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Is God Trying to Tell Us Something?

WAYNE SAFFEN

The author is campus pastor at the University of Chicago.

The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, because they are foolishness to him. Neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is judged by no man. For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Cor. 2:14-16)

AS THE 1970s BEGAN, THE WESTERN REGION OF THE NATIONAL CAMPUS MINISTRY Association held a convocation at the University of California's Santa Cruz campus to consider "Life Planning." The present article is a revision of this author's discussion paper for that conference. Its theme really deals with the crisis in ministry as such. As usual, campus ministry turns out to be one of the sensitive outposts catching some of the first signals of changes coming to affect church and ministry in the world. It is shared here with a wider readership in a firm commitment to and belief in confraternity in ministry. We share a mutually supportive ministry, and what affects one affects all, as St. Paul indicates in his view of the organic unity of the church. If we aren't hurting, we aren't feeling the suffering of fellow saints and a world in travail waiting for redemption. If we are hurting, we need to know we aren't alone. Dividing into "moderate" and "liberal" and "radical" and "conservative" camps is an attempt to ease the pain by cutting others off. It will not work. It only increases pain without settling problems. It is power politics, not faith. Faith is active in love, and love never fails. Ministry is shared. God has called us for such a time as this to bring the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ, to encourage the hearts of the faithful with Word and Sacrament.

"Life Planning" is a euphemism for the fact that the financial rug is being pulled out from under ministries—special ministries and parish posts—of many denominations, leaving many lying full-length on the floor, considering the existential question: "What shall we do now? We have the rest of our lives before us. That to which we were committed is no longer committed to us." The existential question assumes religious import for us, since it is a religious vocation which is in process of being vitiated for financial rea-

sons. Is God trying to tell us something?

It has long been alleged that religion is parasitic, feeding off the host of a productive people, taking their money and giving little in return, whatever it may promise in an afterlife. This is a crude overstatement, but in our more honest moments we know it to be too true in part. Campus ministers (to cite but one case; medical chaplains or professors would do for others) leech themselves onto another professional conference; in this case the National Society for Religion in Higher

Education. To be sure, the concerns merge. But one is a professional faculty group, Kent and Danforth fellows. The other, a ministerial group, wants to get in on the action. But even the professional group is derivative. It is sponsored by a foundation which subsidized religion in higher education and campus ministry out of American corporate earnings in breakfast food and dog food. Evaluate that theologically in the light of congressional hearings into the nonnutritional characteristics of breakfast food for our American champions of liberty the world around. As a Danforth scholar, it ill befits to bite the hand that fed many of us. But somehow the realization dawns that we are being taken as much as we are taking. Marxists would substitute the more familiar jargon of "exploitation." The unholy alliance between American corporate interests and the church's complicity of silence to protect its vested interests emerges like the tip of an iceberg. In plain words, the church has been bought, sold, bartered, silenced, intimidated, kept. And we wonder why ministry loses its edge or why more radical ministries soon find themselves without funds. Is God trying to tell us something?

Everywhere the parasitic and symbiotic relationship to nurturing institutions becomes evident. Campus ministry nurses at the breasts of university and church. Military chaplaincy nurses at the breasts of military and church. Suburban chaplaincies (parish pastorates) nurse at the breasts of corporation and church. Urban chaplaincies (urban ministries) nurse at the breasts of politics and church. Every ministry knows where it is "bought off" by admitting where its critical voice has been

silenced: what may not be criticized without risking loss of funds, whether denominational subsidy or parish contributions. To talk about "preaching without fear or favor" is delusive. Is God trying to tell us something?

Wherever we minister, we rest upon our credentials as ministers of established churches to be there. The church, we say, is properly interested in all spheres of life. We claim to be represented at universities legitimately as a friend of knowledge while a defender and proponent of faith. Each ministry makes a similar link with its clientele, whether business or union people, farmers or ghetto poor. So far, so good. Except that at certain sensitive points the church questions our credentials and wonders what we are up to. Those points invariably are friction points, where vested interests are getting burned, or slippage points, where nothing seems to be happening. When we seek nourishment at the breasts of both world and church, we may become alienated from both. When we are weaned, we suffer the usual traumatic reactions of having the breast removed. Let psychologists make of that what they will. These are the financial, cultural, and religious facts of the matter. Is God trying to tell us something?

Ministry also tends to ride the wave of current concerns as something to talk about. Less often does ministry *do* anything about it. As the seventies began, ecology and environment were the new concerns. Environment was raised to social and political consciousness, the current focus for mass anxiety, sometimes hysterical, on "what we can do something about." "Environment" triggers a revival of naturalism and romanticism. Paul Til-

lich said that there is no such thing as "the Romantic period." There are periodic romantic revivals, rekindling man's sense of kinship with nature from which we feel alienated and in which we rediscover reconciliation. Our current term for this romantic revival is "ecology." A psychiatrist friend suggests a more archetypal word for our rediscovery of the spirits of the place we live in. That which creates in us a sense of the numinous is called "autochthonous." That might be our religious word to couple with the ecology enthusiasts in a new legitimate marriage between "religion AND—science, humanism, naturalism—" whatever current lover we take on to get the old zest out of life renewed in contemporary fashion. Is God trying to tell us something?

