

Truth and Politics at 1930s Union Seminary

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Introduction

Union Theological Seminary has long been a home for public intellectuals and social critics, but its place in the intellectual history of the United States has not been well-explored. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the seminary students and faculty, from Walter Rauschenbusch to Reinhold Niebuhr, in addition to its Columbia University neighbors like John Dewey, made it an important site for the exchange and development of ideas. This thesis will examine the intellectual and social life of Union Seminary during a period that proved transformative both for the institution itself and for 20th-century American history: the 1930s.

Union was founded in 1836 as a Presbyterian seminary meant to serve the cities of New York and Brooklyn, but soon expanded its sphere of influence. Its founders sought to provide “a full and thorough education” so as “to furnish a supply of well-educated and pious ministers of correct principles to preach the Gospel to every creature”¹ In other words, Union was founded to disseminate knowledge in both the immediate and long-term. It was meant to provide religious knowledge to future ministers so they can go on to provide it to others.²

The exact theological content of this religious knowledge changed over time. In its first hundred years, Union, and American liberal theology in general, borrowed a great deal from German thinkers. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, Albrecht Ritschl developed a systematic theology around the concept of the “kingdom of God,” claiming that the primary concern of Christ’s teaching was not the salvation of individual souls but the uplifting of

¹ Articles 3 and 1, respectively, of the Preamble to the Charter of Union Seminary

² Robert Handy, *A History of Union Theological Seminary in New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) is the most comprehensive institutional history of Union. George Prentiss, *The Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York: Historical and Biographical Sketches of its First Fifty Years* (1889) and Henry Sloane Coffin, *A Half Century of Union Theological Seminary: An Informal History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1954) also provide institutional and social histories of Union during the period discussed here.

communities. He and his student Adolf Harnack were important influences on American theologians who trained in Germany, most notably Walter Rauschenbusch. Rauschenbusch led the Social Gospel movement in American theology, which stressed the idea of the “Kingdom of God” as Ritschl did. According to Rauschenbusch’s Social Gospel theology, the essential purpose of Christianity is to transform human society into the kingdom of God by regenerating all human relations and reconstructing them”³ by caring for the poor and combatting inequality. Teachers and students at Union took these lessons to heart; their writings are littered with references to Rauschenbusch and the “kingdom of God.”⁴

Around the turn of the twentieth century, Pragmatism became the predominant school in American philosophy, and influenced the ways in which theologians at Union Seminary thought about truth, religion, and education. For the purposes of this thesis, three aspects of Pragmatism are of particular importance: William James’s view of truth, his writings on religious experience, and John Dewey’s philosophy of education. According to James, “ideas become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relations with other parts of our experience.”⁵ James related truth to usefulness; ideas which best make sense of one’s perceptions of the world, and help one act in the world, can rightly be called true. Ideas emerge from practical perceptions of

³ Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, quoted in Coffin, *Half Century of Union*, pg. 183

⁴ Gary Dorrien is the leading scholar on the history of American liberal theology. For information on Rauschenbusch and the American Social Gospel movement, see the second volume of his *The Making of American Liberal Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989). Johannes Zachhuber, *Theology as Science in Nineteenth-Century Germany: From F.C. Baur to Ernst Troeltsch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) provides a history of German theology in the period when it was most influential in America, and argues that Ritschl’s doctrine of the Kingdom of God served to integrate theology with modern scientific knowledge. Such integration was a goal for American theologians in the early twentieth century.

⁵ William James, “What Pragmatism Means,” quoted in John Dewey, “What Does Pragmatism Mean by Practical?” in *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods* 5, No. 4 (Feb. 13, 1908), 95

the world and are validated (or invalidated) by real-world experience. James also wrote on religion in his famous book *Varieties of Religious Experience*. In *Varieties*, James took a sociological approach to religion, observing and recording the practices and experiences of religious people, irrespective of any specific doctrines or theology. In religion, as elsewhere, James gave priority to real-world experience, rather than the specific content of ideas. Finally, John Dewey's philosophy of education also stressed the importance of practical experience. Education ought to follow the scientific model of experimental, empirical discovery, culminating in "the use of the idea as instrument, the verification of the idea, the proof of the extent of its 'practical bearing.'"⁶ The use of ideas as instruments for practical action is a key feature of pragmatist thought.⁷

Shifting notions of truth, combined with the growing importance of Darwinian evolution in scientific thought, led to a crisis in American Protestantism following the First World War: the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. During the 1920s, two sides emerged in a debate over how to resolve tension between Christian belief and modern scientific discoveries about evolution. One group, the modernists, argued for intellectual openness and modification of theology to account for new scientific knowledge, while fundamentalists rejected Darwinian evolution altogether and argued against adapting theology to accommodate modern ideas. Dispute between the two sides came to a head at the infamous Scopes Trial, but primarily manifested in disputes within church organizations, most notably Harry Emerson Fosdick's

⁶ Reginald D. Archambault, Introduction to *John Dewey on Education*, xvii

⁷ Of use in understanding these topics in 19th-century pragmatism are William James's essays "What Pragmatism Means" and "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," his book *Varieties of Religious Experience*, and Reginald D. Archambault's helpful volume *John Dewey On Education: Selected Writings*. For a general account of the historical development of pragmatism, see *The Metaphysical Club* by Louis Menand.

disagreements with the Presbyterian Church, which will be discussed below. The controversy as a whole was a formative experience for American liberal theology, and for the theologians discussed in this thesis. The modernists who fought for open-mindedness in theological inquiry came to occupy positions of leadership at Union Seminary. The debates of the 1930s that took place at Union were, at least in part, over the legacy of the battle for open-mindedness in the 1920s.⁸

In this thesis, I argue that that at Union Theological Seminary in the 1930s, the liberal consensus on the social purpose of theology, which had emerged from the controversies of the previous decade, faced new challenges from radical faculty members, radical students, and global political events, resulting in a new consensus around ideas that Reinhold Niebuhr developed. Niebuhr emerged as an intellectual leader at Union in the mid-1930s, and together with Seminary President Henry Sloane Coffin, he brought together ideas from the different theological schools that mingled at Union. This synthesis, often referred to as liberal realism or Christian realism, came to be adopted broadly across lines that once divided Union's faculty.

The argument of this thesis will have three parts. Part 1 argues that Union's faculty emerged from the 1920s in general agreement over certain principles of liberal education and liberal theology—namely open-mindedness and practical training in ministry—but the arrival of new scholars bringing new ideas re-opened debate over the purpose of teaching theology.

⁸ Dorrien's *Making of American Liberal Theology* is the best secondary source on the controversy, though it focuses more on the modernist side. Other books on the topic that examine the fundamentalist side more closely include George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism: 1870-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), which traces the development of fundamentalism as a movement, and Norman F. Furniss, *The Fundamentalist Controversy, 1918-1931* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), which focuses on the dispute over evolution. A great deal has been written on the Scopes Trial, including H.L. Mencken's notable, if openly one-sided, reports of the trial for the Baltimore Sun.

Reinhold Niebuhr joined the Union Seminary faculty in 1928, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer came to the school two years later. Niebuhr wanted Union to teach its students to conduct social criticism, to develop a 'prophetic' role in young ministers. Bonhoeffer, an advocate of Karl Barth's neo-orthodox theology, believed the liberal commitment to open-mindedness was obscuring important theological truth about human nature. Older faculty members, most notably Henry Coffin, Harry Fosdick, and William Adams Brown, had to defend their liberalism.

Part 2 argues that the 1933-34 academic year marked a turning-point for Union's faculty. It discusses new intellectual developments that catalyzed a synthesis of the various factions at Union, arguing that the political crisis in Germany that caused Paul Tillich to join the Union faculty contributed to Niebuhr's re-acceptance of theology in his book *Reflections on the End of an Era*. It also examines the aftermath of student protests that took place in the same year. Through the events of 1933-34, Reinhold Niebuhr and Henry Sloane Coffin emerged as leaders.

Part 3 argues that the Seminary faculty reached a new consensus in the aftermath of 1934's events that incorporated elements of the theological perspectives discussed in parts 1 and 2. In particular, the personal leadership of Coffin and the intellectual leadership of Niebuhr brought about a general consensus that theology was of social value because the truths it reached independently of social circumstance could provide unique commentary on any social circumstance. The liberal commitment to open-mindedness, neo-orthodox religious anthropology, radical social critique, and Tillich's perspective on the truth-value of myth became cornerstones of the liberal realism championed by Niebuhr and adopted by most of his peers at Union, younger and older. Though Niebuhr's view did not retain the pragmatist view of truth or the optimism for radical social change that was present at Union before 1934, it managed to satisfy almost all the most influential faculty members.

This argument relies on both archival and published sources. I use correspondence from the Reinhold Niebuhr collection at the National Archives and from various collections at Union's Burke library to reconstruct the social history of this period at Union, examining what Niebuhr and faculty members have to say about each other. Similarly, course materials from the same archives allow a glimpse into the intellectual life of the seminary, revealing the content of what was taught in the classroom and preached in the chapel at Union. Historians of mid-twentieth-century Protestantism, such as Heather Warren and Mark Edwards,⁹ explore the degree to which American theology became international in the aftermath of the Second World War. Tracing the intellectual origins of the international ecumenical movement, they discuss the interactions of theologians across institutions. My focus on education, ideas about teaching and preaching religious truth, and on Union in particular, is an approach that has not been taken in the existing historiography.

The published sources are similarly divided between retrospective accounts of life at Union by the faculty members discussed, and their monographs on theology and ethics. Some of the published sources are already well- explored and written about, primarily Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* and *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. These two are of primary interest to anyone who writes about Niebuhr, from theologians to historians to political pundits, most of whom are more interested in his political theology, not in the history of his own intellectual development from Marxism to Christian realism. While I do discuss both of these books for the sake of intellectual context, I focus more on two of Niebuhr's minor works: *Leaves from the Notebooks of a Tamed Cynic* and *Reflections on the End of an Era*. The former was published the

⁹ See Heather Warren, *Theologians of a New World Order: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Christian Realists, 1920-1948* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) and Mark Thomas Edwards, *The Right of the Protestant Left: God's Totalitarianism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)

same year Niebuhr started teaching at Union, and provides an account of his pastoral career in Detroit from 1913 to 1928, while the latter appeared in the pivotal year of 1934. Compared to his more famous writings, they are not particularly influential as works of political theory or theology, but represent important milestones in his intellectual development.

Leaves and *Reflections* appear only infrequently in the existing historiography on Niebuhr. Gary Dorrien's *The Making of American Liberal Theology* and Richard Wrightman Fox's *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* draw on *Leaves* primarily for biographical information and for examples of Niebuhr's social critiques, in particular critiques of Henry Ford.¹⁰ This thesis uses the book for a different purpose; *Leaves* provides a snapshot of Niebuhr's worldview at the time he came to Union. It is highly autobiographical, but also contains commentary on the state of Christian preaching, as Niebuhr saw it. Dorrien and Fox take very different approaches to *Reflections*; Dorrien discusses it only briefly, mentioning it as the pinnacle of Niebuhr's Marxism before his theological turn, while Fox identifies it as the beginning of Niebuhr's departure from Marxism. In general, my reading of *Reflections* accords more with Fox's than with Dorrien's, but while Fox sees it as part of a conversation with Niebuhr's brother Richard and Christian Socialist circles in New York,¹¹ I examine *Reflections* as the product of conversation between Niebuhr and his colleagues at Union.

Little historiography exists on the intellectual history of Union Seminary. Several members of the faculty and administration wrote accounts of the seminary's history after their

¹⁰ For example, Dorrien quotes *Leaves* to show Niebuhr's early discontent with his job in Detroit (440), and his thoughts on the League of Nations and the international politics of the early 1920s (443). Fox uses *Leaves* to describe Niebuhr's state of mind at important moments early in his career, such as his decision to leave the War Welfare Commission during the First World War (55), or his first impressions upon becoming pastor of Bethel Evangelical Church (62-63).

¹¹ Fox describes *Reflections* as Niebuhr's "first effort to bring together his own commitment to radical politics and Richard's commitment to Reformation orthodoxy" (151).

retirement, including Henry Sloane Coffin and Robert T. Handy.¹² Handy's book provides the most thorough history of Union as an institution, but says little about what its faculty taught. By contrast, Niebuhr's thought is well-documented because his place in American intellectual history as a father of mid-century anti-Communist liberalism is well-recognized. However, his own thought emerged from the debates over the social role of theology and theological teaching at 1930s Union Theological Seminary. Retelling Niebuhr's personal intellectual development as one piece of these debates sheds light on the exact ideas that motivated his change, and reveals the importance of Union Seminary in 20th-century American intellectual history.

Part 1

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Union Seminary's long tradition of theological liberalism and open academic inquiry faced new challenges, both radical and orthodox. The arrival of new thinkers and new ideas gave rise to faculty-wide debate over the social role of theology. In the midst of this sudden diversity, the Seminary's liberal voices struggled to strike a balance with new commitments to prophetic social criticism and to Christian tradition. A near-consensus on liberalism had emerged from the fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the previous decade, and almost as soon as it began to shape Union as an institution, new critics arrived.

At the close of the 1920s, Union Seminary's faculty included many of the theological modernists who had spent a decade fighting for ecclesiastical inclusivity and theological liberalism, including Homiletics Professor Harry Emerson Fosdick, Systematic Theology

¹² Authors of *A Half Century of Union Theological Seminary: An Informal History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954) and *A History of Union Theological Seminary in New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), respectively.

Professor William Adams Brown, and Seminary President Henry Sloane Coffin. By 1930, all three had been at Union for decades.¹³ Fosdick and Brown in particular set the theological and pedagogical tone for the institution, while Coffin worked behind the scenes to promote their vision of liberalism, which emphasized openness to new knowledge, concern for the lower classes, and the independence of theological study from any political agenda. This view emerged from Fosdick and Brown's theological education, as well as their public debate with fundamentalism.

