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FAITH IN AN AGE OF CULTURAL PLURALISM:
AN AESTHETIC APPROACH TO TRANSFORMATION

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To my parents

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ABSTRACT

In an age of cultural and religious pluralism, relating Christian faith and culture becomes an increasingly pressing problem. Efforts to relate Christian faith and culture have relied predominantly on sociological and political categories of thought, which have framed the personal and interpersonal experience of pluralism in terms of identity rather than integrity. This dissertation treats the theological ethical problem of relating faith and culture as the problem of finding a way to live with integrity in an age of cultural and religious pluralism.

Learning to live with integrity in a pluralistic age requires aesthetic attention to the process of integration. More specifically, the thesis of this dissertation is that attending to the formal and emotional qualities of faith is precisely what distinguishes an aesthetic approach from other approaches and further, that such an aesthetic approach is necessary for addressing the question of faith and culture in a globalized cultural context.

In order to advance this thesis, the dissertation draws on the work of three thinkers who have significantly shaped the American Protestant theological and philosophical tradition: H. Richard Niebuhr, Jonathan Edwards, and John Dewey. This dissertation engages in a critical analysis of Niebuhr's work and examines the background resources to his thought, in particular the works of Jonathan Edwards and John Dewey. More explicitly than any other American Protestant theologian, Edwards held faith and aesthetics together. It could be argued that after Edwards the relationship between faith and aesthetics fell apart and was restored, albeit in a different configuration, when the American pragmatists, especially John Dewey, took an interest

in the aesthetic dimension of experience. Against the background of the aesthetic thought of Dewey and Edwards, this dissertation sets forth an aesthetic re-interpretation of Niebuhr's conception of faith.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The Problem of Relating Christian Faith and Culture

In an age of cultural and religious pluralism, relating Christian faith and culture becomes an increasingly pressing problem. Efforts to relate faith and culture have relied predominantly on sociological and political categories of thought, which have framed the personal and interpersonal experience of pluralism in terms of identity rather than integrity. A politics of identity has dominated the discourse. In more recent years, the additional and useful concept of cultural hybridity has arisen in the discourse. Cultural hybridization, which sociologist Jan Nederveen Pieterse has defined as referring to “the ways in which forms become separated from existing practices and recombine with new forms in new practices,”¹ has been identified as one of the outcomes of cultural globalization.² In their study of cultural globalization, sociologists have generally come to recognize that understanding the processes and outcomes of cultural hybridization is essential for a deeper understanding of cultural globalization.³

¹Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *Globalization or Empire?* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 64. Keri E. Iyall Smith, “Hybrid Identities: Theoretical Examinations,” *Hybrid Identities: Theoretical and Empirical Examinations*, ed. Keri E. Iyall Smith and Patricia Leavy (The Netherlands: Brill Academic Publishers, 2008), 3.

²Cultural hybridization, alongside differentiation and assimilation, is identified as one of the three outcomes of cultural globalization. See Keri E. Iyall Smith, “Hybrid Identities: Theoretical Examinations,” *Hybrid Identities: Theoretical and Empirical Examinations*, 3.

³See *ibid.*, citing the work of Ien Ang, “Together in Difference: Beyond Diaspora, Into Hybridity,” *Asian Studies Review* 27 (2003): 141-54; Nestor G. Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving*

This dissertation takes as its point of departure the recognition that cultural hybridization complicates the experience of cultural and religious pluralism. Given that cultural hybridization involves processes of integration that result in the creation of new cultural experiences and forms, the theological ethical enterprise of relating Christian faith and culture in a pluralistic context must investigate how integration takes place in the first place. Relating Christian faith and culture also begs for concepts that can illuminate and help, rather than hinder, this constructive work. More helpful than the concept of identity is the concept of integrity. By privileging identity over integrity, certain communitarian and liberal Protestant theological ethical positions have tended to equate or conflate the two, albeit in different ways. What is needed is a careful re-examination of integrity and its potential contribution to the theological ethical enterprise of relating faith and culture in the context of cultural and religious pluralism.

This dissertation understands the theological ethical problem of relating faith and culture as the problem of finding a way to live with integrity in an age of cultural and religious pluralism. Whereas the concept of integrity has principally referred to moral character in which a person adheres to a moral code or acts in accordance with moral principles and values, there is another, more helpful, definition of integrity for this theological ethical enterprise. Integrity can also refer to the quality of being whole and undivided. There is an aesthetic dimension to this definition that, when developed, may be useful. Learning to live with integrity in a pluralistic age requires aesthetic attention to the process of integration. An aesthetic approach has been sorely lacking from the overall discourse on cultural and religious pluralism, including cultural hybridization. More specifically, the thesis of this dissertation is that attending to the formal and

Modernity (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); and Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

emotional qualities of faith is precisely what distinguishes an aesthetic approach from other approaches and further, that such an aesthetic approach is necessary for addressing the question of faith and culture in a globalized cultural context.

Thesis and Method

In order to advance this thesis, the dissertation draws on the work of three thinkers who have significantly shaped the American Protestant theological and philosophical tradition: H. Richard Niebuhr, Jonathan Edwards, and John Dewey. Over the course of his life, Niebuhr studied the experience of faith in order to understand its interaction with and power to transform culture. This dissertation engages in a critical analysis of Niebuhr's work and examines the background resources to his thought, in particular the works of Jonathan Edwards and John Dewey. More explicitly than any other American Protestant theologian, Edwards held faith and aesthetics together. It could be argued that after Edwards the relationship between faith and aesthetics fell apart and was restored, albeit in a different configuration, when the American pragmatists, especially John Dewey, took an interest in the aesthetic dimension of experience. Against the background of the aesthetic thought of Dewey and Edwards, this dissertation sets forth an aesthetic re-interpretation of Niebuhr's conception of faith.

Interpreting Niebuhr's conception of faith from an aesthetic perspective goes a long distance in addressing the current dilemma of relating faith and culture in a context of cultural and religious pluralism. In addition to his conception of faith, Niebuhr provides a constellation of other concepts, including the concepts of integration and Christomorphism that can give us a handle on approaches and inquiries that theology might investigate going forward. By bringing

these concepts into relief, this dissertation puts forth a critical reconstruction of Niebuhr's understanding of faith and its relationship to culture.

Re-framing the Problem of Faith in a Pluralistic Culture

Christians have struggled perennially to understand the social nature of their faith in relation to other cultural authorities. Relating faith to culture is, according to Niebuhr, “an enduring problem,”⁴ and Niebuhr spent his career as a theological ethicist studying this relationship from a number of different perspectives: historical, sociological, political, phenomenological, and, as this dissertation argues, aesthetic. In his major works, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929), *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937), *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941), *Faith on Earth* (1940s-1950s), *Christ and Culture* (1951), *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (1960), and *The Responsible Self* (1963), Niebuhr appropriated from different disciplines methodologies and perspectives that would help him to understand the experience of faith. During the later years of his life, Niebuhr began to express more explicitly an aesthetic understanding of faith. Delivering *The Cole Lectures* in 1961, he spoke about the significance of aesthetics for theological ethical reflection on faith and the need for theology to explore its relation to two borderlands: the emotions and aesthetics.⁵ When we examine Niebuhr's body of work in light of his growing interest in the aesthetic nature of faith, we can see more clearly significant aesthetic features shaping Niebuhr's thought.

The contemporary debate on the relation of Christian faith and culture has tended to

⁴H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1951), 1-44.

⁵H. Richard Niebuhr, “Toward the Recovery of Feeling,” *The Cole Lectures*, in *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings*, ed. William Stacy Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 34-49.

overlook the aesthetic dimension of Niebuhr's understanding of faith.⁶ Communitarian and liberal Protestant ethicists alike have appropriated the work of Niebuhr. They have acknowledged the social nature of faith. Furthermore, they have claimed their own social accounts of faith to relate to culture in such a way that is authentically Christian. Liberal Protestant theological ethicists have offered differing accounts of how Christian faith can transform cultural forms. Rejecting such accounts as accommodationist, communitarians have proposed social accounts of faith that counterpose Christian faith and other cultural authorities. Despite the specific differences in their views, there is nonetheless a shared assumption among them: that we must understand the relation of faith and culture primarily in terms of political and sociological categories of thought.⁷ This dissertation departs from this predominant assumption.

This is not an effort to diminish the profound degree to which Niebuhr was concerned about the social and political issues of his day. In his first book, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, Niebuhr wrote about and against the social and political forces that created divisions in society, the world, and the church.⁸ He spoke and wrote against racism, classism,

⁶This is not to say that the presence of aesthetic sensibilities has gone altogether unnoticed by scholars and students of H. Richard Niebuhr. See R. Melvin Keiser, *Roots of Relational Ethics: Responsibility in Origin and Maturity in H. Richard Niebuhr* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 85-7, 198 in which Keiser acknowledges an "unannounced" aesthetic sensibility specifically in Niebuhr's concern for "fittingness" in his ethics of responsibility. For a discussion of Niebuhr's linguistic perspectives, see R. Melvin Keiser, *Recovering the Personal*, American Academy of Religion Studies in Religion, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham, no. 52 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), in which Keiser argues the postcritical nature of Niebuhr's mature thought.

⁷Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder, eds., *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996); Charles Scriven, *The Transformation of Culture* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1988); D. M. Yeager, "The View from Somewhere: The Meaning of Method in *Christ and Culture*," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23, no. 1 (2003): 101-20; Glen H. Stassen, "It Is Time to Take Jesus Back: In Celebration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23, no. 1 (2003): 133-43; Duane K. Friesen, "A Discriminating Engagement of Culture: 'An Anabaptist Perspective,'" *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23, no. 1 (2003): 145-56; Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 1981); Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989).

⁸H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1929), 264-5.

regionalism, and nationalism.⁹ By the time Niebuhr wrote *The Kingdom of God in America*, his central concern for an ethic that would transform culture rather than accommodate such social and political forces became clear. Describing his motivation to undertake this second study of American religious culture, he wrote:

Though the sociological approach helped to explain why the religious stream flowed in these particular [denominational] channels it did not account for the force of the stream itself; while it seemed relevant enough to the institutionalized churches it did not explain the Christian movement which produced these churches; while it accounted for the diversity in American religion it did not explain the unity which our faith possesses despite its variety; while it could deal with the religion which was dependent on culture it left unexplained the faith which is independent, which is aggressive rather than passive, and which molds culture instead of being molded by it.¹⁰

Niebuhr sought to understand the experience of faith, especially its dynamic and creative power to transform and unify culture. He sought to understand the movement, rather than the institutionalization, of faith. As noted by Harry Stout, we find Niebuhr turning away from sociological and political explanations for religious experience toward a more observably “cultural or anthropological concern with symbolic commonalities of religious experience,” which becomes more fully developed in *The Meaning of Revelation*.¹¹ In the Preface to *Faith on Earth*, Richard R. Niebuhr, H. Richard’s son, indicates how significantly the social and political

⁹For a study tracing the centrality of Niebuhr’s prophetic social and political concerns over his lifetime, see Glen H. Stassen, “Concrete Christological Norms for Transformation,” in *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, ed. Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 127-89.

¹⁰H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1937), ix-x.

¹¹Harry Stout, “The Historical Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr,” in *The Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr*, ed. Ronald F. Thiemann (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 87-8. James Gustafson attributed the distinctiveness of Niebuhr’s approach to the existentialist personalism that shaped Niebuhr’s ethics. “Moral existence” for HRN was “personal existence, and personal existence is social. . . . Niebuhr cannot make the sharp differentiation between individual and society that has characterized much social thought in the Church.” James Gustafson, “Christian Ethics and Social Policy” in *Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 121.

events of the 1940s and 1950s – the Cold War, the Korean War, the internment of Japanese Americans under Senator McCarthy’s leadership shaped his father’s reflections on the structure of faith, the forms of faith, and the need for ongoing reformation of faith.¹² Over time, while Niebuhr continued to draw upon sociological methods in his work, such as the typological method he appropriated from Troeltsch and Weber and employed in *Christ and Culture*, his concern for the integrating and transformative power of faith led him to develop a more aesthetic approach to the problem of faith and culture.

In the contemporary debate on the problem of faith and culture, critics of Niebuhr have failed to perceive the aesthetic features of Niebuhr’s thought, and furthermore, they have failed to appreciate the socially and politically transformative potential of Niebuhr’s aesthetic approach to the problem of faith and culture. Instead they have identified the absence of social and political normative standards in Niebuhr’s later work, especially with regard to Niebuhr’s constructive claims in *Christ and Culture*, and they have equated this absence with the lack of a social ethic. In an essay responding to *Christ and Culture*, John Howard Yoder criticized Niebuhr’s work for lacking any concrete normative standards by which Christians can measure the authenticity of their actions in the world.

To “transform” must mean to change the form of something according to some standard. We should have had to be shown “before” and “after” pictures of how the impact of Christ can be expected to modify cultural values, or how it has in fact done so in history. We would have expected to see by what criteria adequate

¹²In his “Preface” to *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith*, Richard R. Niebuhr indicates the significance of these social and political events during the 1940s and 1950s on Niebuhr’s thought. He writes: “Readers who recall those decades, the onset of the Cold War, the Korean War, and the reckless persecution of many Americans as unpatriotic and traitorous, spearheaded by Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin, will recognize the background against which the author carried on his reflections.” Richard R. Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), xi. As Richard R. Niebuhr notes, the themes developed in *Faith on Earth* are most similar to the themes developed in *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941), *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (1960), and *The Responsible Self* (1963).

and less adequate “transformations” would be discerned. Yet Niebuhr identifies no such cases or criteria.¹³

Yoder thinks that Niebuhr’s account of transformative faith lacks normativity and therefore, is not a viable social ethic. According to Yoder, Niebuhr transformed the “field of ethics from a ‘normative’ to a ‘descriptive’ science,”¹⁴ and as a result Niebuhr’s social account of faith finally amounts to historical and moral relativism.

What his critics called historical relativism, however, Niebuhr understood as “historical relationism.”¹⁵ In “Reformation: Continuing Imperative,” Niebuhr explained his convictions. In particular he discussed his abiding conviction that human existence is radically historical. As his thesis on Ernst Troeltsch reflects, the historicism that Niebuhr learned from Troeltsch made a profound and abiding impression on Niebuhr’s worldview.¹⁶ “I am certain,” he wrote, “that I can only see, understand, think, believe, as a self that is in time.”¹⁷ This means that “structures and institutions have a primordial and shaping influence on individuals from which individuals

¹³John Howard Yoder, “How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*,” in *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, ed. Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 31-89. Yoder wrote this essay originally in 1958 and circulated it privately in unpublished form before it was incorporated into this volume.

¹⁴Ibid., 41. Yoder goes on to say, “A ‘normative’ discipline is one which claims to have a way of determining truth and falsehood or right and wrong, and concludes with judgments of value. Most thinking and teaching in the field of ethics in the past has assumed that this was its purpose. At some point hard decisions must be made.”

¹⁵H. Richard Niebuhr, “Reformation: Continuing Imperative,” *The Christian Century*, 2 (March 1960): 249.

¹⁶H. Richard Niebuhr, “Ernst Troeltsch’s Philosophy of Religion” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1924), 263. Niebuhr identified three elements as present in all of Troeltsch’s writings: “The one is the idea of the relativity of all historical values, and so of religion, the other is the apriori and imperative obligation which such values impose upon us, the third is the presentiment, the intuition, the direct inner experience of the Divine Life.” Niebuhr explained that, while Troeltsch was interpreted and criticized as a relativist because of his commitment to the first of these elements, Troeltsch himself placed more emphasis upon the second and third elements.

¹⁷H. Richard Niebuhr, “Reformation: Continuing Imperative,” 249.

cannot withdraw their minds and allegiances by simply saying ‘no.’”¹⁸ In other words, human ideals, values, and faith are inherently historical and social.¹⁹ This also means that “the substance of ‘Christian social ethics’ cannot be abstractly and definitively fixed but must be worked out by Christians interpreting and responding to their complex, varied, and changing particular situations.”²⁰ Niebuhr was careful, however, not to equate historical relativism with moral relativism. Whereas moral relativism involves subjectivism, historical relativism, as he understood it, does not slide into subjectivism. In an effort to identify his position more accurately, therefore, Niebuhr preferred to use the term “historical relationism.” Saturating Niebuhr’s historical relationism is the idea that all of history is the “story of God’s mighty deeds and of man’s responses to them.”²¹ In relating to the world, therefore, the individual Christian or the communal church looks for God’s will, not necessarily in commandments and norms that are fixed, but rather in the relations, interactions, and connections between and among existing things. Faith is not a subjective, morally relativistic experience. Whereas historical relationism affirms the historicity of the subject, it also accepts the independent reality of the objective relations that are being interpreted. Within the limits of our historical knowledge, there are

¹⁸D. M. Yeager, “The Social Self in the Pilgrim Church,” in *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, ed. Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 95.

¹⁹“History and sociology have continued the human self-criticism which psychology began. They have taught us that we are not only beings whose intelligence is conditioned by sensation, interest and feeling and whose limited categories of understanding give limited form and structure to sense-experience, but that we are also beings whose concepts are something less than the categories of a universal reason. Critical idealists and realists knew themselves to be human selves with a specific psychological and logical equipment; their successors know themselves to be social human beings whose reason is not a common reason, alike in all human selves, but one which is qualified by inheritance from a particular society.” H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941), 9.

²⁰D. M. Yeager, “The Social Self in the Pilgrim Church,” 97.

²¹H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 195.

experimental tests, Niebuhr held, for discerning anything about God and for validating what is discerned.²² These experimental tests involve aesthetic sensibilities and skills, which will become clearer in the proceeding chapters of this dissertation.

A Communitarian Aesthetics

Among communitarian ethicists, Stanley Hauerwas has articulated the most ardent communitarian response to the question of faith and culture. Furthermore, Hauerwas has constructed an aesthetic approach to a social account of faith. We find in Hauerwas's work the privileging of narrative as the artistic form most appropriate for theological ethical reflection, almost to the exclusion of other forms of art. He has drawn an intimate connection between narrative and theology, not simply because biblical sources are often in the form of stories, but because God is a "storied God whom Christians come to know only by having their character formed appropriate to God's character."²³

To summarize briefly, Hauerwas's thesis involves three main claims. First, character, not discrete acts, determines the morality of an individual. Second, the stories and histories passed down in a given community shape the character of the members of that community. Third, the story of the God of Jesus Christ shapes the morality of the Christian community, distinguishing it from all other moralities.

²²"Furthermore, historic faith, directed toward a reality which appears in our history and which is apprehended by historic beings, is not private and subjective, without possibility of verification. To be in history is to be in society, though in a particular society. Every view of the universal from the finite standpoint of the individual in such a society is subject to the test of experience on the part of companions who look from the same standpoint in the same direction as well as to the test of consistency with the principles and concepts that have grown out of past experience in the same community." Besides the social test of experience and the test of consistency, Niebuhr also maintains that an interpretation of reality must be relevant and beneficial to experience. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 20-1.

²³Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

Hauerwas asserts that every social ethic involves a narrative – a narrative that tells the story of the community’s existence. The form and substance of a community’s moral character depends upon its narratives. Only when persons know what is happening do they know what they should do. That through Israel and the work of Christ God has called and formed a people to serve him makes it possible for the church to live truthfully in the world.

Furthermore, given that every community has a particular history, every community will have a distinctive moral character. The distinctive moral character of the church is formed by the biblical narrative of God acting in Israel and Jesus Christ. Shaped by the gospel story, Christians can act truthfully, with moral integrity, in the world. That is, their actions can flow from a character that has been shaped by their particular history. “My insistence on the distinctiveness of Christian ethics,” Hauerwas writes, “is not meant to be defensive or exclusionary, but derives from a frank, and I hope, honest recognition that, methodologically, ethics and theology can only be carried out relative to a particular community’s convictions.”²⁴ One can hear the influence of Niebuhr’s historical relativism in Hauerwas’s recognition that ethics and theology can be carried out only from a particular social and historical standpoint.²⁵ Hauerwas, like Niebuhr, takes seriously the self’s moral history. For Hauerwas, character, though open to refinements, is to a large extent the result of that history.

Methodologically, Hauerwas cannot account sufficiently for the experience of faith for persons whose moral histories are embedded in more than one cultural and religious community. The experience of cultural and religious pluralism, or hybridity, complicates the formation of

²⁴Ibid., 2.

²⁵Hauerwas has acknowledged the profound influence of *The Meaning of Revelation* upon his own intellectual agenda. Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

moral integrity, because the narratives, rituals, and other cultural and religious practices to which people are exposed and in which people engage do not originate in a single, coherent way of life. In the context of cultural pluralism, we increasingly find that persons' moral histories have been shaped by commitments to multiple cultural and religious communities. Furthermore, tensions and conflicts often arise from these commitments, making moral integration a very challenging process. In Hauerwas's methodology, we can observe a close correlation between a conception of aesthetics narrowly focused on narrative and a communitarian approach to the question of faith and culture.

An Aesthetic Approach to Integration

In order to take the experience of cultural and religious pluralism more seriously, the field of theological ethics must necessarily examine insights appropriated from aesthetic inquiry more broadly conceived. Such an aesthetic approach can enable those who are concerned with integration in a culture of pluralism to identify what makes integration possible in the first place. The increasing complexity of globalized culture and the proliferation of new forms of cultural experience call for an aesthetic approach that can account for the dynamics of integration and transformation not only within particular cultural communities but across them.

More helpful to this project than the narrow appropriation of narrative that we find in the communitarian theological ethics of Stanley Hauerwas are the broader aesthetic inquiries of Frank Burch Brown and Edward Farley as they discern and reflect upon the aesthetic dimension of religion and the experience of faith. In his book *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic*, Edward Farley defines his usage of "aesthetic," as distinguished from "aesthetics," in the following way:

“Aesthetic” refers to an aspect of human experience evoked by an immediate relation to what is beautiful – that is, with what draws human beings into self-transcending and non-useful satisfactions. “Aesthetics” refers to a branch of philosophy or art criticism whose task is to understand the unity and features of works of art and the experience of art.²⁶

In search of a way to address the aesthetic quality of life experiences, Farley has to liberate aesthetics from its usual usage in philosophizing about art, including liturgical and religious art. To this end, Farley draws the distinction between “aesthetics” and “aesthetic” and very consciously broadens aesthetic inquiry beyond the study of works of art and experiences of art so that he can consider “a dimension of human experience, an engagement with and participation in what is intrinsically attractive – in other words, with what is beautiful.”²⁷ As Farley’s work shows, a broader aesthetic inquiry makes more room for the role of beauty in the experience of faith. “Beauty occupies a central or defining place in aesthetic inquiry and only a secondary and non-defining place in aesthetics.”²⁸ By retrieving the concept of beauty to inform the definition of “aesthetic,” Farley is able to inquire into the relation between “what is intrinsically attractive” and the experience of faith.

In the book *Religious Aesthetics*, Frank Burch Brown offers a yet broader conception of aesthetics that is helpful to this project. He writes:

It seems, then, that aesthetics might better be made broader in scope than narrower. In point of fact, aesthetics should perhaps be nothing less than

²⁶Edward Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2001), 117.

²⁷Ibid., vii.

²⁸Ibid. Acknowledging the diminished role that beauty has played as a concept in aesthetics, Farley attempts to restore the significance of beauty for breaking down the postmodern dichotomy between the ethical and the aesthetic dimensions of experience. He writes, “Certainly, it is an unfashionable concept in aesthetics, art criticism and the arts themselves. But from Plato through Kant to Whitehead, beauty has been the term used to describe something about the world (harmony, differentiation, novelty) which if experienced at all gives some sort of satisfaction. In this meaning of the aesthetic, a theological aesthetics uncovers the relation between what is intrinsically attractive and the life of faith.”

basic theoretical reflection regarding all aesthetic phenomena, including their modes of significant interrelation with, and mediation of, what is not inherently aesthetic: abstract ideas, useful objects, moral convictions, class conflicts, religious doctrines, and so forth. The coherence of the field of aesthetics so conceived would derive from its central interest in *aesthetica* – a term we can use technically to denote not perceptibles (as in Greek) or beautiful objects alone, but all those things employing a medium in such a way that its perceptible form and ‘felt’ qualities become essential to what is appreciable and meaningful.²⁹

Appropriating this broad understanding of aesthetics is beneficial to this project in two ways.

First, it allows us to discern an aesthetic dimension of cultural, moral, and religious experience with which theological ethics, not aesthetics, has characteristically been concerned. By focusing on the form, pattern, or shape of experience and the role of the emotions in experience, aesthetics can help us to address the question of what makes integration, whether in artistic activity or in our moral lives, possible in the first place. Second, a broad conception of aesthetics makes it possible to draw coherently from the thoughts of two thinkers known not only for the ways they themselves radically broadened aesthetic concepts such as beauty and aesthetic experience, but also for their seemingly opposing emphases and worldviews, as in the case of Jonathan Edwards and John Dewey.

With regard to the first point, it is important to note that aesthetic analyses and concepts have played only a minor role in the field of contemporary ethics.³⁰ Perhaps the greatest

²⁹Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), 22.

³⁰The work of Hauerwas and others who have argued for the importance of narrative in Christian ethics may arguably be an exception to this situation. The privileging of narrative as the artistic form most appropriate for theological ethics, the lack of attention to the role of emotions in aesthetic experience, and the anti-theoretical approach to art, however, reflect an overly narrow understanding of how ethics might engage aesthetics more broadly conceived. Retrievals of the theological aesthetics of Jonathan Edwards, as proposed by Roland A. Delattre, can go further to create critical conversations between the field of aesthetics and religious ethics. See Roland A. Delattre, “Aesthetics and Ethics: Jonathan Edwards and the Recovery of Aesthetics for Religious Ethics,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 277-97.

impediment to an ethical engagement with aesthetics has been the general notion that as a “normative” discipline ethics should be wary of engaging aesthetics. In a multicultural era, however, objectivity in the realm of values, including ethics and aesthetics, has been severely questioned. Both ethics and aesthetics, as disciplines that involve value judgments, have sought ways to justify their enterprises against a skepticism that reduces all value judgments to ideological constructions. Recent scholarship in ethics and aesthetics has observed not only the common challenge facing both disciplines in a multicultural era, but it has also begun to show that aesthetics and ethics, in their interactions, can contest such skepticism. In particular, the work of Martha Nussbaum and Satya P. Mohanty engage both aesthetics and ethics and explore what is constructively possible in social and political life when we understand their intimate interactions.³¹ Evident in their scholarship is the understanding that a broad conception of aesthetics enables persons to discover the continuities between aesthetic experience and other dimensions of experience, including dimensions of experience that can be subjected to objective experiential testing and adjustment.

With regard to the second way in which a broad conception of aesthetics is beneficial to this dissertation project, it is interesting to note the ways in which Jonathan Edwards and John Dewey have been and might be related in the history of American thought. Perhaps more than any other thinkers, these two men have contributed to the shape of American intellectual history. Surveys of American philosophy have usually traced the movement of American intellectual

³¹Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary and Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); idem, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Satya P. Mohanty, “Can Our Values Be Objective? On Ethics, Aesthetics, and Progressive Politics,” in *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*, ed. Emory Elliott, Louis Freitas Caton, and Jeffrey Rhyne (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 31-59.

thought from evangelical religion to secular liberalism and have portrayed Edwards and Dewey as the quintessential representatives of these opposing commitments and worldviews. Historian of American philosophy Bruce Kuklick has criticized this typical story as overly emphasizing “thought that is seen to anticipate the secular values of contemporary intellectuals.”³² In an attempt to correct this tendency, Kuklick creates a historical narrative in which the intellectual tradition of New England Theology produced by Jonathan Edwards and his followers created the context out of which Dewey’s naturalism and instrumentalism arose. In *Churchmen and Philosophers: From Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey*, Kuklick attempts to show continuities between the theology of Edwards and the philosophy of Dewey. Discussing the significant intellectual influences on Dewey’s thought, Kuklick highlights major themes of New Theology that seemed to resonate in Dewey’s work throughout his life.³³ Dewey’s early intellectual work as a philosopher of religion was spent trying to provide a philosophical basis for a theology of immanence which would overcome the dualisms that he thought had come to characterize Calvinist Congregationalism. He wanted to overcome the dualisms separating God and man, the supernatural and the natural, as well as the dualisms in German philosophy between form and content, absolute and individual spirit, and the noumenal and the phenomenal worlds. Dewey

³²Bruce Kuklick, “Jonathan Edwards and American Philosophy,” in *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Harry S. Stout (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 247. Furthermore, Kuklick suspects that “the canon reflects more Harvard’s dominance of the academic world in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the canon was established, than the truth about the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. . . . But if this is the chronicle of Harvard, it should not be mistaken for the chronicle of America.” *Ibid.*, 249. In his volume *Churchmen and Philosophers*, Kuklick argues in greater detail that the “‘secular’ thinkers were a tiny group in the eighteenth and most of the nineteenth centuries, and ‘secular’ ideas were only a fragment of their thought.” Bruce Kuklick, *Churchmen and Philosophers: From Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), xx.

³³Kuklick identifies three themes of the New Theology that structured Dewey’s thought: an appropriation of science as its method; a reversal of the dichotomy between God and man; and a reversal of the dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural. *Ibid.*, 233.

also appropriated from science a vocabulary and method to be applied not only to the natural world but also to the social and cultural world, giving Calvinist Congregationalist ideas a new philosophical guise. Summarizing the significance of Dewey's achievement, Kuklick writes:

His great achievement was incorporating what were recognized at the time as religious values into a scientific conception of man and nature. In the twentieth century, he articulated the spiritual mood of contemporary problem-solving social science. By creating a rationale for socially concerned intellectuals, he provided a twentieth-century "common faith."³⁴

Kuklick regards Dewey's contribution not merely as superficial, but rather as profoundly creative. The shift in axes from the supernatural to the natural enabled an application of science to religious experience.³⁵

As Kuklick acknowledges, his study of the trajectory in American thought from Edwards to Dewey focused on New England's Calvinist Congregationalism and its theology.³⁶

Excavating Calvinist Congregational thought as well as its institutional life, he discovers concerns and themes that resonate from Edwards to Dewey. That these two systematic thinkers had deeply aesthetic worldviews, however, is missing from the family of resemblances that Kuklick portrays.³⁷ In the work of H. Richard Niebuhr, we can observe an appreciation for and an appropriation of the aesthetic features in these men's systems of thought.

³⁴Ibid., xx.

³⁵Bruce Kuklick, "Jonathan Edwards and American Philosophy," 254.

³⁶See page xvii of the Introduction where Kuklick acknowledges, "Congregationalism and its theology remain at the heart of the book." Bruce Kuklick, *Churchmen and Philosophers: From Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey*.

³⁷Perhaps this can partially be explained by Kuklick's focus on the role of Calvinist Congregationalism in this study. Ever since the 1960s, when scholarship on Edwards began to flourish, secondary literature on Edwards's theology and philosophy has addressed the various intellectual sources that shaped his thought. In an article published in the *Journal of Religious Ethics* for the tercentenary of Edwards's birth, Stephen Wilson demonstrates that the secondary literature on Edwards tends to under-appreciate the complex and subtle ways in which Edwards synthesized the full spectrum of sources upon which he drew, including Calvinism, British "moral sense," Cambridge Platonism, Protestant scholasticism before and after Calvin, and New England Puritanism, Separatism,

Niebuhr was a student of the history of American theology and philosophy. He sought to understand religious experience in America. Scholars of Niebuhr's work have brought attention to Niebuhr's significant contributions to "an American" trajectory of thought.³⁸ Building on the thesis of Bruce Kuklick, Thomas A. Byrnes extends the intellectual tradition that Kuklick traced, from Edwards to Dewey, to Niebuhr. Niebuhr's *The Responsible Self*, he argues, is an American pragmatist reconstruction of Edwardsean theology. In her Introduction to Niebuhr's essays on the church and its role in society, Kristine Culp places Niebuhr's work within "an American strand of thought" that "insisted, against the prevailing European theologies of his day, that the social, historical character of Christian community is intrinsic to its being, indeed, is a means of divine interrelation with the world."³⁹ She places Niebuhr among American theologians such as Howard Thurman, Martin Luther King, Jr. Daniel Day Williams, James M. Gustafson, Beverly Wildung Harrison, Katie G. Cannon, and etc., who take seriously the actual historical, social,

and Anabaptism. In particular Wilson focuses on the tendency of scholarship to displace Edwards's appropriations of either Calvinism or the moral sense tradition at the expense of the other. Stephen A. Wilson, "Jonathan Edwards's Virtue: Diverse Sources, Multiple Meanings, and the Lessons of History for Ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31, no. 2 (Summer 2003): pp. 201-28. In the works by Edwards that are of primary significance to theological ethicists, the influence of moral sense thinking and of Cambridge Platonism is apparent. Furthermore, insofar as Edwards engaged British philosophers Francis Hutcheson and David Hume in developing his aesthetic understanding of virtue and the role of the affections in religious experience and insofar as he appropriated the highly aesthetic phenomenology of divine emanation from Cambridge Platonism, the significance of the moral sense tradition for understanding Edwards's aesthetic ethics should not be underestimated. While the moral sense tradition is present in Kuklick's historical account, it is definitely not a lens alongside Calvinist Congregationalism through which Kuklick interprets the history of American theology and philosophy.

³⁸In his Introduction to *The Responsible Self*, James Gustafson notes that both *The Responsible Self* and *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* are "impregnated with this American standpoint," characterized by the philosophical pragmatism of G. H. Mead and Dewey and the theology of Jonathan Edwards. James Gustafson, introduction to *The Responsible Self*, by H. Richard Niebuhr (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978), 10. See also Thomas Byrnes, "H. Richard Niebuhr's Reconstruction of Jonathan Edwards's Moral Theology," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 5 (1985): 33-55. See also Kristine A. Culp, introduction to "*The Responsibility of the Church for Society*" and *Other Essays by H. Richard Niebuhr*, by H. Richard Niebuhr, ed. Kristine A. Culp (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), xvi-xix.

³⁹Kristine A. Culp, xvi.

interpersonal patterns of human life as revealing divine activity in the world.⁴⁰ Niebuhr also contributed to the formation of what became “American studies” or the history of “American philosophy” during the 1940s and 1950s. *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*⁴¹ and *The Kingdom of God in America*⁴² are recognized as two classics in the field, establishing Niebuhr’s legacy in American historiography. Niebuhr most notably made religion in America a central category for study. As Harry Stout explains,

The great contribution of *Kingdom of God* was to establish religion as the central category in American history. Until then, the central categories of interpretation in American historiography were fixed largely without reference to religion. To the extent that it was recognized at all, theology was perceived as a dead language that had to be retranslated into what Vernon Parrington termed the “modern equivalents” of political and economic commentary.⁴³

Niebuhr also redirected the attention of scholars to the theology and philosophy of Jonathan Edwards, which he thought had been woefully neglected and under-appreciated for too long.⁴⁴

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹See Harry Stout’s discussion of the impact that *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* had upon the fields of American history and sociology. Harry S. Stout, “The Historical Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr,” in *The Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr*, ed. Ronald F. Thiemann (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 84-7.

