EDITORIALS

Ideals and Exploitation in the Desert Sands

IN JULY 1951 Reinhold Niebuhr spent ten days in Geneva at a World Council of Churches meeting. Karl Barth was also there, and he engaged Niebuhr and the American delegates in one of those intense theological arguments that shape future thought but which at the time probably seem highly esoteric to others. Barth recalled the meeting as one in which "we sat there and talked for ten whole days. . . . Americans (Niebuhr at their head!) with bright, healthy teeth, great determination and few problems," and with too much self-assurance and too little capacity for serious thought.

Richard Fox recounts this event in *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*, adding that Barth was particularly incensed because he felt that Niebuhr "ignored the Christian's 'final hope' of victory over evil in favor of a more worldly focus on incremental advances in social justice." Niebuhr saw it differently. He thought Barth was being his "usual irresponsible, ahistorical self." Niebuhr insisted that Barth's theology, far from being a pure dependence on any "final hope," was as historically conditioned as that of any American theologian. Yes, Niebuhr said, God is beyond history, but our Christian witness is always profoundly shaped by history. It is the Christian's task to seek a "responsible" society, making judgments according to historical circumstances.

When he returned to the U.S., Niebuhr continued work on a book he was calling *This Nation Under God.* It was, says Fox, to be a "short study of the curious amalgam of virtue and vice in the American experience." But as he worked on his manuscript, Niebuhr could not put aside the Geneva experience. Two of his chapters dealt with the significance of irony in the American situation, and gradually Niebuhr began to lift up that notion and reshape his manuscript. His argument with Barth had made him reexamine "the complexity of the American reality." He realized, Fox writes, that "one had to avoid pretension, as an American author, in order to understand the mix of pretension and achievement in the American past." Thus the book's major theme emerged: "the ironic tendency of virtues to turn into vices when too complacently relied upon." The book's title was changed to *The Irony of American History.*

Though written against the backdrop of the early days of the cold war, the book remains pertinent today because of its central theme. Our current experience reminds us of the American tendency to turn high ideals into gross exploitation. We are a people formed by a religious sensibility, but we have consistently twisted that sensibility to serve our baser natures. This trait becomes even more apparent when we take up arms against an enemy. Whatever the motivation for a specific war, we quickly justify it in the highest and most idealistic terms.

If, as Senator Hiram Johnson of California told the Senate in 1917, "the first casualty when war comes is truth," it is also true that loss of clear perspective soon follows. Patriotism quickly pushes aside reason when one's own country enters a war. With our own military personnel engaged in battle with Saddam Hussein's forces—battles that are reported almost minute-by-minute by radio and television—it becomes exceedingly difficult to step back and adopt an ironic view of what is taking place in the Persian Gulf. And when Americans start receiving the news that their loved ones have died in the war, it will be very difficult to criticize the war in which these deaths occurred. The Christian perspective respects this grief and understands this patriotism. But our ultimate commitment requires that we transcend national boundaries. Even in war, and perhaps especially

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in war, our commitment is to humankind, regardless of region or religion.

Niebuhr also reminded us, however, that we are fixed in a particular moment and place, and are required to make decisions in that specific situation. We are not victims of our history; we have made choices that put us in our present circumstances. We have, for example, refused to reduce our use of oil. And it is most certainly control of that source of energy that is the real reason we are fighting this war.

We also elected the officials who encouraged our irresponsible use of oil, and who have led us into this war. But it isn't just our leaders who created a climate for war. We are participants in a television culture through which we are "amusing ourselves to death" with our fascination over the success of our technological weaponry. Several network commentators have, without any show of embarrassment, made the connection between our pilots' skill at delivering bombs and their teen-age training as avid video game players.

NOT SINCE John F. Kennedy's standoff with the Soviet Union in the Cuban missile crisis has any president experienced as high a rating as President Bush did in the first weeks of the war. Television gives us a front-row seat at a real-life version of *Top Gun.* Public attention has focused on our early "successes" and the accuracy of our weapons. One pilot said flying his first sortie was like finally getting into the Super Bowl after months of training. Against this version of conflict, the question of why we are fighting remains only as a nagging doubt.

This zeal is understandable, but superficial. To use Niebuhr's categories, it would be nothing less than

"pathetic" if we concluded that we have reached this juncture in our national life through no fault of our own. And it would be "tragic" if we had to acknowledge that we have made all the decisions that put us here. Describing Niebuhr's understanding of the "irony of history," Fox reminds us that "the unexpected disappointments and dilemmas of American life [are] the result not of fully conscious choice, but of partly unconscious stumbling."