This generation of liberal theologians was well-versed in the Ritschlian theology that emphasized the "Kingdom of God" as the central doctrine of Christianity, as well as its American counterpart, the Social Gospel movement. Fosdick noted the influence of Walter Rauschenbusch on his own thinking. He admired Rauschenbusch's "momentous appeal to the social conscience of the Christian churches in the early nineteen hundreds,"¹⁴ and came to believe that being Christian meant taking "responsibility for the social conditions that condemn multitudes to physical and moral ruin."¹⁵ Christianity needed a social dimension if it was to adhere to Christ's teaching about the kingdom of God, so Fosdick and other students of the Social Gospel sought to alleviate suffering where they could. William Adams Brown, who had studied Ritschl in Germany from 1890 to 1892, took to heart the idea that "Christianity must express itself in social terms."¹⁶ In 1895, as a Union Professor, he co-founded the Union

¹³ Fosdick joined the faculty in 1908, Brown in 1892, and Coffin in 1904, according to Dorrien 362, 28, Coffin 1

¹⁴ Harry Emerson Fosdick. *The Living of These Days: An Autobiography*. (New York: Harper, 1956), 110

¹⁵ Fosdick, 109

¹⁶ Samuel McCrea Cavert, "William Adams Brown: Servant of the Church of Christ" in *The Church Through Half a Century: Essays in Honor of William Adams Brown*. (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1936), 17

Settlement on New York's Upper East Side. The Settlement was one of many such 'urban settlements' – the most well-known of which is Jane Addams's Hull House in Chicago – that provided social services and education for the city's poor. The *New York Times* reported that the Settlement "in connection with its religious work has a kindergarten, a library, a sewing school, men's and boys' clubs, and a penny provident bank" as well as organized recreation.¹⁷ In addition to the services it provided the community, Brown saw the settlement as a valuable "training-ground for the students of Union Theological Seminary in the social work and outreach of the Church."¹⁸ Due in part to the influence of the Social Gospel, practical training became an important element of Brown's approach to education.

In addition to their background in Ritschlian and Social Gospel theology, many of Union's older faculty were veterans of the fundamentalist-modernist debates of the 1920s. Fosdick in particular had attracted controversy in the early 20's. Though he was a Baptist, he pastored the First Presbyterian Church of New York City. Fosdick delivered a sermon called "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" which he described as a "call for tolerance"¹⁹ but soon became a rallying-cry for modernists. He criticized as "immeasurable folly" any fundamentalist attempt "to drive out from the Christian churches all the consecrated souls who do not agree with their theory of inspiration."²⁰ As Fosdick saw it, the fundamentalists erred both by their inflexibility in their own beliefs about divine revelation and by punishing others for disagreeing. His own beliefs were liberal enough that the New York Presbytery pressured him to either adopt their

¹⁷ "Union Settlement Annual Meeting." April 21, 1902. *New York Times*, 7. See also "Union Settlement Run April 1." March 18, 1917. *New York Times*, 22 on the Settlement's annual handicap race.

¹⁸ Cavert, 17-18

¹⁹ Fosdick, 145

²⁰ Dorrien, 377-78

confession of faith or step down. Fosdick resisted, and fundamentalist leaders began to attack him. One meeting of New York Presbyterians adopted as a slogan “we have a right to demand that those who serve as pastors of our churches shall ‘hew to the line’ in matters of faith.” Fundamentalists of other denominations disliked him just as much – Baptist preacher John Roach Straton called him an “outlaw” and “the Jesse James of the theological world.”²¹ Fosdick remained committed to openness in his theological positions, resisting what he saw as dogmatic adherence to any one position. Eventually, he left First Presbyterian. Fosdick never compromised on his willingness to compromise. He firmly believed that Christianity had to remain open to incorporating new knowledge, especially scientific knowledge, to adjust to a changing world.

Though other Professors at Union were less directly involved in the conflict, they were no less committed to theological openness. Brown developed the liberal theological view that Fosdick and others defended. Brown’s main contributions to liberal theology came early in the twentieth century: *The Essence of Christianity* (1902) and *Christian Theology in Outline* (1906), which he wrote as textbooks for his own courses.²² Fosdick and Brown disagreed with the fundamentalists, but also contrasted themselves with theological radicals who called for liberal Christians to leave the more traditional denominations behind. These radicals saw the liberals’ ecumenism as “cowardly surrender.”²³ Fosdick and Brown emerged from the fundamentalist-modernist controversy opposed not only to orthodox theological doctrine, but to any form of dogmatism, coming from either the right or the left.

²¹ Fosdick, 152-3

²² As Dorrien explains, Brown taught that “in the person of Christ, he explained, God entered humanity in self-imparting love. ... What matters is not to accept the doctrine as an authoritative proposition, but to experience God’s mercy and love through the saving effects of God’s revelation in Christ.” (29-30) Personal experience with God, not the acceptance of doctrines or stories about Jesus, is the central feature of Christianity.

²³ Fosdick, 166

After the controversy died down, Fosdick and Brown turned their attention to their work as teachers, aided by the administration of Seminary President Coffin. Coffin believed that theological teaching and traditional Christian practices had to remain independent from political concerns. From the beginning of his Presidency, he argued that Union's social role was the training of ministers and theological study. In his inaugural address, he stated that "first, [Union] is a training school for Christian ministers, recognizing the varied ministries for which our time calls ... Second, it is a school for graduate study ... Third, it carries on what may be termed (in clumsy phrase) extension education in theology, offering training for workers in churches and kindred institutions"²⁴ Coffin made practical pastoral training and theological inquiry cornerstones of his administration. In the 1928-29 academic year, he founded the School of Sacred Music to train church musicians in religious history and liturgy. Coffin also advanced academic collaboration with Columbia University and its Teachers' College. A 1928 agreement with Columbia made Union's faculty part of the university's, and allowed Columbia Masters students to study the Bible, comparative religion, and Christian education at Union. As Coffin saw it, Union existed to provide education and training to future clergy, and he promoted this vision without much regard to social conditions outside the Seminary.²⁵

²⁴ Morgan Phelps Noyes, "The Contribution of Henry Sloane Coffin" in *A Half Century at Union Seminary*, 120

²⁵ See Robert Handy, *A History of Union Theological Seminary in New York*, 167-171. In addition, Coffin dedicated a new chapel at Union in November 1929, started a summer program for theology students, and advocated for ecumenism early in his presidency. At the New York Conference of the Christian Unity League in November 1929, Coffin, an ordained Presbyterian minister, was scheduled to give communion at the Episcopal St George's Church. William T. Manning, the Bishop of New York's Episcopal diocese, refused to allow Coffin to give communion. Manning wrote a letter explaining his decision, which was published in the *New York Times*. Coffin, unfazed, offered the Union Seminary Chapel as an alternate venue for the communion ceremony and closing events of the Conference. These events were reported in "Manning Refuses Altar to Dr. Coffin." *New York Times*, Nov. 13, 1929, 29. The Coffin collection also contains correspondence between Coffin and Karl Reiland, rector of St. George's

Under Coffin's presidency, Fosdick's teaching accompanied his own practice. He became pastor of the newly-opened Riverside Church in 1931 while teaching Homiletics alongside Coffin. The two focused their courses on practical training for future ministers. Fosdick recalled in his autobiography that "along with Henry Sloane Coffin and others, I played a small part in helping to make the teaching of homiletics at the seminary an affair of practical drill. We brought groups of students into the chapel, heard them preach, and then fell upon them with approval where they deserved it and with rigorous criticism of their faults."²⁶ Fosdick's connection of education with practice—teaching by doing, and doing while teaching—emulated John Dewey's philosophy of education, in particular Dewey's idea that the training of teachers should be as practical as the training of students. Under this approach to education, "the aim is immediately as well as ultimately practical."²⁷ Union's homiletics teachers envisioned their students first and foremost as future practitioners of a craft, as opposed to experts in an academic field.

Brown was deeply interested in theological education. After his early works of theology, Brown contributed an article on the topic to the 1914 *Cyclopedia of Education*²⁸ and collaborated with Mark May to produce a four-volume study on *The Education of American Ministers*²⁹ written 1928-34. Brown understood "theological education" not as the teaching of theology per

Church, about the event. The episode reveals something of Coffin's personal agreeability and his commitment to ecumenism.

²⁶ Fosdick, 83

²⁷ John Dewey, "The Relation of Theory to Practice in Education" in *John Dewey on Education*, 314. Dewey's philosophy of education discussed briefly in introduction. In "The Relation of Theory to Practice in Education," Dewey takes as given that "adequate professional instruction of teachers is not exclusively theoretical, but involves a certain amount of practical work" and argues that

²⁸ Brown also wrote a brief entry on Union Seminary. His entry on theological education is in Volume 5, pages 582-606

²⁹ Mark May, William Adams Brown, Charlotte V. Feeney, et al., *The Education of American Ministers*, (New York: Institute of Social and Religious Research, 1934). Its primary findings are summarized in May's chapter in "Church through half a century," from pages 251-264.

se, but as the practical training of ministers. His *Cyclopedia* entry discusses the topic of theological teaching almost exclusively in terms of practical training of professional ministers, using “theological education” interchangeably with “training for the ministry.”³⁰ The entry mentions Union as “particularly significant” for being “an independent institution primarily concerned with the training of ministers for the service of the churches.”³¹ Keeping step with Fosdick, Brown cites Union as exemplary of “the emphasis laid upon practical training during the seminary course ... a very large proportion of the student body is engaged in the practical work of churches, settlements, or philanthropic institutions under the direction of the faculty.”³²

The Education of American Ministers contains similar praise for Union, especially in the chapter on “How the Seminaries Conceive Their Task.” The study notes Union’s longstanding interdenominational approach to training,³³ motivated by a mission to train students for a profession rather than advance a particular theological perspective. Brown understood theological education not as teaching a set of theological propositions, but as training future

³⁰ William Adams Brown, “Theological Education” in *A Cyclopedia of Education*, vol. 5, ed. Paul Monroe (New York: Macmillan, 1914). Begins its historical account of theological education on page 582 with “the need of a separate training for the ministry was not at first felt in the church,” “the effect of these [catechetical] schools upon the training of the ministry was twofold,” “the second influence which affected the training of the ministry was the growth of the church.” Second page of the article: “a revived interest in ministerial training showed itself under Charlemagne,” “the school at the palace came to be the seat of the training of the higher clergy,” “it was necessary not simply to train the mind, but also to school the will and form those habits of obedience and discipline which were fundamental in the priestly ideal of the Middle Ages.” These are only the first two pages of the 22-page article; references to ministerial training are constant throughout.

³¹ “Theological Education,” 596

³² “Theological Education,” 597

³³ See page 28, which notes that Union “has abolished denominational subscription on the part of its teaching force” and has thereby committed “to a broader conception of theological education,” as well as favorable references to Union on pages 20, 25, and 29.

ministers, pastors, and priests, and saw Union in particular as a leading institution of this kind of education.

The liberalism that rose out of the '20s became institutionalized at Union as Fosdick and Brown committed themselves to teaching. Under the administration of Henry Coffin, they established theological open-mindedness and practical training as foundations of a seminary education. Students attended Union to be trained, not to be catechized. But as successful as these liberal theologians were in shaping Union's educational philosophy, they soon met challenges from certain professors who objected that theologians could not be satisfied with openness to all views; they had to take a stand on important social problems. Among these critics was Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr came to Union with his own view of what a Christian teacher should be, and what theology could offer society. Union's administration hired him as a Professor of Christian Ethics after he worked as a pastor in Detroit from 1915 to 1928. During those thirteen years, he wrestled with his social responsibility as a Christian pastor and developed the viewpoint from which he questioned Union's commitment to liberalism.

Niebuhr recounted his time at Bethel Evangelical Church in his first book, *Leaves from the Notebooks of a Tamed Cynic*. *Leaves* is a collection of reflections, resembling journal entries, that Niebuhr collected and curated in 1928, the year he came to Union, so while it is not necessarily reliable as a journal of thirteen years, it does reveal his views of truth and Christian teaching at this critical point in his life.

For his first few years at Bethel, Niebuhr struggled with how to tell Christian truth in a way that parishioners would accept. He acknowledged that effective preaching has certain aesthetic requirements. "Religion is poetry," he wrote. "The truth in the poetry is vivified by the adequate poetic symbols and is therefore more convincing than the poor prose with which the

average preacher must attempt to grasp the ineffable. Yet one must remember that the truth is not only vivified but corrupted by the poetic symbol.”³⁴ The poetry, the imagery, the myths by which religion conveys truth are integral to its being, and useful pedagogically, but also corrupt its truthfulness. Niebuhr had to navigate these problems, carefully considering what truth is and how best to tell it.

The ‘leaves’ from Niebuhr’s first five years regularly express his insecurity about his abilities as a preacher,³⁵ and his struggle to strike the proper balance between aesthetic appeal and hard truth. In 1920, he found a solution. Niebuhr shifted the emphasis of his teaching from theology to ethics and immediately gained confidence in himself and a new outlook on his profession. He reflected that “since I have stopped worrying so much about the intellectual problems of religion and have begun to explore some of its ethical problems there is more of a thrill in preaching.”³⁶ Niebuhr had found a way to contribute to his society as a pastor. No longer a mere reporter of theological ideas, he could be a prophet condemning the evils around him, calling his flock to enact social change. Other preachers could, and should, follow his lead for the benefit of the Church. Neglecting the practical ethical consequences of theology had all but rendered Christianity irrelevant in the modern world. Pastors cannot “assume that principles get themselves automatically applied in the world’s complexities. One of the most fruitful sources of self-deception in the ministry is the proclamation of great ideals and principles without any clue

³⁴ *Leaves*, 50-51

³⁵ His insecurity is relentless at the very beginning of the book. The first sentence of the first entry is “There is something ludicrous about a callow young fool like myself standing up to preach a sermon to these good folks” (19). In the second entry, he hopes that visiting his church members will help him “overcome this curious timidity” (21). During a hospital visit in 1919, he worries that “sometimes when I compare myself with these efficient doctors and nurses hustling about I feel like an ancient medicine man dumped into the twentieth century. I think they have about the same feeling toward me that I have about myself” (42).

