

NEO-ORTHODOXY AND THE YOUNGER MINISTERS

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This analysis of the neo-orthodox tendencies among younger ministers is based upon sources which are not available to the readers of this journal. These sources consist in papers read by the men involved, upon theological discussions in which we severally engaged. The designation "younger ministers" includes men within the 25-40 year age range. These men serve churches which vary greatly in size and influence. Some of them are located in cities and belong to the \$5,000 salary group; others are rural ministers, some of whom receive salaries no larger than \$1,200. The membership of the churches they serve ranges from 100 to 1700.

The ministers we have in mind are specific persons. Furthermore, the opinions expressed in these pages are not based upon vague impressions of what these men may think. They are based upon careful analysis of specific papers, sermons and discussions.

The list of names we have before us numbers above 25. These men come from almost every section of the United States. Graduates of most of the well-known theological seminaries are represented.

The men do not seem to reflect the view-points of their respective seminaries. This may be because some of the seminaries do not have a defined view-point and thus could not be so reflected. On the other hand, one man who is a product of a college and seminary whose view-point is definitely neo-orthodox holds a distinctly different point of view himself. It has been observed before that a student may be a reactionary and take for himself a view-point almost the exact opposite of that held by his teachers. Some of these men would justify that observation.

We venture the opinion that not many of the men who hold the neo-or-

thodox position do so because of seminary training. Nor have the ministers been profoundly influenced by the widely recognized champions of neo-orthodoxy. The men from Union Theological Seminary speak respectfully of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich but they do not wax warm in their devotion to the theology these men expound. As a matter of fact, the neo-orthodox younger ministers try to avoid any identification with the so-called neo-orthodox leaders.

It is required of us that we define what we mean by neo-orthodoxy. The term has wide usage but anyone who reflects upon the difficulty of defining "orthodoxy" will immediately appreciate the difficulty in defining "neo-orthodoxy."

However difficult the task may be, it has been attempted by Mr. George La Piana in his contribution to a book, *The Interpretation of History*, edited by Joseph R. Strayer.¹ Mr. La Piana's chapter is not primarily concerned with theology although it is interested in it. It is a specific effort to discover the nature of orthodoxy whether it be in art, music, literature or theology.

In his judgment, orthodoxy is based upon certain myths which we shall presently discuss. He uses the term "myth" in such a way that we feel justified in offering the dictionary definition as meaning what Mr. La Piana has in mind, namely; "a conjectural narrative which is without basis in fact."

The myths of orthodoxy are listed as follows:

1. The myth of a divine revelation which took place as an external historical fact. That is, it took place in time and space but not as an event which had antecedent or subsequent

¹ Princeton University Press, 1943, pp. 186 ff.

historical relationships upon which its existence depended. Through this divine revelation men discover truths which cannot be discovered in any other way.

2. The myth of divine authority. This may exist in many forms or combinations of the political-moral-religious aspects of life, but its basic feature is the absolute imperative of some particular command which is universal in its application. It draws its authoritative quality from the doctrine of its divine origin.

3. The myth of the golden age and man's fall from it. This fall from perfection transformed the perfect life into a degraded one. Redemption from this degradation cannot originate in mankind, but must come from God through a divine agent.

4. The myth of the chosen people, by which a people, either in the ethnic sense or as members of a religious institutional body are considered the object of special and exclusive predilection by the superhuman powers and charged by them with an exclusive mission in the world.

These myths, then, are the characteristic features of orthodoxy. They are also the characteristic features of neo-orthodoxy. In this paper the position is taken that anyone who holds in one form or another the above four interpretations of existence is a member of the neo-orthodox group. This classification is arbitrary, but it could be more so than it is. Generally speaking, the acceptance of the first myth alone could serve as an adequate instrument of classification.

Someone may object that the term "myth" should not be applied to the above four generalizations about the nature of history. To this we may reply that the younger ministers under consideration do not object to its use. They are willing to permit both the term and its definition as a "conjectural narrative which is without basis in demon-

strable fact" but they will then expect one to follow them in their thinking while they expound the nature of their epistemology. They hold Plato's view about the "myth." That is, the "myth" deals with things which lie beyond reason. It does not profess to give an exact account of reality, but in its own manner it brings us nearer to ultimate reality than any reasoning can.

