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 40.

³² Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 41.

³³ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 47.

³⁴ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 48.

³⁵ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 53.

³⁶ Although cf. Tolstoy’s economic radicalism Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 61f. Tolstoy also rejected institutional religion as such, something which means that Niebuhr is going beyond “The Social Teachings of the Churches” to the social ethics of Christian individuals *and* institutions. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 62

³⁷ See chapter three above.

³⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1987 [orig. 1929]), 30-1.

does it matter which side of the Reformation divide they are on: his types transcend divisions between Protestants and Catholics.³⁹

Niebuhr's critique of the oppositionalist type is simple: it is impossible for Christians not to be human beings, and therefore to participate in and benefit from culture. Perhaps he would agree with this deliberate misquoting of *The Meaning of Revelation*: "we are in culture as the fish is in water". Moreover, the rejection of culture can only come at the price of erecting another, "Christian" culture, with firm and exclusive boundaries.⁴⁰ This is in danger of making Christianity another social faith, thus perpetuating an idolatry *within* Christianity, or a particular Christianity *as* idolatry. More theologically, oppositionalists have difficulty with the unity of God, with the idea that the creator and redeemer are one. This reminds us of Niebuhr's classical description of social faith in *The Meaning of Revelation* as a faith that is unable to reconcile power, goodness and unity in God. In *Christ and Culture's* terms, a God of nature is sometimes set up as rival to the God of Jesus Christ, and other times a docetic Jesus replaces the flesh and blood man of history.⁴¹ Ironically, radical Christians may even move away from the particularity of Jesus towards a vague spiritual "presence" which may be found in other faiths. Oppositional Christianity, we may summarise, is not a "home" for radical faith, even though Niebuhr calls it "radical Christianity".

Neither is the other extreme type a home for radical faith. If "opposition" names the first, "accommodation" names the second. Interestingly another term Niebuhr uses in this connection is "harmonize".⁴² This is the same term he used of the role of liberal Christianity as ideal in *Social Sources*. Indeed, "Culture-Protestantism" is a better term than liberal Christianity for what Niebuhr has in mind.⁴³ Accommodation can only be done, Niebuhr thought, by being selective concerning elements of both Christ and culture. Christ especially is reinterpreted so as to lessen the tension.⁴⁴

³⁹ To an extent this is in continuity with *Social Sources*, as the sects of the poor are seen to be part of a thread stretching back beyond the advent of Protestantism.

⁴⁰ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 72-3. Hans Frei has noted that all such attempts to universalise one group over the many others—including a church—are henotheistic. "History, Church, and Nation", in *The Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr*, ed. Ronald F. Thiemann (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 21.

⁴¹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 81.

⁴² Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 84, 103.

⁴³ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 84. For example, the exemplar of culture Protestantism for Niebuhr is Ritschl, who started with the two principles of Christ and culture and set out to harmonise them. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 99f.

⁴⁴ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 91.

He becomes a hero of “manifold culture”⁴⁵ rather than someone pointing beyond the many to the One. Christ is part of the “social heritage” transmitted from generation to generation.⁴⁶ He is an “artefact” amongst other cultural artefacts. Christianity in this view tends to be interpreted as “religion” rather than as “church”, or church is interpreted as “religious association rather than as new society.”⁴⁷ The ties between faith and ethics are also loosened. While its origins are in the Gnostics, the type is most exemplified in religious modernism. Why is this? Because the enlightenment idea of human conflict with nature takes centre stage.⁴⁸

There is, strictly speaking, no obvious parallel in *Social Sources* to the Christ of culture position,⁴⁹ although it could be said that Niebuhr was reading American Christianity as a whole in this way, as well as the “church” Christianity of Europe. Indeed “the ethical failure of the divided church” was in its replication of the divisive forces of culture. And yet it is also not difficult to see Niebuhr’s own early position represented in this type. The names that Niebuhr associates with this type are also synonymous with the American social Christianity we discussed in chapter four: Rauschenbusch, Mathews, and Macintosh.⁵⁰

But culture-protestantism is not simply a loyalty to contemporary or American culture—or to Protestantism for that matter. Culture-protestantism has been opposed by culture-catholicism which looks to a culture more ancient as normative.⁵¹ In South Africa, we might say, there have been contested and contesting culture-protestantisms—particularly in the struggle between nationalisms.

But it was perhaps South African nationalism that fit this type best as Niebuhr describes it.⁵² As long as society’s institutions were “enlightened”, it was only a matter of time before Africans would be brought to the same place as whites. This effectively meant baptising the status quo. Accommodationists locate redemption in the institutions of society. This helps explain why modern liberalism, so critical of “tradi-

⁴⁵ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 91.

⁴⁶ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 41.

⁴⁷ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 88.

⁴⁸ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 101.

⁴⁹ Interestingly Niebuhr intimates that cultural Christians (and he refers to social Christians) can also locate sin in institutions—something he associated with the churches of the disinherited in *Social Sources* Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 85. He also acknowledges, though, that unlike radical Christians, cultural Christians select amongst institutions some that are infected with “ignorance” or “superstition”. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 112.

⁵⁰ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 101.

⁵¹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 102.

⁵² We return below to relating the types of *Christ and Culture* to South Africa.

tionalism” and “tribalism”, becomes a Christ of culture position—but only with reference to its *own* culture. Sin is located in ignorance, its eradication in enlightenment. Allied with a progressivist myth, accommodationalists fail to see the possibility of their institutions as also being corrupt. Direction and structure are conflated.

Like oppositionalists, accommodationalists struggle with the doctrine of the unity of God. The tendency is to identify Jesus with the spirit that is at work in all humans. Combined with the strong antagonism to nature identified above, this means that “the relation of Jesus Christ to the Almighty creator of heaven and earth is ultimately no speculative question for the man concerned with the preservation of culture, but his fundamental problem.”⁵³

The centre

These are the extreme answers, the “left wing” and the “right wing”. But most Christians have sought to occupy the centre. In the centre are three types—synthesists, dualists and conversionists—each of which strives to balance the two sources of authority without compromise. Common to all three is a view of God which embraces both the redeemer and the creator. World as “nature” is also part of God’s order, as is world as “culture”. There are not two incompatible kinds of law, but one. In serving neighbour humans also serve God.

The first type Niebuhr deals with, the “synthesist”, prefers the language of “both-and” to “either-or”. Culture, like Christ, is “both divine and human in its origin, both holy and sinful, a realm of both necessity and freedom”.⁵⁴ What is interesting about this type, and demonstrative of Niebuhr’s types in general, is the way they transcend historical contexts and suggest new configurations. For instance, Clement of Alexandria, writing during a time when the church was still a marginal institution, could speak of “the ethics of a sober, decorous, respectable life as the ethics of Christ” and yet also a life elevated by grace for the love of God for God’s own sake.⁵⁵ Both are commendable. Yet Thomas Aquinas, writing at the very height of “Christian culture”, could represent the same type in a synthesis that embraced “a radical Christianity protesting against the attenuation of the gospel by cultural religious institu-

⁵³ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 114-5.

⁵⁴ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 121.

⁵⁵ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 126.

tions, and a cultural church great enough to accept and maintain in union with itself this loyal opposition.”⁵⁶

We will not go into Niebuhr’s long and fascinating account of Thomas’s theology which synthesised both the ethics of culture and the ethics of the gospel,⁵⁷ except to highlight Niebuhr’s assertion that the conditions for the realisation of such a type were best suited in the thirteenth century with its stable institutions and “common mind”,⁵⁸ and that these conditions were not simply ecclesiastical, but cultural and economic. This is evidenced in the fact that the great synthesis fell apart not as a result of the ecclesiastical or dogmatic changes of the Renaissance or Reformation, but “the conflicts and stresses of the fourteenth century”.⁵⁹ Later attempts to revive Thomas’s synthesis have actually fallen into a “Christ of [thirteenth century] culture.”⁶⁰ It is difficult, Niebuhr writes, to find a consistent contemporary exemplar of this type.

But the type is not without appeal, for Niebuhr. It is a product of a human need for unity: “the union of church and state, of state with state and class with class, and the union of all these with the supernatural Lord and Companion.”⁶¹ Nevertheless, this type, in terms of Niebuhr’s earlier categories, also tends to a social faith. It always exists with the danger of absolutising the relative, and of being blind to the provincialness of its own rendering of culture.⁶² Hence synthesists often fall into the cultural conservatism of the accommodationist. Synthesists also exempt the “man’s religious culture in its Christian form—the holy church” from the taint of sin.⁶³ Not surprisingly, synthesists, like accommodationists, fail to account for pervasive, radical evil. This means, we would conclude, that radical faith does not find a “home” amongst synthesists.

The second “mediating” type is termed by Niebuhr “dualist”. This is not the dualism of the oppositionalists, which seeks to escape one realm by dwelling in another, but one that wishes to honour both. It is, again, not a question of church and

⁵⁶ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 130.

⁵⁷ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 130f.

⁵⁸ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 136.

⁵⁹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 136. See Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 120-23. for an account of the breakdown of the medieval synthesis that focuses on the centripetal force of nationalism.

⁶⁰ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 138.

⁶¹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 142.

⁶² Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 145.

⁶³ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 152.

world, or “Christians and pagans”, but of “God and man.”⁶⁴ Here the distance between grace and sin is infinite. No synthesis between Christ and culture is possible. Yet the distinction between sin and grace runs through, rather than between institutions. There are none that are exempt from the taint of sin, including the church. Even in the noblest endeavours, “the will to appear as gods” is present.⁶⁵ “The whole edifice of culture is cracked and madly askew; the work of self-contradicting builders, erecting towers that aspire to heaven on a fault in the earth’s crust.”⁶⁶ Put more positively, it also means that culture and social institutions are places where grace can be present. This view of sin is strongly reminiscent of Niebuhr’s in “Man the Sinner”.⁶⁷ There he also eschews the idea that institutions or loyalties are *themselves* inherently good or bad. They are ambiguous, and can be turned to serve the one or one of the many, depending on the position of the will. However in his picture of the dualist, particularly the example of Martin Luther, Niebuhr portrays a view of sin and grace that is simultaneous; that is, nations, economies, churches are *at the same time* under wrath and mercy, rebellious and redeemed. The faith process is like alternating current, cycling positive and negative. In Niebuhr’s writings, the faith process is more progressive (without being progressivist). There is a process of conversion of social institutions through the activity of radical faith.

The dualist exemplifies Niebuhr’s picture of a person confronted by revelation of God both in wrath and mercy; encountering in life “reason, order, and life-giving goodness, but also force, conflict, and destruction.”⁶⁸ Niebuhr’s own monotheistic theology subsumes this challenge in a narrative process of conversion from God the void to God the enemy to God the companion.⁶⁹ The temptation of the dualist, however, is always to slacken this tension through the positing of two gods, along the lines of the oppositionalist. The unity of opposites of the dualist is not easy to maintain.

One exemplar of dualism, according to Niebuhr, is the Apostle Paul.⁷⁰ Niebuhr understands Paul as combining the radical demand of Christ, radical faith we

⁶⁴ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 150.

⁶⁵ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 155.

⁶⁶ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 155-6.

⁶⁷ See above chapter six.

⁶⁸ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 158.

⁶⁹ *Radical Monotheism*, 123f.

⁷⁰ Interestingly, in his 1942 sketch which would form the basis of *Christ and Culture*, Niebuhr placed Paul as a “conversionist”. “Types of Christian Ethics”, in Stassen, et al, *Authentic transformation*, 28-9.

might say, with the necessity of living according to given cultural norms. He does this while recognising that cultural norms are also judged as fallen. This may sound like Paul is a synthesist, but Niebuhr points out that for Paul cultural life is not good in itself, but has more a restraining function. Even “Christian society” is “to prevent sin from being more destructive as it might otherwise be.”⁷¹ The two ethics are not for two realms or two stages, but for two contradictory tendencies.

The most radical example Niebuhr gives of dualism is Luther—someone who could write a devotional classic like *A Treatise on Christian Liberty* and yet also write the political polemic *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*. Niebuhr explains this, in part, because Luther had not simply church but also national responsibilities—something that is significant for the present study. Paradoxically, Luther could proclaim a liberating message in one realm and a politically conservative message in another. This paradox is not, however, a contradiction. Nor is it a rejection of culture for the sake of Christ, resulting in an “anything goes” attitude. For Luther, life in culture was the realm where Christ was to be followed. Special institutions which had previously had an inherent sacrality were delegitimised and “ordinary life” became a place of sanctity. But sometimes the ideal cannot be followed; mercy can be destructive.⁷² Condemning the peasant revolts and even putting peasants to death was such an act of mercy—for the sake of the whole of society.

The hidden, dark side of God—God’s “strange work”—is the equivalent of the idea of mercy in the guise of wrath. While Luther rejected the synthesist solution, which carefully worked out the attributes and activities of God according to a hierarchically ordered scheme, he was “at least equally firm in maintaining the unity of God and the unity of Christian life in culture.”⁷³ At the same time as he affirmed “grace and mercy” on the one hand, he affirmed “wrath and severity” on the other.⁷⁴ But the temptation to split these was always there. Luther’s dynamic faith would eventually become the confessionalism of Lutheranism. The dialectic would become a parallelism.⁷⁵ Christ and culture ran alongside to each other, with different norms for each. The “two kingdoms” idea identified which norms were to be applied to which realm. Loyalties differed according to realm. This resulted in a domesticated gospel, which

⁷¹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 165.

⁷² Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 178.

⁷³ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 172.

⁷⁴ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 171.

fell back into a cultural Christianity. This was challenged by Soren Kierkegaard, as well as by Ernst Troeltsch.

We have already made reference to Troeltsch's own "double wrestle" with Christ and culture. Applied to this type, Niebuhr highlights conscience as Troeltsch's "Christ" principle and social morality as his "culture" principle. Social morality is historical while conscience is transhistorical. Yet social morality must be obeyed if life is to continue. "No synthesis is possible save in individual acts of achievement. At the end we are justified only by faith."⁷⁶ This last sentence calls to mind a passage from *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, where after naming the Master Entanglement, Niebuhr also states that justification is only by grace.

It has often been pointed out that no ideal can be incorporated without the loss of some of its ideal character. When liberty gains a constitution, liberty is compromised; when fraternity elects officers, fraternity yields some of the ideal qualities of brotherhood to the necessities of government.... the very essence of Christianity lies in the tension which it presupposes or creates between the worlds of nature and of spirit, and in its resolution of that conflict by means of justifying faith.... At the end, if not at the beginning, of every effort to incorporate Christianity there is, therefore, a compromise, and the Christian cannot escape the necessity of seeking the last source of righteousness outside himself and the world in the divine aggression that is justification by faith.⁷⁷

Indeed, the Master Entanglement is itself a version of the Christ and culture paradox. In this passage, as in the whole of *Social Sources*, there is a bringing of creation and fall into close proximity.⁷⁸ Life in culture for the Christian seems inherently a life of struggling against pluralising forces, and yet one in which participation is necessary.

But the Niebuhr of *Christ and Culture* no longer sees the Master Entanglement as ontologically necessary. Rather, it is but one historically relative configuration of the perennial problem. Radical faith allows him to offer a final alternative: conversionism. While conversionism continues to look for righteousness outside human ac-

⁷⁵ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 179. Niebuhr here speaks of a version of the degeneration of radical faith like that highlighted in *The Kingdom of God in America*.

⁷⁶ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 182.

⁷⁷ Niebuhr, *Social Sources*, 4-5.

⁷⁸ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 188.

tivity, the divine aggression is not “outside” but woven into the very structure of life. It is this conviction that forms the basis of “Christ the transformer of culture.”

The conversionist type is therefore also Niebuhr’s own confession of faith. The examples he gives are inadequate perhaps because the type is something only seen “through a glass darkly.” Its abstractness—which John Howard Yoder has criticised—is perhaps because, like radical monotheism, it is present only in broken form.⁷⁹

“Man the creature lives... under the rule of Christ and by the creative power and ordering of the divine Word.”⁸⁰ Humans live, whether they are aware of it or not, as *responders* to God’s creative Word. This creation is good in itself, not simply the backdrop for redemption, as the dualist sees it. But unlike the accommodationalist, the conversionist sees culture as fallen, though not *as such*. Sin is pervasive as corruption of good creation. Fallenness is not however identified with creatureliness, as the oppositionalist would have it, but is negative response to God’s Word. This does not mean that culture is order for corruption, but rather corrupted order which can be re-ordered through redemption. This brings about the third conviction: that history is an interaction between God and humans. “History is the story of God’s mighty deeds and of man’s responses to them.”⁸¹ The goal of history is not an “eternity” beyond history, but the transformation of all things in God. The redemption that Christ effects is a restoration of that which is corrupted through a *redirection* of what has been perverted.⁸²

Niebuhr’s exemplars of conversionism are ambiguous at best. The Gospel of John has conversionist themes, but is also mixed in with “a particularist tendency” which draws a sharp distinction between the church and the world.⁸³ Augustine, while representing conversionist views of sin and salvation, eventually turns “from the hope

⁷⁹ See below. Yoder’s criticism is similar to that of Kleiver noted at the end of chapter seven: that the transformation of ideas of God alone is inadequate. “What needs to be transformed is actual ways of living, working, relating, and not merely our ways of thinking about them.” Yoder, “How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned”, 75. Yoder’s point about concreteness is taken, as indicated in our comments at the end of chapter seven above. Glen Stassen follows Yoder, pointing out “Concrete Christological Norms for Transformation” later in the volume (ch. 3). However, the reality of fallenness means that any normative account—or practice—will be only a partial realisation of the norm. The question then becomes, does a particular idea or practice point in the right *direction*? Is it *faithful*? rather than, is a particular idea or practice something which one can point to *as a norm*?

⁸⁰ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 192.

⁸¹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 195.

⁸² Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 214.

of the conversion of culture” to “the defense of Christian culture”.⁸⁴ Like the writer of the Gospel of John, Augustine erects a firm barrier around the church, substituting assent for the dynamics of faith. Calvin, also broadly placed within this type, works within a dualism of “temporal and eternal existence”.⁸⁵ Niebuhr’s great example of F. D. Maurice resembles more a revival of cultural Christianity than a transformative one. Indeed, in Maurice as presented by Niebuhr, the element of tension is loosened to the point at which one wonders whether conversion is not a disguised “accommodation”. While he is careful to distance Maurice from humanism, a modernist progress theme is strong in statements like: “We are not dealing with human progress in culture, but with the divine conversion of the spirit of man from which all culture proceeds.”⁸⁶ God’s spirit guides culture to its proper end, subduing ignorance and superstition.⁸⁷ This of course is visible only to those who see themselves as being in touch with what is really going in history, a kind of latter-day Gnosticism prevalent in cultural Christians.

Conversionism, like radical faith, is more descriptive of an activity than an historical position. Like radical monotheism and the covenantal structure of faith⁸⁸, it would seem to exist only in broken form. This opens up the question of what the content of faithfulness might be, and the possibility that even taking one of the positions Niebuhr criticised might be an authentically transformationist option in a given context. Paul Ramsay notes that when *Christ and Culture* appeared, “almost everyone in American Christendom rushed to locate himself among the transformists: naturalists, process theologians, personalists, idealists, Lutherans and Anglicans who were sometimes Thomists, as well as those you would have expected.”⁸⁹ Indeed, Niebuhr’s latter-day critics especially within the Anabaptist camp have claimed that the particular position Niebuhr advocated as transformationalist is not the only strategy of transforming culture. For Charles Scriven, for example, Niebuhr leaves the question of “what precisely is it to be in culture as loyalists to the cause of Christ” unanswered.⁹⁰

⁸³ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 204-5.

⁸⁴ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 216.

⁸⁵ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 218.

⁸⁶ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 228.

⁸⁷ cf. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 112-13.

⁸⁸ See below.

⁸⁹ “War and the Christian Conscience”, 112, quoted by Yoder, “How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned”, 53.

⁹⁰ Charles Scriven, *The Transformation of Culture: Christian Ethics after H. Richard Niebuhr* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1988), 63.