Unless one has a program to impose, ministerial conferences, particularly on higher levels, like to have "theological reflections." That is, what is happening provides the material for discussion as a matter of common experience to which theological thought is brought, with or without the Book. Life is the text, environment the context, experience is the recorder, and word the interpreter. Theological reflection is a hermeneutic of experience. Institutional crises precipitate personal crises which result in existential *Angst*. Theological "reflection" becomes effete. The matter is more serious than that. The faith question is forced. "God language" is called out of the closet to deal with the too tangible intangibles pressing in upon us.

To ask if God is trying to tell us something is to get quite serious soon. Professional ministers are often surprised to find themselves talking about God seri-

ously in their own lives. "God" has long been an operational tool to use in talking with other people, preaching, and praying. "God language" died when it was no longer "relevant," that is, when people wouldn't pay attention to it any more. It revives when people find themselves confronted by forces too big to deal with. We discover that in trying to be relevant we often become irrelevant to the things which really count in life. Is God trying to tell us something?

Consider the impact that our social and political environment has had on the formation of our religious consciousness. Each week's news and events makes the consciousness reel. Our minds cannot keep up, absorb, interpret, shift, change, reevaluate, rethink. Toffler's *Future Shock* was simply an inventory of the things that numb us with newness, with more shocks waiting in the wings. Is God trying to tell us something?

How do we "reflect" upon this rapidly shifting scene which whirls around us and sucks us into events? The term "reflection" is too ambitious. It assumes the old classical stance, where we kept our cool and looked upon situations as nonparticipants, noninvolved, objective. We give theological interpretations to current events out of our theological bag. We know that does not describe our situation today. We are all involved, like it or not. Is God trying to tell us something?

We did not go to where the action was, as once we thought. It came to us. It reached out tentacles and snared us. It knocked us off our perches of alleged neutrality and objectivity. Participants do not reflect, except afterwards. They are caught up by circumstances. They react; they do

not act. Circumstances determine them. Their predispositions, not at all well thought out, incline them to act in certain ways. Ministers did not get arrested in riots because they are rioters. They got swept into situations with their sheep, and with other sheep in trouble, and found themselves fighting wolves. Unless we are hopeless ideologues, simply conditioned reflexes consecrated as ministers, we find ourselves tangled. While we take sides, because we are forced to, if not because we had arrived at a general position, it is still hard to tell the good guys from the bad guys. We were orthodox Manichees until the crisis hit us and left us with a sense of things being too mixed up for simple answers. This is not simply a liberal reaction, the times being out of joint. It is also orthodoxly Christian. We rediscover that all people, including ourselves, are sinners. The self-righteous are most suspect of all, whatever side of the street they are working, whether revolution or counterrevolution. Is God trying to tell us something? The answer doesn't come out of a book. It does; but we remember it only vaguely from there. It comes out of our experience. We rediscover that man is *simul justus et peccator*, that the "natural" man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, because they are foolishness to him—and to us—on all sides of all disputes.

How shall we reflect on what is happening to us, to the universities, to our vocations, our ministry, our country, our world? These are our questions. It is an existential crisis, not an academic one, which calls for religious response and reflection. It is because it is happening to us in our very existence, what we think

our life is all about, that it is existential. It is because it is happening to those we care about and what we care about that it is ministerial. That we care about what happens to others is a signal that we do respond pastorally. This is no neat conclusion logically arrived at. It is a response that the situation elicits from us by thrusting hard upon us. "Reflection" is an effete word from our classic liberal past. We shall have to substitute for it our more primal, visceral, gut reactions, which tell us more about ourselves than we may care to know. Something is pressing upon us, we know not what, trying the reins and purifying the soul and clarifying the mind. We call it the "crisis." It may be something more than that. God may be trying to tell us something. Whatever it is, we do not merely observe or reflect. We are caught up in it and fear we may become its casualties.

We mask a good deal of the personal crisis which is precipitated by projecting our problems upon the social scene and exacerbating the sociopolitical conflict. I do not mean to underestimate the seriousness of that conflict, but simply to acknowledge the personal component in the struggle. Our crisis is personal because it deals not merely with what happens to others. The crisis presents us with the question whether we believe what we preach or if we are hypocrites. We had not thought to ask ourselves this question. So God, who searches the hearts, brings it up in His own effective way. He pulls the rug out from under us and asks what it is in which we really trust. What do we fear, love, and trust above all else? What, *really*, is our God?

The times that try men's souls reveal our

own souls to ourselves and others. Can we who preached to others be castaways ourselves, as St. Paul warned? Could be. If so, we shall surely find out, when our defenses are collapsed. It is not an easy thing to acknowledge that preachers and ministers have to go through life just like everybody else. We thought we led a charmed life, that we were immune to mortal ills that flesh is heir to, that faith consisted in right answers which would never have to be put to the existential test, that we could reflect upon what other people experienced and explain it to them without having to go through it ourselves.