The younger ministers under discussion do not neatly outline their positions as we have done, and it may represent an over-simplification, but their thinking fits into the general pattern of the four myths in a remarkably clear fashion. Let us consider each myth in its turn and the younger ministers' representation of thought which gives expression to the myth.

1. The myth of the divine revelation which took place as an external historical fact is not confined to Christian theology but it has occupied a place of primary prominence throughout Christian history. These men, in the main, believe that Jesus stands as an extra-historical revelation of God. They think of his birth, ministry and death as a supernatural act which broke through history and provided a revelation of truths which could be secured in no other way. Some of them believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus while others speak of a "spiritual" resurrection. Almost all of them use the word "resurrection" at Easter-tide.

Sometimes actions speak louder than words. A minister who is Unitarian in belief was proposed for membership in a discussion group which is limited in size to fifteen ministerial members. His name was rejected because, "He does not believe in Jesus." One is correct in assuming that this means, "He does not believe that Jesus is the revelation of God." Thus the myth becomes more than a belief, it becomes a prerequisite of social approval.

This belief in the myth of a supernatural revelation which lies outside

of history determines certain features of neo-orthodox approach to other problems. One of the most marked features of its followers is their impatience with New Testament scholarship. They are impatient with those scholars who discuss the theological ideas of the New Testament in terms of their social origins. For example, if one proposes that the author of Mark was seeking to answer practical questions raised by people in Rome and that he did so by placing statements upon the lips of Jesus, there is a general rejection of the suggestion on the grounds that the method of study which leads to this point of view has failed to prove its merits. One has reason to believe that the faith these men have in the myth of the revelation determines their basis of approach to the New Testament.

To make the story worse, there are grounds for fearing that many of these men reject the findings of New Testament scholarship without knowing what those findings are. It is a matter of record that they roundly reject the "Chicago School" without being able to name an individual scholar of that "school," if there is one!

The careful and critical study of the New Testament does not seem necessary to those who accept the myth of the supernatural revelation. This has always been true in some degree. Luther taught that "the truth of the gospel determines what is true in the Scriptures." The neo-orthodox ministers take from the New Testament whatever they need to support their already accepted myth of the revelation, for the revelation is the source of the truth.

This point of view would produce many difficulties for them if they were to examine it carefully. For instance, how does one know of the revelation? Were you there? Did you see it? If not, where did you learn of it?

Some of them might reply, "I learn

of it in the Bible" but others would say, "The content of the revelation is a discovery of faith." This also produces its complication in the form of another question, "You mean, then, that the revelation does not really reveal, for faith must reveal the revelation?" To such pressing questions there usually comes a silence which may be accompanied by an expression of long-suffering indulgence in the lack of perception present in the inquirer's mind.

On the list before us, there are two men who do not accept this myth as a basic feature of their theology. The others hold to it as the source of truth and light. The nature of the "truth" which they receive is not exactly clear. It does not compose a body of facts. Perhaps it is some other kind of "truth," but whatever it is, it cannot be made the subject of rational discussion or yield itself to attempts at verification. The whole question of what the specific content of the revelation is has not challenged their thinking very much. In spite of the fact that Wilhelm Pauck does not consider Emil Brunner a "neo-orthodox" theologian, leaving Karl Barth as the only contemporary theologian in that category,² it is well to remember that Professor Brunner's last book, *The Divine-Human Encounter* is, in part, an attempt to define the nature and content of the divine revelation, but Brunner does not emerge from his study with specific data. We might add that according to our definition, Professor Brunner definitely belongs in the ranks of the neo-orthodox.

2. The myth of divine authority of some kind, either religious, moral or political, takes as many different forms as there are religions, moral or political groups. The authority of Heaven has ever been called upon to vouch for the validity of some claim which men of power wish to impose upon men

²*The Christian Century*, March 1, 1944, p.273.

with lesser power. The wicked and the righteous seek to win their way by saying, "I do the will of God."

