



The Kingdom of God in the United States

C. CARLYLE HAALAND

Wagner College, Staten Island, New York

I. RETROSPECT

In 1937 H. Richard Niebuhr published his *The Kingdom of God in America*, a work that broke like a thunderclap on the American scene. In it Niebuhr appeared to depart from the view explanatory of the dynamics of religion in the United States previously set forth in his notable and widely received *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. To the consternation of those of more socio-economic-political interpretive persuasion, and to the approbation of those inclined to favor the power of ideas, Niebuhr came to argue that it was not just the empirical conditions of human life but also (and especially) key ideas persisting down through the course of time that shaped the religious situation. Further, the idea that possessed the most significant trailing power, Niebuhr contended, was the Biblical motif—the Kingdom of God.¹

One may argue that Niebuhr drew too sharp a distinction between the empirical and the ideational in explaining how the religious fabric of the nation was woven. But surely, as an excellent social analyst, he knew that both aspects offered valuable insight into religious belief and behavior. What he wished to accomplish, therefore, was to sensitize the public to a lost element in respect to clarifying the power of religion in the life of the nation.

One may argue further that the particular lost element that he seized upon—the Kingdom of God—was merely an influence of the early Neo-Orthodox movement resonating in an arena of inquiry in which it had no business to be. But one might counter here that regardless of the connection with Neo-Orthodoxy Niebuhr had brought into focus and offered for consideration a point of view that indeed had its own integrity when it came to elucidating religion in the United States.

In treating the idea of the Kingdom of God, Niebuhr contended that three substantive meanings of the concept had functioned in the national life. In the

¹H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (original, 1937; reprinted, New York: Harper & Row, 1959) xii.

early period, what he called the Puritan years, the dominant sense of the Kingdom of God was understood to be the sovereignty of God. In the middle period, characterized as the Evangelical years which were highlighted by the Awakening and Revivalism, the Kingdom of God came to mean chiefly the reign of Christ within people. In the early twentieth century, the era of the Social Gospel movement, the Kingdom of God suggested primarily a kingdom on earth.²

The differences among these three meanings should be clear. But additionally, there is a fundamental difference between the first two meanings and the third. The first two convey the

notion that the element constitutive of the Kingdom of God is power. As the sovereignty of God, this power transcends human life. As the reign of Christ within, the power is immanent to human life. The third meaning, however, focuses not so much upon power as upon place. In this meaning the Kingdom of God is a domain. Specifically, the Kingdom eventuates in the empirical fabric of social life, albeit through human effort.

This essay accepts the general framework laid down by Niebuhr. However, it will not track the first meaning, the sovereignty of God, as this idea still prevails among both the Billy Grahams and a great host of pulpit preachers. Neither will it deal with the third meaning, the Kingdom on earth, carried forward in our times on the one hand by those devoted to the traditional goals of social justice and world peace, or on the other hand by Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority, whose goals are equally as empirical as those of the former, but clearly divergent. Our specific concern will be with the second meaning of the Kingdom motif—the reign of Christ within—a nuance which is still operative and indeed appears to be ascending in the contemporary era in several quarters. The focus will be upon a few select kindred religious personalities of our times, representative of many others inside as well as outside of more traditional churches in the United States. These are persons who appeal to the notion that there is a divine power within the self, and that this power can be utilized to address both the expectations and anxieties awash in our society. The point of view presented here is that even though these representative figures draw upon a variety of religious traditions to legitimate their position, they tend to take special note of the Bible for this purpose. However, in the process they do violence to the biblical text, while at the same time separating themselves from the prior sense of the Kingdom within and, indeed, from the Pauline-Augustinian perspective, as they pursue a religious course preoccupied with self-aggrandizement and social manipulation.