The situation has the ominous shape of an emerging cross, which was not what we had in mind at all. What we thought we were going to get was a good name, popularity, advancement, power, glory, and some kind of kingdom. We preached about the cross, but we did not actually expect to get it, having to settle for some crown of life stored up somewhere for us sometime in eternity, some pie in the sky when we died. We wanted to be winners, not losers. We thought the cross was over and done, that the worst we could expect was "hard times," as even the Depression memory fled into ancient history until more recent economic crunches revived old bad dreams. Is God trying to tell us something?

Do we believe what we preach? Does the church believe it? Are we still members of the church? Are our critics right, that we really are the troublemakers in Israel, false prophets and not true ones? What if our church rejected us entire? Would we still believe the fables? Would we go with Martin Luther in full faith against the Establishment, or would we

be glad the charade was over and that the church called our bluff? These are hard questions. But if there is to be *theological* reflection, and not merely grousing over the church political spoils system, we have to ask them. What if all the supports of faith and vocation were gone and we were thrown back on our own resources? Who would we be then? Professionally we are ministers. Suppose that professional role were abolished. Would we still be Christian? Could we still believe? That, I submit, is *our* environmental crisis. Do we need supporting agencies to confer our status upon us? If they remove our support and we lose our status, what status do we actually have before God and man? How do you plan a life as a Christian minister if both support and status are removed, which reinforce identity?

This is no small question, as each of us must admit when it touches us to the heart of our anxieties. Nor are any answers easy. We may not know for sure until the situation actually happens, when our response will reveal to us what we actually believe. But we may sense, now, that God is trying to tell us something. Our masks are being ripped off, as well as those of others. We were in the perfect spot of being official unmaskers. A good offense is the best defense. Someone or something is tearing at our own masks now, and our panic reveals the inner crisis. Crisis makes us aware. We can reflect on what is raised to the level of consciousness. To find ourselves caught in the human situation and condition is embarrassing, to say the least. This was not at all what we had in mind.

I wish to drive to the heart of this question directly. What are we wrestling with? Who is the enemy? We sense that we do

not wrestle with flesh and blood but with invisible powers of some sort that we cannot get our hands on. We are angry, frustrated, disappointed, verging on unbelief, despair, and other great shame and vice. The schnooks are winning. We are experiencing what Richard Neuhaus calls "Fascism: American style." The old reprisals and revenge and head-rollings take place as the power shifts in our modern age of "enlightenment" with scarcely less gusto than in bloody days of yore. And the name of God and country are still taken in vain to mask the naked power plays of the new mandarins in church and state.

But there is more than that going on. When each side in a polarized conflict perceives the other as the enemy, left or right, then we may know that the devil is doing his work. I am on the new left side of most questions. My "enemies" call me a "liberal." I think I am a crypto-conservative. My friends laugh: there is nothing crypto about it to them. Yet, upon discovering the "enemy" and searching him out, what I find revealed in almost every instance is an actual human being. The prejudice dissolves; the difference doesn't. Circumstances alter cases. A humanized enemy is no enemy. If he is, flesh and blood can be wrestled with. Uniforms of pose or dress do not cover the actual person adequately so as to obliterate him. Human beings are masquerading in all the disguises. Fellow human beings are not our enemies, although they and we may make ourselves so, thanks to our invincible stupidity. Hatred simplifies things. If we can turn human beings into enemies, caricatures, mere objects, then we think we can manipulate our environment of misplaced hostilities much more effectively. We can't,

of course; but we don't learn that until after the damage is done. We do indeed daily sin much and deserve nothing but punishment, for stupidity and damage to others in the name of our good, if for nothing else. But who could tell us that? Only God can; and we don't listen. No wonder we need the invitation to repentance and the good news of forgiveness, after the mess we make of things and the carnage of human life we leave behind in our holy crusades. Let every "winner" ponder this in his moment of "victory" gained at the expense of casualties he deemed as expendable in his drive to power. Let him try to find a gracious God. He will need one.

What we discover in human beings all around us are centers of consciousness, very much like our own, who do not see things as we see them. It is our task to try to communicate, to break through, to connect, not merely to confront, isolate, and destroy. Something happens to us, not to the other person, when we see him as the devil incarnate. When we look at him again as a human being, the devil disappears into thin air. It is not that people are not often demonic, but that the demonic is in all of us. We see the other person's demons, never our own. We are all experts in removing motes from other people's eyes. We are very good at knowing what is wrong with them. But we do not know our own astigmatism and distortions. We think the way things look to us is the way they actually are.

God is telling us something. We are perceiving it in our environment. It does not come from the environment, although it is verified there. It comes from somewhere else and corrects our distortion of the environment. This means that we are

not merely conditioned reflexes of our natural and human environments. The environment gives us the material we take as substance and the stimuli which arouse our responses. But the responses come from some other conditioning. Something is in us prompting us which does not come from our environment. God seems to be telling us something.

