

REINHOLD NIEBUHR AND
JONATHAN EDWARDS: A COMPARISON

Thesis for the Degree of M. A.

MICHIGAN STATE COLLEGE

Lois Jane Corey

1950

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REINHOLD NIEBUHR AND JONATHAN EDWARDS: A COMPARISON

By

LOIS JANE COREY

A THESIS

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PREFACE

This essay is an attempt to point out the similarities in the lives and, more especially, in the religious creeds of Reinhold Niebuhr and Jonathan Edwards. I have not endeavored to evaluate their thought nor to trace all the influences which shaped it.

Since Reinhold Niebuhr is a contemporary whose life and works have not been completed nor subjected to the scrutiny of biographers, it is difficult to make a just comparison of his thought with that of Edwards who lived two centuries ago. On the other hand, it is not easy for a person living in the twentieth century to think with the mind of the eighteenth century, so there is also danger of misinterpreting the thought of Edwards. In an effort to be as fair as possible in these respects I have based my proof of the similarity of the religious creeds of these two theologians chiefly upon their own words as found in their writings rather than depending much upon the opinions of contemporary critics or biographers, however reputable these may be.

It has been a privilege to do this work under the direction of Dr. C. M. Newlin of the Michigan State College English Department. I wish to express here my gratitude and appreciation for the inspiration I have received from his graduate courses in American literature and for the encouragement and helpful suggestions he has offered as my major professor for the writing of this thesis.

L. J. C.

Chronological Tables

Jonathan Edwards

1561 - 1626	Francis Bacon
1571	First Congregational Church in England
1620	First Congregational Church in America
1627 - 1691	Robert Boyle
1631	Only church members admitted as freemen in Massachusetts
1632 - 1704	John Locke
1633	East Windsor settled
1636	Harvard College founded
1638 - 1715	Nicolas de Malebranche
1642 - 1727	Isaac Newton
1646 - 1716	Gottfried Liebnetz
1648	Cambridge Platform; Westminster Confession adopted
1650	Descartes died
1654	Northampton settled
1657	Half-Way Covenant
1664	Approval of magistrates required in order to settle a minister
1669 - 1758	Rev. Timothy Edwards
1677	Spinoza died
1679	Reformatory Synod, Boston
1684	Colonial Charters withdrawn
1685	James II
1685 - 1753	George Berkeley
1686	Gov. Andros sent to Boston
1688 - 1691	New England witchcraft trials
1688	William and Mary
1689 - 1697	King William's War

1691	New Massachusetts charter
1692	Episcopalians, Baptists, and Quakers exempt from tax to support Congregational Church in Massachusetts
1693	William and Mary College established
1701	Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Saybrook (Yale) College established
1702 - 1714	Queen Anne's War
1703*	Jonathan Edwards born
1703 - 1791	John Wesley
1705	Plea of Cotton Mather for increased efficiency of councils
1706 - 1790	Benjamin Franklin
1707 - 1709	Controversy over Lord's Supper as convert- ing ordinance
1708	Saybrook Platform
1710 - 1712	John Wise's pamphlets
1713	Anglican bishoprics established in America
1713 - 1738	German and Scotch-Irish immigration
1714 - 1727	George I
1715*	"Of Insects"
1716 - 1720*	Edwards at Yale
1720	John Woolman
1720 - 1722*	Edwards studied theology in New Haven
1721	Cotton Mather's <u>Christian Philosopher</u>
1722*	Edwards licensed to preach; went to a Presbyterian Church in New York
1723 *	Resolutions for daily living in Diary Conversion of Edwards
1724 - 1726*	Edwards a tutor at Yale
1725	Proposed reformatory synod forbidden by King

- 1726 Cotton Mather's Manductio ad Ministerium
- 1726 - 1728 Berkeley at Northampton
- 1727* Edwards ordained at Northampton
Marriage to Sarah Pierrepont
- 1727 - 1760 George II
- 1731* Sermon on Man's Dependence
First American public library at Philadelphia
- 1734* Sermon on Spiritual Light
Arminianism growing
Zenger case
- 1735* First revival at Northampton
Wesley sailed for Georgia
- 1736 Bishop Butler's Analogy
- 1737* Narrative of Surprising Conversions
- 1738* Whitefield in Georgia
Publication of sermons on Justification, etc.
John Wesley's conversion
- 1739* Narrative of Edward's conversion
- 1739 - 1741 Whitefield's second visit to America
- 1740 Great Awakening
- 1741* "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"
Distinguishing Marks...
- 1742* Thoughts on the Revival
- 1744 - 1748 Whitefield's third visit
King George's War
- 1746* Treatise on Religious Affections
College of New Jersey (Princeton) established
- 1747 David Brainerd died
Union...for the Revival of Religion formed
- 1749* Trouble at Northampton
Brainerd's Life
"Qualifications for Full Communion"
- 1750* Edwards dismissed from Northampton
"Farewell Sermon"
Decline of Half-Way Covenant

1751* Edwards went to Stockbridge
University of Pennsylvania established

1752* Edwards' Reply to Williams

1754 - 1763 French and Indian War

1754* Freedom of the Will
Albany Congress
King's College established

1755* Treatises on Virtue and on the End of the
Creation

1757* Edwards as president of Princeton

1758* Treatise on Original Sin
Edwards died

Reinhold Niebuhr

1803	Albright Methodist Church founded
1806 - 1873	John Stuart Mill
1815 - 1914	Concert of Europe
1816	Evangelical Association formed
1818 - 1883	Karl Marx
1820 - 1903	Herbert Spencer
1820 - 1906	Susan B. Anthony
1837 - 1899	Dwight L. Moody
1839 - 1898	Frances Willard
1842 - 1910	William James
1844 - 1900	Friedrich Nietzsche
1847 - 1931	Thomas A. Edison
1850 - 1898	Edward Bellamy
1851 - 1930	Adolf von Harnock
1856 -	George Bernard Shaw
1859 -	John Dewey Darwin's <u>Origin of Species</u>
1860 - 1935	Jane Addams
1861 - 1941	Tagore
1863 - 1947	Henry Ford
1863 - 1935	Billy Sunday
1865 - 1933	Irving Babbitt
1866 -	H. G. Wells
1868 - 1901	"Victorian Age"
1870	Italy unified
1870 - 1891	Bismarck
1872 -	Bertrand Russell
1874 -	Winston Churchill
1875 -	Albert Schweitzer Charles A. Beard

1873	Harry Emerson Fosdick
1880	H. L. Mencken
1885	Will Durant
1885 - 1930	D. H. Lawrence
1886 -	Karl Barth Chiang Kai Shek Paul Tillich
1888	Kagawa T. S. Eliot
1891 - 1914	Kaiser Wilhelm II
1892*	Reinhold Niebuhr Martin Niemoller
1893	Joseph Wood Krutch
1898 - 1899	Spanish - American War
1901	Theodore Roosevelt
1903	Wright brothers' airplane
1910*	Niebuhr at Elmhurst College
1913*	Niebuhr at Eden Theological Seminary
1914 - 1918	World War I Woodrow Wilson regime
1914*	Niebuhr received B. D., Yale Divinity School
1915*	Niebuhr received M. A., Yale Divinity School Ordained minister in Evangelical Association
1915 - 1928*	Niebuhr minister at Bethel Evangelical Church, Detroit Joined Socialist party
1918	League of Nations
1920 - 1948	Ghandi's non-violent resistance
1921 - 1924	Lenin
1922 - 1947	Mussolini
1928 *	Briand - Kellogg Peace Pact <u>Does Civilization Need Religion?</u>

1928 - 1930* Niebuhr associate professor of philosophy,
Union Theological Seminary

1929* Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic

1929 - Stalin (first five-year plan)

1929 - 1933 Depression

1930* Niebuhr left Socialist Party
Professor of applied Christianity, Union
Theological Seminary

1931* Japan took Manchuria
Niebuhr married Ursula Keppel - Compton

1932* The Contribution of Religion to Social Work
Moral Man and Immoral Society

1933 - 1945 Hitler regime

1933 - 1945 F. D. Roosevelt

1934* Reflections on the End of an Era

1935* Italy took Ethiopia
An Interpretation of Christian Ethics

1935 - 1941 Nazi aggressions

1936* Niebuhr received D. D., Grinnell
Fellowship of Socialist Christians organized

1936*- Niebuhr editor of Christianity and Society
and Christianity and Crisis

1937* Beyond Tragedy
Niebuhr at Wesleyan College

1938* Munich Pact
Niebuhr at University of Pennsylvania

1940* Christianity and Power Politics

1941* Niebuhr at Amhurst College
The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. I

1941 - 1945 World War II

1942* Niebuhr at Yale

1943* Niebuhr at Oxford
The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. II

1944* Niebuhr at Harvard
The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness

1945 Atom bomb - Hiroshima
 United Nations Organization

1946* Discerning the Signs of the Times

1947 Philippine independence
 Marshall Plan

1947 - Presbyterian New Life Movement; similar
 movements in other churches

1948 World Conference of Churches at Amsterdam
 Declaration of Human Rights
 India independent

1949* Faith and History
 Cardinal Mindszenty trial
 Israel recognized as a nation
 North Atlantic Pact
 Republic of West Germany
 United States Conference on Church Union
 established

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I. THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY AND JONATHAN EDWARDS

Twenty centuries ago Christ went about doing good. Since that time there have been a few people to whom it has been very disconcerting that they have been so easily satisfied with just going about. One of these was Jonathan Edwards, a Puritan of the fourth generation, who lived during the confusion and controversy of eighteenth century America.

Deism and latitudinarianism began before the close of the seventeenth century to pervade the colonies and to soften the temper of puritan piety, as well as the letter of puritan doctrine. Supernaturalism was attacked by science, dogma by rationalism, pessimism by optimism and humanitarianism, and the theocratic oligarchy by the rising forces of democracy.¹

Science, philosophy, education, politics, and religion were all faced with new theories and forced to choose one of three modes of action: to strengthen the defenses of their traditional doctrines, to adapt them to the new ideas, or to allow the old to be entirely supplanted by the new. The new science of Newton and the corresponding rationalistic philosophy would no longer allow men to receive the dogmas of religion now imperialistic political practices without question. Life on the American frontier had made

¹Ralph Barton Perry, Puritanism and Democracy (New York, 1944), p. 191.

colonial minds receptive to the empirical doctrines of Locke and had made them skeptical of the right of one man or group of men to rule the rest.

Dogma was face to face with rationalism.... A critical spirit was stirring, an incipient rationalism was beginning to ask questions; orthodoxy for the first time was on the defensive, and ill-equipped for the pending battle.²

There was a tendency toward a transition from religious mysticism to philosophical idealism and from fatalistic supernaturalism to naturalistic self-sufficiency. Rationalism and liberalism waged war against conservatism.

...as the world grew more complex, as the simple theocracy of the seventeenth century became the regionalized, expanding, contentious society of the eighteenth, as winds of new doctrines began to blow... preachers were more and more obliged to entice and cajole their people instead of handing down dogmas....³

Two conflicting forces were at issue in the religious mind from the beginning of American history - the obligation to think and act in obedience to certain principles that had been inherited from the past, and freedom under the new colonial conditions to change the code.⁴

Religious dogmas such as special election and original

²Vernon Louis Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought (New York, 1927), Vol. I, Book I, pp. 149-50.

³Perry Miller, Introduction to Jonathan Edwards, Images or Shadows of Divine Things (New Haven, 1948), p. 13.

⁴Henry Kalloch Rowe, The History of Religion in the United States (New York, 1924), p. 105.

sin had been found by observation and experiment to be inconsistent with a democratic society based upon the rights and worth of the individual. New England villagers, having experienced the kindness of their neighbors in time of need, could not think of them as the totally depraved characters which the Church represented all to be. Although they repeated the familiar creed, the sanction for that creed was gone; it was the voice of dogma that spoke, and not the voice of reason and experience.⁵ Fact must now receive new respect. No longer could it be a mere servant of theology. Rather theology must be tested by reason and, if found wanting, atheism or religious indifference were often the result. To many, Rousseau's teachings of the essential goodness of man, the Arminian doctrines of freedom of the will and individual responsibility, and the deism of Milton and Locke seemed rational substitutes for the old beliefs.