The problem of the will of God is, of course, solved by those who believe that the revelation completely exposes His will to the human mind. The younger ministers do not claim to know the will of God in every detail, but there are some instances which suggest that this is almost done.

The pacifists in the group justify their position on the assumption that it is the will of God for them to be such. This is, of course, an ancient custom. Great excitement was once caused by the suggestion that it might be proper for a person to be a pacifist in one situation and a militarist in another. This, most of the men would say, is impossible. God's will does not require one thing here and another there! God's will may require one man to be a pacifist and another man to be a militarist, but any particular man should be either one or the other!

Such thinking may be rooted in some conception of the value in holding an ideal through thick and thin, but even so, the determination to remain true to one's conviction is usually a product of the notion that it is God's will and thus authoritative. This is cited merely to illustrate the general feeling that there is a divine authority which is absolute.

There are two forms of this myth which have not been mentioned in the usual discussions which consider the matter of authority. These younger ministers are intensely interested in church union. The interest on the part of the young Presbyterians who look forward to union with the Episcopal church is very great. Is it too much to wonder whether a portion of this interest may be associated with the desire to become more authoritative through affiliation with the apostolic succession? This may be a minor matter in itself, but it carries some significant suggestions with it.

The other form we wish to mention is in connection with the recent emphasis upon "the moral law." This emphasis emerged in the Catholic broadcasts concerned with the basis of peace. It was soon adopted by Protestant speakers and within a very short period became a part of the vocabulary of the younger ministers. The "moral law" was not clearly defined, but whatever it was, it was the basis for authority and as such, gave emphasis to the "six pillars of peace."

These men believe that there is something within the universe which is known as "moral law." They forget that laws are descriptions of behavior and not objects or events of existence. They cannot seem to remember that a "law" is a human thing; that it is a construction of the mind designed to describe something that has been observed or inferred from observation.

That they do not define what this "moral law" is should not worry one, for it does not worry them. It is there and can be known whenever it needs to be known. In this area, there is a large mystical element present in their thinking.

One further word needs to be said. These men feel that the church is the chosen vehicle of expression through which the moral law will become known, but the political state is the power which will see to its enforcement. At least two of the ministers who are subjects of this discussion often seem to believe that the "moral law" will see to its own enforcement. However, if they were charged with holding this belief they would probably deny it with good faith, for it is not likely that they are conscious of this aspect of their theology.

3. The third myth is concerned with the golden age and man's fall from a perfect or nearly perfect state. This fall of man resulted in a corruption of his nature; the restoration of his being, his redemption, can be realized only

through the efforts of a divine agent.

This myth represents a familiar pattern and there are unlimited illustrations of its development. In the minds of the younger ministers it does not take on the literal pattern followed by some of the groups which use the book of Genesis as a theological proof-book. Rather, it follows the generalized patterns as found in poetry, hymns, sermons and essays. This is to say that it is not systematized. This makes discussion difficult for the men cannot be pinned down on the subject although it dominates the background of their thinking. The language of "the fall" is there but the meaning of the terms employed vary from man to man.

The real nature and meaning of the acceptance of this myth is discovered, not by attempting to discuss it with them, but by discussing the meaning of salvation. In such a discussion a single emphasis soon develops. These neo-orthodox thinkers believe that human salvation must come from non-human sources.

These men are very sceptical about the real effectiveness of religious education. They have had a steady decline in church school attendance and this may influence their views, but there appears to be something more profound than that. They know that religious education, as we have known it for the most part, failed to make much, if any, difference in the fundamental behaviors and attitudes of people.

The "failure" of religious education is a favorite topic of discussion. It should be recognized that "failure" does not mean "not valuable" but it does mean that religious education did not accomplish what was expected of it.

This fact is a bitter well of disappointment, for some of these men have given unlimited time and energy to religious education. Having now lost faith in the power of education to transform life, they have come to the con-

clusion that what men cannot do by education, God must do through some agent. They are now turning to an acceptance of Mr. La Piana's third myth.