⁴²In his essay “The Historical Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr,” Stout writes: “It would be difficult to overstate the impact *Kingdom of God* had in revising American historians’ understanding of their nation and the forces that helped shape it. In his seminal essay on ‘The Recovery of American Religious History,’ Henry F. May credited *Kingdom of God* with informing ‘many of the ablest religious historians of the next period’ (*American Historical Review* 70 [1964]: 85). Chief among these historians was Perry Miller, an admirer of H. Richard Niebuhr. His magisterial studies of *Jonathan Edwards* (1949) and *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (1953) were in many respects a massive elaboration of the periodization and conceptualizations set forth in *Kingdom of God*.” Ibid., 93.

⁴³Ibid., 89.

⁴⁴In a speech given on the bicentennial of Edwards’s death at the Northampton church where Edwards had been pastor from 1727 until 1750, Niebuhr intimated the degree to which Edwards had been banished by modern intellectuals. Referring to Vernon Louis Parrington’s designation of Edwards as the great “anachronism” (in Parrington’s book *Main Currents in American Thought*), Niebuhr set out to show that Edwards’s “outdated” views were ironically the things that modern folks needed most to hear. “The Anachronism of Jonathan Edwards,” in *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings*, ed. William Stacy Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 123-33.

In another essay on Niebuhr's historical legacy, William R. Hutchison suggests that Niebuhr's work *Christ and Culture* might also reasonably be considered a classic within American historiography: the problem of faith and culture Niebuhr posed and the categories Niebuhr used have contributed to the recovery and re-examining of the liberal traditions and to the study of cross-cultural problems in American religious history.⁴⁵ The contributions that Niebuhr made to American historiography arose out of his astute study of American religious experience, which he undertook in order to understand how faith could be a dynamic, creative, and reforming force, integrating and thereby transforming culture.

This dissertation focuses on the aesthetic dimension of H. Richard Niebuhr's theological ethics that Niebuhr appropriated, synthesized, and further advanced from the systems of earlier American thinkers, specifically those of Jonathan Edwards and John Dewey. That Niebuhr perceived the significance of and appropriated aesthetic concepts from the work of Edwards and Dewey suggests that there may be an aesthetic dimension in the American strand of thought that is worth mining. The specific purpose of this dissertation, however, is to present the aesthetic concepts at work in H. Richard Niebuhr's thought and to argue that his aesthetic approach can lay a foundation for understanding and integrating the experience of faith in a context of cultural and religious pluralism.

An Outline of Chapters

Niebuhr acknowledged his indebtedness to American pragmatism, especially the work of George Herbert Mead. Yet, among American pragmatists, it was John Dewey who wrote most extensively on aesthetics. **Chapter Two** of this dissertation examines John Dewey's aesthetic

⁴⁵William R. Hutchison, "Response to Harry Stout," in *The Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr*, ed. Ronald F. Thiemann (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 103-5.

philosophy as well as its relation to his understanding of religious experience. This chapter concentrates on two of Dewey's later works, which reflect his mature thought: *Art As Experience* and *A Common Faith*. In *Art As Experience*, Dewey analyzes the anatomy of artistic experience. By showing the continuities that exist between artistic experience, religious experience, and normal processes of living, Dewey argued that aesthetics is meaningful for the entirety of life.

It will become clear that Dewey and Niebuhr shared convictions that shaped their lifelong inquiry into the nature of experience, specifically to understand what conditions, processes, and functions enable experience to be dynamic, creative, and transformative. Dewey's quest to understand the aesthetic processes of integration and individuation led him to bring into relief the formal and emotional aspects of aesthetic experience. Focusing on form and emotion, Chapter Two provides the aesthetic concepts that will be employed in the rest of the dissertation and that will make more visible the aesthetic character of Niebuhr's understanding of the experience of faith.

In addition to showing the ways in which Dewey's philosophy of aesthetic experience is compatible with Niebuhr's understanding of the experience of faith, Chapter Two will identify a significant divergence in their views. Dewey and Niebuhr argued for different conceptions of God, the object of faith: whereas Dewey construed the object of faith in terms of a function, Niebuhr imagined the object of faith in terms of a person. Chapter Two will discuss Dewey's functionalist conception of God, and Chapter Four will return to the issue in order to show that Niebuhr's personalist conception of God would advance not only Dewey's moral theory, but more significantly, for the purpose of this dissertation, an aesthetic conception of faith that has

the potential to help people integrate their commitments to multiple cultural and religious communities.

Chapter Three of this dissertation examines the aesthetic theological ethics of Jonathan Edwards insofar as it illuminates the aesthetic dimension of Niebuhr's thought. That Edwards' thought is best understood through the lens of aesthetic categories is debated. This dissertation claims neither that Edwards is best understood through an aesthetic interpretation, as does Roland Delattre in his work *Beauty and Sensibility in Jonathan Edwards: An Essay in Aesthetics and Theological Ethics*, nor that Niebuhr interpreted the entirety of Edwards's thought through an aesthetic lens. Although Niebuhr considered Edwards to be a highly aesthetic thinker, Niebuhr did not pursue a solely aesthetic interpretation of Edwards's thought. In his dissertation entitled *Triangulating Faith, Virtue and Reason: An Edwardsean Account*, Jamie Schillinger offers a critique of aesthetic interpretations, such as that of Roland Delattre, that treat the concepts of beauty and sensibility, as they appear in Edwards' writings, as predominantly aesthetic lenses for understanding the entirety of Edwards' thought.⁴⁶ Given that Niebuhr saw aesthetic features in Edwards's thought, this chapter provides background for investigating the ways in which Edwards's aesthetics informs Niebuhr's aesthetic pursuits and his conception of faith. Niebuhrian scholarship has noted several thematic similarities in the two men's thought, though not primarily from the viewpoint of aesthetics.⁴⁷ Chapter Three prepares for a discussion

⁴⁶Jamie Schillinger, "Triangulating Faith, Virtue and Reason: An Edwardsean Account" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2004).

⁴⁷Libertus Arend Hoedemaker, *Faith in Total Life* (Groningen: Druk. V.R.B., 1966), 89. See also Roland Delattre, "Religious Ethics Today: Jonathan Edwards, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Beyond," in *Edwards in Our Time: Jonathan Edwards and the Shaping of American Religion*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee and Allen C. Guelzo (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 67-85.

in Chapter Four, in which Edwards's influence on the aesthetic thought of Niebuhr will become more explicitly apparent.

Chapter Three draws primarily on those works by Edwards in which his theological ethic is clearest and which Niebuhr knew well: Edwards's *Two Dissertations*, separately entitled *Concerning the End for Which God Created the World* and *The Nature of True Virtue*, as well as *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*. All three of these works reveal the profoundly aesthetic nature of Edwards's theological ethical worldview. In particular, Edwards's theory of the affections, his conception of beauty, his symbolic perception of the universe, and his understanding of God as the universal system of being in which all things are in relation informed Niebuhr's aesthetic thought.

Chapter Four is the exegetical heart of this dissertation. Drawing on the background of Dewey's aesthetic philosophy and Edwards's aesthetic theological ethics, Chapter Four argues that Niebuhr's conception of faith is best understood in light of aesthetic insights.⁴⁸ Rather than understanding faith as assent to particular Christian dogma, Niebuhr developed a conception of faith in terms of proposals about the role of emotions in faith and the interpersonal structure of faith. Niebuhr defined faith in terms of interpersonal attitudes of trust and loyalty and morally

⁴⁸In this regard, H. Richard Niebuhr's thought and this dissertation are in a similar vein as the theological aesthetic of Edward Farley. See Edward Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2001), vii. Farley begins the book's Preface by writing: "An autobiographical note may help explain how this work on theological aesthetics had its origin. I had almost completed a rather comprehensive interpretation of the Christian faith when I realized there was something odd about that project. The oddity was the tension – one could say, lack of relation – between the way in which I had interpreted the Christian faith and one of my own strongest orientations. From as early as I can remember, I have been fascinated by the sights, colours, occurrences and sounds of everyday life. . . . The oddity of my theological project was that it almost entirely ignored this powerful aesthetic dimension of my actual life. . . . Faith, it would seem, is simply about 'something else': church doctrines, the after-life, Jesus, the Bible, liberation. This odd lack of relation between faith and the aesthetic dimension of human life is not, I realize, peculiar to my project, a rare autobiographical idiosyncrasy. It haunts the work of most theologians I know. It was only after finishing a four-volume work on Christian theology that I was prompted to inquire into theology's typical exclusion of the aesthetic from faith and, beyond that, the place of the aesthetic in the life of faith."

evaluated the experience of faith in terms of its structure, or form, manifest in the world. If properly conceived, faith, Niebuhr thought, could be a dynamic force by which both the moral life of the self and the culture in which the self lives can be shaped in an ongoing process of integration.

Chapter Five of this dissertation returns to the question of relating faith and culture. This chapter argues that an aesthetic engagement with theological ethical work of relating faith and culture is indispensable in an age of cultural and religious pluralism. Although Niebuhr himself did not experience firsthand the proliferation of multicultural and interreligious experiences that people experience today, he had already envisioned an aesthetic approach to faith that was prepared to address it. Given that for Christians the question of relating faith and culture necessarily pivots on their understanding of the role and authority of Jesus Christ, this chapter will explain the distinction that Niebuhr drew between a Christocentric and a Christomorphic approach to Jesus Christ as symbol. This chapter will show that Niebuhr's Christomorphic aesthetic approach to Jesus Christ makes possible an authentic Christian engagement with multiple cultural and religious communities. Unlike a Christocentric approach, a Christomorphic orientation requires a confessional approach. This chapter will shed light on the ways in which a confessional approach to the experience of faith drives forward multicultural and interreligious integration. Of course, the personal, interpersonal, or communal integrity that is facilitated by an aesthetic approach was never the goal of Niebuhr's theological ethic. The goal that Niebuhr consistently held up was the integrity of a much enlarged sphere, of human community in relation to God.

CHAPTER TWO
JOHN DEWEY ON THE
FORM AND FUNCTION OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Introduction

According to John Dewey, modern societies have undergone one of the greatest changes in religious history. Whereas in prior eras religion had been perceived to shape the culture of a community to the extent that nothing stood independently of it, in his day, Dewey observed religion as no longer thoroughly pervading culture and society. In the last chapter of *A Common Faith*, Dewey recalled the permeation of religion throughout social life.¹ Religious rites organized civic life. Religious practices were tied up with communal customs. The temple served as a public institution. A social group identified itself entirely by its religion and its deity. A person became by birth a member of a collective religion.

That such a picture no longer accurately portrays the role of religion in society signified, for Dewey, the greatest historic change in and challenge to religion.² He wrote:

The change that has taken place in conditions once universal and now infrequent is in my opinion the greatest change that has occurred in religion in all history. The intellectual conflict of scientific and theological beliefs has attracted much more attention. It is still near the focus of attention. But the change in the social center of gravity of religion has gone on so steadily and is now so generally accomplished that it has faded from the thought of most persons, save perhaps the

¹John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 59-60.

²Dewey spoke of the U.S. here. He did recognize that there still existed in the world a few communities for which a religion permeated the entirety of social life. *Ibid.*, 60.

historians. . . .³

That religion, no longer a social center, is one among many institutions within a secular community and that persons can choose whether or not to be members of a religious community have created new social conditions under which persons can interact with one another.

Dewey understood the proliferation of associations, each with independent standing, to be an indirect effect of science, and he attributed to this indirect effect a significance greater than that of the direct effects of science upon religious beliefs. Whereas revisions in creeds, due to the direct pressure that science exerts upon religious beliefs, have affected a relatively small number of usually highly educated persons, the proliferation of associations and their independence from each other have affected all persons.⁴ Dewey wrote that even the fundamentalist cannot escape these indirect effects.

The fundamentalist in religion is one whose beliefs in intellectual content have hardly been touched by scientific developments. His notions about heaven and earth and man, as far as their bearing on religion is concerned, are hardly more affected by the work of Copernicus, Newton, and Darwin than they are by that of Einstein. But his actual life, in what he does day by day and in the contacts that are set up, has been radically changed by political and economic changes that have followed from applications of science.⁵

Under these social conditions, no one remains unaffected. These conditions shape the lives of persons who do not attend church as well as persons who all their lives remain in the church into which they were born.

Accompanying the notion of personal choice in religious matters has been the dislocation of values from religion. However much a religion may have shaped a person's values, s/he can

³Ibid., 61.

⁴Ibid., 63.

⁵Ibid.

carry these values into a social realm that stands apart from a religious institution.⁶ Because of these two “revolutionary” facts, there arises the possibility of overcoming the divide between apologetic and unapologetic religious attitudes. Dewey argued that overcoming the division would require rescuing religious experience from religion, which tends to draw a line between the religious and the secular. A pragmatist approach to religious experience, which would be independent of ideas about the supernatural, could overcome the need to draw such lines and could show the continuity between religious experience and other kinds of experience.⁷

The continuity between religious experience and other kinds of experience can be traversed when we approach all experience aesthetically. All experience, Dewey was keen to show, has an aesthetic form and function. This chapter will explicate Dewey’s aesthetic understanding of experience in order for us to be able to see the aesthetic form and function of religious experience. In his own writings, Dewey himself never explicated an aesthetic understanding of religious experience per se. That will be the aim of this chapter. I concentrate primarily on two of Dewey’s later writings, both of which reflect his mature thought: *Art as Experience* and *A Common Faith*. These separate works, written around the same time and both published in 1934, reflect Dewey’s primary concern to expand the possibilities of and enrich human experience. An aesthetic approach to Dewey’s analysis of religious experience is consistent with the recognition by some scholars of Dewey’s thought that his theory of artistic-aesthetic experience represents the culmination of Dewey’s work⁸ and that his aesthetics of

⁶Ibid., 66.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Thomas M. Alexander, *John Dewey’s Theory of Art, Experience and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling*, SUNY Series in Philosophy (Albany: State University of New York, 1987), xvi: “The search for an adequate aesthetics of experience is what drives the development of Dewey’s philosophy.”

experience is, therefore, indispensable for understanding the whole of his thought.⁹ Even without this academic foundation upon which to rest, the relationship between Dewey's theory of artistic-aesthetic experience and his conception of religious experience, or faith, is sufficiently clear on the basis of a comparison of these two primary texts.

A comparative analysis of Dewey's theories of artistic-aesthetic experience and religious experience reveals that the two theories have in common certain fundamental convictions. These convictions are the features characterizing Dewey's pragmatism, an objective relativism and interactional theory of experience.¹⁰ Given the necessary conciseness of this comparative analysis, a brief preliminary discussion of these convictions will not only facilitate the reader's understanding of Dewey's thought, but will also intimate the ways in which an appropriation of Dewey's aesthetics may be valuable to the exegetical and constructive aims of this dissertation.

First, Dewey was committed to a principle of continuity characterizing human experience. Underlying Dewey's theories of aesthetic¹¹ and religious experience is a reaction against the philosophical tradition that tended to separate into dualisms mind and body; reason and emotion; the ideal and the practical; the supernatural and the natural; the objective and the

⁹Foremost among scholars taking this view is Thomas M. Alexander, who, in his book *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling*, writes: "It is the thesis of this book that the best approach to what Dewey means by 'experience' is not to be gained by focusing primarily on the theme by which Dewey is generally known, his 'instrumentalism,' but instead by looking at experience in its most complete, most significant, and most fulfilling mode: experience as art. In short, I claim that when we explore experience which has been shaped into an aesthetically funded process, into 'an experience,' we will discover Dewey's paradigmatic understanding of experience. And this, in turn, may lead to a more coherent understanding of the rest of Dewey's philosophy." Ibid., xiii.

¹⁰For a concise summary of the distinguishing features of Dewey's pragmatism, see Thomas A. Byrnes, "H. Richard Niebuhr's Reconstruction of Jonathan Edwards's Moral Theology," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 5 (1985): 42-3.

¹¹Dewey preferred to speak of artistic-aesthetic experience to hold together the active experience of creating art with the experience of perceiving and enjoying art. Since such a construction is burdensome, from this point on, I will refer to artistic-aesthetic experience as simply aesthetic experience. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1934), 46.

subjective and in all cases to relegate the latter to an inferior status. Dewey, like other pragmatists, sought to show continuity in the whole of life. He argued that continuity between the elements of each dualism as well as among all the dualisms was built into the structure of experience. In *Art as Experience* and *A Common Faith*, Dewey concerned himself with revitalizing the meaning of art and religion in human experience by recovering the continuity of aesthetic and religious experience with normal processes of living.

This brings us to a second fundamental conviction. More than anything else, Dewey aspired to expand the possibilities of and enrich common human experience. Toward this end, he analyzed the form of experience, which he understood as an intentional interactional process, or function, by which the self interprets and interacts with his or her environment in such a way that both the self and the world are inherently shaped by the interactions. Dewey thought that attending to the form of an experience could enable fostering integration without compromising individuality. All that Dewey wrote on the roles of consciousness, imagination, the emotions, and integration served the end of infinitely expanding the possibilities of new and unique experiences and enriching the quality of each experience.

Third, like George Herbert Mead and other pragmatists, Dewey recognized the thoroughly social nature of the self. Built into Dewey's account of experience, the social nature of the self accounts for the process by which perspectives are shared and by which the accumulation of shared perspectives forms the basis of knowledge, thereby making experience objective and capable of serving as a guide for further purposeful interaction with the environment. Conceiving of experience as a "shared response to the world and to each other,"¹²

¹²Thomas M. Alexander, xvii.

Dewey wanted ultimately to empower human beings to take responsibility for creating a morally meaningful culture.¹³

These features of Dewey's pragmatism are pronounced also in the moral philosophy of H. Richard Niebuhr. Clearly, American pragmatism, which significantly shaped the intellectual context in which Niebuhr worked, made its mark on Niebuhr's thought. Niebuhr himself pointed out a family resemblance between his own thought and that of American pragmatism. In an article that takes as its inspiration Niebuhr's claim of indebtedness to the thought of American pragmatist George Herbert Mead,¹⁴ Thomas A. Byrnes makes the case that *The Responsible Self* is "a classic expression of objective relativist moral philosophy."¹⁵ Interpreting Niebuhr's thought in light of a trajectory of American theology and philosophy, drawn out by Bruce Kuklick in the book *Churchmen and Philosophers: from Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey*,¹⁶ Byrnes skews Niebuhr's contribution to American theological ethics by perceiving it overly one-directionally as a pragmatist reconstruction of Edwards' theology. To be sure, Niebuhr drew upon pragmatist thought in his own work, and, as this dissertation intends to show, underscoring the features of American pragmatism in Niebuhr's thought helps to bring into relief the aesthetic approach to the experience of faith and the moral life that Niebuhr developed. Interpreting

¹³A number of scholars have concluded that Dewey's overall philosophy is concerned with advancing a robust sense of responsibility. See Steven Fesmire, *John Dewey and Moral Imagination: Pragmatism in Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 129. Larry Hickman, *John Dewey's Pragmatic Technology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 196. Cf. Raymond Boisvert, *John Dewey: Rethinking Our Time*, SUNY Series in the Philosophy of Education (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 26.

¹⁴James Gustafson cites Niebuhr responding to a critique of a version of his essay "The Center of Value," in which Niebuhr writes: "Philosophically, it is more indebted to G. H. Mead than to Aristotle; theologically, it is closer, I believe, to Jonathan Edwards ('consent of being to being') than to Thomas Aquinas." Introduction to H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1999), p. 10.

¹⁵Thomas A. Byrnes, 34.

¹⁶ Bruce Kuklick, *Churchmen and Philosophers: from Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

Niebuhr's thought in light of Dewey's pragmatist theory of aesthetic experience helps us to see more clearly the relationships that Niebuhr came to understand between the experience of faith, the role of the emotions, the power of symbols, and the contribution of the arts. To interpret Niebuhr's thought as though it were a pragmatist reconstruction of Edwardsean theology, however, would falsely skew Niebuhr's worldview and would risk missing the significant advances made to Dewey's approach to religious experience by Niebuhr's retrieval of Jonathan Edwards's theological insights.

As this dissertation will show, in some respects it will seem that Dewey and Niebuhr made their way to similar conclusions. For example, Niebuhr and Dewey shared in common the importance of moral responsibility. Furthermore, both men analyzed and explicated the interpretive process of experience and the possibility of formal and moral integration that depends upon it. In other respects, Dewey went beyond Niebuhr. In greater depth than Niebuhr investigated, Dewey examined and theorized about artistic-aesthetic experience, and it is with the help of Dewey's more sophisticated analysis of artistic activity that the aesthetic character of Niebuhr's thought will become visible. In particular, Dewey's articulation of the technical role that emotions play in aesthetic experience sheds light on the process by which Niebuhr thought that a conception of faith in terms of the emotions can lead to an integrated moral life.

The compatibility between certain features of their thinking also makes more apparent the profound differences in the conclusions that they drew about religion and religious experience. Whereas Dewey chose to construe the object of faith – God – in terms of a function, Niebuhr chose to conceptualize the object of faith in terms of a person. Both men maintained moral grounds for conceiving of God in these divergent ways. For Dewey, a functionalist conception of God as a unity of ideals was a necessary condition for a fully moral life – a life of integrity. In

contrast, Niebuhr thought that a personalist conception of God would be a necessary condition for integrity in moral and religious life. It is by revealing the aesthetic character of experience that a personalist conception of God is shown to be necessary. Niebuhr would argue that a personalist conception of God is more capable than a functionalist conception of God of facilitating an aesthetic experience of faith.

This chapter will be organized in the following way. First, I will focus on Dewey's understanding of experience and aesthetic experience. In order to recover "the continuity of aesthetic experience with normal processes of living," Dewey undertook first an analysis of common experience. In doing so, he distilled the aesthetic form of an experience, which I will show. Next, I will examine Dewey's understanding of the role of emotions in aesthetic experience. It was important for Dewey to show that, just as in actual artistic activity, emotions have a unifying as well as an individualizing function in any aesthetic experience. Next, I will focus on Dewey's conception of religious experience. While religious experience, according to Dewey, is clearly aesthetic, it also differs from non-religious aesthetic experience. Unlike non-religious aesthetic experience, religious experience has a comprehensive end, and this comprehensive end is what makes religious experience ultimately moral. Given that emotions play such an essential integrating role in any aesthetic experience, I will inquire into Dewey's understanding of how emotions function in religious experience. I will try to understand the ways in which Dewey contrasted emotions in religious experience from emotions in non-religious aesthetic experiences. In the final and concluding section of this chapter, I will question Dewey's decision to imagine the object of religious experience – God – in functionalist terms, as "the active relation between ideal and actual."¹⁷ I will examine Dewey's reasons for

¹⁷ John Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 51.

rejecting traditional conceptions of God; for choosing a non-personalist conception of God; and for preferring nevertheless to give the name “God” to this functionalist understanding of the religious object.

The question raised in the last section of this chapter will be taken up again in Chapter Four. There I will discuss the importance, as Niebuhr saw it, of conceiving of the object of faith as person. Relating to a personalist conception of God, Niebuhr thought, requires particular emotions without which the morality of an experience would be limited. Given that both Dewey and Niebuhr concerned themselves deeply with the moral consequences of how religious experience is understood and given that the morality of religious experience requires aesthetic consciousness of greater inclusivity and complexity than does an immoral aesthetic experience, the question of how the self should imagine the object of his/her faith has not only aesthetic, but also moral significance. How we imagine the object of faith – as a function or as a person – has both aesthetic and moral consequences.

In addition to raising the question about how we ought to imagine the object of faith, this exposition of Dewey’s thought also serves the overall purpose of the dissertation, which is to construct an aesthetic approach to the problem of the relationship between faith and culture. The sociological pluralism that gradually evolved over time is, as Dewey recognized, a fact of our existence. Today, this fact, accompanied by other dynamics as well, allows for the phenomenon of cultural pluralism to penetrate experience more deeply than ever before. Dewey’s insight that the social conditions of his day necessitated an aesthetic approach to experience gains even greater significance in light of this phenomenon. Aesthetically relating his or her faith to culture, the self no longer has to identify himself or herself with apologetic or unapologetic stances. An

aesthetic approach to experience breaks down this divide and offers the possibility of forming faith and a moral life marked by integrity in contexts of cultural pluralism.

Experience, an Experience, an Aesthetic Experience, and Art

“Experience,” Dewey wrote, “is a matter of the interaction of organism with its environment.”¹⁸ In the interaction between the self and the environment, both the self and the world act and undergo actions upon them. Interactions can take various forms, and the form of an interaction, according to Dewey, determines whether or not the interaction is “an experience.” Dewey distinguished between “an experience” and experience in general. The following passage presents the distinctions that Dewey had in mind:

For in much of our experience we are not concerned with the connection of one incident with what went before and what comes after. There is no interest that controls attentive rejection or selection of what shall be organized into the developing experience. Things happen, but they are neither definitively included nor decisively excluded; we drift. We yield according to external pressure, or evade and compromise. There are beginnings and cessations, but no genuine initiations and conclusions. One thing replaces another, but does not absorb it and carry it on. There is experience, but so slack and discursive that it is not an experience.¹⁹

From the passage above, it is clear that a genuine experience involves attention to form, discriminating selection, and intentionality. An experience has definition by virtue of its form.

In part, the form of an experience is a result of its cumulative character.²⁰ The doings and undergoings of an experience, as Dewey wrote, “absorb” each other. Whether active or passive, each interaction carries forward preceding interactions, and each interaction affects subsequent

¹⁸John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 246.

¹⁹Ibid., 40.

²⁰Paul Monroe, ed. *A Cyclopaedia of Education* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1911), s.v. “Experience and the Empirical,” by John Dewey.

interactions. The form of an experience depends, therefore, on the cumulative character of the interactions between the self and the environment. Given the cumulation that takes place, neither the self nor the environment will remain unchanged. An experience, therefore, is a creative process. Over time, experiences can give rise to new selves, new environments, and new cultural forms.

Because consciousness guides this process, the cumulative form of an experience contrasts from an “aimless,” “loose” succession of events.²¹ The conscious self takes a more active role in the creative process. He or she perceives the connections among the doings and undergoings and recognizes the meanings that these connections make possible.²² His or her perception of what has happened and what is going on informs what he or she will do next. The conscious self also has dilated vision.²³ S/he imagines numerous possibilities of actions and consequences. Describing the creative and perceptive skills of a moral artist, Steven Fesmire writes: “The moral artist, like the prototypical artist, must have a dilated eye. . . an amplified receptivity to the potential of the present. People fail morally in part because . . . their range of creative prospects becomes contracted.”²⁴ The conscious self finally selects the next action according to some interest. Perception, imagination, and interest converge in the formation of an experience.

²¹John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 40.

²²Ibid., 44: “The action and its consequence must be joined in perception. This relationship is what gives meaning; to grasp it is the objective of all intelligence.”

²³Steven Fesmire, 149: “A dilated mind’s eye has an enlarged receptivity to ideas and sentiments latent in a situation just as a dilated pupil has an enlarged receptivity to light.” See also Steven Fesmire, 115. Fesmire borrows the image of “a dilated eye” from Emerson’s metaphor in “Nature,” 193, 204, in *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Signet Classic, 1965).

²⁴Steven Fesmire, 115.

Dewey called the end result of an experience a “consummation.”²⁵ The end grows out of the consciously organized interaction of its varied parts. As an integration of its parts, it cannot exist independent of, or separate from, the process. “Fulfilling, consummating,” Dewey wrote, “are continuous functions, not mere ends. . . .”²⁶

Consummation is the aesthetic mark of an experience. Although Dewey thought that ultimately any activity, including practical and intellectual activities, could possess aesthetic form, he nevertheless recognized that distinctively aesthetic experiences differ, in their treatment of their ends, from distinctively practical or intellectual experiences. In intellectual activity, for example, “the conclusion has value on its own account. It can be extracted as a formula or a ‘truth,’ and can be used in its independent entirety as factor and guide in other inquiries.”²⁷ Contrastingly, “in a work of art, there is no such single self-sufficient deposit. The end, the terminus, is significant not by itself but as the integration of the parts.”²⁸

Unlike an anaesthetic experience, an aesthetic experience possesses a discernable beginning and end. This is not to say that an experience, once complete, no longer participates in the ongoing flow of experiences. Dewey preferred to call demarcations among experiences “pauses,” or “rests,” rather than “cessations.”²⁹ Behind his choice of terms is the intention to convey that an experience continues to affect future interactions between the self and the

²⁵John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 15.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 56.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 55.

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹*Ibid.*, 35-36.

environment.³⁰

As we have seen, the idea of “an experience” already implies that artistic consciousness has played a role in shaping the interaction between the self and his or her environment. Not all of us would consider ourselves to be artists, but all of us, and this was Dewey’s main point, exercise some degree of aesthetic consciousness whenever we are conscious of the form of our interactions with the environment – that is, whenever we have an experience. Art, Dewey thought, was the idealization of the aesthetic form latent in common experience.

For the most part, when Dewey addressed the arts, he made references to literature and painting.³¹ Nevertheless, Dewey’s theory of artistic-aesthetic experience illuminates our general understanding of all kinds of artistic activity. In his book *John Dewey and Moral Imagination*, Steven Fesmire illustrates Dewey’s theory in the specific artistic activity of jazz musicians.

Acknowledging the similarities between jazz, bluegrass, blues, and drum circles, Fesmire writes:

A jazz musician. . . takes up the attitude of others by catching a cadence from the group’s signals while anticipating the group’s response to her own signals. Drawing on the resources of tradition, memory, and long exercise, she plays *into* the past tone to discover the possibilities for future tones in the way moral imagination enables us to see the old in terms of the possible. This is not casual drifting into the next note, but movement toward an emerging sonorous image that is felt to unify the composition.³²

³⁰Ibid., 89. Dewey recognized the inevitability of this process. He wrote: “Aspects and states of his prior experience of varied subject-matters have been wrought into his being; they are the organs with which he perceives. . . . Memories, not necessarily conscious but retentions that have been organically incorporated in the very structure of the self, feed present observation.”

³¹Lawrence J. W. Dennis, “The Implications of Dewey’s Esthetics for the Teaching of Music” (Ph.D. diss., Southern Illinois University, 1967), p. 21.

³²Steven Fesmire, 94.

With the help of pragmatist theory,³³ Fesmire draws out an analogy between artistic activity and the moral life. Both entail perception of how the self might fit into the complex relationships already in his or her environment. In jazz improvisation, acting in a fitting way requires listening and responding creatively to the tone of a composition. Furthermore, it requires anticipating that other musicians will respond creatively to the music they hear and feel. Similarly, Fesmire writes, “Moral-agents/patients must respond empathetically to each other instead of imposing insular designs, and they must rigorously imagine how others will respond to their actions.”³⁴

Fesmire rightly recognizes that, as analogies, different artistic activities disclose different salient features of the moral life.³⁵ Jazz improvisation highlights the role of feeling, or emotion, in determining the fitting response and in bringing coherence to a composition. A skilled artist, he writes, “plays into the past tone.” Only by discerning the felt quality – in the case of music, the tone – of the environment can one participate in creating a coherent, meaningful experience.

Dewey recognized the significance of the emotions for unifying the form of experience, whether artistic or non-artistic. Given the significance of emotions in producing an aesthetic experience, they will be the focus of our attention in the following section. We will examine the relationship between emotions and their objects. This will bring to view the unifying as well as individualizing functions of emotions.

³³In addition to Dewey’s work, Fesmire cites George Herbert Mead’s theory of the self as a useful framework for this analogy. *Ibid.*, 146, footnote 11.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

³⁵Steven Fesmire, 110.

The Role of Emotions in Aesthetic Experience

Aesthetic theory, Dewey asserted, should not separate the self from the environment, the subject from the object. A separation of the two, which he observed in much philosophy of art, would be fatal to aesthetic theory.³⁶

For the uniquely distinguishing feature of esthetic experience is exactly the fact that no such distinction of self and object exists in it, since it is esthetic in the degree in which organism and environment cooperate to institute an experience in which the two are so fully integrated that each disappears.³⁷

A complete interpenetration of self and environment is, according to Dewey, the height of aesthetic experience.³⁸ Aesthetic theory, therefore, should concern itself with the conditions and elements that make possible and facilitate such complete interpenetration of the self and the environment. It should concern itself, Dewey thought, with all the elements that, in combination, are necessary for creating experiences of vitality. Vitality requires, the whole self – “thought, emotion, sense, purpose, impulsion.”³⁹ “For their unity is found in the cooperative roles they play in active and receptive relations to the environment.”⁴⁰

For the purposes of this dissertation, we will focus on the role of the emotions in aesthetic experience. Without the integration brought about by emotions, a complete interpenetration of a self and his/her world would be impossible. Emotional coherence differs from a unity resulting

³⁶Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 249. Dewey argued that the separation of the self from the environment led inevitably to the separation of the various “factors and phases of the self,” by which he meant “thought, emotion, sense, purpose, and impulsion.” See also his discussion of Kant’s theory of art as an example of this separation. *Ibid.*, 252-255.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 249.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 22.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 252.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

from external force or characterized by mechanical connections. Emotional coherence involves wholehearted engagement of the self with the environment. It is the integrity of the self's internal desires and external interactions. In an emotionally coherent experience, that which the self values informs how the self interprets a situation and motivates him or her to act in a way that brings about "inner harmony."⁴¹ Dewey described this inner harmony as happiness and delight that "come to be through a fulfillment that reaches to the depths of our being – one that is an adjustment of our whole being with the conditions of existence."⁴²

Dewey perceived dulled emotions in connection with ordinary experience and their subsequent outlet in the realm of fantasy to be one of the main reasons for a philosophy of art guilty of separating the self from his or her environment.⁴³ Dewey hoped for the increase of experiences in which lively, passionate engagement with the world would break down the callousness with which persons undergo daily monotonies. An aesthetic approach to ordinary experience would reveal the significance of emotions in common life.

Dewey thought that using artistic activity as an analogy for non-artistic experience would heighten our awareness of the role of the emotions in the formation of experience. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey described the integrating power of emotions. Dewey wrote:

Emotion is the moving and cementing force. It selects what is congruous and dyes what is selected with its color, thereby giving qualitative unity to materials

⁴¹Ibid., 17.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid., 260: "Repelled by the dreariness and indifference of things which a badly adjusted environment forces upon us, emotion withdraws and feeds upon things of fantasy. These things are built up by an impulsive energy that cannot find outlet in the usual occupations of existence. It may well be under such circumstances that multitudes have recourse to music, theater and the novel to find easy entrance into a kingdom of free floating emotions. But this fact is no ground for the assertion by philosophic theory of an inherent psychological separation of sense and reason, desire and perception."

externally disparate and dissimilar. It thus provides unity in and through the varied parts of an experience.⁴⁴

An emotion, whatever it may be, moves the artist. It may be that the work of art, in its current unfinished state, expresses an emotion that moves the artist and informs her next artistic action. The artist is mindful of the felt quality of the work already in progress. If the artist is emotionally perceptive, he or she can create a composition that is unified. If the artist is simultaneously imaginative, he or she can create a composition that is unified without being monotone. As Dewey recognized, emotions can undergo change within a work of art without necessarily yielding its stable felt quality. This is because emotions are tied to particular objects. With each new shade of color, new line, change in tempo, or change in tempo, the artist can modify the composition's felt quality.