II. EMERGENT PRINCIPLES OF THE KINGDOM

By way of entry into the matter, an observation can serve us well. Not quite two years ago I chanced to pick up a Sunday edition of *The New York Times*. In the sports section was an article featuring John Thompson, the Georgetown University basketball coach. Georgetown had just defeated Syracuse University in the Big Eight finals, thus gaining a berth in the NCAA play-offs. What many observers took to be the impossible dream had come true. But Thompson knew all along that it was thus to be. Hence, tearing a page from the Christian Gospels,

²Ibid.

this new Black Victorious Messiah intoned, “Those doubting Thomases can come and put their hands on my scars. Then maybe they will believe....”³

Granted, while this may not be a tremendously sophisticated theological statement, it does indicate that alongside of more traditional uses of the Bible, there is in our common life a pervasive tendency to adapt the biblical text to a new situation, including the casual exalting, even deifying, of the self.

From one point of view, of course, this proclivity reveals nothing new. The Bible appears to function persistently in the United States as a sort of “ink blot,” with the content of the text coming not from itself but from the interior of the particular reader. From another point of view, however, there is something always new in this tendency. Since the reader provides the content,

it bears the stamp of the reader's particular life and times. Thus, in the past the popularized views of the Bible might have been more dominantly millennial of one sort or another, as for instance in the origins of the Millerite and Russellite movements. Or they might have tended toward inculcation of nineteenth century American values, as in the McGuffey texts, or urgings to build a Christian nation, as with Josiah Strong. Today, however, it would appear that an increasing body of this type of biblical interpretation is geared toward some version of what may be called the Meta-mentalist Movement. Specifically, this involves a tendency to assert that the mind of an individual possesses a non-cognitive aspect which has the power, if consciously and intentionally utilized, to produce relatively precise practical results—therapeutic or otherwise—in the person's life.

This use of the biblical material can, of course, be easily dismissed by skeptics as the deliberate seduction of the unsuspecting hearer or follower in order to serve the pecuniary interest of the preacher or leader. However, as Abraham Maslow tells us, the motivation for engaging in most things in life is often for other purposes than financial gain.⁴ So it is with this Meta-mentalist trend. In most cases, more is at stake than the acquisition of money or property even when these appear to be primary. And the biblical popularizers of this type believe that they have found the key by which to open the value of the Bible for our times in order to secure a variety of other goals—status, friendship, happiness, health.

Before investigating representative cases, it would be fruitful to indicate some further lineaments of this Meta-mentalist trend. First, it tends to be strenuously oriented toward personal concerns—if not those of the leader, then those of the follower. Hence, this style of religion is frequently linked to the so-called personalistic movement. Not uncommonly, however, while concern for the person of the follower is offered as paramount, that of the leader tends to come center stage, literally and figuratively, hence frequently eventuating in a new cult, whatever the particular group might actually call itself.

Second, the trend reveals a solid stratum of popular religion in America. Popular religion, as Peter Williams informs us in his recent book, is understood to be that which not only has mass appeal, but also is “of the people” in the sense that it emanates from, and thus belongs to, a broad section of the populace, reflecting their shared common interests and values. Thus, we are dealing with a

³*The New York Times*, Section 5 (sports), Sunday, March 2, 1980, p. 1.

⁴Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (2nd ed., New York: Harper & Row, 1970) 35-51.

phenomenon which is extra-ecclesiastical in the sense that it tends to have its vitality and source outside of the more typical structures and heritage of the Christian church.s Thus, further, though it does produce its own institutional forms, it is not uncommon that it is presented on the stages of converted theatres, in urban lecture halls, in newspaper advice columns and greeting cards, in popular best sellers, and on wall plaques and *New York Times* sports pages.

This leads to a third point. Meta-mentalism is like many recent trends which, as Robert Ellwood reminds us, tend toward non-normative Christianity.⁶ That is, the beliefs associated with it are wide of those found in the more traditional churches, though, parenthetically, this Meta-mental perspective is now beginning to seep into these churches as well—as even a casual review of ecclesiastical signboards or bulletins will attest. This divergence from more normative

Christianity is especially clear in reference to such issues as the nature of God, the person of Christ, the condition of humanity, and the *eschaton*—all of which come neatly together in the idea of the Kingdom of God. Hence, the Christian Bible is used to subvert the theology that historically has been drawn in great part from it, providing instead justificatory material for insights more congenial with those widely shared in the current times.