³⁶ *Leaves*, 45

to their relation to the controversial issues of the day.”³⁷ Pastors could offer valuable social criticism by applying Christian principles to real life, and their congregations need them to adopt this prophetic voice. Pastor Niebuhr came to see himself as a prophet of modern industrial society.

Industrial Detroit, dominated by Ford factories and Ford advertising, was an ideal training ground for Niebuhr’s social criticism.³⁸ He preached against injustices inherent in the city, in the productive process, and the capitalist system. In one 1926 entry, he writes, “look at the industrial enterprise anywhere and you will find criminal indifference on the part of the strong to the fate of the weak. The lust for power and the greed for gain are the dominant note in business.”³⁹ It was his duty as a minister to point out this indifference and lust, to teach his flock that as Christians they could not ignore the vices of their city. This view of an industrial urban center gave Niebuhr cause to critique Christians as well as society. At times, he comes off as extremely pessimistic about the church, calling its morality “anachronistic,”⁴⁰ accusing its leaders of lacking insight and courage. The church, he believed, was not well-adjusted to the realities of modern life, but he ultimately saw hope in the possibilities of pastorship. Through the ministry, one “can awaken a complacent civilization to the injustices which modern industrialism is

³⁷ *Leaves*, 218

³⁸ For context on early twentieth-century Detroit and the importance of Henry Ford, see Scott Martelle, *Detroit: a biography* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014) which uses census data to show how Detroit changed as a city, from its initial settlement to the present day, and discusses the changes brought about by Ford in particular, referring to his assembly line as “the first critical step in the dehumanization of manufacturing work” (73). For another perspective on Ford’s Detroit, see Beth Tompkins Bates, *The Making of Black Detroit in the Age of Henry Ford* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), which argues that the living and working conditions of black Ford employees led to political activism that eventually contributed to the Civil Rights movement.

³⁹ *Leaves*, 115

⁴⁰ *Leaves*, 100, in which Niebuhr’s visit to an auto factory provokes a diatribe on the ethical failures of pastors.

developing.”⁴¹ Preachers can shake the Christian religion out of its complacency and ignorance of working-class problems. Their important social role was not necessarily to revolutionize society, but to tell the ugly truth about the industrial system and the people trapped in it.⁴²

Due to his concern for the ethical problems of society, Niebuhr immediately set himself in opposition to the older generation of liberal theologians at Union. Theological liberals and modernists, he thought, neglected ethical problems and ignored the traditions that could be used to alleviate them. Niebuhr targeted this critique at Fosdick in an article called “How Adventurous is Dr. Fosdick,” in which he “accused [Fosdick] of not taking the theological, ethical or social problems seriously enough.” Fosdick responded to this critique with his characteristic personal warmth, asking Niebuhr to preach at Riverside one Sunday, then pulling him aside to tell him “as an older man to a young man, that we have only one serious battle in our system, and the other battles are secondary. You and I have the same attitude toward life, but our problems are different. I have put one – the intellectual – problem in a primary position, and you have put the social problem in the primary position.”⁴³ Fosdick had fought his theological battles long before Niebuhr was hired, and he had tired of fighting even for so worthy a cause as a Christianized

⁴¹ *Leaves*, 200-201

⁴² Niebuhr’s criticism of industrialism is occasionally very conservative, thanks in part to his Jamesian view of truth. The truth he had to tell as a pastor was not drawn directly from divine revelation, but from the collected experience of Christians holding different perspectives tested by modern experience. On this basis, Niebuhr defends Christian tradition as a guiding light in industrial society. He writes on 138 that industrialism tends to deprive people of “the traditions which guided their fathers and [leaving them] incapable of forming new and equally potent cultural and moral restraints.” Niebuhr preferred the term “experimental,” in the sense of testing old knowledge in a new context, to “traditional,” but admitted that “it seems to me quite unreasonable to proceed on the assumption that all traditions are wholly unreasonable. Most of the moderns who think so are significantly defective in the knowledge of history” (177-8). Niebuhr’s criticism both of industrial capitalism and of modernist theologians was, in part, a surprisingly conservative one.

⁴³ Niebuhr to DB Robertson, Dec. 1 1969, RN 48.13

social order. Fosdick knew how to address radicals like Niebuhr. Niebuhr's attacks on Fosdick stopped after this incident, though he continued to criticize liberal theologians who held the same views.

Aside from personal insecurities and grievances, Niebuhr's views were truly incompatible with those of Union Seminary's establishment. Coffin wrote that Niebuhr "was a test of the genuineness and extent of the Seminary's liberalism, for his views contravened those taught at the time."⁴⁴ The Seminary's Board of Directors and William Adams Brown in particular disliked his decision to run for Congress as a Socialist in 1932 (Niebuhr's sole foray into electoral politics).⁴⁵ For Union's liberal establishment, Niebuhr too closely resembled the radicals of the 1920s. Niebuhr expected more than priestly training from Union; he wanted Union to take a prophetic stand against oppressive social systems.

During the Fall 1931 term, Niebuhr wrote almost daily to his fiancé, Ursula Keppel-Compton, giving her frequent updates on nearly every aspect of his life. She had been Union's English Fellow during the previous academic year, so she knew the faculty, and Niebuhr did not shy away from divulging his honest opinions. His letters reveal that the insecurity he felt as a pastor returned. Writing about a sermon he delivered at Union's chapel, he told Ursula "to my consternation [Professor] Foakes Jackson showed up at church and disconcerted me by his presence. Fortunately it looked as if he slept through the sermon but appearances may be deceiving. The old boy may have been wide awake and known what a terrible discourse it was."⁴⁶ Adding to his intellectual disagreement with colleagues, Niebuhr felt insecure in his new

⁴⁴ Coffin, 149

⁴⁵ See Fox, 134-36

⁴⁶ Niebuhr to Ursula Keppel-Compton, Oct. 18 1931, RN.58.5. There are many other instances of Niebuhr questioning his ability as a UTS teacher, including his letters of July 26 – "I seem to have lost the capacity for consistent thought and the stuff I write sounds so banal after it is on

position. In times of stress he often let Professor Harry Ward, his fellow Professor of Ethics, take the lead.

Ward was the most politically radical faculty member at Union, even more so than Niebuhr. He had, by the time Niebuhr arrived, taught at Union for a full decade and consistently voiced concern that Christians were insufficiently sensitive to the inherent immorality of industrial capitalism. Ward, following the most revolutionary strand of Social Gospel theology, believed that Christianity demanded an egalitarian economic system. In his 1914 book *The Church and Social Service* in the United States, he wrote that “those who were laboring to apply the gospel to the whole of life, found that it must reach out and transform the surroundings as well as the people; that if it was to be effective in individual life, it must also reach the social, industrial and political conditions which were so largely affecting life.”⁴⁷ Ward saw radical change, even revolution, as a viable method to spread Christian principles. He believed that “political freedom depends upon the removal of existing social inequalities.”⁴⁸ Coffin remembered Ward as an “attached disciple”⁴⁹ of the Bolsheviks who only became more radical over time, attacking theological and political liberalism as “outworn and impotent.”⁵⁰ By 1931, Niebuhr sensed that Ward “is a complete communist by now and says that nothing he reads from

paper that I throw it into the fire,” September 24 – “I find it difficult to concentrate upon my work and I suppose I will do horrible stuff in the next months,” and November 11 – “I am getting back to study Egyptian, Chinese and Indian religion and ethics. Wish I knew something about those subjects. I just don’t. I’ll scratch the surface and bluff my way through.”

⁴⁷ Harry F. Ward, “The Church and Social Service” in *The Harry F. Ward Sampler: a selection from his writings 1914-1963*, ed. Annette T. Rubinstein (Ardsley, New York: The Methodist Federation for Social Action, 1963), 6

⁴⁸ Ward, “The New Social Order” in *The Harry F. Ward Sampler*, 12

⁴⁹ Coffin, 100

⁵⁰ Coffin, 101

us, that is in our magazines interests him. It all seems to belong to an old world while he is in the world which represents the future.”⁵¹

Ward, in standing apart from his colleagues, stood with Niebuhr on the extreme left wing of Union’s faculty. Ward was not at Union during the semester Niebuhr wrote daily to his fiancée, and Niebuhr felt his absence acutely. Writing about the mood of the seminary a year into the Great Depression, Niebuhr told Ursula that “things are rather tense around here. . . . With Ward gone I feel isolated and alone.” He found it difficult to convince some “that religious people should mix in political questions at all.”⁵² Such mixing of religion and politics was his very reason for being a Christian teacher, and only one of his fellow Christian teachers agreed. At the same time, Niebuhr knew he could not be as radical as Ward, if only because, as he once told a group of his more radical students, “I didn’t have as much ‘guts’ as Harry Ward when it came to the realities of the social struggle.”⁵³ Niebuhr was tough, but Ward was tougher. Ward set the tone for the radical wing of UTS faculty, and Niebuhr followed his lead.

Together, Ward and Niebuhr committed themselves and their courses to radical social criticism. Ward arranged his ethics courses chronologically; each was as much a course in religious and philosophical history as in ethical thought. The curriculum of his Christian Ethics 11 course began with “primitive ethics,” then proceeded through Hebrew and Mesopotamian law codes, Greek philosophy, the medieval Christian tradition, and concluded with modern philosophy. This historical overview provides, implicitly and explicitly, a sense of positive progress in the development of ethics. For each period, Ward had his students “estimate” the

⁵¹ Niebuhr to Ursula Keppel-Compton, Nov. 24 1931, RN 58.5

⁵² Niebuhr to Ursula Keppel-Compton, Oct. 1 1931, RN 58.5. See also his letter of October 6, in which he tells Ursula “I will certainly miss Ward around here this year.”

⁵³ Niebuhr to Ursula Keppel-Compton, Oct. 18 1931, RN 58.5

influence of each on “the development of ethical ideals.”⁵⁴ Ward presented ethics as a progression over time most explicitly in his discussion of Judeo-Christian ethics. The prophets, Ward taught, expanded a Hebrew law code from tribal ethics to universal ethics, and Jesus developed the prophetic moral ideal into a social ideal.⁵⁵ The prophets condemned Israel for immoral business practices, such as “false weights and measures, adulteration, ... mortgages, interest, pledges, usury,”⁵⁶ and Jesus continued in their tradition while positing his own social ideal. Jesus’s ideal society was based on love, with little or no recognition for property but all recognition for human personality, complete equality, and the brotherhood of all mankind.⁵⁷

Ward taught his students to understand ethics in social terms. His curriculum identified four themes in the history of ethics: property, family and sex, inter-group relations, and crime and punishment.⁵⁸ Despite its mention as a major theme, “family and sex” rarely comes up in the course’s reading lists; Ward’s ethics were social ethics, not only in general courses but in elective courses. Ward devoted an entire course to aspects of modern capitalism that he found immoral, such as the length of the workday and wage inequality.⁵⁹ He taught another course called “Tactics of Social Change,” the first directive of which was to “Become thoroughly familiar with the nature and characteristics of revolution.” The course material covered historical

⁵⁴ Christian Ethics reading list 9, Ward 4A1.3. Similar discussion prompts appear in reading lists 4, which asks whether ancient law codes constitute “advance or retrogression,” and 12, which repeats the same prompt from list 9.

⁵⁵ This is the topic of Christian Ethics 12, reading lists for which are in Ward 4A1.5

⁵⁶ Christian Ethics reading list 12, Ward 4A1.5. Ward had his students discuss “practices and conditions in the modern business world that call for similar treatment” and “the relation of the class interest of the prophets to a universal ethic then and now.”

⁵⁷ Discussed in reading lists 14-16, Ward 4A1.5

⁵⁸ Christian Ethics 11 term paper assignment, Ward 4A1.5, and Christian Ethics Reading List 2 Ward 4A1.3

⁵⁹ Christian Ethics 21, in Ward 4A1.8

revolutions, from the American to the Russian.⁶⁰ Ward was no reformist; revolution was the only method of social change. In using his courses to criticize industrial capitalism and promote radical change, Ward emulated the prophets, and taught his students to be similarly prophetic. He taught students to evaluate each moral system or law code according to its social consequences, discussing the “comparative ethical value of the priestly and prophetic function.”⁶¹ Ward had his students discuss such questions as “how does the teaching of Jesus operate to reduce inequality?”⁶² and “what features of our economic order does the Christian ethic condemn and reject?”⁶³ The social realities of modern industrial capitalism demanded prophets, rather than priests, so Ward wanted his students to practice prophetic critique through discussion so as to leave Union as social critics.

Niebuhr borrowed heavily from Ward’s curriculum. He taught the same courses—Christian Ethics 11 and 12—and used almost the same material. Like Ward, he taught the ethics of primitive societies, then those of “early civilizations,”⁶⁴ the Judeo-Christian tradition, and modern ethics, focusing on Marxism and Dewey.⁶⁵ Within this historical narrative, Niebuhr taught the same ethical topics using the same terminology: “sex and family relations,” “inter-

⁶⁰ Christian Ethics 44, in Ward 4A1.22. In this course, Ward assigned readings from at least four different works by Lenin: *The State and Revolution* (1917), *On the Eve of October* (1917), “*Left-Wing*” *Communism: An Infantile Disorder* (1920), and *Toward the Seizure of Power* (1925)

⁶¹ Christian Ethics 12, Ward 4A1.5

⁶² Reading list for “The Ethical Teaching of Jesus” lecture, Ward 4A1.5

⁶³ Reading list for “The Economic Order” lecture in Christian Ethics 42, Ward 4A1.11

⁶⁴ Primitive ethics, classical philosophy, and medieval thought are the topics of Christian Ethics 11, reading lists and assignments for which can be found in both RN 24.9 and Ward 4A1.3. RN 24.9 contains a partial schedule of lectures for Christian Ethics 11. Niebuhr’s first lecture of the course is entitled “Primitive Social and Ethical Origins.” After a survey of Egyptian, Babylonian, and East Asian religions – inclusion of East Asia is a notable difference from Ward’s curriculum – he spends six lectures on the Hebrew Prophets. Roughly a third of the course covers Greek, Roman, and Zoroastrian religion and ethics. Apart from the inclusion of East Asian and Persian religion, Ward and Niebuhr covered the same historical topics.