We are in an environmental crisis. The question is whether we are wholly creatures of that environment or whether we are somewhat independent, if not autonomous, centers of consciousness who also bring something to the environment and help create it. Are we purely passive respondents to external aggression, are we passive aggressive, or do we aggress and ingress into our environments? Each of us creates his own (fantasy) world in which he prefers to live, and each of us has that world disturbed by the actual external world which corrects our distortions. Each of us refuses to accept that world as is. We are bent upon changing it, thereby courting misery, if not disaster. Each of us faces the question whether to sell out or go along. I submit that these are highly pertinent religious questions. "For what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"

What norm do we bring to the world which will not let it be as it is? What power does the world bring to bear upon us which will not let us remain as we are? We are caught in a conflict situation of no minor importance, of extreme complexity. We are faced with a situation which questions us, which requires us to give answers out of inadequate resources. We must act upon faith with whatever knowledge we can get to support and justify our

decisions. Whether we are right or wrong, only time will tell. But some sort of norm is needed to judge the judgment of time; for historic judgments also may be wrong. History is not the judge. History only tells how it turned out. God is the judge of history. There is a *last* judgment, a final one.

The Western theological tradition has divided nature from history. Ecology is a rediscovery of nature, of man's historic place in it. Science also is a recovery of nature, however distorted by technology. Greek thought was ontological, and pagan religion was nature worship with a cyclical view of time. Jewish-Christian thought was linear, purposive, teleological, eschatological. Biblical theology was dynamic, with a God who acts in history. Hellenistic theology tried to naturalize God by thinking in terms of essence and substance. Modern thinking is contextual and relative. God is to be discovered now in the relativities of history as the nexus of all things. Religious awe was aroused by nature, man responding to discovering his creatureliness in the all-encompassing All and the mystery of being. Historical consciousness introduced the sense of alienation, sin, redemption, the tragedy of existence. The ecological crisis confronts us with the cohesion of nature and history. God is telling us something we had better hear when nature protests our misuse of our lifeline. God does not leave Himself without witness. Nature speaks. A word of new coinage which describes the natural reality we need to know more about is "life support system." However we may rail against "the System," the system we violate at our own peril is the one in which we live and move and have our being. The natural en-

vironment and our environmental crisis demand a historical response if man is to survive as a species. Existential threat hastens theological reflection along to seek modes of saving action. The interrelatedness of nature and history now provide grounds for theological reflection. "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the earth shows His handiwork," the psalmist sang. Now that the heavens declare the glory of man and the earth shows our handiwork, there is less to get ecstatic about. Is God trying to tell us something?

The crisis we are in is eminently moral. It calls for a prophetic ministry and theological reflection on what is moral, good, necessary, saving. That is not yet the Christian ministry of the Word of sin and grace. It is not yet kerygmatic, defining the good news of salvation for our time. The situation calls desperately for the revelation of the good, saving grace. It calls for valid analysis and accurate knowledge, so that we are not swept away by fanaticism or vitiated by destructive anger. It calls for preaching of repentance and conversion of whole peoples, in church, politics, and culture, as well as in the educative process itself. Friendly persuasion may not be enough, so there is theological reflection on pressure groups or revolution as economical means toward saving ends as an essential ingredient in any theology of hope. "The powers that be are ordained of God," St. Paul says. Far from an advocacy of the status quo, this judgment rests on the Biblical vision of history that sees God changing orders and collapsing empires, lifting up the poor and casting down the proud, making nothing into something and supremacy into nonentity. This is not a theology of change without

value. It rests on the value of historic redemption as what God is doing in history because He will not permit His good creation to collapse. This is an article of faith, elaborated by the church fathers, not empirically evident but "seen" in history by theology. The Marxists knew that something real was going on in history and wanted to ride the wave, calling it "historical determinism." Anticommunists who would try to stem that wave would get wiped out. The only question was not whether there was a historical force, but which way the force would go and which wave to ride. Those with utopian visions would seek to seize the kingdom of God and bring it to earth by violence. This should be familiar language to any reader of the gospels.

We are still left with the persistent dilemma that to "see" God acting in history is an act of faith and vision, seeing things that aren't there yet and hoping for a future which has not yet arrived historically. This is no easy doctrine of progress and optimism. The Reality Principle of the social status quo is against us. (We use the phrase "status quo" so freely that we forget its derivation: status quo *ante*, the status of things *before* the change took/takes place.)

Besides the "law" of change there is another "law" at work whereby each existent thing tries to survive against all odds. We fancy that we can change things, or at least explain change to recalcitrants. It is when change is forced upon us, particularly when it looks like conservative retrenchment, that we become confused. For all our theology of change, we were not the ones who needed changing by the new situation, we thought. It is a new

experience for us to be the objects of change. We rode the liberal wave when the tide came in. Now the conservative tide is rolling in with others riding the crests of those waves. The surf is beating on us and we are getting wiped out. This, we protest, is no way for the kingdom of God to come. What kind of God would let this kind of thing happen to us? The same kind of God who would let His own Son die on the cross and not lift a finger to save Him. The kind of God who says this is the way the world gets saved.