III. EXEMPLARS OF THE KINGDOM

These matters become relatively more clear if we sketch the ideas of three of the current gurus of this trend in the United States—Raymond Charles Barker, Eric Butterworth, and Frederick J. Eikerenkoetter, “better known to millions,” his broadcasts trumpet, “as Rev. Ike.” I pass over Robert Schuller and his famous televised Hour of Power simply because, while the claims he makes are highly similar, they are not as crisp and clear as those of the above three—all of whom take the perspective to the extreme conclusion and use mass media to disseminate their messages.

Raymond Charles Barker, head of the Church of Religious Science centered in New York City, pivotal figure in the International New Thought Association, and prolific author, speaks in a manner extraordinarily reminiscent of Mary Baker Eddy, foundress of The Church of Christ, Scientist. Beginning with Jesus, Barker interprets the Jesus portrayed in the Gospels as one who was both human and divine. The divinity of Jesus centers in the fact that he had the potential, inherent to his mind, to accomplish great things. He used his mind, and taught others to use theirs, to perfect life, thus inaugurating anew age of personal health, wealth, and happiness.

According to Barker, the uniqueness of Jesus rested just in the fact that he exercised his innate mental power fully and completely. No one else had done that prior to the time of Jesus. Can we approximate Jesus? In Barker’s view, to a considerable extent we can. That is to say, we can recapitulate Jesus in our lives as we utilize the divinity power that is within ourselves, specifically the power in our minds, to establish a kind of private Kingdom of God on earth.

⁵Peter W. Williams, *Popular Religion in America* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1980) 5.

⁶Robert S. Ellwood, Jr., *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973) 3.

Barker’s personal opulence might lead the observer to the conclusion that the whole goal of this form of religion is financial gain. However, this should not obscure the fact that a major component in the new age as conceived by Barker is a life devoid of the ordeal of work, the pain of illness, and even the horrors of much death—all of which traditionally are viewed as resulting from The Fall. Thus, for Barker, devices or techniques to ease life’s burdens become a chief *modus operandi* in his religious activities. But however Barker presents his message, the essence is always the same. The divine power, which effects change in human life, is within us. Thus, belief is in oneself, and prayer is directed to oneself.⁷

Prima facie the same as Barker, yet different in terms of nuance, is Eric Butterworth, a central figure in the Unity Centers of Christianity. Through his radio messages and his monthly *Challenge* bulletin—a combination of religious tract and organizational schedule—he points out to his audience and readers the prospects for a more abundant life through biblical commitment.

A recurring event, offered at his mid-Manhattan center, is a series of classes in what he

calls the metaphysical interpretation of the Bible. These classes are promoted as enabling one to “unlock the mysteries of the Bible” in order to secure the “vital keys to an abundant life”—that is, to attain “to the kingdom of a full and complete life.”

Butterworth, more partial to scriptural quotation than Barker, likes to remind us, quoting Mark 10:27, that “all things are possible,” not from an outside source of power but from the power within ourselves. The reason for this is because in our essential nature we are divine. This divine power is the “imprisoned splendor” within ourselves which must be released, actualized.

At base, Butterworth maintains, mental power works according to a kind of law of attraction and repulsion—rather like a magnet. This mental power governs all of our acts, and thus determines all the outcomes of these acts. If we utilize our mental power in a non-divine manner, a negative manner, we produce only failure, pain, and despair in our lives. If, however, we utilize this power in a divine manner, a positive manner, we shall accomplish great things.

The model before us is, of course, Jesus. Jesus was Christ because he had the ability to actualize the divine power within his mind. As a consequence of this he was able to feed multitudes, heal the sick, and even raise the dead. These biblical claims are not to be explained away as non-empirical events. Nor are they to be dismissed as non-events on the erroneous grounds that natural laws do not permit such occurrences. Neither are these events to be understood as traditional miracles in the sense that natural laws were suspended or violated. Natural laws can never be suspended or violated. Jesus functioned in accordance with natural laws to accomplish the things recorded. The Old Testament prophets did likewise when they performed unusual feats. Most humans have not done these sorts of things. But, they can, Butterworth tells us, for Jesus himself asserted that “greater things than these shall Ye [*sic*: he] do” (John 14:12). These great things, however, tend to come to rest under the rubrics of personal prosperity, health, and happiness—all empirically possible because of inner divine, mental power.

