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Nicaea, Council of, 325 AD, the first and, at least symbolically, the most important of the imperially sponsored synods of bishops designed to solve large-scale problems of organization and doctrine within the *church. These later became known as the ecumenical *councils, and tended to take Nicaea as a paradigm.

The occasion of the synod was *Constantine's desire to settle the *Arian controversy, which he found to be disrupting the unity of the churches when he conquered the east Roman provinces in 324. The disarray in which he found the *episcopate was a setback to his hopes of using the church as a force for social cohesion in the empire. He had already intervened in the cause of western church unity by summoning a large council at Arles in 314, to settle the *Donatist problem. This undoubtedly served him as a model. After the failure of direct action by letter and legation sent to *Alexandria, when he had commanded all parties to cease 'foolish disputes', Constantine decided to summon a large-scale assembly. It gathered at Nicaea (modern Iznik in Turkey), where he had his summer palace. The emperor was determined to impose an eirenic solution, by force if necessary. From the start the council was thus invested with the air of a quasi-senatorial legislature. All the bishops were afforded free use of the imperial post-stations for their travel (though very few western sees were represented), and were given other privileges that dramatically marked their emergence from the era of persecutions. Constantine's management of proceedings at Nicaea provided a pattern for the subsequent involvement of Christian emperors in church affairs. Eusebius of Caesarea, the church historian, in his *Life of Constantine*, gives a vivid, if somewhat sycophantic, account of how influential Constantine's presence was.

The council opened on 19 June 325. Later tradition, following *Athanasius of Alexandria, says that 318 bishops were in attendance, though 250 is probably a truer figure. Very quickly rejecting a pro-Arian creed offered by Eusebius of Nicomedia, the council recognized the orthodoxy of a chief defendant, Eusebius of Caesarea, but promulgated its own credal statement (probably supplied in its original draft form by the standard confession of the church of Jerusalem) to summarize its teachings. At Constantine's insistence this contained the technical term *consubstantial* (*homoousios*) to describe the Son of *God's relationship to the Father and, thus, his full divine status. Into the basic creed the bishops inserted several anti-Arian annotations, and appended five specific anathemas (or denunciations) to proscribe all the major points of Arian teaching. Thus the council affirmed a realist hermeneutic of the biblical analogy of Sonship and *Fatherhood. Explicating the traditional phrase 'begotten from the Father' the council added, as a synonym, 'of the essence [*ousia*] of the Father'. It also specified the traditional statements on the Son's procession from God. To avoid the subordinationist hermeneutic of 'a god from God', or 'a light from the Light', it added its synonym 'true God, from true God'. The five appended anathemas were designed to leave no room for an Arian revival, though this proved a hopelessly optimistic strategy. Constantine

positively discouraged any clarifying debate on the meaning of the key term 'consubstantiality', wishing to use the cipher to forge a broad agreement on the day. Accordingly bishops signed with varying understandings, a factor that contributed to the doctrinal confusions of the next fifty years.

Despite the importance of the Nicene council, a detailed record of proceedings (if there ever was one) did not survive. Historians have only a random collection of letters, indirect testimonies, and later accounts of what happened. The reliability of various sources is a problem. Accounts by ancient historians (some eyewitnesses, but several from later periods) evidently reflect tendentious versions. A Synodical Letter survives, and twenty 'canons' or laws are also attributed to the council. Their common theme is that of raising standards among the clergy and bringing order back into church practice after times of persecution.

The Nicene *Creed which is today recited at the Sunday Eucharists of many different churches is not the original conciliar confession, rather another creed, a development from that of Nicaea, which was adopted after the Council of Constantinople (381). The council and its creed continue to hold a high theological authority in the traditions of oriental Christianity, Orthodoxy, and Catholicism. It represented, for subsequent Christian tradition, a definitive expression of the inspired mind of the church, interpreting its traditional biblical *christology in new and specific categories for the *Greek world; affirming the divinity of Christ by a 'substantive' hermeneutic of the analogy of Sonship. Today there continues to be considerable debate between Christians who regard the creeds as definitive and propositional statements about the nature of Christian revelation, and those who read them more loosely as *typological or *symbolic guides to the theological thought of a particular era.