Increasing materialism due to the growth of commerce and the development of manufacturing offered another impetus to the decay of the traditional religion. Perry Miller speaks of Cotton Mather as one of the "men of Boston, where piety had come to terms with mercantile prosperity." He adds that "To Edwards their neurotic moraliz-⁶ings were a confession of spiritual poverty."

⁵ Parrington, loc. cit.

⁶ Miller, op. cit., p. 17.

As early as 1679 the leaders of the New England Congregational Churches met in a Reforming Synod, called because of the increasing evil practices of the inhabitants. Among these sins were listed "'imprecation in ordinary discourse,' 'intemperance,' 'want of truth and promise breaking'".⁷ Later Edwards mentioned "tavern-haunting, vain Company - keeping, Night - walking"⁸ as evidences of moral laxity. Other writers spoke of the slave trade, sexual immorality, and loss of church membership through migration as problems confronting the eighteenth century churches. Proof of a widespread indifference to religion is found by William Warren Sweet in the fact that the majority of eighteenth century Americans were not members of any church.⁹ Edwards complained that "There is commonly a certain unhappy Shyness in great Men with respect to Religion, as tho' they were¹⁰ ashamed of it, or at least ashamed to do very much at it,...

The Half-way Covenant of 1657 which granted a kind of associate membership to non-converted children of church

⁷ William Warren Sweet, Revivalism in America (New York, 1945), p. 8.

⁸ Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival.... (Edinburgh, 1743), p. 96.

⁹ Revivalism in America (New York, 1945), p. 19.

¹⁰ Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival.... (Edinburgh, 1743), p. 206.

members was an attempt to enlarge church membership as was the Wholeway Covenant of Reverend Stoddard, Jonathan Edwards' maternal grandfather, at Northampton. This covenant granted full church membership, including the privilege of partaking of communion, to all who professed the intention of leading a Christian life, whether or not they had experienced a conversion. This lessening of the requirements of church membership led to superficially performed religious duties, a living according to the letter of the law rather than the spirit of it.

Was there ever an Age wherein Strength and Penetration of Reason, Extent of Learning, Exactness of Distinction, Correctness of Style, and Clearness of Expression, did so abound? and yet, was there ever an Age, wherein there has been so little Love to God, Heavenly-mindedness, and Holiness of Life, among the Professors of the true Religion? Our People don't so much need to have their Heads stored, as to have their Hearts touched; and they stand in the greatest Need of that sort of Preaching that has the greatest Tendency to do this.¹¹

We have placed Religion too much in the external Duties of the first Table; we have abounded in religious Meetings and there has not been a proportionable Increase of Zeal for Deeds of Charity, and other Duties of the Second Table;...¹²

II

Here was another problem of the eighteenth century churches: a shortage of ministers, especially well-trained ones. It was primarily to remedy this that Harvard and the other denominational colleges were being established and improved.

12

Edwards, Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival... (Edinburgh, 1743), pp. 88-94.

Joseph Gray also speaks of this change in attitude toward religion.

At this time the old, sterner Calvinism of the past was already changing. Since the harsh predestination of the Puritans ascribing salvation to the sheer inaccessible will of God, with nothing for men to do but accept their fate, men had begun to ask what they could do to put themselves in such a position that God might save them. Accordingly, they had given themselves to prayer and Bible reading and church attendance, not as works of salvation but as means by which God might be influenced toward them. As time passed they had drifted into the belief.. that these duties really constituted religion itself; and some had begun to go yet further, and to speak and conduct themselves as if the Christian life were but the practice of morality and as if what is needed is not the transformation of character but the education of the mind.¹³

The emphasis had been shifted from the doctrine of divine sovereignty to a creed of benevolence to one's fellowmen. The clergymen were alarmed lest God might punish this indifference and turning away from Him by withdrawing His blessings from this land.

Other events, however, proved favorable to the cause of orthodox religion. Immigrants from Scotland and Germany were introducing new creeds into some parts of the country. The proposal for the establishment of Anglican bishoprics in America and the missionary efforts of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel gave New England

Puritans further cause for strengthening their own churches. The wars between England and France increased the colonists' fears that Catholicism might gain a stronghold among them. These fears that God might withdraw Himself from the colonies or that strange doctrines might replace those traditionally held, combining with the efforts of the clergy to increase church membership, prepared the land for a religious revival. The increasing use by ministers of appeals to the emotions rather than to the mind determined the nature of this Great Awakening. It is for his part in that movement that Jonathan Edwards is usually remembered.

This man, who is considered by some to be the greatest American theologian, was born in East Windsor, Connecticut, in 1703, the youngest of eleven children and the only son of a Congregational minister. His mother was a minister's daughter. Young Jonathan received instruction in farm and household tasks and religion, as well as grammar school subjects, from his parents. By the time he entered Yale College at the age of thirteen he had already done considerable reading and had written several essays which manifested an interest in nature and science and demonstrated his ability in literary composition. One of these essays, "Of Spiders," received the acclaim of the British Royal Society.

During his four years at Yale Edwards began writing

thoughts on religion, nature, science, and philosophy in notebooks; and this habit of making notes of ideas as they occurred to him continued throughout his life, furnishing ready material for his books and sermons.

From his college days Edwards dreamed of writing a systematic 'Rational Account of the Main Doctrines of the Christian Religion Attempted,' in which he proposed 'to show how all arts and sciences, the more they are perfected, the more they issue in divinity, and coincide with it, and appear to be as parts of it.' The first sketches for the project are the fragments we know as 'Notes on the Mind' and 'Notes on Science,' written while he was an undergraduate at Yale College...It is less well known that throughout his life he kept a journal, provisionally entitled 'Miscellanies,' into which he poured his best thought and out of which he intended to construct the monumental 'account'.¹⁴

However technical as doctrine, this early attempt to set down a philosophical ideal on nine sheets of foolscap is the kernel of everything that later took root. It is Edwards' first attempt to harmonize emotion and reason, mercy and justice, fate and free will. To read the world in terms of love was Edwards' unique contribution to the philosophic system of Calvin.¹⁵

At this time also he began keeping a record of the books he had read, among which were those of Locke and

¹⁴

Miller, op. cit., p. 1 f.

¹⁵

Literary History of the United States edited by Robert E. Miller et al., New York, Macmillan, 1948, I, 72.

Newton, and of those which he wanted to read. His diary, too was kept up-to-date along with his other writings.

At the same time that he was discovering the new science and philosophy which strongly appealed to his logical mind, his Calvinistic tenets were strengthened by his theological studies. Consequently, rather than discarding the traditional Puritanism, he attempted to explain and to find a logical foundation for it by means of these new ideas. He found that the new science helped to clarify the doctrines of special election and predestination which he had not yet been able to accept without question. The rationalistic philosophy also aided him in fitting his sense of a union of God with nature into his religious creed.

Considering the amount of time and concentration all this meditating and writing must have taken, it is not surprising to learn that Edwards was not a sociable type of person. At times when he resolved to visit his friends more often he usually managed to become involved in some theological argument with them or to alienate them by trying to reform them. "All his life he was to be one standing before many; never one of a group sitting side by side in friendly equality and comradeship."¹⁶

¹⁶

Ola Elizabeth Winslow, Jonathan Edwards (New York, 1940), p. 67.

In 1720 Edwards went to Yale to study theology for two years. At the end of this time, he was licensed to preach and was sent to a small Presbyterian Church in New York which he served from August 1722 until May 1723. On January 12, 1723 at the age of twenty, Edwards experienced a religious conversion and dedicated his life to God. This conversion experience was not motivated by a preacher as were those which later took place among his parishioners during the Great Awakening, but arose from his meditations on the Scriptures and the mystical inspiration he received while walking alone in the woods and fields where he felt a complete union with God and the universe.

As a young man he felt himself to be living in the very presence of God; he was conscious of the divine life flowing through and around him, making him one with the Godhood; and he was filled with yearning for personal union with the divine love in Christ. His intellectual and spiritual life was molded by a God-consciousness as passionate as that of Spinoza; and it is this fact of a life-long devotion to the God-idea that furnishes the clue to an understanding of his development. Not content that God had marked him for His own, he must build a philosophical universe about the Godhood, justifying his mysticism by a metaphysical idealism. He must examine critically the foundations of his creed and establish his theology upon philosophy.¹⁷

The year following his conversion, Edwards began a two year term as a tutor at Yale. In 1726 he was

appointed assistant pastor of the Congregational Church in Northampton, his Grandfather Stoddard's parish and the most influential clerical position in Massachusetts outside the Boston district. It was also a rather difficult congregation for a young minister to please.

The village of Northampton has grown rapidly in wealth and importance. Many of its inhabitants were marked by cultivation of mind, and refinement of manner. They were also characterized by a certain high-spiritedness which made them a turbulent people, not easy to control. They rejoiced in their reputation as a knowing people, and many of them having been promoted to places of public trust there had been much to feed their pride. There was also an unfortunate division among them: the court party, as it might be called, had wealth, land, and authority; while the country party, not so well endowed, was jealous of them, afraid of their having too much power in town and church.¹⁸

In 1727 Jonathan Edwards became full pastor of the Northampton Church. In this year also he married Sarah Pierrepont, a brilliant and devout woman who submerged her life in the purpose which dominated her husband's. Edwards was, despite his preoccupation with books and theological dogmas, a devoted husband and an affectionate, though stern, father. Family letters which have been preserved show a quite different person than one would picture from reading

¹⁸

Alexander A. V. G. Allen, Jonathan Edwards (Boston, 1891), p. 40

"Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

Time was to him the most precious of commodities, yet in the line of pastoral duty there were no marks or limits to his generosity. He could spend half of his morning composing a methodical fourteen - page answer to Deborah Hathaway of Suffield, who had requested 'Mr. Edwards to tell her Some Directions how to Conduct [Her] Self in her Christian Course.' He had time to prove to a boy of thirteen that a piece of matter two inches square is eight times as large as a piece one inch square. The demonstration was made with pieces of wood cut by Jonathan Edwards, first into one - and two - inch cubes, and then into smaller and smaller pieces to be handled and measured by the incredulous child.¹⁹

It has been found also that the majority of Edwards' sermons were not terrifying ones.

As a young preacher he chose more texts from Revelation, Psalms, Proverbs, Solomon's Song than in later years, and he also developed his thought more poetically....These early sermons suggest many correspondences to his own personal experiences, his sweet sense of the divine presence, and his own absorption in religious contemplation. He made much of the beauty of nature as an earnest of celestial glory...As he grew older, there was less of the mystic's rapture, more interest in doctrine, a more realistic view of human nature, and more emphasis on the practical virtues of Christian living.²⁰

These sermons appealed to his people even though he

¹⁹

Winslow, op. cit., p. 128.

²⁰

Ibid., p. 139.

became increasingly insistent upon reviving doctrines which they had, in their daily living, rejected. "Here was a young man who, without calling the offensive new doctrine by name, preached the old with such fervor as to make it appear the more desirable."²¹ The doctrines he preached seemed new because they were expressions of his own religious experiences and because he, with deep humility truly "practiced what he preached." The fact that "he preached to them one and all as though they were his peers,"²² Edwards' belief that laymen should encourage and aid religious work, and his realization that new beliefs should be introduced and old ones abolished gradually, so as not to create opposition nor prejudice, help to explain his success as a pastor.

We are in the secret of his being when we comprehend how on the one hand he humbled himself, as few Christians succeed in doing, to a realization that only God can speak for Himself, but on the other hand enjoyed the magnificent assurance that he, solitary in pioneer America, could accurately report the vocabulary of the deity's monologue.²³

Edwards' conviction of his own rightness - stern, yet truly humble - was as an armor of invincibility,....He stood for a dogma that the people were rejecting; he stood incorruptible in a

²¹

Ibid., p. 153.

²²

Ibid., p. 127.

²³

Miller, op. cit., p. 35.

moral world where compromise with lax tenets foreboded spiritual death; and he, not the laity, was qualified to judge the tenets of faith.²⁴

Edwards did not confine his interests and efforts to his own parish. He attended the biennial meetings of the Hampshire Association of ministers at which ministerial problems and theological topics were discussed, and was instrumental in establishing a library for the use of members of this association. He corresponded and exchanged books with other ministers, especially those abroad where he was better known as a theologian than at home. It was, however, the lesser theologians of his day who knew him best - the Presbyterian ministers of Scotland and such men as Isaac Watts and John Wesley.