⁷The essential points here were gleaned from a long, detailed conversation with Barker at his Manhattan headquarters in June, 1973.

Butterworth is insistent upon his chief point. The “Christ of you,” which is “life’s innermost secret,” is the divine pattern within ourselves which we can use to accomplish things which appear to be miraculous, but which are, strictly speaking, in conformity with the laws of nature.

Returning again to the Old Testament Butterworth asserts that the injunction to wait on the Lord (cf. Pss 27:14; 37:34; Prov 20:22) does not impel us to be passive and contemplative, but to perceive ourselves to be at one with the Infinite—the divine flow within—so that we become vehicles for the expression of inspiration and power.⁸

In one respect the Boston-based Rev. Ike is the epitome of this general trend in American religion. Passing beyond the more physiological or metaphysical concerns evinced by the former two, Rev. Ike includes for major emphasis more socio-economic aspects.

One of Rev. Ike’s key phrases addressed to his hearers is that he aims “to turn you on to life.” The meaning of this is brought into somewhat clearer focus by another stock phrase—to give you “the good which you desire.” This good is given further precision by identifying it with the five goals of health, happiness, love, success, and prosperity.

The various dimensions of his public meetings—frequently televised—are directed toward one or more of these goals. An example is his so-called prayer treatment. In this he instructs his hearers to sit back, lift up the chin, close the eyes, relax, and “repeat after me” phrases that reconfirm positive self-images in respect to health, happiness, and love—with success and prosperity evident but more muted. The testimonies—both written and verbal—of his followers, however, tend to focus upon success and prosperity (social and economic)—with health, happiness, and love also evident but muted. Rev. Ike’s facilities, sumptuously appointed, and his own exhortations tend to reinforce the success and prosperity goals. His physical presence does likewise. His grooming is impeccable, his raiment fine, and his rings expensive. At the same time, his behavior suggests one to whom health, happiness, and love are no strangers. He laughs. He jokes. He is physically active. And the sexual allusions roll easily from his lips.

A disaffected Baptist preacher from the South, Rev. Ike now reads from no Bible and includes no Christian hymnody in his services. Indeed, he scorns such traditional aspects, even calling his organization the Science of Living Institute. Thus, the songs sung have been written by himself, and he sings solo. The word is he himself, the Living Word and Witness. He is introduced as the one who has bestowed so many blessings upon so many people. He is messiah, *sotēr*, model, guarantor. As he promises, “You can’t lose with the stuff I use.”

In spite of this, as Rev. Ike’s comments unfold, one is brought up short with phrases straight out of the King James Version. Especially after having asserted a particularly audacious point or having referred to an event that appears to be at best tenuously related to the Christian tradition, he calms the waters of incredulity by stating that “we’re not out of the good book; we’re not out of the Bible,” before delivering an appropriate quote. Thus, in reporting to his audience that a faithful follower had acquired a piece of real estate in the Bahamas which she

⁸The material pertinent to Butterworth’s ideas was obtained from several issues of his *Challenge* bulletin as well as a number of broadcast messages over local New York City radio.

characterized as her gold mine, Rev. Ike reminds his hearers that the situation is truly biblical—“Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matt 6:33; cf. also Luke 12:31). If more biblical support is necessary, it comes from the Old Testament. “Money answereth all things” (Eccl 10:19). Psalm 23 helps, too: “My cup runneth over” (v. 5).