There was a Second Council of Nicaea, held in 787. This affirmed the validity of the use of *icons in Christian worship; the veneration given to them being understood to pass directly on to the person of Christ (or the saint depicted). Nicaea II is regarded by both Eastern Orthodoxy and Catholicism as the seventh of the ecumenical councils, but it was far more significant in the praxis of the Christian east than ever it was in the west. It continues to exert an influence over the symbolic and sacramental thought of eastern Christian thinkers.

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Niebuhr, Reinhold and H. Richard (1892-1971 and 1894-1962). The Niebuhr brothers, along with the German-American Paul *Tillich, are often regarded as the most influential American theologians of the mid-20th century. In the turbulent theological climate of *North American Christianity, such a judgment is bound to be controversial. Both Niebuhrs broke out of the categories of the *fundamentalist-modernist controversy that shook the American churches in the early part of the century. The combatants in that continuing struggle looked to other intellectual leaders, but often took account of the Niebuhrs as makers and shakers of Christian thought. Ironically, the two were not in the

strictest sense theologians. Both did their primary work in Christian *ethics; neither wrote a treatise on the major Christian doctrines. But in a cataclysmic era of world history their response to events and to culture had a considerable impact upon church and society, including more systematic theologians.

The brothers grew up in a parsonage of the Evangelical Synod of North America, a church that inherited both the *Lutheran and *Calvinist traditions of Germany. Both went to a college and theological seminary of that church, then continued studies at the more ecumenical Yale University Divinity School. Both were men in motion, responding in different ways to a changing history. Hence it is appropriate to treat them individually, with attention to their biographical developments, before making some comparisons.

Reinhold Niebuhr

Reinhold Niebuhr began his professional career with a thirteen-year pastorate in Detroit, Michigan (1915–28). There, in the motor capital of the world, he met the problems and conflicts of urban-industrial society. He championed the cause of labour in the automobile industry and chaired the mayor's Race Committee. His book, *Reflections from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (1929), records pastoral experiences from 1915 to 1928 and gives hints of ideas he would later make famous. In 1928 he joined the faculty of Union Theological Seminary in New York and, a little later, the Graduate Faculty of Columbia University. Soon America faced the Great Depression, and Niebuhr entered the ten years that shook his world, as he called them in 1939. At Union he met the British fellow, Ursula Keppel-Compton, whom he married in 1931. The two became devoted marital partners and intellectual companions.

In 1932 Niebuhr published his epochal book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. It was a polemic against the '*liberalism' that he had earlier advocated. He argued that people who may be genial and generous in personal relations are often stubborn partisans of their own class or race or nation. He maintained that liberal optimism fails when reason and religion, hailed as the hopes for a better world, become the instruments of power, intensifying rather than moderating factional strife. There was more than a tinge of *Marxism in the book, although Niebuhr kept a critical distance from Marx.

Soon he was urging a more radical politics and more conservative religious convictions than prevailed in American society. That meant a shattering of stereotypes, in which both politics and religion clustered in liberal-radical or conservative groupings. The effect was to disturb conventional thinking and to create new alliances and new debates. Niebuhr ran for Congress as a socialist in 1932, after assuring his seminary president that he would not give up teaching because he had no chance of winning. He founded the Fellowship of Socialist Christians and edited its quarterly, *Radical Religion*, later *Christianity and Society*.

Theologically, he won an international reputation with his address at the Oxford Conference on Life and Work (1937) and enhanced it with his Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh (1939), published as *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Niebuhr's mature thought drew on many sources, especially three improbable partners in dialogue: *Augustine, Marx, and *Kierkegaard. In Augustine he appreciated the interest in the long drama of history with its ceaseless conflicts between good and evil, never to be resolved this side of the ultim-

ate coming of God's kingdom. In Marx he found the importance of the grubby stuff of economic and political history, too often neglected by Christian thought. In Kierkegaard he found illumination of the anxieties of the self in its frailties, sin, and struggles for faith.

The rise of Nazism led to new moves in Niebuhr's political and theological life. As early as 1933 he resigned from the *pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation, of which he had been national chairman. In 1940 he left the Socialist Party, which stood aloof from the war. The next year he founded the bi-weekly *Christianity and Crisis*, to oppose the mingled quasi-pacifism and isolationism of much American Christianity and to relate theology to the contemporary world-historical struggles.