If we do not like that kind of God, then we know with whom we have our quarrel. Our quarrel is with that kind of God. If we do not like that kind of God, we invent other more amenable idols out of our own heads we can live with more comfortably. Those gods will fail precisely because they are the products of our own imaginings and cannot contend with historical forces. It is as if some invisible, intangible, unlocatable, spiritual Reality is having its way with all the tangibles, whose reason does not correspond to our reason, whose "will" gets done against all contrary wills, whose depth is in existence, and whose ways are past finding out.

Alan Harrington in his paperback *The Immortalist* says that what we wrestle with and fight is death, that religion is a mask to propitiate the not-yet-dead gods who frustrate our ancient struggle to become immortal, to become gods. Religion worships death, philosophy justifies it, and science accepts it, thereby betraying man's only real hope: attaining immortality by making life prevail against death, he says. This is a long way from Harrington's *Life in the Crystal Palace* and other examinations of organization men and corporate

structure power elites of the 1950s. Harrington is not a theologian. But he has written a theological book intended for the masses with a preacher's passion. Although atheistic in the usual sense of the word, it isn't a bad book, if you can get used to the idea of engineering man's divinity by means of cryonics. I kid you not.

Here is our secular man of the post-Christian era gone (atheistically) religious on us, after we have spent no little effort trying to get the church to enter the 20th century and accommodate to secularity as the wave of the future. Try his thesis on for theological size. See if it doesn't ring some bells attached to notes we took in seminary classes when we weren't nodding in boredom. Man's project is the salvation of humankind. Man will have to do it, because the gods he invented are gone. Religion, at this point, hampers man's efforts toward saving himself, because it anaesthetizes us for death. Man can save himself if we make this our project and pursue it technologically with the same kind of crash programs we undertook to develop nuclear energy and space flights. The enemy of man is death. The last enemy to be overcome is death. That much of Jesus he buys—the great rebel representative of man fighting our common fight against our common enemy.

This, if you please, is the agelong debate, from St. Paul through Augustine and the Reformation, about salvation by works versus salvation by faith. Whatever side of those arguments we may have been on, we can at least recognize a familiar issue when we see it, no matter what kind of clothes it wears in masquerade. Let us take the clothes off Harrington's basic question we all ask of life, so that in the nude its

nakedness may be unmistakably clear: "What must I do to inherit (earn, get, grab, steal, wrest) eternal life?" That question lands us smack dab in the middle of the gospels. It is an existential, theological, serious, desperately important question. If it be objected that Jesus is not the answer to the question (it's our vocation to say how He is, if He is, however He is), we must still deal with the question. It still remains at the center of human consciousness which will not accept death as final. Harrington does not ask this question from indoctrination into Christian dogma and Biblical theology. He asks it as a serious secular man of the 20th century locating what he thinks is the supreme question before all men, about which something can and must be done. His answer appears so frivolous that we are tempted to dismiss the seriousness of the question. The question remains. It will not go away. The way is open for theological pursuit. The question begs for answer. This kind of secular questing is a happening in our modern world symptomatic of something latently and emergingly important, upon which we are directed to reflect theologically again as a vocational enterprise. The lead question tolls again: Is God trying to tell us something?

Langdon Gilkey—to work the officially recognized theological side of the street for a while—argues in his 1969 book, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of Theological Language*, that what we need is a hermeneutic of experience. God is the naming of our experience. Gilkey goes almost all the way with the secular push toward eliminating God-language as not meaningful to describe human existence today, and then laps the field by using

language analysis to demonstrate that common language (or specialized language) is not adequate to describe common experience, either. His task is to demonstrate that only theological language is adequate to describe what ordinary or specialized language cannot account for. God is hidden somewhere in secularity as unaccountable; or, to be more precise, *that* is present for which no other language is adequate, and it is about *that* (whatever it is) that God-language talks. The ultimate is experienced in ordinary experience for which ordinary language is not adequate. If the age is resistant to God-talk, that is no real barrier. For that about which God-language talks is the Reality underlying ordinary experience and raises the questions for which ordinary language has no descriptions. If it be objected that this is dragging religion in the back door after it has been kicked out the front, so be it. Have it your way. Use your own language. Come to your own conclusions. What we are up against is still up against us. Whatever we call it, it is God who has been pointed to.

The point is that there is something unnameable but real with which we contend in ordinary and historical experience. Theology reflects upon that unnameable Reality with whatever tools, traditions, and makeshifts at hand, preferably with revelation when we can get it. The unspeakable unnameable speaks in his own ways in his own times with a language we are not tuned in on, making us pay attention and giving no easy answers. It is as if we were blind and our eyes had to be opened, as if we were deaf and had to hear. What we are blind to is before our very eyes, and what we are deaf to is simply what we tune out of our hearing. Life has a char-

acter to which we are blind and deaf. It will be there nonetheless, and will be uncomfortably insistent. We can reflect upon that as a mystery, or we can open our eyes and ears (or have them opened) and see and hear what is happening with understanding.