⁶⁵ Christian Ethics 12 covers Christian and modern ethics.

group relations,” “intra-group standards of justice and punishment,” and “property relations and classes.”⁶⁶ Personal ethics was of little concern to Niebuhr; like Ward, he understood ethics as primarily social. He wanted students to reflect on ethical teachings as potential “rationalizations of given economic and social situations” and as a potential “creative element in changing standards”⁶⁷ of social and economic relations. Niebuhr’s teaching of ethics did not deviate very far Ward’s, at least for his first few years at Union.

Niebuhr often had to counsel students interested in radical social change. Sometimes, these students went further than Niebuhr wanted, as in the case of Arnold Johnson, whose advocacy for Kentucky miners cut into his studies and eventually landed him in jail. Niebuhr reported to Ursula that “they indicted him on a charge of ‘criminal syndicalism,’ an offense against which some of our backward states have very strict laws and which includes sympathy for communism. Our young men have a curious lack of perspective. Once involved in a social struggle they become so excited about the class struggle that nothing but communism is good enough for them. Arnold was becoming quite romantic about the necessity of turning communist.”⁶⁸ Niebuhr consistently cautioned against association with the Communist Party, but his stance of constant critique toward liberals rubbed off on students, some of whom came to believe that only revolutionaries were courageous enough to tell the ugly truth about modern industrial society. The full extent of Niebuhr and Ward’s influence would not emerge until the

⁶⁶ These four topics mentioned explicitly in Niebuhr’s term paper assignment, his lecture schedule, as well as Ward’s term paper assignment, particular reading lists

⁶⁷ Christian Ethics 11 term paper assignment, RN 24.9

⁶⁸ Niebuhr to Ursula Keppel-Compton, Aug. 8 1931, RN 58.4. Niebuhr mentions Johnson’s sloppy coursework in a November 19th letter, in which he says Johnson “he is working too hard for his miners to do proper work in the seminar.” See also his Sept. 23 letter to Ursula, RN 58.5, in which he notes that Johnson and another student radical “sat in my office till midnight and I couldn’t get rid of them. They are very much confused” about communism and social critique.

student protests of 1933-4, but it began to concern Union administration as early as 1931. After a conversation with President Coffin early in that academic year, Niebuhr began to worry that Coffin “will become more and more inclined to bring pressure against radicalism”⁶⁹ because of Johnson and others. The events described in Part 2 confirm that Niebuhr was right to worry. Despite his best efforts, Niebuhr’s teaching inclined students toward revolutionary politics, further alienating himself and Ward from Union’s liberal teachers.

A third camp entered the debate over the purpose of theology in 1930 through German Fellow Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer subscribed to the relatively new neo-orthodox theology developed by Swiss theologian Karl Barth. Barth’s theology was a reaction against the methodology and ideas of the same German theologians that shaped liberal theology at Union. In his 1918 commentary on Romans, Barth criticized the historical-critical method of Biblical scholarship that was a hallmark of modernist theology, writing that while “has its rightful place ... were I driven to choose between it and the venerable doctrine of Inspiration, I should without hesitation adopt the latter.”⁷⁰ Barth found more value in traditional Christian belief in divine revelation, and took seriously Biblical narratives like the fall of Adam, which he saw as relevant for all of human history. “The sin which broke forth in the visible action of Adam,” he wrote, “we see recurring repeatedly in varying forms throughout the whole story of human life.”⁷¹ Even man’s best efforts and accomplishments are tainted by Adam’s fall, because “by an invisible necessity we cannot do otherwise than willfully and consciously exalt ourselves to divinity and

⁶⁹ Niebuhr to Ursula Keppel-Compton, Sept. 26 1931, RN 58.5. See also John Baillie to Niebuhr, Feb. 17 1935, RN 46.5, in which Baillie says everyone at Union was concerned with questions about socialism and communism.

⁷⁰ Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 1

⁷¹ Barth, 172

depress God to our own level.”⁷² According to Barth, Christianity is not about social experience, or the “kingdom of God,” but about man’s relationship to a just and holy God. Neo-orthodoxy called for a return to Reformation ideas, especially the all-pervasiveness of sin, and salvation through divine grace in Christ, rather than social regeneration.

Bonhoeffer brought these ideas with him to Union and looked down on the American theological tradition. Union’s faculty recognized that his views differed significantly from their own; Theology Professor John Baillie referred to Bonhoeffer in the *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* as “the most convinced disciple of Dr. Barth that had appeared among us up to that time, and withal as stout an opponent of liberalism as had ever come my way”⁷³ — high praise given that Niebuhr, another stout opponent, had arrived only two years earlier. Bonhoeffer saw little value in liberal and radical theology. Baillie asked him to give a lecture on Barth, which Bonhoeffer began by telling his classmates to begin “by forgetting, at least for this one hour, everything you have learnt before.”⁷⁴ He also took one of Niebuhr’s ethics courses, but took few notes.⁷⁵ During his year at Union, Bonhoeffer was far more interested in spreading Barthian neo-orthodoxy than being trained in American theology or social criticism.

⁷² Barth, 190

⁷³ Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 117, quoting John Baillie in *UTS Quarterly Review*, Vol XII, No. 2, 3. Eberhard Bethge, a close friend and in-law of Bonhoeffer’s, wrote a biography which makes liberal use of Bonhoeffer’s own writings.

⁷⁴ From volume 3 of Bonhoeffer’s collected writings, quoted in Bethge, 118. Bonhoeffer’s collected writings, especially from this early period in his life, are only partially translated from German. Bonhoeffer took a seminar with Harry Ward, and according to Bethge wrote a great deal about it to his parents, but I found no English translations of those letters.

⁷⁵ The little he wrote in his notebook for Niebuhr’s class was not very liberal: “Religion is the experience of the holy, transcendent experience of Goodness, Beauty, Truth and Holiness” (118). His opinion of American theology and philosophy was not wholly negative; according to Bethge, Bonhoeffer took an interest in William James, if only as a tool for understanding the American mindset (120).

The leading voices on Union's faculty defended the American theological tradition as more and more students adopted neo-orthodoxy. Fosdick admitted that "It is not easy for a liberal to describe neo-orthodoxy with objective fairness,"⁷⁶ since he saw in neo-orthodoxy the same narrow-minded dogmatism of 1920s fundamentalists. Referring to neo-orthodox students in his homiletics classes, he claimed that he "never had heard at Union such homiletical arrogance, such take-it-or-leave-it assumption of theological finality, such cancellation of the life and words of the historic Jesus by the substitution of a dogmatic Christ. My first contacts with neo-orthodoxy's effect upon the preacher were very disillusioning."⁷⁷ He was deeply concerned with neo-orthodoxy's practical effects on the training of preachers, and could not bear that neo-orthodox thinkers did not share his openness and flexibility.

Niebuhr was fascinated with Bonhoeffer's views, but neo-orthodoxy forced him to be defensive of his own ideas. In his feedback for one of Bonhoeffer's course papers, he wrote that "obedience to God's will may be a religious experience, but it is not an ethical one until it issues in actions which can be socially valued."⁷⁸ Niebuhr responded to Bonhoeffer's arguments in the same terms he had used since turning from theology to ethics in 1920: practical experience and social consequences. Niebuhr was vocally critical of Barth and neo-orthodoxy overall, but privately wondered if it offered solutions to real theological problems, like whether man can know God. He wrote to his friend and colleague Henry Van Dusen that "I grant that some of my phrases are subjective but that is because every apprehension of God is cursed with subjectivism. I know of no way to get out of that except through Barthianism and I doubt whether it does."⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Fosdick, 248

⁷⁷ Fosdick, 247

⁷⁸ Bethge, 119

⁷⁹ Niebuhr to Van Dusen, Feb. 27, 1932, RN 52.19

Despite his private musings about neo-orthodoxy, Niebuhr remained an ethicist above all. The years of debate with liberal and neo-orthodox theologians drove him further from religious teaching and into social criticism. His 1932 book *Moral Man and Immoral Society* argues that groups do not operate according to the same moral principles that individuals do. He criticizes both religious and secular liberals for their naïve trust “that the egoism of individuals is being progressively checked by the development of rationality or the growth of a religiously inspired goodwill.”⁸⁰ *Moral Man and Immoral Society* takes a skeptical view of both religion and education as tools for social change, and is nearly silent on the questions about preaching that plagued Niebuhr in *Leaves*. Niebuhr saw “constitutional limitations in the genius of religion which will always make it more fruitful in purifying individual life”⁸¹ than bringing about an ethical social order. Education is similarly limited; it “is to this day both a tool of propaganda in the hands of dominant groups, and a means of emancipation for subject classes.”⁸² Liberals like John Dewey had too much faith in education as an engine of ethical progress, and religious liberals made a similar mistake with religion. The unethical social order could not be remade by these means. According to Niebuhr, the whole project of religious education was not sufficiently honest about its own limitations or about the problems of modern society.

Three theological camps converged at Union in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The seminary’s liberal establishment wanted to focus the institution’s efforts on practical training for professional ministry, but Reinhold Niebuhr and Harry Ward argued that Christian ministers and

⁸⁰ *Moral Man*, xii. He never mentions Fosdick in the book, but on xxi-xxii he criticizes Brown’s optimism that the League of Nations would bring about international cooperation “in fighting common enemies like war and disease” and that “in our attitudes toward the weaker and more dependent members of society we are developing a social conscience.” The book says far more about secular liberals like John Dewey.

⁸¹ *Moral Man*, 63

⁸² *Moral Man*, 122

teachers had a more radical social role. They believed Union should train prophetic social critics, not simply pastors. The introduction of neo-orthodox theology through the person of Dietrich Bonhoeffer only drove the liberals and radicals in Union's faculty deeper into their own perspectives. The battle-lines were drawn, and would not move until international and institutional crises struck in 1933.

Part 2

In an article reflecting on his retirement from Union in 1960, Niebuhr wrote that a new chapter of the Seminary's history "began roughly with Hitler's accession to power in 1933."⁸³ Indeed, the 1933-34 academic year brought significant changes to Union's intellectual and institutional life. Two events in particular catalyzed the formation of a new consensus on the social role of theology: the arrival of Paul Tillich, and a series of student protests. The former spurred Niebuhr into new intellectual territory; the latter spurred Coffin to take a stronger stand than ever before in favor of intellectual freedom and openness.

Following the publication of *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr's views of the social significance of theology changed drastically. Niebuhr's movement away from radicalism into realism is an important topic that his biographers all address, though generally with little reference to the problem of prophetic truth-telling that Niebuhr explored as both a pastor and a professor. Gary Dorrien argues that Paul Tillich's understanding of myth contributed to Niebuhr's intellectual development in the mid-1930s,⁸⁴ and that Niebuhr's departure from Marxism and re-adoption of theology began with his 1935 book *An Interpretation of Christian*

⁸³ Reinhold Niebuhr, "A Third of a Century at Union Seminary," n.d., RN 17.2

⁸⁴ see Dorrien, 454-56

Ethics. Fox places the shift earlier, with Niebuhr's 1934 *Reflections on the End of an Era*. I argue that Fox correctly identifies 1934 as a turning-point in Niebuhr's thought, and that Tillich's ideas about myth directly precipitated Niebuhr's departure from certain views he expressed in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. The idea of myth as a distinctly religious form of communication gave Niebuhr an answer to the long-standing problem of how to tell prophetic truth that is both realistic and transcendent, both honest and poetic.

Tillich's thought was available to Niebuhr and his colleagues before he came to Union in 1933 from the University of Frankfurt. H. Richard Niebuhr, Reinhold's brother and a Professor of Christian Ethics at Yale,⁸⁵ encountered Tillich and his work during a 1930 sabbatical in Germany, and two years later translated Tillich's 1925 book *The Religious Situation* into English. This was the first English edition of Tillich's writing,⁸⁶ and it quickly caught the attention of Union's faculty for its insistence on the autonomy of religion and its critical diagnosis of society.

Religious Situation is primarily a work of social critique. Tillich criticized modern capitalism for its tendency to stifle man's connection to the "Unconditioned," that is, to the eternal source of being and meaning. Every part of society needs some point of contact with the Unconditioned; the sciences connect material parts to spiritual structures, art expresses meaning, and economics provides people with a "share in the world."⁸⁷ Religion provides this connection;

⁸⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr is best-known for his book *Christ and Culture*. Dorrien provides an overview of his work in *The Making of American Liberal Theology*. Other sources on him include Jon Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr: A Lifetime of Reflections on the Church and the World* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), a biography which looks at his understanding of Christianity and secular culture, grounded in his background with the German-American evangelical church.

⁸⁶ *The Religious Situation* was Tillich's second book. The first was *Mysticism and Guilt-Consciousness in Schelling's Philosophical Development*, which was not translated until 1974

⁸⁷ Tillich, 73

it “seeks to be the direction of the conditioned toward the Unconditioned. It stands in essential antithesis, therefore, to a culture whose fundamental principle is the self-sufficiency of the finite. It stands in essential antithesis to the spirit of capitalist society.”⁸⁸ The capitalist spirit suffers from “the lack of a comprehensive, community-forming religious content.”⁸⁹ It disconnects the historical from the ahistorical, the material from the spiritual, thereby isolating individuals and societies from the source of their meaning.