In 1735 the unprecedented religious revival at Northampton brought Edwards into the consciousness of his own countrymen and became the first in a nationwide series of revivals, known as the Great Awakening, which lasted until 1750.

Edwards soon became the intellectual leader among the 'New Lights', as those Puritans were called who inclined toward religious individualism and participated in revivalism, he constructed a philosophy which is impressive for its personal intensity

as well as for its masterly dealing
with the intellectual currents of
his day.²⁵

It was during these years that most of Edwards' books were written and published. By the end of this period he had become the philosophical theologian and would not again be a theological philosopher. His reading and interest in fields other than theology did not diminish, but henceforth this other knowledge must serve only to strengthen theological tenets. His Treatise Concerning Religious Affections was an attempt to form a psychology of religion, using science and the logic of rationalism to defend emotionalism as a valid part of religious experience and thus to express his faith in the work of George Whitefield. Edwards was loath to criticize any method which appeared to awaken the religious impulse in men who had for too long subdued or ignored it and he fought with sermons, pamphlets, letters, and books against those who would belittle the Great Awakening. His prowess in this field of battle has been aptly described by Miss Winslow who says that Edwards was

...thoroughly at home in the controversial manner. Freight of minutiae does not retard his progress. The whole argument moves with a rush and celerity, as though carried from point to point by its own momentum. His resources

seem exhaustless; his intellectual energy is astounding. With his readers winded and left far behind, he turns a new corner, as though the race had just begun.²⁶

During these years while Edwards' fame was growing abroad, his popularity began to wane in Northampton. The trouble began when he publicly censured some of the young people of the town's best families for reading English novels and culminated in a division of the church over the qualifications for full communion.

For the moment he seemed an isolated reactionary, lost to the times because he would not compromise with them. Need religion be more than regular church attendance, profession of a reasoned belief in godly living based on good breeding and humanitarian interests in the welfare of one's neighbors? Edwards thought it should be.²⁷

Edwards' emphasis on the validity of individual beliefs was his undoing. Although the Congregational Church government was based on local autonomy and believed in individual freedom, its officers have no ecclesiastical authority. In attempting to return to the hierarchical practices of the earlier New England pastors and to regress from his grandfather's whole-way covenant, Edwards met the opposition of his congregation and was finally forced to leave Northampton.

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²⁶ Op. cit., p. 302.

²⁷

Literary History of the United States, I, 74.

What Jonathan Edwards had done...was to take the life principle of all religion, as he had found it out by his own search, vital and joy-giving, and shut it up in the husk of a dead idiom. He translated a personal experience into a theological system, and a system of which forward-looking men, even among the clergy, had begun to be disrespectful.²⁸

In 1751 Edwards and his family moved to Stockbridge, a small settlement established as a center for an Indian mission. Edwards welcomed the change to a place where his duties as preacher and as host to travellers would be lessened, thereby affording more time for study and writing. However, he found much to be done among the Indians, in whom David Brainerd²⁹ had interested him, and very little material and few assistants for the work. Here, too, he met with hindrances from some of his wife's relatives who had also had much to do with his removal from Northampton. He became more dependent than before upon reading and meditation for pleasure. He became greatly interested in interpreting current history as the fulfillment of scriptural prophecy and devoted much time to planning a book which would show the relationship of history and Christianity.

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Winslow, op. cit., p. 157.

²⁹

Brainerd was engaged to one of Edwards' daughters and was cared for in his last illness at the Edwards home in Northampton. The scholarly pastor gained much knowledge and inspiration from the young missionary and in 1747 published a Life of David Brainerd.

According to Edwards Scripture reads like one continuous chapter of fulfilled prophecy. His interpretation of history is in harmony with his view of life, as ordered by divine decrees.³⁰

Yet in the writing which has been preserved from this period, Edwards spoke little about happenings which seemed very important to others of his time. When the French and Indian War began in 1754, he did urge defensive warfare as a duty to God, the country, and oneself. However there seems to be no mention of the Albany Congress, which was held the same year that his Freedom of the Will was published, nor of the growing number of pamphlets and speeches which laid the basis for the movement toward the Revolution and colonial independence. The writing which Edwards did during these later years dealt increasingly with abstract theological doctrines, as the treatises on virtue, the end of the creation, and original sin. His years of self-abnegation and the worry of the last years at Northampton were now taking toll of his health. Nevertheless in 1757 he accepted the presidency of the Presbyterian College of New Jersey. He was warmly received by the faculty and was admired and respected by the students.

Edwards' youthful interest in science had been continued and, ironically, he died a few months after becoming

president of the college, as the result of a smallpox vaccination. Death was not a thing which he feared. Early in his career he had resolved to live each day as if it were to be his last and he had often spoken and written of the sweetness and joy he anticipated when he should join his Saviour in Heaven.

The deeds and words of this man's life had been dedicated solely to proclaiming to his fellowmen the absolute sovereignty of his God. "The God consciousness was the deepest substratum of his being, - his natural heritage from Puritan antecedents, coloring or qualifying every intellectual conviction he attained."³¹ Out of his searching to understand and explain the reality of this omnipotent God grew Edwards' theories of the reality of human sin and the justification of its punishment, the personal and emotional nature of religion, and the doctrine of necessity.

Fundamentally, his beliefs were the beliefs of the great religions of all ages. He believed that man's life is of eternal consequence. He believed that the imperfect world we see cannot be all. He believed that reality is of the spirit. He believed that there is a pathway to present peace in spite of the frustrations of life, and that man can find it, but not of himself.

What is his greatness? In a word, it is the greatness of one who had a

determining part in initiating and directing a popular movement of far-reaching consequence, and who in addition laid the foundations for a new system of religious thought, also of far-reaching consequence....He was a compelling preacher and also a master logician; an evangelist and also a thinker; a metaphysician on the side of the New Lights.³²

Combining the severe piety of the first generation of the fathers with the mystical fervor of an eighteenth century prophet, he performed for the churches the service of clarifying their theology and spiritualizing their religion.³³

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Winslow, op. cit., pp. 325-9.

³³

Rowe, op. cit., p. 48.

II THE TWENTIETH CENTURY AND REINHOLD NIEBUHR

Jonathan Edwards was a man of mighty intellect and of a faith more vigorous still. It has been nearly two hundred years since his death and his equal among the followers of Him who went about doing good has not yet been discovered. There is, however, a theologian of our day, Reinhold Niebuhr, whose life and thoughts are so similar to Edwards that they invite speculation as to whether he may be the twentieth century counterpart of that eighteenth century man of God. Even the era in which he lives is comparable to Edwards' time, in spite of two centuries of progress and change.

Since Niebuhr was born a few years before the end of the Victorian Era, it is necessary to begin with the nineteenth century in order to understand the elements which made the world of his time. Of the religious situation of the nineteenth century Ralph Barton Perry writes:

To secular doubt was added the waning influence of protestant Christianity. Although Catholicism grew less rapidly than protestantism, the absolute number of its adherents steadily increased, and Catholic opinion exercised a more conscious political influence. At the same time an increasing number of Americans were without religious adherence of any kind.

The religious change was to be measured not so much in terms of the number of church members as in a wavering and thinning of faith among professing

protestants....The theory of evolution seemed to assimilate man, soul and body, to nature. The development of Biblical criticism struck a blow at the authority which protestantism had substituted for the church. New cults, such as Ethical Culture and Christian Science, won adherents from the recognized protestant sects. The World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893 disseminated the idea that non-Christian religions possessed claims equal, or even superior, to those of Christianity. In the protestant sects themselves latitudinarian and modernist tendencies dulled the edge of orthodoxy and tended to obliterate the line between the religious and the moral sanctions.¹

Niebuhr reminds us that our twentieth century capitalism grew out of the liberalism in philosophy, the laissez - faire economic theory, and the ethical utilitarianism of the nineteenth century.

The expansive mood of an era, which felt that its conquest of nature had provided the human race with new and unlimited possibilities of development; the effect of the evolutionary theory in biology upon the interpretation of human history; and the confidence of modern rationalism in the possibility of arresting the processes of nature by the artifices of mind, all these have contributed to the unlimited faith in itself of a commercial civilization.²

In nineteenth century Europe Mill's utilitarianism,

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Puritanism and Democracy (New York, 1944), p. 16.

²

Reflections on the End of an Era (New York, 1934), p. 3.

Darwin's theory of evolution, the socialism of Marx, Spencerian biology, Nietzschean morality, and romanticism in literature and art were laying the foundation for the intellectual world of the nineteen-hundreds. In America the pragmatic philosophy of William James and the educational theories of John Dewey were to have widespread effect. All this intellectual development as well as the growth of a mechanistic, urban civilization based upon the accumulation of material wealth were in a great measure made possible by the hundred years of peace from 1815 to 1914, maintained by means of the Concert of Europe.

Nationalism grew and, along with a greater nationalistic consciousness, the United States experienced an increase in sectional controversies which culminated in the Civil War. That conflict with the consequent abolition of slavery formed the basis for racial problems of the twentieth century.

Another development concurrent with a spirit of national pride was a tendency toward imperialistic policies. Imperialism became evident in the United States with the beginning of the Spanish-American War in 1898, and later talk was heard of "manifest destiny," words to salve the consciences of those whom imperialism would benefit.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century

came the gold rush, the Homestead Act, the discovery of petroleum and the consequent development of oil trusts, the achievement of woman suffrage, and the opening of the West by the railroads managed by more trusts. The capitalistic society of the twentieth century was fast emerging. Industry developed mass production methods based upon standardization and an emphasis upon quantity rather than quality, and all our resources and too many of our people were being exploited. Partly because of the latter, labor unions were formed, and these have played a prominent role in the United States of the twentieth century.

Prison reforms, temperance, and equal rights for women were the social reforms advocated during the latter part of the nineteenth century while Dwight L. Moody preached to lost souls and Thomas Edison invented electric lights. The end of the "Gay Nineties" found Italy united, the German states joined under the Prussia of Bismarck, and the age of Victoria drawing to a close.

The first decade of the twentieth century found the American middle class capitalistic system well established. Along with this development of a mechanistic "gadget civilization" had evolved a spirit of individualism in thought and behaviour.

There was also a revolt against the romanticism of the nineteenth century and a seeking for realism which was

encouraged by the new scientific, philosophical, and psychological theories. Farrington sees in this an attempt to return to the eighteenth century realism of John Locke.³

In accord with this search for realism were the debunkers of history, those who carried on extensive research to prove that George Washington was capable of prevarication and that the Puritans were not pure, and the muckrakers who unearthed the corruption of politics and trust companies. The zeal for realism and the desire to base all knowledge upon science created a new liberalism in thought at the same time that a spirit of skepticism and cynicism developed which was not lessened by a depression, two world wars, and experiments with atomic energy.

Geographers and map salesmen often mention our "air age world," and they are not wrong in emphasizing the changes brought about by air communication. One of the most drastic revisions of thought which must be made by twentieth century man is the exchange of the one country or one section viewpoint for an intellectual field of vision which includes the people and interests of the entire world. Niebuhr finds the root of this dual spirit of nationalism and sectionalism in the tendency to hide

³
Op. cit., Vol. III, p. xxviii.

all emotion or passion which was one of the characteristics of the revolt against romanticism.