An emotion, Dewey maintained, must have an object beyond itself. The interpenetration of the self and the world that constitutes an aesthetic experience is an integration that does not dissolve the object. Even in such moments of complete integration with the environment, an emotion is not complete in and of itself.⁴⁵ On the objective nature of emotion, Dewey wrote: "Emotion belongs of a certainty to the self. But it belongs to the self that is concerned in the movement of events toward an issue that is desired or disliked."⁴⁶ To cling to the happiness and delight of a present or past experience is to treat emotions as if they were objects in and of themselves and leads to a withdrawal from the world.⁴⁷

⁴⁴Ibid., 42.

⁴⁵Ibid., 67: "But, in fact, an emotion is to or from or about something objective, whether in fact or in idea."

⁴⁶Ibid., 42.

⁴⁷Ibid., 17: "Any attempt to perpetuate beyond its term the enjoyment attending the time of fulfillment and harmony constitutes withdrawal from the world."

The unifying function of aesthetic experience, Dewey insisted, requires and depends upon engagement with the world in all its particularities. The particularities of an object are what lead to new interpretations or new arrangements of old materials. The dependence of aesthetic experience upon the particularities of objects becomes clear in Dewey's discussion of the individualization of works of art. Works of art are unique, rather than typical, expressions, whenever artists attend to the particularities of their objects.⁴⁸ For example, "the esthetic portrayal of grief manifests the grief of a particular individual in connection with a particular event. It is *that* state of sorrow which is depicted, not depression unattached. It has a *local* habitation."⁴⁹ Art is always an expression of an emotion about some particular object. Although there may be countless works of art that express love, it is possible for each expression to be distinctive, because each work expresses a love of/for some particular thing. In other words, the specific object qualifies the emotion so that an emotion never exists as if it originated complete in itself. Dewey wrote:

The notion that expression is a direct emission of an emotion complete in itself entails logically that individualization is specious and external. For, according to it, fear is fear, elation is elation, love is love, each being generic, and internally differentiated only by differences of intensity. . . . Save nominally, there is no such thing as *the* emotion of fear, hate, love. The unique, unduplicated character of experienced events and situations impregnates the emotion that is evoked. Were it the function of speech to reproduce that to which it refers, we could never speak of fear, but only of fear-of-this-particular-oncoming-automobile, with all its specifications of time and place, or fear-under-specified-circumstances-of-drawing-a-wrong-conclusion from just-such-and-such-data. A lifetime would be too short to reproduce in words a single emotion. In reality, however, poet and novelist have an immense advantage over even an expert psychologist in dealing with an emotion. For the former build up a concrete situation and permit *it* to

⁴⁸Ibid., 67.

⁴⁹Ibid., 91.

evoke emotional response. Instead of a description of an emotion in intellectual and symbolic terms, the artist “does the deed that breeds” the emotion.⁵⁰

Because emotions are dependent upon and qualified by their particular objects, it is false to imagine that they can exist eternally as if they were timeless. The happiness and delight that result from having an experience cannot endure eternally. They are, after all, happiness *about* and delight *in* something specific. Once the specific conditions of an experience change, the emotions qualified by these particular conditions also must change.

In *Art as Experience*, Dewey explained that emotions are tied to specific objects. These objects, he thought, could be actual or imagined. In every artistic experience, the artist imagines the work of art in its completion before he or she actually completes it. No matter how much the imagined object undergoes modification during the creative process, it is nevertheless essential to the creative experience. In the next section we will turn to religious experience. Dewey understood “religious” to signify an emotion, an attitude, an outlook. We will examine how he understood emotions to function in religious experience. As we shall see, his understanding of the role of the emotions is complicated by his conception of the object of religious experience.

Religion and Religious Experience

Just as Dewey tried never to determine ends for aesthetic experience, he refused to determine an ultimate end for religious experience. He was committed to the notion that ends arise organically out of intense engagement with the environment. More attention should be spent, he thought, on creating the conditions for lively, wholehearted engagement with the environment than on determining from the outset the ends toward which a society should strive. The problem with traditional religions has been that they have reified ideal ends. While these

⁵⁰Ibid., 67.

ideal ends might have originated in common experience, over time they have become institutionalized in such a way that they hinder creative processes out of which new ideals can grow and be actualized.

It is important to note a fundamental distinction that Dewey drew between “a religion” and “religious experience.” Dewey defined “a religion” to be “a special body of beliefs and practices having some kind of institutional organization.”⁵¹ When Dewey spoke of “religious experience,” he spoke of “attitudes,” “a quality of experience” and “religious elements of experience” that do not “denote anything that can exist by itself or that can be organized into a particular and distinctive form of existence.”⁵² This distinction served his purpose in writing *A Common Faith*: that was, to liberate religious experience from the burden of religion.⁵³

Raymond D. Boisvert, in his *John Dewey: Rethinking Our Time*, writes:

What is the “load” that Dewey wishes to jettison? There are specific intellectual commitments and ritualistic practices to be sure, but what Dewey mostly seeks is a reversal of traditional assumptions. Typically, religious practices and attitudes are said to be grounded or rooted in an absolute Being who is their source and guarantor. Dewey begins rather with practice and claims that, when certain conditions are met, the experience in question can be deemed “religious.”⁵⁴

In order to emancipate religious experience from religion, Dewey tried, first, to establish the possibility of religious experience by identifying the conditions and processes that make an experience possible and, second, to show that the beliefs and institutional practices – in short,

⁵¹John Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 9.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 9-10.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 9: “. . . it is conceivable that the present depression in religion is closely connected with the fact that religions now prevent, because of their weight of historic encumbrances, the religious quality of experience from coming to consciousness and finding the expression that is appropriate to present conditions, intellectual and moral. I believe that such is the case.”

⁵⁴Raymond D. Boisvert, 144.

religion – have no intrinsic relationship to the conditions and processes that make religious experience possible.

Dewey suspected that views propounding religious experience to be something *sui generis* are actually attempts to justify “some special kind of object” and “some special kind of practice.”⁵⁵ Rather than defining religious experience in terms of an object, manner, or end, Dewey preferred to speak of it as a function. The function, independent of any particular content, determines the religious quality of the experience. It is a mistake, therefore, to understand religious experience as a specific kind of experience to be “marked off from experience as aesthetic, scientific, moral, political; from experience as companionship and friendship.”⁵⁶ Any of these kinds of experiences can come to possess a religious quality, because the possibility of religious experience resides in the ordinary processes of living.

In *A Common Faith*, Dewey described how a religious experience functions. He wrote:

. . . there are also changes in ourselves in relation to the world in which we live that are much more inclusive and deep seated. They relate not to this and that want in relation to this and that condition of our surroundings, but pertain to our being in its entirety. Because of their scope, this modification of ourselves is enduring. It lasts through any amount of vicissitude of circumstances, internal and external. There is a composing and harmonizing of the various elements of our being such that, in spite of changes in the special conditions that surround us, these conditions are also arranged, settled, in relation to us.⁵⁷

⁵⁵John Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 11.

⁵⁶Ibid., 10. Dewey wrote *A Common Faith* with a particular audience in mind. See Raymond D. Boisvert, 140. Boisvert cites a passage from a letter in which Dewey described his intended audience. “The lectures making up the book were meant for those whose religious beliefs had been abandoned, and who were given the impression that their abandonment left them without any religious beliefs whatever. I wanted to show them that religious values are not the monopoly of any one class or sect and are still open to them.” Boisvert is citing here Douglas Anderson, “Theology as Healing: A Meditation on *A Common Faith*,” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, Toronto, 8 March 1996, 3.

⁵⁷John Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 16.

Religious experience functions as an “adjustment” of the self in relation to the world.⁵⁸ The distinctions Dewey made among “adjustment,” “accommodation,” and “adaptation” bring clarity to how religious experience functions. Accommodation entails the self who modifies his particular attitudes in accordance with particular conditions in the environment. The attitude underlying accommodation is more passive than the attitude underlying adaptation. The self who is engaged in adaptation actively changes conditions in the environment so that those conditions will accommodate her purposes. Though accommodation and adaptation differ on the scale of agency that runs from passive to active, both accommodation and adaptation are similar in that they involve *specific* changes in relation to *specific* environmental conditions rather than changes in the *whole* self. Unlike these processes, only adjustment involves an interaction between the self and the environment in which the *whole* self changes.

Adjustment, accommodation, and adaptation – all three attempts to fit the self to the environment – involve the emotions. As Dewey’s description of adjustment makes clear, emotions, or attitudes, play a significant role in creating coherence between the self and the environment. Dewey wrote that whenever an adjustment occurs, “there is a religious outlook and function.”⁵⁹ Dewey usually spoke of the function of religious experience in terms of outlook, attitudes, or emotions. According to Dewey’s discussion of adjustment, the main difference between a religious experience, in which an adjustment takes place, and other kinds of experiences, in which accommodations or adaptations take place, hinges on the emotional orientation of the self. In religious experience, the entire self interacts with the environment in

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Ibid., 17.

such a way that the resulting changes are deep-seated. Consequently, the new integration resulting from adjustment is stable.

The Aesthetic Quality of Religious Experience

Religious experience, described here, resembles Dewey's conception of aesthetic experience. Like aesthetic experiences, religious experiences involve a "composing" and "harmonizing" of the elements of the self with his or her environment.⁶⁰ As in aesthetic experiences, the whole self participates so that the resulting integration is "wholehearted." Dewey even described aesthetic and religious experiences as bringing about the same kind of emotion: "happiness," "delight," or "gladness."⁶¹ Furthermore, Dewey conceived of religious experience and aesthetic experience primarily as functions independent of any object, manner, or purpose/end/ideal determined, or specified, in advance.

The question arises: did Dewey equate aesthetic and religious experience? Did he treat religious and aesthetic experience interchangeably? Given the striking similarities between his conceptions of religious and aesthetic experience, it is clear that while not all aesthetic experiences are religious, all religious experiences are aesthetic experiences.

Discussing adjustment, Dewey wrote about the attitude with which the self engages in the process of adjustment. From this discussion we can gain insight into how Dewey differentiated religious experience from aesthetic experience. Regarding the attitude involved in adjustment, Dewey wrote:

⁶⁰Ibid., 16.

⁶¹Ibid.: Contrasting the religious attitude from a voluntary, yet stoic resolve, Dewey wrote that the religious attitude "is more outgoing, more ready and glad."

This attitude includes a note of submission. But it is voluntary, not externally imposed; and as voluntary it is something more than a mere Stoical resolution to endure unperturbed throughout the buffetings of fortune. It is more outgoing, more ready and glad, than the latter attitude, and it is more active than the former. And in calling it voluntary, it is not meant that it depends upon a particular resolve or volition. It is a change *of* will conceived as the organic plenitude of our being, rather than any special change *in* will.⁶²

Emphasizing the change *of* will, rather than a change *in* will, Dewey spoke of a generic character of volition. A religious attitude involves a “generic,” not merely specific, volition. Adjustment refers “not to this and that want in relation to this and that condition of our surroundings, but rather to a kind of stability between the will and the environment which specific changes in the environment do not endanger.”⁶³ While the integrating role of the emotions seems to be that which lends religious and aesthetic quality to experience, religious experience seems to differ from aesthetic experience insofar as the former depends upon a generic volition, while the latter does not.

If we recall, Dewey wrote in *Art as Experience* that emotions are specific and that the particularities of the objects with which the self interacts are what qualify the self’s emotions, giving them their specific character. In his discussion about the individualization of works of art, Dewey explained that a work of art is unique, rather than typical, because it expresses a particular emotion qualified by the specific object. Given that Dewey recognized the impossibility of a generic emotion, how did he understand volition to be generic? Related to this question is yet another question: what is, according to Dewey, the object of religious experience?

⁶²Ibid., 17.

⁶³Ibid., 16.

Dewey clearly thought that religious experience, like aesthetic experience, involves lively and wholehearted engagement with the environment. Unlike aesthetic experience, religious experience necessarily has the world as its ultimate environment. The world is an environment that is physical, natural, human, social, and cultural. The world includes everything with which we interact, including the cumulations of our interactions. It includes that which takes up space around us, that which we institutionalize, that which we remember, and that which we imagine.

Describing the role of imagination in religious experience, Dewey explained that when the self encounters any object, he or she observes the object with reference to some other imagined object, end, or purpose.⁶⁴ In religious experience, the object that the self imagines is an idea of “complete unification,”⁶⁵ whether it is conceived as the whole self or the world.⁶⁶ The more the self imagines a unified world and participates in unifying the world, the more the self also becomes unified. For Dewey, the question “what sort of self is in the making” is tied up with the question “what kind of world is in the making.” Dewey wrote:

The limited world of our observation and reflection becomes the Universe only through imaginative extension. . . . The whole self is an ideal, an imaginative projection. Hence the idea of a thoroughgoing and deep-seated harmonizing of the self with the Universe (as a name for the totality of conditions with which the self is connected) operates only through imagination – which is one reason why this composing of the self is not voluntary in the sense of an act of special volition or resolution. An “adjustment” possesses the will rather than is its express product.⁶⁷

⁶⁴Ibid., 18: “There actually occurs extremely little observation of brute facts merely for the sake of the facts. . . . Facts are usually observed with reference to some practical end and purpose, and that end is presented only imaginatively.”

⁶⁵Ibid., 19.

⁶⁶Ibid., 18: “The idea of a whole, whether of the whole personal being or of the world, is an imaginative, not a literal, idea.” Dewey understood the interdependence of the ideas of the unified self and the Universe. See Ibid., 19: “The self is always directed toward something beyond itself and so its own unification depends upon the idea of the integration of the shifting scenes of the world into that imaginative totality we call the Universe.”

⁶⁷Ibid., 18-19.

In having a religious experience, the self interprets the particular objects he encounters in light of an idea of the world that the self imagines and desires. Insofar as the idea of the world is imagined and not real, Dewey understood the desire for it to be generic, rather than specific. In every religious experience, a generic volition is at work.

The harmonizing, or composing, of unity – the function of religious experience – requires an object beyond that which the self encounters in his or her immediate environment. The role of imagination is, therefore, crucial in having a religious experience. Dewey wrote, “The intimate connection of imagination with ideal elements in experience is generally recognized. Such is not the case with respect to its connection with faith.”⁶⁸

In order to explain the connection between religious experience and imagination, Dewey appropriated the insight of philosopher George Santayana.

Mr. Santayana has connected the religious quality of experience with the imaginative, as that is expressed in poetry. “Religion and poetry,” he says, “are identical in essence, and differ merely in the way in which they are attached to practical affairs. Poetry is called religion when it intervenes in life, and religion, when it merely supervenes upon life, is seen to be nothing but poetry.”⁶⁹

Dewey appreciated Santayana’s distinction between “supervening” and “intervening,” and Dewey applied the term “intervening” to his conception of religious experience. To make his own point, Dewey explained Santayana’s distinction:

If I may make a comment upon this penetrating insight of Mr. Santayana, I would say that the difference between imagination that only supervenes and imagination that intervenes is the difference between one that completely interpenetrates all the elements of our being and one that is interwoven with only special and partial factors.⁷⁰

⁶⁸Ibid., 19.

⁶⁹Ibid., 17.

⁷⁰Ibid., 18.

Religious experience, Dewey thought, occurs when some object of the imagination intervenes, permeates, and unifies life. For Dewey, this object was the idea of a “universe.” In *Art as Experience*, Dewey wrote: “The ‘universal’ is not something metaphysically anterior to all experience but is a *way in which things function* in experience as a bond of union among particular events and scenes.”⁷¹ In this sense, the universal, by virtue of its intervening function, is common. “The more deep-seated it is in the doings and undergoing that form experience, the more general or common it is.”⁷²

Dewey recognized the difficulty in discerning the degree to which an object has penetrated one’s life. This, he thought, was the problem with religions. In their historical development, beliefs and practices become institutionalized. Over time, persons become emotionally attached to the rituals, traditions, and teachings that have grown up around religions. Furthermore, they interpret their experiences in such a way that reinforces the stability of religions. Religions penetrate into persons’ lives through habituation. It is no wonder, therefore, that persons attribute their sense of self and their worldviews to the beliefs and practices of which their religions consist. Despite how deeply they can habituate persons, despite even the aesthetic qualities present in experiences of religion, religions, Dewey argued, merely supervene upon persons’ lives. Not only do religions lack intrinsic connection to religious experience, they

⁷¹John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 286.

⁷²Ibid.

also hinder the possibility of religious experience.⁷³ Dewey thought that by rejecting religion nothing significant would be lost and much would be gained.⁷⁴

Dewey raised the question of what would be lost if we were to conceive even of God as an extension of the function of religious experience. So conceived, God would be “the unity of all ideal ends arousing us to desire and actions” rather than a particular Being.⁷⁵

Suppose for the moment that the word “God” means the ideal ends that at a given time and place one acknowledges as having authority over his volition and emotion, the values to which one is supremely devoted, as far as these ends, through imagination, take on unity. If we make this supposition, the issue will stand out clearly in contrast with the doctrine of religions that “God” designates some kind of Being having prior and therefore non-ideal existence.⁷⁶

Dewey’s rejection of religion involves foremostly a rejection of belief in the supernatural. Notions about the supernatural are, according to Dewey, attempts to convert moral ideal ends into metaphysical realities.⁷⁷ A result of their conversion is that religion becomes mistakenly identified to be intellectual assent to beliefs about the supernatural. According to Dewey, even belief in the existence of God merely supervenes upon life. In contrast, a functional conception of God would have intervening, rather than merely supervening quality.

⁷³Dewey did not give serious thought to how the content of particular religious teachings, beliefs, rituals, and practices might be approached or with which emotions they might be approached in order to be a religious experience.

⁷⁴A sympathetic reading of Dewey would not take Dewey to be advocating dogmatically the rejection of religion. See Raymond D. Boisvert, 152-3: “His 1943 letter to Charles Witzell makes a point of saying that ‘I have taught many years and I don’t think that any students would say that I set out to undermine anyone’s faith.’ Here, Boisvert is citing Douglas Anderson “Theology as Healing: A Meditation on A Common Faith,” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, Toronto, 8 March 1996.

⁷⁵John Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 42.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 42.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 21-22: “Faith that something should be in existence as far as lies in our power is changed into the intellectual belief that it is already in existence. When physical existence does not bear out the assertion, the physical is subtly changed into the metaphysical. In this way, moral faith has been inextricably tied up with intellectual beliefs about the supernatural.”

Dewey argued that, if theologians want to succeed in defending an intrinsic value of religion, they must attend to the aesthetic function of religion more than to particular articles of belief. Dewey defined religious experience in terms of its function. He wrote: “I should describe this faith as the unification of the self through allegiance to inclusive ends, which imagination presents to us and to which the human will responds as worthy of controlling our desires and choices.”⁷⁸ The removal of ideas about the supernatural would enable moral ideals to function more freely.⁷⁹ Furthermore, such a functional conception of God would make room for an infinite number of unique religious experiences. We would understand religious experience as taking place “in different persons in a multitude of ways.”⁸⁰

In the concluding section of this chapter, I will examine Dewey’s decision to imagine the object of religious experience – God – in functionalist terms as “the active relation between ideal and actual.”⁸¹ Specifically, I will examine Dewey’s reasons for rejecting traditional conceptions of God; for choosing a non-personalist conception of God; and for preferring nevertheless to give the name “God” to his functionalist conception of God.

A Functionalist Conception of God

Underlying Dewey’s rejection of a personalist conception of God in favor of a functionalist conception of God was the association of a personalist conception of God with the

⁷⁸Ibid., 33.

⁷⁹Ibid., 27: “A body of beliefs and practices that are apart from the common and natural relations of mankind must, in the degree in which it is influential, weaken and sap the force of the possibilities inherent in such relations.”

⁸⁰Ibid., 14.

⁸¹Ibid., 51.

traditional idea of a preexistent supernatural entity. Not only was such a notion rationally unacceptable to Dewey, but he also considered the notion morally harmful. Dewey gave multiple moral reasons for rejecting a personalist conception of God. First, he maintained that the search for a supernatural being weakens the natural sense of responsibility that persons have for attaining ideal ends. It leads persons to rely upon the supernatural rather than their own natural abilities to improve life by active participation in it.

Dewey gave another reason for rejecting the traditional notion of God as a being. It has to do with the philosophical problem of evil that has plagued theology and philosophy throughout the ages and still remains irresolvable. The conception of God as the unity of ideal ends, not yet realized and as an organic function of human experience, would avoid the philosophical problem of evil altogether. God, for Dewey, is Good, which Dewey understood not as a fixed ideal, but rather as a process. “The true good,” he writes, “is . . . an inclusive or expanding end.”⁸² On Dewey’s account, evil would be the occurrence of conditions that persons would have otherwise, which Dewey thought was necessary for people to imagine and strive for new possibilities not yet realized.⁸³

Inclusivity is, for Dewey, a criterion for religious experience. Religious experience is not merely inclusive, but is comprehensively inclusive. Only a moral ideal that is comprehensively

⁸²John Dewey, *Ethics, 1908*, Middle Works of John Dewey, vol. 5 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 261.

⁸³John Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 45: “If these apologists had not identified the existence of ideal goods with that of a Person supposed to originate and support them – a Being, moreover, to whom omnipotent power is attributed – the problem of the occurrence of evil would be gratuitous. The significance of ideal ends and meanings is, indeed, closely connected with the fact that there are in life all sorts of things that are evil to us because we would have them otherwise. Were existing conditions wholly good, the notion of possibilities to be realized would never emerge.”

inclusive has the power to unify the self in the self's interactions with the world. On this point, Dewey wrote in *A Common Faith*:

What has been said does not imply that all moral faith in ideal ends is by virtue of that fact religious in quality. The religious is "morality touched by emotion" only when the ends of moral conviction arouse emotions that are not only intense but are actuated and supported by ends so inclusive that they unify the self. The inclusiveness of the end in relation to both self and the "universe" to which an inclusive self is related is indispensable.⁸⁴

Out of his moral commitment to comprehensive inclusivity, Dewey rejected a personalist conception of God. Dewey seemed to think that a personalist image of God would limit the imagination, preventing it from including within its scope relationships beyond personal relationships. In *Art as Experience*, he wrote:

Imagination is the chief instrument of the good. It is more or less a commonplace to say that a person's ideas and treatment of his fellows are dependent upon his power to put himself imaginatively in their place. But the primacy of the imagination extends far beyond the scope of direct personal relationships.⁸⁵

Dewey understood that imagination, depending on its scope, can be just as self-centered as it can be inclusive. Steven Fesmire explains how Dewey recognized that imagination can and often does work for immoral ends: "It is undeniable that imagination is all too compatible with malicious intent and self-serving deception, but the predictable result is disintegrated selfhood (in which habits, such as seeking both friendship and dominance, do not internally support each other) and social fragmentation."⁸⁶ Disintegration of both self and society results, Dewey thought, when the imagination is not extended beyond the scope of the self and his or her

⁸⁴Ibid., 22-23.

⁸⁵John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 348.

⁸⁶Steven Fesmire, 103.

personal relationships. To conceive of God in functionalist rather than personalist terms was necessary, Dewey thought, to enable the self to imagine himself or herself in relation to the whole world.

Interestingly, Dewey did not jettison the name “God” in writing about religious experience.⁸⁷ Although he recognized that misunderstandings could arise from his use of the term “God,” he chose nevertheless to continue using this term, because he wanted to avoid the misperception that he was an “aggressive atheist,” which he understood as viewing the world of nature as hostile or indifferent to human beings.⁸⁸ Dewey perceived aggressive atheism to have in common with traditional notions about the supernatural a moral problem: that is, both led persons to feel either defiance or despair.⁸⁹

A religious attitude,” Dewey wrote, “needs the sense of a connection of man, in the way of both dependence and support, with the enveloping world that the imagination feels is a universe. Use of the words “God” or “divine” to convey the union of actual with ideal may protect man from a sense of isolation and from consequent despair or defiance.⁹⁰

It seems that Dewey maintained the term “God” as the ultimate object of religious experience because Dewey recognized that “God” engenders emotions in persons that are conducive to the self’s engagement in and interaction with the world. From the passage cited above, it is clear that Dewey began to sense that a conception of God as pure function could not generate a wholehearted, generic emotional orientation toward the world that was necessary for an experience to be religious. A purely functionalist conception of God would more likely

⁸⁷John Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 51.

⁸⁸Ibid., 52.

⁸⁹Ibid., 53.

⁹⁰Ibid.

engender emotional orientations of despair and defiance, which would counter, rather than facilitate, religious experience. A sense of isolation, despair, and defiance would result in fragmentation rather than facilitate integration in the moral life.

Building on this sensibility, Dewey gave further explanation for his use of the term “God.” In *A Common Faith*, he wrote that the term “selects those factors in existence that generate and support our idea of good as an end to be striven for. It excludes a multitude of forces that at any given time are irrelevant to this function.”⁹¹ Dewey’s explanation resounds with his insight into the role of emotions in aesthetic experiences. Dewey understood that our conceptions, or imaginations, of an object, insofar as they engender an emotional orientation toward that object, influence the aesthetic process by which persons create a coherent vision, work of art, or experience. This aesthetic process involves selection, discrimination, and integration. The term “God,” by conveying a vision of the world that is supportive, life-affirming, creative, and interrelated, can arouse in persons the generic emotional outlook that moves them to participate voluntarily, wholeheartedly, and actively in the aesthetic process that leads to integration in their lives and in the universe.

⁹¹Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE
JONATHAN EDWARDS' AESTHETIC VIEW OF THE
MORAL LIFE AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Introduction

Since the 1940's the thought and life of Jonathan Edwards have attracted renewed interest among scholars of American studies and theology. Scholars have rediscovered Edwards as having immense significance in the shaping of an American theological tradition. Describing Edwards's significance, Leo Sandon wrote: "At this point in American studies the reassessment of Jonathan Edwards's position in the history of American thought as that of 'the most important American theologian before the twentieth century' is well established."¹ In an article from 1976, Sandon traces a trajectory of influence from Edwards to Niebuhr.² Niebuhr was, according to Sandon, "a precursor of those who have pointed us to a reawakened interest in Edwards's theology."³ Niebuhr's deep appreciation of Edwards's thought is evident in many of his writings, including his earlier works, such as *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937). Sandon and other Niebuhrian scholars have recognized Niebuhr's indebtedness to Edwards with regard

¹Leo Sandon, Jr. "Jonathan Edwards and H. Richard Niebuhr," *Religious Studies* 12, no. 1 (March 1976): 101.

²Ibid., 101-15.

³Ibid., 102.

to theological concepts and moral theories that were fundamental to Niebuhr's theological ethical worldview.⁴

In this and the next chapter, I will continue examining the influence of Edwards's insights upon Niebuhr. In particular I will focus on Edwards's theory of the human affections in relation to his understanding of beauty and how his aesthetic conception of the religious and moral life might have influenced Niebuhr's conception of faith. An aesthetic interpretation of Niebuhr, which will follow in the next chapter and for which the current chapter prepares, cannot demonstrate influence in the same way that Sandon's interpretation of Niebuhr's work could show.⁵ Clear evidence of Niebuhr's appreciation for Edwards's aesthetic conception of the moral and spiritual life is limited to Niebuhr's statements in *The Cole Lectures*, which he delivered in 1961, one year before his death. Niebuhr entitled the lecture series "Next Steps in Theology" and regarded them as "the old man's bequest to the young theologians."⁶ In these lectures, Niebuhr urged young theologians to take seriously Edwards's hypothesis concerning the centrality of the human affections in religious experience and to explore "the movement toward the rapprochement of religion and art."⁷ Niebuhr's message was more suggestive of a

⁴Ibid., 101-15. See also Leo Sandon's dissertation "H. Richard Niebuhr's Interpretation of the American Theological Tradition," (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1971). See also Sidney Ahlstrom, "H. Richard Niebuhr's Place in American Thought," *Christianity and Crisis* 23 (1965): 215.

⁵Leo Sandon, Jr., "Jonathan Edwards and H. Richard Niebuhr," 114-5: "It is the conclusion of this author that Libertus A. Hoedemaker is incorrect in his judgment that 'no direct line of influence and dependence can be established between the two [Edwards and Niebuhr], and it is wrong to assume that Niebuhr derived the cornerstones of his theological thought from Edwards.' The lines of influence and dependence are both implicitly demonstrable and they are explicitly acknowledged by Niebuhr." Sandon cites here Libertus Arend Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Boston Pilgrim Press, 1970), 33.

⁶See H. Richard Niebuhr, "Toward the Recovery of Feeling," *The Cole Lectures*, in *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings*, ed. William Stacy Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 48.

⁷Ibid., 47.

theological ethical frontier than demonstrative of what Niebuhr had already accomplished. Therefore, the aesthetic interpretation of Niebuhr's thought, for which this chapter lays partial groundwork, is more constructive than historical. Its aim is to highlight those concepts and ideas in Niebuhr's writings that could be appropriated for constructing an aesthetic approach to faith. It is an effort to discern how far Niebuhr's thought can lead theology into the "land of the emotions"⁸ and toward that place where religion and art meet.

Although it is probable that Niebuhr's familiarity with the writings of Edwards was broad in scope, this chapter will draw upon those writings by Edwards that I am certain that Niebuhr knew well. Niebuhr knew the series of Edwards's sermons entitled *Charity and Its Fruits* as well as Edwards' *Two Dissertations*, separately entitled *Concerning the End for Which God Created the World* and *The Nature of True Virtue*. These works comprise the *Ethical Writings*, or Volume 8, of the *Works of Jonathan Edwards*. In his editorial introduction to the volume, Paul Ramsey wrote that Niebuhr had intended to edit this volume and that it was Niebuhr who had chosen these works to be included in the volume.⁹ It is also certain that Niebuhr had studied Edwards's *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*. According to the acknowledgment of its editor John E. Smith, Niebuhr had read over a draft of the editor's introduction to the volume, which was published in 1959. Furthermore, as *The Cole Lectures* make apparent, the ideas in *Religious Affections* seem to have inspired in Niebuhr an ever-deepening appreciation for Edwards's thought. The proceeding discussion will draw primarily from the *Two Dissertations*

⁸Ibid., 48.

⁹Paul Ramsey, introduction to *Ethical Writings*, by Jonathan Edwards, vol. 8, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University, 1989), 3.

and *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, as well as Edwards's typological writings, which Niebuhr may or may not have known.

Each of these works emphasizes different aspects of Edwards's theological ethical worldview. *Religious Affections* analyzes the affective nature of religious experience and argues for the centrality of the affections in religious and moral life. *The End and True Virtue*, which Edwards had intended to be read together, rests on the idea that a proper examination of the moral life depends upon a correct understanding of God's chief end for the world. Though each has its own focus, the three essays nevertheless overlap conceptually, creating a coherent theological ethical worldview. Studying these works in light of one another, we can discern the theories and concepts that function indispensably in holding together Edwards's theological ethic. The coherence of Edwards's thought relies in particular on his theory of the affections and his conception of beauty.

That the affections and beauty are related conceptual categories without which we cannot understand Edwards's theological ethic has been well established by secondary literature on the topic.¹⁰ Especially worth mentioning is the thorough study by Roland Delattre, *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards* (1968), originally a doctoral dissertation written under the guidance of H. Richard Niebuhr.¹¹ Although Delattre argues for the primary

¹⁰See Roland Delattre, *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards: An Essay in Aesthetics and Theological Ethics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968) and Clyde A. Holbrook, *The Ethics of Jonathan Edwards: Morality and Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1973). Acknowledging the prevalence of an aesthetic interpretation of Edwards's thought in Edwardsean scholarship, Jamie Schillinger contests the view established by Delattre. See Jamie Schillinger, "Triangulating Faith, Virtue and Reason: An Edwardsean Account" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2004).

¹¹Referring to H. Richard Niebuhr, Roland Delattre wrote in the Introduction of his dissertation "Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards: An Essay in Aesthetics and Ethics" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1966), 18: "It was in fact under his guidance that this study in aesthetics and ethics was first undertaken."

importance of beauty as the first principle of being in Edwards's ontology, he nevertheless recognizes the necessary corresponding concept of sensibility in Edwards's thought, to which the secondary literature had already sufficiently attended.

In this chapter I will examine Edwards's theory of the affections and conception of beauty. Secondary studies of these ideas in Edwards's thought have made apparent that the order of discussing these ideas is less important than the fact that a discussion of one entails a discussion of the other. I will show that his interpretation of each mutually informs his construal of the other. On the one hand, beauty stirs and attracts the affections. Furthermore, when beauty is attributed to the affections, it focuses our attention on the relational form, or structure, of the affections. This has an important consequence for the moral life. Conceiving of the affections in terms of their beauty – that is, their objective relational form, we are able to analyze, assess, and evaluate them with greater discriminating rigor. On the other hand, the affections, by virtue of their integrating, intensifying, and enlarging capabilities, determine the relational form, degree, and dynamism of beauty. My explication of Edwards's thought will clarify these points. From this study, it will become clear that Edwards's aesthetic view of the moral life and religious experience highlights activities of discrimination and integration, both of which are necessary for the moral life. Edwards recognized that neither beauty nor the affections are dispensable to a theological ethic that cultivates both of these activities.

There are, according to my exegesis, multiple meanings of integration in Edwards's thought. I have discerned three interrelated meanings. The first is coherence between the internal affections and external acts. The second is the integrity of a person's whole life after conversion. The third is the integration of creation. As I will show, the second meaning depends upon the first, and the third involves the other two. Discrimination in the moral life is possible

only because external actions, individually and habitually over the course of a person's life, are visible, giving objective form to the affections, and because the relationships among all kinds of beings in creation are also visible, depending on the perspectives from which they are viewed. Given how important Edwards thought it was to discriminate among the affections, he developed a theory of signs that relied on the visible manifestations of the affections in actions, especially actions over one's lifetime. His efforts to perceive the connections among all kinds of beings in creation led Edwards to engage typological thinking.

Integrity, particularly as conceived in terms of the coherence between internal affections, or desires, and external actions, has been an important moral criterion in the history of Christian ethics. This criterion of integrity is illustrated in the apostle Paul's defense of himself against charges of hypocrisy; the portrayal of integrity between inner heart and exterior actions is also found in Martin Luther's interpretation of the biblical image of a good tree bearing good fruit. In the work of both Jonathan Edwards and H. Richard Niebuhr, integrity took on multiple meanings. By understanding more clearly the aesthetic approach to integrity in Edwards's thought, we will be able to see the ways in which Niebuhr appropriated and went beyond Edwards. Taking a historical relational and hermeneutical approach, Niebuhr goes beyond integrity to consider the process of integration. As the next chapter will show, Niebuhr developed an aesthetic approach to integration that brings into relief the importance of attending to both the emotions at work in and the form of an experience.