Fox also points out that there is hope in viewing our history ironically. If we grasp the past as "ironic" rather than as "pathetic" or "tragic," it is possible that we can be led to a "renewed sense of responsibility for [our] future." Fox puts it this way:

> A pathetic experience provoked pity in an observer; a tragic experience, tears and admiration for the nobility of the doomed hero; an ironic experience, laughter and insight leading to deeper understanding. Irony is therefore an analytical device that points to an actual lived experience in the American past—an experience of paradox—allowing a later generation to build on that past and bring forth a better future. Unlike pathos or tragedy, irony had the capacity to spark contrition; ironic awareness produced a knowing smile and a humbling nod of the head.

As we follow the Persian Gulf war, we must acknowledge the irony of the events that delivered us to this moment. An appropriate place to begin that history is in the period following World War I, when the Western powers recognized the potential for oil development in the Middle East. To seize control of that potential, Great Britain enlisted the support of Arab leaders against Turkey, a German ally. The British were also acting on behalf of their allies, who needed access to the oil fields, and on behalf of Western companies that profited from oil, one of which was partially owned by the British government (today's British Petroleum).

In this postwar power struggle the idealism of Woodrow Wilson prevented the U.S. from demanding any territorial control in the region, though this idealism was not shared by the American oil companies that participated fully in the struggle to control oil concessions. Since this region was largely consigned by postwar agreements to the British and the French, the U.S. did not play a role there until after World War II, when it provided the crucial push to create the state of Israel. Israel was born, in part, from the desire of the Western powers to grant a homeland to victims of the Holocaust. But in implementing that lofty goal they also created what we now call the "Palestinian problem."

An earlier decision by the British to reduce its overt colonialism in the region involved a mixture of idealism and political pragmatism. Hussein bin Ali, the Sharif of Mecca, joined the British side in exchange for a promise that Hussein and his sons would be installed as rulers of the various Arab states carved from the Ottoman Empire. Initially the British Foreign Office arranged the appointment of Hussein's son Faisal as ruler of the newly created nation of Syria. (Faisal is sympathetically portrayed by Alec Guinness in the film *Lawrence of Arabia*.) But when the French took control of Syria, Faisal was ousted from power. In *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power*, Daniel Yergin draws a poignant image of Faisal, the deposed monarch, sitting on his luggage in a railway station in Palestine, waiting for his connection. But Faisal was not out of work for long; the British still needed him—a respected leader among Bedouin Arabs, a leader who possessed royal credentials from the Hashemite family—to govern three former provinces of the Ottoman Empire which had been put together to form the new state of Iraq, formerly called Mesopotamia.

Winston Churchill, then head of the colonial office, made Faisal king of Iraq in August 1921. Faisal's brother, Abdullah, who had originally been selected as the Iraqi king, was "installed as king of what one writer termed 'the vacant lot which the British christened the Amirate of Transjordan.'" (The present King Hussein of Jordan is the grandson of that Abdullah.) As king of Iraq, Faisal ruled over a collection of Shi'ite Arabs, Sunni Arabs, Jews, Kurds and Yazidis, all of whom, says Yergin, lived in a territory with only a few important cities, with "most of the countryside under the control of local sheiks, and with little common political or cultural history, but with a rising Arab nationalism."

Some officials in the British colonial office must have hoped the new country of Iraq would offer its citizens an opportunity to break out of the primitive living conditions they had known under Turkish rule. But Britain's dominant interest in Iraq was in protecting sea and air lanes and in securing oil.

The comfortable relationship between royal Arab families and the West continued until last summer, and still prevails in Saudi Arabia. Iraq's royal rulers were replaced in 1968 by the Ba'th socialist party, whose current leader is Saddam Hussein. A rival faction of the same party controls Syria, a nation shunned by the U.S. until we needed its support against Iraq.

EVEN THIS hasty historical review suggests that our record in the Middle East has been one of pragmatism tempered with occasional idealism. We did not make all the decisions that led us into this war against Iraq. Saddam Hussein's desire for regional dominance and his ability to play the Palestinian card in appealing to the Arab masses were major factors in bringing us to this conflict. But Hussein did not develop in a vacuum. He is a product both of his own lust for power and Western countries' willingness to downplay brutality when it serves their interests. We helped keep Hussein in power, but when he stepped over the border into Kuwait we felt compelled to destroy him.