One’s personal life will be considerably enhanced, of course, if one is able to influence others to serve one’s self interest. Again, one needs simply to follow the biblical text: “If I be lifted up, I will draw all men unto me” (John 12:32). But how does one go about being lifted up? One looks to the Kingdom of God within. In this regard, Proverbs is of great help. Rev. Ike reminds his hearer, that “as [a person] thinketh in his heart, so is he” (23:7). But thinking is not to be confused with mere analytical mental operations, for such does not occur “in the heart.” Thinking is a state in which one has a vision of oneself and one’s own power. This vision is essential. “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Prov 29:18). Moreover, this vision is quickly associated with Rev. Ike’s notion of visualization, a mental technique by which one perceives oneself as “being, doing and having what one desires.” As one visualizes, one does not focus upon the concrete situation in which one finds oneself, but rather upon a situation into which one wishes to enter. However, one must visualize this new situation as if it is, in fact,

present. Only then will one's current, concrete situation be transformed, and relatively quickly at that. The mind, specifically the subconscious, has the power to produce this change. In the subconscious one lifts up, that is, implants, one's desire. People who can make the subconscious work are characterized as self-directed, self-found persons—persons who perceive who they are in God and who God is in them. Indeed, the power of the mind is the power of God within. And the only proper prayer of thanks for what one receives is, "Thank you, God-in-me."

In order to lend greater authenticity to these claims, the Bible is again marshalled. For example, in the case of a follower who had visualized a large salary increase—and received it—Rev. Ike sagaciously utters "and it came to pass." This is a phrase liberally sprinkled throughout the Gospels, especially Luke, to note an event that has transpired. For Rev. Ike, however, the phrase suggests not merely that something has occurred, but that it has occurred because of a precondition. In effect, A guaranteed B. Thus, one's own life can change if one's mind is used in new ways—not to receive information or to react to external events, but to be a formative influence in one's personal situation.

The benediction that Rev. Ike pronounces at the conclusion of some of his meetings comes, paradoxically, from St. Paul and is intended to sum up all things: "Be ye transformed by the renewal of your minds" (Rom 12:2).⁹

IV. WELLSPRINGS OF THE KINGDOM

Rev. Ike, though flamboyant in style—rather like a lively, black Merv Griffin—shares with individuals like Barker and Butterworth common attitudes toward re-

⁹The material relevant to Rev. Ike has been taken from periodic television specials aired in the New York City area during the 1970s. Biblical citations are provided by the author.

ligious traditions or sources. All three of these figures tend not to be specifically Christian. In the case of two, the word Christian is omitted from the institutional title, and only Barker includes the word church therein. Thus, from one angle Christianity is looked upon negatively. Its traditional form is the "route of gloom" to Barker; to Rev. Ike it promises "pie in the sky bye-and-bye"—the typical point of view taught in the theological "cemeteries" of the land. From another point of view, however, Christianity has something to offer, providing it is commensurate with perceived valuable insights from other philosophical and religious traditions, as well as aspects of the sciences that deal with human behavior. Clearly, then, even though each of these persons gives different weight to different sources, there is an overall tendency to isolate the common denominators in a number of different traditions and points of view, synthesizing these into a more useful religious option. Concomitantly, aspects of these traditions that are alien to the concerns of the contemporary Meta-mentalists are set aside. Most notable in this regard is their tendency to look past the suprahistorical, anti-materialistic, anti-egoistic dimensions of various traditions, whether Christian or other. Indeed, for the Meta-mentalist history is good if the individual prospers in it. Hence, matter is good, as is the ego.

Some years ago I was discussing this Meta-mentalist trend with a colleague who is in biblical studies. He remarked that the views espoused by these figures appeared to be a new Gnosticism. To some extent this is true. Like Gnosticism, the sacred in its particularity is found in things. In terms of the individual, therefore, the discovery of God has to do with the discovery

of the self. Through *gnosis*—total, immediate, intuitive insight—knowledge of one is knowledge of the other.