Sentiment is organically related to religion and when hearts grow cold anything that warms them will seem to be religious. Our age is so passionately nationalistic, partly because it has lost all other passions. Incapable of loyalty to either an abstract principle or value or to a larger human fellowship, the average man saves himself from moral bankruptcy by espousing the cause of some comparatively small community, his family or nation preferably with more than ordinary fervor.⁴

Once again, then, men were faced with new ideas and must decide whether to receive or reject them. Again some scorned the new and were labeled old-fashioned or cowardly, some attempted to fuse the best of both old and new, and others rejected all traditional thought and feeling and welcomed the new ways with a maximum of sophisticated optimism and a minimum of common sense. Niebuhr believes that the optimism of these moderns is grounded in the mechanical nature of our civilization which hides the very realities of life which they profess to be seeking. Bewilderment and despair are often the only rewards for these searchers. The present social problem, Niebuhr conceives, is to build a new culture to meet the requirements of a new way of living. He is

⁴
 "A Religion Worth Fighting For," The Survey, Vol. LVIII (August 1, 1927), p. 444.

concerned because "...an increasing number of sensitive spirits, whose chief interest is the social problem, regard religion as a hindrance rather than a help in redeeming society from its ills."⁵

Religion, as in most intellectual upheavals, is being put to a severe test. "The curse of modern religion is that it is so busy adjusting itself to the modern mind that it can find no energy to challenge the modern conscience."⁶ Niebuhr defines modernism as "the spirit in the religious community which issues from the conflict between science and religion and results from the effort of religion to adjust its affirmations to the modern world view."⁷ Niebuhr regards the religion of modern culture as a superficial one, substituting "a cheap optimism for a profound religious faith,"⁸ and says that "The Christian Church of America has never been upon a lower level of spiritual insight and moral sensitivity than in this tragic age of world conflict."⁹

Niebuhr finds religion increasingly influenced by

⁵ Moral Man and Immoral Society (New York, 1932), p. 51.

⁶ Niebuhr, "Would Jesus Be A Modernist Today?", The World Tomorrow, Vol. XII (March, 1929), p. 123.

⁷ Ibid., p. 122.

⁸ "Is Social Conflict Inevitable?", Scribner's Magazine, Vol. XCVIII (September, 1935), p. 169.

⁹ Christianity and Power Politics (New York, 1940), p. 33.

successful classes of people who are responsible for its optimism and sentimentality and who do not come to church to be scolded.

The insights of the Christian religion have become the almost exclusive possession of the more comfortable and privileged classes. These have sentimentalized them to such a degree, that the disinherited, who ought to avail themselves of their resources, have become so conscious of the moral confusions which are associated with them, that the insights are not immediately available for the social struggle in the Western world. If they are not made available, Western civilization,... will suffer from cruelties and be harrassed by animosities which destroy the beauty of human life.¹⁰

The trend toward regarding religion and church attendance as a form of social security and the consequent preponderance of well-to-do people among the congregations of the established churches may have encouraged the formation of the hundreds of small denominations and sects of every variety imaginable as well as obscuring the true purpose of religion.

The sentimental religionist still speaks of the essential goodness of men without realizing how evil good men can be. Anyone who really knows the modern world must be impressed by the fathomless sentimentality which corrupts the life of the modern church.

¹⁰
Moral Man and Immoral Society (New York, 1932),
 pp. 225 *f*.

It obsesses men with their petty deficiencies, and thereby obscures the more basic moral defects of their social attitudes. In them religion easily becomes a kind of romance by which men save their self-respect without moralizing their economic activities.

The modern religious over - estimate of human virtue inevitably produces a cynical reaction. When religion is pessimistic, irreligion produces a Rousseau. When religion becomes corrupted by the romanticism of its former foes, irreligion expresses itself in the cynicism of Marx - and shall we include Mencken?ll

Besides religious indifference, scorn of traditional moral and spiritual codes, and preoccupation with material gain, the churches of the first half of the twentieth century have been faced with a shortage of ministers, lack of funds, and competition from secular entertainment such as golf, baseball, movies, fraternal orders, and other interests which draw people away from religious services. Spreading from Germany, Japan, and Russia has been an actual persecution of Christians more horrible than that of the early Christians in Rome.

The modern ministry is in no easy position; for it is committed to the espousal of ideals (professionally, at that) which are in direct conflict with the dominant interests and

prejudices of contemporary civilization.¹²

In Niebuhr's diary we read of another problem which faces theologians of our time.

One half of the world seems to believe that every poetic symbol with which religion must deal is an exact definition of a concrete or an historical fact, the other half, having learned that this is not the case, can come to no other conclusion but that all religion is based upon fantasy.¹³

Despite the chaos and pessimism, the doubting and the wars, there have been a number of hopeful signs in the twentieth century.

The belief that a revival of religion will furnish the resources by which men will extricate themselves from their social chaos is a perennial one, and it expresses itself even in an age in which the forces of religion are on the defensive against a host of enemies and detractors.¹⁴

Evangelists like Billy Sunday have reached people who were not welcome in the fashionable city churches. Fosdick, Buttrick, Kagawa, Niemoller, Chandi, Higginbottom, Trueblood, E. Stanley Jones, and Peter Marshall are among the prominent names of our time. There has been a growing demand for books of a religious nature,

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Niebuhr, Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic (Chicago, 1929), p. vii.

¹³

Ibid., p. 141.

¹⁴

Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society (New York, 1932), p. 51.

and movies with religious motifs have been well received.

Within the churches there have been new life movements, organizations of men's groups, new educational materials, and more emphasis on layman participation. World War II brought proof of the effectiveness of missionary work in many lands. There have been several movements toward the unification of Protestant Churches and more evidence of cooperation, in some cases cooperation with Jewish, Catholic, and other faiths. More government officials, both national and local, seem concerned with religion and acknowledge its necessity.

Two attempts have been made in the past thirty years to create a workable organization for the maintenance of world peace. Neither of these has been perfect, but at least the thing has been attempted; and the United Nations Organization is still at work.

The twentieth century has its prophets who warn of punishment for sin, but give hope for the world if repentance comes soon enough. Probably the foremost of these theologians is Reinhold Niebuhr who was born June 21, 1892 in Wright City, Missouri, the son of a German Evangelical pastor. He had two brothers and one sister.

The German Evangelical Church to which the Niebuhr family belonged is an offspring of the German Lutheran Church. It was founded by a Lutheran, Jacob Albright,

who joined the Methodist Church through a conversion experience. He soon became dissatisfied because the Methodist bishop would not permit the preaching of sermons in German and in 1803 founded a separate church known as The Newly-Formed Methodist Conference, Albright Methodists, or German Albright Methodists. The name was changed in 1816 to the Evangelical Association. It was known as an aggressively perfectionist denomination, and E. T. Clark writes that "By 1855 the group had definitely classed merely 'justified' or 'partly sanctified' persons with sinners and the lost."¹⁵ The Evangelical Church has an episcopal form of government with bishops elected by the General Conference to superintend the churches and preside at the annual and general conferences. The preachers form classes of candidates for offices and direct the elections at which the presiding elder is chosen. This elder presides over Quarterly Meetings and Conferences and superintends the district churches. The minister also has the power to receive and expel members. The members of this church believe in the Trinity, the resurrection, original sin, free will through grace, justification by faith, and the Holy Scriptures as the decree of God.

¹⁵
p. 89. The Small Sects in America (Nashville, 1937),

From boyhood Niebuhr wanted to be a minister like his father. In 1910 he entered Elmhurst College in Illinois to study liberal arts and theology. At college he attempted to adjust his traditional religious concepts to the new scientific beliefs. He attended Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1913 and in 1914 went to Yale Divinity School with the intention of earning a doctorate in theology. Religious liberalism with its talk of rationalism and progress was at its height then and it had its effect upon Niebuhr.

By the time he graduated a master of arts, [1915] for which he read a considerable amount of theology, he had become irritated by the irrelevance of much of his theological study to the actual daily life around him.¹⁶

Niebuhr says in an article in The Survey¹⁷ that World War I shifted his interest from the metaphysical validity to the moral efficacy of religion. Kepler suggests that Niebuhr's supernaturalist beliefs were a result of that war.¹⁸ This change in interest caused him to leave Yale upon the receiving of his master's degree instead of remaining to become a Doctor of Divinity, and

¹⁶ Davies, D. R., Reinhold Niebuhr, Prophet from America (New York, 1948), p. 5.

¹⁷ See footnote #37.

¹⁸ Contemporary Religious Thought (New York, 1941).

also to hesitate whether he should become a pastor or a theological teacher. He decided to follow his original desire and was ordained a minister by the Evangelical Synod in 1915. He was sent to serve Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit whose membership consisted of eighteen families, factory workers living in the slum section of the city.

The first and greatest obstacle the young pastor had to overcome was his personal shyness and sensitivity which made pastoral calling a painful ordeal. The sincere welcome he received and the gratefulness of his parishioners for his interest in their problems helped him to forget his fears. It was during these years that he resolved

I am going to try to be a disciple of Christ, rather than a mere Christian, in all human relations and experiment with the potency of trust and love much more than I have in the past.¹⁹

Here his interest in theological problems became subordinated to a sympathy for individual people. His parishioners were Ford employees and he was one of the first to recognize the bad effects of assembly line methods of production. He felt that even medieval peasants were more fortunate than these factory workers since they at

¹⁹ Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic (Chicago, 1929), p. 48.

least had some opportunities for creative self-expression. "Here manual labor is drudgery, and toil is slavery. The men cannot possibly find any satisfaction in their work.²⁰ Niebuhr became a member of the Socialist party, believing that it was working for the betterment of such people as these.

Young and old liked and respected their new pastor who strove to make their Church a place of joy and hope in their dreary lives. He formed young people's Sunday School classes and evening discussion groups, and established an informal Sunday evening service in which there was much congregational participation.

Although he liked his work, his salary of fifty dollars a month was inadequate. He began writing articles for religious periodicals to supplement his earnings and to enable him to buy a few of the books he was anxious to read. These articles brought him to the attention of church leaders and led to his being offered an assistant professorship in theology at Union Theological Seminary in 1928, the same year in which his first book, Does Civilization Need Religion? was published. By the time he left Bethel Church that year its membership had increased from the forty who belonged when he became pastor

to over eight hundred.

In 1930 Niebuhr was advanced to professor of applied Christianity, which position he still holds. During that year he received a letter from the Socialist party demanding that he advocate a non-intervention policy, whereupon he immediately resigned from the party.

In 1931 he married Ursula Keppel-Compton, the only Englishwoman to be awarded a "first" in theology at Oxford. They have two children, Elizabeth and Christopher, to whom they both devote as much of their time as possible.

Niebuhr received his doctor's degree from Grinnell College in 1936. Since that time he has continued advanced study at various institutions, including Oxford, and has given lectures at many of them. He is well known by theologians at home and abroad and is very popular with his young students.

Also in 1936 Niebuhr was instrumental in founding the Fellowship of Socialist Christians in America, a society whose title is rather misleading. Its purpose is to correlate Christianity and social reconstruction. Among its activities have been raising funds to aid in rescuing European anti-Nazis, the support of European refugees from Nazism, conferences on labor problems, investigation of the problems of low-paid workers, and a study of Negro - white relationships in America. This

society also publishes a quarterly journal, Christianity and Society,²¹ and a biweekly magazine, Christianity and Crisis, both of which are edited by Niebuhr. In addition to this work, his teaching, preaching, and lecture tours, Niebuhr has written twelve books and regularly contributes to several periodical publications, both religious and secular. Thus he has become one of the outstanding - and most discussed - theologians of our time, especially since the publication of the ponderous two - volume The Nature and Destiny of Man which explains his beliefs in detail and brings together the theories he has expounded in his other books and lectures. His latest book, Faith and History, is an attempt to apply his doctrine to the solution of the social problems of our day by comparing the Christian with the modern view of history.

Continued reading and study by a man possessed of a brilliant mind and the wisdom to distinguish between fact and supposition have made him respected even by his opponents. The books which Niebuhr believes to have most influenced his thinking are Hermack's Essence of Christianity, Carlyle's Sartor Resartus and others, Troeltsche's Soziallehren der Christlichen Kirche, Schweitzer's Civilization and Ethics, and works by William James, especially Will to Believe.

²¹

This publication was originally entitled Radical Religion.

It is generally conceded that Paul Tillich, a disciple of Karl Barth, has exerted the most influence of any contemporary upon Niebuhr's thought. Barthian "crisis theology" was introduced to America by Tillich and Niebuhr at the beginning of the depression era when there was a reaction against the extreme humanism of American liberals. This theology rejected the social gospel theory. It emphasized "God's absolute otherness, his absolute sovereignty and the absolute crisis in human living."²² The followers of Barth believe that man's natural life is evil only if it claims to be, or is conducted as if it were, self-sufficient. Thus they find an absolute crisis, the necessity for making a decision for or against God, in every situation; and evidence of the reality of God in the ability of humans to view every situation with disinterestedness and objectivity and with a judgment undistorted by fear or passion.

Niebuhr, meeting twentieth century man upon his own ground, stresses Christianity in relation to history.