Only an ironic view of history can make sense of a policy that encourages a dictator right up to the point at which he crosses one border too many. And only an ironic view of history can appreciate the tinny sound of our rationale for fighting this war on behalf of Kuwait, when

it is obvious that if Kuwait's major export were brussels sprouts our reaction would have been far less vigorous.

When this war finally ends, presumably with an allied victory, we will once again face choices. We will confront an Arab region which will have suffered another humiliating defeat. Our Arab allies will be burdened with having enlisted Western assistance in overcoming Saddam Hussein, which in itself will be a form of humiliation. And, of course, we will have caused considerable damage and suffering in Iraq.

Whatever happens to Hussein himself, his Islamic card will remain. Gilles Kepel, writing in *Le Monde* before the war began, concluded that "the political language of Islam had achieved a pregnant ideological weight [in the region] vastly more considerable than it had 10 years ago" (quoted by Doug Ireland in the *Village Voice*, January 22). The "re-Islamization" of the region has involved not only the strictest adherence to the norms of Islam in every aspect of daily life, but also a critique of existing political power.

This means, wrote Kepel, that another Hussein will "surge forth from the Middle East . . . to play the same card and preach the *jihad*." To avoid this, he says, the West "must propose a way out of the weightiest problems that perpetuate such insupportable tensions in that part of the world. This way out must include a form of autonomy for the Palestinians, and . . . economic development in the region, on the scale of the Marshall Plan."

When the war ends, we can continue to view the region through a narrow lens of self-interest, or we can listen to the cries in the region demanding change. The only good that could come from this war will be a chance for the West to recognize how self-defeating its previous policies have been. Religious fervor, linked to Arab pride, will not be bombed into submission, and the elimination of one ruler will not alter that fervor.

James M. Wall

A Misguided Assessment of Seminary Education

IN THE DECEMBER issue of the *Atlantic*, Paul Wilkes took a broad shot at the hull of the apparently sinking ship of theological education. "The Hands That Would Shape Our Souls" describes the changes and challenges that face today's schools of higher learning for religious leaders. Wilkes has done the seminary community a favor by providing administrators and faculty an opportunity to examine the purpose, content, process and distinctiveness of their enterprise. Having visited some 15 Catholic, Jewish and Protestant seminaries (mainline and evangelical), Wilkes is troubled by the training being given to today's "moral force." Looking at the nature of today's students and the lack of normative curricula, Wilkes wonders: "Are today's seminarians an indicator species—endangered, fragile, sterile—signaling finally and decisively the end of religion in America as a personal and public force?"

That religion is on the wane is debatable. Certainly mainline Protestantism, "once the warp and most of the woof of the American moral fabric," is facing hard times, but religion and religious ideology are hardly finished. Black, Korean, Hispanic, Middle Eastern and other Asian congregations are growing, despite inadequate resources. What Wilkes sees as the end of religious history in America may be understood as a new beginning. Just because the white church is in decline doesn't mean that God-talk, urban or rural, is at an end.

Wilkes is correct, however, in noting that seminaries today are faced with large challenges which are more than financial. Seminaries must address such issues as religious pluralism, racial, gender and multicultural diversity, urbanization and globalization, an impending recession and now war in the Persian Gulf. Theological education, despite its occasional preference for monasticism, does not occur in a vacuum. It must somehow address issues of the larger culture.

In fact, the seminary population now reflects that larger culture. Seminaries once attracted the social elite—white males of European stock. Now, Wilkes believes, seminarians are people who have "failed" in the larger culture. No longer the "cream of the crop," these are "average students." Many are older, second-career people, women and minorities. Some are divorced or separated, a few are leaders from the gay and lesbian community. Many are adult children of alcoholics.

Wilkes seems to conclude that the "quality" of seminarians has decreased and that people come to the seminaries to resolve their personal problems. It is a mistake, however, to blame the victims of society for difficulties facing the seminaries. The presence of gay and lesbian people, single parents, abused persons, ACOAs and divorced students, reflects more and more society's reality. "What's wrong" with the seminaries reflects more and more "what's wrong" in the culture. With the declining enrollment of white males, schools have attracted, by default and intention, students who bring with them experiences, identities and needs not usually addressed in the standard seminary curriculum. The good news is that many of these students are able to link their experiences to the wider society. Wilkes seems to miss this.

WILKES'S account of his visit to Katie Cannon's class at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is an important case in point. Wilkes implicitly criticizes Cannon's teaching method. But she is seeking to integrate academic questions with preaching, worship and the need for community. In the class, students experience what they need but also what is need-

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