Reflection is premature. We must first have some sort of understanding or revelation or illumination to reflect upon, some experience (or history of an experience) which is both revelatory and illuminating. We do not get there by reflecting upon the "facts" prized by objectivity or the insights treasured by subjectivity or by the sacred mushroom. The Bible talks about it with more clarity than we might think. Theologians have been talking about it for some time with great clarity, depending on how well they know the ineffable Subject. If we reject this possibility out of hand, it is likely because the task of pursuing the Subject through such disciplines is too arduous and we prefer shortcuts to nowhere. So be it. Then we are on our own. The blind will lead the blind till both stumble and fall into a ditch. If these are hard words, so be it. They have been said before. I am only repeating them. At any event, what we are wrestling with or evading will confront us in our common life, in our common experience. It may even show up to harass and press us in our ministries on his behalf, to whom we may not have been as attentive as we might.

Luther said (*Bondage of the Will*) that one of the ways God confronts us as *Deus absconditus* is as Fate or Necessity. When we wrestle with Fate or Necessity (*anangkē*) it is God who wears this mask and hides grace under wrath, life under death. Things are not what they seem. So

we should not fight appearances, apparitions, ghosts, even materialized ones. The spiritual world has masked itself into the monodimensional world and emerges to haunt us in the lying grin of public officials in press conferences. The model has not been perfected yet: the man within still blushes by grinning when he tells his knowing lies. So he is criminally responsible, knowing the difference between right and wrong. Some are more perfectly masked, whose secret may be that they really are the hollow men and have no plans for anything at all. These are important men. The public faces of our time are elected by popular mandate, even though the people do not trust them. The people are masked, too. What is revealed is not materialism triumphant, but fantasy (not spirit) wearing the face of men hollowed of spirit. Fantasy poses as reality as we believe our own pseudo-heroic myths. "John Wayne really thinks he is John Wayne," says James Kunen, holding up the mirror to all of us who come to believe the parts we play. Washington has become Disneyland East as we dream impossible dreams and then think we can make them come true. "Surely this is madness," John Kennedy used to say about other things. But he was mad, too, in his own way, and we all got caught up in the spirit of that utopian style as we thought Camelot had come. Look how our "realities" all dissolve into fantasies we are trying desperately to make come true, driving spirit out to achieve our ends. What is the military-industrial state but the will-to-fantasy transmogrified into the will-to-power to make impossible dreams come true? What is the shooting down of human beings at My Lai, Kent State, Jackson State, and

Attica Prison except rage that any reality should intrude to shake the American fantasy of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence — signs of which are nuclear energy, computers, and seeing-eye satellites? We are on our way toward self-deification, not by way of life but by way of death. When the worlds of fantasy and reality become so intermingled, when idolatry becomes the pursuit of the nation and utopia is set against the status quo of "the best system ever devised by man," then we have no ordinary conflict. We have conflict raised to the level of ultimacy. We have a religious conflict on our hands. Reflect on this, if you will, theologically. There is an "outside agitator." His name is God. He is the ghost in the machine.

Nicolas Berdyaev saw Necessity and Fate not as *Deus absconditus* but as enemy of freedom. Man, as he sees him, is the child of freedom and necessity. Therein lies our tragedy. We are fallen from freedom into objectification. Historical existence is tragic struggle against Necessity for freedom. Redemption can come only through this struggle, for freedom is our own true nature, while caught in the world of necessity. Berdyaev may be our most neglected theologian of the 20th century. If there is a Berdyaev revival, we may know what to make of him. The way the Berdyaev version is mediated to our consciousness is through the conflict between conformity to prevailing systems and existential consciousness. We have been through that whole bag, with no conclusive results. The score stands now at a tie: the System is in power and means to prevail. The Revolution is on and means to overthrow the System. The future we have before us is not Utopia, draw, or

fading away, but tragedy. The forces are now engaged for the future of the world. We are caught, like everyone, in the crunch. Which side God is on we do not know yet, though both claim Him. Whether God desires to become static or dynamic for the next period of history is yet to be discovered historically. Place your bets. The race is on. History will not determine the future, but what it is which has been germinating in our present to see how the present heat (our own) of the human race turns out, not how everything turns out in the end.