He argues that the Anabaptist way of being in culture, ironically the position criticised most sharply by Niebuhr, is the way of true transformation.⁹¹

Christ and culture in South Africa

In terms of our concern in this thesis, we are only interested in Niebuhr's strategy as it illumines or obscures the nature and contestation of loyalties in South African Christianity. While we shall further extend Niebuhr's categories to South African Christianity in the conclusion, it may be helpful to anticipate some of our findings there at this point. We can do this particularly in terms of the challenges to Niebuhr's types which the South African context makes. Drawing on part one above and extending the discussion there from nationalism to culture, it seems that there are three challenges that the South African context offers. Firstly, South Africa has displayed different "cultures", each of which is contested within as well as without. The liberation of one culture can be interpreted within another culture as repression. Even what is seen as the creation of a new common culture can be interpreted as repression by those who feel thereby culturally marginalised. We see this in the discourse of Afrikaner nationalists who claim that the new South African "we" does not include Afrikaners or their culture.⁹²

Indeed, the word "culture" in South Africa has itself been contested and used as a boundary marker. Culture can be and has been a "call to arms", something which signifies identities and interests which must be defended against the incursion of different identities and interests. Or culture can be an inclusive word which speaks of the ongoing creation and recreation of identities.⁹³ In this regard, not only is the question of the meaning of "Christ" contested, but so is the nature of what it means to be "against", "of", "above", or "transforming" culture.

⁹¹ Scriven, *The Transformation of Culture*, 180-192. See also Duane K. Friesen, "Singing God's Song as Citizens and Aliens: A Christian Theology of Culture", *Memnonite Quarterly Review* (1997).

⁹² This issue rose with force in March 1999 when Parliament held a debate on Afrikaner self-determination. See for example, Maureen Isaacson, "Viljoen Dreams of a Place for his African Tribe", *Sunday Independent* 21 March 1999, 4; Philip Nel, "Is there an Afrikaner Problem?" *Mail and Guardian* 19-25 March 1999, 30; Clive Sawyer, "Mbeki and the Afrikaner Debate", *Cape Argus*, 24 March 1999, 15.

⁹³ Apartheid discourse exemplified the first understanding, with the idea that every nationality has a culture, that this culture is monolithic, and that it must be defended with strong political boundaries that prevent, minimise interaction, or structure interaction with other cultures in non-threatening ways. A particular idea of culture was constructed to legitimise this. For the second idea of culture, see the work of Robert Thornton: "Culture: A Contemporary Definition", in *South African Keywords: The Uses and Abuses of Political Concepts*, John Sharp, ed. (Cape Town: David Philip, 1988), 17-28; "The Potentials of Boundaries in South Africa: Steps Toward a Theory of

Secondly, it is not self-evident that those who name themselves “Christians” worship the same God in relatively different ways. James Cochrane has argued that the problem in South Africa has not been a matter of different “perspectives” at all, but a matter of the worship of different gods.⁹⁴ We return to this point below. Third, South African Christians have been unwilling to give the “truth” question over to a historical relativism. This perhaps points to the difference in cultural settings between South Africa and Niebuhr’s America: in a relatively stable culture, one can perhaps speak of “harmonising” truth positions.⁹⁵ South Africans, especially oppressed South Africans, have had no such luxury. Neither has there been, in the research that the author of this thesis has done, any prominent example of “the truth equals the sum of all the parts” idea, particularly when that idea includes the “truths” of colonial and apartheid oppression, as well as resistance. The truth question has not been dealt with in such abstract terms. Nor is it suspended between these “truths”.⁹⁶ Rather, truth is incarnate in a historical praxis which excludes other praxes.

Cochrane’s criticism of *Christ and Culture* centred on Niebuhr’s use of the term “harmonising”.⁹⁷ For Niebuhr, no one can have the “right” or “definitive” interpretation of the two sources of authority and their proper relation. The Absolute relativises all positions and places them, it would seem, on the same ground. However this is not entirely true for, as we have seen above, Niebuhr himself has a point of view which allows him to be critical of the various configurations. We have identified that point of view as his own location in the fifth type. But reconciliation nonetheless seems to be what Niebuhr’s historical relativism is aimed at. The Christ of culture position, for instance, is never *absolutely* wrong, and there are ways in which it anticipates Christ above culture and, through it, Christ the transformer of culture.

Cochrane, however, wants to move beyond the attempt to reconcile alternative interpretations and to honour the conflict of interpretations in Christianity, espe-

the Social Edge”, in *Postcolonial Identities in Africa*, Richard Werbner and Terrance Ranger, eds. (London: Zed Books, 1996).

⁹⁴ James R. Cochrane, “Christ and Culture: Then and Now”, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 71 (June 1990), 7.

⁹⁵ We use the term “harmonising” not in the way Niebuhr uses it with reference to the Christ of culture type (see above), but of all the types together.

⁹⁶ Thornton has argued that, contrary to the social theory of Malinowski and others, South African society has not functioned to harmonise differences. Rather, the multi-levelled nature of “cross-cutting allegiances” (referring to what we have termed the external and internal contestation of cultures), has somehow held society together. Conflict, in other words, provides the centripetal force to keep society from flying apart. “Potential of Boundaries in South Africa”, 151-2.

⁹⁷ “Christ and Culture: Then and Now”, 6-7.

cially in South African Christianity. This is not simply a matter, for him, of Christian interpretations of the same God, but of the contestation of the different gods Christians have worshipped. We have already heard Niebuhr speak of contesting gods with reference to the need for a radical faith that brings them all to order and directs them toward the One. Different gods exist on the level of social faith. There is the clash of henotheisms, of nationalisms and ideologies, always in danger of the void, of no-self and no-society. But what of radical faith? Is it possible that different Christians of radical faith worship different gods? If we see the first four types as a struggle between radical and social faith, with radical faith reaching towards the fifth, then the answer has to be “no”. The contest of gods is always on the side of social faith. The Christian of radical faith is no longer involved in contesting the gods. This would make radical faith—and the fifth type—qualitatively different to the first four types.⁹⁸

What militates against this, though, and invites Cochrane’s criticism, is the way Niebuhr uses an existentialist paradigm to speak of the adjudication of the different types. Niebuhr’s conclusion to *Christ and Culture* is this: “that the problem of Christ and culture can come to an end only in a realm beyond all study in the free decisions of individuals believers and responsible communities.”⁹⁹ For the historical relativist, not only is it impossible to decide absolutely between options, but it is a normative standpoint to acknowledge all as legitimate. The whole is made up of the totality of the parts. Applied to South African Christianity this would mean that no evaluation could be given of the faith of another. Contesting loyalties would be short-circuited. With Niebuhr’s typology as Umpire, all the Christianities in South Africa would be recognised as equally legitimate attempts to wrestle with the two authorities of Christ and culture. While we are tempted to think that Niebuhr would retort that there *is* a difference other than would be drawn between, say, a religion of fear and a religion of radical faith, such as in his discussion in *The Responsible Self*,¹⁰⁰ it is difficult to relate that distinction to *Christ and Culture*’s historical relativism.

It is here that Niebuhr’s historical relativism—that it is impossible to decide absolutely amongst equally viable Christian positions—is in tension with his view of the cross as master image amongst Christians.¹⁰¹ The cross is the defining event in the

⁹⁸ In terms of the categories of *The Meaning of Revelation*, radical faith has to do with the “internal” side.

⁹⁹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 233.

¹⁰⁰ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 99.

¹⁰¹ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 91.

memory of Christian community and the window through which the world is Christianly viewed. If he could say in 1932 that “China is being crucified”, and in 1943 that “War is crucifixion”, there is little doubt that had he seen the South Africa of 1976 and the 1980s, he would have said “apartheid is crucifixion”, and that in the conflict in South Africa, “God is speaking through his suffering servants”.¹⁰² This might have challenged his relativism in that he would have had to come to terms with the fact that the crucifiers were also professing Christians. If the “Christ” of *Christ and Culture* is the crucified one, then surely the range of historically relative social *praxes* must be defined in terms of those which express the understanding that it is here, in the suffering of the oppressed, that the negotiation of loyalties begins and ends. The faith of those who supported apartheid would have to be called “non-Christian faith”, regardless of their profession.

Faith, sociality and decision

“Types of Christian Ethics”, Niebuhr’s original sketch which formed the basis for *Christ and Culture*, ends simply with a warning that “the infinite variety of creative morality in Christianity” transcends typing, and that the types are not measures of value.¹⁰³ *Christ and Culture* finishes with a “Concluding Unscientific Postscript”, which reflects on the larger context in which these five types operate. It introduces three important themes for the next chapter: Niebuhr’s ambiguous idea of “social existentialism”, his reflection on faith as loyalty, and “faithfulness” as the reason in history. We introduce these themes in turn.

After a discussion of the relativity of faith in culture and history, and the importance of relating all values to an absolute,¹⁰⁴ Niebuhr speaks of the importance of decision in the present concerning the relation between the terms of the “many-sided debate”. This decision, while existential, is not however simply that of an “I” apart from a “we”. The question with which the book began “arises in its most passionate form not in our solitariness, but in our fellowship”. The “we” is not a community in the sense of the “Story of *our* life”, but the “we” of humankind.¹⁰⁵ The “I” without a “we” is homeless. Indeed, the very nature of selfhood for Niebuhr is social, as the next chapter will explain. The nature of selfhood is also timed. The “I” is not an iso-

¹⁰² “A Christian Interpretation of War”, 167.

¹⁰³ “Types of Christian Ethics”, 29.

¹⁰⁴ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 234-41.

¹⁰⁵ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 244.

lated entity, existing only in the moment of decision, but a self with past, present and future. Indeed this self is also part of a community in time, with a past, present and future. “Every ‘Now’ is an historical ‘Now,’ in which a historical self is compresent with a historical other and historical companions.”¹⁰⁶ All humankind is the contemporary of the “I”—a theme we have visited in *The Meaning of Revelation*.

So much for social existentialism. The second relevant theme that emerges in the last chapter of *Christ and Culture* is the relation between faith and loyalty, or of loyalty and trust as the two strands of faith. Faith is “inner attachment to an object of loyalty”.¹⁰⁷ But it is more than this: faith is also confidence or trust in that object of loyalty. “Faith is a dual bond of loyalty and trust that is woven around the members of such a community.” It does not simply spring from an individual, but from acts of loyalty in community. “Faith exists only in a community of selves in the presence of a transcendent cause.”¹⁰⁸ And yet our faith is fallen.

The fallenness of faith is set in tension with what Niebuhr calls “the great surd”:

The conviction, mediated by a life, a death, and a miracle beyond understanding, that the source and ground and government and end of all things—the power we (in our distrust and disloyalty) call fate and chance—is faithful, utterly trustworthy, utterly loyal.¹⁰⁹

God’s faithfulness disclosed the faithfulness of which we spoke earlier—a faithfulness that is the reason in history. Those touched by this faithfulness form “the church of faith” in which people do their relative and partial reasoning about Christ and culture, for they alone have the point of view that all cultural activity takes place in the context of the kingdom of God.¹¹⁰ Covenant, in other words, is the larger context within which creation is located. This covenant is a structure of faith by which all things are related. Here is faith having arrived at “a new orientation”, to use the categories of Brueggemann. But what now happens to radical faith? This is the question underlying the next, and last, chapter of this thesis.

¹⁰⁶ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 247-8.

¹⁰⁷ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 252.

¹⁰⁸ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 253.

¹⁰⁹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 254.

¹¹⁰ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 256.

Christ and Culture continues to display the dynamism of faith highlighted in *The Kingdom of God in America*, particularly in the last two types. In Luther and the conversionists, faith is restless striving for transformation, always in danger of settling into dualisms or compromises. Radical faith and social faith are tensile—sometimes seen as two sides of reality, other times in a relation of the former transforming the latter. But another model of faith begins to emerge in the pages of *Christ and Culture*. This is an understanding of faith that is something all humans *as such* share. It is a mapping of faith—faith as loyalty and trust. At the same time this structural account sees faith not ever in danger of ossifying or fossilising, but rather is at the same time broken. We turn in the next chapter to the development of this model.

Reconstructing Faith

Reading Faith on Earth

At the same time as *Christ and Culture* was being written, Niebuhr was refining his understanding of faith, making the metaphor of reconstruction more explicit. This final chapter examines his mature reflections on faith in *Faith on Earth*,¹ a series of fragments only published in 1989—some twenty-seven years after his death. It examines the model of faith that emerges in this work—a model which itself embodies the contradictions and inconsistencies specified in the earlier accounts of Niebuhr's work above, and yet a model suggestive for bringing Niebuhr to South Africa. That model extends the idea of covenant, so prominent in *The Kingdom of God in America*, to a phenomenological account of faith that resonates with the need for the reconstruction of faith—and the reconstructive power of faith—in South Africa. The image of reconstruction is not without problems, not least in the way Niebuhr uses it. But this is suggested as the nexus or crossing point of the strands in this dissertation, and draws it towards closure.

The structure of faith

Changing methodologies

In the confessionally orientated *Meaning of Revelation*, Niebuhr was at pains to define faith as “the point of view” one takes in speaking of God.² This point of view is both formal, in the sense of being a point of view defined in faith rather than so-

¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). This book was edited by Richard R. Niebuhr from a series of fragments, including an unpublished manuscript, written in the late 1940s and 1950s. A table of manuscripts is given on pp. 119-120 of the edited volume. Fowler suggests that the manuscript was at one time to have formed one half of a volume entitled, *Faith on Earth: Essays on Human Confidence and Loyalty*. The other half included the Montgomery lectures which Niebuhr published in 1960 as *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*. See *To See the Kingdom: The Theological Vision of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Nashville: Abingdom, 1973), 203-4.

² H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941), 16ff. The idea of faith as one “point of view” among many is anticipated in H. Richard Niebuhr, “Nationalism, Socialism and Christianity”, *The World Tomorrow* 16 (1933), 469-70. See chapter six and seven above. The idea of “point of view” does not disappear from Niebuhr's later works (see for

The kingdom of God can however be hindered. The tactic of withdrawal is thus related to a church entangled and identified with alien loyalties which is tasked with redirecting cultural social forces but which must first disentangle itself through repentance, through getting things in order. It must prepare itself for the coming of God. The call to repentance, not as a forcing of the hands of a sovereign God but as response to a word of judgement, drew upon distinctly American sources.

Niebuhr himself acknowledged that his turning back to the "Great Tradition" was merely "the familiar story of the whole generation".⁸¹ But his choice of Edwards was unusual because the former President of Princeton was considered by the historians of the day, most notably Niebuhr's sparring partner Vernon Louis Parrington, to be an "anachronism".⁸²

The first note in Edwards' theology, Niebuhr would later reflect on, is the centrality of God and the identification of God as the one with whom humans have to do. The context of Edwards'—and Niebuhr's—thought was as wide as the universe, for God was greater yet. While some would consider this demeaning to humanity, for Edwards and Niebuhr it meant moving human concern and status beyond concern with "domestic love" to "a universal commonwealth".⁸³ God is the cause beyond all causes, and loyalty to God is the one loyalty beyond all loyalties. This theme would stay with Niebuhr from the 1930s throughout the rest of his writings. "Edwards used to say," Niebuhr commented, "that the trouble with men was not that they had no ideas of God, but that they had little ideas of God. We might add that they are ideas of little gods."⁸⁴ With Edwards, Niebuhr would look beyond the many "little gods" to what he saw as the one true God.

A second note of Edwards' theology important for Niebuhr is his view of the human will. The will is not an independent force, able to arbitrate freely amongst various options placed before it, but rather is always moved by its strongest motive. Human agency cannot be abstracted from values. Self-love and self-interest (and Niebuhr understood these both individually and nationalistically) could only be overcome

theology cannot be thought of as one in a series of emergents (relative to human actions), but rather the very possibility of all emergents—and that which relativises all human actions.

⁸¹ Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative", 249.

⁸² Although as Niebuhr would say at the bicentennial celebration of Edwards' death in 1958, such a judgement was as much on the ruminations of anachronistic historians. See Niebuhr, "The Anachronism of Jonathan Edwards", in *H. Richard Niebuhr*, ed. Johnson, 123-33.

⁸³ "Anachronism of Jonathan Edwards", 128.

⁸⁴ "Anachronism of Jonathan Edwards", 132.

by a change of heart.⁸⁵ Such a change could not come from within the self, but had to be an act of divine grace. Again for some this meant determinism and the impossibility of freedom. But for Edwards and Niebuhr it meant rather than freedom was always conditioned and relative, never absolute.

The influence of Edwards is especially strong in Niebuhr's 1935 article, "Man the Sinner". Talk of sin was not out of place in the thirties, as in any "time of disillusionment" where a more pessimistic view of human nature was becoming popular. But for Niebuhr the doctrine of sin had a positive as well as a negative side, in as much as sin presupposes creation and redemption.⁸⁶ Humanity is never further nor closer to sin or perfection. The distinction between humanity perfected and humanity fallen is a qualitative, rather than a quantitative one.

In "Man the Sinner", Niebuhr is again careful to differentiate the sphere of religion from other spheres—especially that of morality. Liberal Christianity had reduced talk of sin to morality,⁸⁷ and talk of God to an extension of human valuation.⁸⁸ For Niebuhr, however, the Christian language of "sin" is not interchangeable with that of morality. Sin is a religious concept "which must be understood from the religious and not some other point of view." Moralism occupies a standpoint, a standpoint that is as relative as "the standpoints of religion, science, and art."⁸⁹ The "evil" to which sin refers is not reducible to morality as it embraces physical evil and psychological dis-ease.⁹⁰ But then, as if to contradict the relativity of the religious standpoint he has just granted, Niebuhr says that "ultimately morality is always driven back to the acceptance of a standard which is given to it, without which morality would be impossible, but which is itself prior to all morality. The source of that standard is religion."⁹¹

The implication here is that a "religious standpoint" is both one standpoint among many by which we understand and analyse morality, but also the proper source of standards of morality.

⁸⁵ "Anachronism of Jonathan Edwards", 129-30.

⁸⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Man the Sinner", *Journal of Religion* 15 (1935), 273, 280.

⁸⁷ This view of sin Niebuhr identified with middle-class religion in *Social Sources*. See chapter five above.

⁸⁸ See Niebuhr's critique of this in "Value Theory and Theology", in *The Nature of Religious Experience: Essays in Honor of Douglas Clyde Macintosh* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 93-116.

⁸⁹ "Man the Sinner", 274.

⁹⁰ "Man the Sinner", 276-7.

⁹¹ "Man the Sinner", 275.

“The religious concept of sin always involves the idea of disloyalty, not of disloyalty in general [contra Royce’s idealism], but of disloyalty to the true God. ... Sin is the failure to worship God as God.”⁹² Loyalty is always directed towards something that claims deity. Hence sin is not simply deprivation but *misdirection*. “To make a god of the self, or of the class, or of the nation, or of the phallus, or of mankind is to organize life around one of these centers and to draw it away from its true center; hence, in a unified world, it is to wage war against God.”⁹³ For God’s part, because we are utterly dependent on God, sin as disloyalty is not “punished” by an angry God, but the consequences of disloyalty are there because “God is God”⁹⁴—that is to say, because a particular *kind* of God is God.

God, it must be recalled, is not a being, as idealism held, but rather is “the structure in things.” While this impersonal metaphor is not the only way Niebuhr talks of God,⁹⁵ it captures well what Keiser terms his “realism of immanent pattern”.⁹⁶ It also anticipates the idea which he would later capture in his use of “covenant”: that the possibility of loyalty is only there on the basis of a covenantal God structuring the world. Disloyalty is therefore not simply disobedience, but denial of the very reality of the world.

What are the consequences? Conflict is one, “for to leave the One is to be scattered among the many. ... Idolatry leads inevitably to polytheism and polytheism is conflict.”⁹⁷ This conflict is social but also personal: “the disintegration of the self”. The idea of “polytheism” (which appears here for the first time in Niebuhr’s writings) is important as it signals Niebuhr’s idea that “god” is whatever is taken as ultimate and upon which the will is fixed,⁹⁸ and that dis-integrated selfhood is directly related to a multitude of deities. It also signals the idea that humans can worship more than one god at the same time—an idea more sophisticated than that put forth in *Social Sources*, where for much of the analysis, various single “gods” (race, class, nation) rather than contesting gods, are considered as determinative. Niebuhr acknowledges that the human self is a site of many competing loyalties and commitments. These

⁹² “Man the Sinner”, 276-7.

⁹³ “Man the Sinner”, 277.

⁹⁴ “Man the Sinner”, 278. Shades of Weiman’s “brick wall or toothache”. See chapter four above.

⁹⁵ See Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 132-49 on Niebuhr’s impersonal and personal metaphors for God.

⁹⁶ Keiser, *Roots of Relational Ethics*, ch. 3.

⁹⁷ “Man the Sinner”, 278.

⁹⁸ cf. on Edwards above.

loyalties, when they are not integrated, result in a fragmented self. Unity comes through the commitment of the will to a loyalty that is able to embrace the others, and yet which judges disloyalty and reorients and reorders the gods. Indeed this loyalty, this single commitment, de-absolutises and de-divinises the gods, allowing them to exist, as creatures, without the burdens of divinity.

