

CHAPTER 1

THE RELIGIOUS CRITIC AND THE END OF AN ERA

But in a larger sense we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.

Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg Address

The crowd departed with a new thing in its ideological luggage, that new constitution Lincoln had substituted for the one they brought there with them. They walked off, from those curving graves on the hillside, under a changed sky, into a different America. Lincoln had revolutionized the Revolution, giving people a new past to live with that would change their future indefinitely.

Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*¹

Lincoln was inclined toward Transcendentalism and its belief that what happens in history is real and important because it copies something eternal and universal lying outside history. And yet on that dark day on which he dedicated a cemetery for men who might have died in vain, Lincoln asserted that this American ground was consecrated, not by the Eternal beyond history, but by “the brave men” in history. Moreover, contrary to his expectations, Lincoln’s own words did add something; they were

not only remembered but hallowed the ground at least as effectively as did the physical deeds of warriors.

While today most intellectuals, including those who might be religious critics (those public intellectuals who analyze and reconstruct the spiritual culture), have dropped Lincoln's Transcendentalism, they still readily agree that "the world will little note nor long remember what we say." Believing that their words are of little public consequence and that they are not compelled, as Lincoln was, to address the public, they devote their energies to their isolated professions and abandon the public audience that Lincoln addressed. The consequence is that today's public culture, unlike Lincoln's, sails without the kind of intellectual rudder Lincoln so effectively offered.

Like Lincoln, America's religious critics once were animated by the belief that Americans were God's chosen people or the special instrument of some sacred force, and thereby an exception, religiously or morally superior to the other nations. This original Puritan myth of God's New Israel was sometimes replaced by equivalent myths, making America the birthplace of democracy, the home of freedom, the nerve center for capitalism. America became a nation on an errand not only into the wilderness of a continent but into the wilderness of the entire world. "Exceptionalism"²—the belief that Americans, among all the world's peoples, were an exception—had offered to Americans a unity of purpose. Religious critics could ground themselves in the belief that beneath the variety of American meanings there was one core meaning: that America had received an extraordinary blessing, one that set her apart from other nations.

But over the generations, that unified influence became implausible and was replaced by the recognition that America was shaped by a variety of disparate influences and was one among a variety of nations. Exceptionalism had given to America a spiritual character. With the death of exceptionalism, an era vanished and with it vanished the confidence that had once inspired American thinkers. The pluralism that replaced exceptionalism may have reached its apotheosis in today's multiculturalism. Thus, a grand, monistic confidence was replaced by a disappointing pluralism and a consequent pessimism that have been damaging to American spiritual culture and disabling to those who might be religious critics. Robert Bellah, in the course of many

books, has demonstrated that the loss of such a myth can contribute to the loss of an American public philosophy.³

In one sense, exceptionalism carried the seeds of its own undoing, for the very success of exceptionalism made America unusually vulnerable to pluralism. When exceptionalism made America a chosen people, it said the sacred operated directly in American history. In effect, it drew the sacred out of a world safely apart from history and placed it directly into the workings of American history; this was true even of the secular forms of American exceptionalism. Unexpectedly, this exposed the sacred to the very forces of history from which previously it had been protected. Thus, when the unitary meaning of America was shattered into a plurality of forces, the sacred itself was shattered.

If this chain of events (from exceptionalism, to pluralism, to the death of exceptionalism's God) is correct, then it is also correct that, to restore American spiritual culture, Americans must learn how to respond deliberately and constructively to these circumstances. They must accept that, despite the blandishments of optimistic national leaders, they can neither regain a plausible exceptionalism nor shed a plurality of national ingredients. The demise of exceptionalism and the onset of pluralism, however, do not preclude the recovery of a viable religious sense of the whole, of a viable spiritual culture, or of the office of religious critic.

In this chapter I discuss the demise of exceptionalism, as well as the cure for exceptionalism as it was offered by religious critics, such as Reinhold Niebuhr. I argue that, while these religious critics rightly attacked the pride endemic to an exceptionalist nation, they wrongly concluded that what Americans most need is contrition. I argue that America, as it struggled to live after the fall of the myth of exceptionalism, was afflicted by pessimism. And I suggest that the last thing America—or, at least, American intellectuals—may need is more contrition.

I do not argue that American pessimism is caused exclusively by the failure of the myths of exceptionalism, nor do I argue that some new myth of America will neatly restore the spiritual culture that grew up around the myth of exceptionalism. The problems of American spiritual culture are various and complex beyond current analysis or, at least, my current analysis. I offer only one approach of possible use to a religious critic.