There is another indication that such a trend is going on. Five years ago the younger ministers were studying psychology. Some of the men on our list have done extensive graduate work in schools of good reputation. Several have worked in hospitals for the mentally ill. At least one of these men has gone through a period when his waiting room was filled with "patients." He doesn't work that way any more. Why? He lost faith in the method. Within the past two months we have discussed the matter at great length. He now believes that people have to be saved by a visitation from God, and that it must come through a non-human agent! The younger ministers are turning away from reliance upon psychology.

There is yet another indication of a return to the myth. These men are talking about revival meetings. It makes history seem strange when a Presbyterian discusses the possibility of a revival meeting, especially when he does so with an Episcopalian. We have heard it happen recently and the idea was rather warmly considered.

There are other signs of a return to the myth that man's redemption from his fallen estate must be accomplished by means of a divine agent but these suggestions are sufficient to indicate a definite trend among the younger ministers.

4. The fourth myth of orthodoxy, and hence of neo-orthodoxy, is that of the "chosen people" whose welfare is the object of special concern on the part of superhuman powers.

This concept enters the thinking of these men in their judgment that the church is charged with an exclusive mission in the world and that this exclusive mission is a special consideration of God, who will, in due time, secure its realization.

There is something splendidly optimistic about such a belief, but it is not the type of belief which derives its convincing qualities from any positive evidence whatsoever. There is no real assurance that the church will survive in any of its known forms or that it will accomplish many of its announced goals. This does not mean that it should not survive or that it should cease from seeking those goals, but it is a brutal fact that we have no reason to suppose that the continuing existence of the institution or the accomplishment of its goals is assured.

These men would hesitate to say that the nation is bound to survive and that it will secure its announced goals, for that would be equal to saying that God has chosen the nation and assured its arrival at the goals. Yet this is what the younger ministers are saying about the church.

What are the goals which will thus be reached? This question produces confusion. How does one know the church will continue forever? This question produces amazement that anyone would ask it.

Some of these ministers will say that the church was founded by Jesus to proclaim salvation and that God will bless its efforts. Some of them deny that Jesus founded the church, but they say that Christ is the living Church and that as often as He (or It) is crucified, God will raise Him (or It) again. Only one man within this group thinks of the church in terms of its social origins and evaluates it upon that basis. All of the others hold more or less mystical views about the nature of the church and these views seem to fall within the category of the myth of the chosen people. This is one of the seldom observed features of neo-orthodoxy.

So much for the four myths as they emerge in the thinking of these ministers who represent, in all probability, the majority of our younger American ministers.

Is it possible to answer the question, "Why do these men believe these things?"

Someone may say at once, "They believe these things because they are true." It is impossible to argue with such an affirmation, for those who accept the four myths do not admit that they can be tested by the standards of truth applied to all other proposed answers and solutions to the questions of existence. Those who accept the four myths declare them to lie outside of the ordinary method of measurement by which truth is judged. For them, the four myths reside in the realm of faith, not in the domain of reason.

We refuse to entertain the possibility of such an escape from the problem. There is an explanation for this widespread adherence to a theology which rests upon these four myths. The four myths represent one of the most beautiful and completely rounded dreams ever presented to the human mind. Behind and beneath them there is all the room in the world for an imaginative escape from reality. These myths provide an opportunity for the wanderings of excited fancy or offer refuge to the tormented minds of the bruised reeds which men so often resemble. The four myths have become a part of the mental habit, or climate, of the human race. No matter where the minister may turn, he encounters this mental habit in one form or another. It is an atmosphere of the human mind.

Alfred North Whitehead once observed that "human life is driven forward by its dim apprehension of notions too general for existing language."³ This suggestion may be interpreted in two ways. It may suggest that the notions so dimly apprehended today turn out to be the truths of tomorrow—and history bears witness that this is often true. On the other hand, the suggestion of Whitehead may

³ *Adventures of Ideas*, London, Cambridge University Press, p. 29.

be taken to mean that a notion has more power if it is expressed in such general terms that specific meanings are avoided or neglected.