The Affective Nature of Religious Experience

Living and writing during the period of U.S. history in which revivalism became a significant phenomenon, Edwards knew of the emotional enthusiasm that characterized the

revivals. The strong presence of emotions in an otherwise dry religious climate characteristic of the New England Puritans of his day was precisely what made Edwards a passionate proponent of the revivals. “True religion,” Edwards wrote, “in great part, consists in holy affections.”¹² Edwards firmly believed that those who opposed the revivals because of their affective excesses were misguided. The fact that emotions were present at all was a sign of the Holy Spirit too significant to dismiss. Whatever else religion entails, Edwards was convinced that without the affections there was no true religion.¹³

Edwards was fully aware that the mere presence of affections did not signify the presence of genuine religion. The affections themselves had to be genuinely religious. He observed in the revivals a mixture of false and genuine religious affections. This phenomenon, he thought, was to be expected. The same phenomenon, after all, appeared during every period of great religious reformation.

’Tis no new thing, that much false religion should prevail, at a time of great reviving of true religion; and that at such a time, multitudes of hypocrites should spring up among true saints. It was so in that great reformation, and revival of religion, that was in Josiah’s time; as appears by Jer. 3:10 and 4:3-4 and also by the great apostasy that there was in the land, so soon after his reign. So it was in that great outpouring of the Spirit upon the Jews, that was in the days of John the Baptist. . . . So it was in those great commotions that were among the multitude, occasioned by the preaching of Jesus Christ. . . . So it was in that great outpouring of the Spirit that was in the Apostle’s days. . . . And so it was in the great Reformation from Popery.”¹⁴

¹²Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith, vol. 2, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 95.

¹³Ibid., 120.

¹⁴Ibid., 85-6.

Rather than disparage the revivals indiscriminately, as some of his opponents did, Edwards discerned in the emotional fervor of the revivals potential for new religious vitality. In his optimism, he compared the revivals to past periods of great religious reformation.

Engaged in the controversy over the true nature of religious experience that the revivals stirred up, Edwards felt moved to write a treatise that at once affirmed the centrality of affections in religious experience and provided objective criteria for discriminating among them.

Recognizing the difficulty of presenting a nuanced view, he wrote:

‘Tis a hard thing to be a hearty zealous friend of what has been good and glorious, in the late extraordinary appearances, and to rejoice much in it; and at the same time, to see the evil and pernicious tendency of what has been bad and earnestly to oppose that. But yet, I am humbly, but fully persuaded, we shall never be in the way of truth, nor go in a way acceptable to God, and tending to the advancement of Christ’s kingdom, till we do so.¹⁵

As Edwards understood it, at stake in the church’s stance toward the revivals and, more specifically, the role of the emotions in religious life, was the church’s participation in the advancement of Christ’s kingdom. It was the presence of genuine religious affections in and by which Edwards understood the Holy Spirit to be at work, advancing the kingdom of Christ.

In order to grasp why Edwards thought that the vitality and dynamism of the church, and ultimately its active participation in the work of the Holy Spirit, depends upon a correct view of human affections, we must first understand what the affections are and how they function. Edwards derived his understanding of the affections from the Bible. He studied those biblical passages in which religion is represented by “fear of God;” “hope in God;” “love to God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and love to the people of God, and to mankind;” “hatred as having sin for its object;” holy desire;” “holy joy;” “religious sorrow, mourning, and brokenness of heart;”

¹⁵Ibid., 84-5.

“gratitude;” “compassion or mercy;” and “zeal.”¹⁶ Furthermore, he tried to understand those passages in which sin is said to consist in the hardness of the heart¹⁷ and God’s great work of conversion is said to take place in the heart.¹⁸ The Bible, Edwards thought, provides a picture of religion as consisting in the affections and of the affections as residing in the heart.

Edwards defined the affections as “the more vigorous and sensible exercises of the inclination and will of the soul.”¹⁹ He observed that people experience varying degrees of inclination as well as disinclination in their interactions with objects, ideas, and other persons. Some inclinations or aversions are strong, while others are weak. Those inclinations that are strong enough to move persons to act are, according to Edwards, affections. Here is what he wrote:

And there are other degrees above this, wherein the approbation or dislike, pleasedness or aversion, are stronger; wherein we may rise higher and higher, till the soul comes to act vigorously and sensibly, and the actings of the soul are with that strength that (through the laws of the union which the Creator has fixed between soul and body) the motion of the blood and animal spirits begins to be sensibly altered; whence oftentimes arises some bodily sensation, especially about the heart and vitals, that are the fountain of the fluids of the body: from when it comes to pass, that the mind, with regard to the exercises of this faculty, perhaps in all nations and ages, is called the heart. And it is to be noted, that they are these more vigorous and sensible exercises of this faculty, that are called the affections.²⁰

Affections have dynamic, actualizing power. Edwards often called them “springs of

¹⁶See Edwards’ discussion of these religious affections and his scriptural references for each. *Ibid.*, 102-5.

¹⁷Edwards wrote: “’Tis an evidence that true religion, or holiness of heart, lies very much in the affection of the heart, that the Scriptures place the sin of the heart very much in hardness of heart. Thus the Scriptures do everywhere.” Edwards provided multiple biblical references supporting this statement. He went on to explain: “Now by a hard heart is plainly meant an unaffected heart, or a heart not easy to be moved with virtuous affections, like a stone, insensible, stupid, unmoved and hard to be impressed. Hence the hard heart is called a stony heart, and is opposed to an heart of flesh, that has feeling, and is sensibly touched and moved.” *Ibid.*, 116-9.

¹⁸See Edwards’ discussion of Ezekiel 11:19 and 36:26. *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 96.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 96-7.

men's actions."²¹

We gain a clearer sense of what the affections are when we contrast them to what Edwards called "wouldings." True religion, Edwards insisted, does not consist in "weak, dull, and lifeless wouldings."²² As John Smith explains in an editorial footnote to this text, Edwards coined the term "wouldings" "to refer to very weak inclinations which do not represent genuine convictions and do not issue in action; it is as if a man were always to say that he 'would' believe or perform but never actually does."²³ Wouldings are only slightly more powerful than indifference and fail to lead to action.

In all affairs of life, the affections are what set people in motion. The possibility of intentional activity, whether religious or irreligious, depends upon the presence of affections.

We see the world of mankind to be exceedingly busy and active; and the affections of men are the springs of the motion: take away all love and hatred, all hope and fear, all anger, zeal and affectionate desire, and the world would be, in a great measure, motionless and dead; there would be no such thing as activity amongst mankind, or any earnest pursuit whatsoever.²⁴

Observing how actively people pursue worldly ends, Edwards's main concern was not that people were living indifferently, and thus passively, with regard to all things. His main concern was that they were lifeless with regard to religious affairs. By treating religion as something that consists primarily in rational assent to propositions and doctrinal knowledge, church leaders were leading people to their spiritual deaths. Edwards desired the revitalization of religion and

²¹Ibid., 100.

²²Ibid., 99.

²³Ibid., n2.

²⁴Ibid., 101.

was convinced that the vitality of religious life and progress toward Christ's kingdom would depend upon the presence of affections.

Edwards understood the human soul to have been designed by God in such a way that action springs from the affections. Edwards located the affections in the heart. According to Edwards's analysis of the human soul and its faculties, the heart relates to the faculties of the soul in such a way that unifies them. Edwards understood the soul as having two faculties: a faculty of understanding and a faculty of inclination. When Edwards spoke of the inclination, he referred sometimes to the will and other times to the heart. The will is the faculty of inclination with respect to the actions that it determines. The heart is the faculty of inclination with respect to the exercises of the understanding. Inclination or disinclination toward an object takes place in the heart. When its attraction or aversion to an object is sufficiently strong, the affected heart acts as "the fountain of the fluids of the body," moving the will to exercise itself.

Explaining Edwards's view of the centrality and unity of the heart, Smith writes:

The point almost invariably missed is that in Edwards's view the inclination (the faculty initially distinguished from the understanding) involves both the will and the mind. When inclination receives overt expression in action it is most commonly called 'will,' and when inclination is expressed through the mind alone it is called 'heart.' . . . Inclination is not a blind affair, since it is based on an apprehension of the idea, the doctrine or the object which the self is attempting to judge. Nor are the affections merely mental, . . . for the sign to which Edwards attached the greatest importance, the sign of consistent practice, shows that in order to be genuine, affections must manifest themselves in an outward and visible way. The essential point is that the affections manifest the center and unity of the self; they express the whole man and give insight into the basic orientation of his life. . . . Affections, then, are lively inclinations and choices which show that man is a being with a heart.²⁵

Although Smith does not use the term "integrity" in his explanation of Edwards' view of the heart, and instead uses the term "unity," Smith nevertheless emphasizes Edwards's concern to

²⁵John Smith, introduction to *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, 13-4.

preserve the integrity, understood here as coherence between the inner affections and the exterior actions of the agent. He argues that Edwards's precision in distinguishing the faculties and powers of the soul should not overshadow his understanding of the soul's unity. The affected heart, according to Edwards, is that which unites the understanding, the will, and the actions that the will instigates. In other words, the affected heart unifies the moral agent.

The agent whose heart is hard lacks this kind of integrity. The unaffected heart fails to move the will to act. No matter what reason understands, without an affected heart, the agent's faculty of understanding is cut off from his or her will. Even upon hearing the Gospel, if the agent's heart remains unaffected by it, the agent's behavior will remain essentially unchanged. Many people, Edwards thought, display this kind of hardened heart.

There are multitudes that often hear the Word of God, and therein hear of those things that are infinitely great and important, and that most nearly concern them, and all that is heard seems to be wholly ineffectual upon them, and to make no alteration in their disposition or behavior. . . . There are many that often hear of the glorious perfections of God, his almighty power, and boundless wisdom, his infinite majesty, and that holiness of God . . . and of God's infinite goodness and mercy, and hear of the great works of God's wisdom, power and Goodness, wherein there appear the admirable manifestations of these perfections; they hear particularly of the unspeakable love of God and Christ, and of the great things that Christ has done and suffered, and of the great things of another world, of eternal misery, in bearing the fierceness and wrath of almighty God, and of endless blessedness and glory in the presence of God, and the enjoyment of his dear love; they also hear of the peremptory commands of God, and his gracious counsels and warnings, and the sweet invitation of the gospel; I say, they often hear these things, and yet remain as they were before, with no sensible alteration on them, either in heart or practice, because they are not affected with what they hear; and ever will be so till they are affected.²⁶

God created human beings, Edwards thought, in such a way that coherence, or integrity between an affection and an action is possible. In creating human beings, God instilled in them hearts so

²⁶Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, 102.

that they could act according to their heart-felt affections. Given the problem of sin, however, people remain unaffected in their hearts and therefore fail either to act at all or to act in a heart-felt manner.

Diagnosing a hard heart is complicated by the fact that sometimes the heart may be hardened not by the lack of affections, but by false affections.²⁷ False affections, Edwards explained, are those affections that arise out of self-love, such as “hatred, anger, vainglory, and other selfish and self-exalting affections.”²⁸ In such cases, the presence of affections hides the true nature of the heart and deludes persons, the self and others, into thinking that their hearts have undergone a genuine religious conversion.

Edwards associated false affections especially with hypocrites. Claiming to have undergone powerful conversion experiences, hypocrites feel a loving affection to God. Their new love to God may manifest itself in passionate acts that others can see. No matter how fervently their hearts are affected, Edwards insisted, as long as their affections originate in self-love, they are false. Edwards understood hypocrites as loving God because of God’s promises for their well-being. Having their own well-being as the primary object of affection, hypocrites initially worry about their salvation. Their concern for themselves motivates them to seek God’s grace. In other words, their love to God arises consequently out of their primary love to themselves.²⁹

²⁷Ibid., 358.

²⁸Ibid., 118.

²⁹Each person needs to test the nature of his/her affections by posing the question: Is this affection such that the grace of God appears lovely as “*bonum utile*, a profitable good to me, that which greatly serves my interest, and so suits my self-love,” or as “*bonum formosum*, a beautiful good in itself, and part of the moral and spiritual excellency of the divine nature”? Ibid., 262.

In most cases, Edwards thought, time will reveal the true nature of their affections. Once they accept Christ as their savior, it is only a matter of time before hypocrites become complacent in their salvation and fail to persevere in their efforts to obey God's commands.

Edwards wrote:

Before, while they looked upon themselves as in a state of nature, they were engaged in seeking after God and Christ, and cried earnestly for grace, and strove in the use of means: but now they act as though they thought their work was done: they live upon their first work, or some high experiences that are past; and there is an end to their crying, and striving after God and grace.³⁰

The fact that they eventually cease to strive after God is, for Edwards, a sure sign of the falsity of their affections. Explaining the phenomenon, Edwards wrote, "false affections, with the delusion that attends them, finally tend to stupefy the mind, and shut it up against those affections wherein tenderness of heart consists."³¹ Becoming increasingly complacent in their salvation, hypocrites

become

less affected with their present and past sins, and less conscientious with respect to future sins, less moved with the warnings and cautions of God's Word, or God's chastisements in his providence, more careless of the frame of their hearts, and the manner and tendency of their behavior. . . . much more easy than before, in living in the neglect of duties that are troublesome and inconvenient; . . . much more slow and partial in complying with difficult commands. . . .³²

Though at first they stir up the heart, over time false affections harden the heart, and eventually persons in whom false affections are at work will eventually disclose the hardening of their hearts as they become less active in complying with God's commands.

³⁰Ibid., 380.

³¹Ibid., 358.

³²Ibid.

Edwards recognized that the hypocrite, no less than the indifferent and unaffected person, lacks integrity. In either kind of person, the heart is hard because of the presence of false affections or the absence of affections. In both cases, the hardened heart leads to inactivity in moral and religious affairs. Given that hypocrites have an initial appearance of integrity, people often mistake hypocrisy for integrity and suspect integrity to be hypocrisy. Furthermore, Satan, Edwards thought, exacerbates the confusion between integrity and hypocrisy in a variety of ways. Compared to hypocrisy, passivity is more immediately identifiable and less deceptive. Perhaps this explains why Edwards spent more effort analyzing the hypocrite than the indifferent person.

It is impossible for persons to know with certainty whether someone else is acting genuinely. Residing in the heart, the affections remain hidden from view. Therefore, it is difficult, if not impossible, for persons to discern completely whether or not some other person is acting with integrity. On the basis of his reading of scripture, Edwards reserved the power to look directly upon the heart of a person to God alone. Citing *I Samuel* 16:7, Edwards maintained the biblical notion that God alone knows the true nature of the affections: “The Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.”³³ Given that human beings are incapable of seeing the hearts of others, they have no authority with which to judge whether someone else is or is not among the elect. This authority to judge belongs solely to God.

The best that human beings can do to discriminate integrity from hypocrisy is to engage in self-examination. Although they are incapable of discerning the heart of others, saints can know the nature of their own hearts. Edwards wrote: “For though they [saints] know

³³ For Edwards’s discussion of this verse, see *ibid.*, 181.

experimentally what true religion is, in the internal exercises of it; yet these are what they can neither feel, nor see, in the heart of another.”³⁴ Edwards thought that striving to know the nature of one’s own affections should be the main occupation of anyone’s life. Edwards began the Preface to *Religious Affections* with this assertion:

There is no question whatsoever, that is of greater importance to mankind, and that it more concerns every individual person to be well resolved in, than this, what are the distinguishing qualifications of those that are in favor with God, and entitled to his eternal rewards? Or, which comes to the same thing, What is the nature of true religion? and wherein do lie the distinguishing notes of that virtue and holiness, that is acceptable in the sight of God.³⁵

Given that “true religion in great part, consists in holy affections,”³⁶ it was absolutely crucial for persons to test the nature of their affections. Toward this end, Edwards developed what he called “experimental religion.” “As that is called experimental philosophy which brings opinions and notions to the test of fact; so is that properly called experimental religion, which brings religious affections and intentions, to the like test.”³⁷ Experimental religion made the affections central to religious experience and demanded that persons rigorously test for themselves the nature of their own affections. Edwards compared testing the affections to “separating between the wheat and the chaff, the gold and the dross, the precious and the vile.”³⁸ At times Edwards emphasized the trials and hardship involved in testing the affections, comparing it with exposing metal to fire in order to discover whether or not the substance is pure and precious.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid., 84.

³⁶Ibid., 95.

³⁷Ibid., 452.

³⁸For the whole quote, see *ibid.*, 121: “The right way, is not to reject all affections, nor to approve all; but to distinguish between affections, approving some, and rejecting others; separating between the wheat and the chaff, the gold and the dross, the precious and the vile.”

Edwards believed that God made signs available for the purpose of testing the affections. That God ordained these signs for this purpose meant that the signs themselves are not to be doubted. Even if human beings' discernment, interpretation, and specific application of those signs are fallible, the signs themselves are reliable.

Out of the three sections of *Religious Affections*, Edwards devoted two sections to a discussion of signs. In the final and longest section of the treatise, he presented twelve positive signs by which individuals could examine for themselves the nature of their affections. Edwards carefully distinguished the positive signs from what he called "negative signs," which he treated in the shorter of the two sections. Negative signs are, according to Edwards, those things that signify nothing about the genuine or false nature of the affections. By distinguishing positive from negative signs, Edwards tried to bring clarity to and counter common notions that he perceived as mistaken. In his discussion of negative signs, Edwards challenged cherished notions about what counted as evidence of religious conversion. For example, against popular opinion, he argued that the order in which affections appear tells us nothing of their nature. That a sense of comfort and joy has followed a sense of terror and fear is not indicative of genuine religious conversion, for it could indicate a common order of affections as well as the order in which gracious affections appear. The particular order in which a person experiences affections is nothing more than a negative sign. Furthermore, Edwards argued, while Satan is incapable of producing the nature of genuine religious affections, he can imitate the order in which they might appear. For the purpose of this chapter, it is unnecessary to review Edwards's list and analysis of the negative signs. It is sufficient to point out that his discussion of them underscores the rigor with which he wanted persons to discriminate among the affections they experience.

Though his theory of signs for examining one's heart may sound naïve in a post-Freudian context, it nevertheless reveals Edwards's concern to show that the enterprise of discerning the true nature of one's affections requires much more discriminating rigor than persons commonly assume. In *Religious Affections* and *True Virtue*, works in which his analyses of the affections make this point, he did not attempt to list, define, and classify all the various affections. He recognized the diversity among the affections and furthermore the complex composition of some of the affections. He cited pity as an example of an affection consisting of two kinds of inclination: pity consists of both liking the person who suffers and disliking what the person suffers.³⁹ Edwards thought it obvious that much of the diversity among affections is due to the fact that they arise in different situations and that they have different objects. What Edwards thought deserved attention were the distinctions among the affections that were due to their nature. He intended to show that the nature of the affections most significantly determined the religious and moral character of experience.

Discriminating between Common and Truly Religious Affections

The most significant distinction that Edwards drew in his theory of the affections was the distinction between common and gracious nature.⁴⁰ Some affections, Edwards explained, have a common nature insofar as they depend upon some principle that God wisely established in human nature. God established, for example, the principle of conscience in human nature. He defined conscience as "that disposition to approve or disapprove the moral treatment which passes between us and others, from a determination of the mind to be easy, or uneasy, in a

³⁹Ibid., 99.

⁴⁰It should be noted that Edwards understood everything, including nature, to have its origin in God's grace. Edwards was drawing a line between the common and saving operations of the Holy Spirit.

consciousness of our being consistent or inconsistent with ourselves.”⁴¹ A sense of conscience has a common nature in that God instilled in human beings both an inclination toward consistency and a sense of proportion and harmony in order that they might have a common sense of desert and justice. Edwards insisted that we should not consider conscience a “saving operation” of the Holy Spirit. Although God ordained conscience to work in conjunction with his saving operations, conscience is nevertheless common. Edwards wrote:

Thus has God established and ordered that this principle of natural conscience, which though it implies no such thing as actual benevolence to Being in general, nor any delight in such a principle, simply considered, and so implies no truly spiritual sense or virtuous taste, yet should approve and condemn the same things that are approved and condemned by a spiritual sense or virtuous taste.⁴²

Originating in principles instilled in human nature, the sense of ease or uneasiness issuing from conscience is also common. People are mistaken, Edwards argued, if they think that the affections involved in a sense of conscience are truly religious affections.

Another principle to which Edwards attributed a common nature is self-love. It is important to this project that we give some attention to the principle of self-love, because for both Edwards and H. Richard Niebuhr, self-love is a basic disposition characteristic of sinful human nature. For Niebuhr, self-love is an existential attitude in human beings that accounts for the fragmentation, or disintegration, of the moral life. Edwards understood self-love to be a natural principle, or disposition, from which affections arise, having as their ultimate object the well-being of the self. Like conscience, self-love is a common principle that God, in divine

⁴¹Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1960), 592.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 595-6.

wisdom, established in human nature. God instilled self-love in human beings as a capacity for enjoyment.⁴³

Self-love is a man's love to his own good Any good whatsoever that a man any way enjoys, or anything that he takes delight in – it makes it thereby his own good 'Tis impossible that a man should delight in any good that is not his own, for to say that would be to say that he delights in that in which he does not delight.⁴⁴

Edwards understood self-love as naturally essential to love for anything, including other persons and God. As any natural principle, however, self-love alone is not a saving operation of the Spirit.

In contrast to an earlier work, *Distinguishing Marks of the Work of the Spirit of God* (1741), in which he attended to both “common and saving operations” of the Spirit, that is, to both self-love and benevolent love, *Religious Affections* focuses on affections that are of a saving nature, that is, affections that flow from the principle of benevolent love.⁴⁵ Edwards understood benevolent love as love for the universal system of Being, or Being in general, which is how Edwards understood God. In the latter work, Edwards spoke of love both as an affection and as a disposition from which other affections arise. The disposition of benevolent love, when vigorously and sensibly exercised, becomes affectionate love.⁴⁶ Truly religious affections flow from a benevolent disposition. Love, in this case, is “not only one of the affections, but it is the first and chief of the affections, and the fountain of all the affections.”⁴⁷

⁴³See Roland Delattre, “Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards: An Essay in Aesthetics and Ethics,” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1966), 66.

⁴⁴Jonathan Edwards, *Miscellanies*, no. 530, cited by Roland Delattre, *ibid.*, 67.

⁴⁵See Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, 89.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 108.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

Diverse affections can flow from the single disposition of benevolence. That a person experiences a wide spectrum of affections in life does not necessarily mean that he or she is an incoherent person. Edwards wrote:

From love arises hatred of those things which are contrary to what we love, or which oppose and thwart us in those things that we delight in: and from the various exercises of love and hatred, according to the circumstances of the objects of these affections, as present or absent, certain or uncertain, probably or improbable, arise all those other affections of desire, hope, fear, joy, grief, gratitude, anger, etc. From a vigorous, affectionate, and fervent love to God, will necessarily arise other religious affections: hence will arise an intense hatred and abhorrence of sin, fear of sin, and a dread of God's displeasure, gratitude to God for his goodness, complacency and joy in God when God is graciously and sensibly present, and grief when he is absent, and a joyful hope when a future enjoyment of God is expected, and fervent zeal for the glory of God. And in like manner, from a fervent love to men, will arise all other virtuous affections towards men.⁴⁸

Eight years earlier, in a series of sermons that he entitled *Charity and Its Fruits*, Edwards explained how diverse affections can flow from a principle of love that has God as its ultimate object. Edwards was concerned to show that all truly Christian affections are one and the same in their principle.⁴⁹ In the first sermon of the series, Edwards wrote:

I would say something of the nature of a truly Christian love. And here I would observe that all truly Christian love is one and the same in its principle. It may be various in its exercises and objects, it may be exercised towards God or towards men; but it is the same principle in the heart which is the foundation of the exercises of a truly Christian love, whether to God or men.⁵⁰

⁴⁸Ibid., 108.

⁴⁹For a discussion on what Edwards meant by "principle," see Paul Ramsey, introduction to *Ethical Writings*, by Jonathan Edwards, vol. 8, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 16. "Edwards used the word 'principle' in the sense of the Latin *principium* or the Greek *arché*. The word 'principle' means a source or beginning or spring of disposition and action. But it also means the direction, shape, or contours of human hearts and lives, as in the root of our word 'archetype,' or the *arché* of formative power of Plato's ideas, such as justice or beauty, or triangularity. So when the first verse of St. John's Gospel reads 'In the beginning was the Word,' that in Greek is *en arché* and in Latin in *principio*. The verse not only points to the source and beginning of all things, without whom 'was not anything made that was made.' These verses also tell us something about the channel in which the whole creation runs, its shape, meaning and direction."

⁵⁰Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits*, in *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey, vol. 8, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 132.

In the passages cited, Edwards explained how specific affections, even those that seem wholly contradictory to each other, relate to each other and to the principle in which they originate. That they originate in one disposition is what lends coherence to them. No matter how diverse the affections are, as long as they have benevolence to God as their principle, they relate coherently with each other.

Edwards contrasted the coherence made possible in Christians from the degree of coherence in non-Christians.

It is not with that holy love which is in the hearts of Christians as it is with other men's love. The love of other men towards different objects may be different principles and motives, and with different views. But a truly Christian love cannot be distinguished in its principles. All Christian love is one as to its principle. About whatever object it is exercised, it is the spring and fountain in the heart though it may flow out towards diverse objects.⁵¹

Edwards distinguished Christians on the basis of the coherence characterizing their moral and religious lives. Unlike non-Christians, whose affections originate from and are guided by diverse interior principles, Christians have a unified interior life.

In persons who have a unified interior life, self-love does not have to conflict with benevolent love. In the saint, the principle of benevolent love channels self-love so that self-love enters into love for the universal system of being. Only when self-love has not been redeemed by the saving operation of the Spirit and is conceived more narrowly as having some private good as its object, it is incompatible with benevolent love. Edwards distinguished between self-love narrowly conceived and self-love broadly conceived. Unlike a self-love that has some private good as its object, a broad conception of self-love is simply the capacity for enjoyment.

⁵¹Ibid., 132.

In his discussion of the two views of self-love with which Edwards was working, Roland Delattre explicates the critical distinction between them in terms of beauty.

So the critical matter in distinguishing the two varieties of self-love is not whether a man will (or can ever be said to) love anything other than what he takes to be his own good, i.e., what he delights in. . . . the critical question is rather whether (a) the object of the will is found to have beauty or to be beautiful by virtue of its agreement with one's own being (consistency with self, which is a form of secondary beauty), or whether (b) the object of the will be found beautiful by virtue of its agreement with being in general (consistency with the universal system of being, or primary beauty).⁵²

Delattre's discussion of the two dispositions highlights the conceptions of beauty upon which Edwards drew in relating self-love and benevolent love. A self-love that is incompatible with benevolent love has some private good as its ultimate object. A self who is oriented by this disposition is attracted by those objects that s/he perceives as being in harmony with, or in proportion to, to the self's well-being. As Delattre writes, such objects are found to have beauty by virtue of their agreement with the self. For Edwards the beauty so perceived is a form of secondary beauty, as opposed to primary beauty. The coherence in which secondary beauty consists is limited in that it has as its object some private good. Moreover, the self who is oriented to secondary beauty cannot achieve complete coherence even within the self because, as Edwards understood, self-love runs into conflict with other natural principles at work in the self.

Edwards understood that both self-love and benevolent love have beauty of some kind as their objects. He recognized that people perceive as beautiful all objects for which they have loving affection. This, he thought, was precisely the problem. Just as people need to discriminate more rigorously between affections that arise out of self-love and those that originate in benevolent love, they also need to discriminate between kinds of beauty. By

⁵²Roland Delattre, "Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards: An Essay in Aesthetics and Ethics," (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1966), 67-8.

critically examining their own notions of love and beauty, they would come to recognize that what they often identify as benevolence is nothing more than self-love and what they commonly experience as beauty is a secondary kind of beauty. Edwards thought that people need to have a more discriminating conception of beauty *so that* they can test more rigorously the true nature of their affections. As a visible sign, beauty can help persons to evaluate the integrity of their moral and religious experience. At stake in analyzing the moral life in Edwards's aesthetic terms is the integrity that he understood to be necessary for genuine religious life.

Objective Signs of the Affections

Edwards recognized that in a fallen reality there is a mixture of true and false affections in every person. Even the saints, he insisted, experience an impure composition in their affections as well as temporary backsliding. Given their sinful nature, people need to undergo continual self-examination throughout their lives. Although Edwards insisted that the inner disposition from which the affections flow is ultimately hidden from view, he believed that there was nevertheless an “anatomy of experience” to be objectively investigated.⁵³ For Edwards, examining one's own heart is not a subjective enterprise. By looking for positive signs, a person can find objective evidences of the nature of the affections residing in his or her heart.

For the sake of brevity, rather than discussing Edwards's exposition of all twelve positive signs, a summary of which John Smith has already provided in his editorial introduction to *Religious Affections*, this chapter will highlight the sign that Edwards accredits as being the most effective, that is the sign of Christian practice. Among the twelve positive signs that Edwards

⁵³Smith describes Edwards's analysis of the religious affections as an investigation into the “anatomy of experience.” John E. Smith, introduction to *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, 9.

identified, the twelfth and “principle sign” of a gracious nature is that of Christian practice.⁵⁴

Christian practice is the most effective sign, because it is an actualized effect of the affections.

On this point, Edwards wrote:

Gracious and holy affections have their exercise and fruit in Christian practice, I mean, they have that influence and power upon him who is the subject of ‘em, that they cause that a practice, which is universally conformed to, and directed by Christian rules, should be the practice and business of his life.⁵⁵

Underlying his argument that daily practice is the best evidence of truly religious affections is the notion that a benevolent disposition cannot restrain itself from being expressed, communicated, actualized, exercised.⁵⁶ The Holy Spirit who dwells in the heart of the saint is a living, vital power that will be actualized.⁵⁷ Christian practice is evidence of divine grace insofar as it manifests integrity between an exterior action and the interior disposition from which it springs.⁵⁸

Beyond the integrity between external actions and the interior heart, Christian practice also exhibits the integrity of a person’s whole life after conversion. Christian practice, Edwards explained, should not be viewed merely as a single act. Rather, it consists of the habitual

⁵⁴Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, 406.

⁵⁵Ibid., 383.

⁵⁶Writing about Christian practices, Edwards was referring to “practical” acts of grace, as opposed to “immanent” acts of grace. The latter, he explained, are “those exercises of grace that remain within the soul, that begin and are terminated there, without any immediate relation to anything to be done outwardly, or to be brought to pass in practice. Such are the exercises of grace, which the saints often have in contemplation: when the exercise that is in the heart, don’t directly proceed to, or terminate in anything beyond the thoughts of the mind; however they may tend to practice (as all exercises of grace do) more remotely.” Ibid., 423.

⁵⁷Edwards wrote, “The spirit of Christ, which is the immediate spring of grace in the heart, is all life, all power, all act.” Ibid., 393.

⁵⁸Edwards argued that Christian practice is properly experience, which consists of both inward spirituality and external action. Ibid., 450-1.

exercising of a benevolent disposition. The saint, unlike the hypocrite, persists in Christian practices over the course of his or her life in Christ. Edwards recognized the imperfection of earthly saints. He did not overly concern himself with occurrences of backsliding. He was more concerned about the overall pattern of integrity that their practices exhibited.

True saints may be guilty of some kinds and degrees of backsliding, and may be soiled by particular temptations, and may fall into sin, yea great sins: but they can never fall away so, as to grow weary of religion. . . . Nor can they ever fall away so, as habitually to be more engaged in other things, than in the business of religion; or so that it should become their way and manner to serve something else more than God. . . .⁵⁹

In his discussion of earthly saints, it becomes clear that Edwards conceived of integrity not only as the coherence between dispositions and acts, but also as consistency. For him, the most reliable sign of integrity was the cumulation of consistent actions – no matter when, where, in what situation, and in relation to whom it is undertaken – that arise habitually from a benevolent disposition.

Among the twelve signs, Christian practice, as an external sign, is the most objectively visible, and therefore, the most public, evidence by which the affections can be evaluated. He likened the consistency of Christian practice to the stamp, or seal, of the Holy Spirit upon the saint. As one act confirms another in continuous sequence throughout the saint’s life, the divine image becomes more clearly visible.

Beauty as the Objective Criterion of Moral Integrity

Edwards described this image as beautiful. Saints, though imperfect, exhibit a “beautiful symmetry and proportion” of virtues.⁶⁰ Edwards wrote:

⁵⁹Ibid., 390-1.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 364.

In the truly holy affections of the saints is found that proportion which is the natural consequence of the universality of their sanctification. They have the whole image of Christ upon them: they have 'put off the old man, and have put on the new man' entire in all his parts and members. . . . the image is a true image; and there is something of the same beautiful proportion in the image, which is in the original; there is feature for feature, and member for member. There is symmetry and beauty in God's workmanship.⁶¹

The beauty of the saints consists in the thoroughness of their sanctification. They exhibit the whole image of Christ in the consistency of Christian practice over time.

In *Religious Affections*, Edwards identified beauty as one of the twelve positive signs by which gracious affections are distinguished.⁶² Within the context of this work alone, its significance among the signs stands out less than when Edwards's discussion of it is read in light of his ethical writings *The End* and *True Virtue*. If we read the three texts in light of each other, we gain a picture of Edwards's theological ethic in which the affections and beauty are interdependent concepts for moral and religious beings. Furthermore, we can recognize Edwards's dependence upon the concept of beauty to analyze moral and spiritual beings. Rather than being just one sign alongside others, beauty, as Edwards developed it in these works, is the primary concept upon which Edwards relied in order to evaluate Christian practices. More than any other concept, beauty is the objective criterion by which persons can rigorously and discriminatingly test the true nature from which their practices arise.

In *Religious Affections* Edwards used the concept of beauty to emphasize the visible quality of persons' interior dispositions. He did this by discussing not only beauty, but also its opposite. Interestingly, his discussion of beauty is dominated by a long and colorful discussion

⁶¹Ibid., 365.

⁶²See Edwards's discussion of the tenth sign of gracious affections. Ibid., 365-76.

of its opposite. The opposite of beauty is, for Edwards, deformity. Persons who display deformity in their affections are hypocrites. Unlike saints, hypocrites exhibit such disproportion that Edwards referred to them as “monsters.”⁶³ As Edwards’s numerous illustrations show, hypocrites display a variety of disproportionate affections.⁶⁴ At their worst, hypocrites exhibit “no manner of uniformity in their affections.”⁶⁵

Like beauty, deformity manifests itself in an endless variety of forms. Edwards understood the variety to be accounted for by the endless variety of affections, their complex constellations, and their degree of intensity in any given situation. Some manifestations, Edwards explained, exhibit an imbalance of different affections. For example, hypocrites who “rejoice without trembling” manifest an imbalance between joy and holy fear which Scripture depicts as properly accompanying each other.⁶⁶ Edwards explained another kind of disproportion in terms of the partiality that people feel towards particular objects. He wrote: “Not only is there often in hypocrites, an essential deficiency, as to the various kinds of religious affections; but also a strange partiality and disproportion, in the same affections, with regard to different objects.”⁶⁷ Whenever we observe persons professing love to God without showing love to fellow human beings or loving partially rather than universally or loving only those who reciprocate their love, we observe this kind of deformity.⁶⁸ In his discussion of hypocrites who

⁶³Ibid., 365.