The spirit of capitalism makes any discussion of the transcendent difficult, so *Religious Situation* proposes a uniquely religious way to describe the problems of Tillich’s time. So as “to speak of the situation of this period in its relation to eternity,”⁹⁰ Tillich must express “the intuition of the Unconditioned in the symbols of the conditioned.”⁹¹ In other words, myth—the representation of eternal, unconditioned truth in terms of earthly, temporal, conditional things—is key to truthfully evaluating the capitalist spirit. Myths do not depend on facts of history for their truth-value, so if they are true, they are true outside the confines of time and can therefore comment on any point in time. “Mythical,” Tillich wrote, “means symbolical of the eternal.”⁹² It is a communication device that is distinctly religious, because it connects the material realm to the spiritual one. Myth in this sense does not denote falsehood, but rather a unique kind of truth that is not true in terms of its relation to material facts, but true in terms of its relation to the Unconditioned.

⁸⁸ Tillich, 122

⁸⁹ Tillich, 66

⁹⁰ Tillich, 23

⁹¹ Tillich, 52-3

⁹² Tillich, 38

Tillich foresees a movement of all of society to a “belief-ful realism”⁹³ that will end the religious crises brought on by capitalism. H. Richard Niebuhr, in his preface to the book, defines “belief-ful realism” as “first of all an attitude in which the reference to the transcendent and eternal source of meaning and ground of being is present.”⁹⁴ This realism acknowledges the need for religion, and rejects secular bourgeois myths, like progress, that fail to connect the temporal to the eternal. The best way to reach a belief-ful realism in modern religion is through synthesis of three existing trends: theological liberalism, a return to Reformation theology, and neo-orthodoxy. According to Tillich, capitalism’s dominance of religious thought and practice “can be surmounted only by way of a union of the priestly spirit of the first and the prophetic spirit of the third of the above-mentioned movements.”⁹⁵ Tillich saw potential for synthesis in the theological movements present at Union, while his respect for liberalism and his exercise of social critique made him agreeable to the entire Union faculty.

Tillich left his post at the University of Frankfurt in 1933 to escape the Nazi regime, and Union took the chance to hire him. Coffin admired Tillich for having “boldly warned his country that the Nazis would crush all liberty of investigation and teaching.”⁹⁶ Coffin expected Tillich to fit right in with Union’s liberal sense of independence from political influence and commitment to study. Niebuhr also appreciated Tillich’s boldness. He visited Tillich in Germany during summer of 1933 after reading *The Religious Situation* and later sent him a telegram explicitly asking him to accept Union’s offer.⁹⁷ The entire faculty was so eager to hire Tillich that, even in

⁹³ See pages 56 and 70

⁹⁴ Tillich, x

⁹⁵ Tillich, 181

⁹⁶ Coffin, 135

⁹⁷ Ron Stone, “Tillich and Niebuhr as Allied Public Theologians” in *Political Theology* (Oct. 1, 2008). Stone was Niebuhr’s assistant from 1966-68 and a Lecturer at Union.

the midst of the Depression, they all agreed to take a 5% pay cut to afford his salary.⁹⁸ Tillich accepted a position teaching Philosophy of Religion at Union, and Philosophy at Columbia, beginning in the 1933-34 academic year.⁹⁹

Niebuhr's encounter with Tillich and *Religious Situation* had an almost immediate effect on his own thought. Niebuhr's book *Reflections on the End of an Era*, published early in 1934,¹⁰⁰ is remarkably open to theology and bears important similarities to Tillich's *Religious Situation*. Like Tillich's book, it attempts to critique modern society from a religious standpoint, it employs myth a communication tool, and takes the first steps toward a synthesis of the ideas present at Union at the time. Like *Religious Situation*, *Reflections* is a work of social criticism, "tracts for the times,"¹⁰¹ in which Niebuhr argues that modern capitalism is old and feeble, bound to pass away soon. Understanding the problems of the current era and imagining a new one requires combination of "a more radical political orientation and more conservative religious convictions than are comprehended in the culture of our era."¹⁰² Niebuhr saw in traditional Christian myths a realism that his contemporaries lacked. Radical and liberal political views risked unrealistic expectations, but "the virtue of Christianity from the beginning has been that it has no illusions

⁹⁸ Coffin, 135

⁹⁹ Tillich stepped back from social criticism in his Union courses. He taught one course on the "History of Christian Thought" and another on the "Doctrine of Man." His history courses spent far more time on medieval Christendom than Ward and Niebuhr's ethics courses did; of the four notebooks containing his lecture notes, only one covers anything after the Reformation. These lectures focus on the development of Christian doctrines about God, man, and the Church (Tillich 35.1) Only the final pages of the fourth notebook cover twentieth-century theology. For all his criticisms of capitalist society in *The Religious Situation*, he left the ethical and political dimensions of religion to Ward and Niebuhr.

¹⁰⁰ The first reviews started appearing in March, according to a list of book reviews for Niebuhr's work in RN 24.2.

¹⁰¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era*. (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), ix

¹⁰² *ibid*

about the world of politics.”¹⁰³ The Christian religion makes absolute moral demands and points out every moral failing of modern man and modern society. For all the flaws it may possess (and Niebuhr does discuss flaws), Christianity is in a unique position to tell the hard truths about modern society.

Christianity communicates these truths through myth. A post-capitalist society needs some contact with the absolute, but “the absolute must always be symbolized in terms of the relative.”¹⁰⁴ Like Tillich in *Religious Situation*, Niebuhr requires a way to express eternal truths in temporal terms. Mythological expression is, therefore, essential for Niebuhr as it was for Tillich. He devotes a chapter of *Reflections*, called “Mythology and History,” to the argument that “meaning can be attributed to history only by a mythology.”¹⁰⁵ Marxists utilize myth just as much as Christians do to attribute meaning to history (Niebuhr quotes Marx, Trotsky, and Lenin throughout the chapter to demonstrate) but ultimately the “Marxist mythology ... destroys the tension between the demands of spirit and the impulses of nature without which man cannot aspire to the highest humanity.”¹⁰⁶ Effective mythology brings the material into contact with the spiritual without destroying the difference; Niebuhr found that Christian myth brought about this contact more successfully than did Marxist myth. Niebuhr’s prior struggles with how to tell the truth both aesthetically and accurately, which he once resolved by telling ethical truth rather than theological truth, re-emerges to be answered once and for all by Tillich’s idea of myth.

Niebuhr’s newfound openness to “conservative religious convictions” found in myth opens him to aspects of other theological views. Most importantly, he began to adopt a view of

¹⁰³ *Reflections*, 210

¹⁰⁴ *Reflections*, 183

¹⁰⁵ *Reflections*, 123

¹⁰⁶ *Reflections*, 136

sin and fallenness similar to that of neo-orthodox theologians. For the purposes of social critique and reform, “the profound religious insight which judges all human actions with the criterion of an absolute standard of love, and finds them all defective”¹⁰⁷ was very useful and illuminating for Niebuhr. The all-pervasiveness and irresistibility of sin in human individual and social life was a truth about human nature that only Christian myth could express, but Christian myth also had its own terms for solving the problems of sin. In places, Niebuhr talks about the advent of a new era in terms of grace and redemption. He defined grace as “the apprehension of the absolute from the perspective of the relative.”¹⁰⁸ In other words, divine grace comes through myth, the tool by which finite, relative mankind can apprehend the absolute and infinite. Conservative religion “in its quintessential character is devotion to the absolute and a yearning after value and truth which transcends the partial, the relative and the historical.”¹⁰⁹ True religion, which comes only through myth, allows for a unique criticism of modern capitalism, as well as the means to transcend it. Niebuhr had not previously understood social problems in terms of sin and grace. This new perspective partially adopted neo-orthodox doctrine about the Fall of Adam in the service of leftist social critique, not as objective historical fact but as accurate descriptions of practical human experience – in this sense Niebuhr retained his Jamesian pragmatism.

¹⁰⁷ *Reflections*, 170. Other references in *Reflections* to the truth behind the Christian idea of sin include: “there is a profound truth in the religious insight which ascribes death to sin: ‘the wages of sin is death’” (31), “whatever the moral and spiritual idea might be, in a ‘world of sin’ individuals would always be claimed by societies and nations for the attainment of their own ends” (108), “[early Christianity] was too conscious of man as a source of evil and too imbued with the idea of sin to trust in a man-made ideal society. Such a society would be established by the grace of God” (126), “insistence upon the transcendence of God and the fact of original sin is an authentic mythological expression of its understanding for the perennial conflict between the moral ideal and the impulses of nature” (213)

¹⁰⁸ *Reflections*, 281

¹⁰⁹ *Reflections*, 183

Niebuhr had, by all appearances, tabled his concerns about how to tell religious truth after 1920. However, Tillich's ideas about myth showed Niebuhr that he could tell religious truths without having to worry about diminishing their power through rhetorical or poetic devices. Religion told itself exclusively through such devices. Tillich had an immediate effect because Niebuhr had already been exposed (through Bonhoeffer and neo-orthodoxy) to one myth that proved immediately useful for social critique: Adam's Fall. His political views did not change much between *Moral Man and Reflections*, but his way of talking about them changed dramatically, and with this shift toward the language of myth and sin eventually came openness to neo-orthodox views.

While Tillich and Niebuhr started a new intellectual trend, a series of student protests expanded the scope of the debate over the social role of theology and theological training, bringing President Coffin to the fore. Administration and alumni came to recognize the extent to which Ward and Niebuhr had influenced students once internal controversy spilled over into the pages of *The Christian Century* magazine. Coffin had to intervene and make his case to students, faculty, and alumni that Union did not exist to advance a political agenda.

Tension between student radicals and seminary administration began when the Agenda Club, a student organization dedicated to "the practical and present application of the general principles of our religion to contemporary social, economic, and political problems,"¹¹⁰ organized protests at Union and elsewhere in New York City. In November 1933, Rev. Henry Darlington, the rector of Protestant Episcopal Church of the Heavenly Rest in Manhattan's Upper East Side, sent a telegram to the Governor of California to express approval for the lynching of two

¹¹⁰ Mary Hurd to Henry Sloane Coffin, Jun. 13 1934, Coffin 1A.1.15

kidnappers. The telegram quickly became city-wide news.¹¹¹ A few days later, on December 3, a group of Union students picketed Darlington's church, holding signs that mentioned the Seminary. One was arrested after an altercation with a member of the church.¹¹² The following semester, the controversy got closer to home. In May and June 1934, the Agenda Club protested what they considered inadequate wages for workers at Union's refectory. They appealed to the faculty, who eventually compiled a report addressing the labor dispute and instituting partial summer pay for refectory employees.¹¹³

The final straw came on May Day, 1934, when a faculty member noticed that someone had raised a red flag over Union's chapel. No one admitted to raising the flag, though the administration pressured the Agenda Club to identify the culprit. Tension over student activism provoked an official response by President Henry Sloane Coffin in mid-May. He wrote an open letter to the student body, to be posted publicly on May 23, which stressed that Union existed to train students for Christian ministry as established in the institution's Charter. "The founders made 'solid learning' a primary goal," but students had pushed academic work aside. Coffin, noting the "exacting demands upon the thought of Christian ministers today"¹¹⁴ that required

¹¹¹ "Jones Defends Radicalism to Union Seminary," *New York Herald Tribune*, Jun 18, 1934, "Dr. Darlington Backs Rolph," *New York Times*, Nov. 28, 1933. The *Times* article reported simply that Darlington "expressed his approval today of Governor Rolph's upholding of the lynching, telegraphing: 'Congratulations on the stand you have taken.'" A much longer *Times* article that ran the following day reported the negative reaction by religious and socialist leaders in New York, including Bishop William T. Manning and Norman Thomas: "Bishop Manning Denounces the Stand Taken by Rolph as a Betrayal of Trust," *New York Times* (New York, NY) Nov. 29, 1933.

¹¹² Herring, "Union Seminary Routs its Reds," *The Christian Century*, Jun. 13 1934, and "Students Picket Church; Pastor Praised Rolph: Two Men, Girl Arrested; N.Y. Recants Approval of Lynching," *The Washington Post*, Dec 4, 1933, 5. Herring claimed that the church member, named Mary Brown, had attacked the protestors, but the *Post* reported that she tore up some of the signs before slipping and falling on the pavement.

¹¹³ Herring, "Union Seminary Routs its Reds"

¹¹⁴ Henry Sloane Coffin to the Students of Union Seminary, May 23 1934, Ward 2.3.3

academic rigor, closed the letter stating that any students who returned to Union for the following term would be expected to comply with the principles of the school's Charter.

Coffin's announcement bothered Ward. In a May 17 letter, he warned Coffin that the message may "invite among the younger alumni something of the atmosphere it seeks to allay in the student body and will provoke a similar discussion in the religious press."¹¹⁵ If Union would not allow students to offer critique, a wider audience – alumni and the press – will take their place, and would perhaps be less forgiving. Ward also warned that Coffin's letter gave a false impression that Union "is becoming only a training school for the pastorate."¹¹⁶ While Coffin may have been perfectly satisfied with leading such a training school, Ward had more ambitious, and more political, expectations for Union.

Despite Ward's misgivings, Coffin continued to preach, quite literally, the importance of academic freedom from political ideology. He delivered a sermon to students and faculty on May 20 about 2 Corinthians 3:17: "Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." This sermon made the case for "freedom to inquire, freedom to speak, freedom to choose their own leaders in church and state, freedom to make their own way in the world."¹¹⁷ The Church submits to a higher rule, a higher way of life, and needs the freedom to live according to its teaching. Church and state stand in tension insofar as the Church must retain its freedom. The state leaves "no room for a church, any more than for a university, which seeks and speaks truth freely,"¹¹⁸ especially in a world where liberty is so undervalued that nations will "vest power in some leader—a Stalin, a Mussolini, a Hitler – or in some governmental agency,

¹¹⁵ Harry F. Ward to Henry Sloane Coffin, May 17 1934, Ward 2.3.3

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Henry Sloane Coffin sermon, May 20 1934, Coffin 2.5.1

¹¹⁸ *ibid*

and let him or it plan for the whole nation.”¹¹⁹ Institutions of religion and of higher learning need their freedom more than ever before, and therefore religious leaders and academics must maintain a liberal spirit.