The truth of the Gospel must be preached today to a generation which hoped that historical development would gradually emancipate man from the ambiguity of his position of strength and weakness and would save him from the sin into which he

falls by trying to evade or deny the contradiction in which he lives. Experience has proved that mode of salvation to be an illusion. But a Gospel which can penetrate through this illusion and save men from the idolatrous confidence in history as a redeemer will also shake the false islands of security which men have sought to establish in history in the name of the Gospel.²³

Davies finds Niebuhr's social and political judgments to be based upon two principles: the relative character of all historical situations and judgments and the absolute, eternal significance of the relative historical situation. Niebuhr's philosophy, then, adheres to the principle of the pertinence of the Christian gospel to every situation in life, the personal element in history, the reality of the sin within each person which causes the corruption of society, an unbiased appraisal of both sides of any conflict, and a retention of the permanent values of both traditional and modern philosophies.

Niebuhr's view of Christianity commits the Church, as the historic agent and vehicle of the Gospel, to a theory of permanent revolution in the literal sense. It commits the Church to a fundamental opposition to the world till the very end of time....If the Church is to be faithful to her Lord and his Gospel, she must wage war against the world for the entire duration of history until it

is swallowed up in the eternal order.²⁴

In his first book Niebuhr foretold the effect upon the effect upon the individual of the Christian life in which he believes.

Not to be conformed to this world, if it is to have any real meaning in modern life, will mean that the religiously inspired soul knows how to defeat the avarice and to overcome the indifference to the worth of human personality which inheres in the whole economic and industrial structure of modern society.²⁵

Niebuhr often warns the modern church of the inefficacy with which it is hampering itself by adapting itself to the ways of the world.

Traditional religion is otherworldly. The modern church prides itself on its bright and happy worldliness. It is more interested in transforming the natural and social environment of personality than in persuading the soul to transcend all circumstances and find its happiness in inner peace. The modern church regards this mundane interest as its social passion. But it is also the mark of its slavery to society. Whenever religion feels completely at home in the world, it is the salt which has lost its savor. If it sacrifices the strategy of renouncing the world, it has no strategy by which it may convict the world of sin.²⁶

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Op. cit., p. 94.

²⁵

Does Civilization Need Religion? (New York, 1928), p. 232¹.

²⁶

Ibid., p. 165¹.

Niebuhr, because of his emphasis upon the reality of sin and the incompetence of humans to overcome their difficulties alone, has been called a pessimist, yet he believes more deeply than some who are known as optimists that there is hope for our civilization.

As we look upon modern civilization with its glorification of man's tribal instincts, with its aggravation of human greed and avarice, with its spiritual confusion and moral impotence, it is difficult to entertain any immediate hope for the finer aspirations of man. Nevertheless I cling to hope. I believe that modern civilization can finally be brought under the control of the human spirit and that the spiritual and ethical forces of civilization, now so impotent can finally be made socially effective.²⁷

It is said that whatever pessimism Niebuhr may appear to express is offset by the magnetism of his personality. Professor Atkins once said, "He can skin civilization, hand the hide up to dry, and offer prayer over the carcass."²⁸ Jones called him "a recusant, an independent, a pathfinder," and said that he "loves to shock the complacent." He further described Niebuhr as "a kind of spiritual mustard plaster on the body ecclesiastical" and

²⁷ "A Religion Worth Fighting For," The Survey, Vol. LVIII (August 1, 1927), p. 444.

²⁸ Quoted in Edgar DeWitt Jones, American Preachers of Today (Indianapolis, 1933), p. 251.

quoted a contemporary preacher who said that "a little more tenderness or downright compassion would help to balance his brilliance,...."²⁹ His humility, however, commands respect. Davies speaks of his "acute and constant awareness of the corrupting element in his own profession of Christian minister, and in his own ideas and interests." He remarks that "This capacity to see in oneself the tendency to self-deception and humbugging is rare in any and every calling,...."³⁰

Niebuhr's orthodox beliefs, anachronistic in an age of religious liberalism, have caused controversy since his college days.

As Niebuhr came to theological clarity and maturity he found himself in a hostile environment - hostile in the sense that he was in opposition to the established theological and social traditions of the American churches.³¹

The mind of Niebuhr has always been open to new ideas and to theories differing from his own but, although he makes his orthodox beliefs sound shocking and new and has often been dubbed a revolutionist, he believes that we must change our ways slowly and cautiously.

It is a question whether a mechanical civilization like our own, which

²⁹

Ibid., p. 253.

³⁰

Op. cit., p. 62.

³¹

Davies, op. cit., p. 70.

destroys the cultures of the past, will be able to form a new religious culture, relevant to the problems of our own life. If it cannot, we had better hold to traditional disciplines as long as we may, lest confusion become worse confounded.³²

This man, who can say with his Master, "I came not to send peace, but a sword",³³ has been preaching and writing for thirty years. There are many who do not agree with his beliefs, but even these he has caused to think - to sort out their own beliefs and examine them with clearer insight - and that seems a great accomplishment in this twentieth century world.

Reinhold Niebuhr is a gift of God to a tortured and troubled world. He is, by any standard of judgment whatsoever, a leading, if not the leading, theorist in the contemporary revolution in Christian thought. He has made orthodox theology relevant to our own secular crisis. He has made it intellectually respectable...By his prophetic insight and passion, he has made the Christian faith an inescapable social issue for a generation whose own secular faith has proved to be bankrupt.³⁴

Is Reinhold Niebuhr the Jonathan Edwards of our time? The fact that they were both sons of preachers and the similarities in their careers and interests are not

³² The Contribution of Religion to Social Work (New York, 1932), p. 39.

³³ Matthew 10:34b.

³⁴ Davies, op. cit., p. 101f.

sufficient proof. Certainly there are similarities in the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. Both periods have been marked by new theories in science and philosophy which have upset the traditional order and have brought about changes in attitude toward religion and morals. Niebuhr, referring to the dislike of modern worshipers for scolding sermons, says that "Evidently Jonathan Edwards would have a hard time of it in a modern metropolitan pulpit."³⁵ Apathy and doubt have in both centuries been met by attempts toward the revival of religion.

The minds of Edwards and Niebuhr were both shaped by the trends of their time, yet the orthodox doctrines which they have preached to their liberal - thinking contemporaries have been anachronistic. A comparison of these doctrines is the final test of the assumption that Reinhold Niebuhr may properly be called the twentieth century Jonathan Edwards.

Although Edwards' theology was based upon Calvinism and Niebuhr's upon Lutheranism, it is more difficult to find differences than likenesses in their thought. Niebuhr has described the difference in the two creeds.

³⁵ "A Religion Worth Fighting For," The Survey Vol. LVIII (August 1, 1927), p. 446.

...Lutheranism [is] more closely related to asceticism than Calvinism; for Lutheranism is the Protestant way of claiming victory for the religious ideal without engaging the world in combat. Both are founded upon an ethical dualism...The one has a dualism which divides the monastic from ordinary men; the other draws the line within the soul of each individual and expects him to realize in his religious experience what he cannot reveal in ordinary human relations. If Calvinism is Weltfreundlich, Lutherism like asceticism is Weltfeindlich.³⁶

Elements of both creeds can be found in Niebuhr's doctrines. Sweet finds the "crisis theology" of Barth, whose influence upon Niebuhr has been mentioned above, to be compounded of Neo-orthodoxy, Neo-Calvinism, and Neo-Lutheranism.³⁷

Neither Edwards nor Niebuhr found theology along sufficient for their needs. Wieman and Meland's book states that a philosophy of religion, in addition to theology, is necessary.

...in an age when the traditional form of religion is not satisfactory, when its basic structure must be re-examined and the abstract essentials distinguished from the passing forms of concrete life,...

The theologian endeavors to present the object of religious devotion in a form

³⁶
Does Civilization Need Religion? (New York, 1928), p. 110.

³⁷
The American Churches (New York, 1947).

that is intellectually acceptable to the people of his time and group. That means that he must organize beliefs about the supremely worthwhile in such a way that they do not contradict one another and are not contradicted by other propositions held to be true. Thus theology gives intellectual expression to religious devotion.

But philosophy criticizes the assumptions of that devotion. It seeks to lay bare the essential characteristics which make this reality worthy of such devotion, if it has such characteristics. Philosophy of religion wants to know if the essentials are there; theology wants to make sure that the form of presentation is acceptable to the needs of the people of that time and place.³⁸

Edwards' philosophy was based on supernaturalism which Niebuhr has discussed in one of his books.

A source above the human is sought to explain the moral demands which transcend human capacities and therefore seem to have originated in superhuman sources...; and an order of reality is recognized in which a more than human perfection is achieved.³⁹

Supernaturalism is characterized by a metaphysical dualism: the antithesis of the divine and natural orders, which is bridged by the communication of a personal God with man through scriptural revelation. Traditional supernaturalism obtained its power from ancient religious

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Op. cit., pp. 15-16.

³⁹

Reflections on the End of an Era (New York, 1934), p. 200.

tradition as recorded in the Bible, from the logic and sufficiency of its thought, from the contrast to daily life offered by its other - worldly philosophy, and because of the weakness or incompleteness of other religious creeds which sought to replace it. Supernaturalism in religion may be likened to conservatism in politics; both ways of thinking resist change and hold to modes of thought and living which are often incompatible with the culture in which they exist.

The differences between traditional supernaturalism and the neo-supernaturalism to which Niebuhr adheres has been explained by Wieman and Meland.

...neo-supernaturalism extricates the supernatural from all entangling alliances with this natural world. Traditional supernaturalism did not. Most of the difficulties of traditional supernaturalism have been due to these entanglements of its beliefs with the world of nature.

Reason has its place in seeking the way of life through nature. It must show what is right and wrong in morals, how the state should be organized, what should be done with industry and the like. But when it comes to the things that are directly concerned with God we must cast off all connection with reason. God makes himself known directly to the individual and is apprehended by faith.⁴⁰

The conception of revelation and its interpretation

marks the greatest difference between the traditional and the new supernaturalism. The neo-supernaturalists believe that the direct revelation of God to the individual

...may come to one by way of preaching and the ministrations of the church, and it may come through the Bible. But it is not the Church and it is not the Bible. These may have all the faults, errors and limitations which can be discovered in them as products of history and society. God, who completely transcends society and history, is not thereby in any way affected, and his revelation to the individual is not thereby impaired.⁴¹

The neo-supernaturalists say "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's"; but the traditional supernaturalists said "Render nothing to any except God."

41

Ibid., p. 79. For a more complete exposition of the beliefs of the neo-supernaturalists see pp. 77-83 of this book.

III. A COMPARISON OF THE RELIGIOUS CREEDS OF NIEBUHR AND EDWARDS

Let us now compare the creeds of Edwards, the orthodox supernaturalist, and Niebuhr, the neo-orthodox neo-supernaturalist. Both are postulated upon an implicit faith in an omniscient, omnipotent God and an acknowledgment of the object sinfulness of humanity. Both men emphasize the complete transcendence of God over man as well as the God-consciousness inherent in each person in contrast to the God who became as man in the person of Jesus and to the human ego which attempts to usurp the functions of God.

In Edwards' Images and Shadows of Divine Things we read, "The material world, and all things pertaining to it, is by the creatour wholly subordinated to the spiritual and moral world."¹ The transcendency of God is also stressed by Niebuhr.

A true and great religion finds the source and pinnacle of life's values above the partial values of history. It believes, in short, in a transcendent God, who is partly revealed and partly obscured by the forces of nature and the facts of history. His will is never fully expressed and His majesty never fully exhausted by any concrete achievement or event.

¹
p. 54.

Men are reconciled to each other by discerning themselves equally distant from the absolute, whatever the distance and difference between them on the historical level.²

Edwards mentioned the equi-distance of all men from Christ in one of his books, saying, "Christians that are but Fellow-worms, ought at least to treat one another with as much Humility and Gentleness as Christ that is infinitely above them treats them."³

The chasm between this all - powerful God and impotent mankind is spanned by the infinite goodness of God for whose glory the world was created by a perfect union of creature with Creator, according to Edwards, who then explained that God's infinite goodness

...seeks the happiness of creatures, the happiness of the created system in general, and of every individual creature in particular, so far as the happiness of that individual is not inconsistent with the happiness of the system, or with the happiness of other individuals...⁴

Niebuhr agrees with this conception of the creation of the world.