The problem for us is to run the race set before us, not to eventuate the outcome of the whole human race. Whether we like it or not, while we are connoisseurs of the daily racing forms of life, the human race goes on. How it will turn out, only God knows (or the future, depending upon your historico-religious frame of reference). We profess to worry about how the whole human race turns out, and have become professional prognosticators, prophets, at that, pretending that our own careers mean little so long as we make our "contribution" to the side of history turning out right. God (or something) is calling our bluff. Objectivity is a privilege reserved to those who have made it and are secure in their home base. A little insecurity, a little troubling of the waters by a visiting angel to see which of the lame can crawl the fastest, goes a long way toward shaking our facade. When institutions tremble, shall men be safe? The difference between the rhetoric of revolution and its reality is very short, but realistically transforming. Two years separate the occupation of Columbia University and the emergence of the Weathermen from

ranks of students "disciplined" (suspended, expelled) by their universities. Kent State and Jackson State followed that, followed by San Quentin and Attica. The situation is still prerevolutionary rhetoric with gestures. The counter-revolution is suppressive, bloody, hyperphobic, and indiscriminate. The difference between early Black Panther rhetoric and now is political imprisonment and assassination of black leaders by what looks like police murder squads. The cycle of revenge rises as riots flare, guerrilla tactics and bombings punctuate the tension, and police are increasingly militarized.

Fantasy has entered the real world to become bloody history. Salvation is the aim. Murder is the method. On all sides. The university and ghetto peace is an uneasy truce, now that it is known the National Guard is ready to go in with the Vietnam rifle, the M-16. That's how real it is. No rubber bullets as in Ireland or water hoses as in Japan. War weapons to kill beards and long hairs and blacks and prisoners and hostages and anybody who gets in the way. The time for rhetoric has passed. Reality has arrived. Is God trying to tell us something? We had better know, for we are the ones who are supposed to speak for God in situations like this.

Reflection is a thing to do when times are past, when it is over and done, when we can get it into perspective. Now is not the time for reflection. Although many crushed radicals are putting themselves together again, there appears to be little official reflection as all the reports by commissions on violence are ignored in favor of paramilitary solutions. Now is the time for vision, for apprehension, for prophecy, for revelation of what is to be revealed,

for attention and awareness, for discerning what God is up to when He is stirring in our midst, for searching for clues, for checking the records of past performance for present hints, for waiting and listening and learning, for speaking only when we have the word and shutting up otherwise, for not making fools of ourselves, for not taking wrong sides, for faith, hope, and some charity and decency, for running the course that is set before *us*.

We are caught in an institutional crisis, a life crisis, a vocational crisis, a possibly emergent revolution, a preemptive counter-revolution already under way. So far as we know the nature of God from Biblical sources, this is what He does historically. He overthrows establishments and establishes nonentities. He has His will despite our will. His will prevails. His ways are not our ways. Ten years from now let us get together and reflect, if a new picture has emerged by then to reflect upon.

There have been times like this before. The Reformation was one of these. So also were the French, American, Russian, and Chinese revolutions. 1848 was abortive; 1917 was epochal; 1984 may be prophetic. Jesus came into such times and went to the cross. Once upon a time God came to Jeremiah, who had no aspirations to become a prophet. He would have preferred to have been left alone. God came to him nonetheless. This is what He said:

I have put my words in your mouth.
See, I have set you this day
Over the nations and over the kingdoms,
To root out, to pull down and destroy,
To throw down, to build and to plant.
(Jer. 1:9-10)

That is the prophetic ministry. To such as it is given there is nothing to do but

to do it. Reflection upon what results is for afterwards.

There is another charge Christ gave to His disciples sent out as His apostles into the world, coupled with a warning:

Go and preach the Gospel to the whole creation.

Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations,

Teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you.

They shall put you out of the churches [synagogs].

Yes, the time will come that whoever kills you

Will think he is doing God a service.

They will do these things to you

Because they have not known the Father or Me.

I am telling you this now,

So that when these things come to pass,

You will not be offended,

And will remember that I forewarned you.

(Mark 16:15; Matt. 28:19-20;
John 16:1-4)

For reflection of ministers of Jesus Christ living in such a time, we commend simply something like 2 Corinthians, particularly chapters 3—4. The time may be ripe for reading the Bible again. God has made it relevant again. It is perhaps the only really relevant literature at hand. But it must be read with Spirit, looking for connections, not merely as literature, objectively. We might look again to 1 Corinthians 1 and 2. Its relevance may surprise us. Only, the word is not "relevance." It is "Spirit." These are not times of the Father or the Son but of the Spirit, leading us into all the truth which has to do with Father and Son and fathers and sons. The Spirit will see us through. The Word will sustain us. The Father will preserve us.

These are faith statements, to be sure. What else is it we have to talk about? A pastoral conference concerned about "life planning" already is in the midst of an existential crisis. It is significant that at such a time we look for the right words (Word) to clarify the situation and a power to prevail which will vindicate us, see justice done and salvation accomplished, our own as well as that of mankind. Can we trust God to do this? Reflect upon this. This is our real question.

Now, a final triad. If we still pray, can we still pray the Lord's Prayer? Can we in all honesty ascribe all governance, power, and glory to God? Is not this the very field of our competition with God and with all men? Is not this what we sought in our ministries, betting on our field of specialization as the place where the action was? Were we not "superior" because we were specialized ministers? When we were called "the cream of the crop," did we demur? Was not our specialized field our power base in the church and the church our power base in the field? Did we not feel secure on our safe platform of the reconciliation between faith and learning? Were we not priests of each to the other, working both sides of the street? Wasn't our power base the very institutional security which has now been shaken and become insecure so as to topple us from our privileged perches?