Two days after delivering this sermon, at an annual alumni meeting, Coffin reiterated the importance of academic inquiry free from political agendas, but included explicit reference to the previous year’s protests. In defense of freedom from ideology at Union Seminary, he drew a comparison to the theological conflict of the 1920s: “you have in extreme social radicalism the same thing as in fundamentalism: they have found the absolute, perfect truth, and know it. It is difficult to carry on a liberal institution in the face of dogmatic intolerance, and this is what we have to confront.”¹²⁰ By invoking memories of the fundamentalist-modernist debates of the previous decade, Coffin attempted to uphold liberalism as the best answer to dogma of all kinds, religious and political, conservative and Leftist. He wanted to preserve a frame of mind that could allow for illiberal voices without itself being illiberal. Such openness could only exist at Union as long as its students “do what they liked as individuals, but ... not commit the seminary by using its name” as they had done in protesting Darlington. The Seminary would permit and empower its students to inquire, to speak, to make their way in the world, but Coffin could not allow student radicals to implicate the Seminary in their controversial activity. For the most part, he remained non-partisan, maintaining that his opposition to radicalism stemmed from a general commitment to open-mindedness. However, he did take one sarcastic jab at the students’ preferred ideology; at one point in the speech he smiled and said “they can’t make this seminary the guinea pig for some future Soviet.”¹²¹ This remark, and Coffin’s entire speech, prompted the

¹¹⁹ *ibid*

¹²⁰ "Union Seminary to Curb Radicals," *New York Times*, May 23, 1934

¹²¹ *ibid*

very reaction from alumni and press that Ward had predicted. Left-leaning alumni did not let Coffin go unchallenged.

Coffin's speech caught the attention of one 1913 graduate of Union, Hubert Herring, who was not present for the alumni meeting but contacted Coffin to express his "sense of joy in observing the evidences of social concern"¹²² on the part of Seminary students and to request a transcript of Coffin's speech. Herring refused to believe that Coffin would discourage advocacy for a new social order. Coffin replied with a summary of the concerns he expressed in his address, while making clear his sympathy "with students who felt that the present economic and social system was wrong."¹²³ As much as he understood the desire for reform, he would not allow students to involve the Seminary in their political activism. Union existed not for a political agenda, but for the pursuit of theological truth with a "generous open-minded attitude"¹²⁴ that was not easily compatible with communism. The preservation of Union's liberal spirit was of primary importance; the Seminary could tolerate illiberal views, but never adopt or promote them.

Dissatisfied with Coffin's response, Herring wrote an article for the June 13 issue of *The Christian Century* entitled "Union Seminary Routs its Reds" on the recent wave of protests. Herring openly defended the students and criticized Coffin as inflexible in his response to their series of well-intentioned "stunts." He found the students remarkable for their social awareness, if somewhat immature in their actions. Disagreement over political activism, Herring realized, was fundamentally a disagreement about the purpose of Union Seminary in which the students and administration took opposite sides. "The students in Union," he wrote, "are frankly troubled.

¹²² Hubert Herring to Henry Sloane Coffin, May 24 1934, Coffin 1A.1.15

¹²³ Henry Sloane Coffin to Hubert Herring, May 25 1934, Series 1A.1.15

¹²⁴ *ibid*

They believe that the present administration is more concerned to turn out priests than prophets.”¹²⁵ Union Seminary could best contribute to broader society by training prophets who would identify problems and call for change. Herring also wrote a short letter, published in the Century alongside his article, calling for Union alumni to write to President Coffin expressing their distaste for his actions.

The majority of alumni who responded to Herring’s call expressed support for Coffin’s administration, though not necessarily for his vision of the Seminary. By and large, those who wrote were relatively young; very few attended Union before 1910, and the majority had graduated since 1920, so many of them were familiar with faculty and ongoing debates at the Seminary. Like Herring, they discerned that administrative response to student protests rested on assumptions of what Union Seminary had to contribute to broader society. Herring’s remark about Union administration prioritizing the training of priests over the training of prophets struck a chord; contrast between priesthood and prophecy is a common theme in the letters, and nearly every alumnus who mentioned this contrast insisted on the importance of prophecy.

Prophecy, in their view, meant both radical social critique and the real-world application of Christian principles. According to Amy Blanche Greene (1918), the world desperately needed “men and women who not only see clearly what is happening in our social and economic life but are able to point the way to a truer application of the fundamental principles of Jesus’ teaching.”¹²⁶ In keeping with the Social Gospel tradition, Greene understood the application of Jesus’ teaching as social and economic reform. Union had taught students this understanding of

¹²⁵ Hubert Herring, “Union Seminary Routs its Reds”

¹²⁶ Amy Blanche Greene to Henry Sloane Coffin, Jun. 25 1934, Coffin 1A.1.15. The year each alumnus graduated from Union is given in parentheses. Some alumni provided their year of graduation in their letters; the rest were listed in *Alumni Catalogue of the Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, 1836-1936*. (New York: Union Theological Seminary, 1937)

prophecy, as S. Ralph Harlow (1912) wrote: “Union taught me that Jesus was a revolutionist, never a theologian or an ecclesiastic.”¹²⁷ The ethical application of Christian teaching, in both the personal and social spheres, was of primary concern to Union’s alumni, and most defined such application as prophetic. Union Seminary, they agreed, existed to train prophets.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ S. Ralph Harlow to Henry Sloane Coffin, Jun. 11 1934, Coffin 1A.1.16. Others extended this view to incorporate all Christians, not just Union students. Lawrence K. Hall (1928) believed the church as a whole ought to “maintain a prophetic position in the world” which requires “every sincere effort to give social meaning to the Gospel of Christ.” (Lawrence K. Hall to Henry Sloane Coffin, Jun. 12 1934, Coffin 1A.1.15). Others conceded that not all forms of prophecy are perfectly appropriate. John B. Grant (1899), for example, stated his confidence that Union sought to train “prophets not like Elijah who attempted to reform the nation by force and bloodshed, but prophets like Amos and Jeremiah, who tried to lead the nation in the way of righteousness and peace by preaching” (John B. Grant to Henry Sloane Coffin, Jun. 15 1934, Coffin 1A.1.16.). See also Edgar Frank to Henry Sloane Coffin, Jun. 12 1934, Coffin 1A.1.16, in which Frank writes that Union ought to train priests, but that priests can continue the work of Old Testament prophets who “demanded mercy, goodness, considerateness.” He advocates for priests, but in a prophetic way.

¹²⁸ Alumni were well aware of division among the faculty over this issue. Several letters, by alumni of various ages, make reference to Ward and Niebuhr in particular, including June 13 letter from Alfred Schmalz, June 19 letter from M. Huyett Sangree, June 13 letter from Charles H. Corbett, June 29 from William T. Holmes, and the postscript of June 30 letter from G.W. Goth. Some younger alumni, such as Alfred Schmalz (1928) and G.W. Goth (1933), asked Coffin about Ward and Niebuhr’s opinions of recent events at the Seminary. Though most who mentioned Ward and Niebuhr merely asked their opinion, it was not difficult to assume that they stood with the radical students. Some voiced their full approval of Ward and Niebuhr, including M. Huyett Sangree (1924), who went so far as to state “I can see no reason why the Seminary should not be the ‘Guinea Pig’ for the students who are interested in the courses taught by Ward and Niebuhr” (M. Huyett Sangree to Henry Sloane Coffin, Jun. 19 1934, Coffin 1A.1.15). Ward and Niebuhr’s views were not a problem, even for older liberal alumni, who pointed to these radical faculty members as evidence of Union’s ability to tolerate diverse views. William T. Holmes (1896) criticized Herring for ignoring Coffin’s decision to “continue on Union Seminary faculty Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, uncompromising preacher of liberalism and pacifism; Prof. Harry F. Ward, stern critic of our ‘acquisitive capitalism’; and Prof. Reinhold Niebuhr, prophet searching for a new day if there is one now alive” (William T. Holmes to Henry Sloane Coffin, Jun. 29 1934, Coffin 1A.1.15). Holmes saw Fosdick, Ward, and Niebuhr as diverse but equally prophetic voices, and admired the administration for its liberalism in hiring them. Similarly, Charles Corbett (1906) argued that Union ought to extend the same tolerance it shows in “paying generous salaries to professors who are advocating social change, even at the cost of violence” (Charles H. Corbett to Henry Sloane Coffin, Jun. 13 1934, Coffin 1A.1.16) to the students who hold similar views. Whether or not they agreed with Herring’s view that Union treated students

The alumni disagreed over the administrative response to student radicals. Young alumni expressed support for the students, or at least criticism of Coffin's position. Mary Hurd (1933), a former member of the Agenda Club, wrote a lengthy and strongly-worded letter in support of the students. She expressed her strong preference for those who "picketed Rev. Harry Darlington's church, yes, or even nailed a Red Flag to the topmost tower of the stately Union James Memorial Chapel" to ministers who "write essays on medieval theology, learn the latest pedagogical methods ... and do nothing to identify [themselves] with the persons who in a world of injustice and violence and war are striving actively to build a Kingdom of righteousness."¹²⁹ She was not alone in her repudiation of Coffin's emphasis on academics. Several of them noted their disappointment in Coffin's use of the Seminary constitution to discourage political activity. Huber A. Klemme (1932) expressed "regret that the preamble to the Constitution of the Seminary should be treated with greater rigor than is customary with the Nicene Creed ... It has often happened that the fathers' charter of liberty becomes the children's writ of enslavement."¹³⁰ Their first allegiance, as Christians and as individuals with theological training, was to the teachings of Jesus which, in their view, call for social change. Coffin stifled that allegiance by discouraging prophetic activity among students.

Even the alumni who sided with Coffin expressed similar concerns about Union and the place of political radicalism in Christianity. Many admitted their own radical political views. Orrin G. Locks correctly wrote that "many of the alumni are profoundly interested, as I am, in revolutionary Christianity. We want to see great changes come in Society."¹³¹ Similarly, Alfred

with intolerance, the alumni recognized the presence of, and conflict between, diverse views among Union's faculty.

¹²⁹ Mary Hurd to Henry Sloane Coffin, Jun. 13 1934, Coffin 1A.1.15

¹³⁰ Huber Klemme to Henry Sloane Coffin, Jun. 11 1934, Coffin 1A.1.15

¹³¹ Orrin G. Locks to Henry Sloane Coffin, Jun. 25 1934, Coffin 1A.1.16

Fisk (1928) admitted to Coffin that “I have been cooperating with strikers, even Communist sympathizers . . . but I am glad that at Union while I was there you did not let us get off on a tangent and forget the other very vital aspects of the Gospel of Christ.”¹³² Despite Locks and Fisk’s own revolutionary views, they did not support the student protests. They, and many other alumni, raised concerns about the students’ maturity. Frank L. Gosnell (1917) held a view very similar to Coffin’s: “these students have perfect freedom to follow these movements as a personal matter but they are certainly open to criticism if they try to involve in their sophomoric pranks, the Seminary and other students.”¹³³ The radicals among the alumni did not see the actions of Agenda Club students as effective or strategic acts of revolution, but as immature stunts, and therefore chose not to support them.¹³⁴

Coffin was traveling while these alumni letters arrived at his office, and was therefore unable to respond at the time, but he had already made his position clear. Student protests only strengthened his resolve to keep Union independent from politics. This resolve coincided with Niebuhr’s turn back toward theology, and allowed the two to lead Union toward a new theological consensus. Student protests and the alumni letters that followed made it clear that,

¹³² Alfred G. Fisk to Henry Sloane Coffin, Jun. 16 1934, Coffin 1A.1.16

¹³³ Frank L. Gosnell to Henry Sloane Coffin, Jun. 15 1934, Coffin 1A.1.16

¹³⁴ Others supported Coffin simply out of personal sympathy. Numerous alumni presumed the difficulty of Coffin’s job and assumed that the trustees pressured him to be conservative, while students applied pressure in the opposite direction. Even those who supported the students imagined the difficulty of “mediating between the Bourbons with money and the sanscoulottes with vision” (Huber Klemme to Henry Sloane Coffin, Jun. 11 1934, Coffin 1A.1.15). Most were willing to give the Seminary’s President the benefit of the doubt, assuming that he faced pressure from above and below. Their sympathy for Coffin grew from positive impressions he left on them as students. Frank Fitt (1914) called him “tolerant and far-visioned” (Frank Fitt to Henry Sloane Coffin, Jun. 21 1934, Coffin 1A.1.16), and Edgar Frank (1918) wrote that he “cannot see how any man can fail to be proud to call you President of the Seminary” (Edgar Frank to Henry Sloane Coffin, Jun. 12 1934, Coffin 1A.1.16). Coffin left a positive personal impression on his students, and this impression affected them long after they left Union.

whatever the intentions of liberal faculty before 1934, Union trained students who valued and practiced prophetic social criticism. This was not what Coffin wanted. Students graduated Union with a heightened sense of political awareness, having learned “never to take anything for granted”¹³⁵ and to seek a more Christianized social order. Coffin wanted Union to hold fast to its tradition of unfettered academic inquiry, which for the first time came into conflict with the prevailing hope to ‘Christianize’ the social and economic order. The 1934 student protests forced Coffin to advocate for his educational approach more vigorously than ever before.

Part 3

Niebuhr and Coffin emerged as leaders of the Seminary in 1933-34. Though both held important formal roles before that academic year, international and local events thrust them both into the spotlight. Under their guidance, the diverse faculty members reached personal and intellectual resolution. A new consensus emerged from crisis. Union’s faculty could agree that theology had a purpose independent of its political context: to express eternal truths about human nature that illuminate social and political problems.