If the minister preaches in the language and thought patterns of these myths the people can understand him in a general and dimly outlined fashion. Also, when he preaches in terms of these myths he can let his poetic impulses move in any direction with abandon. This has both its good and bad points. No doubt preaching is released from bondage when it is released from fact and delivered into the realm of fancy, but one may question whether it is a freedom that can exist without peril.

These ministers are very busy and quite tired. They have been given organizational responsibility which is heavy indeed. In most cases their organizations need more public support and approval than they now enjoy. The fatigue of endless activity does not encourage study and reflection. The demands of the organizations make public approval an important element in making decisions on every subject, including theology. Delivering one's soul to the congregation affects one's peace of mind adversely even when the minister and his people are in agreement. When they do not agree, it is painful beyond imagination. A minister who does not preach in the language of the four myths faces the prospects of some wakeful nights.

Most of these men began to preach before reaching maturity. Some of them have not, and will not, reach maturity. They stopped their movement toward maturity when they came to the conclusion that the congregation does not desire to embark on a voyage seeking new truth. Now they know that the people want answers and not questions. Sometimes this means nothing more or less than a demand that congregational opinions be confirmed from the pulpit—or else. The retreat into neo-orthodoxy

is accepted as the only alternative to an outright clash with the congregation. The congregations have not been trained to think forward but they have been trained to "defend the faith."

It would not be fair to attempt an evaluation of the more personal reasons these men may have for holding neo-orthodox positions. However, it is proper to indicate again that these men are not neo-orthodox because of the influence of so-called leaders. Neo-orthodoxy may be a movement, but it has not been born through the efforts of leaders. The movement has simply given the leaders an audience. Sidney Hook reaches the conclusion that the leader may influence a movement to some extent, but that any major trend within a large society must have a better explanation than simply "the leader did it."⁴ We agree.

At a meeting where twelve of these men were present someone mentioned Niebuhr's Gifford Lectures and asked if anyone had read them. There was a good laugh and then one man said, "We don't need to read them, and besides, who could?"

One man said he was reading the lectures. Knowing the man, one wonders how far he got before he quit. Books by Barth and Brunner, for example, must sell or the publishers would not continue to offer them, but that they are being read by the younger ministers is open to question. The judgment that the neo-orthodox spokesmen of prominence, as well as such neo-scholastic thinkers as Gilson and Maritain, have not had much influence may need correction, but we risk that judgment here and now.

There is nothing cynical in the thesis that the theology of the younger clergy is a reflection, not of seminary learning but of the congregation's theology. The minister yields to his environment and accepts the four myths. Whatever chal-

⁴ *The Hero in History*, N. Y., John Day Company, 1943, p. 273.

lenge he may make to his environment he makes from behind the four myths. They are his fortress and his strength. It is not unusual for the neo-orthodox minister to be an extreme liberal on social questions. Sometimes we may wonder if his security as a liberal exponent of social righteousness does not rest upon the conviction of the people that he is "right" in his theology.

Are there any ministers who are not neo-orthodox? Two of the men on our list are not neo-orthodox. They do not accept any of the four myths in any form. One of them is a graduate of a conservative seminary where the four myths are generally accepted. He is a director of religious education and believes in his work with great conviction. He has never had to do much preaching. He is not loaded with enervating tasks. He works with a select group of teachers. If he continues in his present position for several years he could probably become a preacher without falling into a theology which is built upon the four myths. We venture the judgment that if he now had to preach once each week the pressure of the group would soon begin to affect a modification of his viewpoint.

The other man has preached for fifteen years. He has preached a positive point of view with an emphasis upon rational efforts as over against mystical acceptance of ideas, which, no matter how attractive, can not bring evidence to their support. He has a shrinking church. He is not bitter. He believes in his message. He is a thinker and when he speaks the ministers of his city listen to him, but the public has turned from his church's doors. He stands as the only preacher on the list who has resisted the demands of the public that religion be presented to them in terms of the four myths.

At once the reader may say that the outlook for a minister is not very good unless he becomes neo-orthodox. How can a minister who believes in the ab-

solute immanence of God, the social origins of Christianity, the literary character of the Bible and the rational basis of knowledge remain a minister and secure results which make him relatively happy while he is providing a service which is of value to his people?