I. Why America Lost its Sense of the Whole

In *The End of American History*, David W. Noble argues that in the 1940s there occurred what we now understand to be a revolution among American historians. Using Thomas Kuhn's theory of revolution, Noble argues that the historians' longstanding paradigm for understanding America was abandoned. Young American historians had risen to attack Charles Beard's claim that American democratic industrialism had set her apart from corrupt European capitalism. In effect, by attacking Beard, they attacked America's own 300-year metaphysics of exceptionalism, which had set America apart from all nations as God's elect people or, in later years, as a nation exceptional for its spiritual, moral, political, or economic destiny. The earliest exceptionalist interpretations were fortified by the great American historians. George Bancroft and Frederick Jackson Turner, for example, had argued that, in its simple and pure freeholder-agrarian economics and democratic politics, America had set itself apart from complex and corrupt Europe with its capitalistic and implicitly feudal politics. Charles Beard was merely one more variation on the theme; so the young historians' frontal attack on Beard was, in effect, an attack on the grand American illusion that had explained America's superiority.⁴

Earlier, in *Historians Against History*, Noble had argued that the exceptionalist myth had had at least three phases: the Puritan rhetoric of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Enlightenment rhetoric of the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, and the Romantic rhetoric from 1830 to the mid-twentieth century.⁵ In this progression from Puritan to Enlightenment to Romantic periods, Noble followed a standard narrative of American intellectual history.⁶ The Puritans had seen America as the land of God's elect, a New Israel destined to fulfill God's promise. The Enlightenment interpretation of Franklin and Jefferson looked to the writings of John Locke and the French *philosophes* to argue that America's mission was to return to the state of nature discerned by reason. The aim of returning America to a purer condition function much like, and often was explicitly associated with, the Puritan mission of fulfilling God's promise. The Romantic interpretation—evident in the Jacksonian era, the poetry of Whitman, and the writings of the leading American Renais-

sance thinkers (Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville)—was based on the common person's intuition of an ideal or elemental life and on the belief that that life was uniquely American. All three phases of exceptionalism used some version of the Puritan's three-part jeremiad, proceeding from promise, to declension (declining the promise), to a prophecy according to which the original promise would be fulfilled. First, America had received the promise to be God's or Reason's or Intuition's exceptional people; second, America had violated the terms of the promise and fallen into declension; and, third, America would accomplish what was prophesied for it and become an ideal people.

Sacvan Bercovitch, in his *American Jeremiad*, argues that the jeremiad represents "an ideological consensus" that has characterized American culture.⁷ His argument concentrates on two points: (1) the jeremiad outlived the Puritans, becoming simply "the myth of America," and (2) the tone of the jeremiad is optimistic. In this analysis, Bercovitch counters the American intellectual historian Perry Miller. First, he rejects Miller's claim that the Puritan outlook, in spite of being naturalistic and rationalistic in non-Calvinist ways, was so tied to a Calvinistic, transcendent, and inscrutable God that when that particular notion of God died so did the Puritan interpretation. Bercovitch argues that, in fact, the Puritan influence on political philosophy lasted well into the twentieth century, revealing itself in such figures as Martin Luther King, Jr. Second, Bercovitch rejects Perry Miller's emphasis on the Puritans' preoccupation with failure (the failure of the errand into the wilderness); Bercovitch claims, in fact, that the Puritans saw their critique as only a step in the eventual fulfillment of a promise. Ultimately, the jeremiad is not pessimistic, but optimistic. "The essence of the [Puritan] sermon," Bercovitch states, "is its unshakable optimism. In explicit opposition to the traditional mode, it inverts the doctrine of vengeance into a promise of ultimate success."⁸ Absorbing the optimism of the jeremiad, American history came to be read as sacred history and as a redemption story.

However, this grand jeremaic metaphysics of America was disconfirmed by historical realities, frustrating the historians who used the jeremiad myth or its later variations. Actual history simply would not fulfill the prophecy of ideal history. The demise of the jeremiad was first definitively argued in the 1940s, but it

was not until the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s that the demise of the jeremiad was seen to be, in fact, the failure of the dominant American myth. In this, historians Richard Hofstadter, William Appleman Williams, Sacvan Bercovitch, Gene Wise, and J. G. A. Pocock were important, but it was Reinhold Niebuhr, a religious thinker, who led the way. All of these thinkers described the depth and pervasiveness of the accepted distinction between an undefiled America, informed by high ideals (biblical truth, natural law, the ideal spirit) and able to fulfill its prophecy, and a Europe devoid of a unique promise. It was this categorical distinction between America and Europe that gave resonance to the American Puritans' claim that they had left behind medieval Europe and her decadent ways, as the Israelites had left behind Egypt. On this model American optimism was built. When the rebel historians of the 1940s attacked this paradigm, they not only ended American history, so understood, but made the most fundamental American optimism illegitimate.