⁶⁴See Edwards’s discussion of various disproportionate affections. Ibid., 369-376.

⁶⁵Ibid., 365.

⁶⁶Ibid., 366.

⁶⁷Ibid., 367.

⁶⁸Ibid., 367-8.

claim to have undergone conversion, Edwards described another form of deformity that exhibits what happens when an affection becomes the object of affection. “The affections of hypocrites,” Edwards explained, “are very often after this manner.”⁶⁹

They are first, much affected with some impression on their imagination, or some impulse, which they take to be an immediate suggestion, or testimony from God, of his love and their happiness, and high privilege in some respect, either with or without a text of Scripture; they are mightily taken with this, as a great discovery; and hence arise high affections. And when their affections are raised, then they view those high affections, and call them great and wonderful experiences; and they have a notion that God is greatly pleased with those affections; and this affects them more; and so they are affected with their affections. And thus their affections rise higher and higher, till they sometimes are perfectly swallowed up: and self-conceit, and a fierce zeal rises withal; and all is built like a castle in the air, on no other foundation but imagination, self-love and pride.⁷⁰

In his lifetime Edwards heard many people tell stories about their conversion experiences. He observed that hypocrites, in recounting these experiences, often dwell upon the affections they experienced. These affections signify to them the authenticity of their conversion experiences. In Edwards’s view, however, the fact that the affections themselves have become objects of affection is a sure sign of their false nature. He wrote, “False affections rest satisfied in themselves.”⁷¹ Dwelling upon, taking pride in, becoming complacent in, or longing for how they felt at the time of their conversions, hypocrites pervert the proper form of conversion.

Edwards distinguished this form of hypocrisy from the beauty of genuinely religious affections exhibited by saints. The experience of conversion elicits an affective response in

⁶⁹Ibid., 252.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Ibid., 376.

saints as well. Saints, like hypocrites, enjoy the beauty of an experience. Describing the saint, Edwards wrote:

The more he experiences, and the more he knows this excellent, unparalleled, exquisite, and satisfying sweetness, the more earnestly will he hunger and thirst for more, till he comes to perfection. And therefore this is the nature of spiritual affections, that the greater they be, the greater the appetite and longing is, after grace and holiness.⁷²

The unquenchable thirst that Edwards attributed to saints differs from the way in which hypocrites are affected by their affections.

The difference between saints and hypocrites has to do with the object of their affections.

Edwards wrote:

A true saint, when in the enjoyment of true discoveries of the sweet glory of God and Christ, has his mind too much captivated and engaged by what he views without himself, to stand at that time to view himself, and his own attainments: it would be a diversion and loss which he could not bear, to take his eye off from the ravishing object of his contemplation, to survey his own experience, and to spend time in thinking with himself, what an high attainment this is, and what a good story I now have to tell others.⁷³

Unlike hypocrites, saints have before them an infinite object of attraction. Having as their object the infinite beauty of God and Christ, saints cannot rest in their affections. Rather than focusing on themselves and the beauty of their experience, as hypocrites do, saints remain attentive to the objective beauty of God and Christ. The more they enjoy of the divine beauty, the more they desire to partake in it.

Given the infinite nature of divine beauty, their affection for it can continue to intensify.

Edwards found an analogy for the intensification of affection in the image of a flame.

⁷²Ibid., 379.

⁷³Ibid., 252-3.

. . . the kindling and raising of gracious affections is like kindling a flame; the higher it is raised, the more ardent it is; and the more it burns, the more vehemently does it tend and seek to burn. So that the spiritual appetite after holiness, and an increase of holy affections, is much more lively and keen in those that are eminent in holiness, than others; and more when grace and holy affections are in their most lively exercise, than at other times.⁷⁴

Just as a flame intensifies as it approximates an object, genuinely religious affections continue to intensify throughout saints' lives, moving them to persist in their daily Christian practice. For Edwards, the most important consequence of intensifying religious affections is that they lead to an increase in Christian activity.

Christian practice is God's way of acting in the world. Edwards understood Christian practice as both beautiful and beautifying. Insofar as it reveals the thorough integration of the saint both in terms of his soul and the whole course of his life after conversion, Christian practice is beautiful. Christian practice is beautifying insofar as it dynamically contributes to the integrated structure of the world. Through their actions, saints beautify the world. We can think about this dynamic quality in two ways. First, in their actions, saints increase the coherence, or unity, of creation by themselves having integrity. This is easy enough to understand. Second, saints increase the beauty of the world through their effect upon others. Grasping this point is more difficult at this point, because it requires a fuller discussion of Edwards's conception of beauty and his understanding of the integrating manner of divine activity. For now, let it suffice to say that saints, by being beautiful themselves, attract others and are the means by which others are affectively moved to act. In this way they dynamically change the structure of the world. Through their participation in God's integrating activity, they complicate and enlarge the integrity of the world.

⁷⁴Ibid., 377.

The Complex and General Beauty of the World

In *True Virtue* Edwards provided his most extensive and systematic discussion of beauty. He defined beauty most generally as the agreement and proportion – the relationality – of different things. He appropriated this basic definition of beauty from the philosophical views of his day. In particular, Edwards was familiar with and appropriated the aesthetic thought of Francis Hutcheson, presented in Hutcheson’s *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*.⁷⁵ Edwards agreed with Hutcheson that the beauty of an object depends upon the degree of relationality displayed by the object. “’Tis more considerable to have many things consent one with another than a few only.”⁷⁶ Referring to Hutcheson, Edwards wrote: “He observes that the greater the variety is, in equal uniformity, the greater the beauty: which is no more than to say, the more there are of different mutually agreeing things, the greater is the beauty.”⁷⁷

Edwards disagreed with Hutcheson, however, on what constitutes an agreeable relationship between different things. Edwards broadened the notion of agreeableness beyond mere “equal uniformity.” Some objects, Edwards thought, possess a complex beauty. They exhibit multiple kinds of agreement and proportion. Consider the example of a musical composition. It could be beautiful on account of many things: its rhythm, melody, harmonic arrangement, appropriateness for a given occasion, and etc. Edwards would have considered

⁷⁵Edwards was familiar with the second edition of this work, published in 1726.

⁷⁶Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 563. This sentiment echoes a statement that Edwards made elsewhere: “One alone cannot be excellent.” See Paul Ramsey, ed., Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 562, n. 2 on “Miscellanies,” no. 117 and “The Mind,” no. 1.

⁷⁷Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 562-3. Edwards was referring to ideas presented in Hutcheson’s *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, 2nd ed. (London, 1726).

each of these to be an equality in which the beauty of the musical composition would consist. He wrote, “What is called correspondency, symmetry, regularity, and the like may be resolved into equalities; though the equalities in a beauty in any degree complicated are so numerous that it would be a most tedious piece of work to enumerate them. There are millions of these equalities.”⁷⁸

As Edwards recognized, identifying all the ways in which different things relate to each other is a complicated, and sometimes tedious, task. Usually persons fail to reflect thoroughly on all the reasons why an object appears beautiful to them.

. . . in many instances persons that are gratified, and have their minds affected, in presenting this beauty, don’t reflect on that particular agreement and proportion, which according to the law of nature is the ground and rule of beauty in the case; yea, are ignorant of it. Thus, a man may be pleased with the harmony of the notes in a tune and yet know nothing of that proportion or adjustment of the notes, which by the law of nature is the ground of the melody. He knows not that the vibrations of a note coincide with three of its fifths, etc. Yea, he may not know that there are vibrations of the air in the case, or any corresponding motions in the organs of hearing, in the auditory nerve, or animal spirits. . . .⁷⁹

Being aware of all the agreements that an object displays requires attending to the object from every possible angle and perspective. One wonders if Edwards thought such a thorough perception of beauty to be possible.

The distinction that Edwards drew between “particular” and “general” beauty underscores the role of perspective in the experience of beauty.

By a “particular” beauty I mean that by which a thing appears beautiful when considered only with regard to its connection with, and tendency to some particular things within a limited and, as it were, a private sphere. And “general” beauty is that by which a thing appears beautiful when viewed most perfectly,

⁷⁸Jonathan Edwards, “The Mind,” no. 1, in *Scientific and Philosophical Writings*, ed. Wallace Anderson, vol. 6, *Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 335.

⁷⁹Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 566.

comprehensively and universally, with regard to all its tendencies, and its connections with everything it stands related to.⁸⁰

The beauty of an object depends upon the perspective and context from which it is viewed.

While from one perspective things may appear disproportionate, from another perspective they may appear beautiful. Edwards thought that ultimately, in order to see the beauty of a thing *as it is in itself*, one must view it comprehensively, that is, with regard to everything to which it is related.

Edwards certainly recognized that the beauty of the world is complex. Over the course of many years, he kept notebooks in which he recorded his reflections on various agreeable relationships he observed in the world. These notebooks, “Images of Divine Things” and “Types,” reveal a man fascinated with the complexity of patterns and connections. They reveal a man who sought to perceive beauty in all things. As the notebooks show, Edwards experimented with the angles and perspectives from which and, most of all, the contexts within which to observe beauty. He knew that by locating things within increasingly inclusive contexts, persons could discern greater complexity in beauty and, therefore, discern more general, comprehensive beauty.

Toward the aim of experiencing the general beauty of all things, Edwards applied a method of typology. Traditionally, typology had been limited to scriptural exegesis. Edwards broadened the significance of typology for understanding nature and history. He believed that the material and phenomenal world, and not just Scripture, declares divine truths. Describing Edwards’s conviction, Wallace E. Anderson writes: “In most of the entries, he positively states that the natural things he describes were established by God to be representations, or types, or

⁸⁰Ibid., 540.

images, of those moral and spiritual matters.”⁸¹ For Edwards, discerning the general beauty of anything in nature depends on understanding its connection with God’s spiritual beauty active in the world.

Edwards’s notebook entries express his sense that there is a spiritual beauty beyond the natural beauty that one encounters in the world. In an entry that was apparently intended to be the prologue to “Images,”⁸² Edwards wrote:

For indeed the whole outward creation, which is but the shadows of beings, is so made as to represent spiritual things. It might be demonstrated by the wonderful agreement in thousands of things, much of the same kind as is between the types of the Old Testament and their antitypes, and by spiritual things being so often and continually compared with them in the Word of God.⁸³

Edwards understood natural beauty to be an image, or shadow, of spiritual beauty.⁸⁴ From his observations of nature, Edwards drew various conclusions about spiritual matters. The main conclusion Edwards seems to have drawn is that God “makes an agreement or consent of different things, in their form, manner, measure, etc. to appear beautiful, because here is some image of an higher kind of agreement and consent of spiritual beings.”⁸⁵ In “Images,” no. 79 Edwards wrote an entry about gravity in the physical world.

⁸¹Wallace E. Anderson, ed., Jonathan Edwards, *Typological Writings*, vol. 11, *Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 6. For a discussion on Edwards’s expansion of traditional typology for the purpose of understanding nature and history, see Wallace’s introduction, especially pages 3-7.

⁸²For a discussion about the evidence for this, see *ibid.*, 7.

⁸³Jonathan Edwards, “Miscellanies,” no. 362, ed. Thomas A. Schafer, vol. 13, *Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 434. Cited in Wallace E. Anderson, introduction to “Images of Divine Things” and “Types,” 7.

⁸⁴Edwards conceived of reality as unified. Contrasting Edwards’s conception of beauty with that of Francis Hutcheson, Paul Ramsey writes: “. . . for Jonathan Edwards there is a structural similarity between primarily beautiful moral relations and things that are secondarily beautiful, whether things in nature, artifacts, societies, or systems of thought. Jonathan Edwards’s is the more unified theory: the latter are images or shadows of the former. He did not need two treatises like Hutcheson’s to explicate first beauty and then virtue.” See Paul Ramsey, ed., *The Nature of True Virtue*, 562, n. 2.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 564.

The whole material universe is preserved by gravity, or attraction, or the mutual tendency of all bodies to each other. One part of the universe is hereby made beneficial to another. The beauty, harmony and order, regular progress, life and motion, and in short, all the well-being of the whole frame, depends on it. This is a type of love or charity in the spiritual world.⁸⁶

Edwards perceived in gravity an agreeableness resembling the love of God. Edwards understood gravity to be a principle of attraction that determines the structure of all material things. He saw in gravity an image of the spiritual principle of consentaneity by which God relates all things.

Edwards discerned the principle of consentaneity throughout nature. In “Images,” no. 8 Edwards wrote:

There is a wonderful resemblance in the effects which God produces, and consentaneity in his manner of working in one thing and another, throughout all nature. . . . Therefore ‘tis allowed that God does purposely make and order one thing to be agreeableness and harmony with another.⁸⁷

In this entry, we can detect Edwards trying to discern in the effects which God produces the manner by which God governs the world. Natural beauty acts as a clue to the manner of God’s being.

From his notebook entries, we gain a sense of what Edwards meant by natural and spiritual beauty. He understood both as involving agreement, consentaneity, harmony, proportion. In *True Virtue* Edwards provided a more systematic presentation of these concepts than he did in his typological notebooks. Defining them, he wrote:

That consent, agreement, or union of being to being, which has been spoken of, viz. the union or propensity of minds to mental or spiritual existence, may be called the highest, and first, or primary beauty that is to be found among things that exist: being the proper and peculiar beauty of spiritual and moral beings, which are the highest and first part of the universal system for whose sake all the

⁸⁶Jonathan Edwards, “Images,” no. 79, in *Typological Writings*, ed. Wallace E. Anderson, vol. 11, *Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 81.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 53.

rest has existence. Yet there is another, inferior, secondary beauty, which is some image of this, and which is not peculiar to spiritual beings, but is found even in inanimate things: which consists in a mutual consent and agreement of different things in form, manner, quantity, and visible end or design, called by the various names of regularity, order, uniformity, symmetry, proportion, harmony, etc.⁸⁸

When Edwards wrote of spiritual beauty, he was referring specifically to spiritual and moral beings whose will and intelligence enable them to experience cordial agreement in their being-to-being relations. Only spiritual beings are capable of benevolent love for being. When he wrote of natural beauty, he was referring to those relationships consisting in natural agreement. Natural agreement, Edwards wrote, is “entirely a distinct thing; the will, disposition, or affection of the heart having no concern in it, but consisting only in uniformity and consent of nature, form, quantity, etc. . . . wherein lies an inferior secondary sort of beauty.”⁸⁹

The problem, of course, is that human beings fail to perceive the spiritual dimension of reality. They fail to perceive things as they are in relation to all other beings. In their attempts to discern some design in the world, they attend to some partial view of the world. Their misperceptions result from any number of errors, all of which have in common one fundamental problem: as misperceptions, they arise from natural, not spiritual, principles. Edwards thought that all perceptions based upon natural principles were limited in perspective. The cases with which Edwards most concerned himself were those in which persons’ limited views are due to their affections arising out of self-love. For example, whenever citizens of a nation interpret international events as manifesting God’s love for them, they perceive the object of their affection – in this case, their nation – from a less-than-universal perspective.

⁸⁸Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 561-2.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 565.

By the time Edwards was writing his *Two Dissertations*, he would boldly attempt to perceive the general beauty of the world. He would try to see it “most perfectly, comprehensively and universally, with regard to all its tendencies, and its connections with everything it stands related to.”⁹⁰ As his typological notebooks show, Edwards had been working toward this project over the course of his life. Whereas in his typological writings he approached the task by noting a variety of correlated natural and cordial agreements, in *The End* Edwards tried to comprehend the beauty of the world by investigating the question: What is the purpose for which God created the world? Edwards recognized that the beauty of the world consists in an infinite variety of agreeable relationships and that its form changes with every passing moment. Instead of undertaking the tedious and impossible task of enumerating each and every agreement and proportion observable in the world, Edwards turned to the task of working out a theological argument.

To an audience consisting primarily of philosophers, Edwards argued in his *Two Dissertations* that true perceptions of beauty, or perceptions of spiritual beauty, are impossible without a theological perspective. In order truly to discern the beauty of the world, that is the connectedness of all things, one would have to perceive all things in relation to God. Edwards understood God to be the universal system of being, or Being in general. When we read *The End* as a companion to *True Virtue*, it becomes clear that *The End* is Edwards’s theological argument answering the question: wherein does the beauty of the world consist? Edwards argued that in order to discern the design of the world, human beings have to keep in mind the original, chief end for which God created the world.

⁹⁰Ibid., 540.

God's Chief End for the World

Edwards distinguished between God's activity in creating the world and God's activity in governing the world, or putting creation to use, which he understood as God's providential activity. Unlike the original creation of the world, God's providential works have ends that are consequences of the circumstances shaped by prior acts.⁹¹ Although Edwards distinguished between God's creative and providential activity, he considered all of divine activity to be coherently unified. Edwards thought that God's providential works in the world display God's original purpose in creating the world in the first place and that the original purpose unifies all of God's activity. He wrote: "That which God had primarily in view in creating, and the original ordination of the world, must be constantly kept in view, and have a governing influence in all God's works, or with respect to everything that he does towards his creatures."⁹²

Edwards recognized that identifying the particular ends of providential activity does not always lead one to see the general end of God's activity in the world. Differentiating the general end of providence from particular ends of providence, he wrote:

Whatever appears to be God's "ultimate end" in any sense of his works of providence in general, that must be the ultimate end of the work of creation itself. For though it be so that God may act for an end that is an ultimate end in a lower sense, in some of his works of providence, which is not the ultimate end of the creation of the world: yet this doth not take place with regard to the works of providence in general. But we may justly look upon whatsoever has the nature of an ultimate end of God's works of providence in general, that the same is also an ultimate end of the creation of the world; for God's works of providence in

⁹¹Edwards distinguished between an ultimate last end and consequential last ends. He gave the example of a man who originally loves society. Society is agreeable to him antecedent to all presupposed cases and circumstances. His love for society may cause him to seek to acquire his own family. After he has acquired a family, he finds that peace, good order, mutual justice, and friendship in his family are agreeable to him. He even delights in them for their own sake. Insofar as these goods are the ends for which he acts in government and at home, they can be considered last ends. They are not, however, the original end with respect to his family. They are *consequentially* last ends. Jonathan Edwards, *Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*, in *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey, vol. 8, *Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 411.

⁹²Ibid., p. 413.

general are the same with the general use that he puts the world to that he has made. And we may well argue from what we see of the general use which God makes of the world to the general end for which he designed the world. Though there may be some things that are ends of particular works of providence, that were not the last end of the creation, which are in themselves grateful to God in such particular emergent circumstances; and so are last ends in an inferior sense: yet this is only in certain cases, or particular occasions. But if they are last ends of God's proceedings in the use of the world in general, this shows that his making them last ends don't depend on particular cases and circumstances, but the nature of things in general, and his general design in the being and constitution of the universe.⁹³

Particular ends are not the same as the general end of God's providence. Whereas particular ends are consequential ends arising out of the specific circumstances of situations, the general end of God's providential activity is the end to which all of God's ongoing activity is connected. In this sense, Edwards understood the general end of providence to be the same as the chief end of creation. If we recall Edwards's discussion of general and particular beauty,⁹⁴ it becomes clear that comprehending the general end of providence, insofar as it is connected to the entirety of God's activity in the world, is necessary for perceiving the general beauty of the world.

Investigating the general end of providence, Edwards turned to Scripture.⁹⁵ He studied those passages that refer to the creative and providential ends of God's works. That Scripture focuses primarily on the relationship between God and human beings led Edwards to seek more specifically the end for which God puts to use the moral part of the world. Edwards thought that by examining the general use to which God puts human beings, he could gain a better

⁹³ Ibid., 414.

⁹⁴ See my discussion of "general" and "particular" beauty on pages 34 and 35. See Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue*, 540.

⁹⁵ Edwards considered the question of God's ultimate end in creating the world to be answerable only by revelation. He turned to Scripture as the revelatory account of God's purpose for the world. He wrote: "He best knows his own heart, and what his own ends and designs were in the wonderful works which he has wrought." Jonathan Edwards, *Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*, 419. Note here that Edwards portrayed God as having a heart and as acting with integrity, that is in accordance with God's heart.

understanding of the general end of providence and thereby the end for which God created the whole world. In order to understand why Edwards thought that knowledge of the general end for which God puts human beings to use leads us to knowledge of the general end of God's providential activity, we must keep in mind the distinctiveness of moral and spiritual beings.

At work in his argument is an ontological scheme in which some kinds of beings are closer to God and others farther from God. While all of creation is an image of the divine life, those beings whom God has endowed with intelligence and will, and thereby the capacity for moral action, resemble God most closely. The capacity of moral and spiritual beings to participate actively in God's design justifies their place in this scheme. Edwards explained:

A main difference between the intelligent and moral parts, and the rest of the world, lies in this, that the former are capable of knowing their Creator, and the end for which he made them, and capable of actively complying with his design in their creation and promoting it; while other creatures can't promote the design of their creation, only passively and eventually. And seeing they are capable of knowing the end for which the Author has made them, 'tis doubtless their duty to fall in with it. Their wills ought to comply with the will of the Creator in this respect, in mainly seeking the same as their last end which God mainly seeks as their last end.⁹⁶

Unlike other creatures, moral and spiritual beings can intentionally and actively participate in the divine design of the world. As moral and spiritual beings, human beings have the capacity 1) to perceive the spiritual beauty of things – that is, that all beings are related to God, the universal system of being, 2) to respond to spiritual beauty with heart-felt affection, and 3) to act in accordance with their heart-felt consent to being in general. Human beings, by virtue of these capacities, can be in complex and dynamic relation to many more beings than is possible for

⁹⁶Ibid., 472-3.

inanimate or unintelligent beings. In other words, because human beings are beings with hearts, they are capable of actively promoting general beauty, not just particular beauty.

That God created the moral nature of human beings to resemble most closely the divine nature and thereby to enable human beings to participate in the divine activity of beautifying the world was consistent, Edwards thought, with the fact that Scripture reveals primarily God's concern for the relationship between God and human beings. Scripture focuses primarily upon the general end for which God put human beings to use. Moreover, the general end of God's providential activity with regard to human beings is clearest in those scriptural passages that speak about the saints, "the best part of the moral world,"⁹⁷ as well as Jesus Christ, "the head of the moral world."⁹⁸ Studying those passages in Scripture that speak of the saints and Jesus Christ, Edwards concluded that the general end for which God puts human beings to use is the glory of God.⁹⁹ "The glory of God appears," he wrote,

. . . to be that end or event in the earnest desires of which, and in their delight in which, the best part of the moral world, and when in their best frames, do most naturally express the direct tendency of the spirit of true goodness, and give vent to the virtuous and pious affections of the heart, and do most properly and directly testify their supreme respect to the Creator.¹⁰⁰

What Scripture says about the lives of the saints and even moreso the incarnation, life, crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ reveals the glory of God to be the general end

⁹⁷Ibid., 482.

⁹⁸Ibid., 474.

⁹⁹Jonathan Edwards, "Miscellanies," no. 1080, "God's Glory the End of Creation," no. 1094, cited by Paul Ramsey in Jonathan Edwards, *Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*, 490, n. 5. Ramsey explains that Edwards wrote entry no. 1080 around the year 1745, ten years before the composition of *Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*.

¹⁰⁰Jonathan Edwards, *Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*, 482.

of God's creative and providential activity.

Participation in God's Integrating Activity

In his discussion of the meaning of "the glory of God," Edwards analyzed two aspects of the phrase. First, the phrase expresses a sense of God's internal glory. Second, the phrase conveys the emanation of that internal glory. "The glory of God," Edwards wrote, "when spoken of as the supreme and ultimate end of the work of creation, and of all God's works, is the emanation and true external expression of God's internal glory and fullness."¹⁰¹

Edwards struggled to find other language and concepts that would express these two aspects of God, that is, God's internal fullness and external emanation. In "Miscellanies," no. 1066, he wrote:

Language seems to be defective and to want a proper general word to express the supreme end of creation, and all God's works, including both branches of it, viz. God's glorifying himself or causing his glory and perfection to shine forth, and his communicating himself or communicating his fullness and happiness. The one supreme end of all things is the infinite good as it were flowing out, or the infinite fountain of light, as it were shining forth. We need some other words more properly and fully to express what I mean.¹⁰²

The variety of phrases and images that Edwards employed in his writings reveals his efforts to overcome the limitation of language, which he found so frustrating. Perhaps most expressive of the communication of God's fullness are the scriptural images of light¹⁰³ and a fountain.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 527.

¹⁰²Jonathan Edwards, "Miscellanies," no. 1066, cited by Paul Ramsey in Jonathan Edwards, *Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*, 516, n. 2.

¹⁰³See Edwards's exegesis of I Cor. 15:41, Ezek. 1:28, 10:4, 43:2, Is. 24:23, 60:1-2, Lk. 2:9, Acts 22:11, II Cor. 4:4, 4:6. Edwards examines other scriptural passages as well. See Jonathan Edwards, *Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*, 516-7.

Edwards employed these images frequently in his writings. In *The End*, he drew on these images in his attempts to depict the divine glory effectively.

Using the image of light, he wrote:

And it is fitly compared to an effulgence or emanation of light from a luminary, by which this glory of God is abundantly represented in Scripture. Light is the external expression, exhibition and manifestation of the excellency of the luminary, of the sun for instance: it is the abundant, extensive emanation and communication of the fullness of the sun to innumerable beings that partake of it. 'Tis by this that the sun itself is seen, and his glory beheld, and all other things discovered: 'tis by a participation of this communication from the sun that surrounding objects receive all their luster, beauty, and brightness. 'Tis by this that all nature is quickened and receives life, comfort and joy.¹⁰⁴

Using the image of a fountain, he wrote:

The emanation or communication of the divine fullness, consisting in the knowledge of God, love to God, and joy in God, has relation indeed both to God and the creature: but it has relation to God as its fountain, as it is an emanation from God; and as the communication itself, or thing communicated, is something divine, something of God, something of his internal fullness; as the water in the stream is something of the fountain; and as the beams are of the sun.¹⁰⁵

Edwards drew upon the images of light and fountain to depict what happens in spiritual conversions. He wrote:

The soul of a saint receives light from the Sun of Righteousness, in such a manner, that its nature is changed, and it becomes properly a luminous thing: not only does the sun shine in the saints, but they also become little suns, partaking of the nature of the fountain of their light. . . . The saints don't only drink of the water of life, that flows from the original fountain; but this water becomes a fountain of water in them, springing up there, and flowing out of them.¹⁰⁶

Edwards's appropriation of these images highlights Edwards's understanding of how saints participate in the spiritual beauty of God, that is, the general beauty of the world. Rather

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 530.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 531. Cf. Jonathan Edwards, "Miscellanies," no. 1066.

¹⁰⁶Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, 343.

than conceiving the emanation in terms of dissipation, Edwards thought of the process as an intensification of God's general disposition. Edwards understood the emanation of divine glory as an increase, enlargement, and intensification of God's fullness. Like little suns emanating the beauty of God, human beings participate in the complex integrating activity of God, and in doing so, they increase the general beauty of the world.

Conclusion

For Edwards, the moral and religious life requires heart-felt engagement with the world, in all its complexity of interconnectedness and relationships. It requires the participation of persons, beings with hearts, who perceive the spiritual beauty in the world, and perceiving such beauty, are so moved to action that they themselves further beautify the world. Perceiving spiritual beauty is impossible without a theological perspective, because in order truly to discern the beauty of the world, that is the connectedness and integrity of all things, one would have to perceive all things in relation to God, the universal system of being, or Being in general. God is, Edwards conceived, the universal system of being, relating all things by virtue of being a being with a heart.

As we shall see in the next chapter, it is this thoroughly aesthetic conception of God, a conception of God for which the affective nature of God is foundational to God's integrating activity in the world and for which attention to the form of relationships and interconnectedness of all things is essential to what we know about God's activity in the world and how we evaluate our participation in it, that H. Richard Niebuhr encouraged young theologians to mine more deeply and that had already found a way into his own conception of faith, as an interpersonal disposition of loyalty and trust, and his conception of the moral life, as manifesting a form of

integrity or disintegration. Edwards' theocentrism, insofar as it is a dispositional orientation toward God and places God at the epicenter of the interconnectedness of creation, equipped Niebuhr with an aesthetic approach to the experience of faith and the formation of the moral life in which integrity is of paramount significance.

CHAPTER FOUR

An Aesthetic Interpretation of Niebuhr's Conception of Faith

Niebuhr's Conception of Faith

For Niebuhr, the question of faith and culture does not ask about the proper relationship between religious persons either to religions different from their own or to what they perceive as being secular, irreligious culture. Defining faith in terms of personal attitudes of trust and distrust and observing these attitudes displayed in personal loyalties, Niebuhr understood faith to be a universal phenomenon. All persons live with confidence in and are loyal to some cause, whether the cause be God, nationalism, communitarianism, the self, or some other god. Given his conception of faith, Niebuhr thought it altogether unnecessary to address atheism, which, from his perspective, is not actually possible. Idolatry, and not atheism, is the theological and human problem. Furthermore, Niebuhr recognized that people usually, if not always, devote themselves to multiple causes – causes which, independent of each other, make demands upon persons who are then left with the daunting task of reconciling their responses to them. Niebuhr saw the entirety of culture – individuals and institutions – involved in conflicts of faith.

The church was no exception. Whereas in the 1930s Niebuhr had observed the spirit of capitalism and nationalism prevailing not only in non-Christian culture, but also in the church, by the 1960s he observed the church falling prey to an idolatrous tendency to deify itself. He wrote:

Reflections on the sovereignty of God and the forms of faith have led me to see that the problem of the church – at least as it appears today – is not the problem of

separating itself only from the idolatries and henotheisms of the world but from its own idolatries and henotheisms. (By ‘henotheism’ I mean the worship of one god who is however the god of an ingroup rather than the ground of all being.)¹

The sovereignty of God – the belief that God is acting in every action upon us, not only creating the world, but also loving the world he created – and radical monotheism – faith in the One beyond all the many – provided a critical perspective from which to view the whole of culture, including the church.² From that perspective, the diagnosis for both scenarios was one and the same. The church, despite professing a monotheistic faith, had lost the radical character of its faith. Binding itself to causes that were less than universal in scope, the church no longer expressed genuine confidence in and loyalty to a God who creates and esteems all things.

In an essay attempting to evaluate Niebuhr’s legacy to American theological ethics, Joseph L. Allen identified the theme of radical monotheism as being embodied in everything Niebuhr wrote. About Niebuhr’s commitment to this central theme, Allen wrote: “Although he developed his own way of expressing this idea, he did not consider it new in any way.”³ Examining the heart of the Judeo-Christian teachings, Niebuhr sought to recast our understanding of monotheistic faith in terms of value as well as in the interpersonal terms of being in relationships of trust and loyalty. Looking back on his intellectual career, Niebuhr

¹H. Richard Niebuhr, “Reformation: Continuing Imperative,” *The Christian Century*, 2 March 1960, 250.

²Niebuhr wrote: “I see our human religion now, whether non-Christian or Christian, as one part of our human culture which like other parts is subject to a constant process of reformation and deformation, of metanoia (repentance) and fall. And in that process the deification of the principles of religious society is no less dangerous to men, no less misleading to their faith, than the deification of national or economic principles.” *Ibid.*

³ Joseph L. Allen, “A Decisive Influence on Protestant Ethics,” *Christianity and Crisis*, 23 (1963): 217.

wrote: “The dynamic, interhuman as well as human-divine interaction of trust and loyalty has excited my wonder and challenged my efforts to understand faith more than ever.”⁴

From Niebuhr’s perspective, the church’s customary way of speaking about faith had become ineffective in providing the necessary prophetic critique of the faith characterizing the church.⁵ In an article emphasizing the need for continual reformation in the church, he wrote: “I look for a re-symbolization of the message and the life of faith in the One God. Our old phrases are worn out; they have become clichés by means of which we can neither grasp nor communicate the reality of our existence before God.”⁶ That Niebuhr perceived a need for the re-symbolization of faith sheds light on Niebuhr’s primary vocational concerns. Niebuhr understood himself to be engaged in Christian moral philosophy, by which he meant that he was “a Christian who is seeking to understand the mode of his existence and that of his fellow beings as human agents.”⁷ As a theological ethicist engaged in Christian moral philosophy, Niebuhr understood his task to be one of analyzing the forms of human existence before God, that is, the forms of faith. In doing so, he sought to identify and understand the patterns of our moral existence. To further this endeavor, Niebuhr drew on the aid of theories about symbols.

⁴H. Richard Niebuhr, “How My Mind Has Changed,” in *How My Mind Has Changed*, ed. Harold E. Fey (Cleveland: Meridian Books, The World Publishing Company, 1960), 76.

⁵Niebuhr thought that Christian symbols, such as “justification by faith,” “sovereignty of God,” “grace,” and “faith,” had been used dogmatically for so long that they had taken the place of the actuality to which they once referred. As a result, Christian symbolism had lost its vitality.

⁶H. Richard Niebuhr, “Reformation: Continuing Imperative,” 251.

⁷H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1963), 42. Although Niebuhr offered this reflection on his undertaking in writing *The Responsible Self* specifically, it would be accurate to say that much of Niebuhr’s work as a theological ethicist was engaged in Christian moral philosophy as described in that Prologue.

From the philosophy of symbolic forms developed by Ernst Cassirer and others, Niebuhr appropriated a fundamental insight into human existence: that human beings, even to a greater degree than we are rational creatures, are profoundly symbolic creatures.⁸ What exactly Niebuhr meant by symbol, however, is not clear. Niebuhr took a more eclectic than systematic approach to theorizing about symbols.⁹ What concerned Niebuhr were the processes common to all persons as they think and act morally, and Niebuhr understood symbolization to be such a process. To interpret human existence as symbolic is to recognize:

that we are far more image-making and image-using creatures than we usually think ourselves to be and, further, that our processes of perception and conception, of organizing and understanding the signs that come to us in our dialogue with the circumambient world, are guided and formed by images in our minds.¹⁰

Philosophers of language, art historians, and historians of religion had shown that human beings, in their use of language, artistic interpretations of nature, and worship rituals, are at core symbolic creatures. On the basis of this insight into human nature, Niebuhr thought that apprehending reality at all, no matter the realm of inquiry, depends upon symbols that guide our interpretation of that reality. This led Niebuhr to ask a further question: Is the human being as

⁸For a discussion on what Niebuhr appropriated from Ernst Cassirer and other theorists concerning symbols, see Chapter 2 of the dissertation written by Gay H. Welch, "Symbol, Metaphor and the Affections: The Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr's Responsible Self" (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1980).