God is not merely mind who forms a

² "Is Social Conflict Inevitable?" Scribner's, Vol. XCVIII (September, 1935), p. 168.

³ Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival.... (Edinburgh, 1743), p. 118.

⁴ The Salvation of All Men Strictly Examined (New Haven, 1760), p. 135.

previously given formless stuff. God is both vitality and form and the source of all existence. He creates the world. This world is not God; but it is not evil because it is not God. Being God's creation, it is good.⁵

Man, the creature, is thus enabled to find the Creator revealed by His creation; and, because of this, man's superiority to the other creatures of the natural world is a type of God's relationship to him.

To the essential nature of man belong, on the one hand, all his natural endowments, and determinations, his physical and social impulses, his sexual and racial differentiations, in short his character as a creature imbedded in the natural order. On the other hand, his essential nature also includes the freedom of his spirit, his transcendence over natural process and finally his self-transcendence.⁶

Niebuhr's concept of the transcendency of man over nature and history while he is in another sense a part of both, and the transcendency and immanence of God are akin to Edwards' theory of a total oneness of being. In one of his sermons he said,

Man is a creature who shares all the weaknesses of the other creatures of the world. Yet he is a sublime creature who holds the ages within his memory and touches the fringes

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Vol. 1, p. 12. The Nature and Destiny of Man (New York, 1941),

⁶
Ibid., p. 270.

of the eternal in his imagination.⁷

He wrote in The Nature and Destiny of Man:

The most important characteristic of a religion of revelation is this twofold emphasis upon the transcendence of God and upon His intimate relation to the world. In this divine transcendence the spirit of man finds a home in which it can understand its stature of freedom. But there it also finds the limits of its freedom, the judgment which is spoken against it, and, ultimately, the mercy which makes such a judgment sufferable.⁸

Edwards often wrote of his delight in the beauties of nature and the consciousness of God's presence which they invoked. Niebuhr, too, finds a revelation of God in the elements of nature. "They are sacramental reminders of the ultimate peace which life must achieve. Within limits, they are even the means of grace for achieving such peace."⁹ Again he says, "...the realm of coherence which we call nature, points to a realm of power beyond itself. This realm is discovered by faith, but not fully known. It is a mystery which resolves the mystery of nature...."¹⁰

⁷ Discerning the Signs of the Times (New York, 1946), p. 123.

⁸ Vol. I, p. 126.

⁹ Discerning the Signs of the Times (New York, 1946), p. 179.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 160

Edwards averred that we prove God's being

from our own being and the being of other things, which we are sensible once were not, but have begun to be; and from the being of the world, with all its constituent parts, and the manner of their existence, all which we see plainly are not necessary in their own nature, and so not self-existent, and therefor must have a cause.¹¹

As proof of this, Edwards quoted Romans 1:20, "The invisible things of Him, from the creation of the world, are clearly seen; being understood by the things that are made; even his eternal power and Godhead." Later he said,

The doctrine of necessity, which supposes a necessary connection of all events, on some antecedent ground and reason of their existence, is the only medium we have to prove the being of God.¹²

Edwards, in seeking proof that nature is not God, but only His creation through which His existence is made manifest, concluded that the universe exists only in the mind of God and that man knows the world of nature only through sense impressions.

Niebuhr states the same idea in a different, perhaps more realistic, manner.

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Freedom of the Will (New York, 1856), p. 27.

¹²

Ibid., p. 169.

The obvious fact is that man is a child of nature, subject to its vicissitudes, compelled by its necessities, driven by its impulses, and confined within the brevity of the years which nature permits its varied organic form, allowing them some, but not too much latitude. The other less obvious fact is that man is a spirit who stands outside of nature, life, himself, his reason and the world.¹³

Both Edwards and Niebuhr have realized that God's revelation to man is not complete. Edwards wrote:

The Revelation God has made of himself in his Word, and the Provision made for our spiritual Welfare in the Gospel, is perfect; but yet the actual Light and Communications [Christian] experiences we have, are not perfect, but many ways exceeding imperfect and maimed.¹⁴

Niebuhr speaks frequently of our inability to understand clearly the paradox of God's goodness and His creatures' evil.

To the religious imagination, God is at one moment the ideal toward which all things must strive and by comparison with which all contemporary social standards are convicted of inadequacy, and in the next moment he is the omnipotent creator of all things whose power and wisdom guarantee the goodness of existing social

¹³
p. 3. Nature and Destiny, Vol. I, (New York, 1941),

¹⁴
Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival
(Edinburgh, 1743), p. 163.

organizations.¹⁵

Another facet of this dualistic theology is described by Niebuhr.

One interesting aspect of the religious yearning after the absolute is that, in the contrast between the divine and the human, all lesser contrasts between good and evil on the human and historic level are obscured. Sin finally becomes disobedience to God and nothing else. Only rebellion against God, and only the impertinence of self-will in the sight of God, are regarded as sinful. One may see this logic of religion very clearly in the thought of Jonathan Edwards. 'A crime is more or less heinous,' he declares, 'according as we are under greater or less obligation to the contrary. Our obligation to love, honor and obey any being is in proportion to its loveliness, honorableness and authority. But God is a being infinitely lovely because he has infinite excellence and beauty. So that sin against God, being a violation of infinite obligations, must be a crime infinitely heinous and so deserving of infinite punishment.'¹⁶

The doctrine of original sin was of primary importance to Edwards as it is to Niebuhr. In his defense of the doctrine of original sin Edwards wrote, "God actually deals with Adam and his posterity as one, in the affair of his apostacy, and its infinitely terrible consequences."¹⁷

¹⁵ The Contribution of Religion to Social Work (New York, 1932), p. 22.

¹⁶ Moral Man and Immoral Society (New York, 1932), p. 226.

¹⁷ "Doctrine of Original Sin Defended," in Faust and Johnson, op. cit., p. 328.

Both believed that Adam construed as a collective noun meaning "mankind", as he was originally created in the garden of Eden, was sinless as was his Creator, and that "in Adam's fall we sinned all." Thus every man committed the original sin and must be punished accordingly. This belief explains Edwards' avowal that children are sinful until they are converted. Niebuhr expounded these ideas in The Nature and Destiny of Man.

Adam was sinless before he acted and sinful in his first recorded action. His sinlessness, in other words, preceded his first significant action and his sinfulness came to light in that action. This is a symbol for the whole of human history.¹⁸

In the same book Niebuhr stated the following three terms of original righteousness:

- (a) The perfect relation of the soul to God in which obedience is transcended by love, trust and confidence ('Thou shalt love the Lord thy God');
- (b) the perfect internal harmony of the soul with itself in all of its desires and impulses: 'With all thy heart and all thy soul and all thy mind'; and
- (c) the perfect harmony of life with life: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.'¹⁹

Edwards' and Niebuhr's definitions of sin are very much the same. Edwards described a threefold corruption

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Vol. I, p. 280.

¹⁹

Ibid., p. 289.

of nature: pride plus worldly - mindedness, the devil and the beast, and self and the world. Like Niebuhr, he deemed pride or the ego to be the greatest cause of sin.

When a People oppose Christ in the Work of his Holy Spirit, it is because it touches them in something that is dear to their carnal Minds, and because they see the Tendency of it is to cross their Pride, and deprive them of the Objects of their Lusts.²⁰

Divines are generally agreed, that Sin radically and fundamentally consists in what is negative, or privative, having its Root and Foundation in a Privation or Want of Holiness.²¹

Niebuhr says that Christianity believes "that men are egotists in contradiction to their essential nature. That is the doctrine of original sin, stripped of literalistic illusions."²²

...evil is always the ascertation of some self-interest without regard to the whole, whether the whole be conceived as the immediate community, or the total order of the world.²³

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Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival...
(Edinburgh, 1743), p. 82.

21

A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections
(Boston, 1746), p. 24.

22

Christianity and Power Politics (New York, 1940), p. 38.

23

Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness (New York, 1944), p. 9.

In The Nature and Destiny of Man Niebuhr explains his conception of the cause of sin.

The temptation to sin lies,...., in the human situation itself. This situation is that man as spirit transcends the temporal and natural process in which he is involved and also transcends himself. Thus his freedom is the basis of his creativity but it is involved in the contingencies and necessities of the natural process on the one hand and since, on the other, he stands outside of them and foresees their caprices and perils, he is anxious. In his anxiety he seeks to transmute his finiteness into infinity, his weakness into strength, his dependence into independence.

The actual sin is the consequence of the temptation of anxiety in which all life stands...the bias toward sin from which actual sin flows is anxiety plus sin...Man could not be tempted if he had not already sinned.²⁴

Both Edwards and Niebuhr came to the conclusion that sin should be punished in proportion to its greatness. Therefore eternal damnation was not too harsh a punishment for the original sin, man's attempt to usurp the powers of God. God hates evil as evil and forbids and punishes it as such; yet he continues to love the creatures whom He has created in His image and who have committed these sins against Him. Edwards wrote one book concerned entirely with the justice of endless punishment, and discussed it in several others.

²⁴

Vol. I, p. 251.

It seems to be a dictate of reason and the common sense of mankind, that moral evil should be followed, or deserves to be followed, with natural evil or with pain and shame: and that this natural evil be a real evil to the sinner, an evil to him on the whole.

Moral evil is in itself, or in its own nature, odious and the proper object of disapprobation and abhorrence.²⁵

Men do will sin as sin, and so are the authors and actors of it. They love it as sin, and for evil ends and purposes. God does so to order things that, He permitting, sin will come to pass, for the sake of the great good that by his disposal shall be the consequence.²⁶

Niebuhr, likewise believing that the justice of God springs from love for His creatures, wrote: "the sense of justice is the foundation of the power required to challenge the power of tyranny."²⁷

God judges the world because there are violations of the law of life on every level of human achievement. God 'saves' the world because he has resources of mercy beyond his judgment. But mercy cannot express itself without taking justice seriously.²⁸

²⁵ The Salvation of All Men Strictly Examined (New Haven, 1760), pp. 39-40.

²⁶ Freedom of the Will (New York, 1856), p. 163.

²⁷ Faith and History (New York, 1949), p. 129.

²⁸ "A Faith for History's Greatest Crisis," Fortune, Vol. XXVI (July, 1942), p. 131.

In accord with Edwards, Niebuhr differentiates between God's justice and His love.

Justice is not love. Justice presupposes the conflict of life with life and seeks to mitigate it. Every relative justice therefor stands under the judgment of the law of love, but it is also an approximation of it.²⁹

The justice and the forgiveness of God are one, just as Father and Son are equally God. For the highest justice of God is the holiness of His love. It is love as law which man affronts and dims. Yet forgiveness and justice are not one, just as Father and Son are two.³⁰

Is God, then, the author of sin? Is each man's life predestined and without freedom of will to choose good or evil?

...if, by the author of sin, is meant the permitter, or not a hinderer of sin, and, at the same time, a disposer of the state of events, in such a manner, for wise, holy, and most excellent ends and purposes, that sin, if it be permitted or not hindered, will most certainly and infallibly follow: I say, if this be all that is meant, by being the author of sin, I do not deny that God is the author of sin....³¹

This is Edwards' answer to the first question. Niebuhr's is similar.

If God has created free spirits who have the capacity to defy Him in their freedom, He has created forms of life so independent that even the power of God, acting merely as power, cannot reach the final source of their defiance.

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Nature and Destiny, Vol. II (New York, 1943), p.56.

³¹

Edwards, Freedom of the Will (New York, 1856), p.157.

The divine power, the very structure of the world, the requirements for mutual living which are made part of the very character of human existence, all those are able to set an ultimate limit to man's defiance of the order of creation. The justice and the 'wrath' of God can prevent any human rebellion from developing its defiance to the point of ultimate triumph. The devil, according to Christian myth, is able to defy God but not absolutely. The divine order is supported by the divine power.³²

Again he wrote: "To recognize that only God can perfectly combine power and goodness is to understand that power is not evil of itself,;..."³³

Niebuhr believes that the final majesty of God consists in His freedom, "the power of mercy beyond judgment. By this freedom He involves Himself in the guilt and suffering of free men who have, in their freedom, come in conflict with the structural character of reality."³⁴

The crux of the cross is its revelation of the fact that the final power of God over man is derived from the self-imposed weakness does not derogate from the Majesty of God. His mercy is the Christian answer to the final problem of human existence. The worship of God is reverence toward the mysterious source and end of all of life's vitalities; and toward the mysterious source and end of all goodness.³⁵

³²
1946), Discerning the Signs of the Times (New York, p. 145.