But this commitment of will of which Niebuhr speaks is not the liberal “good will”. It is not a product of human activity at all. Human impotence is “of particular importance to the Christian strategy of life”. “The will is always committed”, and yet always committed against God. All our efforts to rescue ourselves only entrench our particular disloyalties and increase conflict: “The situation is similar to the effort to bring about international peace through international war, which results only in the increase of national loyalties and the increase of war.”⁹⁹ Humans cannot bring about this change of will, for it like radical faith is a divine gift. But humans can prepare themselves for the coming of the Lord. Indeed this is what Niebuhr says humans must do.

In sum, if “Theology in a Time of Disillusionment” announces the period of transition for Niebuhr’s theology, “Man the Sinner” is at its theological heart. It anticipates both *The Meaning of Revelation* (in its idea of irreducible “point of view”) and *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (in its idea of sin as disloyalty to the God who is loyal to all being). The question of integrated selfhood with reference to the gods is common to both, and explored here. The desire for a non-reductive approach to religion and morality answers the attempt in “Nationalism, Socialism and Christianity” to protect nationalism from reduction to “idolatry” (i.e. in religious terms), and also its call for the church to “direct” nationalism.

Excursus: structure and direction

At this point it might help to introduce two technical terms into our discussion of Niebuhr’s idea of sin: *structure* and *direction*. These terms help clarify Niebuhr’s understanding of direction and disloyalty. They also raise a point of criticism.

A number of scholars have argued that human life exhibits numerous kinds of structures, from associational patterns (the church, the state, labour unions), to academic disciplines (theology, political science) to dimensions of experience (sexuality

⁹⁹ “Man the Sinner”, 279. Niebuhr, “The Grace of Doing Nothing”.

and emotional life, thinking, trusting).¹⁰⁰ Each of these can be “loyal” or “disloyal” to the kingdom of God. Structures do not exist in isolation from such a basic direction. They, like the will, are always committed. They always serve something. In the either-or perspective of radical faith, that means either God or an idol.

Identifying sin with certain structures highlights specific areas of life—“politics”, for example—as inherently evil and irredeemable. A loyal Christian response is to avoid contact with such structures. The line separating loyalty in this view from disloyalty runs *between* things. Redemption means simply avoiding those activities or institutions which are bad (usually identified as “worldly”) and favouring those which are good (usually identified as “religious”). Niebuhr would say that this view violates the principle of the sovereignty of God as it posits an area of life over which God has no rightful claim, an area which is not rebellious, but simply going according to its nature. Or perhaps it implies that there is more than one god. This is how the state portrays itself in what Niebuhr will later call *henotheism*. The directional account of sin, on the other hand, sees the either-or of loyalty-disloyalty running *through* all things, as their basic (root, radical) possibilities. Each institution, to use the language of South African liberation discourse, is a site of struggle. This is the either-or of faith: either loyal to God or rebelling against God. However, even in loyalty there remain “countervailing forces”,¹⁰¹ which means that redemptive activity is an ongoing activity. Redemption on this account means “turning” things around... all things, *including* religion. And—as Niebuhr would say in *The Meaning of Revelation*—“permanent revolution”.

However, while he tries to avoid confusing “structure” and “direction”, Niebuhr does not always succeed. Indeed there is a strand in Niebuhr’s writings where this confusion is pervasive. We see it in the idea that, while religion and morality are two different and relative spheres, religion is also supposed to drive morality (and is called upon to direct national loyalties¹⁰²). Religion is one relative sphere among the many, but is also a relativiser. It is both player and referee.

This is an important weakness in Niebuhr’s view of sin. It may be helpful, we suggest, to distinguish faith as a *structure* of human life (something which humans *qua* humans engage in) from faith as *direction*—either faithlessness or faithfulness to God

¹⁰⁰ I am indebted to the discussion of Albert Wolters, *Creation Regained* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 72ff. on these terms. Richard Mouw and Sander Griffioen develop them in relation to social theory in *Pluralisms and Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993). See also Brian Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), ch. 8. For a non-theological account of what these writers call “structural pluralism”, see Paul Marshall’s seminal, “Liberalism, Pluralism, and Christianity: A Reconceptualization”, *Fideis et Historia* 23:3 (Fall 1989), 4-17.

¹⁰¹ Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 49.

¹⁰² “Nationalism, Socialism and Christianity”, 470.

(the latter being the authentic possibility of the structure of faith). “Faith” is not always “faithful”, and sometimes goes astray. When it does, it remains faith, but faith in something else. Faith can be “misplaced”—and this misplacement is called “idolatry”. Not all that goes by the name of “faith” is in fact faithful to God. Sometimes faith is finally faithful to the nation or the class, and therefore disloyal to God. But faith can also be faithful to the nation or class in “non-final” ways, when it is held in relation to faith in God as the context of all other loyalties.

The great strength of Niebuhr’s emphasis on the sovereignty of God—and the kingdom of God as context for all creaturely activity—is that the image of God’s kingdom may be extended to embrace smaller dominions which also contextualise loyalty, but which are in turn subject to the larger whole. Indeed it is *through* these loyalties that we are loyal to the One.

Disentangling and reorienting faith

In 1935, Niebuhr, along with Wilhelm Pauck and Francis P. Miller, wrote a powerful, “neo-orthodox manifesto” entitled *The Church Against the World*.¹⁰³ Here the theme of entanglements reasserts itself, though in a manner different from that of *Social Sources*. The entanglement is not with “social forces” (indeed the term is not mentioned), but rather the “world”. The theological use of sociological categories is not present, nor is the identification of the theological term “world” with the sociological term “social forces.” What Niebuhr offers is not a socio-theological analysis, as in *Social Sources*, but rather a discernment of the spiritual or directional compromises of Christianity.

“Worldliness”, Niebuhr writes, “is protean”.¹⁰⁴ It is “diverse and multifarious”. Humanism, nationalism and capitalism were its dominant forms in his time.¹⁰⁵ But these were tied together by “an idolatrous faith” (a single faith) which is itself a result of a degeneration of radical faith.¹⁰⁶ This idolatrous faith is the current *elan vital* of American culture. *The Kingdom of God in America*, published two years later, would trace the generation and degeneration of this faith. Niebuhr is however careful to say that “humanity”, “capital” and “nations” are not bad in themselves. Radical faith asserts itself over the whole of reality. His charge of idolatry is directed at particular

¹⁰³ See note 37 above.

¹⁰⁴ Interestingly he uses the same term (“protean”) for Christianity in America in Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 2.

¹⁰⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, “Independence of the Church”, 600.

¹⁰⁶ Niebuhr, “Independence of the Church”, 601.

objects which are not *inherently* idolatrous (or else there would be little point in charging them) but become so when made “ends in themselves”.¹⁰⁷

The church—which in this writing is not the institution but a synonym for “Christianity”—is caught in a threefold entanglement. The first is capitalism, which is not simply an economic system but a faith with culturally formative power, mobilising human relations and classifications, families, cities, even architecture to serve its ends.¹⁰⁸ This faith is the antithesis of the gospel, yet the church has seen its identity as bound up with it. Its values are promoted as those of the Kingdom of God.¹⁰⁹

Nationalism, the second form of degenerative faith, is tied up with capitalism but also sometimes in tension with it. By nationalism, Niebuhr means church and politics issues, not simply the more cultural idea of “nation” and its connection with capitalism. His treatment of nationalism is a throwback to the chapter in *Social Sources*. Imperialism is also treated under nationalism, with the church identified as having a role in fomenting the conquest of other national boundaries. Incisive—particularly when read from the so-called third world—is Niebuhr’s warning of the power of nationalism to convert the church during times of cultural crisis such as his own.¹¹⁰

The third form of faith is humanism, something present but not dealt with extensively in *Social Sources*. Humanism is what Niebuhr calls the idea that “human desire is the source of all values. The mind and will of man are sufficient instruments of his salvation. Revolutionary second birth is unnecessary...”¹¹¹ Christianity influenced by humanism of this kind substitutes “religion” for “faith”,¹¹² confusing desire for God with God. But there is an even worse indictment: the church tries to justify its existence not in terms of “faithfulness” to a transcendent kingdom but in terms of “usefulness” to civilisation.

How does this compare to the Master Entanglement of *Social Sources*? First, the analysis is more sophisticated, seeing a complexity of interrelated factors (“our modern polytheism”—¹¹³), rather than just discrete elements. What ties the elements together is his account of an overall direction, or spirit behind them. Secondly, Niebuhr

¹⁰⁷ Niebuhr, “Independence of the Church”, 601.

¹⁰⁸ Niebuhr, “Independence of the Church”, 602.

¹⁰⁹ Niebuhr, “Independence of the Church”, 603-04.

¹¹⁰ Niebuhr, “Independence of the Church”, 606.

¹¹¹ Niebuhr, “Independence of the Church”, 607.

¹¹² cf. *Radical Monotheism* 49-63, where Niebuhr speaks of “religion” as institutions, creeds and liturgies and “faith” as (existential) orientation (esp. radical faith).

places “faith” *against* these factors (and for them as their foundation), rather than simply legitimising them. Faith is redefined as culturally formative power.

But perhaps the most important difference between *The Church Against the World* and *Social Sources* is the idea that there is a revolt not only in society against the church (which he probably would have accepted in 1929) as part of this “disillusionment” but also *within* the church. This is not always good and sometimes can be a strategic alliance around a common idol shared by Christians and non-Christians. He saw this in Germany and by 1935 the alliance between the German Christians and the National Socialists around nationalism and against capitalism had helped consolidate Hitler’s power. In this case, church becomes merely “the religious institution of a revolting society”,¹¹⁴ which is another kind of social faith. Chapter two above identified a similar process in the relation between the Dutch Reformed Church and the “society” of Afrikaner nationalism after the South African War. Or the church can rebel against rebellion by entrenching conservative ideology—something certainly in line with what Niebuhr accused churches of in *Social Sources*. Or the church can fail to read the times as those of “a pre-revolutionary society” and promote a “mere reform program in terms of the existing order.”¹¹⁵ Perhaps the culture-Protestantism of the English-speaking churches in South Africa can be located here. In all cases what is evident is social, not radical faith.

Faced with these alternatives, none of which are acceptable given the tenets of radical faith, what does Niebuhr then counsel? Comparing the present situation with that of Augustine and the Reformation, he advocates a careful reading of the signs of the times. The examples he gives are significant, for they each signalled world-historical (at least in terms of the western world) shifts: classical Roman to medieval and medieval to modern. The grain of the fabric of western civilisation is running a different way to that of the gospel. As then, a fundamental choice must be made: God or idols. Perhaps this risks re-establishing the duality between church and world.¹¹⁶ If we fail to choose, then God will make the choice for us. More positively, though, Niebuhr also counsels a theology as “theory of the Christian revolution”, a theology which is also “a theology of divine determinism, of the inevitable divine judgment

¹¹³ Niebuhr, “Independence of the Church”, 605.

¹¹⁴ Niebuhr, “Independence of the Church”, 611, 613.

¹¹⁵ Niebuhr, “Independence of the Church”, 618.

and of the salvation of men by the suffering of the innocent.”¹¹⁷ This theology is aggressive and proactive.



The idea of radical faith emerges in the early 1930s, which was a time of social and personal challenge and change for H. Richard Niebuhr. His new vision of the sovereignty of God set forth a challenge to culture-protestantism’s domestic front, the social gospel, and American national self-assertion. It laid the foundations for a reorientation of faith whereby culture-protestantism would give way to a critical and constructive protestantism. It identified cultural existence as a unity which is religiously orientated. This religious orientation discloses fundamental loyalties and strategies for living. Sin is disloyalty manifesting itself in idolatry or idolatries which shape cultural life. Radical faith is a faith that turns loyalties around and reorients them towards loyalty to God. This is not a turning away from history, but a turning of those loyalties to go “with the grain” of the pattern of God as disclosed in the present but also in history. Niebuhr’s next major work, *The Kingdom of God in America*, did just this: it reconstructed history and retrieved the symbols of American Christianity for the sake of the present.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Here again the structure-direction confusion: church and world considered with reference to “idolatry” are primarily directional. But he also uses the terms structurally—i.e. the church as institution and the world as a set of institutions different to the church.

¹¹⁷ Niebuhr, “Independence of the Church”, 617.

¹¹⁸ See above on Mead.

Radical Faith in History and Community

Reading The Kingdom of God in America and The Meaning of Revelation

Less than ten years after the publication of *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, Niebuhr revisited American Christianity, this time viewing it through the lens of radical faith. The present chapter carries the discussion of radical faith begun in chapter six further in two ways. First, it develops Niebuhr's understanding of the historical presence of radical faith in American Christianity in *The Kingdom of God in America*. Second, it examines the relation between radical and social faith from a different and contradictory angle in *The Meaning of Revelation*. In *The Meaning of Revelation*, the relation between radical and social faith is both a transformative one and a complementary one. This contradiction demonstrates Niebuhr's concern for both unity and the integrating power of radical faith, and also his quest to preserve particularity and plurality, while bringing plurality under the control of unity. This will become clearer as the second part of the chapter develops.

Radical faith in history

Fowler has identified the Kingdom of God in America as the culmination of Niebuhr's mature thought.¹ Indeed in this radical reinterpretation of American Christianity through the polymorphous symbol "Kingdom of God", we see the integration of Barth's stress on transcendence, Tillich's "belief-ful realism" and Troeltsch's concern for the historicity of apprehensions of the Absolute, all integrated within the sphere of American evangelical and Social Gospel concerns. His view of God and of faith finds its coherence in Jonathan Edwards, the consummate American theologian. In the symbol of the Kingdom of God is woven together the three strands of radical faith, the sovereignty of God and religious realism characterising his theological output in the 1930s.

¹ Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 56n.6.

ciological or psychological terms. It is also specific and rooted in communal existence, as is evident in the plural pronouns (“the story of *our* life”) Niebuhr uses for it. In the case of *Christian* faith, faith is a reflection upon “what has happened” to “us” within that community which finds its central event in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That event is presented (made present) in the ongoing interpretative activity of the community.³ In the light of this event, Christians can never be apologetic about their faith, nor ought they to engage in apologetics. Faith-knowledge is something only “insiders” can speak of. Testimony is the mode of discourse most appropriate to Christian community.⁴

But Niebuhr began to turn away from this confessional method shortly after *The Meaning of Revelation*.⁵ Starting with his 1943 article, “Faith in God and in Gods” and continuing with his 1945 article, “The Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience”,⁶ he began to experiment with a more reflective, phenomenological approach.⁷ In his phenomenological work, faith became “that subjective experience that is the counterpart of the objective God”.⁸ Faith is a response to God who is, as always for Niebuhr, “the structure in things”.⁹ A more universal orientation is also present in his development of the idea of radical monotheism in his Montgomery Lectures of 1957, published as *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*. Niebuhr deduces the logical necessity

example *The Responsible Self*, 45), but the method of reflecting on faith experience within a particular community recedes into the background.

³ See James Gustafson, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976 [orig. 1961]), 56ff.

⁴ Niebuhr advocates confession in the other sense: in his contributions to *The Church Against the World*, he claims that Christians can only confess and repent. To advocate any other activity is to compromise faith. See also the *Christian Century* debate with Reinhold.

⁵ The watershed seems to have been an article entitled “The Nature and Existence of God: A Protestant View”, *Motive* December 1943 (reprinted in *Radical Monotheism*, 114-26). See Keiser, *Roots of Relational Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 48-9. Earlier that year, Niebuhr was still writing in a confessional vein, as for example “A Christian Interpretation of War”, in *Theology, History, Culture: Major Unpublished Writings*, ed. William Stacy Johnson (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1996), 159-73.

⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience”, *Journal of Philosophy* 42 (1945), 352-59.

⁷ By “phenomenological” we do not mean in the Husserlian, continental sense of the term—which seeks to abstract from experience in order to achieve pure subjectivity—but in the American pragmatist sense of exploring the formation of subjectivity in interpersonal and social existence. See Jonathan H. Turner, *The Structure of Sociological Theory* (Belmont CA: Wadsworth Press, 1991), 369ff.

⁸ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 43, cf. Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism*, 11f and H. Richard Niebuhr, Daniel Day Williams and James Gustafson, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry: Reflections on the Aims of Theological Education* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 19: “By Church. . . we mean the subjective pole of the objective rule of God.”

⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr, “A Communication: The Only Way Into the Kingdom of Heaven”, *The Christian Century*, 6 April 1932, 447.

of radical monotheism from “reasoning faith”.¹⁰ This is also different methodological move for him from *The Meaning of Revelation*, where “the reasons of the heart” were related to the telling of “the story of our life”. Now, while reflecting not on “the story of our life” (i.e. that of the Christian community) but trying to come to terms with “western civilization”, Niebuhr ties the rational necessity of radical monotheism to universality, cutting across differences of time and space. “Rational attempts to understand the One beyond the many”, he writes, “are characteristic of radical monotheism”.¹¹ While this statement serves to tie the analysis to the history of western culture at its Greek origins, it is also, in Niebuhr’s own understanding in *The Meaning of Revelation*, indicative not of the God of the Bible but the God of the philosophers.¹²

Both *Faith on Earth* and *Radical Monotheism* are concerned with that faith which is exhibited in all human structures and relationships. *Faith on Earth* is concerned with the structure of faith within which selves exist. *Radical Monotheism* is concerned with the structure of faith within which human community and civilisation exists.¹³ The structure of faith is defined as a universal, participatory, interpersonal and ultimate structure. The presence of God in this structure is the possibility of faith-experience. But speaking this way also lets go of particularity: Niebuhr does not qualify this faith of which he speaks as “Christian faith” nor the community within which it is formed as “Christian community” or church.¹⁴ Indeed, the subtitle of *Faith on Earth* is “An Inquiry into the Structure of *Human* Faith”.¹⁵ His point of departure is no longer

¹⁰ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism*, 14-15.

¹¹ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism*, 33.

¹² Niebuhr, *Meaning of Revelation*, 133.

¹³ Not all human relationships are between selves, as we shall see below. There are, for example, relations of interest. Selfhood is a word Niebuhr uses to refer to persons in covenant.

¹⁴ Fowler suggests that the faith analysis in *Faith on Earth* unfolds on three levels. The first reflects on the general conditions for knowing and existing in community. Faith, on this analysis, is disclosed as common and indeed necessary to all human existence. The second examines faith as the term has been used in the history of theology and philosophy. On this analysis, faith is commonly understood as an organic structure, however with different understandings of the object of loyalty. The third seeks to understand a faith that has been given, from a point of view *within* that faith. In other words, Niebuhr is no longer speaking as a universal human being (where the “we” is supposed to speak on behalf of everyone and the “I” is the voice of a generic human), or as a historian of thought, but as a Christian believer (where the “we” refers to Christians who have a particular experience of faith and the “I” is a self formed by the Christian story, within the Christian community). These “levels” identify the three main parts of the manuscript, although nowhere does Niebuhr make the links explicitly, nor offer transitional statements from one to the other. Fowler understands this as a strategy wherein Niebuhr “draws the reader in” to a Christian understanding of faith. *To See the Kingdom*, 210f. It remains, however, unclear how deliberate this strategy is, and it may simply be a function of the fact that we are dealing with an unpolished draft text. I would argue that the different audiences represent different tensions in Niebuhr’s theology—these tensions that previous chapters in this thesis have demonstrated elsewhere.

¹⁵ Emphasis added. See *Faith on Earth*, 120.

“what has happened to us”. The “us” and the “we” are now defined universalistically, through the reflective “I”, as general or typical human experience. The faith of the one outside the bounds of the Christian community is then also “that subjective experience that is the counterpart of the objective God”. In other words, the formal nature of faith remains, but the particular character of *Christian* faith is held in suspension.¹⁶ This has important implications for Niebuhr’s view of the self, as we shall see below.

Faith as covenantal structure

While the term “structure of faith” is new, we have seen Niebuhr use “structure” language as far back as 1932, in “The Only Way into the Kingdom of God”.¹⁷ There he called God “the structure in things”. Now, the structure of *faith* presents the human world as (in the words of *Radical Monotheism*) “woven together in a web of confidences”, in “networks of faith”.¹⁸ The structure of faith also incorporates God. The structure of faith is “the interpersonal order in which God and man, self and companion, Christ and the Father, Christ and the Church, Church and scriptures, God and world are related to each other.”¹⁹ It is hence a kind of nodal point or crossing, connecting and relating these various entities one to another—as a “context” (weaving together),²⁰ we might say.