⁹As Gay H. Welch argues in her study, Niebuhr's more eclectic understanding of symbol, which was informed by Ernst Cassirer and others, can be given definition by appropriating the theories of symbol developed by Alfred Schutz and Paul Ricoeur, whose phenomenological approaches to symbolic processes are compatible with Niebuhr's thought. Finding phenomenology to be the philosophical approach most compatible with Niebuhr's view of the structures and dynamics of the moral life, Welch writes, "He is, to be sure, not a pure phenomenologist, and he never intended or accomplished the rigorous reduction and bracketing demanded by the radical phenomenological method. We can nevertheless, look to the phenomenologists as a source of enrichment and clarity for Niebuhr's thought." *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁰H. Richard Niebuhr, "Metaphors and Morals," chap. in *The Responsible Self*, 151-2.

moral being a symbolic creature?¹¹ Niebuhr hypothesized: “Since man as moral agent is present in all his activities it would seem likely that in his total decision-making and the administration of all his affairs he would be no less symbolic than he is in any one of them.”¹²

In his work Niebuhr sought to analyze the symbols – conceptual images or patterns – that human beings have employed in understanding their moral existence. Certain symbols have arisen and have become thematized in the history of human self-understanding, whether philosophical or religious. Niebuhr identified two symbols by which the Christian community traditionally has interpreted the moral life: “man-the-maker” and “man-under-the-law.”¹³ Understanding these symbols to have arisen from and to have shaped non-Christian communities as well, Niebuhr self-consciously approached his task from the perspective of Christian moral philosophy. The approach was philosophical insofar as it took as its object human moral life in general and undertook a method of critical reflection upon its principles; the approach was Christian by virtue of its main interest, which was to understand the particular manifestation of this general pattern of self-understanding within the Christian community.¹⁴

Within the Christian community the symbols of man-the-maker and man-under-the-law have functioned as synecdochic analogies.¹⁵ That is, by generalizing one pattern of human activity to represent the whole of human existence, these symbols have attempted to answer the

¹¹Ibid., 154.

¹²Ibid.

¹³H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*.

¹⁴Ibid. See H. Richard Niebuhr’s prologue to *The Responsible Self*, 45-46 and James Gustafson, introduction to *The Responsible Self*, 8-9.

¹⁵Niebuhr describes this function: “In trying to understand ourselves in our wholeness we use the image of a part of our activity. . . .” Ibid., 56.

question, “What is man like in all his actions?”¹⁶ With the aid of these symbols, Christian thought has developed helpful insights into human existence before God. When we interpret all our actions as analogous to the teleologically oriented actions of artists, technicians, and craftsmen, we come upon the truth that as human beings we have the ability to act upon ourselves as objects to be shaped, fashioned, and perfected. Alongside this symbol arose the deontological symbol of man-under-the-law. As a corrective to the notion that human beings have within their power control over both their ends and means, the symbol of man-under-the-law interprets human life through the political image of citizens who can aspire to do no more than rule themselves as being ruled.¹⁷

From Niebuhr’s perspective, the teleological and deontological symbols, whether taken alone or in symbiosis, have proven to be inadequate interpretive accounts of moral existence. Their inadequacies are evident in the ways that they need to correct each other as well as in the paradoxes they raise – paradoxes that the other symbol fails to resolve.¹⁸ These inadequacies demonstrate the need for a symbol of moral existence that includes the insights of both man-the-maker and man-under-the-law and resolves the paradoxes they pose.

In The Robertson Lectures, which Niebuhr delivered in 1960 at The University of Glasgow and which were later published as *The Responsible Self*, Niebuhr analyzed a third symbol of moral existence: that of “man-the-responder.” This symbol found articulation in Niebuhr’s day in the modern studies of biology, sociology, history and psychology, all of which

¹⁶Ibid., 48.

¹⁷Ibid., 52.

¹⁸See Niebuhr’s discussion of the deontological “paradox of law and gospel” and the teleological “paradox of vision and image.” Ibid., 136.

“have taught us to regard ourselves as beings in the midst of a field of natural and social forces, acted upon and reacting, attracted and repelling”¹⁹ In The Robertson Lectures, Niebuhr showed that the symbol of man-the-responder meets the above-mentioned criteria. It incorporates the insights of the teleological and deontological interpretations of life as well as resolves the paradoxes arising from each.

Moreover, Niebuhr argued that the symbol of the dialogical human being accounts for responses to *every* kind of action upon human agents. From the perspective of this symbol, teleological and deontological approaches are to be interpreted as responses to two kinds of actions upon us: ideals and commandments. Human beings, however, respond to a variety of kinds of actions, not all of which fall into these two categories. In this sense, Niebuhr hypothesized that responsibility could serve as a root-metaphor for all moral activity.²⁰ Responsibility is a root metaphor in that all moral activity has dialogical form. Moral action is response to action upon us as well as anticipation of further response to our action. Before the responsible self asks, “What shall I do,” she asks, “What is going on?” This is a question that precedes even the first question required by the teleological symbol, “What is my goal” and by the deontological symbol, “What is the law?” The responsible self finds the fitting response only after she has interpreted the total interaction in which she is involved.

The symbol of man-the-responder resonates with the way in which human beings experience life. More than the teleological and deontological symbols, the symbol of man-the-

¹⁹Ibid., 56.

²⁰Niebuhr understood moral action as being response to interpreted action upon us. He wrote: “We do not, however, call it the action of a self or moral action unless it is response to interpreted action upon us. All actions that go on within the sphere of our bodies, from heartbeats to knee jerks, are doubtless also reactions, but they do not fall within the domain of self-actions if they are not accompanied and infused, as it were, with interpretation.” Ibid., 61.

responder resonates deeply with the moral life in two ways. First, by interpreting moral existence as consisting of responses to every kind of action upon the self, this approach makes room for the experience of simultaneous participation in diverse kinds of interactions.²¹ Niebuhr recognized the human situation: it is not the case that the self is simply responding to more than one action at a time, but rather it is the case that she is responding to various systems of actions in his/her environment.

Interpreting the Christian experience of sin with the aid of the symbol of the responsible self, Niebuhr wrote:

I see my human condition, my condition in selfhood rather, and that of my companions, as one of internal division and conflict because though I am one and though they are one in themselves, yet I and they are surrounded by many agencies, many systems of actions upon the self; these are diverse from each other, and to their actions the self makes unreconciled, ununified responses.²²

The problem, as Niebuhr saw it, is that the systems of actions can and, more often than not, do remain incoherent for the self. When this is the case, even if the self's actions within a given system, or total interaction, are coherent, the self remains divided. This lack of integrity characterizing the self is the fallen condition that theological ethics must address.²³ With the aid of the dialogical symbol, Niebuhr interpreted sin as having the form of polytheism, faith in multiple authorities, each reigning in domains independent of each other.

²¹For a recent study of participation as a “root metaphor,” or hermeneutical principle for integrating the whole of the self's life, see essay by H. Richard Niebuhr's student James M. Gustafson, “Participation: A Religious Worldview,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 44, no. 1 (2016): 148-75. In it, Gustafson explores “the meaning of ‘participation’ from the perspective of human conscious or unconscious actual participation in, and response to, the ordering of creation by God.” *Ibid.*, 148.

²²H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 137.

²³See Gustafson's remarks on Niebuhr's understanding of his task as a theological ethicist. Theological ethics helps the self to achieve integrity as an indirect consequence of its main task, which is to clarify the self's self-understanding through analyzing the patterns of his/her moral existence. *Ibid.*, 16.

The second way in which the symbol of the responsible self resonates so deeply with human experience that it qualifies as a root-metaphor is by its capacity to account for the self's responsiveness to that which is ultimate for her. Niebuhr understood the self's relation to that which is ultimate for her to be a religious matter.²⁴ According to Niebuhr, there is nothing more ultimate to the self than the act by which the self exists at all and exists as a unique self in a particular time and place, shaped by a particular history and social context. Whenever the self considers this action by which she exists, she becomes aware of a passive, receptive, dependent, quality of life. When Niebuhr described the self's awareness of the radical action by which the self exists, he wrote, ". . . it seems truer to say that I am being lived than that I live."²⁵ The self's existentially absolute dependence upon some prior radical action is inescapable.

Human beings respond in a variety of ways to this ultimate action upon them. According to Niebuhr, the most common response is, for whatever reason, to ignore the absolute dependence of the self.²⁶ Niebuhr observed such a response in the ways people speak and write about the self, not as an "I," but rather as "a man," "a rational creature," "a Christian," "an American," "a member of Western culture," "as an organization man," or as part of some other system of ideas.²⁷ Such a self, Niebuhr wrote, "responds in all its action not to the act by which it is a self but to the action by which the group of bodies or of minds or of emotions exists."²⁸ In

²⁴ Ibid., 109.

²⁵Ibid., 114.

²⁶Niebuhr wrote: "Because of the uniqueness of the radical act by which I am – the act, let us say, of fate; because there seems to be nothing that I can do about it; because it is painful to think of the absolute dependence in which I have been established; or for a score of other reasons, my usual reaction to that act is to try to forget it." Ibid., 115.

²⁷Ibid., 116.

²⁸Ibid.

this mode of response the self tends to understand itself in the third person encountered by less radical others. Niebuhr observed a second type of response, one which acknowledges the radical dependence of the self's existence. This response defines wisdom as the recognition of the act by which the self exists and as disciplined adherence to a strategy that combats the self's desire to be a self. Niebuhr detected in both kinds of responses an underlying distrust or suspicion of that power by which the self exists.

Niebuhr identified a third kind of response to the radical act of existence. It is a trust, a confidence, in the power and the act by which the self and all other beings exist. Niebuhr never exclusively correlated this confidence with Christian interpretations of the self's existence. Given his conviction in the sovereignty of God, Niebuhr was careful to maintain the possibility for non-Christians also to have positive existential attitudes. He knew persons who, though not Christian, genuinely exhibited trusting orientations toward life. Furthermore, he recognized strands of Christian tradition embodying existential attitudes of distrust more than trust. Nevertheless, Niebuhr spoke of this trust from the perspective of a Christian who interprets life with the help of Christian symbols, the necessary symbol being the symbol of Jesus Christ.²⁹ For the Christian, Niebuhr wrote,

Jesus Christ is the symbolic figure without which the Christian can no longer imagine, or know, or believe in the Determiner of Destiny, or the final end, or the

²⁹Contemplating the centrality and adequacy of the symbol of Christ for Christians, Niebuhr concluded the following: "The situation of Christians then seems to be this: they cannot understand themselves or direct their actions or give form to their conduct without the use of the symbol Jesus Christ, but with the aid of that symbol only they never succeed in understanding themselves and their values or in giving shape to their conduct. . . . In our time the question of the general symbols we must employ for the understanding of our existence as agents seems as acute as the question about the Christian symbol itself. Man's moral self-understanding is full of problems. Hence when we ask whether a new general symbolic form is arising in our culture, namely the root-metaphor of responsibility, we are asking a double question. Are we finding a new symbolic form through which to understand Jesus Christ as well as a new form through which to understand ourselves, and so a new form in which to understand ourselves in our relation to Christ?" H. Richard Niebuhr, "Metaphors and Morals," 159.

ultimate source, or the last environment to which he is related in all his relations, though he stops short of identifying symbol and actuality.”³⁰

Niebuhr understood the story of Jesus Christ – his birth, life, teachings, death and resurrection – as expressing complete trust and confidence in the source of life and in life itself. On the basis of this interpretation of Jesus Christ, Niebuhr interpreted Christianity as having an existentially life-affirming orientation.

The fundamental existential orientation toward that which is ultimate is what Niebuhr understood to be faith. Following Luther, Niebuhr identified faith as an existential trust or distrust. Niebuhr wrote:

Faith is the attitude of the self in its existence toward all the existences that surround it, as beings to be relied upon or to be suspected. It is the attitude that appears in all the wariness and confidence of life as it moves about among the living. It is fundamentally trust or distrust in being itself.³¹

According to Niebuhr’s analysis, all responses to this radical act of existence could be parsed into one or the other, trust or distrust. What is important to note here is that Niebuhr, drawing on Luther, conceived of faith fundamentally in terms of the emotions.

The Emotional Nature of Faith

Like many of his colleagues, Niebuhr turned back to the “Great Tradition” in order to retrieve the insights of Edwards, Pascal, Luther, Calvin, Augustine, and Thomas and to re-appropriate them into efforts to reform the church’s relation to culture.³² Given that the church is a historical community of faith, Niebuhr spoke about the necessity of continual reform,

³⁰Ibid., 155.

³¹Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 118.

³²H. Richard Niebuhr, “Reformation: Continuing Imperative,” 249.

which he understood as repentance, or “metanoia.” In a lecture entitled “Toward New Symbols,” Niebuhr attributed Martin Luther’s success in reforming and revitalizing every aspect of the church to the intensely personal, emotional quality of his faith in God.³³ Niebuhr thought that, without having been engaged in such an intensely personal and emotional relationship with God and the realities of his day, Martin Luther could not have reformed the religious symbols of his day as comprehensively as he had done. Niebuhr came to believe that an appreciation for the emotional nature of human existence was absolutely essential for the possibility of generating fresh symbols for religious faith.

Although Niebuhr never tried to specify the form that future reformation should take, he did recommend to a younger generation of theologians that they seek guidance for their work in the thought of Jonathan Edwards. In *The Cole Lectures*, delivered late in his career, Niebuhr even admitted that were he a younger scholar, he would follow in Edwards’ footsteps:

For myself, who am at the end rather than at the beginning of my work in theology, I can only say that were I at the beginning – and I am thinking of these lectures somewhat as the old man’s bequest to the young theologians – I can only say that were I at the beginning I should want to follow in Edwards’ footsteps more, and undertake an exploration of the land of the emotions with certain hypotheses almost amounting to convictions to be proved or disproved, refined or extended – the hypothesis that contrary to prevalent opinion about the emotions they put us into touch with what is reliable, firm, real, enduring in ways that are inaccessible to the conceptual and spectator reason.³⁴

³³In “Toward New Symbols,” Niebuhr writes: “Fundamentally I believe that we can expect it [grand renewal of symbolic system] from no other kind of source than from the kind represented in Luther’s experience. He made all things new in his day. He could translate the Gospel into the vulgar tongue of his day. He found freshly minted parables. He brought forth new symbols because he wrestled with, he encountered, he experienced, he heard, he searched out himself-before-God and God-before-himself. What he communicated was not the word of God in the Scriptures but the word that he had heard God speaking to him, Martin Luther, in the Scriptures. It was not the word that anyone could hear but which came to the ears of an agonized listener, of one who was fighting for his life, who was crying for help and heard the distant answer of the helper.” H. Richard Niebuhr, “Toward New Symbols,” *The Cole Lectures*, in *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings*, ed. William Stacy Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 32-3.

³⁴H. Richard Niebuhr, “Toward the Recovery of Feeling,” *The Cole Lectures*, in *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings*, ed. William Stacy Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 48.

Theologians, Edwards thought, have a duty to communicate not only conceptual truths, but also emotional truths, for “true religion, in great part, consists in the affections.”³⁵ Niebuhr found in Edwards’ thought a deep appreciation for the emotional nature of religion as well as a defense of the importance of appealing to the emotions in the use of symbols.³⁶

By discerning what he himself found of value and appropriated from Edwards, we can see that Niebuhr tried to lay a foundation for future reform – reform that would powerfully invigorate Christian faith. Niebuhrian scholarship has already recognized the significance of Jonathan Edwards’ moral theology on Niebuhr’s thought. It not only has detected strong conceptual similarities, but also in some instances has traced a line of influence from Edwards to

Taking his father’s retrieval of Edwards’s interest in the emotions and affections as a point of departure, Richard R. Niebuhr provides a definition of the affections, which H. Richard Niebuhr himself did not offer, but would nevertheless be consistent with H. Richard Niebuhr’s thought. An affection is “the basic and all-including frame of mind that gives to the whole of personal existence its determinate quality, color, and tone. An affection, so conceived, is not a specific response to a stimulus or object, although a particular object may elicit in us a consciousness of the pervasive tone of our existence. Rather, it tempers the rapid succession of stimulæ and responses in personal existence and superimposes on them a degree of quality and color.” See Richard R. Niebuhr, *Experiential Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1972), 44-5. Richard R. Niebuhr drew a distinction between affections and passions similar to that of Edwards: whereas an affection qualifies all of the self’s perceiving and thinking, a passion refers to attractions or repulsions of the self toward something particular in his or her environment. Such a distinction is at work in H. Richard Niebuhr’s discussion of faith as trust or distrust in the principle of being and how trust or distrust qualifies all the self’s interpretations of the self’s interactions with the world.

³⁵H. Richard Niebuhr, “Toward the Recovery of Feeling,” 49, citing Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith, vol. 2, *Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 99. In this same essay, Niebuhr sounds like Edwards when he writes: “. . . what we suffer from in our religion is not really the impoverishment of religious emotions only but rather our failure to understand that religion is primarily an affair of emotion and of all the emotions of man. . . .” Ibid., 40. In this essay, H. Richard Niebuhr seems to be using the terms “emotion” and “feeling” less technically and more generally, though certainly, Niebuhr was informed by Edwards’s more precise definition of “affections” as distinguishable from “passions.” See footnote above.

³⁶In “Toward New Symbols,” Niebuhr writes: “In our own American theology Horace Bushnell with his essay on language and Jonathan Edwards before him with his reflections on the importance of images had this country of symbols in view. . . .” H. Richard Niebuhr, “Toward New Symbols,” 20.

Niebuhr.³⁷ The two men shared a conviction in the concept of divine sovereignty³⁸ -- the idea that God is acting at every moment and in every aspect of the world, or as Niebuhr would say, “God is acting in all actions upon you.”³⁹ Scholarship has related Niebuhr’s concept of God as the “ultimate environment”⁴⁰ to Edwards’ concept of God as the system of being and Niebuhr’s relational theory of value to Edwards’ theology of being-in-relation.⁴¹ With regard to his theory of value, Niebuhr himself acknowledged his indebtedness to Edwards: “Philosophically it is more indebted to G. H. Mead than to Aristotle; theologically, it is closer, I believe, to Jonathan Edwards (‘consent of being to being’) than to Thomas Aquinas.”⁴² What this scholarship has yet to address fully is Niebuhr’s appropriation of Edwards’ insight into the significance of emotions in religious experience,⁴³ Edwards’ perception of the symbolic nature of the world, and Edwards’ conception of God as a being with a heart. Niebuhr thought that these Edwardsean insights

³⁷On this issue, Sandon writes: “It is the conclusion of this author that Libertus A. Hoedemaker is incorrect in his judgment that ‘no direct line of influence and dependence can be established between the two [Edwards and Niebuhr], and it is wrong to assume that Niebuhr derived the cornerstones of his theological thought from Edwards.’ The lines of influence and dependence are both implicitly demonstrable and they are explicitly acknowledged by Niebuhr.” Leo Sandon, Jr., “Jonathan Edwards and H. Richard Niebuhr,” *Religious Studies* 12, no. 1 (March 1976): 114-5. Sandon cites here Libertus Arend Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Boston Pilgrim Press, 1970), 33.

³⁸Sandon, 112. See also Sydney E. Ahlstrom, “H. Richard Niebuhr’s Place in American Thought,” *Christianity and Crisis*, 23 (1963): 215.

³⁹H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 126.

⁴⁰H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Ethical Crisis,” *Universitas: A Journal of Religion and the University* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1964): 48.

⁴¹Leo Sandon, Jr., “Jonathan Edwards and H. Richard Niebuhr,” 112.

⁴²Gustafson refers to this in his Introduction to *The Responsible Self*, 10.

⁴³See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings*, xxii. In his Introduction William Stacy Johnson recognizes the influence of Edwards’ theology on the whole of Niebuhr’s theological vision, including Niebuhr’s interest in the religious affections. It should be noted, however, that although Niebuhrian scholarship has recognized Niebuhr’s appreciation for Edwards’ pioneering ventures into the land of the emotions, no major study of the role of the emotions in Niebuhr’s thought has yet been made.

could help to lay the foundation for a much-needed re-symbolization of faith, and once we have examined Niebuhr's understanding of faith from an aesthetic perspective, we will be able to see the progress that Niebuhr himself made in laying this foundation.

While Niebuhr observed a growing interest in the role of the emotions in various areas of theology, he recognized the need for "some unified, systematic inquiry" that would relate the work done in these fields. Theology, Niebuhr asserted, should not only value, but also seek to understand comprehensively the role of the emotions in human life.⁴⁴ Clearly, Niebuhr thought that Edwards could guide theologians in this endeavor.⁴⁵ As Harold Peter Simonson's study of the "religious affections" in Edwards' thought has demonstrated, Edwards' defense of the emotions relates integrally to his entire theology, including his interpretation of Calvinist doctrine as well as his moral theology, so much so that Simonson calls him a "theologian of the heart."⁴⁶ Niebuhr understood an appreciation of the emotions to pervade Edwards's moral theology. Given that Niebuhr shared this appreciation for the emotions in religious and moral life, we will pursue an exegesis of Niebuhr's thought in light of the background that Edwards provides.

Niebuhr discerned a hypothesis in Edwards' writings defending the emotions. In his own words, Niebuhr wrote: "Contrary to prevalent opinion about the emotions they put us into touch with what is reliable, firm, real, enduring in ways that are inaccessible to the conceptual and

⁴⁴H. Richard Niebuhr, "Toward the Recovery of Feeling," 48.

⁴⁵Niebuhr esteemed Edwards as "the great pioneer who ventured most competently and lovingly into that country [the emotions] which theology in general seems to have avoided." *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁶Harold P. Simonson, *Jonathan Edwards, Theologian of the Heart* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2009).

spectator reason.”⁴⁷ Nothing, Niebuhr thought, is more reliable, real, enduring, and ultimate than the principle of being itself. By defining faith as trust or distrust in that which is the ultimate object for the self, that is, the radical power of existence in general and the self’s unique existence in particular, Niebuhr established the priority of the emotions for any religious foundation. Faith, in his view, is first and foremost an emotional response to the principle of being, and this emotional response precedes any intellectual conception of who the ultimate is.⁴⁸

Furthermore, by perceiving all patterns of the moral life as diverse manifestations of these emotional orientations, Niebuhr also established the emotions as foundational for the whole of moral life. According to Niebuhr, trust or distrust in being itself qualifies every moral act. The emotional response to “the radical action whereby I am I, and things are as they are”⁴⁹ qualifies every particular response to action upon the self. Niebuhr understood faith – trust or distrust in the principle of being – to be the ultimate context in which the self encounters, interprets, and responds to particular actions upon him/her. Just as the particular context of any given action qualifies the self’s interpretation of that action, the ultimate context of faith gives meaning to every action.

Interpreting an action upon the self involves not only reason, but also memories and feelings, about which the self is conscious and unconscious. Niebuhr wrote: “Such interpretation, it need scarcely be added, is not simply an affair of our conscious, and rational, mind but also of the deep memories that are buried within us, of feelings and intuitions that are

⁴⁷H. Richard Niebuhr, “Toward the Recovery of Feeling,” 48.

⁴⁸“So also it may be that love of God or enmity to God, hate to God, is prior to all articulation of our idea of who God is. And so with all our relations to his creatures.” Ibid.

⁴⁹H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 123.

only partly under our control.”⁵⁰ The emotions as well as the mind provide a larger context of meaning by relation to which the present act can become meaningful to the self. Without knowing the emotions involved in another person’s response to something, there is no way that one can understand fully the meaning of his response -- how it relates to that person’s larger picture, to his history and the future he anticipates. Imagine hearing a story that recounts only the actions and events of a plot, omitting the characters’ emotions. At the very least, the story would seem incoherent. It would not make sense. Emotions lend coherence to a plot, as dramatic as a plot might be. Ignorant of the emotions motivating the characters and clueless about the characters’ emotionally laden interpretations of events, one would have difficulty in making sense of the story and empathizing with its characters. Attention to emotions is necessary for the meaningful interpretation of events, whether the events involve oneself or others. Emotions, therefore, are not simply one of many conditions that qualify the self’s interpretation of action upon himself. They are indispensable to the process of interpretation.

Paying attention to the emotions at work not only helps us to interpret actions and events in a coherent way, but it also makes it possible for us to respond fittingly to actions upon us. From the perspective of the self who trusts in the principle of being, every action upon her is good. By identifying the principle of being with the principle of value, this perspective sees that “whatever is, is good, affirmed by the power of being, supported by it, intended to be good in relation to the ultimate center, no matter how unrighteous it is in relation to finite companions.”⁵¹ Interpreting all actions upon the self as actions in which the principle of being as the principle of

⁵⁰Ibid., 63.

⁵¹Ibid., 125.

value is at work, the self subjects all finite evaluations to, as Niebuhr described it, “the continuing and great correction.”⁵² All finite, or relative, evaluations, Niebuhr wrote,

will be made to fit into a total process producing good – not what is good for me (though my confidence accepts that as included), nor what is good for man (though that is also included), nor what is good for the development of life (though that also belongs in the picture), but what is good for being, for universal being, or for God, center and source of all existence.⁵³

When the self responds with distrust to the radical action whereby all things exist, the self eventually and unavoidably devotes herself to some finite thing as her center of value. The self, the church, the nation, humanity, or some other finite thing takes on absolute value. All henotheisms and polytheisms are forms of faith expressing distrust in the principle of being. They do not identify the principle of being with the principle of value. Within this context of faith, the self interprets every action upon herself either as a potential threat or as conducive to the existence and well-being of the self and the objects of self-love. As a result, defensiveness characterizes every response.⁵⁴

The Re-symbolization of Faith

The problem facing the church, as Niebuhr saw it, was that religious symbols had lost their vitality. In the second and third of The Cole Lectures, Niebuhr provided a discussion of why symbols had lost their vitality and what a symbolic renewal would require. Having become identified with the reality to which they referred, symbols no longer pointed beyond themselves to an actual reality, unique in all its detail.⁵⁵ As a result, they failed to facilitate communication

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid., 99.

⁵⁵H. Richard Niebuhr, “Toward New Symbols,” 24.

about the world of objects. Once the usages of symbols became conventional or dogmatic, their meaning became fixed and exclusive of other meanings. Whenever this happened, symbols failed to facilitate communication between human beings. Niebuhr wrote:

The symbol, the word, or sentence conveying to you an image or a concept, may be so conventional, so agreed upon between us that there are no more questions to be asked, that there is nothing more that needs to be said, between us, nothing more that needs to be done. When symbols are used dogmatically among men there is no communication, but only impartation.⁵⁶

Monotony of symbols resulted in monotony of interaction between human beings and their environment. At stake in the vitality of symbols is, therefore, the vitality of communication between subjects about a world of objects. Whenever symbols lose their vitality, this three-way communication breaks down.

Revitalization of a symbolic system requires, according to Niebuhr, repentance as well as a simultaneous recognition that while symbols are necessary, they lack ultimate reality. Without this recognition, symbols can become idols. Niebuhr described repentance with regard to symbols as the self's sorrow for lacking the proper words and the self's recognition that the symbols he or she employs, when speaking about a reality to another person, are perhaps overly provincial.⁵⁷ Attempts to communicate about divine reality only heighten this sense of limitation. Niebuhr described repentance as the first necessary step toward the revitalization of symbols.⁵⁸

⁵⁶Ibid., 26.

⁵⁷Ibid., 30. Niebuhr wrote: "Often while we are insisting that others should learn our language and that we fully know what we are talking about when we use our words, we yet remain unhappy for we sense that there is something provincial in our speech and something vague in our apprehension of the realities."

⁵⁸Ibid.

Despite the shortcomings in our ability to speak adequately about divine reality, symbols are, Niebuhr argued, nevertheless necessary. He wrote: “We must accept then the necessity of symbols while denying to them ultimate validity.”⁵⁹ Given his view that human beings are inherently social and symbolic creatures, Niebuhr maintained the necessity of symbols for communication about anything, especially communication about God. Like Edwards, Niebuhr understood God to be active in the world at every moment. According to Edwards’ typology, human beings need symbols, images, in order to discern the patterns of God working in the world. In fact, Edwards argued, God had ordained the symbolic use of the natural world for the purpose of divine communication.⁶⁰ Although Niebuhr would not have appropriated the typological theory that Edwards and Edwards’s contemporaries utilized, he built into his own theory of interpretation and ethics of responsibility the fundamental conviction that God is acting in every action upon us and that, therefore, every action upon the self must be interpreted through symbols as God’s action. The challenge for the responsible self is to perceive correctly the patterns of divine activity in the world. “Responsibility affirms,” he wrote, “God is acting in all actions upon you. So respond to all actions upon you as to respond to his action.”⁶¹

In the second of The Cole Lectures, “Toward New Symbols,” Niebuhr steered his discussion of symbols toward a third requirement. A truly “grand renewal” of symbols must, according to Niebuhr, go beyond simply meeting the two requirements already discussed; symbols must also originate from, be expressive of, and stir the emotions. Only those symbols

⁵⁹Ibid., 31.

⁶⁰Jonathan Edwards, “Types,” ed. Wallace E. Anderson, vol. 11, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 152.

⁶¹H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 126.

that arise from, express, and stir the emotions are able to facilitate the interpreter's participation in the reality to which the symbols refer and in which the symbols themselves participate.

In making this third point, Niebuhr drew fundamentally upon the insights of Edwards. Edwards perceived "an agreeableness and harmony" in the world.⁶² He believed that the order of the natural world reveals the divinely established principle of order by which God created and governs the world.⁶³ Edwards called this principle "consentaneity."⁶⁴ The principle of consentaneity functions similarly to Niebuhr's conception of the principle of value. By identifying the principle of being with the principle of value, Niebuhr was able to assert a universally unifying pattern underlying divine sovereignty. This universally unifying activity is love. The God who loves all creation is the center of value to which all beings are related and in relation to which all beings have value.

For Edwards, the criterion for being able to interpret properly the natural world of objects is the interpreter's participation in the principle of consentaneity. Only after receiving the gift of faith, which enables the heart to consent to, and thereby participate in, God's love, can the self interpret the natural world according to the principle of consentaneity. The sanctified self interprets every being within the universal context of a system of being-to-being unified by

⁶²Jonathan Edwards, "Images of Divine Things," no. 8, ed. Wallace E. Anderson, vol. 11, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

⁶³All natural objects and events symbolize this spiritual principle insofar as they participate in it. In his "Images or Shadows of Divine Things," Edwards interpreted a number of worldly objects and phenomena as demonstrating how God is at work in every event. In this work Edwards recorded, among other things, his interpretation of gravity. "The whole material universe," he wrote, "is preserved by gravity, or attraction, or the mutual tendency of all bodies to each other. One part of the universe is hereby made beneficial to another. . . . This is a type of love or charity in the spiritual world." Jonathan Edwards, *Images or Shadows of Divine Things*, ed. Perry Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), 79. Gravity, according to Edwards' interpretation, reveals the principle of consentaneity by which God created and continually orders the world.

⁶⁴Edwards, "Images of Divine Things," no. 8.

spiritual love. Without faith the self interprets the world of objects according to the natural principle of self-love. For Niebuhr, too, the self's responsible interpretation of the beings and actions she encounters depends upon her emotional participation in the reality to which the symbols point and in which they participate. In *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, Niebuhr explained how the form of a person's faith as trust in the principle of value qualifies his/her interpretations of the world. Niebuhr described radical monotheism as "the confidence that whatever is, is good, because it exists as one thing among the many which all have their origin and their being in the One – the principle of being which is also the principle of value."⁶⁵

Compared to henotheistic and polytheistic forms of faith, radical monotheism is radical precisely because it perceives the universality of the ultimate context in which all interpretations take place. Niebuhr's interpretation of the love commandment from the perspective of each form of faith highlights this radical character.

Love of the neighbor is required in every morality formed by a faith; but in polytheistic faith the neighbor is defined as the one who is near me in my interest group, *when* he is near me in that passing association. In henotheistic social faith my neighbor is my fellow in the closed society. Hence in both instances the counterpart of the law of neighbor-love is the requirement to hate the enemy. But in radical monotheism my neighbor is my companion in being; though he is my enemy in some less than universal context the requirement is to love him. To give to everyone his due is required in every context; but what is due to him depends on the relation in which he is known to stand.⁶⁶

The self who trusts in a God whose love is constantly unifying the world participates, through faith, in the divine activity of integration. Trusting in God, she is confident in God's universal cause, and being loyal to God, she is loyal to God's universal cause. Radical monotheistic faith

⁶⁵H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1960), 32.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 34.

possesses integrative power that extends beyond and prophetically critiques the polytheistic and henotheistic tendencies toward self-love.

Observing the henotheism and polytheism so prevalent in society, Niebuhr recognized the urgent need to revitalize symbols so that they would orient our attention beyond the separate objects of self-love to the unifying activity of God in the world. Even the symbols used by the church had become flattened and narrowed in scope, thereby losing their capacity to reveal and engage people in God's integrating activity in the world.

Jesus Christ: The Christian Revelatory Symbol

Niebuhr understood that while all symbols guide and shape our interpretations of reality to some extent, not all symbols have the power to integrate the whole of reality. Some symbols have the capacity to illuminate, make sense of, and integrate more of reality, and others less. The former are, according to Niebuhr, revelatory.

For Christians, Jesus Christ is the primary symbolic form “with the aid of which men tell each other what life and death, God and man, are *like*; but even more he is a form which they employ as an a priori, an image, a scheme or pattern in the mind which gives form and meaning to their experience.”⁶⁷ Like all symbols, the symbol of Jesus Christ both expresses and shapes experience.⁶⁸ Distinctive from all other symbols for Christians, however, Jesus Christ is the symbol through which all things can make sense. Therein lies the revelatory power of Jesus Christ for Christians.

⁶⁷H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 154.

⁶⁸For a discussion of how Niebuhr understood symbols to function, see Jerry A. Irish, *The Religious Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 49-56.

Revelation, as Niebuhr defined it, is “that special occasion which provides us with an image by means of which all the occasions of personal and common life become intelligible.”⁶⁹ Through the means of an image, a concept, or a symbol, revelation has illuminating power. Niebuhr understood this in two ways. First, a revelatory event brings to light all that has happened in one’s personal and communal history. In other words, it calls to a person’s memory even those events that he has forgotten or tried to keep buried. Second, a revelatory event is illuminating in that it makes the past intelligible. Whatever was forgotten, neglected, or buried – whatever failed to make sense before – through revelation makes sense. In *The Meaning of Revelation*, Niebuhr wrote:

Our buried pasts are mighty; the ghosts of our fathers and of the selves that we have been haunt our days and nights though we refuse to acknowledge their presence. The revelatory event resurrects this buried past. It demands and permits that we bring into the light of attention our betrayals and denials, our follies and sins. There is nothing in our lives, in our autobiographies and our social histories, that does not fit in.”⁷⁰

Niebuhr explained that persons often try to forget those parts of their past because they cannot make sense of them in light of the symbols, concepts, or images they are using to interpret their lives. Employing concepts that are too narrow, persons will be unable to make sense of the entirety of their lives. Idolatrous concepts may have the power to facilitate integration to a limited extent, but not farther than that.

Besides illuminating one’s personal and communal history, revelation, according to Niebuhr, has an additional function. It is an occasion in which the past of those who are outside

⁶⁹H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962), 109.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 114.

one's communal history can be appropriated to create a common past.⁷¹ Niebuhr wrote:

To Christians the revelatory moment is not only something they can all remember as having happened in their common past, be they Hebrew or Greeks, slaves or free, Europeans or Africans or Americans or Asiatics, medieval men or modern. It becomes an occasion for appropriating as their own the past of all human groups.⁷²

A truly revelatory event requires a concept, image, or pattern through which the histories of persons in all times and places can be integrated into a common history. This process of integration, Niebuhr recognized, is much more challenging than the integration that takes place in one's personal and communal histories. It requires a concept or symbol that can illuminate and integrate the whole of human history.