³³
p. 22. Nature and Destiny, Vol. II (New York, 1943),

³⁴
Ibid., p. 71

³⁵
1946), Discerning the Signs of the Times, (New York, p. 134.

Like Niebuhr, Edwards believed that God's absolute freedom is limited only by His absolute goodness which causes Him to choose only those things, even sin, for his world which will bring the greatest ultimate benefit to mankind, His creatures. This divine necessity causes God to be free only to do right.

...it is agreeable to common sense to suppose that the glorified saints have not their freedom at all diminished in any respect; and that God himself has the highest possible freedom, according to the true and proper meaning of the term; and that he is, in the highest possible respect, an agent, [a moral agent] and active in the exercise of his infinite holiness; though he acts therein, in the highest degree, necessarily; and his actions of this kind are in the highest, most absolutely perfect manner, virtuous and praiseworthy; and are so, for that very reason, because they are most perfectly necessary.³⁶

..God must necessarily perfectly know, what is most worthy and valuable in itself, which, in the nature of things, is best and fittest to be done. And as this is most eligible in itself, He, being omniscient, must see it to be so: and being both omniscient and self-sufficient, cannot have any temptation to reject it, and so must necessarily will that which is best.³⁷

Edwards believed that "God has an absolute and certain foreknowledge of the free actions of moral agents."³⁸

³⁶

Freedom of the Will (New York, 1856), p. 136.

³⁷

Ibid., p. 168.

³⁸

Ibid., p. 61.

Like him, Niebuhr believes in the omniscience of God. Both men agree that the individual person, created with free will in the image of God, is free to misuse that liberty even though God foreknows - indeed, ordains - all his acts and thoughts. This furnishes another justification for the punishment of sin. Man chooses to sin, therefore he deserves to be punished for it or, conversely, to receive reward for doing well.

...man is entirely, perfectly and unspeakably different from a mere machine, in that he has reason and understanding, and has a faculty of Will, and so is capable of volition or choice; and in that, his Will is guided by the dictate or views of his understanding; and in that his external actions and behavior, and, in many respects, also his thoughts, and the exercises of his mind, are subject to his Will; so that he has liberty to act according to his choice, and do what he pleases; and by means of these things is capable of moral habits and moral acts, such inclinations and actions as according to the common sense of mankind, are worthy of praise, esteem, love and reward; or, on the contrary, of disesteem, detestation, indignation and punishment.³⁹

Like his Creator, the creature possesses a conditional freedom.

Concomitant with this faith in the unity of God's will and wisdom, man is interpreted as a unity of will in which human vitality, natural and spiritual, is set under the ordering will of God. No

pattern of human reason but only the will of God can be the principle of the form and order to which human life must be conformed.⁴⁰

In the Christian faith man's insignificance as a creature, involved in the process of nature and time, is lifted into significance by the mercy and power of God in which his life is sustained. But his significance as a free spirit is understood as subordinate to the freedom of God. His inclination to abuse his freedom, to overestimate his power and significance and to become everything is understood as the primal sin. It is because man is inevitably involved in this primal sin that he is bound to meet God first of all as a judge, who humbles his pride and brings his vain imagination to naught.⁴¹

It is this freedom of will which distinguishes man from animal and shows mankind to be akin to God. Edwards discussed this in Freedom of the Will.

It is manifest, the moral world is the end of the natural: the rest of the creation is but a house which God hath built, with furniture, for moral agents: and the good or bad state of the moral world depends on the improvement they make of their natural agency, and so depends on their volitions.⁴²

Niebuhr, in like manner, has written that "human life distinguishes itself from animal existence by its greater

⁴⁰
Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny, Vol. I (New York, 1941), p. 29.

⁴¹
Ibid., p. 92.

⁴²
p. 72.

freedom and the consequent possibility of the misuse of
⁴³
 freedom.

The freedom of man consists not only,
 as it were, of the windows of mind
 which look out from his second story;
 but also of vents on every level which
 allow every natural impulse a freedom
 which animals do not know.⁴⁴

Niebuhr believes that "man is free enough to violate
 both the necessities of nature and the logical systems
⁴⁵
 of reason.

Both Edwards and Niebuhr differentiate between the
 mind, which they conceive to be the soul, and the body
 which instantly obeys the dictates of the mind. Obviously
 the mind wills, or chooses, that which appears to it
 to be best and in that way is similar to the will of
 God. "A man never, in any instance, wills anything con-
 trary to his desires, or desires any thing contrary to
⁴⁶
 his Will." Niebuhr calls man "the creature of necessity
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 and the child of freedom."

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Discerning the Signs of the Times (New York,
 1946), p. 41.

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⁴⁴
Nature and Destiny, Vol. I (New York, 1941),
 p. 40.

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⁴⁵
Ibid., p. 124.

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⁴⁶
 Edwards, Freedom of the Will (New York, 1856),
 p. 2.

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⁴⁷
 "The Fulfilment of Life" from Beyond Tragedy,
 New York, Scribner's, 1937, quoted in Contemporary
Religious Thought, op. cit., p. 374.

Niebuhr agrees with Edwards that man's misuse of his freedom, caused by his ego or pride, is his sin.

Man is a sinner. His sin is defined as rebellion against God. The Christian estimate of human evil is so serious precisely because it places evil at the very centre of human personality: in the will...His sin is the wrong use of his freedom and its consequent destruction.⁴⁸

Sin is, in short, the consequences of man's inclination to usurp the prerogatives of God to think more highly of himself than he ought to think, thus making destructive use of his freedom by not observing the limits to which a creaturely freedom is bound.⁴⁹

Man, having been endowed with the power of reason, seeks a way to escape the primal curse, a means of justifying himself in the sight of God. Niebuhr and Edwards, believing that reason is involved in the decisions made by the will, have deduced that the spirit of God may operate upon the understanding or reason, and thus upon the will, by means of the emotions or affections.

Niebuhr believes that man will never be wholly reasonable, therefore the religious impulse is necessary to raise him above his natural self.

Life itself is not rational. Reason may refine and qualify our central

⁴⁸
p. 16. Nature and Destiny, Vol. I (New York, 1941),

⁴⁹
Faith and History (New York, 1949), p. 121.

loyalties, but the loyalties themselves are religions because they spring from either primary or inherited conceptions of the meaning of life and the goal of existence, these invariably implying an ultrarational affirmation.

Reason controls impulse, but religion transfigures it. Reason is never as creative and never as dangerous as religion.⁵⁰

That religion, which may be apprehended by the reason, is yet irrational is conceded by both Niebuhr and Edwards.

Indeed, it is a glorious argument of the divinity of the holy Scriptures, that they teach such doctrines, which in one age and another, through the blindness of men's minds, and strong prejudices of their hearts are rejected, as most absurd and unreasonable, by the wise and great men of the world; which yet, when they are most carefully and strictly examined, appear to be exactly agreeable to the most demonstrable, certain and natural dictates of reason.⁵¹

...religion adds a touch of madness, precisely that touch of madness which when combined with common sense, produces a compound of wisdom. Without the touch of madness all ethical life governed by reason sinks deeply into common sense and therefore it degenerates more and more into an enlightened self-interest, a prudent

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The Contribution of Religion to Social Work
(New York, 1932), p. 58.

51

Edwards, Freedom of the Will (New York, 1856), p. 182.

selfishness.⁵²

It is this element of divine madness which makes it necessary for the emotions to be involved in the revelation of God's will to men. Edwards and Niebuhr agree that true virtue or holiness springs from the heart rather than from the head.

Religion is, on the whole, an affair of the will and the emotions, rather than of the mind. At its best, it transfigures the will, giving the whole of man's character a foundation in the will to do good. At its worst, it effects only transient emotions and sinks very easily into sentimentality.⁵³

Edwards, especially in his writing concerning the Great Awakening, stressed the close relationship of the affections and the will.

All Acts of the Affections of the Soul are in some Sense Acts of the Will, and all Acts of the Will are Acts of the Affections. All Exercises of the Soul's Appetition or Aversion; or, which is the same Thing, of its Love or Hatred.⁵⁴

The foregoing theories concerning the role of the

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Niebuhr, "The Ethical Resources of the Christian Religion" from Education Adequate for Modern Times, New York, Association Press, 1931, quoted in Contemporary Religious Thought, op. cit., p. 52.

⁵³

Niebuhr, The Contribution of Religion to Social Work (New York, 1932), p. 247.

⁵⁴

Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival... (Edinburgh, 1743), p. 5.

affections explains the predilection of Niebuhr and Edwards for occasional terrifying and frequent pessimistic sermons. In his Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England Edwards stated that ministers appeal to the affections through the understanding. He also maintained that any benefit accomplished by sermons is effected at the time of hearing, rather than by a later memory of them and that it is all right to frighten sinners in order to enlighten them. Niebuhr agrees with this theory.

The more men and nations fear the wrath of God, the more can they be brought under the sway of divine mercy. The more they anticipate doom, the more can they avoid it.⁵⁵

As a result of this action of God's spirit upon the affections and thence upon the understanding and the will, man develops a conscience. He becomes able to discern between good and evil and develops a feeling of guilt when he chooses to sin. Edwards defined conscience as

...a natural sensation of a certain fitness or agreeableness, which there is in uniting such moral evil..viz., a being or doing wrong with the Will, and resentment in others, and pain inflicted on the person in whom this moral evil is.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Discerning the Signs of the Times (New York, 1946), p. 72.

⁵⁶ Freedom of the Will (New York, 1856), p. 132.

Niebuhr says that "The kingdom which is not of this world is always in this world in man's uneasy conscience." ⁵⁷

In investing the heart of the cosmos with an ethical will, the religious imagination unites its awe before the infinitude and majesty of the physical world with its reverence for the ethical principle of the inner life. The inner world of conscience, which is in constant rebellion against the outer world of nature is made supreme over the world of nature by the fiat of religion.

The religious conscience is sensitive not only because its imperfections are judged in the light of the absolute but because its obligations are felt to be obligations toward a person. The holy will is a personal will.⁵⁸

For what the individual conscience feels when it lifts itself above the world of nature and the system of collective relationships in which the human spirit remains under the power of nature, is not a luxury but a necessity of the soul.⁵⁹

From this action of the spirit of God upon the soul of man springs a desire for a closer union of the two. Niebuhr and Edwards have both believed in predestination, yet both also have believed that man is possessed of a limited freedom of the will. Man is free to misuse his freedom but he is also free to repent of his sins.

⁵⁷
Beyond Tragedy, p. 279, quoted in D. R. Davies, op. cit., p. 97.

⁵⁸
Moral Man and Immoral Society (New York, 1932), pp. 52-3.

⁵⁹
Ibid., p. 276f.

Revelation of God's will to man through the world of nature and the Scriptures depends upon the sensitivity of his emotions. Niebuhr has listed three elements of revelation, the steps which prepare man for salvation.

The first is the sense of reverence for a majesty and of dependence upon an ultimate source of being. The second is the sense of moral obligation laid upon one from beyond oneself and of moral unworthiness before a judge. The third, most problematic of the elements in religious experience is the longing for forgiveness.⁶⁰

These were the very steps which Edwards described in writing of his own conversion.

Neither Niebuhr nor Edwards prescribed exact requirements for the conversion experience, but the latter stated the requisites for a profession of Christianity as a repentance for one's sins, an understanding of the beliefs professed, and a demonstration of practicing them. Sincere repentance and the showing of faith by works were stressed by both men.

The means of salvation is Christ, the second Adam, a perfect man again on earth who propitiated for the sins of all mankind by his death on the cross. Men, by believing on Christ and attempting to learn and do God's will may escape the primal curse through the grace of God.

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Nature and Destiny, Vol. I (New York, 1941), p. 13.

Edwards differentiated between common or natural grace as evidenced by a natural conscience, moral codes, duties, and virtues and the special or supernatural grace which is granted to those whom God has elected to be saved.