What is the point of connection between human experiences of loyalty and the structure of faith? We might think the answer to be one of *analogy*, that our interpersonal experience of loyalty is *like* the structure of faith that connects God and world. In this way, our experience of loyalty and disloyalty would parallel, or possibly mirror, a higher realm. Or we might go as far as to say that our experience of loyalty *anticipates* the structure of faith. Here the relation would be eschatological. Or, again, we might say that we conceive a structure of faith as a *projection* of our experience of loyalties, or our need for final loyalties. For Niebuhr, the theological realist, the connection is one of *participation*. Every act of loyalty participates in the “ultimate struc-

¹⁶ It is page 83 (of 118) before Niebuhr begins to explicate anything like a specifically Christian understanding of faith.

¹⁷ Niebuhr, “A Communication”.

¹⁸ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism*, 68.

¹⁹ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 45.

²⁰ This of course is my view of “context”. See the Introduction for an explanation of this term. Niebuhr uses the term “context” to refer also to the “ultimate environment” which, in his view, is covenantal and therefore monotheist.

ture”,²¹ and is a moment in the history of the cosmic covenant. Conversely, the structure of faith is also the structure *for* faith: it is the transcendental possibility of human loyalties. We can be loyal to each other because the universe is structured to support a web of loyalties. Indeed, the universe is such a web.

The triadic structure of faith

But Niebuhr does not proceed in *Faith on Earth* by means of transcendental argument. Rather he argues from analogy (bearing in mind that the relations here, as already noted, are more than analogical), showing how knowledge is both *like* and *dependant upon* faith. The connecting point is the ambiguity of the term “belief”. Knowledge is not, in Niebuhr’s view, dyadic (subject and object) but *triadic*. Knowledge involves three elements: a knower, an object known and a community of knowers. The community of knowers functions in three ways.²² First, it provides a *fund* of knowledge based on the past activities of its knowers. The community, secondly, provides *concepts* or *categories* for grasping objects. Thirdly, the community provides *conviction* to knowers, either by confirming knowledge or by providing purchasing power for disagreement, a backdrop for innovation.²³ A simple diagram helps clarify this:

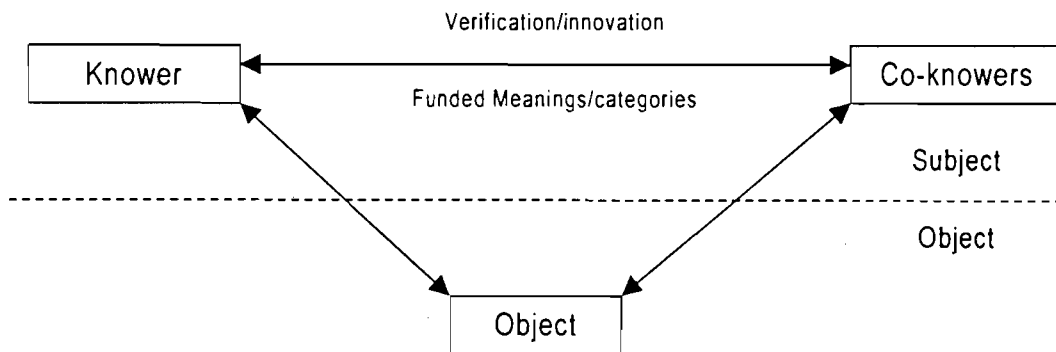


Figure one: the knowledge triad

Niebuhr’s social model of knowing is not unique or new. Indeed it reflects the American pragmatist tradition and is especially indebted to the philosophy of William James and John Dewey. In pragmatism, as Richard Rorty, explains, knowledge is a “social phenomenon”, rather than a “a transaction between ‘the knowing subject’ and

²¹ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 60.

²² Niebuhr, as we shall see, was fond of triads and his thought often unfolded in terms of triads within triads.

²³ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 23f.

'reality.'²⁴ Concepts on this view are tools which are evaluated not in terms of a "permanent neutral framework" but in terms of whether they "edify" or build up the community.²⁵ In the theory of George Herbert Mead knowledge is always social and historical, as are the categories for knowing.²⁶ Paul F. Pfuetze argues that this dyadic structure of knowing leaves Mead and others who embrace this perspective open to charges of relativism. It is Niebuhr's positing of the "third" in-between the two subjects which has an existence outside of the relation (but which cannot be *known* outside the relation) that allows him to get around this charge, writes Pfuetze.²⁷ There is something outside the relation of selves, which is also a condition for unity. Indeed, as we shall later see, there are many objects around which many different social relations and communities are constructed.²⁸

Knowledge is always of objects. We do not, however, know other knowers as objects.²⁹ We know them as subjects, or selves. Niebuhr utilises the well-known distinction of Martin Buber between "I-it" and "I-thou" relations,³⁰ summarised here by Pfuetze:

Our relationships to environment fall into two classes: first *personal response*, mostly made toward our fellow men; and secondly, mechanically manipulative *adjustments*, which are mostly made toward the things around us. The latter is the attitude in which the object is a "thing" that serves my purpose or advantage; the former is an attitude in which I enter into and "realize" the essence of the other in a relation between persons.³¹

I-thou and I-it are two ways of being in the world, two attitudes to take towards the other. Niebuhr would also agree that it is possible to take an "I-it" attitude towards another person. This would be to treat the other in terms of interests or functions, rather than their unique selfhood. This is why our diagram makes a separation between subjects and objects. We "acknowledge", "believe" or "disbelieve" other

²⁴ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 9.

²⁵ Rorty, *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*, 8.

²⁶ George Herbert Mead, *The Philosophy of the Present* (Chicago: Open Court Pub. Co., 1932).

²⁷ Paul E. Pfuetze, *Self, Society, Existence* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961), 333.

²⁸ See "Ego-Alter Dialectic", 354. This also made Niebuhr's theory of knowledge different from Mead's, who held that we exist in *one* community, with one "generalized other".

²⁹ The exception is the body. The body of another, for Niebuhr, can be an object of knowledge. This implies that he sees the self as transcending the body.

³⁰ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor-Smith (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1937).

³¹ Pfuetze, *Self, Society, Existence*, 141.

knowers.³² But we do not “know” them.³³ The common object of knowledge creates community and the basis for unity.³⁴ As there is no such thing as a knowing community without objects, so there is no knowledge of objects apart from a community of knowers. But objects are not constituted arbitrarily. Nor does Niebuhr hold a radical constructivist view that would say that objects are *created* within a community. Objects “answer back”.³⁵ They make a claim on the knower and the community (hence the arrows in our diagram go both ways). So also communities make a claim on each of their knowing members.

Thus knowledge, in Niebuhr’s view, is a kind of circulating economy. Everything must be kept in proper balance and reciprocity. Funded meanings are provided and drawn and cashed-in again. There may come a destabilisation in the form of an object that stretches or breaks the categories or currency of the community. But this would soon be compensated for by new currency, and so the balance would be restored. This economy of balance and reciprocity is a fairly constant feature of Niebuhr’s “triads” in *Faith on Earth*. We shall return to this point below—and to its exceptions.

We have already noted that Niebuhr grounds the analogical relationship between faith and knowledge in the ambiguity of the word “belief” in everyday speech.³⁶ A belief may be a tenet of a church or a church member, but it may also be an entirely non-theological “guess” or a supposition, something not yet “proven”. In Kantian epistemology “believing” is a middle stage between “opining” and “knowing”, referring to a state of subjective but not objective sufficiency for holding a thing to be true. Niebuhr takes distance from this view, claiming that the certainty of “knowing” is only possible through “believing”.

In human knowing, the objective world³⁷ is “almost always” mediated by a tacit community present through language and concept.³⁸ That is, even as someone

³² Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 40.

³³ It is not the purpose of this thesis to criticise Niebuhr’s epistemology. However, this identification of “knowing” with controlling reflects what he criticises in the modernist “Christ of culture” type as setting human activity over nature, and of his own definition of the cultural as superimposing on the natural. See chapter eight.

³⁴ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 38.

³⁵ Put crassly, one cannot construe a rock as a loaf of bread—as putting a knife to it would soon confirm!

³⁶ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 31ff.

³⁷ The idea of an “objective world” corresponds in *Faith on Earth* to the idea of external knowledge in *The Meaning of Revelation*.

apprehends an object in the privacy of their study, they do so with the materials provided by their community.³⁹ This has already been made clear. But this knower must also be in a relation of trust with their fellow knowers, especially if they are to accept what the others say about the common object of knowledge. It is here that Niebuhr uses faith language to describe the relations in a community.⁴⁰ By this point, Niebuhr is no longer using the terms “knowers” and “co-knowers”, but the more explicitly covenantal terms “selves” and “others”.

Niebuhr insists that a self is a self only in a covenant relationship. “Faith exists in the I-thou community in the reciprocity of trust and distrust which respond to fidelity and infidelity, shuttling back and forth between selves who have this peculiar nature that they cannot live as selves save in covenant relations”.⁴¹ Niebuhr has thus already not only extended his model of knowing to embrace faith, but has reinterpreted the social psychology of Mead—upon which his work in the 1930s relied—by introducing distinctions in types of community, relative to different objects. Mead said that the self was simply the “I” as object regarded through the other.⁴² For Niebuhr, a person is a self not in *any* community where they happen to live, but in a particular *kind* of community: a community characterised by covenant relations. Moreover, there are many different communities that a self may belong to at any one time.⁴³ Covenant community exists by virtue of a faith-full (believing and trusting) relation to other selves in loyalty to a common object. The violation of covenant, as a corollary, means the impossibility of faith.⁴⁴

³⁸ Niebuhr allows for the possibility that there may be a direct (“unmediated”) knowledge of something, but he never talks about how this could be or how it would fit into his scheme. *Faith on Earth*, 40. It is possible that this also is a Kantian move into the realm of practical reason while acknowledging that there may be a “theoretical” reason outside the scope of his inquiry. It may be useful to recall that *Faith on Earth* is a collection of documents rather than a finished book from the hand of H. Richard Niebuhr.

³⁹ At this stage, Niebuhr has not yet defined “community” beyond the idea of “community of knowers”. He does recognise the existence of different types of community, however. Presumably though the structure of knowledge would remain the same whether the companion is a marriage partner, a fellow church member or a fellow citizen.

⁴⁰ I note here that faith-language is not the language of faith, which is an explicitly mythical or symbolical language, but rather employs categories such as “trust”, “belief” and “loyalty” to interpret human experience.

⁴¹ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 50.

⁴² Mead, *The philosophy of the present*, 184. cf. Niebuhr, “Ego-Alter Dialectic”, 353-4.

⁴³ Niebuhr, “Ego-Alter Dialectic”, 354. Niebuhr does not push things to the point where there are plural selves. Indeed, as we saw earlier, the notion of a plural self for Niebuhr is deeply problematic—one could even say oxymoronic. The idea is still to have one community (a community that embraces all other communities—a federalist idea) which embraces all other communities, but provides transcendent norms for activity in each of them.

⁴⁴ Hence as we said in chapter eight, an assemblage of associations for Niebuhr is no society at all.

Faith as “human confidence in a center and conserver of value” and “human loyalty to a cause” is both active and passive.⁴⁵ In its passive moment, faith is trust in a value-centre, something which functions as the source of all meaning—indeed which is the *context* of meaning. In an interesting image, Niebuhr speaks of the sentence by which particular words find their place.⁴⁶ It is this context that also provides a sense of national purpose to which the activities of citizens is required to contribute and by which their activities are seen as “right” or “wrong”. Faith as confidence is thus trans-personal and even inter-personal.

In its active moment, faith is loyalty. Here a faith-ful self actively organises its loyalties and its world. Faith is both taking a pledge of allegiance and the expression of that allegiance in actions—something captured in the meaning of the word *credo*.⁴⁷ Perhaps we could say that a self is always faith-ful, in that selfhood is constituted in its allegiances. But Niebuhr also wants to talk about disloyalty, which is not an escape from loyalty but an embracing of a different loyalty. So from the perspective (context, form, pattern) of radical monotheism (which is also radical faith), other forms of faith are “disloyal” (less than radical).

Like knowledge, faith is triadic. And, as in the knowledge triad, the “interaction of self and other persons which appears in the act of believing the other” relies on a common object, or “copresence”.⁴⁸ But there is another triad. Faith may be understood in three interacting moments: *fideis* (believing), *fiducia* (trusting) and *fidelitas* (loyalty). These are not three different meanings of faith but are rather “three parts of one interpersonal action in which *fideis* (believing) is the phenomenal element which is largely based on the fundamental interaction of *fiducia* (trust) and *fidelitas* (loyalty or fidelity)”.⁴⁹ Loyalty/fidelity is, in turn, “the mode of self-existence which comes to appearance in the making, keeping and breaking of promises, in the acts of loyalty and treason of which selves are capable and in which they exist”.⁵⁰ Another diagram helps illustrate this:

⁴⁵ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism*, 64.

⁴⁶ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism*, 17.

⁴⁷ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism*, 18.

⁴⁸ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 46.

⁴⁹ Fowler has criticised Niebuhr at this point for confusing the reader by now introducing a different kind of structure: that of a triad describing moments in an interpersonal relation. *To See the Kingdom*, 244.

⁵⁰ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 48.

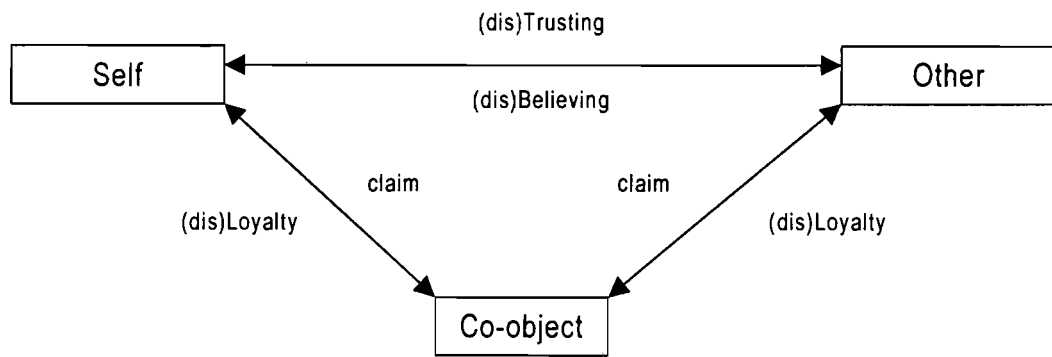


Figure two: the triad of faith

Again we see Niebuhr present a picture of three elements in careful balance. The structure of faith is, however, not always directed towards its proper ends of trust and reciprocity, and it is not always in balance. It is, as we shall see below, a broken structure. All faith has elements of disloyalty and distrust. All belief has elements of unbelief. This is the tragedy and ambiguity of existence. And yet even as a broken structure it is an inescapable structure. Even acts of disloyalty are moments within the history of the cosmic covenant. The freedom of a self is a freedom to enter covenant. But it is also a freedom to violate trust, to be faithless, disloyal, to break covenant. "Faith exists in the I-Thou community in the reciprocity of trust and distrust which respond to fidelity and infidelity, shuttling back and forth between selves who have this peculiar nature that they cannot live as selves save in covenant relations."⁵¹

Faith, covenant and community

As the object in the knowledge triad is crucial for constituting community, so is the "co-present" or "cause" which unites the faith triad. Again Niebuhr both invokes and goes beyond Mead's social psychology, which saw sociality as founded on the necessity of associating with others in a common project of *survival*. Niebuhr identifies the key role of the object as also constitutive of the relation, sufficient to invoke loyalty, something *valued*. This object, which is present to both self and other, can be a common interest, such as in the welfare of animals that brings people together in an organisation like the SPCA, a child that binds two parents together, a concept of "justice" or a mission to "civilise" the world that binds a nation together.

⁵¹ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 50.

Obviously these are very different kinds of society, and as such not necessarily in competition. Within a “national” community, for instance, there may be many different communities or institutions.

Corresponding to these examples, Niebuhr identifies three types of society: “associations”, where the terms related are *interests*; communities, where the terms related are *minds*; and communities where the terms related are *selves*. As noted, when Niebuhr talks about selves in relation, he is talking about covenant community.⁵² Bisecting the three types of society are two other distinctions. Some societies (such as the example of the SPCA) are *by nature* of one variety. That is, the SPCA will only ever be a relation of interests. A marriage, by contrast, can be a relation of mutual interest that can develop into a relation of minds and from that to a relation of “responsible selves”. A state can likewise take on any one of these three forms.⁵³ Ironically, then, a marriage based on covenant bond would have more in common with a state founded on covenant than with a marriage based on self or even mutual interest.⁵⁴

At any rate, the key differentiating factor amongst different kinds of society is found in the nature of the “third” object by which the terms are related. Associations, while external, are not simply biological (like a beehive) because they are entered into freely (“based on choice rather than nature”).⁵⁵ The difference between a community and an association is to be found in the fact that in an association the terms related are external (interests) whereas in a community the terms related are internal.⁵⁶ The difference between a community of interested individuals (“merely sociological”⁵⁷) and a covenant community (“spiritual”) is found in the presence in the latter case of “faithfulness” to the other, and of “a third reality beyond the I and the Thou to which I and Thou have their direct relationship”⁵⁸

⁵² This kind of community is a normative and primordial, “the fundamental form of human association”, which corresponds to the primordality of selfhood as “in the presence” of other selves. *The Responsible Self*, 73, 71. Whether Niebuhr’s theology can hold this emphasis on relationality amid its concern with the one will be returned to below.

⁵³ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 53-58.

⁵⁴ Niebuhr’s discussion is confusing as sometimes he speaks, for instance, of the state in this second, normative sense and at other times he speaks of it as an institution with a specific character and shape different from any other kind of institution (i.e. in a descriptive sense), regardless of whether it is a relation of selves or interests. His idea of covenant community as normative on the one hand and his granting the legitimacy of the existence of communities of interest such as the SPCA on the other drives the confusion further. See the excursus on structure and direction in chapter six.

⁵⁵ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 58.

⁵⁶ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 54, 56.

⁵⁷ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 55.

⁵⁸ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 58.

Whatever else this implies, it would seem to indicate that the “church” as a type of community finds its norm in a covenantal bond between responsible selves. In his earlier writings Niebuhr had already made statements like, at the one level, there is little difference between the church, considered as institution, and a barber-shop.⁵⁹ But at the same time the church is always more than an institution. He had indeed from *Social Sources* eschewed the reduction of church to visible, historical institution. In *Kingdom of God in America* he almost grudgingly admits the necessity of institutional Christianity for preserving an essential Christianity, although *The Meaning of Revelation* would seem to want to do more honour to an institutional *dimension* of the church. But there the honouring of the institutional dimension went along with a particularism (“our” community). From the mid-1940s onward, coinciding with his move away from speaking in confessional terms, Niebuhr enlarges the community of faith beyond the institutional church (or any other institution) and beyond the “us” in the story of “our” life. Perhaps in line with the ambiguous idea of a “structure of faith” that all human faith participates in, the community of faith is extended to embrace a universal community “grounded in God and existing toward him as well as in mutual relations”.⁶⁰

This universal community, a corollary of radical monotheism on the one hand and of integrated selfhood on the other,⁶¹ is present as gift and as hope; it is past and present, and eschatological and teleological.⁶² It “is not identical with the visible societies, institutions, actions, rites and organizations we also call by the name of church”.⁶³ *This church is truly catholic; but so is the world:*

Every person, so far as he is a self, participates in the life of faith and is a subject of redemption, thus belonging to the Catholic church more or less actively. Every person, so far as he participates in the anxiety, distrust and disloyalty of the world—that is to say every person—is outside the commu-

⁵⁹ See “The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight”, *Religion in Life* 15 (Winter 1945-46) 106-116; reprinted in *Religion in Life* 47 (1978) 371.

⁶⁰ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 109.

⁶¹ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 86-7. Note the coincidence of the terms “ultimate person”, “ultimate cause”, “universal other” and “universal community”. See the excursus below.

⁶² Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 112.

⁶³ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 116. Indeed, the boundaries of this community “cannot be drawn in space, or time, or extent of interaction, short of a whole in which we live and move and have our being.” *The Responsible Self*, 88.

nity of faith. The line between church and world runs through every soul, not between souls.⁶⁴

It would appear that Niebuhr here has sundered what he hitherto held together with his categories of empirical and ideal in *Social Sources*, with institution and movement in *Kingdom of God* and external and internal in *Meaning of Revelation*. But then Niebuhr returns to the body-soul idea and states that while the church of faith does not point to the institutional church, the church of faith cannot exist apart from the institutional church. That this was an unsatisfactory answer for Niebuhr is evident (at least in terms of *Faith on Earth*) in that this is how the manuscript ends.