Yet, there is no evidence that people like Barker and Butterworth, and least of all Rev. Ike, have come in contact with Gnosticism. That, however, may be of no great consideration inasmuch as Gnosticism is a point of view that is similar to what is found in other movements in the ancient and classical world—for example, Neoplatonism, and early Jewish and Christian mysticism. Indeed, the substance has already been gleaned from these other traditions and passed down to our times through such conduits as Emmanuel Swedenborg, eighteenth century Swedish inventor and religious writer, and Phineas Quimby, nineteenth century Portland, Maine, healer and seer. The former was also a direct influence upon the latter, who was, in turn, a source for much of the lore of the Meta-mentalists, if we may accept the claims of Barker as authentic.¹⁰ Yet, unlike the ancient sources, as well as Swedenborg and Quimby, all of whom maintained the transcendent reference, the Meta-mentalists take their stand almost completely with an immanent divine reality. Any transcendent reality either does not exist or is ultimately inconsequential.

Swedenborg and Quimby were also conduits for other traditions which have come to bear more directly upon our society in recent times, and have influenced the Meta-mentalists. Among these is the Hindu tradition. Except for the tendency among the Meta-mentalists, especially Rev. Ike, to locate the ultimate goal of existence within the material order rather than viewing matter as revelatory of a higher reality, they all evince a similarity to the Vedanta Society and the

¹⁰This historical connection was indicated by Barker in the conversation of June, 1973.

Self-Realization Fellowship, both of which rose from the Indian source.

Christopher Isherwood, a devotee of Vedanta, once said:

Vedanta began by telling me that I was the Atman, and that the Atman was Brahman; the Godhead was my real nature, and the real nature of all that I experienced in the external, surrounding universe.¹¹

Paramahansa Yogananda, organizer of the Self-Realization Fellowship in the United States, has put it in somewhat different language, though the intent is the same. Though, says Yogananda, human life reflects the character of limitation and frustration, individuals possess the drives for love, joy, and power by which to transcend this situation. Moreover, they possess these drives because of an innate infinite, divine capacity (*prana* or “life energy”) that proceeds toward the actualization of love, joy, and power. Due to ignorance, however, humans direct life energy toward material things. By coming to realize their true nature, humans can direct this energy toward higher forms of love, joy, and power.¹²

What Isherwood and Yogananda both affirm is the notion that God as sacred is everywhere. Hence, one can encounter God within the self. What they do not emphasize here, but is emphasized by our Meta-mentalists, is that discovery and channeling of the inner reality can lead to the achievement of a number of personal, frequently material, goals.

Another strand that comes to bear through Quimby is the work of Friedrich Mesmer, the later eighteenth century German physician, who was at the forefront of the development of modern hypnosis. Working with individuals, both singly and in groups, Mesmer sought to

channel external forces toward humans in order to achieve health. After accepting this point, it is only another step or two to assert that the force external is actually the force internal, that this is “triggered” by hypersuggestibility associated with the practitioner’s words, and that the outcomes can pass beyond the area of health—physical and mental—to more concrete social and economic ones. It is in this framework that Barker, Butterworth, and Rev. Ike function via their verbal treatments.

A further strand appears to be the area of the Occult. The Meta-mentalists tend to use subtle forms of psychokinesis (the influence of material things by the mind), telepathy (the communication of ideas mind to mind), and precognition (the perceiving of events in advance of their occurrence) in their programs.

A final strand, and perhaps the most determinative since it is indigenous to the United States, must also be noted. In doing so, Robert Bellah’s essay, “The Revolution and Civil Religion,” is instructive.¹³

Bellah argues that the emphasis upon personal happiness—undergirded by a philosophy of Utilitarianism bent toward economic self-interest—was preying upon America as far back as the Revolutionary Era, displacing biblical and classical ethics which emphasized the common good. While the Founding Fathers sought to block the excessive, obsessive, and aggressive applications of this out-

¹¹R. Ellwood, *Religious and Spiritual Groups*, 224.

¹²*Ibid.*, 225.

¹³Robert N. Bellah, “The Revolution and Civil Religion,” *Religion and the American Revolution*, ed. Jerald C. Brauer (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 55-73.

look, seeking rather to perpetuate a more corporate commitment in the new nation, strenuous concern for one’s personal worldly affairs did emerge.

Bellah argues, further, that by 1900 this outlook had come to dominate the nation. Moreover, it had been transformed from a potential vice into an absolute virtue. Though it could focus upon many pragmatic goals, the economic one usually stood at the extreme. In its crudest form, godliness and wealth were equated. The clear continuation of this idea is located in Rev. Ike.