The following years brought a stream of writings on theology, politics, American history and culture, and international affairs. These were slowed but not stopped by serious illnesses, beginning with a stroke in 1952. Niebuhr modified his earlier moves towards more radical politics and more conservative theology, in both cases coming to appreciate some elements in the liberalism that he had once attacked.

Politically the evils of Nazism convinced him that the liberal values of *freedom and tolerance, which he had always endorsed, deserved a stronger defence than he had earlier realized. Simultaneously, the social changes brought about by the New Deal in the United States, the Labour Party in Great Britain, and the social democratic parties of continental Europe showed him that liberal democracy had greater capacities for self-correction than he had once supposed. But he sustained his attacks on the liberal faith in progress and the neglect of attention to *sin. Some advocates of neo-conservatism in the United States came to claim the heritage of Niebuhr, although on the American spectrum he remained left of centre and a biting critic of political reactionaries.

Theologically, also, he reclaimed elements of the liberal heritage that he had always taken for granted. Following the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches (Amsterdam, 1948), at which he and Karl *Barth were major speakers, he entered into controversy with Barth, accenting the liberal elements in his own political and theological beliefs. During the Cold War his fierce opposition to Stalinist communism (involving further controversy with Barth) led to greater appreciation of American democracy, even though he continued to criticize its self-righteousness and urged patience in the prolonged coexistence necessary to avoid a nuclear war.

Niebuhr's thinking, never static, responded continuously to historical change. He characteristically advanced by correcting his own earlier thoughts. But four insights remained persistent throughout his mature career. First, he regarded theological language as *symbolic, often *mythological, to be understood 'seriously but not literally'. This brought attacks from conservatives who took literally biblical and traditional beliefs (e.g. original sin) and from liberals who dispensed with such beliefs, regarding Niebuhr as 'neo-orthodox', although he himself disliked that term.

Second, his beliefs about human nature included affirmations of the image of God in human personality, of the power and persistence of sin, and of human dependence on divine *grace, both the common grace that sustains all human life and the special grace described by the bible and Christian tradition.

Third, he was indefatigably activist, an heir of the *social gospel, but anti-utopian. The persistent fact of sin betrays all utopias, which

breed fanaticism ('hard' utopias) or ineffective idealism ('soft' utopias). But, against despair, he refused to set limits on the possibilities of improving public life.

Fourth, the love-justice dialectic pervaded all his thought. *Love without *justice degenerates into sentimentality. But when love seeks justice, it moves into the conflicts of power that characterize human social life. Love, which is gracious and voluntary, exercises coercion in the enforcement of law and, most poignantly, in armed defence against aggression or revolution against tyranny. Thus love and justice exist in uneasy tension, yet each is incomplete without the other. Friends of US President Jimmy Carter (1976-80) say that he often quoted Niebuhr's statement that 'the sad job of politics is to bring justice to a sinful world'.

At the time of Niebuhr's death in 1971 the political scientist Hans Morgenthau had acclaimed him as America's 'greatest living political philosopher'. The Federal Bureau of Investigation maintained a file of 635 pages on him, telling more about its follies than about him, yet he was awarded the President's Medal for Freedom in 1964. He was widely known in Europe, and public figures in India and Indonesia acknowledged his influence. A published bibliography of his works ran to more than a thousand items, ranging from articles (some scholarly, some journalistic) to major books. His 'Christian realism', although rejected both by ethical perfectionists and by Christians who abjured political involvement, was the reference point for most Christian debates about social ethics. Although clearly Protestant, he sustained cordial relations with many Roman Catholics and Jews, sometimes joking about his frequent political efforts to get Jews and Catholics to outvote Protestants. Intellectuals quipped about 'atheists for Niebuhr'.

H. Richard Niebuhr

H. Richard Niebuhr, after earning his Ph.D. at Yale—a rite of passage that Reinhold ignored—became for three years president of Elmhurst College, then for four years a professor at Eden Theological Seminary, his alma maters. In 1931 he joined the faculty at Yale Divinity School, where he taught until his death in 1962.