Niebuhr led the charge into the questions about religious truth and teaching that he had abandoned in 1920, with Coffin’s full support. From *Reflections* onward, Niebuhr developed an approach to theology and politics that synthesized elements of different schools of thought present at Union. The key to this synthesis was myth, which Niebuhr developed beyond the ideas

¹³⁵ *ibid.* While the alumni credited Union and its faculty with developing their political radicalism, Coffin himself thought that Socialist and pacifist groups in New York were responsible for radicalizing students. He wrote in *Half Century at Union* that the Fellowship of Reconciliation, a Christian pacifist group that Niebuhr led for two years, was the source of “a vigorous pacifist propaganda” which contained “no presentation of the complexity of international relations,” (Coffin, 194) preventing students from developing a healthy sense of political realism.

expressed in *Reflections*, becoming increasingly neo-orthodox in his view of human nature while preserving a more liberal view of truth. Coffin's insistence on the autonomy of theology from politics fit in with the new ideas that Niebuhr communicated in his interactions with his peers at Union and beyond.

Part 3A

Niebuhr's 1936 book *Beyond Tragedy* took a new approach to theology. Though presented as a collection of separate essays, it explores "Christianity's dialectical conception of the relation of time and eternity, of God and the world, of nature and grace."¹³⁶ At first glance, it is unclear how any of these topics relate to Niebuhr's interests in political theory and social criticism, but *Beyond Tragedy* uses Christian mythology to connect the metaphysical realm to the social one. "The essential truth in a great religious myth cannot be gauged by the immediate occasion which prompted it."¹³⁷ Myths emerge in history, but their underlying truth transcends it. Free from the constraints of historical facts or specific social circumstances, myths communicate eternal truths that Niebuhr used to critique modern society.

Niebuhr saw Biblical stories as mythical truths about human nature. Through the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel, *Beyond Tragedy* makes a neo-orthodox point about human nature: sin and limitation are present in every human achievement. The story "expresses a permanently valid sense of guilt in all human striving."¹³⁸ It teaches that human striving is natural, as is human limitation, and that ultimately all human accomplishments are bound to fall. The basest human nature infects all of society; "every form of human culture ... is subject to the same corruption,

¹³⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (New York: Scribner's, 1948), ix

¹³⁷ *Beyond Tragedy*, 27

¹³⁸ *Beyond Tragedy*, 28

because all are products of the same human heart.”¹³⁹ Niebuhr employs this connection between unavoidable human nature and social outcomes in critique of bourgeois society. As in *Reflections*, he expresses confidence that the current order is passing away. Capitalist society “which began by puncturing the illusions and pretensions of the feudal world ends by involving itself in the same illusions.”¹⁴⁰ It is another Tower of Babel that will reach its limits and fall. However, Niebuhr sees the same limitation in Marxism. Marxism’s weakness is that “on the basis of an erroneous identification of human finiteness with class interests it gives itself to the false and illusory hope that a classless society will achieve universal truth.”¹⁴¹ In *Reflections*, Niebuhr saw Marxism as a mythology that resolves too neatly the highest and lowest impulses in man. Two years later, in *Beyond Tragedy*, Marxism is one more human achievement that will fail, and in this respect it bears greater similarity to capitalism than to Christianity. Niebuhr insists, in fully Biblical language, that no human endeavor or political program can break free of human limitations.¹⁴²

This view of human striving bears strong resemblance to the neo-orthodox emphasis on the insurmountable distance between the human and the divine. “True religion,” Niebuhr explains, “is a profound uneasiness about our highest social values. Its uneasiness springs from

¹³⁹ *Beyond Tragedy*, 38

¹⁴⁰ *Beyond Tragedy*, 35

¹⁴¹ *Beyond Tragedy*, 37

¹⁴² The chapter on the Tower of Babel is one of many examples in *Beyond Tragedy* of Niebuhr using Christian myth for social critique. Each chapter begins with a Biblical passage, which Niebuhr uses to make an argument about theology and/or modern society. For example, the chapter “Four Hundred to One” uses 1 Kings 22, in which the prophet Micaiah predicts the death of the wicked King Ahab, to assert the value of prophetic social criticism that retains independence from partisan political interest. In another chapter, “Two Parables About Judgment,” Niebuhr reinforces the point he makes in “The Tower of Babel.” In “Two Parables,” Niebuhr uses two seemingly contradictory parables to argue that while human goodness is preferable to human badness, even the good need divine mercy – there is “an element of positive evil in even the most virtuous life” (pg. 265).

the knowledge that the God whom it worships transcends the limits of finite man.”¹⁴³ The transcendence of God, the sinfulness of man, and the limits of human striving are key features of neo-orthodox theology that Niebuhr adopted in the mid-30s. Despite his initial resistance to the likes of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, he became more measured in his criticism of the neo-orthodox school and struck up personal friendships with prominent neo-orthodox theologians. In a 1936 letter, Niebuhr admitted his growing respect for Barth, whom he regarded “as one of the greatest figures in contemporary Christianity, but that ought not to prevent me from criticizing his theology.”¹⁴⁴ At other times, his praise of neo-orthodoxy came without reservation. He began openly acknowledging neo-orthodox influence on his own theology, especially that of Emil Brunner, a neo-orthodox theologian who split with Barth over the question of whether humanity lost the *imago dei* in the Fall.¹⁴⁵ Niebuhr began corresponding with Brunner in 1938, praising his work as “a great contribution”¹⁴⁶ to Christian anthropology. He later wrote that “I may say that Brunner’s whole theological position is close to mine and that it is one to which I am more indebted than any other.”¹⁴⁷ Niebuhr also became acquainted with Barth himself, and while the two never agreed completely, they came to respect each other. Barth once told Niebuhr “in reading your books, I can see you have read me and learned some things from me, or, of course,

¹⁴³ *Beyond Tragedy*, 28

¹⁴⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr to A.E. Armstrong, Oct. 19 1936. RN 2.12

¹⁴⁵ This debate has been visited and revisited by many scholars since. See Trevor Hart, “A Capacity for Ambiguity? The Barth-Brunner Debate Revisited,” *Tyndale Bulletin*, Nov. 1 1993. Upon visiting Barth, Niebuhr made his own position in the Barth-Brunner debate clear, saying “I was too much of a preacher not to look for points of contact between the truth of the Gospel and the despair of the world” (Niebuhr to Ursula, Apr. 2 1947. RN 54.12.)

¹⁴⁶ Niebuhr to Brunner, March 10 1938. RN 54.12

¹⁴⁷ Ursula Niebuhr, “Notes on Reinhold Niebuhr’s Relationship to Emil Brunner and Karl Barth,” RN 54.12. Brunner stayed with the Niebuhrs when visiting the United States, according to the same document.

it is just possible that you have rediscovered the Reformation as I did.”¹⁴⁸ Over the course of the late 1930s and ‘40s, Niebuhr grew more neo-orthodox in his view of human nature, and more personable with neo-orthodox theologians.

Niebuhr’s agreement with neo-orthodoxy did not diminish his instinct that religious truth must be compatible with practical facts about the world. This instinct led him to connect his religious thinking to current events, and to support liberal views of the historicity of Christian beliefs. In a 1940 address, Niebuhr argued that contemporary political crises stripped away “modern optimism,” and “now that these illusions have been dispelled, it is possible to recognize again that historic religion has a note of provisional pessimism in its optimism, for the simple reason that it takes cognizance of more of the facts of human existence.”¹⁴⁹ Christianity is simply realistic. As an idea, it alone explains the tragic facts of human history; the factuality of its myths and stories is not of great concern. Christianity is like art insofar as it “describes the world not in terms of its exact relationships” but in terms of its spiritual reality. For instance, the Fall of Adam as described in Genesis “is not historical. It does not take place in any concrete human act. It is the presupposition of such acts.”¹⁵⁰ According to Niebuhr, all Christian stories are explanatory paradigms useful for understanding facts about human existence, though some such stories are not themselves factual. This view allowed Niebuhr to remain open-minded, even liberal, in his approach to theological truth. If Christianity could retain its truth and usefulness

¹⁴⁸ Niebuhr to Ursula, April 2 1947, RN 54.12. Niebuhr further recounts his conversation with Barth in this letter to Ursula: “Then he added slyly that he thought I was in my spiritual development where he was when he wrote the Commentary on Romans. ‘I thought,’ he said, ‘that I had to beat people over the head with divine judgment. Now I know they do not repent unless they know the divine grace.’”

¹⁴⁹ Niebuhr, “Optimism, Pessimism, and Religious Faith” in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. Robert Brown (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), pg. 13. This essay was originally a lecture, delivered in 1940.

¹⁵⁰ *Beyond Tragedy*, 6 and 11

without insisting on literal, factual truth of stories like the creation of Adam, it need not conflict with Darwinian evolution or other discoveries of modern science.

As the 1930s wore on, Niebuhr had more opportunity to exercise this flexibility. Christian realism had to account for a new fact—the growing evils of Nazism—so Niebuhr became increasingly insistent on the brokenness of human nature. He spent 1939 in the United Kingdom, writing and delivering his Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh. He wrote home regularly to his mother and sister, expressing anxiety over current events.¹⁵¹ While there, Niebuhr was able to meet with Bonhoeffer, who reminded him of the dire situation of Christian churches that refused to support Hitler.¹⁵² Niebuhr’s Gifford Lectures came at a tense time, and included his most thorough and systematic description of man as sinner.

Niebuhr began his Gifford lectures with the proclamation “man has always been his most vexing problem.”¹⁵³ His first topic was the problems of human nature and their expression in modern society. Modern man “is characterized by his simple certainties about himself”¹⁵⁴ that

¹⁵¹ These letters are in RN 58.3. Through the spring of 1939, he anticipated Nazi action, and noted Prime Minister Chamberlain’s diplomatic missteps. Examples include April 1: “Now either Hitler has to back down or there will be war. The Nazi’s will undoubtedly delay action for some months now and I expect no real crisis until June. But I am making tentative plans to come back quickly if anything develops;” April 13: “Chamberlain’s new policy is not vigorous enough to stop Hitler and Mussolini. If you are going to advance you have to advance quickly. It’s all like the Oedipus tragedy, everyone bringing about what he wants to avoid;” May 7: “One gets accustomed to the international tension. By the time this reaches you we will know what Germany will do with Poland.” He remained quiet on political affairs for much of the summer, until one August letter full of dark prognostications for Europe: “Before you receive this letter the Nazis will be in Danzig and probably partitioning Poland;” “That announcement of the Russian alliance was a bombshell if there ever was one. It certainly leaves the poor communists in other countries in a hopeless pickle. And it seals the doom of Europe. Nazi domination can no longer be prevented. It will probably be decades before Europe will breathe free air again.”

¹⁵² Ursula Niebuhr to Christophe Von Hase, Apr. 29 1988, RN 49.4

¹⁵³ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1 (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), pg. 1. The Gifford Lectures were later published as the two-volume *Nature and Destiny of Man* in 1941 and 1943.

¹⁵⁴ *Nature and Destiny*, 1:4

blind him to the tensions in his nature. Romantics and rationalists fight over the nature of the self, but a “complacent conscience” acts as the “one unifying force”¹⁵⁵ in every modern perspective. Man is blissfully unaware of the extent to which the social and economic systems he created stifle his vitality and sap his agency; “the bourgeois individuals who initiated the age with such blithe confidence in the power of human decisions over historical fate see an historical process unfold in which individuals appear as hapless and impotent victims of an ineluctable destiny.”¹⁵⁶ Having surrendered his agency over history to the structures he created, man remains complacent. “No cumulation of contradictory evidence seems to disturb modern man’s good opinion of himself.”¹⁵⁷ Niebuhr sought to reveal what modern man hides from himself, and argued for a return to the traditional Christian view of human nature.

His lectures proceeded to explore the Christian view of human nature, which Niebuhr saw as vital to a proper view of the self. Modernity has demonstrated, Niebuhr argued, that “without the presuppositions of the Christian faith the individual is either nothing or becomes everything.”¹⁵⁸ the traps of fatalism and egotism are ever-present. Niebuhr identifies three important and unique features of the Christian view: “its doctrine of ‘image of God’” which allows for self-transcendence, its insistence on “man’s weakness, dependence, and finiteness,” and its acknowledgement that evil arises from man’s “unwillingness to acknowledge his dependence.”¹⁵⁹ Christianity sees man as both the image of God and as sinful. Man has agency that matches that of God, but always fails to transcend self-obsession. Christian doctrine of sin

¹⁵⁵ *Nature and Destiny*, 1:93

¹⁵⁶ *Nature and Destiny*, 1:67

¹⁵⁷ *Nature and Destiny*, 1:94

¹⁵⁸ *Nature and Destiny*, 1:92

¹⁵⁹ *Nature and Destiny*, 1:150

asserts that “man loves himself inordinately,”¹⁶⁰ that an inaccurate view of self is an eternal problem, not a strictly modern phenomenon. Through all these sweeping statements about mankind, Niebuhr remained pragmatic. In his overview of the Christian view, he insisted that it be tested by “measuring the adequacy of its answer for human problems which other views have obscured.”¹⁶¹ Its worth and truth come from its ability to solve real human problems, especially the problems of modernity that his British audience, on the eve of the Second World War, knew all too well.

Part 3B

Niebuhr brought his new perspective on Christian theology to his work at Union, and his interactions with his colleagues, especially Coffin, with whom he developed a close friendship. Writing about the post-1934 realist consensus years later, Niebuhr attributed the change not to his own intellectual pioneering but to Coffin’s leadership, writing that Coffin “had always claimed my personal loyalty and respect but whom I followed both religiously and politically more than ever before. I think his thought and spirit dominated the whole Seminary and after decades of Union being the arena of warring schools of thought, it developed an almost unified theological outlook.”¹⁶² Union’s faculty united behind Coffin and Niebuhr’s leadership as the latter began to teach liberal realism in the classroom. Niebuhr incorporated material from his Gifford Lectures into his Christian Ethics courses, and began teaching classes on “Doctrine of Man.” One course on the “Imago Dei in Christian History” made many of the same points as the Lectures, in particular his interpretation of the Imago as “freedom [which] includes

¹⁶⁰ *Nature and Destiny*, 1:203

¹⁶¹ *Nature and Destiny*, 1:151

¹⁶² Niebuhr, “A Third of a Century at Union Seminary,” n.d., RN 17.2

transcendence over the necessities of nature.”¹⁶³ He also taught a seminar course entitled “Nature and Destiny of Man” which followed the same structure and covered the same material as his Giffords.¹⁶⁴ Niebuhr’s views of sin and human nature became part of the curriculum at Union.