It is worth arguing that in the last two or three decades personal happiness—what the early Americans called “felicity” and we call “peace of mind”—has spread beyond economic and social frameworks to physiological and psychological ones. Philip Rieff has aptly characterized this as the triumph of the therapeutic.¹⁴ Thus, the real nursery for the ideas of the Meta-mentalists is the American school of self-interest gone to seed, so to speak.

V. THE SEEDS OF THE DISCONTENT

This concern for personal happiness has received much attention in recent years. In the 1950s it was usually given focus through Norman Vincent Peale’s *The Power of Positive Thinking*. In the last decade or less it has become more common to characterize our culture as a “me, too” culture in which Robert Ringer’s promptings to look out for Number One carry the weight of a virtual gospel.

The core of the preoccupation with the self can be debated, but two social analysts, each

with an interest in the religious dimension, cast some light upon the matter.

One of the most significant works by the late Erich Fromm is his *To Have or To Be?* Unfortunately it is one of his lesser read works too. In this work Fromm notes that our society is devoted to acquiring property and making a profit.¹⁵ This, however, is not purely a pecuniary issue. As Fromm shows with great lucidity, the acquisitive mentality can bear upon such other dimensions of life as reading, learning, conversing, exercising authority, loving, and even religious faith. The opposite of this acquisitiveness, which is the having-mode, is the being-mode. The being-mode does not involve the accumulation of goods, words, ideas, or power in order to enhance the self at the expense of others. It involves participation, relationship, dialogue, caring, and offering, and requires expressing in one's own life the dynamism of the relation among the self, others, and God.¹⁶ In the being-mode, love of others, of self, and of God are conjunctive. In the having-mode, the love that comes to dominance is an inauthentic self-love, for it divides the self from others and, indeed, from God.¹⁷ Christopher Lasch's recent *The Culture of Narcissism* has given important credibility both to analysis and critique of this social tempo.

The view that our society is afflicted with a narcissistic impulse appears to

¹⁴Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

¹⁵Erich Fromm, *To Have or To Be? (World Perspectives, vol. 50; ed. Ruth Nanda Anshen; New York: Harper & Row, 1976) 28.*

¹⁶*Ibid.*, chapter 2.

¹⁷Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956) 58.

be beyond dispute. The Meta-mentalists are merely the most explicit proponents of this in religious terms.

But what is narcissism? Most would define this trait as self-love, or self-infatuation. However, Lasch has suggested, following Sigmund Freud, that narcissism is not simple self-admiration.¹⁸ It is the result of love rejected, that returns as self-hatred or self-contempt.¹⁹

On this ground, then, the social malaise of our times involves such symptoms as getting (more than one needs) and spending (on things for which one has nothing more than passing use). It involves pursuing some objects which are beyond grasp, and others which, if grasped, destroy. It involves the manipulation of people, beckoning them to come and dominating them, or cutting them off when they make the overture. The purpose of this behavior, however, is not because one hopes ultimately to fulfill the self, but precisely because one does not wish to. Life as a treadmill is firmly fixed. Rather than resulting in peace, it compounds the anxiety.

Lasch is correct when he suggests that the lineaments of modern life are a camouflaged self-discontent. He is wrong, however, when he suggests that there is no connection with the religious heritage of our land.²⁰ In asserting that one can control one's total existence on the grounds of an interior divine power, as our Meta-mentalists do, the connection has been made with the advocacy of the "Kingdom within" motif. Yet, how this squares with the theological tradition is the final and ultimate question. For among the followers of the Meta-mentalists it is all too common that health remains precarious, anxiety does not pass, status is altered scarcely at all, and the economic condition is improved usually by securing a second and even a third job.