It would seem that this changing understanding of the nature of the church is caught up in the drive of radical monotheism to transform every institution, including those with the name “religion”. In *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* Niebuhr makes a careful distinction between “radical faith” and (western) “religion”,⁶⁵ the former is the agent of transformation of the latter. At the same time, radical monotheism fails to be truly itself when it is confined to the sphere of religion—whether the institution of the church or to “Christianity”.⁶⁶ Radical faith is driven toward the transformation of all things through a reorientation of human loyalties.

Hence what Niebuhr terms “faith” is linked with words such as “selfhood” and “covenant”. We can see that in a general, phenomenological sense the acts of faith have important social and communal significance. But what of the referent of faith? Does Niebuhr’s description fit *any* referent, *any* object? Or does it demand a particular *kind* of referent (or God)? With the raising of this question, phenomenological method begins to take strain. Not surprisingly, it is at this point that Niebuhr moves to an explicitly confessional account of faith.

Faith and God

The theological problem of monotheism in *The Meaning of Revelation* is the problem of how God can be both slayer and life-giver: a problem that is resolved Christologically in placing the event of Jesus Christ, his death and his resurrection, as the founding event in the history of the community that professes to know God. On the

⁶⁴ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 117.

⁶⁵ But by implication *all* religion (though Niebuhr here as in *Social Sources* is reluctant to speak to a context other than his own—in spite of the universalism of his ideas).

⁶⁶ In *The Purpose of the Church*, 21ff. Niebuhr returns to the bipolar idea of church as “community” and “institution”.

cross, as Niebuhr wrote in one of his powerful war articles, God gives “his best beloved rather than to allow the work of his creation to dissolve into the anarchy of existence”. Thus does the church learn “the meaning of his signs through Jesus Christ”.⁶⁷ This God is One. In *Faith on Earth* and *Radical Monotheism*, the paradoxical unity of God understood in God’s identity as slayer and life-giver remains. But here the unity of God is also a *logical* necessity. That is, given both the structure of faith as Niebuhr describes it and Niebuhr’s realism, God *must* be One. And given Niebuhr’s personalism, also this One has to be transcendent or absolute personality.⁶⁸

The idea of God as Absolute Person brings Niebuhr’s relational theology together with his theological realism. But the convergence has a dissonant ring. Niebuhr’s realism, which in contrast to the idealism characteristic of his work in the 1920s, refuses to see God as one actor among many in history or creation, but rather sees God as “the structure in things”.⁶⁹ Gradually Niebuhr moved away from impersonal metaphors for God, but his transcendentalism remained. In faith in God, the object of faith is disclosed as person, as subject, in its claims on the subjectivity of the faithful. A third diagram illustrates an important transformation in the structure of faith:

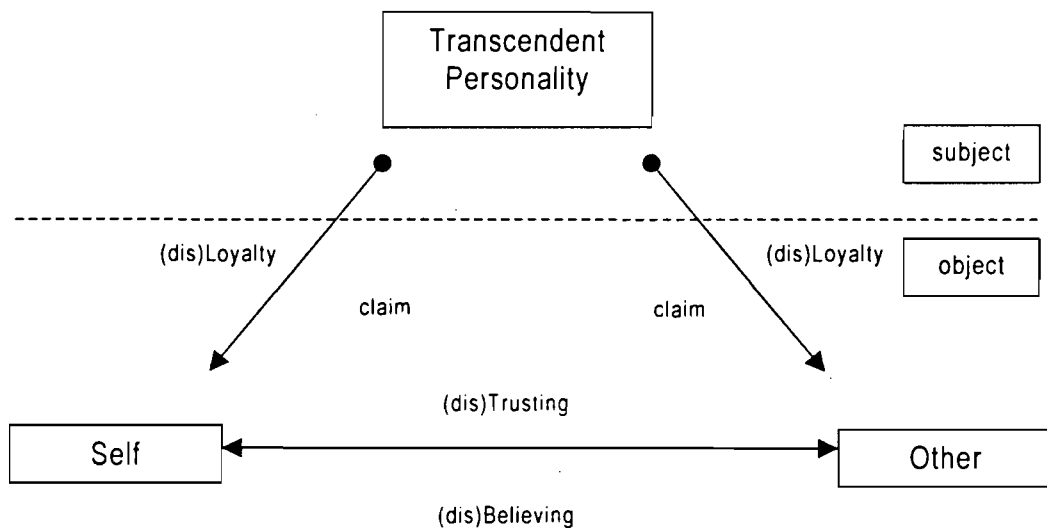


Figure three: Faith in God

⁶⁷ Niebuhr, “A Christian Interpretation of War”, 166-67.

⁶⁸ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 103. We underline “logical necessity” partly because this indicates that Niebuhr’s phenomenology is not far from metaphysics. We do not develop this, however, since it would take us too far away from the point. It is notable that in *Faith on Earth* Christology remains central to the argument (in so far as a whole argument can be constructed from such a fragmentary work) whereas in *Radical Monotheism* Jesus Christ is now only an example—albeit paradigmatic—of radical faith.

⁶⁹ Niebuhr, “A Communication”, 447.

The subject-object line has returned, only now the self and other are objects with reference to the transcendent personality, which now seems to assume the character of unifying cause. And yet this is an asymmetrical relation, as God is a necessary part of the equation and God's faithfulness is ontologically written into the covenant structure of the world. If God were to be unfaithful, the structure of the world would collapse. The claim to loyalty and the possibility of disloyalty can therefore only go one way. The triad is asymmetrical in another way: there is no triad in God. Niebuhr's multiplication of triads and trialectics stops there.⁷⁰

As mentioned above, we *participate* as believers in the structure of faith which, in terms of Niebuhr's realism, must be seen as God's relation to the world. Participation is, however, primarily one way. God as object of loyalty becomes disclosed as Person who is loyal to creation, to Being. Here the value of Being is grounded in its "being valued" by God.⁷¹ But God does not thereby participate in our human relationships (or in creation), because this would be to subject God to relativisation within human relationships. God, in other words, is not a self in the same way that another human person is a self. And one's relation to God cannot be placed on a plane with other relationships. Were God to be so relativised, it would create a tension between Niebuhr's relational theory and his Troeltschean pursuit of the Absolute—two things he tries to balance.⁷² God must always remain "the One beyond the many"—with an accent on the word "beyond". The sovereign, in other words, must never become "one of the many". Sovereignty and pluralism must be kept carefully distinct.⁷³ Failing this endangers both. It is sovereignty that makes a genuine pluralism possible, just as it is faith in the One that allows loyalty to the many (or the many loyalties) to be honoured.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ On Niebuhr's (largely unsuccessful) attempts to articulate a version of the doctrine of the Trinity in terms that fit his theology, see Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned", in Glen Stassen, Diane Yeager and John Howard Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 61-65, and the excursus later in this chapter. We could also say the same of his transcendentalist view of the self. Indeed, as his "Address on the Eightieth Birthday of Martin Buber" makes clear, in spite of his commitment to honouring particularity, Niebuhr longs for an essential self beyond particularity. In *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, Culture*, ed. William Stacy Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 134-9.

⁷¹ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism*, 32.

⁷² On Niebuhr and Ernst Troeltsch, see chapter four above.

⁷³ Libertus Hoedemaker has claimed that these motifs (sovereignty and pluralism) are constitutive elements not only in Niebuhr's, but in American theology in general. *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1970), 1.

⁷⁴ Here is a tension within Niebuhr's idea of "structure" and God's relation to it. For God is expected to be "the structure in things" and yet at the same be a participant *within* this structure.

The structure of faith is replicated in God's relations (to Christ, to Church and to world). Indeed one could say that God's relations is the transcendental possibility or condition of our human relations to each other, and therefore of the negotiation of our loyalties. But Niebuhr is in danger of winding up in a metaphysics whereby God is no longer a covenanting person but a necessary element within the structure of faith—or even the structure itself—just as the other is a necessary component of the construction of selfhood. The economy of relations within the structure of faith is a tightly closed one.

Excursus: Covenant, Absolute Personality and Trinity

Our exposition has reached a crucial juncture. Niebuhr's view of God seems incompatible with aim to develop a theological account of faith that honours relationality and selfhood. At this point we wish to suggest that Niebuhr's theory would be greatly helped by two moves: first, a move away from God as absolute person to the covenanting God of the Hebrew Bible; second, a move towards a trinitarian understanding of God. To elaborate in detail on both these moves would take us beyond the scope of this thesis, which is to offer an account of Niebuhr's theology in terms of the problem of loyalties and faith which can be read in South Africa. However, some notes are in order, as the problem is not unrelated to the distant colonial one which has characterised much of South African political and religious discourse.

Radical monotheism, the structure of faith and covenant are all synonymous for Niebuhr. And yet his view of covenant falls short of the biblical idea of covenantal monotheism, which is aimed at the critique of false faith. While Niebuhr spoke at great length about the idea of covenant, it is arguable that he never truly came to grips with its radical implications. In his writings, covenant belongs to a constellation of ideas, including historical realism, which owes as much to the thinking of Ernst Troeltsch and his quest for the absolute as to biblical understandings. Biblical understandings of covenant and monotheism are scandalously particular, as N. T. Wright shows.⁷⁵ Biblical monotheism is situated, concrete and historical, related to the history of particular people with a particular mission. The biblical witness is more concerned about idolatry, about the substitution of a creature for the creator, than it is for transcendental unity.

This endangers God of being reduced to "one of the many", and perhaps accounts for the ambiguity in Niebuhr's formulations as stated.

⁷⁵ *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 248ff.

Niebuhr's radical monotheism is posted as a safeguard against idolatry, which he sees as human henotheistic tendencies. In this way he is in touch with biblical motifs. However, his radical monotheism is abstract and negative, distancing God from anything relative or finite.⁷⁶ As Stanley Hauerwas has said in criticism of Niebuhr, the God of radical monotheism lacks "the characteristics necessary to identify with a particular people and their history".⁷⁷ Niebuhr's monotheism owes more to transcendentalism than to biblical traditions.⁷⁸ God's otherness in a radical monotheistic scheme is understood metaphysically: "the one beyond the many in whom the many are one". Hence concreteness is difficult and seems to work against the view of God. In biblical covenantal monotheism, God's otherness is understood ethically, and honouring it means striving to imitate God in ethical action. Behaving monotheistically means nothing less than concretising by imitating God.

Niebuhr's absolutising of the One can also be seen in his ambivalence toward the doctrine of the trinity.

Kenneth Hamilton has called Niebuhr's *Radical Monotheism* "trinitarianism disregarded".⁷⁹ The term "disregarded" is important. While he is ambivalent towards the personhood of the Holy Spirit,⁸⁰ Niebuhr nowhere explicitly *refutes* the doctrine of the trinity in his affirmation of *Radical Monotheism*. He simply passes it over.⁸¹ Perhaps this is because, for Niebuhr, the unity of God is more important than God's trinity. Indeed the unity of God is a key problem for Realist theology and experience. If God is "the structure in things", then one must account for the pain and suffering and injustice that characterise the world. The question of God's unity is put in these terms: how can God be good and powerful? How can God be slayer and life-giver? In terms of the discussion of *Christ and Culture* earlier in this chapter, the question is how to relate the Creator and governor to the redeemer and the immanent spirit.⁸²

Niebuhr may also pass over the doctrine of the trinity because he identifies it with speculation. Niebuhr does however implicitly utilise an economic view of the

⁷⁶ Glen Stassen, "Concrete Christological Norms for Transformation", in *Authentic Transformation*, 174.

⁷⁷ *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1983), xxi.

⁷⁸ See Stassen, "Concrete Christological Norms", 175-76.

⁷⁹ "Trinitarianism Disregarded: The Theological Orientation of H. Richard Niebuhr and Cyril C. Richardson", *Encounter* 23 (1962), 343-52.

⁸⁰ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 103-08; *Christ and Culture*, 80-81.

⁸¹ Niebuhr, like many others since Augustine, reflects the view that the trinity is more "a dogma to be believed rather than as the living focus of life and thought." Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1991), 3.

⁸² Niebuhr does not *completely* "disregard" the doctrine of the trinity in *Christ and Culture*, but uses it as a test for the way the different worldviews or types deal with God as creator-governor and redeemer. e.g. *Christ and Culture*, 80-1, 114-5.

trinity to buttress his account of the sovereignty of God, the kingdom of Christ and the coming kingdom in *The Kingdom of God in America*. Indeed, one could push the parallels further by saying that the relation between historical periods, where each is anticipated in the others, is perichoretic,⁸³ without disturbing the particular, individual character of each period. Likewise, the idea of the trinity is implicit in his parallel scheme in *The Meaning of Revelation*: sovereignty, grace, hope.⁸⁴ But when in *Kingdom of God* he states an awareness of this, he immediately pulls back for fear of becoming caught up in “abstract ideas”.⁸⁵

But it is most likely that Niebuhr passes over the doctrine of the trinity simply because in his theology unity must always trump diversity, sovereignty must win out over pluralism. Plurality is always “relative”. History and nature must be grounded in an Absolute, and that always means for Niebuhr a unity. The object of faith must be one. It must be the One. Niebuhr speculates that the doctrine of the trinity may have arisen in the life of the church as a way of dealing with multiple objects of faith: as a competition between religions centred in the Father, the Son and the Spirit.⁸⁶ In terms of his scheme in *Radical Monotheism* this could only mean that the doctrine of the trinity was an incorporation of what essentially were three henotheisms. Perhaps we should rather say two henotheisms.⁸⁷ In his strongest radical monotheist passages, Niebuhr tends to equate “God” with “the Father”, “the Source and Center of all being, the determiner of destiny.”⁸⁸ This is the identity of God as revealed in radical monotheism. Christ then becomes identified with the “Christian” version of radical monotheism, as an example of radical monotheism rather than the Second Person of the trinity.

What of the Spirit? We have already mentioned Niebuhr’s ambivalence toward the personhood of the Spirit. For Niebuhr, the Father and Son are related in terms of the same relational triad described in the triad of faith above,⁸⁹ by the Spirit as the principle of personality. The “third” part of the triad is the human person. The Spirit, is therefore an internal structural principle by which Father and Son are related, and by

⁸³ *Perichoresis* refers to “mutual indwelling” of the persons of the trinity. See Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1991), ch. 8. Applied to *Kingdom of God* and *Meaning of Revelation*, this would mean that each “note” (e.g. “grace” or “the coming kingdom”) could not be abstracted from the others without radically changing its character.

⁸⁴ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, x.

⁸⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 128.

⁸⁶ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 17. See also “The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church” (1946), in Johnson, ed. *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 50-62.

⁸⁷ In *Christ and Culture*, 80-81, Niebuhr speaks of a “monotheism of the Father” but a “henotheism” or “unitarianism” of the Son.

⁸⁸ Niebuhr, Williams and Gustafson, *The purpose of the Church and its ministry*, 36.

⁸⁹ See on page 19 above.

which God (Father and Son) are related to the human person. Niebuhr sees no need to go beyond this binitarian formulation to ground his idea of relationality.⁹⁰

Niebuhr also uses this idea in more descriptive ways. Illustrating the unity of the church as incorporative rather than exclusive, “The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church” surveys three theological unitarianisms. The first is a religion of the Father (e.g. Monarchianism, Deism, Unitarianism) wherein the “Almighty creator”, the “God of power and might” is worshipped. The second is a religion of the Son (e.g. Marcionism and Pietism) wherein the Saviour, “fairest Lord Jesus”, is worshipped. The third is a religion of the Spirit (e.g. Mysticism) wherein immanentism is emphasised, but also charisma and the establishment of a sectarian community.

Radical monotheism is however a refutation of the doctrine of the trinity, not simply a disregarding or passing over of it. It entrenches a transcendentalism of the One over the many that compromises the grounding of relationality.

Why is Niebuhr’s rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity in its classical form significant? Addressing this question fully would involve more space than is available to us here. We can only sketch an answer.⁹¹

Colin Gunton has argued that the inability of western philosophy and theology to come to terms with unity and diversity, and its insistence on setting the one over the many, or the many over the one, is direct outworking of its rejection of the Nicene formulation of the trinity. Since Schleiermacher, the emphasis on the doctrine of the trinity has been one of preserving continuity in tradition rather than using it as something to see the world through. But the Nicene formulation of the trinity and its outworking by the Cappadocian Fathers, claims Gunton, offers “ontological innovation”, a way of thinking about God and world otherwise impossible.⁹² That is, it suggests an idea of being as being-in-relation.⁹³ It also redefines the notion of person as different from “individual”.⁹⁴

In the speculative Greek thinking that stood behind the Arian heresy, “to be is either to be universal or to be individual: to be defined by virtue of participation in universal form or by virtue of material separation from other beings.”⁹⁵ Augustine re-

⁹⁰ *Faith on Earth*, 103.

⁹¹ Were this a full-blown critical analysis of the theology of Niebuhr, rather than a reading within a specific context, the implications of the trinitarian turn for his radical monotheism would have to be worked out in more detail, particularly with relevance for his anthropology, Christology and ecclesiology.

⁹² Gunton, *Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 7.

⁹³ Gunton, *Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 8.

⁹⁴ Gunton, *Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 10.

⁹⁵ Gunton, *Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 8.

called this idea in his rejection of eastern theology:⁹⁶ “he allowed the insidious return of a Hellenism in which being is not communion, but something underlying it.”⁹⁷ Gunton argues that this is the basis for the dualism between act and being, being and becoming, and divine unity and trinity that has preoccupied Western theology since. God becomes “an essentially singular deity for whom community is epiphenomenal or secondary.”⁹⁸ God is understood in terms of supreme substance and then, following Kant, as Absolute Person.⁹⁹

Niebuhr’s binitarian formulation, curious in the light of his favouring of triads, runs the risk of a full-blown dualism. Binitarianisms honour relationality, but do not allow for openness in the relation. “Shared love,” wrote Richard of St Victor, “is properly said to exist when a third person is loved by two persons harmoniously and in community.”¹⁰⁰ Niebuhr, as we saw above, did anticipate this insight in saying that the “third” in the trinity was the human self, though at the expense of making the Holy Spirit into “spirit”—an abstract principle or “substance” of personality.

Niebuhr wants a relational self,¹⁰¹ but his view of God as absolute person precludes it.¹⁰² Trinitarian theology, deabsolutises one-ness, and opens the way for an understanding of personhood more in tune with Niebuhr’s concerns.

But we have also argued for a more biblical idea of monotheism. Are trinitarianism and covenantal monotheism compatible? It would seem on the surface that they are not. Indeed, many contemporary proponents of trinitarian theology use the term “monotheism” as synonymous with the opposite of trinitarian thinking.¹⁰³ David Nicholls has argued however that this is to confuse monotheism with “monolithism”, that God’s unity is undifferentiated unity.¹⁰⁴ Perhaps it is better to say that this is to

⁹⁶ Gunton says that Augustine “either did not understand the trinitarian theology of his predecessors, both East and West, or looked at their work with spectacles so strongly tinted with neo-platonic assumptions that they have distorted his work.” *Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 38-9.

⁹⁷ Gunton, *Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 10. See below for our criticism of Niebuhr’s understanding of an essential identity prior to particularity.

⁹⁸ Gunton, *Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 53.

⁹⁹ Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (London: SCM, 1980), 10-16.

¹⁰⁰ Gunton, *Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 92. Quoting Richard of St Victor’s *De Trinitate* book 3 § xix.

¹⁰¹ See the fragment quoted in Richard R. Niebuhr’s preface to *Theology, History, and Culture*, which places “life is relation, being-with” alongside “God is pure act”.

¹⁰² We could also note feminist theologian Catherine Keller’s deconstruction of the idea of absolute as the quest for a self-absolving, loosening way from relation, from “the ties that bind” as it were. *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), ch. 1. Keller follows with a critique of Niebuhr, who while offering the possibility of plurality and relationality, “recoils” into monism that demonises plurality. *From a Broken Web*, 181. cf. Keiser’s defence of Niebuhr on this point in *Roots of Relational Ethics*, 59-60.

¹⁰³ Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, for example.