At the same time, Niebuhr and Coffin grew personally closer. Their correspondence reveals a change in their personal relationship in the mid-1930s. From 1933 onward, Coffin had switched from addressing him as “Professor Niebuhr” and began addressing him as “Reinie,”¹⁶⁵ the nickname used by members of the Niebuhr family. Niebuhr attributed much of his personal and intellectual development to Coffin’s leadership and patience. Niebuhr enlisted Coffin’s help in his work on the Gifford Lectures, offering editorial advice but in general praising Niebuhr’s work, telling him “I have enjoyed reading these chapters and have immensely profited. . . . You are making a notable contribution to theology, and your lectures will belong with the best in the series.”¹⁶⁶ In his preface to the second volume of *Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr expressed his “special debt of gratitude to Doctor Coffin because of his painstaking work on the

¹⁶³ Materials for this course are in RN 24.12

¹⁶⁴ Materials for this course are in RN 24.13, which includes a course outline which, like *Nature and Destiny*, begins the first lecture with discussion of “the amphibious nature of man” and proceeds to compare Christian views of man to classical and modern ones, then discusses sin, pride, and self-love in greater detail. Themes like “vitality” and “individuality” also appear repeatedly in the lecture notes for this course. Perhaps needless to say, Niebuhr assigned his own book as required reading.

¹⁶⁵ See 1929 letter regarding Yale’s offer to hire Niebuhr away from Union in RN 3.3. In this letter, Coffin addresses him formally, as “My dear Dr. Niebuhr” and uses affectionate, if somewhat impersonal, language – “we all here consider your work a brilliant contribution to the Seminary and, what is more, that we know that you have added to the spiritual vitality of the institution. For all this we love you and want you to stay with us.” In a December 28, 1933 letter in RN 47.10, Coffin addresses him as “Reinie” (the earliest instance among letters in the Niebuhr collection) and thanks him for “that letter of affectionate friendship. I prize it highly.” In the same letter, Coffin tells him “I have the highest regard for you personally.” In all Niebuhr’s correspondence with his brother (see RN 9.15 and 58.1), H. Richard addresses him as “Reinie.”

¹⁶⁶ Coffin to Niebuhr, July 16 1938. RN 3.3

manuscript.”¹⁶⁷ Coffin was greatly pleased by the developments in Niebuhr’s thought, and encouraged his further exploration into theology.

Niebuhr’s relationship with Fosdick also improved. Fosdick’s resistance to neo-orthodoxy and adherence to liberalism held fast, but he came to agree with Niebuhr’s view of sin. In his memoir, he praised “Niebuhr’s haunting analysis of sin – even our best good corroded by egocentricity and pride” and even wrote that the liberalism of the 1920s needed a view like Niebuhr’s; “our thinking would have been better balanced if it had been there.”¹⁶⁸ Elsewhere in his memoir, he takes a detour from discussing his impressions of neo-orthodoxy to defend Niebuhr from accusations of undue pessimism. “When Reinhold Niebuhr presents the desperate estate of man,” Fosdick insisted, “he is not pessimistic and discouraging. He is provocative, stimulating, shocking, challenging, sometimes paradoxically bewildering, but he is not disheartening.”¹⁶⁹ Fosdick’s praise for Niebuhr was motivated by the latter’s willingness to adopt new ideas. In changing his mind so drastically, Niebuhr had proved himself to be open-minded, unlike the radical, fundamentalist, and neo-orthodox theologians with whom Fosdick disagreed. He identified Niebuhr as both liberal and neo-orthodox, but not cut from the same cloth as the neo-orthodox students he criticized. He could appreciate those “who had come into their neo-orthodoxy through liberalism – as Reinhold Niebuhr did.”¹⁷⁰ Fosdick had always been friendly to Niebuhr, despite their disagreement, but Niebuhr’s return to questions of religious truth and teaching drastically improved Fosdick’s view of him. By the late 1930s, Fosdick’s influence had

¹⁶⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2 (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1943), vi

¹⁶⁸ Fosdick, 239

¹⁶⁹ Fosdick, 252

¹⁷⁰ Fosdick, 247

waned—Niebuhr eclipsed him as Union’s leading theologian, and Coffin eclipsed him as its leading liberal—but Fosdick was content to see Niebuhr’s ideas thrive.

Niebuhr grew intellectually and personally closer to his colleagues at Union, with only one exception: Harry Ward. The two became distant as Niebuhr grew increasingly wary of Communism and utopian ideology in general, and Ward grew closer to Communist orthodoxy. Beginning in 1934, the two offered different interpretations of American society, disagreeing in particular over whether American capitalism resembled German fascism. Ward saw the two as nearly identical, criticizing the New Deal as a “use of the powers of the state in the effort to sustain the failing capitalist economy,” which he also saw as the essence of Fascism.¹⁷¹ Niebuhr argued the opposite in *Reflections*: “since the class struggle has not become a fully conscious one in American life it is foolish to speak of the Roosevelt program as ‘fascism.’”¹⁷² Niebuhr became dismissive of Ward’s views, as it became clear to him that Ward was “merely following the communist line.”¹⁷³ Ward’s Social Gospel theology was “caught in the toils of Stalinism under the influence of the Marxist theory that ‘fascism’ was merely the last and most desperate period of ‘capitalism’ in its decay.”¹⁷⁴ Niebuhr and Ward were no longer comrades on the left wing of Union’s faculty. They diverged after 1934: Ward into communism, and Niebuhr into his liberal realism.

The rising leaders of Union Seminary were closely aligned with Niebuhr and Coffin. William Adams Brown retired in 1936, and Henry Van Dusen replaced him as the Roosevelt Professor of Systematic Theology. Van Dusen had been at Union for about as long as Niebuhr,

¹⁷¹ Ward to Keeble, Oct. 26 1934, Ward 2.3.3

¹⁷² *Reflections*, 79

¹⁷³ Niebuhr to Ursula Niebuhr, Oct. 13 1939, RN 59.2

¹⁷⁴ Niebuhr, “A Third of a Century at Union Seminary,” n.d., RN 17.2

and the two were fairly close, though Van Dusen was far more politically moderate. He served as Dean of Students up until Brown's retirement, organized the 1937 Oxford Conference that would give rise to the World Council of Churches, and in 1945 he succeeded Coffin as President of Union.

Van Dusen's view of politics closely resembled Coffin's. In an article in *Religious Education* announcing the Oxford Conference, he wrote that he saw among his religious contemporaries a revived interest in "The Church," as opposed to individual institutionalized churches, and "a reviving interest in worship."¹⁷⁵ Van Dusen saw intrinsic value in the Christian Church and its practices — value that transcended political concerns. Because the Church could speak to human nature and politics as a whole, it could draw together people of different backgrounds from across the globe. Van Dusen notes in this essay that "men's minds, their consciences and even their lives are more and more conscripted in servitude to the nationalistic State," but "freedom of speech, tolerance, spiritual liberty, world brotherhood"¹⁷⁶ must be maintained. Freedom of religion from the grip of the State was vital. In another essay written in preparation for the Oxford Conference, "Church and State Through Christian History," Van Dusen elaborated on Christianity's relationship to political power. He argued that independence from any political agenda had always been the intention of Christianity. He wrote that Jesus's teaching was "a rejection of the identification of Church and State" and "an assertion of the independence of religion."¹⁷⁷ He acknowledged that historically, Church and State were often

¹⁷⁵ Henry Pitney Van Dusen, "The Church-and the World Crisis," *Religious Education* 32, no. 2, pg. 104

¹⁷⁶ *ibid*, 105

¹⁷⁷ Henry Pitney Van Dusen et al., *Church and State in the Modern World* (New York: Harper & brothers, 1937), 10

intertwined, and that political powers ought to recognize “the essential importance of religion, for national life,”¹⁷⁸ but he insisted that they also respect the autonomy of religion.

Another important proponent of Union’s post-1934 liberal realism was John Bennett, who became President of Union after Van Dusen.¹⁷⁹ He agreed with Niebuhr and Coffin that “Christianity is not an economic program”¹⁸⁰ but rather “an interpretation of life... by which all economic programs must be tested.”¹⁸¹ Christianity alone could act as an interpreter of practical human experience. Religion, he wrote, is a question of “following the demands of rigorous thought in the interpretation of both man and nature.”¹⁸² Bennett saw religion as interpretive, rather than prescriptive; it provides a language for understanding human nature, not a program for fixing it. Bennett also agreed that Christianity was more realistic than any political ideology. “In recognizing this inevitable human situation, Christianity is not only more realistic than communism; it also insures the existence within the society of the future of a standard, an ideal, which will judge that society as it judges our own.”¹⁸³ It strikes an important balance: providing an eternal moral ideal without a utopian vision of society.¹⁸⁴ Christianity’s social prophetic role is of eternal value, never beholden to specific political circumstances.

¹⁷⁸ *Church and State*, 39

¹⁷⁹ Bennett began his teaching career at Union in 1927, then left in 1930 for Auburn Theological Seminary, returning to Union in 1943.

¹⁸⁰ John C. Bennett, *Christianity—and our World* (New York: Association Press, 1936), pg. 39

¹⁸¹ Bennett, 40. On the next page, Bennett says “Christianity is in contradiction with some forms of economic life but that it does not imply any particular economic system,” that is, the value of Christianity is that it points out problems, not solutions.

¹⁸² Bennett, 15-16

¹⁸³ Bennett, 16

¹⁸⁴ In the preface to his book *Christian Realism*, Bennett explains why he uses the term “realism,” writing that “Christianity avoids the illusions of both the optimists and the pessimists. I believe that the liberal optimism of the past generation and the theologians who deduce their view of human possibilities from a dogma of original sin which goes beyond the evidence are both wrong.” (pg. x)

Niebuhr's intellectual leadership, with Coffin's support, brought the faculty together. Coffin's values and Niebuhr's ideas developed the next generation of Union's institutional leaders. Niebuhr had emerged from the shadow of Ward on the radical wing of UTS faculty, adopted Tillich's ideas, but then innovated beyond them to forge a new school of thought. At the same time, Coffin had replaced Fosdick as the champion of Union's liberalism. His insistence that the Seminary remain devoted to academic pursuits and free of political commitments guided his successors in administrative leadership, and led him to encourage Niebuhr's intellectual development.

Conclusion

The emergence of Niebuhr and Coffin as leaders at Union Seminary solidified and spread the liberal realist school of thought. The embattled theological liberalism that defined Union in the 1920s gave way to a new generation of thinkers who learned as much theology from current events and from European theologians as from their American predecessors. The open-minded spirit of American liberalism remained, but Niebuhr and his colleagues also adopted elements of Tillich's existentialism and Bonhoeffer's neo-orthodoxy. Early debates between these different schools of thought resolved into a liberal realist consensus that took seriously traditional Christian beliefs and stories, seeing them as valuable insights into the social and political crises of the day.

These debates were not merely political; they brought into dispute the very reason for Union's existence, and the purpose of the kind of theological education it offered. One of the many questions in play was whether a theological education was anything more than professional training, a tool for social justice, or a narrow study of Biblical literature. Modernity

has tended to rule out theology, once the “queen of the sciences,” as a true field of knowledge. The place of theology in modern academic institutions is unstable, but in the second half of the 1930s, Union demonstrated that theology could be a field of academic knowledge, no longer an instrument for professional training or social change. A theological education could help students to better understand the world.

Through Reinhold Niebuhr in particular, Union’s liberal realism had wide-reaching effects. During and after the Second World War, Niebuhr had an important influence on American political thought. He shaped the anti-Communist liberalism of the Cold War period, and to this day politicians and political commentators cite his work. Niebuhr’s thought emerged directly from the debates at 1930s Union. He worked with the philosophical and theological resources that Union provided; his colleagues helped him answer questions he had struggled with, such as religious truth-telling and the social value of theology.

Of course, Niebuhr did not bring about liberal realism alone. Even by Niebuhr’s own account, Henry Sloane Coffin’s leadership made possible the realist consensus at Union. The dual leadership of Coffin and Niebuhr illustrates that intellectuals are not the only ones who make intellectual history; an intellectual’s social and institutional context can either stifle or facilitate the development of new ideas. Such was the case for Niebuhr. Coffin was instrumental—not as a theologian, though he certainly was one, but as the leader of an institution—to the development and spread of Christian realism.

The development of liberal realism at Union in the 1930s was an important development in American intellectual history. In the late nineteenth century, Pragmatism and Darwinian evolution had cast doubt on any metaphysical or theological truth, but Union’s liberal realism reopened the possibility of truth beyond the realm of practical experience. American philosophy’s

devotion to modern science and practical experience was not ignored or negated but superseded; in the face of the crises of the twentieth century, it became clear that keen observers of human nature needed truth beyond modern scientific findings. Theology proved relevant to society. The problems of modern life demanded a renewed religiosity.

Note on Archival Source Citations

In the footnotes, I use abbreviations to refer to archival sources. “RN” refers to the Reinhold Niebuhr Papers, “Ward” refers to the Harry F. Ward Papers, and “Coffin” refers to the Henry Sloane Coffin Papers. The numbers following the abbreviated archive name refer to the box, then folder number, of the document. When three numbers, or a combination of letters and numbers, appear, the first refers to a series number. For example, RN 58.4 refers to a document in the Reinhold Niebuhr collection, box 58, folder 4. Coffin 1A.1.15 refers to a document in the Henry Sloane Coffin collection, series 1A, box 1, folder 15.

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