VI. THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

The implications of the Meta-mentalist Movement for Christian theology are profound. Providence is not absolutely transcendent, but is at least equally immanent; not beyond, but also and especially within. Thus, God is not over against humanity, but is chiefly, if not exclusively, identical with the crucial interior power of humanity. True, to some extent this notion may be ferreted out of the theology of St. Augustine, and it can even be found in the theology of Luther. But both of these maintained the very important counterweight of transcendence. The same is true for the early American proponents of the Kingdom within. Interior grace made no sense without the sovereignty of God.²¹ As to the theology of Calvin, as well as the content of much of the biblical literature, the immanence of God is muted in favor of the sense of God as “other.” However, the reverse is true for the Meta-mentalists. Divine immanence is normative. And with it the apotheosis of humanity is affirmed.

It follows, then, for the Meta-mentalists that God is not a supreme, personal

¹⁸Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978) 32.

¹⁹Ibid., 36.

²⁰Ibid., 5.

²¹H. R. Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 89.

being. Rather, God is a name for an impersonal power or force defined as a dimension of the mind. Thus, the word “being,” sometimes used by Meta-mentalists to refer to God, is a misty word designed more to impress than to clarify. And the term “personal” has meaning only insofar as it is applied to the individual human in an intrapersonal sense.

It follows, further, that Jesus is Messiah, Christ, *Sotēr* in virtue of the fact that he knew his inner self and used it in service to others, being a model for others to follow. In the present day Jesus is still our exemplar, with one important difference. All humans have the capacity to follow Jesus and so serve others. But chiefly they are urged to use their resources to further their own interests. Regardless of that, for the Meta-mentalists the world is full of countless potential and not a few actual messiahs.

If the foregoing is true, then one ought not to view the human condition as freighted with a finiteness that is unalterable except through the initiative of a transcendent, external reality. Neither should one give much play to the factors of heredity and environment in shaping life; they play limited, not limiting, roles. Human life can be altered. Individuals—with the aid of other individuals—can transcend their condition. The present and the future are in the hands of people. People are righteous; they are holy. They are not, as in the theology of Luther, both holy and sinful, with all of the ambiguity implied. If they are holy, then they can render life good. Sin, insofar as it is a term to be used, involves the refusal to alter the conditions of one’s own life. Thus, because of what one is and of what one can do, one can evince great pride in the self—a virtue that is surely alien to the Christian tradition that is passed down from St. Paul through St. Augustine, St. Benedict, St. Bonaventure, and the Protestant Reformers.

What, then, of eschatology, of the Kingdom of God? The Kingdom of God is, in the first instance, within; it is divine power within the self. The sovereignty of God has been internalized. This Kingdom eventuates in human life in terms of personal gains, but not in a broad

programmatically reconstruct the social order. Thus the Kingdom of God on earth does exist. But it constitutes a private, not a public, world. The *eschaton* is a potentially realizable one; the Kingdom of God is here, or can be here as it is discovered and/or established in reference to the self. If one is not at ease in Zion, one can shortly become so, contra Jeremiah. And contra the statements of the Gospel writers, Paul, and the author of the Book of Revelation, there is no need to be a pilgrim in the world, patiently enduring suffering and tribulation, for there is no universal apocalypse that will wrack the present order as a prelude to the inauguration of the new age. Things will be much more amiable than all that.

In reflecting upon these things, and then recalling the tendencies to draw upon traditions and to quote, paraphrase, or exegete the Bible, to one's own advantage, one might come to believe that biblical usage is merely epiphenomenal—of no essential value—for the Meta-mentalists. The matter, however, is different. As in religious trends generally, there is a dimension here of both continuity and change. Peter Slater suggests that what we need as humans is to keep faith with our ancestors and their best insights, while also being true to our changing world.²² The use of the Bible, and almost invariably of the King James

²²Peter Slater, *The Dynamics of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978) 2.

Version, by the Meta-mentalists may well be done to provide a touchstone with Christian origins while giving free rein to interpret it and utilize other sources to transform Christian theology in order to reinforce a preoccupation with the self that is more congenial with the current times. But even if this is so, one is still faced with Karl Barth's concern on the front side of the Neo-Orthodox movement.²³ Somewhat restated as a question, it is:

Can one speak about God
by speaking about man in
a loud—or even soft—voice?

²³Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957) chapter 6.