¹⁰⁴ David Nicholls, *Deity and Domination: Images of God and the State in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1989), 235.

confuse monotheism with *unitarianism*. We have argued that the main problem with Niebuhr's monotheism is its Greek philosophical understanding of one-ness, over against a biblical ethico-religious understanding of "the one true God" and a critique of idolatry. It is not necessarily the case that understanding this one true God in personal terms entails understanding God as one person. This would make God's personhood dependent again on creation: God's personhood would be derived from God's relation to creation, which would imply that God is not a person *apart* from creation. This again would import necessity into the creator-creature relationship—something not only problematic biblically and theologically, but in terms of Niebuhr's own emphasis on the freedom of the sovereignty of God. Trinitarianism, with its understanding of intersubjectivity as the very foundation of selfhood, leads to a reinterpretation and renewal of the idea of covenant.¹⁰⁵

Faith: broken and reconstructed

Broken faith

The operations of the structure of faith describe something integral to creaturehood. And creation, biblically speaking, is good. But existentially and historically¹⁰⁶ our faith is fallen. Indeed Niebuhr puts this in even stronger and deterministic terms: we experience our creation as our fall.¹⁰⁷ Distrust, Niebuhr says, is as much a human possibility as trust; unbelief as belief; treason as loyalty. However, this does not challenge or present an alternative to the structure of faith (as if there is another way of being in the world) since while we can choose to act in belief or unbelief in our relations, we cannot choose to not believe. Unbelief is actually rebellion, a believing otherwise.¹⁰⁸ Put another way, one can only be a self in relation, and one can only be in relation to a companion in trust or distrust, and in relation to an object in loyalty or disloyalty. This means that even those who act in disloyalty—whether to God or to other companions—are acting as selves. Covenant breaking reaffirms the inescapability of covenant bonds.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Again the development of this idea would take us too far away from the objectives of this thesis.

¹⁰⁶ See Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 81.

¹⁰⁷ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 77-78.

¹⁰⁸ See "Man the Sinner", *Journal of Religion* 15 (1935), 272-80.

¹⁰⁹ As Miroslav Volf points out, even rebellion against God takes place in the context of the covenant. *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 156.

The idea of broken faith seems appropriate to describing the old South African context—where in the name of loyalty to some, much disloyalty to others has been evident—although Niebuhr means it in a general, human sense. The community of loyalty ultimately has to extend beyond our parochial bonds to humankind and beyond.¹¹⁰ Broken faith speaks of violated trust and broken covenants, but also of broken selves and broken relationship to God. With reference to an object of loyalty: we can only either be loyal to it or betray it. No other possibility exists. The structure of faith, as previously noted, has this either-or character. This either-or character however means that faith can be re-orientated, re-stored, re-storied. Niebuhr's theological realism means that the restoration of broken faith is inseparably bound together with the realignment and reconstitution of loyalties and the formation of responsible selves—surely a message relevant for a post-apartheid society.

Put another way, the structure of faith is disclosed in every human act, but in broken form (or forms).¹¹¹ In describing broken faith, Niebuhr returns to the idea of natural religion he developed in *The Meaning of Revelation*. Natural religion or “faith” (which seems to be a synonym for “broken faith” here) is described using words with a deterministic flavour, such as “unchosen”, “unfree”, and “conditioned”, and the “first relation” of the self to God described by the terms “distrust” and “disbelief”.¹¹² Natural religion (which is also social, cultural or indeed *any* “given” religion), whereby our creation is our fall, is original religion, and refers not to any specific set of beliefs, but to any set of beliefs prior to their transformation by God. At the same time, in line with Niebuhr's realist scheme, it is not that the object of faith, the “third” part of the faith triad, can be either the true Absolute (the One) or a substitute thereof—as if the third element is empty and waiting to be filled. Rather, the third element in the triad *is already* the true Absolute. This is so because all our “natural religion” is a response—of rebellion, fear or withdrawal—to the presence of that Absolute.¹¹³ The Absolute is only disclosed as person, as “friend” in surrender. Idolatry is not so much a replacing of the One as it is a masking or hiding from the One. In this perspective nationalism, capitalism, humanism (or any other “ism”) are not only broken responses

¹¹⁰ See Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism*, 33-37. cf. William Johnson Everett, *God's Federal Republic: Reconstructing our Governing Symbol* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988).

¹¹¹ c.f. *Radical Monotheism*, 31, where radical monotheism exists also only in broken form.

¹¹² Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 66, 67.

¹¹³ Again though this conflation of the third element in the structure and the structure itself creates problems. Is the reason for our fear, rebellion or resignation the fact that we cannot escape the “hound of heaven”? Or is it that we risk negation of ourselves since in rejecting God we reject the structure within which selfhood is created and sustained?

to faith, but ways of defying, suppressing or avoiding the One. Hence the very structure of faith is put at risk in our broken responses to the One. And if the structure of faith is at risk, the structure of the world (which is characterised by covenant) is at risk.

Nevertheless Niebuhr is at pains to point out that, however negative that experience, we do indeed experience God even in “natural faith”. What happens in the conversion of natural faith, as we saw in our discussion of revelation in chapter seven, is the experience of God as person, and as unity of goodness and power.

The first form that natural religion takes is the religion of defiance. Here the inequalities of life, the tragedy of existence, come up against the need to confront “that which is” (given) in the name of “humane” or “spiritual” values.¹¹⁴ Niebuhr offers Bertrand Russell as an example. Russell held that “if the nature of things is the creation of a transcendent God, then that God is our enemy, and if it is not, then the world itself is our enemy and must be resisted, though the fight may be carried on without personal hatred”.¹¹⁵ It is important to note how this continues to exhibit the triadic structure of faith, however, not simply a Promethean defiance of an individual against God. Arising “out of the tragic situation in which a self is bound to other selves in loyalty,” the religion of defiance “raises its voice against Omnipotence on behalf of others”.¹¹⁶

It is interesting to note that in describing the religion of fear Niebuhr moves from characterising the “nature of things” as the creation of a transcendent God (seen by the religion of defiance) to describing God as the transcendent “nature of things”.¹¹⁷ Whether manifested in naturalism, existentialism or Epicureanism, the religion of fear “seeks to deal with the same situation of enmity between the Ultimate and man” as the religion of defiance, “only its approach is one of appeasement.”¹¹⁸ “If defiance says ‘I am against God’, fear says ‘God is against me’.” Echoing the sentiment of Henry Nelson Wieman, who said that the “real” God is “more like a stone

¹¹⁴ Perhaps in more contemporary terms Niebuhr is getting at the dialectic identified by Douglas R. McGaughey between actuality and possibility. *Strangers and Pilgrims: On the Role of Aporiai in Theology* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997).

¹¹⁵ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 72.

¹¹⁶ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 70.

¹¹⁷ See Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 72-73. Ironically, then in natural religion we are all realists.

¹¹⁸ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 74.

wall or a toothache than an ideal being”,¹¹⁹ a projection of human needs and wishes, Niebuhr characterises the religion of fear with the sentiment that “over all life there lies a strange justice which upholds laws that are supernaturally established and unintelligible in rational terms”.¹²⁰ Natural religion expresses itself in natural “religions”, which Niebuhr says are marked with “strange taboos” and images of heaven and hell. But the fear element is not simply fear of God the enemy. Nor is it simply fear of death. It is fear of the loss of selfhood, of the void. Hence Niebuhr is not woodenly repeating Whitehead’s well-known formula. The void and the enemy are both present, lurking in Niebuhr’s description. They are related to the human imperative and call to selfhood.¹²¹ The risk in breaking covenant is the loss of selfhood, which means that the divine partner is experienced as void or enemy. The religion of fear may become a religion of withdrawal or avoidance. This form is exemplified in Epicurianism and pietism. The religion of withdrawal is the religion of despair where “the flight from the Other is accompanied by the flight from the self while the effort is made to interpret the world as superficial, without depth or meaning, without foundation or superstructure”.¹²²

There is a relation between those forms and the restoration of faith. We have already encountered Niebuhr’s appropriation of Whitehead’s dictum that religion is the transition from God the Void to God the Enemy to God the companion.¹²³ The forms of broken faith parallel the first two terms of Whitehead’s dictum. The final term, however, requires a Christological transformation of “broken faith” or in the terms of *The Meaning of Revelation*, “natural religion”. Indeed it is Jesus Christ who becomes the “companion”.

¹¹⁹ Henry N. Wieman, “The Wrestle of Religion with Truth”, in *Modern American Protestantism*, ed. William R. Hutchison (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1968 [orig.1927]), 1-7.

¹²⁰ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 75. cf. “A Christian Interpretation of War”, 162-64.

¹²¹ This is a powerful reminder of the fear that held white South Africa in its grip during the 1970s and 1980s—indeed which the Church of England at the TRC faith hearings blamed for compromising its theology, making it justify conservative ideology to its fearful white constituents. It is also worth recalling that a discussion of “the religion of fear” was the context for Niebuhr’s only reference to South Africa. *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 99.

¹²² Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 76. Another example of a religious orientation which resonates within South Africa.

¹²³ Although it is not necessarily so that “defiance”, “fear” and “withdrawal” are stages corresponding to the stages of faith from “void” to “enemy” to “companion”.

The reconstruction of faith

If “our creation is our fall”, if human history is a “history of treason”,¹²⁴ if our “natural religion”—and remember natural means “born into” (cultural) as well as that of “nature”—is rebellion, then one wonders how Niebuhr can see selfhood, loyalty and wholeness as real human possibilities alongside the actualities of individualism, disloyalty and brokenness. His descriptions up to this point seem to lock human experience into rebellion. Where is the possibility of the restoration of faith?

For Niebuhr it is Jesus Christ that re-presents the possibility of the restoration of faith. Jesus Christ as present, as loyal companion, both to us and to God, exemplifies wholeness both in selfhood and in faithfulness. It is in Jesus Christ that a new covenant is inaugurated, bringing with it a new selfhood, in short redemption of the soul (self).

But does Jesus Christ merely *exemplify* faith (suggesting a liberal or Abelardian soteriology), giving us an example of integrated selfhood to follow? Or does he *participate* in the structure of faith even as God and we participate? It would seem that he would have to, if that structure is to truly connect God, Church, Christ, scriptures and world. Put another way, if the essence of the problem (the human dilemma) is relational, then the solution to the problem comes in a new relationship of trust (community and selfhood) with God and each other in the faithful companion, Jesus Christ. This new relationship is the restoration or *reconstruction* of faith with Jesus Christ as significant other, as transforming presence in our history, as bearer of a *new* covenant.

The term “reconstruction”, like the term “transformation”, is live in South African debate today.¹²⁵ But it also has a special sense for Niebuhr. In a footnote, Richard R. Niebuhr suggests that his father used the term “reconstruction” as a technical term,¹²⁶ after the fashion of George Herbert Mead. For Mead, “reality exists in a present. The present of course implies a past and a future, and to these both we deny existence.”¹²⁷ What he means is that there is no past separable from a present (the past

¹²⁴ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 81.

¹²⁵ It was, of course, much more so before it was replaced by the rhetoric of growth in the government’s economic policies.

¹²⁶ *Faith on Earth*, 88n.3. Earlier, Richard R. made another interesting observation: “In the handwritten Stone Lecture, “Jesus Christ and the Reconstruction of Faith”, Niebuhr wrote in the top margin the following alternatives for *reconstruction*, all of which he crossed out: rebirth, regeneration, reformation, revival, resurrection, renovation.” *Faith on Earth*, 83n.1.

¹²⁷ Mead, *The Philosophy of the Present* (Chicago: Open Court Pub., 1931), 1.

belongs to a present), and presents are destined to become pasts. There is therefore no such thing as an “in itself” past, or a definitive account (for all time) of the past, indeed of *any* past.

Once an emergent has come into being, it becomes “part of the determining conditions that occur in real presents”. And then “we orient ourselves not with reference to the past which was a present within which the emergent appeared, but in such a restatement of the past as conditioning the future that we may control its reappearance.”¹²⁸ James Gustafson puts the point this way: “Although the ‘I’ aspect of the self acts, responds, and is free, the past actions and responses form a structure of attitude which limits and conditions the ‘I.’ This structure is the ‘me.’”¹²⁹ It is here that the past exists, but also in “the significant symbols and their meanings through which the self comes to being in a community.”

Now we meet the term “reconstruction”. The past is continually under reconstruction with every new present. Reconstruction takes place in a new relating or re-orienting of things. “The function of the past in experience.... is a continual reconstruction as a chronicle to serve the purposes of present interpretation.”¹³⁰ “Reconstruction”, for Mead, is not a function of negativity or brokenness, but simply a matter “essential to the conduct of an intelligent being in the universe”.¹³¹ Niebuhr, however, wants to identify *redemption* with reconstruction.¹³² This could mean that again he is confusing creation and redemption, “structure” and “direction”, “is” and “ought”. But he also sees reconstruction here as being of a specific kind. Not all reconstruction is redemptive. Again what makes the difference is the nature of the “third”.

As in *The Meaning of Revelation*, in *Faith on Earth* Niebuhr makes an ontological distinction between personal and impersonal, between participative and non-participative knowledge, and applies this to knowledge of Jesus Christ. Jesus is commonly presented in two ways: first, as a *historical figure*, as a particular individual who was born, lived and died in the first century, based on the testimony of eyewitnesses;¹³³ second, as a *dogma*, as one who was present in creation, was incarnate, cruci-

¹²⁸ Mead, *The Philosophy of the Present*, 15.

¹²⁹ Gustafson, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, 126.

¹³⁰ Mead, *The Philosophy of the Present*, 48.

¹³¹ Mead, *The Philosophy of the Present*, 3-4.

¹³² cf. Niebuhr’s contrast of “reconstructed interpretations” with “merely customary symbols and emotions” in *Responsible Self*, 103, recalling *Meaning of Revelation*, 87-8.

¹³³ cf. the “portrait gallery” in *Christ and Culture*, 11-29—and Niebuhr’s inability to evaluate the various portraits according to a fixed norm.

fied and resurrected. Niebuhr affirms the validity of the first only insofar as it is based on the testimony of persons that we trust. This already introduces subjectivity into the equation and also the possibility that the witnesses may at the end of the day be untrustworthy—but also that our decision to accept their testimony is based on faith.

The second (dogma) is only possible as reflection from present experience (again subjective). In each of these, however, despite the ever present dimension of trust (which exists in all kinds of knowledge), Jesus Christ is presented as an *object* of knowledge, as “out there”, not as a *person* who is redemptively present in “our” history. In the terms of *The Meaning of Revelation*, this is a Jesus Christ of “external history”.

It is as loyal companion that Christians experience him as “the Christ of faith”. Faith here is understood not as a written *credo*, but in terms of Niebuhr’s triadic structure of faith, as a living and dynamic process of *fideis*, *fiducia*, and *fidelitas*.¹³⁴ This is no longer the Christ of dogma, although Niebuhr acknowledges that like any personal relationship there are things “about” Jesus Christ that we know as part of the relationship. Neither does it exclude the importance of the Jesus of history. But the understanding of Jesus from the perspective or “point of view” of faith is different, says Niebuhr, from the understanding of Jesus as an historical figure. It is reasonable to assume that there was a person who led a life of loyalty, faith and trust.¹³⁵ But these very categories and our ability to conceptualise Jesus in their terms cannot be held apart from our present experience of distrust and disloyalty.

It is from present experience therefore that we understand the Jesus of history. Niebuhr follows Mead again here in understanding “the present as the locus of reality” and the past as reconstructed *from* it, rather than seen as leading up *to* it.¹³⁶ Our experience of the Christ of faith not only affects the way we view the historical figure Jesus, but also begins the process of reconstructing our own past of disloyalty and betrayal. The presence of Jesus Christ is therefore a *redemptive* presence.

Central to all this is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Again Niebuhr eschews any search for a basis in historical events in favour of a “presentist” and personal inter-

¹³⁴ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 48.

¹³⁵ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 93ff. Here Niebuhr is concerned to defend his Christology against charges of docetism.

¹³⁶ Mead, *The Philosophy of the Present*, ch. 1 (e.g. 23); Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 88.

pretation. Rather than simply “an exception to the rule that all men must die”,¹³⁷ the resurrection signals the personal presence of Jesus Christ in our interpersonal world. But the significance of the resurrection is also in its vindication of the faithfulness of Jesus Christ and of the unity of God’s power and goodness. Indeed the resurrection, for Niebuhr, is paradigmatic of God’s activity in the world, and the vindication of the identity of goodness *and* power.¹³⁸ The presence of Jesus Christ, as testimony to this unity, then begins its work of conversion,¹³⁹ of *metanoia*, transforming our existence as selves by transforming our faith. We are again at the point of the reconstruction of faith, of the realignment of loyalties, of permanent revolution, of the disclosure of the Deity of God, that finished up *The Meaning of Revelation*. The transcendent One is the Father. “The Absolute is made known as Father in his glorification of the Son”.¹⁴⁰

Just as God is understood as being-in-relation, so human selfhood is a calling to being-in-relation. Our selfhood must imitate God’s selfhood. But recall that the relation between God and humanity is for Niebuhr not simply one of imitation, mirroring or analogy. Humanity is connected to God through *participation* in the structure of faith, through a covenant relation. When we experience faithful human relations (self and companion) we are participating in God’s faith-relation to the world.

The idea of “companion” extends to the relations between Christ, scriptures and the church. Christ is “one of us”—his humanity is understood as a real-isation of the possibility of faithfulness and single-minded loyalty to God, and his divinity is understood as.... “The interpersonal movement of faith... [which] centers in the person of Jesus Christ”.¹⁴¹ Jesus Christ is the companion of the church, not an “object” of faith. As companion, he mediates not by standing *between* God and us but by standing *with* us before God. “He is the personal companion who by his loyalty to the self and by his trust in the Transcendent One *reconstructs* the broken interpersonal life of faith”.¹⁴²

Community, as we noted in our study of *The Meaning of Revelation*, exists not only in space but also in time. Christian community represents a kind of unity, of continu-

¹³⁷ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 98.

¹³⁸ e.g. H. Richard Niebuhr, “Reflections on the Christian Theory of History”, in Johnson, ed., *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, 87.

¹³⁹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, ch. 6; cf. *The Meaning of Revelation*, 132f.

¹⁴⁰ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 101.

¹⁴¹ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 86. This quote, I should note, appears in the context of distinguishing between institutional Christianity and the dynamic movement that sustains it (c.f. *Kingdom of God and Social Sources*).

ity, that transcends institutions, denominations and groups. It even transcends, in its faith-confession, B. C. and A. D. distinctions. “The faith of Abraham is as great as the faith of Paul”.¹⁴³ The scriptures are written testimony of the faith of our companions in the past. “Scriptures and church are one and the same principle, the community of faith at our side, interpreting the Word of God, presenting the living Christ of faith”.¹⁴⁴

The point of all this is that redemption takes place for Niebuhr in community, just as sin as disloyalty is manifested in community. It is in participating in a community which experiences Jesus Christ as personally present in the way mentioned above that redemption is effected. This redemption is not, however, simply focussed on the community of faith. For the community of faith is but one community among the many.¹⁴⁵ The real thrust of redemption is cosmic. As representative (or first-fruits) of that larger community, it sees with cosmic vision. Its understanding of context is that of a covenantally structured and maintained world. In our participation in the structure of faith, we (members of the community of faith) are able to see “the covenant made by God with man from the foundation of the earth and witnessed to by seed time and harvest, by rainbow and by social covenants, in marriage, in political constitutions, in the community of truth-seekers.”¹⁴⁶

The structure of faith is thus a web that connects all to all, and all to the One. But *how* this connection is effected, and how much elasticity the web has, is not clear.

We have implied that the term “reconstruction” is understandable in two different ways: first, in the sense of repairing something that is broken; second, in the sense of adapting and reconfiguring as part of an ongoing process. Niebuhr uses the term in both senses, yet both senses are in some manner contradictory. The first refers to the broken “structure” of faith that is always broken whereas the second does not refer to any broken-ness but simply to the way creatures transact with their environment to create meaning (at least that is the way that Mead uses the term).

This is an example of the changing nature of Niebuhr’s theology during this time. His Meadian understanding of the reconstruction of faith fails to actually ad-

¹⁴² Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 87.

¹⁴³ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 114.

¹⁴⁴ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 115.

¹⁴⁵ Although for Niebuhr, redemption has little to do with “becoming a Christian”. Christians also can be henotheists or even polytheists.

dress the problems laid out in his discussion of “broken faith”. His ideas of unity are shifting away from the dynamic idea of unity of *The Meaning of Revelation* toward the more static “One beyond the Many” idea of *Radical Monotheism*.¹⁴⁷ Here unity is conformity to a structure rather than participation in a process. His reliance on Buber’s idea of “I and thou” typifies this ambiguity. For Buber’s concern is not simply to develop a relational philosophy, but to rehabilitate metaphysics with an idea of “authentic being”.¹⁴⁸ Niebuhr’s placing of Buber’s philosophy of “I and thou” within a Christian redemptive framework means he looks for reconstruction as a transition from inauthentic to authentic being—which is also a transition to covenantal relations. Yet he still relies on Mead’s understanding of social dynamics.