David Noble demonstrates that Niebuhr, Hofstadter, and Williams replaced exceptionalist categories with new categories: divine providence and natural law were replaced with experience; unitary national and international systems with a variety of systems; and deduction from a myth with pragmatic testing. The conclusion of the revisionist history is that Americans should see themselves as not unlike, and certainly as not superior to, Europeans or the rest of the world and that they should abandon the jeremic metaphysics of optimism. America is a plurality of peoples and is a nation among a plurality of nations. Its best hope is to acknowledge its former pretensions and to muddle through. In short, America should be contrite and practical.

This American pluralism did not spring up suddenly in mid-twentieth century; it had been implicit throughout American history. Noble notes that "For Hofstadter, the United States in 1800 provided a political model of a pluralistic democracy to the world because its leaders had chosen not to live by the European ideology of the republican tradition, which declared the possibility of harmony with the universal, but by the encounter with the dynamic flow of particulars, which was their American experience."⁹

The pluralism of America is deeply rooted. The European immigrants occupied a land they understood to be without an

established native tradition. They lived without a common bloodline, without a geography developed through centuries of habitation, and without the institutions that grow up amid such continuities. Nor did Americans succeed in directly transferring to their new land the traditions that unified their mother countries. To put it in Henry James's extravagant language:

one might enumerate the items of high civilization, as it exists in other countries, which are absent from the texture of American life, until it should become a wonder to know what was left. No State, in the European sense of the word, and indeed barely a specific national name. No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, no manors, nor old country houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages, nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great universities nor public schools—no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class—no Epsom nor Ascot! . . . The natural remark, in the almost lurid light of such an indictment, would be that if these things are left out, everything is left out.¹⁰

Americans compensated for the absence of institutions and traditions by repeated efforts to define and to distinguish themselves. As though drunk with a mixture of ethnic, religious, and cultural ingredients, they staggered on, from decade to decade, in search of the historic and cultural lamppost that would show them the way to go home, that would illuminate some clear route from their true past, into their proper future.¹¹

Pluralism in America is partially attributable to specific features of the immigrant population. The immigrants originated from a wide variety of cultures. Further, with the exception of the African Americans, the immigrants were atypical before arriving. They were a minority in their mother country, forced to acknowledge their strangeness, odd in their willingness to leave the ancestral land to struggle for a new life in a distant land. Further still, the Americans were unusually egalitarian, less structured by social status than were the Europeans. The sources of American equality and its horizontal pluralities are numerous. Alexis de Tocqueville points to two when he asserts that "the happy and

the powerful do not go into exile, and there are no surer guarantees of equality among men than poverty and misfortune” and that “the soil of America was opposed to a territorial aristocracy,” for it was so hard to clear and its produce was so meager that it “was not sufficient to enrich at the same time both an owner and a farmer.”¹² Factors such as these combined to keep America moving in a pluralistic direction.

While many Americans, despite such pluralism, were able to sustain in the twentieth century a unifying monism based on the exceptionalist myth, that monism was largely destroyed for them by a plurality of another sort. This was not a quantitative pluralism, where singularity of type and tradition is overwhelmed by the variety of immigrants and their diverse traditions. Rather, it was a qualitative pluralism, where an unambiguously good destiny is overwhelmed by irremediable evils always present beneath whatever is good about America. This qualitative pluralism was brought home most vividly in international and domestic politics. Two world wars, the cold war, and, particularly, the Vietnam War presented a variety of experiences that shook the belief that Americans were a protected and virtuous people, invulnerable to compromising entanglements. How, Conrad Cherry asks, can America in a pluralistic international world see itself as a persuasive “light to the nations” or as a “chosen people” without risking imperialism on one hand and isolationism on the other hand?¹³ On the domestic side, many Americans recognized that the nation’s treatment of African Americans and women was not the behavior appropriate to a blessed and righteous people.

Admittedly, a kind of exceptionalist monism still lives on, but it is certainly not robust. Even Ronald Reagan, its most vociferous recent champion, acknowledged its sickness even while propping it up. In admitting to a biographer that his primary mission as president was to “restore America’s self-confidence,” he tacitly conceded that restoration was necessary, that Jimmy Carter’s July 1979 speech on the malaise of America had had its truth.¹⁴ Reagan’s failure to overcome that malaise might be measured in people’s unwillingness to vote: by 1988, at the end of Reagan’s eight years, the United States had the lowest rate of voter participation of any democracy in the world.¹⁵

America’s pluralism, always there covertly, now works overtly. Sometimes it seems that the very identity of America is

to deny any identity at all, that the sameness of the American people lies in the regularity with which they want to be mavericks, that the togetherness of the American people lies in the ease with which the foreign is felt as native to the American national body. America is a traditional society in one respect: it is the planet's oldest uninterrupted democracy. But democracy, as it is conceived in the United States, is the institutionalization of plurality, of the separate rights and powers of individuals, groups, and branches of government. This institutionalized plurality is protected officially (even if often unsuccessfully) against the domination of the society by any single ethic, racial, gender, religious, cultural, or sexual-preference group or ideology.