...there is a two-fold image of God in Man, his moral or spiritual Image, which is his Holiness, that in the Image of God's moral Excellency, (which Image was lost by the Fall) and God's natural Image, consisting in Men's Reason and Understanding, his natural Ability, and Dominion over the Creatures, which is the Image of God's natural Attributes.⁶¹

That intelligent Being whose Will is truly right and lovely, he is morally good or excellent.

This moral Excellency of an intelligent Being, when it is true and real, and not only external or merely [*sic*] Seeming and Counterfeit, is Holiness.⁶²

There is no virtue, on the other hand, in acts prompted by self-love or natural conscience.

...whatever benevolence or generosity toward mankind, or other virtues or moral qualifications which go by that name, any are possessed of that are not attended with a love of God which is altogether above them and to which they are subordinate and on which they are dependent, there is nothing of the

61

A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections
(Edinburgh, 1743), p. 149.

62

Ibid., p. 148.

nature of true virtue or religion in them.⁶³

Niebuhr wrote:

There is enough natural grace in the human heart to respond to the challenge of the real message in the gospel - and enough original sin in human nature to create opposition to it.⁶⁴

Niebuhr defines grace in the following paragraph:

'Grace' would correspond to ideal possibility of perfect love, in which all inner contradictions within the self, and all conflicts and tensions between the self and the other are overcome by the complete obedience of all wills to the will of God.⁶⁵

Edwards described this action of God's grace upon the soul of man. He said that the Spirit of God or the Holy Ghost, "unites himself with the mind of a saint, takes him for his temple, actuates and influences him as a new supernatural principle of life and action."⁶⁶

Niebuhr conceives of this saving grace of Christ as "the final revelation of the personality of God."

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Edwards, A Treatise on the Nature of True Virtue quoted in A.V.G. Allen, op. cit., p. 322/.

⁶⁴

Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic (Chicago, 1929), p. 41.

⁶⁵

Nature and Destiny, Vol. II (New York, 1943), p. 246.

⁶⁶

"A Divine and Supernatural Light" in Faust and Johnson, op. cit., p. 103/.

The good news of the gospel is that God takes the sinfulness of man into Himself; and overcomes in His own heart what cannot be overcome in human life, since human life remains within the vicious circle of sinful self-glorification on every level of moral advance.⁶⁷

Contrary to popular opinion, both Edwards and Niebuhr have believed that all men are given the opportunity to be saved, but that their freedom of will makes it possible to choose ways of living, by which they will forfeit their claim to salvation and will be punished for the original sin rather than saved through the grace of Christ. Edwards' doctrine of the elect is not inconsistent with this belief. God, the omniscient, selects and therefore knows aforetime which of his creatures will choose the way of salvation and which will not. Since all men committed with Adam the original sin, all are sinners until they choose to follow Christ's teachings and thus are saved.

...all men are by Christ put into salvable circumstances, yet through their obstinate impenitence and unbelief they may fail of this great salvation.⁶⁸

The only certain Foundation which

⁶⁷
Nature and Destiny, Vol. I (New York, 1941),
 p. 142.

⁶⁸
 Edwards, The Salvation of All Men Strictly Examined (New Haven, 1760), p. 261.

any Person has to believe that he is invited to partake of the Blessings of the Gospel, is that the Word of God declares that Persons so qualified as he is are invited, and God who declares it is true and cannot lie. If a Sinner be once convinced of the Veracity of God, and that the Scriptures are his Word, he'll need no more to convince and satisfy him that he is invited; for the Scriptures are full of Invitations to Sinners, to the chief of Sinners, to come and partake of the Benefits of the Gospel. He won't want any new speaking of God to him, what he hath spoken already will be enough with him.⁶⁹

Niebuhr's concern for those whom the large prestige - seeking congregations refuse to admit to their company is one evidence that he too believe that salvation is offered to all men.

Edwards and Niebuhr have both emphasized the fact that belief in and practice of Christianity is the only means of salvation and that this salvation is attained not by any worthiness of man, but solely through the mercy of a loving God.

The faith through which we understand the meaning of our existence and the fulfillment of that meaning in the divine mercy is, ultimately, a gift of grace and not the consequences of a sophisticated analysis of the signs of the times.⁷⁰

Edwards expressed the same opinion two centuries

⁶⁹ Edwards, A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections (Boston, 1746), p. 83.

⁷⁰ Niebuhr, Discerning the Signs of the Times (New York, 1946), p. 20.

earlier.

The scripture knows of no salvation but that which is founded on the mere favour of God forgiving the sins of men, according to the riches of his grace, and justifying them freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ.

And pardon or forgiveness, which is a discharge from deserved punishment, is, in its very nature an act of grace, and is, in scripture, always spoken of as such, and as dispensed through Christ only.⁷¹

The revelation of God to the world in the life and death of Christ is the culmination of the revelation man receives through the world of nature and points the way toward a love for all mankind as well as for God. Niebuhr has frequently discussed this point.

And Jesus, in the sublime naivete⁷ of the religious imagination at its best, interprets the impartiality of nature toward the evil and the good,... as a revelation of the love of God. The religious imagination, seeking an ultimate good and point of reference for the moral urges of life, finds support for its yearning after the absolute in the infinitude and majesty of the physical world. The omnipotence of God, as seen in the world of nature, invests his moral character with the quality of the absolute and transfigures it into holiness.⁷²

71

The Salvation of All Men Strictly Examined
(New Haven, 1760), pp. 13-14.

72

Moral Man and Immoral Society (New York, 1932),
p. 53.

This impartiality of God's love was also cited by Edwards who said, "the Grace of Christ don't behold Iniquity in his People, imputes not what is amiss in 'em to them, but to Sin that dwells in them, and to Satan that influences them."⁷³ This is the example set for men in their dealings with one another. Niebuhr has said that "every man sees in Christ not only what he is and ought to be but also the true reality to which his own life stands in contradiction."⁷⁴

The same Christ who is accepted by faith as the revelation of the character of God is also regarded as the revelation of the true character of man. Christ has this two-fold significance because love has this double significance. 'God is love,' which is to say that the ultimate reality upon which the created world depends and by which it is judged is not an 'unmoved mover' or an indifferentiated eternity, but the vital and creative source of life and of the harmony of life with life. But the essence of human nature is also love, which is to say that for man, who is involved in the unities and harmonies of nature but who also transcends them in his freedom, there can be no principle of harmony short of the love in which free personality is united in freedom with other persons.⁷⁵

⁷³ Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival... (Edinburgh, 1743), p. 169.

⁷⁴ Christianity and Power Politics (New York, 1940), p. 37.

⁷⁵ Nature and Destiny, Vol. I (New York, 1941), p. 146.

The humility engendered in man by Christ's compassion also encourages in him a spirit of benevolence toward his fellow men who are, after all, no greater sinners than he.

Pure Christian Humility disposes a Person to take notice of every Thing that is in any Respect good in others, and to diminish their Failings; but to have his Eye chiefly on those Things that are bad in Himself, and to take much Notice of every Thing that aggravates them.⁷⁶

Niebuhr, like Edwards, emphasizes the humility of Christians and the necessity for constant self-examination as well as frequent re-appraisal of one's creed.

I make no apology for being critical of what I love. No one wants a love which is based upon illusions, and there is no reason why we should not love a profession and yet be critical of it.⁷⁷

These attitudes of repentance which recognize that the evil in the foe is also in the self, and these impulses of love which claim kinship with all men in spite of social conflict, are the peculiar gifts of religion to the human spirit...they require a sublime madness which disregards immediate appearances and emphasizes profound and ultimate unities.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Edwards, Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival (Edinburgh, 1743), p. 116.

⁷⁷ Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic (Chicago, 1929), p. xii.

⁷⁸ Moral Man and Immoral Society (New York, 1932), p. 255.

When love for all mankind has been developed through a faith in Christ, men are enabled to see God's image in each other's best characteristics. Edwards wrote that "we see the most proper image of the beauty of Christ when we see beauty in the human soul."⁷⁹

Niebuhr has commented thus:

The Christian faith in God's self-disclosure, culminating in the revelation of Christ, is thus the basis of the Christian concept of personality and individuality. In terms of this faith man can understand himself as a unity of will which finds its end in the will of God.⁸⁰

Both Edwards and Niebuhr have warned that the conflict of good with evil is not ended by conversion.

But many in these Days have got into a strange antisciptural Way of having all their Striving and Wrestling over before they are converted; and so having an easy Time of it afterwards, to sit down and enjoy their Sloth and Indolence; as those that now have a Supply of their Wants, and are become rich and full.⁸¹

The fact that the discovery of sin invariably leads to the Pharisaic illusion that such a discovery guarantees sinlessness in subsequent actions is a

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"Observations on the Scriptural Economy of the Trinity" in A.V.G. Allen, op. cit., p. 356.

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Nature and Destiny, Vol. I (New York, 1941), p. 15.

⁸¹

Edwards, A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections (Boston, 1746), p. 266.

revelation of the way in which freedom becomes an accomplice of sin. It is at this point that the final battle between humility and human self-esteem is fought.⁸²

Niebuhr says further that "A real faith in God must arise out of conflict with the world, otherwise it is the world and not God in whom one reposes confidence."⁸³

This other-worldly viewpoint is at the root of all the beliefs of these two men. Both believe that evil can finally be overcome by good only at the end of history when the last judgment occurs, and that all our efforts to imitate our Saviour are means to that end.

To say that the innocence of Adam before the fall can be restored only in terms of the perfection of Christ is to assert that life can approach its original innocence only by aspiring to its unlimited end.⁸⁴

Edwards, too, believed that man's original innocence could only be regained through the ultimate triumph of Christ.

It is impossible that all things should be brought back, in all respects, to their original state. All mankind cannot now live in the

⁸² Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny, Vol. I (New York, 1941), p. 263.

⁸³ "Let Liberal Churches Stop Fooling Themselves!", Christian Century, Vol. XL, Pt. 1 (March 25, 1931), p. 403.

⁸⁴ Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny, Vol. II (New York, 1943), p. 77.

garden of Eden. It cannot be again fact, that all the knowledge of God possessed by man, should be such as is derived from either the works of creation and providence, or from immediate intercourse of God and angels with men. Nor can it be ever again true, that God is propitious to men immediately, without a mediator.

...as the original state was a state of order, regularity and due subordination, wherein every person and thing were in their proper places; so in this sense all things will finally be brought back to their original state, and order will be again restored to the universe.⁸⁵

Niebuhr agrees with Edwards' conception of the final triumph of God over the devil as a restoration of order to the universe, a final organized unity of Creator, creation, and creature.

Faith in God is faith in some ultimate unity of life, in some final comprehensive purpose which holds all the various, frequently contradictory, realms of coherence and meaning together.⁸⁶

Other ideas of the two men coincide. Both preached on evangelical type of religion, both believed it possible that America might be the nation destined to lead the

⁸⁵ The Salvation of All Men Strictly Examined (New Haven, 1760), p. 203.

⁸⁶ Discerning the Signs of the Times (New York, 1946), p. 154.

way toward the establishment of God's kingdom on earth, and both favored a separation of church and state. Both men warned against the temptation to sin produced by too great material wealth, emphasized the importance of family worship, and regarded the young people as the hope of the Christian world.

The differences expressed in the writings of Edwards and Niebuhr are insignificant in relation to their principal beliefs. Had the two men been contemporaries, they might conceivably have agreed upon most of these points. History as the fulfillment of scriptural prophecy, freedom of religion, and racial relations are subjects upon which there is a discrepancy in their ideas.

The principal doctrines in the creeds of Edwards and Niebuhr - the absolute sovereignty of God, the original sin inherent in all mankind, the limited freedom of human and divine will, the offer of salvation to all men through Christ's death on the cross, and the belief in the ultimate triumph of God over sin - are identical except for minor differences in emphasis. Both creeds are based upon an ethical dualism and terminate with a divine unification of the paradoxical contradictions inherent in them. Both men have been more concerned with thoughts of the world to be than with the things of this world. It is fitting that Reinhold Niebuhr, whose religious creed

and Christian living are so similar to that of Edwards and who, like him, is often spoken of as a prophet, should be called the twentieth century Jonathan Edwards.

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