In his helpful comparative study on Mead and Buber, Paul Pfuetze argues that they both hold a similar theory on the social nature of the self, but arrive at it through different methods.¹⁴⁹ The differences in their theories, strangely downplayed by Pfuetze, turn out to be profound. Mead is basically a Kantian in his epistemology, although he has removed the transcendental ego,¹⁵⁰ making him a post-Kantian in his ontology and anthropology. His concern is for the empirical “me” which is produced in the social dynamic process. He says little about the “I”. In this way we might say that there is an affinity for the kind of social analysis Mead engages in and that of *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*.

Buber, on the other hand, is not afraid to speak of a transcendental ego. This allows him to locate the “I” above its contingent locations. It was this that attracted Niebuhr to Buber. In his tribute to Buber on the latter’s eightieth birthday, Niebuhr said that he mourned that “I” and “Thou” (which for him means “unique selfhood”) are compromised by particular identities, such as “Protestant”, “Christian” and “Jew”, identities that marked in-group and out-group. Reminiscent of Mead, Niebuhr speaks of how society creates roles for the self. However, it loses the “I” that plays the role.

¹⁴⁶ Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 114.

¹⁴⁷ As pointed out in chapter seven, in *The Meaning of Revelation*, unity is an ongoing, dynamic, storied process of *integration*. But as Niebuhr moves closer to “the One beyond the many”, unity becomes a necessary structure or economy.

¹⁴⁸ For contemporary criticism of Buber along this line, see for example Emmanuel Levinas, “Ap-ropos of Buber: Some Notes”, in *Outside the Subject*, translated by Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 40-48.

¹⁴⁹ Pfuetze, *Self, Society, Existence*, 299ff.

¹⁵⁰ Pfuetze, *Self, Society, Existence*, 335-6.

Society—and here he speaks particularly of modernity rather than society as such—can only refer to persons as complexes of forces.¹⁵¹

Buber reminds us, Niebuhr continues, that “I” am first of all a self before a Christian, and beyond Christianity is “the transcendent ‘Thou’ by whom he and I and you are called to be living souls.” Selfhood is a mystery, but also a revelation: “the openness, the clear presence of selfhood, of you and me, of I and thou.”¹⁵² Here for Niebuhr revelation is self-presence, the reconciliation of old friends. It is a reconciliation of that which has been forgotten amongst the instrumentalisation in roles and impersonal science that estranges. It is a renewal of covenant. While it is difficult not to be sympathetic with the thrust of Niebuhr’s argument, he loses as much as he gains in suggesting covenant is helped by abstract subjectivities stepping out of their particular skins.

The kind of existentialism that unites Buber and Niebuhr leaves Mead far behind. Nevertheless Mead and Buber typify two moments in the theology of Niebuhr. The difference between them echoes the shift in his thought during the late forties and early fifties (the time of the writing of *Faith on Earth*). Not that this shift is ever completed in Niebuhr; we cannot identify Mead with “early Niebuhr” and Buber with “later Niebuhr”. Mead and Buber remain tied to two sides of his thought: the assertion of sovereignty (the one, literally, to whom we are subject[s]), with its emphasis on *being* and the affirmation of plurality in dynamic process of *becoming*.

Perhaps the irony is that, pushed to the extreme of the One, Niebuhr’s God is no longer a God that can be a trustworthy partner, but rather is portrayed in *Radical Monotheism* as “the all-determining power encountered universally in all power, and the One Beyond.” This fell down (as such conceptions usually do) on the problem of evil. “God as all determiner”, writes Glenn Stassen, “was hard to trust in the face of tragic evil that Niebuhr experienced both personally and historically.”¹⁵³ But the dialectic remained, and in his very last writings, Stassen argues, Niebuhr changed back to a Christological orientation, speaking “of the oneness of God less as the One beyond the many and more as ‘the One who acts in all the many’... The universality of God

¹⁵¹ While “I and Thou are always foreigners in the world of things”, the twentieth century has made us “Strangers and aliens”. “Address on Martin Buber’s Eightieth Birthday”, 134. See also H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Idea of Covenant and American Democracy”, *Church History* 23 (1954), 133-5.

¹⁵² “Address on Martin Buber’s Eightieth Birthday”, 137.

means that the ruler of all being is working in all events to create universal community".¹⁵⁴ This universal community is a reconciled and reconstructed community.

Retrospect and prospect: faith, reconstruction and covenant

The exposition of Niebuhr's *Faith on Earth* finished with a discussion of his term "reconstruction of faith". Here again there is an important shift from the earlier idea of radical faith, where faith is a reconstructive force, to an idea of faith in need of reconstruction. The connection made in *Faith on Earth*—which is captured in the *double entendre* of the term "reconstructing faith"—is that as faith engages in the reconstruction of loyalties, it is also reconstructing itself. His phenomenology of faith, whatever its other problems, thus makes an important link between the life of faith and other loyalties. It also makes an important, though more implicit, link between faith community and other communities—including a national community. Niebuhr's powerful call for the reconstruction of faith took place during a time in American life when "loyalties" were at the fore, when an accusation of disloyalty could mean the loss of job and livelihood. Loyalty language and its sacred veneer was contested perhaps in a way similar to South Africa in the virulent anti-communist rhetoric of the apartheid state. To be disloyal to the state was to incarnate the spirit of Anti-Christ.

Even five years after the dismantling of the apartheid state, loyalties remain at the fore in South Africa, as does a certain discourse of reconstruction.

The popular image of "reconstruction", of building up that which is broken down is important and appropriate for South Africa. Likewise is the idea of a new foundation for a new building, though that lands us in some metaphorical difficulty, since the old was never truly razed to the ground. But the term "reconstruction", like the term "nation-building", can be problematic when taken to be a master image. It speaks of "engineering", not "contesting" or "negotiating". It is a static and centred image, calling forth firm boundaries. It speaks of closure, closing in gaps, putting roofs on, keeping drafts out. Buildings have front doors which can be secured and policed. They have impermeable walls which contain people in rooms. A household is an *oikos*, the centre of an economy carefully measured, balanced, planned.

¹⁵³ Glen H. Stassen, "Concrete Christological Norms for Transformation", in Stassen et al, *Authentic Transformation*, 179.

¹⁵⁴ Stassen, "Concrete Christological Norms", 187-88. cf. Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 73.

Understanding reconstruction with Niebuhr's more dynamic image of transformation as radical ("at the root", the foundation) and ongoing reorientation, helps address this shortcoming, as does his idea of "permanent revolution" introduced in chapter seven. But the combination of Mead's image of reconstruction, reinterpreted according to a Christian scheme of fall and redemption, with Buber's *I and Thou* creates fissures in the structure of his thought. The steady-state economy of balance in the self-other-cause relation has been shown to be at odds with the dynamism of the ontology he borrows from Mead. In an economy of balance, both God and the other are necessary objects in the relation, built into the structure supporting the self. Niebuhr does not allow the possibility of the self being destabilised by the call of other. Destabilisation is a function of bad faith, rather than part of the ongoing nature of negotiating identity, of giving and for-giving.

This dimension of negotiation constitutes an important feature of South Africa in transition. It is perhaps the metaphorical opposite of talk of reconstruction. Nonetheless the two images are an inescapable part of the public identity of the New South Africa. Negotiation and contestation are not new, however. They were seen in the way faith and loyalties existed in a relation of negotiation as presented in part one. What is new is their public presence in single acts and symbols orientated to nation building. The new South African national anthem, for example, is a pastiche of the old liberation anthem, "Nkosi Sikilel' iAfrika" and the old apartheid national anthem, "Die Stem".¹⁵⁵ The anthem is sung at official functions in four languages. Old antagonists exist side-by-side, but the new context transforms them, reorientates them, converts them. Yet once converted, there is no inevitable Hegelian *aufhebung*, no "higher synthesis" wherein they lose their identity. The contestation, the tension remains.

Seeing negotiation rather than integration as the dynamic of conversion is therefore a consequence of reading Niebuhr's theology in South Africa.¹⁵⁶ This has important consequences for his notion of covenant.

The idea of covenant, alongside the image of reconstruction, is important to reaffirm. It also needs to be transformed, however. Drawing on the work of Niebuhr and others, William Johnson Everett has spoken of the need for South Africa to take

¹⁵⁵ See the introduction above.

¹⁵⁶ See also chapter seven below.

federal republicanism seriously as an option for a post-apartheid state.¹⁵⁷ For Everett, federal republicanism provides an alternative to “blood and soil” orientated and legitimated polities, where community is defined according to “natural” descent or some other physical or genealogical feature.¹⁵⁸ Indeed Everett goes as far as to claim that these are the *only* alternatives: cool rational discourse or hot ethnic or nationalist struggle. In a post cold war world, this is the polarisation that remains, as he sees it.

The challenge is how to grow a covenantal culture.¹⁵⁹ In a covenantal culture, “natural” differences are relativised by arguments rooted in transcendental commitments. For Everett, facilitating such growth is a particularly apt role for faith communities, which are positioned to nurture the publics that now exist, as well as creating spaces for new publics to develop. In order for faith communities to facilitate and disseminate such a new understanding of covenant, they must, however, change their organisational structure to one modelled after an association.¹⁶⁰ They must become, in the manner of American denominations, voluntary associations.

Within the South African context, as we discovered in part one, the dominant role and function of Christian communities historically has been to legitimate the rights of one particular group or identity over others, whether that is a *vdk*, a race, or a class. Thus Christianities have developed and contested faith identities parallel to and even at the heart of communal identities. Everett advocates a shift to faith communities changing their polity, ethics and doctrine (cf. *Social Sources*) to legitimating the project of the new state. At the same time, faith communities point to a higher law than the state—a law to which the state or government is subject.¹⁶¹ This is structurally similar to the historical task taken on by the so-called English-speaking churches in South Africa, however in a more radically inclusive way. Churches again

¹⁵⁷ William Johnson Everett, “Religion, Law, and Constitutionalism”, Concept paper, Constructing a Language of Religion in Public Life (Dept. of Religious Studies, University of Cape Town, 30 September -- 2 October, 1998), 15-17; William Johnson Everett, “Going Public, Building Covenants: Linking the TRC to Theology and the Church”, in *Faith Communities Face the Truth*, ed. James R. Cochrane, John W. de Gruchy and Stephen W. Martin (Cape Town: David Philip, 1999), 153-63.

¹⁵⁸ William Johnson Everett, “Religion and Federal Republicanism: Case Studies from India’s Struggle”, *Journal of Church and State* 37 (1993), 61.

¹⁵⁹ Note the organicist shift in metaphors.

¹⁶⁰ Here of course Everett means something different than what Niebuhr means by “association”. For Niebuhr an association is merely a relation of interests. For Everett, association (or “denomination”, when speaking of faith communities) refers to a voluntarily-based, covenanted public.

¹⁶¹ It is this higher law that functions as transcendent norm—albeit one rooted pragmatically and legitimated symbolically.

have a stake in promoting national unity—albeit now the unity of one, inclusive nation rather than one of the many.

For Everett, an emphasis on unity is of secondary importance to the primary need to create spaces for contesting symbols, visions and ideas.¹⁶² These spaces are marked by an agreement to negotiate in a certain way which for Everett is according to the dictates of “reason, public debate, and compromise”.¹⁶³ In making a similar point, Chidester argues not on transcendental grounds (i.e. that there is a higher norm to which all are committed which in turn relativises the symbols and identities contested), but rather on the basis of an historical deconstruction of symbolic negotiation in South Africa. Such an investigation concludes that while everyone claims ownership of symbols, no one person, group or tradition can stake a final, uncontested claim on them.¹⁶⁴ Chidester agrees that this sounds “hopelessly utopian”, but sees it as the only alternative to violent struggles over ownership.

Whether argued on transcendental or pragmatic grounds, de-emphasising unity in favour of creating space for non-violent negotiation is positive—as long as the terms of negotiation remain open and its many possible dimensions (political, emotional, symbolic, historical and so forth) are honoured. The de-absolutising of unity is in accord with an observable shift in culture in the years between 1994 and 1999. While the symbol of the “rainbow nation” (the national “cause”) was at the forefront during 1994, in the intervening years that symbol has been contested—though the cause remains.¹⁶⁵ The discourse of “national unity” has given way to the question of how South Africans can live with the differences that remain—even after the idea of a universal “citizenship” has been published.¹⁶⁶ These differences include not only those in-between people, but also the hyphens within selves that constitute and celebrate “new South African” identities. But what of covenant?

We have criticised Niebuhr’s idea of covenant as involving abstract, not concrete selves. An idea of covenant appropriate to a post-apartheid South Africa will

¹⁶² cf. David Chidester, *Shots in the Streets: Violence and Religion in South Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1992), 170f.

¹⁶³ Everett, “Religion and Federal Republicanism”, 61. The alternative is an ethnic politics, which is retrogressive and can only end up in violence, as there is no higher court of appeal.

¹⁶⁴ *Shots in the Streets*, 171.

¹⁶⁵ See for instance, Mark Gevisser, “Rainbow Nation is Still Black and White”, *Mail and Guardian* 22 December 1995. cf. Everett, “Going Public, Building Covenants”, 160.

¹⁶⁶ In a debate on SAFM on the Tim Modise Show, 6 April 1999, it was admitted that South Africans had underestimated in 1994 the differences in the society, even beyond the obvious socio-economic differences.

have to be one that honours and celebrates alterity and difference. This is not simply to fall in line with European academic trends which speak of celebrating alterity and difference (ironically while European nations bomb each other to oblivion). Rather it is to recognise that the legacy of apartheid is a legacy of walled-in difference, of closed covenants, of expelling strangers. If there is a post-apartheid “structure of faith” (which, when all is said and done, is really a synonym for a post-apartheid social covenant, or covenants that reflect a post-apartheid context), it must be one that is open to the other. Perhaps the idea of a “nationalism without walls” fits this idea of new covenant.¹⁶⁷

But before the celebration begins, there is one other dimension to covenant—one recognised neither by Niebuhr nor Everett. That is, that covenant in biblical perspective is inseparably linked to a *theologia crucis*. As Volf points out, in the biblical idea it is God who takes on Godself the consequences of covenant violation by humans.¹⁶⁸ Put another way, the history of covenant (and this does not need to be underscored in South Africa) is a history of crucifixion. While recognised by Niebuhr in his war articles, particularly “The Grace of Doing Nothing” and “War as Crucifixion”, it was not something he reflected on in “peace-time” contexts. It is not a part of his exposition of the carefully balanced economy of the structure of faith. Jesus is not the crucified one, but rather the faithful companion that restores equilibrium by his act of obedience. By contrast, embracing pain—one’s own and that of others (including the suppressed “other” within the self)—is central to a Christian understanding of the structure of faith. This brings us back to the faith hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

In the main, faith communities have remained aloof from the TRC process in South Africa, despite the presence and profile of members of faith communities in the setting up and running of the Commission.¹⁶⁹ Faith communities did not come forward on their own initiative. They were summoned to special meetings on their role in the past and potential role in the future.

We noted the significance of these hearings in the prologue to part one, and it is perhaps significant that we draw our journey to a close by returning to them. We

¹⁶⁷ Richard Gwynn, *Nationalism Without Walls: The Unbearable Lightness of Being Canadian* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1995).

¹⁶⁸ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 155f.

noted that the TRC faith hearings was not the first time faith communities (or at least their representatives) were summoned by agents of the South African state. Under the Union government and before the Lagden Commission of 1903-5, these communities were given the task of providing inner “spiritual” unity for the dominant classes, while legitimating industrialising “native policies” for the dominated classes. Under the apartheid government they were given the task of fostering obedience to temporal authority, to appease the masses with hope of heaven, while guarding the border of western civilisation against “godless communism”. This is how the state saw the role of faith (or actually, to be accurate, Christian) communities. Now they were being summoned to account for how they had failed—not simply to meet the expectations of government, but their own professions. They were also summoned to tell their stories of suffering and solidarity—sometimes at the hands of their own members. Moreover, they were summoned to “come on board” the reconstructive process.

Why was this significant? Everett encourages us to think of faith communities not simply as institutions that promote particular dogmas and creeds, but as centres of formation for loyalties. Perhaps, going behind Everett to Niebuhr himself, we can find significance in the summoning to *these particular meetings in this particular historical moment* in Niebuhr’s construction of the relation between faith and loyalty. If we take a meso-cosmic perspective, and engage in some anthropomorphic mythologising,¹⁷⁰ faith communities acting to restore covenant (Everett’s emphasis) can be to the national “self” what Niebuhr sees as Christ to the community of faith—his faithfulness restores the community by becoming an “other” loyal to the self.

While an interesting application of Niebuhr’s ideas, this however would run against the grain of the ambiguous history and historical legacy of faith communities in South Africa. The faith communities, by and large, while admitting complicity and responsibility, left the hearings without, one believes, having their discourse de-centred by the pain of the victims of apartheid. Perhaps, to use the categories of Walter Brueggemann introduced in chapter six above, the hearings were a “re-orientation” without “dis-orientation”, or perhaps an exchange of one social faith for another, without being touched by radical faith. They seemed to position the faith communities within the discourse of a new South Africa without evidencing an em-

¹⁶⁹ Alex Boraine, Deputy Chair of the TRC, at a lecture in the Department of Religious Studies, University of Cape Town, 25 August 1998.

¹⁷⁰ That is, to indulge the myth of “the national self”.

brace of the pain of the past and of their complicity in it. At this point it is difficult to say for certain. The hearings may yet prove a turning point.

This legacy relativises such a profound, Christological role for faith communities. So does the plurality of faiths in South Africa. As noted in the discussion of *Christ and Culture* in chapter eight, not only have Christianities disagreed on interpretation of the relation of gospel and society, they have worshipped different gods. In the end, the question of reconstructing faith in South Africa leaves us with ambiguity and uncertainty—but perhaps a glimmer of hope.



Reconstructing faith in South Africa, in a Niebuhrian reading of the matter, carries a double meaning. First, that faith is itself subject to reconstruction, not in the static sense of rebuilding a house but in the dynamic sense of reinterpreting the past, telling a story which uncovers that which is repressed, which speaks that which has remained unspoken. Second, that reconstructing faith is a faith that reconstructs, that creates the possibilities for the renewal of trust and the reinvigoration of loyalties, that promotes the telling of new stories in the broader culture—stories that are open, negotiated and dynamic.¹⁷¹

The radical implication of Niebuhr's reflection on community, that even the church is not *inherently* a covenantal community, is a reaffirmation of the church, and all faith communities, as site(s) of struggle. His call for the transformation of *all* communities and institutions by radical monotheism—means that the call must go out not simply to churches (or other faith communities) but to all communities in South Africa, whether political, religious, ethnic, or whatever, to become open covenant communities, thus acting to heal faith and loyalty in the broader society. Far from being simply a political act, this is profoundly (for a Niebuhrian) spiritual activity, even in “secular” institutions. Indeed, Niebuhr gives us a way of thinking beyond “faith communities” to reconstructing “faithful communities”, including political communities. These also are to be normed by covenant.

This reading of *Faith on Earth* in South Africa can draw the following conclusion: there remains the healing possibility and hope that South Africa's “webs of

¹⁷¹ In this way, “reconstructing” faith is similar to Derridean deconstruction, in the sense that deconstruction is open-ness, to deconstruct is to open something up—particularly to the other.

compromise” might be transformed into an “interpersonal order”, a “web of loyalties”, a “structure of faith” that is renewed and renewing. In spite of their past, this is a message that faith communities could bear for the future.

Conclusion

Point(s) of Return

This thesis has explored South African Christianity through a contextual reading of the theology of H. Richard Niebuhr. Its point of departure was the relation between Christian faith and loyalties. Its point of return is a survey of the landscape from the other side of our investigation, an assessment of the value of the exercise for illuminating the topic of loyalties, and a summarising its findings in the form of theses. It ends with a personal reflection on my journey in South Africa.

Reconnoitring

Before I made my crossing to South Africa, I held the belief that since the majority of South Africans considered themselves to be Christians this commonality, this single loyalty above all other loyalties, would provide the basis for building a new future together. I knew that Christianity had given support both to oppression and liberation, and that each side could call the other “bad” or “heretical” Christians. But surely this could be overcome. In the reconfiguration of identities a South African identity and a South African Christianity would emerge. Faith would provide a point of integration, for different class, ethnic, racial and ideological loyalties. Indeed when I arrived at the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town, this was very much in the air—the quest for a common South African identity that transcended the differences of the past and the role of religion in its promotion.¹

My belief proved naïve. My exploration of South African Christianity, chronicled in this thesis, especially in its interface with the first nation-building project signalled by the Act of Union of 1910, showed how implicated Christianity is in creating, supporting and perpetuating a diversity of loyalties, rather than a single loyalty. In the process, Christianity has itself fragmented into contesting and contested segments.