We are getting an education, free of tuition charge. We are learning what kingdom and power and glory are about. Gay Talese, in writing the history of the "Grey Eminence," the *New York Times*, called his book *The Power and the Glory*. The title was befitting for the official chronicler of our times, the "newspaper of record,"

in its own internal dynamics of power struggle. In our times the kingdom is Richard Nixon's ("the president is the most powerful man on earth") for a 4-year stewardship of office. (It's our power he is exercising.) The power belongs to the Establishment, specifically to the "fiscally responsible Republicans," as Vice-President Spiro Agnew put it. The Establishment has the power and is showing a new willingness to use it. A government willing to exercise its power, a ruling elite actually ruling out in the open, is a new thing for us. It throws the whole question of individual freedom into a new light. We are getting a primer lesson on man and state and limitation of personal liberty when it conflicts with the interests of a totalitarian state. Authority was the question, to which power has become the answer. New leftists and revolutionaries concur, saying with Mao Tse Tung that "power grows out of the barrel of a gun" and thereby establishes authority. Not so incidentally, Paul Tillich said that the first affirmation we make about God, if He is to be God, is that He is omnipotent. He has to have *all* the power, or He can't be God. What we worship in God first is power, power raised to the level of ultimacy. Only because God is omnipotent can we thank God in the Collect that He uses His power chiefly in showing mercy. It is because God is omnipotent that St. Paul marvels that God takes the side of the weak, that His weakness is more powerful than the strength of men and nations. The only reason the whole earth would stand in awe of God is that He has all the power. The only reason Christians can love God is because He veils His power and comes in the weakness of human flesh, in Jesus. Now,

there is something to reflect upon, a mystery to engage our devoted attention.

God has all the glory. Men glory in war. But there is no glory in our genocidal war in Southeast Asia. There is glory in the People's Wars of Liberation, pitting intrepid guerrillas against behemoth. So the revolutionaries get the glory, not unwilling draftees and "grunts." On campus, the students get the glory. The state gets the kingdom. The Establishment gets the power. Students and minority groups get the glory or the notoriety. So where does this leave us as ministers? Empty handed. Kingdom gone, power gone, glory gone. That was not what we had in mind. We are reduced to impotence and redirected towards ministry.

Listen to our lament. A few years ago we had a power base. Then we could get things done. Now our power base has eroded. Others have our former power and we are under their power. The power brokers have won. The same men with small minds and killer instincts who rule to purge have emerged again, as always in history, to look for Spirit to kill it and drive it out. We no longer speak of "impact upon campus or university." The impact has come, but not from us. We are hardly on the scene, left on the sidelines as interpreters, defenders, apologetes. We have been thrown back upon a defensive posture. We think now in terms of "viability," "survival," and "life planning." God (or someone or something) is surely telling us something. Belatedly, the Danforth study has come up with a new word which we all grasp at like drowning men at any straw: "governance." As if that word could save us. Without power there is no governance. There is only the struggle for

survival. "Governance" is for the privileged elite. Ministers are rapidly being disabused of the notion that they are a "privileged elite." Such privilege is paid for by silencing the Word of God and accommodating to the establishments of power in church and society. Let the prophetic voice be raised, and God will be silenced again and again, if targeting His spokesmen can suppress the Word. Power? Kingdom? Glory? Whom are we kidding? God (or someone or something) is trying to tell us something.

Herewith some provisional conclusions: (1) Institutions are likely to prevail. Our strength, power, and glory are resident upon the strength of religious institutions in corporate public life. We may make our peace with our institutions, con them, or get out. They shall prevail, cutting all ballast (ministry) in order to save themselves. (2) In saving themselves as first priority, they show themselves as unredeemptive, exploitative institutions, seeking not to liberate men from their misery but men from their money. (3) Our ministry remains, financed or recognized or not. (4) Our ministry is the redemption of human life. God will see that this is done,

with or without us — also, with or without the institutional church. Where do we stand on that? (5) Are we listed for the duration, no matter what, whether supported or not? The question cuts to the heart of our ministry and our commitment, tells us whether we are false prophets or true. Reflect on that. If we need leads, consult St. Paul or any current revolutionary who lays his life on the line for what he believes. If that seems too strong, listen to our young people, who say they want to see religion authenticated in our lives before they will be minded to follow it or us. Sermons are not enough. It is the positing of a life which counts. (6) Do we have the guts? Only God knows. We don't. We hope so. We will find out. God will see to it. (7) Can we trust God? If not, consult the want ads. We are not cut out for this line of work. (8) Can we let God have the kingdom, the power, and the glory and be satisfied with that? That is not what we had in mind. But it is what we will have to settle for.

That is what God has been trying to tell us.

Chicago, Ill.