The Emergence of American Neo-Orthodoxy

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Since the early sixties American Protestantism has been undergoing a turbulent process of intellectual transition. During the span of little more than a decade a myriad of diverse theological movements have emerged: the Death of God movement, Process Theology, the Theology of Hope and the Theology of Liberation. It is apparent today, however, that these intellectual movements have had little lasting impact upon Protestant thought. Ironically, the most potent theological force of the seventies has been a grass-roots movement best defined as the New Evangelicalism. This massive shift in religious thought toward evangelicalism or conservatism has been precipitated by a deep hunger in Americans for spiritual roots, biblical authority and experiential faith. It is difficult to predict how long the New Evangelical movement will dominate American Protestantism. Historically such movements have held sway for two or three decades. At any rate, we have certainly passed through an important era of theological transition in America.

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The last major transition in American Protestant thought took place between 1925 and 1935. Then the basic shift was from liberalism to neo-orthodoxy. American religious liberalism was a multifarious movement which can be traced to the ironic mid-nineteenth century writings of Horace Bushnell. Its proponents generally assumed the immanence or indwelling of God in man and nature, expressed confidence in the goodness and improvability of human nature, employed advanced views in biblical criticism, and adopted a sympathetic stance toward modern culture. Although it sustained constant attacks from religious humanists on the left and from Christian fundamentalists on the right, liberalism was undoubtedly the most dynamic religious force in this country during the first quarter of the twentieth century. During the late twenties, however, the confidence and vitality of liberalism began to dissipate and by the early thirties its spokesmen were lamenting the collapse and even the decline of the liberal system.1

By the late thirties it was apparent to most observers that an important transition had already occurred in Protestant thought. In the fall of 1938 the Christian Century, the widespread liberal weekly, asked thirty-four prominent churchmen and theologians to contribute to a projected series of articles which would explore changes in religious thought during the previous decade. The covering letter, which editor Charles Clayton Morrison sent to the prospective contributors, indicated why the series was being initiated. "We believe," Morrison wrote, "that there has been coming, in the past decade, a radical and significant change in the thinking of Christian scholarship and leadership." While some theologians had experienced the change more dramatically than others, "all of us are aware that ours is a period of intensive and profound transition."2

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The "How My Mind Has Changed" series, which the Century ran throughout 1939, substantiated Morrison's contention that a transition had occurred in American religious thought during the late twenties and early thirties. Upon completion of the series, Morrison calculated that as many as twenty-six of the thirty-four contributors had expressed at least a "considerable change" in their thinking, and that as many as eleven of the respondents had experienced a "radical change." The editor concluded that there had been a perceptible shift away from liberal perspectives. Liberalism, which had been "the common presupposition of Christian scholarship" for nearly a half-century, had been effectively challenged and put on the defensive by a "highly sophisticated attack" upon its theological foundations. America had moved through a crucial decade in its religious development. Liberalism had waned, and "a whole new theological outlook had emerged."

The theological movement which moved into the vacuum created by the disintegration of liberalism during the late twenties and early thirties, has come to be known as American neo-orthodoxy. The term "new-orthodoxy," like most terms which designate historical movements, is somewhat misleading. In the first place the leading edge of American theology had been nurtured within the liberal system. Its early formulators—Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr, Walter Marshall Horton, Wilhelm Pauck, Elmer G. Homrighausen, Edwin Lewis, Walter Lowrie and George W. Richards—were all self-conscious liberals who "converted" to the new movement when they became increasingly disenchanted with the reigning assumption of liberalism. While they did appropriate a number of pre-liberal motifs, the converts did not really advocate a new form of orthodoxy. Considering these facts, perhaps "neo-liberalism" would have been a more accurate term than "neo-orthodoxy," for it was more truly a revamped liberalism than a repristination of orthodoxy. In the second place, the term "neo-orthodoxy," seems to reflect an American version of European neo-orthodoxy, also known as crisis theology or Barthianism. This is unfortunate, for while the formulators of the nascent American movement appreciated Karl Barth's critique of liberalism, they did not appropriate his theological prescriptions. Despite its somewhat misleading connotations, however, "neo-orthodoxy" has gained more currency than any other label. Therefore, rather than champion a more precise term, it is best to shape and define "neo-orthodoxy" so that it becomes clearly identified with the distinctive American movement which burgeoned during the early thirties.  

As already indicated American neo-orthodoxy was spawned from within the movement of religious liberalism. In many respects, it continued to bear the liberal stamp. For instance, it appropriated liberalism's social concern as well as its appreciation of modern biblical scholarship. Essentially, however, neo-orthodoxy was a liberal heresy. In a direct and deliberate manner it repudiated much of its liberal heritage and adopted "antidotes" to the essential motifs of liberal theology. Rejecting immanence, neo-orthodoxy stressed the transcendence or otherness of God. Reacting against an optimistic interpretation of human nature, neo-orthodoxy emphasized man as sinner, incapable of bettering his lot without God's grace. And disillusioned with
cultural adaptations, neo-orthodoxy proclaimed that the church must stand apart from and challenge culture.

The transition from liberalism to neo-orthodoxy was stimulated by various social, as well as intellectual, forces. On the one hand, cultural events, such as World War I, the Great Depression, and the rise of totalitarianism in Europe, jolted the formulators of neo-orthodoxy into a more realistic or pessimistic understanding of human nature and the human situation. On the other hand, the Continental "theology of crisis" had a decisive impact on the tone of emerging American neo-orthodoxy. While Barth's theology was not directly absorbed by the proponents of the American movement, all have acknowledged their debt to the dynamic Swiss theologian. Even Reinhold Niebuhr, who had many celebrated disagreements with Barth, later admitted that he was the spiritual son of this giant rebel against religious liberalism. Together, these external social and intellectual forces exacerbated the "internal critique" of liberalism, an ongoing process of self-adjustment which had long been promoting greater and greater moral realism. Thus, American neo-orthodoxy must be viewed as a revolt from within liberalism, which under the sway of crisis events and crisis theology, blossomed into a full-fledged religious movement during the early 1930's.

It is extremely difficult to delineate the "era of neo-orthodoxy" in America. While it did not really penetrate the grass roots of Protestantism until the fifties, it had already lost much of its intellectual vitality as early as the late forties. Sydney Ahlstrom is probably correct, however, in assuming that the movement came to an end during the late fifties. While neo-orthodoxy was certainly a transitory movement, it must be emphasized that many elements of its critique survived the transitional era of the sixties and early seventies. Certainly the neo-orthodox insistence upon radical transcendence, as well as its pessimistic understanding of human nature have undergirded the theological assumptions of today's New Evangelicalism. So, despite the fact that neo-orthodoxy was a transient movement, it contributed significantly to the advancement of religious thought. As successor to liberalism and predecessor to present-day theology, neo-orthodoxy constituted an important stage of theological development in America.

FOOTNOTES


2 Quoted from a copy of the original letter (dated October 3, 1938) which Morrison sent to the prospective contributors. It was published upon completion of the series. See Morrison, "How Their Minds Have Changed" The Christian Century, 56 (October 4, 1939), p. 1194.


For a provocative assessment of neo-orthodoxy's impact upon the radical theology of the sixties, see Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-language* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1969.)