In his approach to non-Christian worldviews and societies, Niebuhr was modest and open. He was modest probably not only because he recognized his own limited exposure to worldviews and societies different from his own, but also because of his theological ethical commitments. Niebuhr believed that defensiveness was the existential root of all idolatry and social violence. Existential trust and confidence in God, in contrast, expressed itself in an open orientation toward the whole of creation and all of humanity. As a Christian moral philosopher, Niebuhr sought to test whether or not the symbols of the Christian faith had such revelatory power that they would express and arouse the existential emotions of trust and faith, enabling Christians to be repentant, non-defensive, and open to persons of religions and cultures different from their own.⁷³

⁷¹Ibid., 115.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³H. Richard Niebuhr, "Metaphors and Morals," chap. in *The Responsible Self*, 150.

It is clear from what he wrote in his essay “Responsibility and Christ” that Niebuhr believed that the symbol of Jesus Christ imbued Christians with such confidence in the world. Not only does Jesus Christ as a symbol exhibit complete trust and confidence in the source of all life, but he also evokes in humanity such an orientation toward God. Making this point, Niebuhr wrote:

But now for Christians Jesus Christ appears not only as the symbol of an ethos in which the ultimate response to the inscrutable power in all things is one of trust. He is also the one who accomplishes in them this strange miracle, that he makes them suspicious of their deep suspicion of the Determiner of Destiny. He turns their reasoning around so that they do not begin with the premise of God’s indifference but of his affirmation of the creature, so that the *Gestalt* which they bring to their experiences of suffering as well as of joy, of death as well as of life, is the *Gestalt*, the symbolic form, of grace.⁷⁴

Imbued with this kind of trust in God and his activity in the world, Christians undergo a transformation in their own orientation toward the world itself. The world becomes not an environment from which they need to defend themselves, but rather an environment created and loved by God and in which God is active. For Christians Jesus Christ is the symbol by which the world, including the universal community, is seen not under suspicion, but rather through the lens of God’s beneficence and grace.

What Makes a Symbol Revelatory?

In *The Meaning of Revelation*, Niebuhr investigated the nature of revelation. His extensive investigation culminated in this conclusion:

The most important fact about the whole approach to revelation to which we are committed by the acceptance of our existential situation, of the point of view of faith living in history, is that we must think and speak in terms of persons. In our history we deal with selves, not with concepts. Our universals here are not eternal objects ingredient in events but eternal persons active in particular occasions; our axioms in this participating knowledge are not self-evident convictions about the

⁷⁴H. Richard Niebuhr, “Responsibility and Christ,” chap. in *The Responsible Self*, 177.

relations of such objects but certainties about fundamental, indestructible relations between persons. We need therefore, to put our question in the following form, “What persons do we meet in the revelatory event and what convictions about personal relations become our established principles in its presence?”⁷⁵

In order for a symbol to be revelatory it must, Niebuhr thought, disclose a personalist image of God. Like Edwards, who conceived of God as a being with a heart,⁷⁶ Niebuhr insisted upon relating to God through the symbol of a person.

Moreover, Niebuhr insisted, God must be conceived of and related to in the second person. “We acknowledge revelation by no third person proposition,⁷⁷ such as that there is a God, but only in the direct confession of the heart, ‘Thou art my God.’”⁷⁸ For Niebuhr the experience of revelation was necessarily profoundly interpersonal. Only an interpersonal relationship with God would facilitate the reasoning work of the heart from which the interpersonal, emotional attitudes of trust, loyalty, and non-defensiveness would originate.⁷⁹

⁷⁵H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 143.

⁷⁶See Jonathan Edwards’s argument that human beings are moral beings by virtue of being created with hearts. Endowed with hearts, human beings resemble God, who also is a being with a heart. Jonathan Edwards, “Concerning the End for Which God Created the World,” in *Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey, vol. 8, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 472-3.

⁷⁷In *Faith on Earth*, Niebuhr drew on the insights of the Reformers who were concerned to differentiate carefully between expressions of dead and living faith. Whereas Luther discerned dead faith in propositions *about* God, Calvin identified dead faith in the usage of third-person pronouns. Quoting Calvin, Niebuhr wrote, “‘The principal hinge on which faith turns,’ he writes, ‘is this – that we must not consider the promises of mercy, which the Lord offers, as true not only to others, and not to ourselves; but rather make them our own, by embracing them in our hearts. . . . In short, no man is truly a believer, unless he be firmly persuaded, that God is a propitious and benevolent Father to him.’” H. Richard Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 9-10.

⁷⁸H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 154.

⁷⁹Chapter Four provided a discussion on Niebuhr’s conception of faith as trust in and loyalty to God. Niebuhr established the priority of emotions for any religious foundation. Faith, in his view, is originally an emotional response to the fact of existence and to the person of God who is the source of all existence, and this emotional response precedes temporally any intellectual conception of who God is. Furthermore, by perceiving all patterns of the moral life as diverse manifestations of these emotional orientations, Niebuhr also established the emotions as foundational for the whole of the moral life.

Niebuhr understood Jesus Christ to be the person through whom human beings could relate to God and others in the second person.⁸⁰ In all that he said and did, Jesus Christ pointed beyond himself. In *Christ and Culture* Niebuhr wrote about the double movement of Jesus Christ by which he was “a single person wholly directed as man toward God and wholly directed in his unity with the Father toward men.”⁸¹ The image of Jesus Christ that Niebuhr thought best captured this double movement was the image of Jesus as the Son of God.⁸² “The Son,” Niebuhr explained in *Faith on Earth*, “reveals himself as Son in his moral, personal character. By his trust in the Transcendent Source of Being, by his loyalty to all to whom he trusts the Father to be loyal, by his faithfulness to God he makes himself known to us as one who has the character of a Son.”⁸³ Evoking emotions of trust and confidence, Jesus Christ directs Christians toward a God whom they too can address as “Father” in the second person.

⁸⁰In “The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church,” Niebuhr explained the interdependence of three unitarianisms that has characterized the church. With regard to the interdependence between a Unitarianism of God the Creator and a Unitarianism of Jesus Christ, Niebuhr wrote: “The religion of the Creator appears to be a straightforward faith in the goodness as well as power of the author of nature. Looking to science and philosophy as the handmaidens of religion, it bases itself on rational reflections about the implications of nature’s being and order. There must be one God, a first cause, a purpose and designer; to him man owes honor and on him man is dependent. But in ancient and modern times, particularly in modern, the question arises whether indeed there is any unambiguous evidence that the power or reality declared in the invisible things of creation is indeed personal, so that it can be addressed, and whether it or he is good. Facing these questions, the Unitarianism of the Creator discovers that it is dependent not simply on reason but also on the faith of Jesus Christ and that the God it worships is after all not simply the God of nature but the Father of Jesus Christ.” H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church,” in *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings*, ed. William Stacy Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 58-9.

⁸¹H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1951), 29.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 28.

⁸³H. Richard Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth*, 99-100.

A Pragmatic Approach to a Personalist⁸⁴ Symbol of God

Chapter Two concluded with a discussion to which we must now return. In writing *A Common Faith*, John Dewey set out to liberate religious experience from the burden of religion – those institutions, practices, beliefs, and dogma – which he perceived to be preventing ordinary experiences from becoming religious experiences. Dewey considered a personalist conception of God to be a traditional trait of religion that, for the sake of liberating religious experience, needed to be jettisoned. Rejecting any conception of God as a supernatural Being or a personality, Dewey instead conceived of God as a function, that is, “the unity of all ideal ends arousing us to desire and actions.” He even felt uncomfortable using the term “God” for this function. As Chapter Two explained, the reasons for which Dewey rejected a personalist conception of God were moral. For both Dewey and Niebuhr, what was at stake in the question of how best to imagine the object of religious experience was the question of what image or concept would be most conducive to the moral process of integration to which both men were intellectually committed. The disagreement between the two men puts into sharper relief this shared moral commitment as well as the pragmatic approach taken by both men. As this discussion will show, the personalist conception of God, upon which Niebuhr insisted and which Dewey rejected, would advance the aesthetic and moral theories of both men.

⁸⁴It is not the intention of this dissertation to identify either John Dewey or H. Richard Niebuhr in a stream of philosophical or theological personalism. Determining the extent to which Dewey and Niebuhr identified themselves with personalist thought would go beyond the bounds of this dissertation. Rather, this dissertation’s use of the term “personalist” with regard to their symbolic conception of God is grounded in observations of the ways they incorporate personalist values, such as positing ultimate reality in terms of personhood, whether human or divine, emphasizing the relational essence of persons, and safeguarding against dehumanizing impersonalist modes of thought. See Edward N. Zalta, ed. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “personalism,” by Thomas D. Williams and Jan Olof Bengtsson, accessed on May 5, 2019 at <https://plato.stanford.edu/search/searcher.py?query=personalism>.

To make this argument, it is important to note the pertinent places where Dewey and Niebuhr seem to be in agreement. First, while using different phrases or terms, both men thought that the object of religious experience, or monotheistic faith, was the universe, the ultimate environment, the universal community, the One beyond the many, or that to which all things are connected. Second, Dewey's understanding that religious experience occurs whenever the ultimate environment, as an object of the imagination, penetrates and unifies life is comparable to Niebuhr's conception of revelation as taking place when we encounter a symbol that compels us to seek unity not only of our own history, but more comprehensively of the world. Third, both Dewey and Niebuhr understood emotions to play an indispensable role in this unifying process. Whereas Dewey wrote about the general change *of* will, as opposed to a specific change *in* will, that takes place in religious experience, Niebuhr wrote about the fundamental existential emotions of trust and confidence that reorient the self's entire interpretation of reality. Finally, Dewey and Niebuhr both recognized that our conceptions of God – in this case, functionalist and personalist – have pragmatic, moral consequences.

For both men, the pragmatic, moral consequences of how we conceive of God were of greatest concern. Like Edwards, both men understood that religious or revelatory experiences motivated persons to action. More than Edwards, however, Dewey and Niebuhr recognized the need to discriminate among conceptions of God, given that the concepts we use have consequences upon our spheres of loyalty. Perhaps one of the strongest reasons for which Dewey opposed a personalist conception of God was his concern that a personalist conception of God would limit the inclusivity of that sphere. Inclusivity, for Dewey, was a criterion for religious experience. On this point Niebuhr would have been in agreement with Dewey. Like Dewey, Niebuhr conceived of God as the universe. Furthermore, like Dewey, Niebuhr

understood the moral risks involved in employing personal images of God in our thinking. Practical reasoning, Niebuhr recognized, could be vulnerable to what he called “evil imaginations of the heart.”⁸⁵ By “evil imaginations of the heart,” Niebuhr meant those concepts or symbols that are false insofar as their employment causes division and disintegration rather than unity and integration. Giving examples from history, he writes:

Again the image of the depraved race, now in the form of a Semitic, now of a Germanic, now of a Negro, now of a Japanese people, is used for the interpretation of social and individual sorrow. These are evil imaginations, resulting in continued conflict, in the impoverishment and destruction of selves both as agents and as sufferers.⁸⁶

What is necessary, Niebuhr argued, was not the jettisoning of personalist images altogether, but rather discriminating pragmatically among the personalist images that might be used in our thinking. On this point Niebuhr wrote:

The question which is relevant for the life of the self among selves is not whether personal images should be employed but only what personal images are right and adequate and which are evil imaginations of the heart. Evil imaginations in this realm are shown to be evil by their consequences to selves and communities just as erroneous concepts and hypotheses in external knowledge are shown to be fallacious by their results.⁸⁷

Taking a pragmatic approach⁸⁸ to the question of which religious symbols have revelatory power, Niebuhr came to the conclusion that for the sake of greater inclusivity, it is necessary to imagine God as a person, as a being with a heart, whose loyalty extends to all of humanity.

⁸⁵H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 99-100.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 100.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 99-100.

⁸⁸The pragmatic approach of Niebuhr is not dissimilar from the experimental approach of Edwards in which actualized and visible signs were considered the best evidence to determine the true nature of an affection.

Near the end of his chapter on “Faith and Its Object” in *A Common Faith*, Dewey himself seems to have begun to note the pragmatic need for a personalist conception of God. Explaining his decision in the end to call the object of religious experience “God,”⁸⁹ Dewey gave the reason that a religious attitude requires a sense of support and confidence in the universe rather than that of despair and defiance toward the universe. In order to combat the possibility that human beings might orient themselves toward their environment as though their environment were at worst hostile and at best indifferent to their existence, Dewey conceded that it could be beneficial to consider employing images for the object of faith other than a functionalist image.⁹⁰ Like Niebuhr, Dewey recognized that the way we conceive of the object of religion does have moral consequences and thus requires discrimination. “In any case,” Dewey wrote, “whatever the name, the meaning is selective. . . . It selects those factors in existence that generate and support our idea of good as an end to be striven for. It excludes a multitude of forces that at any given time are irrelevant to this function.”⁹¹

Dewey’s decision to call the object of religious experience “God” was motivated by pragmatic concerns. Calling for a personalist conception of God, Niebuhr was able to advance the pragmatic moral reasoning that both men shared. Niebuhr insisted upon a personalist conception of God precisely because he understood that only a personalist conception of God could elicit the emotions of trust and confidence that are necessary for the moral processes of

⁸⁹John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), 53.

⁹⁰“Use of the words ‘God’ or ‘divine’ to convey the union of actual with ideal may protect man from a sense of isolation and from consequent despair or defiance.” Ibid.

⁹¹Ibid.

integration.⁹²

An Aesthetic Approach to Faith

In this chapter, by interpreting H. Richard Niebuhr's thought against the background of both John Dewey and Jonathan Edwards, both highly aesthetic thinkers, I have shown the thoroughly aesthetic nature of Niebuhr's understanding of faith and the moral life. Niebuhr was profoundly impressed by Edwards's insistence on envisioning God as "the universe," as "one unified interdependent system of being" in which all things are in relation to all things and in which "everything participates in and is symbolic of larger meanings."⁹³ Like Edwards, Niebuhr became convinced that faith was to be conceived fundamentally in terms of the emotions – emotions that put us in touch with and engage our heart-felt participation in the universal system of being. For a person who trusts God and relates to God interpersonally, the world is seen as benevolent and not threatening. Like Edwards, who saw a principle of consentaneity underlying the interconnectedness of the world, and Dewey, who saw in the emotions the power to unify the form of any experience, Niebuhr understood the indispensable role of the emotions in forming a life of integrity. As keenly as artists, Niebuhr recognized the intimate connection between the emotions and symbols, and encouraging the rapprochement between art and theology, he recognized the vital significance of symbols for theology and the moral life. Like Dewey, Niebuhr encouraged us to pay discriminating attention to symbols and how they function in our lives, but rather than discarding religious symbols, Niebuhr was more willing than Dewey to

⁹²Discussing why it is necessary to conceive of God, "the principle of being" or "the One beyond the many," as "Thou," Niebuhr wrote, "This principle of personlike integrity is fundamental in a revelation that is an event which elicits the confidence of selves in their ultimate environment and calls upon them as free selves to decide for the universal cause." H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 47.

⁹³Waldo Beach and H. Richard Niebuhr, eds., "Introduction to Chapter 13: Jonathan Edwards," in *Christian Ethics: Sources of the Living Tradition* (New York: Ronald Press Company, 1955), 381-2.

reinterpret them. He perceived the power of personalist symbols in religion to engender faith that is capable of unifying all our loyalties in life. Though late in his life he advised younger theologians to venture more deeply into an exploration of the emotions so that they might lay a foundation for the re-symbolization of faith and culture, Niebuhr seems already to have laid this foundation for us.

CHAPTER FIVE

AN AESTHETIC APPROACH TO INTEGRATION

Christ, Christocentrism, and Christomorphism

In the debates about Christian faith and culture, Niebuhr's work has stood front and center. Not surprisingly these debates have raised the question of what is the correct interpretation of Niebuhr's thought. Of particular importance has been the question: how are we to interpret Niebuhr's understanding of the role and authority of Jesus Christ for Christians? For Christians loyal to Christ, the question of faith and culture in a pluralistic culture with competing faiths becomes intensified and increasingly complicated. Given that Christ is that which is distinctive about Christian faith, the way we think about Christ could either facilitate or hinder a Christian's attempts to integrate commitments to multiple cultural and religious communities. Scholars of Niebuhr's work have varied in their interpretations of the role and significance of Jesus Christ in Niebuhr's thought,¹ and underlying the debate seems to be a concern about whether or not and to what extent the church should claim a distinctive identity.

In his Foreword to a comprehensive study of Christology in Niebuhr's overall thought, Terrence Owen Sherry begins by recognizing that many have ignored or misunderstood

¹For different interpretations of Niebuhr's understanding of Christ's role and significance in relation to culture, see articles written by Douglas F. Ottati, Glen H. Stassen, Duane K. Friesen, and Darryl M. Trimiew in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* in the *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2003): 121-165. See also Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder, eds., *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

Niebuhr's Christology. Sherry has attributed misreadings both to Niebuhr's highly nuanced writings about the role of Jesus Christ in Christian faith and to "the shadows cast by Barth and his 'Christo-centric' followers."² "Niebuhr's Christology," Sherry argues, is "a most profound and viable one," and he sees in it potential for addressing many contemporary concerns, including, though Sherry himself does not address it, "religious pluralism" in the list.³ Sherry understands that Niebuhr's Christology has been overlooked partly because of the theocentrism that pervades Niebuhr's thought. It is true that Niebuhr sought to understand Jesus Christ in such a way that would not violate his conviction in the sovereignty of God. This does not imply, however, that the role of Jesus Christ is overshadowed in Niebuhr's theological ethic. As already discussed in Chapter Four, Niebuhr understood that for Christians Jesus Christ as Son of God is the primary revelatory symbol through which the whole of reality can make sense and become integrated.

Consistent with Niebuhr's fervent desire for ongoing reformation of religion and his aesthetic insight that reformation requires a continuous re-examination and revitalization of the symbols we engage was Niebuhr's recognition that Jesus Christ has never been and cannot ever be the only symbol at work in the lives of Christians. To be sure, such a view of Jesus Christ that makes room for the revelatory power of other symbols has implications for how the church would approach the challenge of relating faith and culture, especially in multicultural and interreligious contexts. In an effort to provide more nuanced attention to the church's

²Terrence Owen Sherry, *The Christo-Morphic, Hermeneutical Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr: Shaped by Christ* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), iii.

³Ibid.

engagement of the symbol of Jesus Christ in relation to other symbols, Niebuhr began to use the terms “Christomorphism,” a term which he coined,” in contrast to “Christocentrism.”

Over the course of writing some of his major works, *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941), *Faith on Earth* (1940s-1950s), *Christ and Culture* (1951), and *The Responsible Self* (1963), Niebuhr wrote about the symbolic significance of Christ for Christians, and he made careful distinctions between “Christomorphism” and “Christocentrism.” Given that the term “Christomorphism” appears to have slightly different connotations in different writings, sometimes perjorative and other times favorable, it seems that over time Niebuhr was working out the meaning and usefulness of this term in relation to “Christocentrism,” his theocentric worldview, and his ongoing reflections about symbols. Furthermore, due to the sometimes ambiguous way in which Niebuhr employed the term “Christomorphism,” scholars have taken it upon themselves to interpret its meaning in light of what Niebuhr wrote about the symbol of Jesus Christ and to articulate a more consistent, favorable, and clear working definition for the term.⁴

⁴See *ibid.*, iv. Terrence Owen Sherry interprets Niebuhr’s usage of the term “Christomorphic” as meaning “the attempt to be informed only by Jesus Christ.” Sherry then explains his appropriation of the term. He writes: “In this narrow sense Niebuhr’s theology was certainly not Christo-morphic. Nonetheless I have decided to apply this term – in a wider sense than admitted by Niebuhr – to Niebuhr’s theology because it highlights the way in which the elements of Niebuhr’s theology are shaped and determined by Jesus Christ, and it retains its focus upon Niebuhr’s abiding theo-centrism.” The “wider sense” to which Sherry refers is the definition that he borrows from H. Richard Niebuhr’s son, Richard R. Niebuhr. The younger Niebuhr used the term “Christomorphism” to describe Schleiermacher’s Christology in contrast to Barth’s “Christocentrism.” See Richard R. Niebuhr, *Schleiermacher on Christ and Religion: A New Introduction* (New York: Scribner’s, 1964), 212. See also Patrick Primeaux, *Richard R. Niebuhr on Christ and Religion: The Four Stage Development of His Theology* (New York: E. Mellen Press, 1981), 237, n. 84. Borrowing from Richard R. Niebuhr, Sherry defines “Christo-morphism” as the view “that Christ exercises a forming, re-forming, informing influence upon the ‘matter’ of human nature and human religion,” and that Jesus Christ “is paramount and central as the agent who reforms and shapes anew the Christian’s relations to God, the world and himself.” See Terrence Owen Sherry, *The Christo-Morphic, Hermeneutical Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr: Shaped by Christ*, iv, n. 2.

See also R. Melvin Keiser, *Roots of Relational Ethics: Responsibility in Origin and Maturity in H. Richard Niebuhr*, *The American Academy of Religion Reflection and Theory in the Study of Religion*, ed. David E. Klemm (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 190. Keiser uses the term “Christomorphic” to understand the church as a community that has been shaped by the symbolic form of Jesus Christ. He writes: “Grasped, shaped, pervaded, transformed by the gestalt of grace and the glory of being, the church is Christomorphic community.”

The term “Christomorphism” appears in Niebuhr’s essay “Metaphors and Morals,” in which Niebuhr illustrated how the symbolic form of Jesus Christ functions as a lens through which Christians see the world, including their companions. When a Christian sees his companion in need through this lens, the needy companion is “a Christo-morphic being, apprehended as in the form of Christ, something like Christ, though another.”⁵ The Christian, Niebuhr explained, apprehends, interprets, and evaluates his fellow human being through the symbol of Jesus Christ. This same use of the symbol of Jesus Christ takes place, consciously and unconsciously, in the Christian’s apprehension, interpretation, and evaluation of God, the ultimate environment to which the Christian “is related in all his relations, though he stops short of identifying symbol and actuality.”⁶ In this way, Jesus Christ is the symbolic form with the help of which the Christian understands himself, his companions, the whole of reality – God – and is guided in his interactions.

Whereas in his earlier works Niebuhr had already explained why a symbolic understanding of Jesus Christ not only relies upon a historical understanding of Jesus Christ, but also grasps how the significance and meaning of Jesus Christ is carried forward to make sense of and to shape the present, in this essay written late in his life, Niebuhr turned his attention to the question of whether the symbol of Christ relates to other symbols or stands alone. “Is the Christ symbol the only or the wholly dominant and completely adequate form for Christians, or is it always associated with other symbols so that it is impossible for Christians to define themselves

⁵H. Richard Niebuhr, “Metaphors and Morals,” chap. in *The Responsible Self* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1963), 155.

⁶Ibid.

simply as Christians?”⁷

In one articulation or another, this question has arisen throughout the church’s history. “The problem often presents itself,” Niebuhr noted, “as one about the Christian’s concern with a social morality that is not pervaded by the Christ-symbol.” Underlying the concern for a Christian social morality is often, Niebuhr observed, a concern about one’s authentic identity and the identity of the church as Christian. The effort “to make Jesus Christ not only the exclusive principle of their understanding but also of their action” is what Niebuhr called “Christocentrism.”⁸

Where the term “Christomorphism” appears in Niebuhr’s writings, it is often times in the context of Niebuhr’s critiques of Karl Barth’s insistent exclusive reliance upon the symbol of Christ. In his critique of Barth’s Christocentrism in “Metaphors and Morals,” Niebuhr wrote:

In our time the effort to achieve a completely Christocentric and solely Christomorphic form of thinking and acting has been confined to theology, most notably to Karl Barth’s theology. . . . Barth, to take this representative of the most consistent Christian symbolism as our example, attempts to dismiss all analogies, all metaphors, all symbols from Christian speech and conduct except Jesus Christ.⁹

The usual distinction between Christomorphism and Christocentrism is muddled in this statement, but the context of his essay makes it clear that Niebuhr understands Christocentrism to be the exclusive version of Christomorphism. While both Christocentrism and Christomorphism understand Jesus Christ to be an indispensable symbol for Christians, Christocentrism is an

⁷Ibid., 157.

⁸Ibid., 158.

⁹Ibid.

exclusive Christomorphism that treats Jesus Christ as the sole symbol at work in the lives of Christians and apart from which nothing about God and the world can be meaningfully disclosed.¹⁰

Niebuhr argued that in actuality Barth and his followers employed many symbols other than Christ. No matter how much anyone insists upon a Christocentric view, other symbols are necessarily employed even to make sense of the symbol of Christ. Barth, Niebuhr wrote,

cannot interpret the meaning of Jesus Christ without the aid of other metaphors and symbols such as Word of God, Son of God, Servant, Lord, covenant, humiliation, exaltation, reconciliation, salvation. Particularly in speech about Christian ethics he must employ non-Christian though not non-biblical symbols, such as commandment, law, obedience, and permission.¹¹

Niebuhr understood the complex hermeneutical reliance of symbols upon symbols. Furthermore, he understood that symbols resonate across the boundaries between intra-biblical and extra-biblical, between religious and secular, between philosophical and theological, and etc. Even the symbol of Jesus Christ, which has primary revelatory value for Christians, relies on the revelatory value of other symbols that originated in non-Christian realms. It would be a denial of truth, Niebuhr thought, not to recognize this.

Niebuhr argued that Christocentrism is a problematic stance not only because it is impossible to rely exclusively on one symbol, but also because Christocentric attempts or

¹⁰Ibid. My interpretation of this passage differs from that of Terrence Owen Sherry, whose reading of this sentence results in the following conclusion: “Indeed Niebuhr even seeks to avoid what he calls Christo-morphism, which for him is the attempt to be informed only by Jesus Christ – culture, science, history and church all are to be excluded from a positive contribution to Christian understanding. In this narrow sense Niebuhr’s theology was certainly not Christo-morphic. (Indeed, Niebuhr’s point in disavowing such a characterization is that *no* theology can be solely so Christo-morphic.)” Terrence Owen Sherry, *The Christo-Morphic, Hermeneutical Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr: Shaped by Christ*, iv. Sherry’s reading of Niebuhr’s definition of Christomorphism is problematic insofar as it does not make sense of the distinction between Christocentrism and Christomorphism that Niebuhr here and elsewhere draws.

¹¹H. Richard Niebuhr, “Metaphors and Morals,” chap. in *The Responsible Self*, 158.

tendencies risk idolatry. Pervading Niebuhr's theological ethic is a concern to be aware of idolatrous tendencies. In his writings on polytheism and henotheism, Niebuhr warned that Christocentric stances lead to the dislocation of God from the center of all value. Throughout his work, Niebuhr made clear his lifelong commitment to a radical monotheism and a theocentric ethic, upholding God as the Creator and center of all value. The church, with a Christocentric orientation, tends easily to conflate God and Jesus Christ. Niebuhr carefully distinguished between the confession in the One God who is Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit and the "confession that Jesus Christ is God."¹² He wrote, "It may be said that the former confession is implied in the latter, but if it is not made explicit, it is easily forgotten and becomes ineffective."¹³ There is a danger for the church, Niebuhr thought, in failing to distinguish clearly between God and Jesus Christ: by conflating God and Christ, a Christocentric view of the world would eventually amount to a church-centered view of the world, disparaging anything outside the realm of the church.¹⁴ He explained the danger in the following way:

Insofar as it is forgotten we tend to separate ourselves as church from the created and inspired world; we seek to understand ourselves as creations of Jesus Christ in a certain isolation from the Creator of all things and the inspiration of all things; we depreciate what is not recognizably related to Jesus Christ directly; we misjudge the world that is without knowledge of Christ as without any awareness of God.¹⁵

¹²H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Church Defines Itself in the World," in *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings*, ed. William Stacy Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 73.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962), 148-9. See also *Radical Monotheism and Western Religion* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1960), 59-60.

¹⁵H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Church Defines Itself in the World," in *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings*, 73.

By making clear distinctions between God and Jesus Christ and by locating God at the center of the church's confession, Niebuhr wanted most of all to avoid the reduction of God to Jesus Christ and the depreciation of anything in the world that is not directly related to Jesus Christ. Moreover, we see in Niebuhr's analysis his foresight that the depreciation of anything that is not directly related to Jesus Christ can result in an idolatry in which the church sees itself at the center and takes a defensive stance toward the rest of the world.

Overlooking Niebuhr's Christomorphism

Interpretations of Niebuhr's thought from predominantly sociological and political perspectives have tended to overlook, or at least have failed to flesh out, the significance of Niebuhr's "Christomorphism."¹⁶ Rather than having taken seriously the value of a Christomorphic approach to the role and authority of Jesus Christ for Christians, theological ethicists involved in the debate about faith and culture have tended to evaluate Niebuhr's ethic from the perspective of Christocentric orientations. The main question they have asked and sought to answer has been: Was Christ central to Niebuhr's theological ethics?

In an article entitled "It Is Time to Take Jesus Back: In Celebration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*" and in a chapter of an edited volume "Concrete Christological Norms for Transformation,"¹⁷ Glen H. Stassen put forth what he

¹⁶The work of Terrence Owen Sherry in *The Christo-Morphic, Hermeneutical Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr: Shaped by Christ* stands in sharp contrast with those works that have tried to interpret Niebuhr's work from sociological and political perspectives in order to arrive at concrete ethical norms. Sherry studies Niebuhr's Christology and shows the power of a Christomorphic hermeneutic to address concrete ethical issues in our day.

¹⁷Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder, eds., *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, 127-89.

considered to be both an accurate and sympathetic interpretation of Niebuhr's work. Finding traces of a "thick," content-filled appreciation for Jesus in Niebuhr's work over a lifetime, Stassen argued that Niebuhr did in fact return to a more Christocentric ethics before he died.¹⁸ Stassen was responding to critics like John Howard Yoder who evaluated Niebuhr's theological ethics on the basis of the absence of concrete normative standards appropriated from the historical life of Jesus Christ as recounted in the New Testament and made applicable to the social and political situations of contemporary Christians. Stassen sought to show the presence of a Christocentric ethic in Niebuhr's writings. In the spirit of extending Niebuhr's thought, he discussed seven normative practices that he and other ethicists extrapolated primarily from New Testament scholarship on the historical life of Jesus.¹⁹

In his chapter "Concrete Christological Norms for Transformation," which in part was a response to the criticism of Yoder and other theological ethicists who found Niebuhr's theological ethics to be lacking in prophetic, normative content, Stassen remarked on the final convergence between his own constructive work and that of Yoder.

It is striking how Yoder has come via his route, criticizing Niebuhr, and I have come via my route, learning from Niebuhr (and Yoder), and we have arrived at a very similar understanding of criteria for an ethics of authentic transformation.²⁰

¹⁸Glen H. Stassen, "It Is Time to Take Jesus Back: In Celebration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23, no. 1 (2003): 133.

In this essay, Stassen provides an explanation for and a response to the criticism that Niebuhr's ethics presents an all too "thin" picture of Jesus and therefore lacks a prophetic edge. Stassen writes: "My argument is that a historically particular Christocentric emphasis was essential to H. Richard Niebuhr's ethics. . . . Although some know Niebuhr mostly for his lean against Christocentrism in *Radical Monotheism* during the 1950s, the logic of his life work points to a theocentric ethic with essential emphasis on the disclosure of God in the historically particular Jesus Christ." See *Ibid.*, 134-135. My thesis is that while he was writing *Christ and Culture*, Niebuhr was in the process of making this shift.

¹⁹For a list of these seven practices, see Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder, eds., *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, 163-7.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 173.

Despite their different stances toward Niebuhr's writings, the eventual convergence that Stassen noted may be less remarkable than he recognized.

If we recognize that both men interpreted Niebuhr's Christology from a Christocentric perspective, we can understand at least part of the reason for the convergence in their ethical theories. Niebuhr himself provided insight into the practical decisions that lie behind ethical theories invested in defining the church solely by reference to Christ. His insights shed light on the fact that the ethical theories of Stassen and Yoder share in common not only outcomes, but also prior decisions. In an essay entitled "The Church Defines Itself in the World," Niebuhr wrote:

The tendency of the church to define itself almost exclusively by reference to Jesus Christ and to interpret the Scriptures in Christocentric fashion is doubtless connected with the search for unity. Obedience to the Lordship of Christ, an allegiance to him, is the point on which the various churches can agree. It is accepted also as the distinctive element in the Christian belief, separating it from what it is not, namely the world. For some, perhaps many interpreters, Jesus Christ is in such a way the revelation of God that where he is not present there is no knowledge of God; hence church in relation to Christ is opposed to world without relation to Christ, as church with revelation [is opposed] to world without knowledge of God. There are relations then between the various decisions. Yet the definition of the church as related Jesus Christ has the character of decision and not of necessary consequence of other decisions previously taken.²¹

Niebuhr's analysis of what underlies ethical theories helps us to see that prior to the convergence of their ethical theories developing moral norms on the basis of biblical narratives about Jesus Christ are practical decisions that Stassen and Yoder already made. Both men were already concerned to seek integrity in the knowledge and actions of Christians, and both men were already committed to a Christocentric Christology. As Niebuhr saw it, the moral and theological problem lay not in the effort to seek integrity, but rather in limiting the sphere within which this

²¹H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Church Defines Itself in the World," in *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings*, 68.

effort is made. By neglecting or depreciating anything outside the realm of Jesus Christ, by looking only through a Christocentric lens, the church becomes preoccupied with its own identity and self-enclosed integrity, losing sight of its interconnection and integration with the rest of God's creation.

Despite the Christocentric orientations of Stassen and Yoder, their interpretations of Niebuhr's work have nevertheless failed to grasp the symbolic meaning of Jesus Christ. As is evident in their interpretations of the following passage from Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*, they tried to understand Niebuhr's symbolic conception of Jesus Christ in terms of abstraction and concreteness. Niebuhr wrote:

As Son of God he points away from the many values of our social life to the one who alone is good; . . . he points away from all that is conditioned to the Unconditioned. He does not direct attention away from this world to another; but from all worlds, present and future, material and spiritual, to the One who creates all worlds, who is Other of all worlds.²²

In his discussion of this passage, Stassen wrote that "a tendency toward abstraction was already beginning to show itself in *Christ and Culture*."²³ Like Yoder, Stassen employed this passage to reveal Niebuhr's tendency toward abstraction in his Christ-centered ethics. Reading this passage more sympathetically than Yoder, however, Stassen included in his discussion the statement Niebuhr made immediately following the passage cited above. "Niebuhr does immediately say, however: 'Yet this is only half the meaning of Christ, considered morally.' The other half is the movement of God toward us in Christ."²⁴ Stassen was quick to interpret this statement by

²²H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1951), 28.

²³Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder, eds., *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, 175.

²⁴*Ibid.*

Niebuhr as signifying a movement in Niebuhr's Christological ethics toward historical particularity and normative concreteness.