In 1929 he jolted the American church with his first book, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. It was primarily a sociological study in the tradition of Ernst Troeltsch, who had been the subject of Niebuhr's doctoral dissertation. It showed that denominational divisions, often attributed to theology, are actually rooted in social realities—in class and caste, nation, region, and race. But if Niebuhr diminished the historical influence of doctrine, he displayed theological fervour in his attack on the 'hypocrisy' of denominationalism. Those who think of Reinhold as the polemicist and Richard as the quiet sage are still surprised at the sting in his attack on the moral failure of Christianity in its denominational divisiveness.

Eight years later in *The Kingdom of God in America* he pointed to a more creative role of the American churches. It was their faith in the *Kingdom of God. He showed major variations in this faith: from the *Puritan sovereignty of God to the evangelical reign of Christ in the human soul to the Social Gospel's kingdom on earth; but Niebuhr found in all of these a *prophetic motif. This book includes the most-quoted sentence in all his writings, characterizing one form of liberal theology: 'A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross' (p. 193).

His next major work was more clearly theological. *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941) acknowledged the influence of both Troeltsch and Karl Barth. Troeltsch, the pluralist, relativized theological declarations, showing their roots in cultural particularities. Barth declared the radical authority of the *Word of God, addressing and judging human creatures from above. Niebuhr drew together these contrasting themes. Revelation, he said, is the inward appropriation of a particular history, which becomes the centre of a continuing revolution in the religious community. Like Troeltsch he found no superhistorical vantage point from which to judge religions and assert the superiority of one's own. But in Barthian style he said that revelation is self-evidencing, not vindicated by any authority, empirical or rational, outside itself. Thus he affirmed, more modestly than most of the Christian tradition, that Christian insights are limited; yet he reached for universality in holding that God, known by Christians in their limited history, is the God of all histories.

In *Christ and Culture* (1951), Niebuhr again drew together his sociological and theological interests. Christians, he said, are constantly trying to relate Christ to the culture in which they live. Over the expanse of history he found five principal ways of relating the two. Between two limiting positions, 'Christ against culture' and 'Christ of culture' he discerned three mediating possibilities. Of these, 'Christ the transformer of culture' was his favourite. Yet he found all five to be important partners in a dialogue that is 'unconcluded and inconclusive'. The continuing quest was important to the man who had earlier described revelation as 'continuous revolution'.

All these works reveal a concern for the *church, not always evident in academic theologians. Niebuhr made it quite explicit when he took leave from academia in order to direct a study of theological education in the United States and Canada, sponsored by the American Association of Theological Schools. Once again he brought together his interests in sociology and theology. The study, involving many people and institutions, produced three books, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (1956), and two others assembled by the team that he headed.

The final book published during his lifetime was *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (1960). Here he modified the radical historical accent of earlier works and, in a turn to *metaphysics, described God as 'the principle of being itself' (p. 32). Some scholars saw here the influence of Paul Tillich, whose early book, *The Religious Situation*, Niebuhr had translated from German in 1932. Others saw the influence of his old love, the American Puritan Jonathan *Edwards.

While friends and admirers were still grieving over Niebuhr's death, *The Responsible Self* appeared in 1963. Many were surprised to find it a book of 'moral philosophy', in conscious resistance to the neo-orthodoxies that isolated theology from philosophy. He understood moral decisions as the acts of persons responding to other persons and to God in an ever-changing history. He sought to chart a path that avoids both traditional ethical absolutism (which generally absolutizes the particularities of a partisan group) and the glibness of situation ethics.

Continuing influence

Both Niebuhrs fell into some neglect in the 1960s, with the rise of theologies of *liberation and diverse ethical movements. Their self-critical pilgrimages and anti-utopianism seemed tame to more mes-

sianic enthusiasts. But with the fading of many partisan hopes came a renewed influence of the brothers. A flurry of posthumous books, by them and about them, thrust both back into the midst of discussion. Republication of their older books kept their ideas in circulation long after the shorter influence of most, though not all, of the thinkers who for a time displaced them.

The brothers had different and complementary styles. Reinhold in his exuberance would seize on an idea, put it forth, then revise or criticize it in later publications. Richard tested his ideas in teaching and reformulated them many times before putting them in print. The two esteemed and admired each other. Occasional dabblers in psychobiography have sought signs of sibling rivalry. Given their searching doctrines of sin, the Niebuhrs probably believed that no brothers since *Cain and Abel have been utterly free of such rivalry. But each dedicated a book to the other. Each occasionally teased the other as each poked fun at himself, and the affection of the teasing was evident to all who observed the smiles and the tone of voice.