The most important suggestion is that the liberal (to suggest the minister who is not neo-orthodox) minister should make certain that his departure from the neo-orthodox camp is not an attempt to secure psychological satisfactions made available to those who get recognition because they are rebellious. Many a man has bolted the camps of neo-orthodoxy just to be smart, just to flout convention. The liberal whose birth comes about as an unconscious expression of his hatred for his fellowmen may one day discover that he does not have very rich soil within himself. Rebellion does not of itself bring a philosophy of life into existence. It would be a good thing for the liberal minister to ask himself now and then if he has any truly good reasons for not being in the neo-orthodox camp.

The second suggestion is that the liberal minister should compose his soul and ignore the four myths and all their various forms. People who accept them do not do so because of any "reasons." Any attempt to give "reasons" for abandoning the myths will not help the people. If people live by the myths, let them do it. An attempt to explode the myths directly only disrupts fellowship. Let change come like the seasons when spring supplants winter without destroying it.

The third suggestion is that the minister prove to his people that he has a profoundly satisfying philosophy of life. He must prove that he can be a happy man with controlled desires and the ability to work. This has usually been lacking in the liberal minister. He has been a rebel, unhappy, moody and full of fight. He needs to be a confident

rebel who has faith in his work, who is not discouraged with small results, whose moods are well controlled and whose fighting spirit is full of laughter.

The last suggestion to the liberal minister is that he discover his people. A minister who ministers can preach almost anything and it will be helpful. The average liberal minister simply will not visit his people for fear that they may want him to pray with them! Or he may think too well of himself to hold conversation with Aunt Maggy whose old body is wounded with years. His time is so valuable — and she may want him to pray for her healing. As a

result he fails Aunt Maggy and himself.

Neo-orthodoxy is the refuge of those who have no place to go except into the conservatism of the four myths already accepted by the people. It is a concentration camp of the human spirit. Its fat ranks fill us with dismay. It is a symptom of a confused generation and the younger ministers are confused leaders of a confused people. Let any liberal minister who would offer another way of life be sure that he has found it himself and that he can communicate his newly-found way convincingly.

THE STRATEGY OF RELIGION

Strategy is defined as "the science and art of employing the armed strength of a belligerent to secure the objects of war." There is a strategy in religion as well as in war. It consists in overt behaviors or motor responses made by individuals and groups in the interest of the objects they seek. We call these arts "the techniques of religion." Their number is legion, and include all that we normally mean by private and public worship, religious activities, and "doing the will of God." They are designed, primarily, to make God and divine interests central or dominant in life.

It may be possible to make God and divine interests central or dominant in one's religious thinking without such overt activities, but it is highly doubtful that this can be done with one's emotions. In order to make an idea effective in normal living, it must become part of an individual's bone and muscles. This can be done most effectively by active participation in some form of activity which is associated with or is presupposed by the idea in question. The practical application of this may be seen in the loyalty developed by the more ritualistic churches. The Catholic and Episcopal churches develop loyalty in their membership which appears to be more lasting than that developed in the average non-liturgical churches.

Protestant churches are now engaged in a reconsideration of this problem of the strategy of religion. Present indications suggest they are convinced that the solution lies in the imitation of the traditional Episcopal and Roman Catholic forms. But this means they have not raised the question as to the reasons for the rise of these several forms of techniques. Perhaps the late Dean Shailer Mathews' answer deserves consideration. He stated that the forms which theology and worship assumed was determined by the acceptable social patterns of the time. When emperors were in vogue, God was defined in imperial terms, and the ritual of the courts became the ritual of the church. If this be true, it will be necessary for Protestants to revise their ritual, not in mere imitation of historic forms, but to conform to the more acceptable social patterns of the present. What are the socially acceptable patterns of behavior which are at once widespread and adaptable to the architecture of our churches and are not too much at variance with present practice? This is a question which must be answered by experimentation in hundreds of Protestant churches.

(William H. Bernhardt)