It is true that Niebuhr maintained the historical particularity of Jesus Christ. That Jesus Christ lived in a particular time and place, however, was ethically significant to Niebuhr not because it enables Christians to apply concrete normative principles from Jesus Christ's life and teachings directly to their own lives, but rather because a symbolic conception of Jesus Christ requires a historical understanding of Jesus Christ. In *The Responsible Self*, Niebuhr wrote:

To insist in this fashion on the symbolic function of the Christ-figure and the Christ-story does not beg the question of the historical actuality of that figure and story. For history may function as myth or as symbol when men use it (or are forced by processes in their history itself to employ it) for understanding their present and their future. When we grasp our present, not so much as a product of our past, but more as essentially revealed in that past, then the historical account is necessarily symbolic; it is not merely descriptive of what was once the case.²⁵

Niebuhr understood the historic person of Jesus Christ – his life, teachings, and deeds – to be important, not as a part of our serial past, but rather as that which has endured into the present. Through the memory of Jesus Christ, the church can perceive God at work in every event. If the historic person of Jesus Christ, including his teachings and deeds, becomes the focus of the church and loses its symbolic dimension, Niebuhr warned that, “despite its pragmatic values,” it would disclose nothing more than the church itself.²⁶ Understood instead as a symbol, Jesus Christ would have greater revelatory power. Insofar as Stassen and Yoder have measured the role of Jesus Christ in Niebuhr's thought primarily in terms of abstraction and concreteness, they

²⁵H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1963), 156.

²⁶H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 148-9.

have failed to engage Niebuhr's symbolic view of Christ.²⁷

The Form of Christian Life

In his essay "Metaphors and Morals," Niebuhr explained that Jesus Christ functions symbolically in pointing beyond himself to *both* God and to humanity. A symbol, Niebuhr would say, points beyond itself insofar as it acts as a vehicle through which persons interpret some other actuality and insofar as the symbol does not identify itself with the actuality to which it points. Pointing beyond himself to God,

Jesus Christ is the symbolic figure without which the Christian can no longer imagine, or know, or believe in the Determiner of Destiny, or the final end, or the ultimate source, or the last environment to which he is related in all his relations, though he stops short of identifying symbol and actuality.²⁸

Pointing beyond himself to humanity, Jesus Christ is the symbol by which Christians consciously or unconsciously interpret, evaluate, and respond to other persons.²⁹ Illustrating this point, Niebuhr wrote:

But we are now concerned with the role of this symbol in the life of agents, who value and disvalue, who judge and respond to judgment, who decide, and react to decisions made about them. And there we note first of all how much there has entered into the moral language of Christians the figure of Jesus Christ. They know themselves to be Christians when they see their companions in need in the form of Christ; there echoes in their memories in such moments the story Christ told which ended in the well-known statement, "Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these my brethren you have done it unto me." The symbol is not a mere figure of speech. Symbol and reality participate in each other. The

²⁷As Terrence Owen Sherry argues in his book *The Christo-Morphic Hermeneutical Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr: Shaped by Christ*, Niebuhr's Christomorphic approach to Jesus Christ does offer constructive moral reflection for concrete moral issues.

²⁸H. Richard Niebuhr, "Metaphors and Morals," chap. in *The Responsible Self*, 155.

²⁹"With the use of the symbolic form of Jesus Christ, the Christian – consciously or unconsciously – apprehends, interprets, and evaluates his fellow man." Ibid.

needy companion is not wholly other than Christ, though he is not Christ himself.³⁰

While a symbol points beyond itself, a symbol and the reality to which it points nevertheless participate in each other. As a symbol the form of Jesus Christ functions as a lens through which Christians interpret their interactions with other persons. Interpretations of encounters and interactions with other persons are shaped by the forms, styles, and patterns discernable in what Christians know about Jesus Christ, including the stories of his life, death, resurrection, sayings and deeds.

As a theological ethicist, Niebuhr certainly took seriously the moral significance of Christian faith upon the specific decisions made and the concrete actions taken by Christians. He certainly counted as important the moral choices and actions of Christians. Rather than asking what the distinctively Christian normative principles are in order to apply those principles to specific situations, however, Niebuhr sought to discern the general pattern or form of Christian life so that Christians would be able to determine the fitting response in any specific situation. In his essay “Metaphors and Morals,” here are the kinds of questions that Niebuhr raised about Christian life:

What is its form and character? How does it differ from other styles of human existence and action? To what other styles is it most closely related? How does the general Christian character and form manifest itself in specific activities such as those in which Christians, like all other people, engage when they marry and raise children, eat and drink, obey civil laws and help enact them, when they make material goods, buy and sell, participate in war and peace-making; when they make all the countless daily evaluations, decisions and choices that human beings must undertake in their inescapable freedom?³¹

³⁰Ibid., 154-5.

³¹H. Richard Niebuhr, “Metaphors and Morals,” chap. in *The Responsible Self*, 149.

Niebuhr hypothesized that the Christian life would bear a particular form, pattern, or style, because all of the specific actions comprising that life would have been informed, though not exclusively, by the many symbols of Christian faith and by the primary symbol of Jesus Christ. Consciously and unconsciously interpreting, evaluating, and responding to reality through the lens of these symbols, the Christian life should reveal a form that has been informed by those symbols.

By asking after the form of Christian life, Niebuhr did not intend to claim a distinctive Christian identity or Christian integrity. He was open to the possibility that the practices of non-Christians would reveal a pattern, or form, not so different from the form of Christian life. He wrote: “In practice, Christians undertaking to act in some fashion in conformity with Christ find themselves doing something like what some other, conforming to other images, are doing.”³² The point of such inquiry was to explore the complex formative role that symbols can play in shaping our lives, each individuated and unique, and to apply a critical, discriminating eye to the selection of symbols that would lead to a continually expansive integration of our lives and the world.

Niebuhr suspected that the pursuit of a distinctive identity for Christians underlay the many Christocentric positions in the debates about how the church should relate to the world as well as the predominantly sociological and political approaches to that debate. Furthermore, he suspected that pursuits of a distinctive identity would ultimately risk idolatry. By framing the debate about church and world instead in terms of faith and culture, Niebuhr was able to examine the experience of the social self, even the social self whose faith has been shaped by

³²H. Richard Niebuhr, “Responsibility and Christ,” in *The Responsible Self* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1963), 168.

commitments to multiple cultural and religious communities and for whom integrity more than identity is the ethical issue. By taking into account the fundamentally emotional nature of faith, its interpersonal structure, and the power of symbols to shape the form of our faith, Niebuhr developed an aesthetic approach to pursuits of integrity.

A Multi-centric Analysis

One of Niebuhr's most astute observations was that the self is a member of multiple social spheres, each sphere having its own norms and standards as well its own narratives, rituals, and other cultural and/or religious practices. Functioning symbolically, the narratives, rituals, and practices within each sphere shape our interpretations of and our interactive engagement with our environment, including all the people in it. In each sphere multiple symbols are at work, reinforcing, reinterpreting, selecting, and discriminating among certain features of experience. By a complex process symbols help the self to make sense of, to integrate, his or her experiences within that social sphere. Given that the self participates in more than one social sphere and given that symbols can either facilitate the coherence of multiple social spheres or hinder such coherence, the aesthetic question that Niebuhr positions us to ask is: which symbols help the self who participates in multiple social spheres to integrate the entirety of his or her life and in doing so also affects the interrelatedness of the world around him or her?

Describing the social formation of the self, as Niebuhr understood it, James Gustafson wrote:

The self comes into being as a member of various communities. Through interaction with other persons the child internalizes the meanings of gestures, language, and other symbols. Attitudes are formed as the value and meaning orientations of one's family, neighborhood, class, nation, and church are

incorporated into the personality. The self develops a personal identity, a continuing structure whose content reflects its participation in various social groups.³³

The formation of the self takes place over a lifetime, from infancy onward, through his or her interactions within many social spheres. In many cases, the various social spheres in which the self participates share a common culture, and sometimes a common religious culture, current or originating, and because of that common culture the self is able to relate his or her responsibilities to the various spheres somewhat seamlessly. The commonality of culture makes it easier for the responsible self to unify his or her many responses over the course of his or her lifetime. Considering how coherence between religious and general culture facilitates this process, Niebuhr explained:

Because I can interpret the deeds through which my religious thoughts and practices have come to me – through parents, society, church, the general culture; because I can recall and reinterpret at least some of the emotional and intellectual responses I have made to these actions on me by finite agents, therefore I can respond to the continuing action upon me of religious men and institutions in more fitting ways than was possible before I understood such actions. My responses can be more fitting in the sense that they fit into the whole intellectual, emotional, religious process of my life more consistently. . . .³⁴

It is only when tensions arise, for whatever reason, between the various social spheres that the self's commitment to one or another sphere is called into question. Niebuhr was a keen observer of such tensions. In his lifetime, he observed and mostly focused on tensions that arose between church and nation. In his analysis, Niebuhr understood that different spheres of commitment demand loyalty from the self and that conflicting demands for loyalty present Christians with the moral task of integrating their commitments in some form or fashion.

³³James Gustafson, "Christian Ethics and Social Policy," in *Faith and Ethics*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New York: Harper & Bros., 1957), 133-4.

³⁴H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 111.

Niebuhr's conception of each social sphere as having its own "center of value" and his terminology of "theocentrism" and "Christocentrism" helps to bring into sharp relief the dilemma of negotiating among and integrating the self's many commitments.

This image of multiple centers of value is especially helpful in analyzing the separation that can exist among the social spheres to which a person belongs and the moral disintegration or distortions that can come to characterize a person's life when her loyalties to multiple centers of value conflict. For persons who are intimately engaged in more than one culture or religious community, we cannot assume that there is a common constellation of cultural and religious symbols that seamlessly unify all the social spheres in which they participate. More than likely, the narratives, rituals, practices, images, and language that have shaped them do not all fit together, and the loyalties that bind them to different cultural and religious communities conflict. As symbolic forms become separated from their original cultural and religious contexts and as loyalties become strained, the integrity of persons and the cultural communities of which they are a part become called into question. The tension and conflicts among different centers of value become magnified. While this phenomenon was not something that Niebuhr yet faced, his analysis in terms of multiple centers of value resonates with and illuminates the cultural hybridization that is becoming an increasingly pervasive phenomenon in our current situation.

While the multi-centric image presents an incisive sociological picture of the problem, it does not offer any insight into how we might resolve the problem. It does not offer any direction for bringing the different centers of value into fitting relationship with one another. For the church, this is an especially significant problem. For the church whose center of value – God – is not to be one among the many centers of value, but to be the One beyond the many, positioning Christ to be one among the many centers of value can only lead to a disintegration of

faith that is unacceptable for Christians. In his critique of Christocentric orientations that positioned the church defensively against culture, or against the world, Niebuhr recognized the irreconcilability of Christocentrism and instead developed a Christomorphic approach that would explore the symbol of Jesus Christ in relation to the complex of symbols at work in every sphere of our lives.

Although Niebuhr did not explicitly address the situation of cultural and religious pluralism, it is fair to assume that had he witnessed the proliferation of new forms of cultural experience that characterizes globalized culture today, he would have directed his attention to it.³⁵ Becoming a more widespread phenomenon in today's globalized culture is that of

³⁵See Gilbert Meilander and William Werpehowski, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), s.v. "H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*," by D. M. Yeager. Elaborating upon H. Richard Niebuhr's understanding of the pluralism already present in culture as presented in *Christ and Culture*, Yeager writes, "There are myriads of secondary environments, as people in different places at different times, co-operating for different purposes, and serving different causes, bring into being, maintain, and reconstruct an evolving, overlapping array of social systems. It is precisely because there is no single, fixed, monolithic, normative, God-ordained 'culture' that there is an 'enduring problem' involving the relationship of God to all the shifty variegated work of human hands and minds and tongues. The social environment of any particular people. . . 'comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values.'" Citing Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*, she writes: "'Culture' as a signifier does not, in this context, name any substantive entity; it points to 'the total process of human activity,' whereby human beings transcend their strictly biological being to generate new and relatively durable layers of social reality – as specifiable as constitutions, contracts, power grids, and currencies, and as elusive webs of conceptual interdependence and patterns of social trust."

See also D. M. Yeager, "The View from Somewhere: The Meaning of Method in *Christ and Culture*," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 23, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2003): 116. Yeager sees a profound recognition of pluralism built into Niebuhr's understanding of culture, and she attributes this recognition as one of the underlying differences between Niebuhr and Yoder, when she writes that whereas Niebuhr took it for granted that Christian theology is plural, "Yoder, it seems, takes it for granted that Christian theology is a singular gospel that is expressed in the idiom of a plurality of cultural situations."

Yeager thinks that HRN recognizes profoundly that "there are myriads of secondary environments, as people in different places at different times, co-operating for different purposes, and serving different causes, bring into being, maintain, and reconstruct an evolving, overlapping array of social systems. It is precisely because there is no single, fixed, monolithic, normative, God-ordained 'culture' that there is an 'enduring problem' involving the relationship of God to all the shifty variegated work of human hands and minds and tongues. The social environment of any particular people. . . 'comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values.'" See Gilbert Meilander and William Werpehowski, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), s.v. "H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*," by D. M. Yeager.

hyphenated and hybrid identities. What previously was an experience isolated to immigrants and minorities is now shared by persons who themselves may not be either. Increasingly, families are becoming multicultural and multireligious. As these new intimate relationships are forming across cultural and religious communities, individuals will face the new challenge of negotiating among the multiple communities to which they are now committed, and those communities will face the challenge of making the narratives, rituals, practices, and images – in short, the symbols – that have been so integral in unifying their respective communities still meaningful to the moral and religious lives of those who are tied to more than one community.

Personalist Symbols of Faith in a Pluralistic World

Niebuhr understood that at stake in these challenges are the loyalties among persons. In his investigation of faith, Niebuhr took a “meandering route” to explore what people meant by and associated with the term “faith.”³⁶ His exploration led him to conclude that faith foundationally consists of the interpersonal emotions of loyalty and trust. Chapter Four has already explained that upon the basis of this conclusion, Niebuhr recognized the significance of employing symbols that would facilitate our interpersonal relation with God and Christ. Like Edwards and Dewey, Niebuhr understood that relating to God as a being with a heart was a necessary condition for engendering in humanity the existential emotion of trust in a God who is neither indifferent nor hostile, but who loves and is loyal to his creation. In his own work, Niebuhr gave priority to the symbol of Jesus Christ as Son of God because it was especially capable of communicating the loving and loyal relationship that exists between son and father and of informing humanity’s relationship with God as children of God.

³⁶H. Richard Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 4.

Niebuhr's insight into the deeply interpersonal nature of faith and his critical recognition of the necessity of personalist symbols for engendering interpersonal emotions of trust and loyalty are no less significant for efforts to relate faith and culture in multicultural and interreligious situations. In their complex and dynamic interactions, symbols that do not resonate with the interpersonal nature of faith will lack potential to integrate the many loyalties that are at the heart of the challenge. They will lack revelatory power.

Niebuhr's careful reflection on the symbols by which we relate to God and Christ demonstrates for us the importance of aesthetic inquiry not only into the revelatory role that symbols play in the experience of faith, but also into the standards by which we can discriminate among symbols. Some symbols have more revelatory power than others. Some symbols help to illuminate, make sense of, and resolve more tensions and conflicts in our interpersonal loyalties across cultures than others. The degree to which a symbol is revelatory for our multicultural and interreligious lives provides an objective measure by which theological ethics can evaluate and discriminate among symbols. Which symbols are revelatory for our multicultural and interreligious lives?

Enlarging Our Interpersonal Histories

Committed to a radical monotheism, for which the basic aesthetic orientation is toward the coherence of all things in God, Niebuhr warned against efforts to defend the unity of anything less. Personal and interpersonal integrity as well as the unity of the church were important for Niebuhr not as entities unto themselves but as participating in the ongoing interactional and interpretive dynamic that unifies all of humanity, the whole world.³⁷ Idolatry

³⁷Niebuhr wrote, "Church unity is not to be treasured more highly than any other reconciliation of parents and children, of husbands and wives to each other, in reconciliation of God; the reconciliation of nations to one

resulted, Niebuhr thought, whenever persons limited the sphere in which unity and integration were sought, and the tendency toward idolatry was rooted in an existential disposition of fear and defensiveness toward God and the circumambient world. The dispositional change that certain symbols effect, like the symbol of Jesus Christ as Son of God, enables Christians to expand their loyalties to include an enlarged society. In *Faith on Earth*, Niebuhr wrote: “What appears to happen in fellowship with Jesus Christ to our life of faith is that our distrust of God is turned somewhat in the direction of trust, that our hostility is turned slightly in the direction of a desire to be loyal, that our view of the society to which we are bound in loyalty begins to enlarge.”³⁸ The enlarged fellowship that the symbol of Jesus Christ makes possible for Christians takes on the quality of family. Through Christ, Niebuhr wrote, “we become acquainted with him and his character in the interpersonal family of those who are his companions and whose companions he is in trust and loyalty.”³⁹ This process of enlargement is “the great metanoia, a revolution of the personal life” and interpersonal history.⁴⁰ It is a process that is open-ended. It extends beyond the church to include persons for whom Jesus Christ is not a symbol.

In order for the church to undergo this process, the church must approach “the multiplicity of events in all times with the confidence that unity may be found.”⁴¹ Confidence

another in reconciliation to him; in short, the coherence of everything and all things in God is the gift for which thanks are offered and for which we pray; the gift also we seek to appropriate.” H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Church Defines Itself in the World,” in *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings*, 72. See also H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 120: “The problem of human reunion is greater than the problem of church reunion.”

³⁸H. Richard Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith*, 99.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 89.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 99.

⁴¹H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 87.

and trust placed in God who is acting in every interaction displaces the fear and defensiveness of the church that seeks its own unity. In essays like “The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church” and “The Church Defines Itself in the World,” Niebuhr articulated an ecumenical vision that sought God acting in human history more than in church history. In both of these essays Niebuhr saw the church’s Christocentric approach to the symbol of Jesus Christ as hindering Christians from recognizing God’s unifying activity in the world. In his essay “The Church Defines Itself in the World,” Niebuhr wrote:

We tend to overlook the fact that the church we know is a religious community expressing movements of the human soul toward God . . . which are part of man’s created nature and which are expressed also in other religions. We try (and in doing so ignore many facts about ourselves) to derive everything in our churchly existence from Jesus Christ.

We do not in this limited perspective take much note of the work of Jesus Christ outside the church or of the obedience rendered to him on the part of those who do not explicitly call him Lord, nor do we rejoice very often in the confidence in God, the fidelity to him and the hope of glory introduced into human rather than church history by Jesus Christ.⁴²

As this passage indicates, Niebuhr thought it important to recognize God at work outside the church by symbols other than Jesus Christ as well as to entertain the likelihood that the symbol of Jesus Christ is exercising revelatory power among non-Christians. On this latter point, he wrote:

To be Christian is simply part of my fate, as it is the fate of another to be Muslim or a Jew. In this sense a very large part of mankind is today Christian; it has come under the influence of Jesus Christ so that even its Judaism and Mohammedanism bears witness to the fact that Jesus Christ has been among us.⁴³

⁴²H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Church Defines Itself in the World,” in *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings*, 70.

⁴³H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 43. This is one of the few references to Islam in Niebuhr’s writings.

Niebuhr did not venture so far as to say in what ways or to what degrees the symbol of Jesus Christ might have been significant to Jews, Muslims, or persons of other religious communities in their own internal histories. He did not venture beyond brief mention of religious communities other than the church, and he certainly did not claim perspectives other than the Christian community's perspective on history. No one, Niebuhr thought, can speak for the inner life of another community's history.⁴⁴

In his writings on how Christians themselves have been changed by their interactions with the symbols of other religious communities, however, we gain a sense of how Niebuhr understood the power of symbols to inform and transform the internal histories of cultures other than their own, religious and secular. By interacting with the symbol of Jesus Christ, other religions' and cultures' symbols have become meaningful and sometimes revelatory for Christians. On this point Niebuhr wrote:

To Christians the revelatory moment . . . becomes an occasion for appropriating as their own the past of all human groups. Through Jesus Christ Christians of all races recognize the Hebrews as their fathers; they build into their lives as Englishmen or as Americans, as Italians or Germans, the memories of Abraham's loyalty, of Moses' heroic leadership, of prophetic denunciations and comfortings. All that has happened to the strange and wandering people of God becomes a part of their own past.⁴⁵

Continuing, Niebuhr wrote:

But Jesus Christ is not only the Jew who suffered for the sins of Jews and so for our own sins; he is also the member of the Roman world-community through whom the Roman past is made our own. The history of empire through which his life and death must be understood is the history of our empire. Beyond all that, he is the man through whom the whole of human history becomes our history. Now there is nothing that is alien to us. All the struggles, searchings after light, all the

⁴⁴H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 82: "We are enabled to see why we can speak of revelation only in connection with our own history without affirming or denying its reality in the history of other communities into whose inner life we cannot penetrate without abandoning ourselves and our community."

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 115.

wanderings of all the peoples, all the sins of men in all places become parts of our past through him. We must remember them all as having happened in and to our community. Through Christ we become immigrants into the empire of God which extends over all the world and learn to remember the history of that empire, that is of men in all times and places, as our history.⁴⁶

As his comments show, Niebuhr was confident that God is acting throughout all of human history. For Niebuhr, God is acting in those times when the church's history comes into contact, even conflict, with histories of other cultures. Through interactions with symbols of cultures that were once considered outside the church, the symbol of Jesus Christ enlarges the church's internal history to include and be transformed by others' histories, thereby enlarging the church's sphere of loyalty and responsibility.

Confidence in the activity of God as Lord of heaven and earth, rather than as God of the Christian community,⁴⁷ is accompanied on the one side by Niebuhr's conviction that "self-defense is the most prevalent source of error in all thinking and perhaps especially in theology and ethics"⁴⁸ and on the flip side by the confession that the church can see history only from its own viewpoint. The great metanoia, the permanent revolution of personal life and interpersonal history, requires a confessional approach. As opposed to an apologetic approach, a confessional approach guards against the error of self-defense.⁴⁹ As discussed in Chapter Four, built into a confessional approach is the recognition that a community's historical perspective is limited and

⁴⁶Ibid., 115-6.

⁴⁷See Terrence Owen Sherry's discussion in *The Christo-Morphic, Hermeneutical Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr: Shaped by Christ*, 79.

⁴⁸H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, viii.

⁴⁹In his writings on what it means to be confessional, Niebuhr does not work with the usual Reformed understanding of confessionalism, by which the church states and gives witness to itself and the world who and what it is, what it believes, and what it resolves to do. See Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, (U.S.A.)*, Part II, Book of Order 2019-2021 (Louisville, Kentucky: The Office of the General Assembly, 2019), F-2.01.

that its symbols are by themselves inadequate. Selecting the patterns by which Christians interpret their ultimate context, symbols can make us blind to some parts of reality and unaware of perspectives shaped by symbols different from our own. We need, Niebuhr wrote, to recognize that “there is something provincial” and “something vague” in our interpretations of reality,⁵⁰ and that, therefore, we can benefit from external views of our own history.

When taking a confessional approach to itself and its history, the church can see itself as though from an external perspective. From such a perspective, the church might be able to see itself as: “finite, created, limited, corporeal being, alike in every respect to all other beings of creation.”⁵¹ The church might even be able to see its faults, its pride, and its failings.

To describe that vision in detail, to see the limited, human character of its founder, the connections between itself and Judaism to which it often, in false pride, feels superior, between Catholicism and feudalism, Protestantism and capitalism, to know itself as the chief of sinners and the most mortal of societies – all this is required of it by a revelation that has come to it through its history.⁵²

Niebuhr explained that whenever the church comes to see itself from the viewpoint of persons outside the church, the external history becomes an event in inner history.⁵³ The church’s response to its external history also becomes an event in its inner history. Insofar as the event brings to light things that were hidden before, removes blind spots, and makes sense of things that had been unresolved, the event is revelatory. Niebuhr wrote:

⁵⁰H. Richard Niebuhr, “Toward New Symbols,” *The Cole Lectures*, in *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings*, ed. William Stacy Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 30.

⁵¹H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 88-9.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 89.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 84. “To see ourselves as other see us, or to have others communicate to us what they see when they regard our lives from the outside is to have a moral experience. Every external history of ourselves, communicated to us, becomes an event in inner history.”

External histories of Christianity have become important events in its inner history. . . . The church has had to respond to them. Though it knew that such stories were not *the* truth about it, it willingly or unwillingly, sooner or later, recognized *a* truth about it in each one. In so far as it apprehended these events in its history, these descriptions and criticisms of itself, with the aid of faith in the God of Jesus Christ it discerned God's judgment in them and made them occasions for active repentance.⁵⁴

Even though the church may not accept an external history as the full truth, there may be something worth appropriating from it, and the church's response to it can be an opportunity for enlarging the church's realm of loyalties.

In our globalized era, the external-internal dyad is by itself too simplistic to account for the myriad ways in which events are related. Combined with what Niebuhr wrote about the ultimate nature of an event, however, its application is still valuable. The full history of any community is a history that takes into view every event in connection with all other events and from all possible inner views. In *The Meaning of Revelation*, Niebuhr imagined that only God had such historical knowledge. He wrote:

The ultimate nature of an event is not what it is in its isolation only but what it is in its connection with all other events, not what it is for itself but also what it is from an inclusive point of view. The event as it really is, is the event as it is for God who knows it at the same time and in one act from within as well as from without, in its isolation as well as in its community with all other events.⁵⁵

Though Niebuhr attributed such an inclusive point of view only to God, he nevertheless attributed to the church the responsibility of seeing things as reflected in God's eyes. To be able to see how things are truly related, how things are integrated, requires ongoing engagement with external observers and the symbols that they use to interpret events.

⁵⁴Ibid., 85.

⁵⁵Ibid., 83-4.

Writing from his Christian and American perspectives, Niebuhr drew examples from Christian and American history to illustrate the process by which these inner histories have been reformed as a result of their interactions with the histories of other religious and cultural communities. He understood that whenever the church interacts with cultures and religions different from its own there is an opportunity for reformation. Whereas such interactions have taken place throughout the church's history, reformation only intensifies when the inner histories of more than one cultural or religious community are simultaneously at work, and this is the phenomenon we increasingly encounter in a globalized society.

Although Niebuhr did not explicate his understanding of the ultimate nature of events in terms of beauty as Edwards would have done, his understanding of history and reformation was nevertheless thoroughly aesthetic. Niebuhr conceived of history as ultimately consisting of the relationships of all things to all things and recognized the role that symbols play in interpreting, reforming, and creating these relationships.

For those persons who have loyalties to multiple cultural or religious communities and whose lives have been informed by multiple inner histories, the question of how to form lives of personal and interpersonal integrity comes to the fore. They cannot assume that some kind of seamless coherence will come easily. More likely they will experience their loyalties in conflict with one another. For them and for the church who sees this situation as an opportunity ripe for revelatory reformation, rather than cultural, religious, and interpersonal disintegration, careful aesthetic attention will be required to relate faith and culture.

In our era of globalization, the responsibility to relate faith and culture has been shouldered mostly by the individuals and families whose most intimate interpersonal relationships extend across multiple cultural and religious communities. With the exception of

Christocentric positions on the issue of faith and culture, the church has, for the most part, left this work to be undertaken by the individuals and families themselves. Without being more attentive and proactive in integrating, discriminating, and reinterpreting its symbols for a multicultural and interreligious situation, the church will likely find religious symbols, even those that have been revelatory throughout history, falling by the wayside. Without the reinterpretation and resonance that comes from interacting with symbols of other cultural and religious communities, the symbols of the church will not be able to illuminate, make sense of, or integrate the interpersonal loyalties that exist across these communities. They will also lack the power to counter dogmatism, conventionalism, and idolatry wherever they appear.

Conclusion

One year before his death, Niebuhr gave The Cole Lectures, which he entitled “Next Steps in Theology.” At the start of these lectures Niebuhr asked the question: “What is it then that we ought to prepare for insofar as theology can make preparations for the future?”⁵⁶ In the spirit of the non-defensive, confessional approach to which he was committed throughout his life, Niebuhr responded:

I believe that what concerns us most of all is not the question how to escape the dangers that may threaten us in the future but how to meet the opportunities and needs that arise before us? And the great opportunity as I see it is the opportunity and need for a new awakening, a new revival, a new reformation of religion.⁵⁷

⁵⁶H. Richard Niebuhr, “Next Steps in Theology,” *The Cole Lectures*, in *Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings*, ed. William Stacy Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 3.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 3-4.

Niebuhr spoke about the opportunity for a new awakening and reformation of religion, and he mapped out the next steps as aesthetic ventures into the role of the emotions in faith and the re-symbolization of faith.

This dissertation has presented an aesthetic interpretation of Niebuhr's understanding of faith in relation to culture, and in doing so it has shown that Niebuhr had already undertaken these aesthetic ventures himself. In his life's work he had already laid an extensive and secure foundation for the rapprochement of theological ethics and aesthetics. He had already identified the aesthetic questions to be asked, and he had already articulated moral questions in aesthetic terms.⁵⁸ What is the form of faith? What makes integration possible in the first place? What role do the emotions play in the experience of faith? What role do they play in integration? How do symbols function in our lives? Which symbols are most revelatory? How can we discriminate among them?

This dissertation has argued that an aesthetic interpretation of Niebuhr's theological ethical thought is especially critical if we want to address the relationship between faith and culture in a culturally and religiously pluralistic context. Niebuhr's aesthetic approach enabled him to relate faith and culture in incisive ways that predominantly sociological and political approaches could not. Living in an era in which the West could no longer be viewed as a Christian society, Niebuhr recognized that the question of faith and culture needed to be situated on that imprecise boundary where "the line between church and world runs through every soul, not between souls,"⁵⁹ and with remarkable insight he understood that theology needed to equip

⁵⁸Even in writing about moral hypotheses, he thought about hypotheses as patterns and the need to discriminate among hypotheses always in search of "a larger pattern, a more inclusive hypothesis." H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 120.

⁵⁹H. Richard Niebuhr, *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith*, 117.

itself with the indispensable aid of aesthetics. In our globalized era, the aesthetic approach developed by Niebuhr is all the more valuable.

In order to make more visible the aesthetic features of Niebuhr's thought, this dissertation has interpreted Niebuhr's theological ethics against the background of the aesthetic thought of Jonathan Edwards and John Dewey. The conclusion of Chapter Four provides a summary of the aesthetic insights that Niebuhr appropriated from these men and adapted in important ways. By interpreting Niebuhr's thought against the background of Jonathan Edwards and John Dewey, this dissertation places Niebuhr along one trajectory of American thought.⁶⁰ Given that the views of these three thinkers so significant in American intellectual history were highly aesthetic, as this dissertation has shown, it is my hope that this study might contribute to future investigations into the role that aesthetics has played in shaping the intellectual history that we have inherited.

Niebuhr would likely warn that such investigations would best be undertaken confessionally rather than apologetically. Niebuhr himself wrote against academic efforts to claim an "American" vision, perspective, or theology. Cognizant of how many different cultures and religions have informed the inner history of theology in America, he recognized the illusion that is created when intellectuals claim a distinctively "American" character of their thought. In an essay entitled "The Gift of the Catholic Vision," Niebuhr wrote precisely on this point:

To be sure we are all members of nations and conditioned by national culture so that we interpret what we see and hear with the aid of patterns inherited from our particular national society. But it seems evident to us now that we have usually greatly overestimated the independence of a national culture and that, whatever may have been the situation in former times, we are not allowed even if we would to understand what we hear and see simply in the company of other Christian members of our nation. We recognize, I think, that there has never really been

⁶⁰See the earlier discussion in Chapter One, 17-23.

such a thing as American theology whatever modifications theology may have experienced when expressed in the idiom of America. The Puritanism, Anglicanism, Lutheranism, and sectarianism with which we began our national life were not the products of thought and endeavor in America. The theologies which arose out of them, such as those of Edwards and Finney and Bushnell, were not only related to the common roots of an ecumenical evangelical Christianity but were influenced by a worldwide movement of revival which was English as well as American, Continental as well as Anglo-Saxon, Roman Catholic as well as Protestant.⁶¹

Niebuhr recognized how deeply indebted communities of thought are to one another. Even the most acclaimed events in American religious history, such as the Great Awakening, were indebted to religious movements elsewhere in the world. In light of his concern, the effort to situate Niebuhr within the context of other American thinkers and theologians would need to be in service not of identifying a distinctive “American” theological trajectory, but of formulating a larger hypothesis that concerns an enlarged view of human community.

Niebuhr laid a foundation upon which further inquiries can be identified and pursued. In addition to investigating the contributions of aesthetics in the history of American intellectual thought, inquiries into the aesthetic conditions that make greater integration possible would be beneficial not only in the convergence of aesthetics and theological ethics, but in the intersections of theology with all the human sciences. Given that symbols are profoundly at work in every activity of human life, in every social sphere, and in every academic discipline, and given that symbols have the capacity to interact with other symbols across any of these boundaries, aesthetic sensitivity in theology would likely contribute to any of interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, interreligious efforts.

⁶¹H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Gift of the Catholic Vision,” in *“The Responsibility of the Church for Society” and Other Essays by H. Richard Niebuhr*, ed. Kristine A. Culp (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 108-9.

This dissertation, however, addresses the effort to relate faith and culture in the context of cultural and religious pluralism. By providing the theoretical foundation for this effort, it envisions future work to be carried out primarily by churches. For the church, it is imperative that the multicultural and interreligious context in which we do all that we do is not only taken seriously, but also faced with confidence and trust in the God to whom all things are in benevolent relation. With a trusting disposition and an open orientation, churches can engage with religious and cultural communities different from their own as well as with individuals and families who are intimately familiar with the challenge of negotiating their multicultural and interreligious loyalties. Together they can identify the source of tensions and conflicts in these relationships and bring into relief the structure of their faith. At this point the new work and new inquiry must begin. Rather than reverting to a defensive stance, which will inevitably result in symbols once revelatory falling by the wayside, together they can probe more deeply into the symbols that have remained alive and effective in their lives. They can identify the symbols that have helped them or hindered them to make sense of their multicultural and interreligious commitments. They can discover which symbols from other cultural and religious communities resonate with them and have revelatory power and which symbols need to be discarded. The proliferation of new experiences and new relationships calls for the reinterpretation of the symbols we engage, and in turn the symbols help us to interpret our experiences and relationships in new ways. This is the ongoing reformation that Niebuhr had in mind for the church. Likely, as Niebuhr recognized, the greatest challenge for the church will be to abide by a confessional approach by which the reformation is undertaken not ultimately for the sake of

personal, interpersonal, and church integrity, but rather for the sake of human community and our need to communicate with one another about God.⁶²

⁶²H. Richard Niebuhr, "Toward New Symbols," *The Cole Lectures, in Theology, History, and Culture: Major Unpublished Writings*, 33: "Of this, however, I think we can be certain, that a new religious language and a new symbolism do not in the first place grow out of our need to communicate to our fellowmen something we already know but out of our encounter and communication with the actuality, with the reality of our own existence in, with, before God – in all of our searching out of what we do not yet know but experience in twilight, sense as present, recognize as inescapably there and still have no word for it."

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