On rare occasions they entered into public or semi-public controversy. An example in 1941 was a meeting of the Fellowship of Socialist Christians. Hitler's blitzkrieg had hit Norway, Denmark, and Belgium, made France a puppet state, and bombed British cities. Reinhold publicly advocated American support of Britain at the risk of involvement in *war. Richard said that 'the real issue' for the church was not whether to go to war. It was 'to help the nation to become morally fit either to stay out or to enter into war'. Years later Richard diagnosed the difference: Reinhold was called to the reform of culture while Richard was called to the reformation of the church. A consequence was that Reinhold was the conspicuous public figure, whose opinions were heard (though often rejected) by high government officials. But he sometimes acclaimed Richard as a superior scholar. A later generation would dishonour the Niebuhrs if it fixed their ideas as final truth. Both brothers would rather be known as pilgrims.

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Nietzsche, Friedrich (1844–1900), anti-Christian *philosopher. Nietzsche was the son of a Lutheran pastor. His major writings date from a sixteen-year period of intense creativity, 1872–88, terminated by his lapse into insanity. Nietzsche did not believe in either moderation or modesty. 'I know my fate,' he wrote in *Ecce Homo*. 'One day my name will be associated with the memory of

something tremendous—a crisis without equal on earth, the most profound collision of conscience, a decision that was conjured up *against* everything that had been believed, demanded, hallowed so far. I am no man, I am dynamite.' And he is certainly among the most ambitious of the 19th-century critics of *Christianity; in that, unlike the followers of Feuerbach for instance, he did not simply seek to do away with Christian faith whilst preserving Christian *ethics, but instead argued that Christian ethics are immoral.

He attacks Christian ethics in the name of radical honesty. God, he declares, is dead. But that means that moral 'truth' is also dead—in any sense of the word other than the most searching honesty. There is for him no longer any more objective basis for *morality than this.

Along with *Marx and Freud, Nietzsche has been termed (by Paul *Ricoeur) one of the three great modern 'masters of suspicion'; but he is the most theologically focused of the three. Christian ethics, he suggests, is essentially the product of *ressentiment* (resentment—he always uses the French term). It is the classic expression of 'slave morality'. The primordial form of ethics was 'master morality': the creation of the ruling class, who defined everything most distinctively characteristic of themselves—glorious ostentation, aristocratic pride, ruthless self-assertion—as 'good', and the uncultivated manners of the herd-like lower classes as 'bad'. But slave morality is the direct reversal of this. It represents the revenge of the lower classes, accomplished through a redefinition of the original master-ethos as 'evil' and the opposing herd-ethos as 'good'; and eventually it prevails, converting even the ruling classes to its precepts. Nietzsche's goal is to go 'beyond good and evil' in this sense—not back to the fragile naivety of master-morality, but on to a new morality of sophisticated free-spiritedness.

Slave morality is the greatest threat to honesty, simply because it must always seek to disguise its true origins in *ressentiment*. It markets itself by offering not only sublimated revenge but also consolation. True honesty demands an absolute renunciation of both. Nietzsche's ideal is a state of wisdom in which the very desire for such revenge or consolation is eradicated. And to the Christian notion of eternal life he therefore opposes the hypothesis of 'eternal return'. Suppose you were faced with the prospect of your whole life, complete with all its sources of grief and all its failures, quite unchanged, recurring eternally, could you bear it? That, he suggests, is the ultimate criterion for truth-as-honesty. For only someone who could seriously answer yes, without reservation, would finally be immune from the fundamental discontents out of which dishonesty springs. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* he tells the story of a prophet's wrestling with the true purgative horror of this hypothesis, genuinely taken to heart. In the end, he argues, no mere human could ever fully bear the prospect. To say yes to eternal return, and really mean it, would be the defining quality of the 'overman'.

Nietzsche does not charge *Jesus with promoting slave morality. That is what the *church has done; and the church has thereby betrayed its founder. But his criticism of the original gospel of Jesus is the same as his criticism of Buddhism: that it represents a form of decadent world-weariness. And so it still markets itself with a consoling hope, a promise of release. The 'overman', by contrast, would be fired by a 'Dionysian' creative energy, which simply dispenses with such hopes and promises.