The original research question I brought to South Africa was the theoretical question of how the various strands that make up identity integrate, and how identi-

¹ For examples of this, see Charles Villa-Vicencio, “The Quest for a National Identity: Can the Religion Debate Help?” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 86 (March 1994): 26-38; N. Barney Pitso, “Minorities in Global Society”, *Marry Cultures, One Nation: Festschrift for Beyers Naudé*, ed. Charles Villa-Vicencio and Carl Niehaus (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1995), 163-83.

ties can find common ground in a post-metaphysical world. In writing this thesis, I have come to see that these strands not only are more complex, but that the passive image of integration must be replaced by the active image of negotiation and even contestation. This contestation also takes place in the community and in the self. Indeed, negotiated identities means that we are all complex crossings; perhaps one could even say we are *constituted* by our crossings.

Being in South Africa during its transitional time—when negotiations have characterised the public realm—has demonstrated that contestation is not necessarily a negative thing. Contestation need not preclude shared horizons, and even a minimally shared horizon captured in vague phrases like “new South Africa” and “rainbow nation” can provide such grounds. Even the horizon is open to contestation within different visions.

Negotiations have to proceed *from* somewhere, from some standpoint. It is here that faith enters the picture. However, this standpoint is not an egress from the fray. It is also a crossing. It exists also as suspended in a web of relations. The one faith loyalty only exists stranded together with the many other loyalties. It is negotiated within such a context. But it *does* exist—in the many, *through* the many—but never *without* the many. As soon as we attempt to grasp it as the one *apart* from the many, it vanishes.

The introduction to this thesis suggested three metaphors for contextual reading: sojourning, framing, and weaving.

This has been a *journey* with H. Richard Niebuhr. Its form has also been “Niebuhrian”. Without embracing wholesale his theological realism this thesis began with an attempt to articulate “logos in mythos”,² to examine the pattern or patterns emerging from South African Christianity,³ though with particular reference to the construction of national loyalties. The structure of the interaction with Niebuhr was itself “trialectic”: myself, my dialogue partner and a common topic or interest. H. Richard Niebuhr has been my partner and the question of loyalties and faith our common concern. This “contextual reading” has not been a simple dyad, but a complex triad. At the same time, as I have looked with Niebuhr at South African Christianity, I have looked, with South African Christianity, at H. Richard Niebuhr, casting

² *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1951), xii.

³ *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937), ix-xvii.

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suspicions on his constructions of unity. Meanwhile, South African Christianity and Niebuhr have asked questions of me, prompting me to reflect on the shaping power of loyalties on the construction of my identity.⁴ The *frame* and the picture have changed positions. The *threads* have twisted together. This complex process ends with questions to explore further. The engagement will continue beyond the terms of this thesis. The point of return of a conclusion invariably becomes a new point of departure. But this particular cycle must also end here with some conclusions.

Drawing Conclusions

Pulling the strands of this thesis together then, a number of conclusions can be drawn.

1. The broad conclusion that we can draw from this study is this: **that a reading of H. Richard Niebuhr in South Africa discloses three kinds of faith in his writings which cut across the examination of loyalties in South Africa: social faith, radical faith and reconstructing faith.**

Social faith, corresponding to henotheism, is evident in all three nationalisms and Christianities considered in part one. Indeed these are not simply three components of one social faith but three contesting and contested social faiths. They are three culture-protestantisms which came to birth in this most protestant (almost!) of nations.⁵ However, each functions differently. In the case of colonial nationalism, social faith ties Christianity to the colony and the realm. The South African nation is considered to be a Christian nation in the same way as the British King or Queen was considered to be a Christian monarch. Christianity functions as the “soul” or “centre” of society, providing a basis for the unity of the white citizens. This was especially evident in the idea that ecumenical activity was a guarantee of stability, and earned the interest of state political leaders, such as Jan Smuts, and the ire of Afrikaner nationalist leaders, who proclaimed a distinctive Christianity for an exclusive nationalism—Afrikaner nationalism.

African nationalism also saw Christianity as a shared faith amongst all South Africa’s people, black and white. More properly, they saw Christianity as a faith uniting all people of a certain class. The non-Christian “red people”, over against whom the “school people” formed their identity, were also considered subjects for uplift-

⁴ See the reflection that closes this conclusion.

ment and Christianisation by middle class nationalist leaders. This began to change with the class-orientated mobilisation of the proletariat, as well as activity amongst rural people on the part of the communist party. This would herald a new African nationalism which transcended class lines.

African nationalism was also broadly similar to colonial nationalism and different from Afrikaner nationalism in that it saw its political loyalty to Britain, even while the South African state was moving away from Britain. While it is possible to interpret this as pragmatic and strategic, i.e. that it was a way of invoking another loyalty to hold against the state that was eroding its rights away, African nationalism also displays a deeper, more formative faith. Its transcendent variety of Christianity was a critical tool, providing African nationalism the ability to distinguish the ideals of British justice from Britain's inconsistent implementation. Through its negotiation of loyalties African Christianity gave African nationalism a higher norm to which to appeal. Whereas colonial nationalism was clearly henotheist, pledging allegiance to a distant one, the henotheism of African nationalism, which mobilised around a continental identity, tended in a monotheist direction. Its social marginality and hybridity (African but not African) was doubtless a contributing factor to this. The call for an African national church, while not without basis in missionary discourse and practice, was also an expression of despair for African unity. It was a quest for a transcendental basis, rooted in an institution, for mobilising African nationalism across the borderlands of region, class and denomination. It was similar to the calls within colonial nationalist circles, particularly the Anglican Church, for "the reuniting of Christendom", only this time for the benefit of blacks.

Afrikaner nationalism also sought to unify its idea of the nation, this time on an ethnic basis, through a single institution. While there was a certain denomination-ism within Afrikanerdom, it was the Dutch Reformed Church that emerged as the church of the people on a trans-regional basis. The Gereformeerde and Hervormde Kerke retained a power base in the Transvaal and Free State. Set against other "nations", however, Afrikaner nationalism tended in a polytheist direction. Its espousal of "the people" as a transcendental while claiming "different peoples" with their own nationalisms meant ascribing ultimacy to diversity. If colonial nationalism tended in a henotheist direction, and African nationalism in a monotheist direction, then Afri-

⁵ See John de Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), ch. 1.

kaner nationalism tended in a polytheist direction. And yet its awareness of belonging to a faith tradition which transcended its ethnic boundaries counterbalanced this. It is perhaps not surprising that the ascendancy of Apartheid thinking went hand in hand with a withdrawal from ecumenical ventures.

The history of loyalties and their negotiation in South Africa can therefore be seen as an interaction of social and radical faith, *within* nationalisms and Christianities. No easy classification is possible; no ideal-typologies are unambiguously evident. However, the categories of radical and social faith, as well as their development in the ideas of henotheism and monotheism, do provide an analytical point of entry to South African Christianity and nationalism.

2. Broadly, we can characterise social and radical faith in this way: **Social faith is stabilising and orientating, providing social unity and cohesion. Radical faith is destabilising and disorientating. It is disclosed in situations of marginality. It negotiates loyalties afresh.** However, radical faith taken formally can produce desirable and undesirable outcomes. Ethnic mobilisation can take the form of a faith that cuts across other loyalties, including geographical, class, denominational and even historical divisions, constructing, and dialectically invoking, a higher unity. In its relativisation of differences, its advocacy for poor whites and its critique of imperial unity, Afrikaner nationalism exhibited many of the features of radical faith. Yet it was broadly directed toward henotheism with a tendency to polytheism. Therefore we may conclude that something more than Niebuhr's formal account of radical faith is needed. We need to add to our notion of radical faith the idea that **the content of radical faith, what makes it "Christian" in a normative sense, must be spelled out.** Niebuhr does this implicitly in his idea of images that "make sense" of the experience of the community. We saw the cross as one example of this, indeed the image through which history is interpreted from a Christian point of view. But Niebuhr was unable to push this to its conclusions, as he feared Christian henotheism. Reading Niebuhr in South Africa, in the light of South Africa's past, makes this problem all the more acute.

Perhaps this does nothing more than restate the old dilemma in Niebuhr's theology between Christocentrism and theocentrism, between the realist-orientated particularity of Christian faith and the idealist-orientated universality of the structure of faith. We noted this tension in chapter nine. But it also raises the question of

which *Christos* and which *theos* is at the centre, if there is to be a centre. The Christ of the gospels was not a principle of authority to correlate with the authority of the world, as *Christ and Culture* saw him, but a concrete historical person. The God of biblical monotheism is not the formal principle of “the one beyond the many”, but a particular God who enters into particular covenants. It is outside the scope of this conclusion to develop this point, but it is important to restate, as it hinders the applicability of radical faith to Christianity in South Africa.

3. A third conclusion can be drawn: **that there is nothing inherently negative about nationalism, and that nationalism can be mobilised as a social faith or as radical faith.** When the latter happens, however, it is overturned. And when it is done in a way that opens to the other, we can say this overturning is redemptive. For example, Afrikaner nationalism could also give way to a more inclusive—and more radical—faith. Though his time was after our era of the formation of nationalisms, Beyers Naudé is an example of radical faith in a monotheist direction with a normative Christian content. Naudé was mentioned in passing in chapter two as an example of a “dissident Afrikaner”, of someone who challenges the easy identification of Afrikaner identity and nationalist domination. His faith development was a trajectory that began in the contest of nationalisms that was described in part one. Named after the *bittereinder* General Beyers, Naudé was raised on stories of British atrocities against Afrikaner women and children. His identity was formed within the bounds and the bonds of Afrikaner nationalism. Yet he became an example of the transforming potential of Christian faith and one of the few whites trusted by the Black Consciousness Movement in the 1970s.⁶ His conversion was not as a result of being convinced by higher, transcendental principles. Rather it was through an encounter with the African other which destabilised his identity as an Afrikaner and forced him to give it another reading, another interpretation. The stories of atrocities created a shared solidarity with those who were contemporary victims of oppression. While considered a traitor to the *volk*, his Afrikaner identity did not drop off, Chrysalis-like. It was re-negotiated, re-formed and re-interpreted.

⁶ Hlope Bam speaks of a “cross-pollination” of ideas between Beyers and Steve Biko. “Crossing the Frontiers: A Tribute to Beyers Naudé”, in *Many Cultures, One Nation: A Festschrift for Beyers Naudé* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1995), 36.

Starting from a strong Afrikaner identity, Naudé's conversion led him across those borderlands⁷ to seek the African other and to embrace a more inclusive nationalism than Afrikaner, colonial or even the older African nationalism.

4. Social faith is an orientating faith; radical faith is a disorientating faith. Each comes to the fore in different situations. Social faith is disclosed in times of stability and settledness. Radical faith is disclosed in times of social and personal upheaval. Symbols which function to articulate orientation in one situation can articulate disorientation in another. They can also reorientate and reconstruct. Both social and radical faith are needed together, each on its own is destructive, though the relation between the two is that radical faith transforms social faith in a state of permanent revolution.

Added to the dynamic of radical and social faith, reconstructing faith makes a third kind of faith which reorientates and restores. It does this with special reference to reconstructing the self and society in covenant. **But reconstructive faith has to be descriptive of a process that allows for stability and destabilisation within a social covenant. Indeed, as Niebuhr would say, reconstructive faith is a social covenant which loosens and reconfigures.** We discussed this at the end of chapter nine, and will not develop this conclusion further.

What can be said about this exercise? That a reading of H. Richard Niebuhr in South Africa illuminates the question of loyalties, their formation and relation to faith: ^{church} But that to Niebuhr's reflections on loyalties must be added the dimensions of contestation and negotiation, both between and within different loyalties. The self and the society, in consequence, is constituted by hybridities and suspended in a web of loyalties.⁸ Read in this way and through the particular lens of South African Christianity, Niebuhr's message for faith in a post-apartheid South Africa is to negotiate covenants which allow for crossings, hybridities and contestations.

⁷ Bam, "Crossing the Frontiers".

⁸ I have explored the contested nature and complexity of South African religion with James Cochran and Gillian Walters in "Constructing a Language of Religion in Public Life", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 103 (March 1999), 64-87.

Reflection: Crossing Back

In most instances we are unaware of the ways in which our subjectivities have been formed and are maintained within contexts of familiarity. The discourses that constitute our unquestioned perceptions, languages and practices may become visible when they are disrupted by a challenge or a contradiction, or when we notice the way the workings of power play out a scenario of subjugation in the life or lives of others, or in our own.⁹

At the outset, I identified the subject area of this thesis as loyalties, the broad area around which the strands of this thesis are wound. In this conclusion I have noted that the dialogue between Niebuhr and South Africa has actually been a “trialogue”. I now wish to reflect in close on that third element: the construction of my subjectivity. It is this that has been the driving force behind this investigation.

The term “loyalty” has always had certain associations for me. I spent my first seven years in East Belfast. My family was rooted in Shankill Rd. Protestant loyalism and I was raised on stories of defiance and danger. One that I remember concerns my maternal grandfather who one day found himself (the story goes) on the wrong side of town when a Roman Catholic Cardinal was visiting and while all the people around him were bowing, he alone was standing. He was fortunate (the story finishes) to escape with his life. I am not sure what the moral was, or how the same event would have appeared to another witness, but it reinforces the posture of “not bowing”, of “no compromise” as strongly worked into my family’s identity. It is of the iconoclastic nature of Protestantism. However, the iconoclast is not him or herself devoid of illusions. Apart from transformation, one social faith is invariably demolished in the name of another.

“Loyalism” in Northern Ireland is an ideology. The reality of the content of that loyalty is no longer important, and it is arguable that the Britain to which my ancestors and relatives were and are loyal no longer exists—if it ever did. The intensity of loyalty that paints kerbs red, white and blue is not shared even by those who live on the “mainland”, as they call it. On the other hand, of course, it is equally arguable that the Ireland to which nationalists in Northern Ireland are loyal—and which Protestants fear—also does not exist. Both “Britain” and “Ireland” are, in Benedict An-

person's words, "Imagined Communities". They take on a reality within discourse, however, that carries sufficient intensity to cause the deaths of hundreds in Europe's longest-lasting civil conflict.

The word "Belfast" comes from two Irish words, "Beal" and "Feirste", which refer to the sandbank where the Lagan River could be crossed at spring-time.¹⁰ I didn't grow up anywhere near the crossing of the Lagan, however, but across the Atlantic, in Canada. My accent quickly disappeared after that first crossing, I am told, although I remained self-conscious in the presence of school friends about the "different" way my parents spoke. But growing up in diaspora did not mean that the old loyalties were replaced by new ones. With pride I marched beside my father on the 12th of July, which in the Toronto of the late 1960s was still a Big Day. We were British subjects *and* Canadians and, even though with my family I acquired Canadian citizenship at the age of sixteen, we always kept that hyphenated identity.

Two years after becoming a citizen, I became a Christian. The thought that I had not been a Christian before, of course, was a matter of great bother to my parents, even though neither of them attended church. "Becoming Christian" meant for me a fundamental change in loyalties. For my parents it meant abandoning my ancestral faith. My previous identity formation I renounced as idolatry. But the other identities were available for me when needed. When I embraced Calvinist theology, for instance, being an Ulster-Scot no longer seemed so bad. But it is only since I've been in South Africa, that I have gained an appreciation for identities and loyalties and the links to religion, and begun to reflect on how they not only formed me, but also formed my interests in writing this thesis. Indeed my original topic concerned the transformation of Afrikaner identity in a post-Apartheid context.¹¹

Identities and loyalties tie one to home, provide a point of reference. They remind us of our point of departure—where we left off, a point of departure that is

⁹ Erica Burman, Amanda Kottler, Ann Levett and Ian Parker, "Power and Discourse: Culture and Change in South Africa", in *Culture, Power & Difference*, ed. Erica Burman, Amanda Kottler, Ann Levett and Ian Parker (Cape Town; London: UCT Press: Zed Books, 1997), 6.

¹² Perhaps it is another of those ironies about Northern Ireland that there are barriers preventing crossing, though such transgression is becoming more common. In a recent visit to East Belfast, I was warned as I enjoyed my late summer strolls not to "cross" the (Springfield) road to the nationalist side (you could always tell by which flags were flying where you were). Such a crossing represented a danger both physical and spiritual.

¹¹ For parallels between Afrikaner nationalism and Ulster Unionism, see e.g. Donald Harmon Akenson, *God's Peoples: Covenant and Land in South Africa, Israel, and Ulster* (Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 1992).

also a point of origin. Perhaps inevitably we always find our way back to them. The question H. Richard Niebuhr would ask at this point would concern whether in coming back to them, there is also a return journey of transformation. Answering that question is beyond the scope of this work, and is best done not in words but in other ways.

With the exception of the odd theological nudge (such as the Calvinist theology link), my hyphens were fairly intact in June 1990 when, with a crowd of several thousand people I cheered Nelson and Winnie Mandela on their first visit to Toronto. The first day I spent in South Africa, on this side of my crossing, began to expose my hyphens, however. It was a society with a perverse kind of order. The first thing that struck me upon walking through Jan Smuts Airport in July 1990 was the way all the black people had worker's coveralls and all the whites wore suits. Class and race identities, along with choices of clothing, converged.

I had been a native (though Ulster-Scots are not really natives); then an immigrant; then a citizen. Now I was a tourist. But the first time I was approached by a black woman (who interrupted me while I was trying to sleep off my jet lag) at the door asking for money, I was confronted with a new location—beyond that of a camera-in-hand voyeur. I occupied a certain place and took on a certain role in this particular relationship, and it had nothing to do with any particular identity I had constructed over the previous thirty years. This woman did not care whether I was a tourist or not; neither did she care that I had cheered Mandela only three weeks before. The context re-created me as a white person in South Africa. And that meant being drafted or grafted into a certain history. At the same time, many of the white South Africans I met, especially on the road while hitchhiking, treated me with reserve. For to them I represented a different crossing: the white foreigner, his loyalties dubious.

On my return to Toronto in the autumn of 1990, I experienced my crossings like never before. I worked in a largely West Indian part of the city, attended seminars on the fringes of Toronto's Chinatown and lived in an area with a growing Korean population. Riding the bus on the way home from work I noticed for the first time who I was, my hyphens exposed. And I noticed who the other was. Naivete was gone. I had become aware. I began to feel the tug of my hyphens—something I continue to experience. When I came back three years later to research the negotiation of identi-

ties in South Africa, this awareness was at the fore. It was tempered, however, by an idea, a belief, that faith commitment integrated these identities. The idea was that faith turned the hyphens ninety degrees, pointing to the transcendent commitment that gave them their glue. In the course of studying South African Christianity, I have come to see that this is also a problematic formulation. Even faith is hyphenated and tensile (as I said at the outset of this conclusion). The ideal of integration has given way to the experience of negotiation and contestation. But it is a faith something like what H. Richard Niebuhr spoke of that continues, I confess, to unsettle, to keep things open. A life lived by faith is a life lived under negotiation. A faithful life is one where the content of faith opens up new configurations, but which is also open to the challenge of context.

I place these reflections at the end, rather than the beginning (where they are usually put in the form of a preface) because I want to see them not simply as point of departure but also point of return. The end is where I find myself. But it is a different self I find at the end of this exercise. Comparing the argument of this thesis to these few lines of autobiography demonstrates, I believe, both parallelism (the ideas discussed parallel developments in the autobiography) and interactivity in some key twists and crossings. While the “third” is largely a silent voice in the “super-text”, it is present in the sub-text, in the con-text. This thesis has been a “trialectic” (Niebuhr’s word) weaving together of texts, the removal of any one would change the character of the other two.

What is the outcome, then? That this process has been one not only of problematising a homogeneous idea of “Christianity”, but also of the self. Opened up to the otherness within, the self is also disclosed as a site of struggle, of negotiation, rather than integration. Loyalties contest the self, centre, decentre and recentre the self. Faith negotiates loyalties; loyalties are faith-negotiating. In micro-cosm, then, perhaps it may be concluded that what I discovered in exploring South Africa I also discovered in myself. The sojourn, the crossing, of this particular set of crossings has been a voyage of discovery and (I say in trust) transformation.

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