Why should plurality be so peculiarly devastating for America? The answer can be traced to exceptionalism: America was made unusually vulnerable to plurality when its sacred and extrahistorical depths were brought into the surface of its lived history. The American myth declared that the foundation of America's spiritual culture was immediate, at hand, living in its very historical events. America's day-to-day history was sacred history; this was the keystone to exceptionalist thinking from the beginning. Despite the Puritan scenario that seemed to make this world a place of sojourn, a mere preparation for the other world, Puritan theology was primarily a theology of divine providence operating in this world. This theology did not represent a religion of private salvation but a divine mission acted out on the plane of social history to regenerate social history. In this respect, the Puritan religion was a nationalistic religion. The new Americans would not merely act out their religion somewhere within the boundaries of history; they themselves would become the chosen people, their land would become the promised land, and their story would be the story of the New Israel. They would see Europe as Egypt and their America as the promised land. They would be a chosen people, and their history would be a religious history. In the words of Giles Gunn, what might have been merely the "religion *in* America" became the "religion *of* America."¹⁶ This commitment to sacred history was, at the same time, a commitment to a sacred empiricism, an empiricism that saw ultimate meanings not in ideal essences but in overt events. But because the sacred had been located in history, the eventual pluralization of history went all the way down. This sacred his-

tory and this sacred way of knowing meant that, when plurality was recognized in history, it was an unmitigated plurality, unrelieved by some unifying reality beyond history. The God that would unify America was so caught in the surface of America's history that that God was shattered when that history's unity was broken.

By comparison, the Continental European could gain relief from historical plurality through reflection on extrahistorical realities known through rational ideals, mystical experiences, totalitarian ideology, or institutional religion. Even its late-twentieth-century philosophies of deconstruction and hermeneutics tended to become, more than anything else, purely formal methodologies, making the ahistorical ideal of interpretive play more real than anything in particular, local histories. That is, Continental poststructuralism escaped the full impact of historical plurality and the challenge of acting in that history, by reifying a uniform and always-consistent method of interpretation.¹⁷

Today America seems, therefore, to be an uncongenial home for a myth of meaning or for a distinctly spiritual culture. Having brought the sacred into history and then having fragmented the sacred, America had no remaining grounds for a myth of meaning or a spiritual culture. How then can Americans understand, let alone produce, religious critics who would work out of a common spiritual culture?

II. The Religious Roots of American Pessimism

When Walter Lippmann made "public philosophy" famous in 1954, he put on that phrase just the construction that America was abandoning. He argued that a growing pluralism must be placed by a recrudescing public philosophy which represents "a universal order on which all reasonable men were agreed," an order that is not "discovered or invented," but that is "known" and can be "revived and renewed" in current society. Such a sense of the whole can be traced at least to Alexander the Great, who chose to treat the Persians not as barbarians but as fellow citizens living with the Greeks under one common order; it was continued under the aegis of Roman law until 1800, when modern

pluralism began to assume real importance. Lippmann was convinced that such a transcultural sense of the whole is a "necessary assumption," without which liberty, free institutions, even the right of private property are, "unworkable."¹⁸

Ironically, it is because Americans first accepted, and then saw shattered, another kind of monism (the unification offered by the exceptionalist myth) that they cannot now accept Lippmann's classical monism. But the question remains, can some other, specifically American, identity be found after the waning of exceptionalism? Is the old optimism associated with the myth of exceptionalism to be replaced simply by a newly dominant pessimism associated with a myth of America as a meaningless plurality of voices—a veritable myth of cacophony?

Admittedly, in the eyes of most students of American history and culture, it is a mistake even to suggest that an American pessimism exists, let alone to claim that it is distinctively American. Religious scholars in revolt against the old Protestant liberalism—virtually all Protestant religious scholars for the last fifty years—find the distinct trait and sin of the American character in its typical optimism. Among these scholars are not only neo-orthodox religious thinkers such as Reinhold Niebuhr, but even post-neo-orthodox thinkers such as Langdon Gilkey.¹⁹ And as we have seen, historians of American culture like Bercovitch and Noble center their critiques of American exceptionalism and progressivism on the naive optimism they find still to be endemic to the American character.

Ironically, the scholars' attack on optimism may contribute to a pessimism that is more virulent than the optimism they disparage. While I agree with efforts to undermine exceptionalism and its accompanying optimism, I question whether the new revolutionaries have examined the full implications of their own efforts, particularly their attitudinal impact. Bercovitch and Noble may have established that for three hundred years Americans were, in one sense, optimistic. They may have shown that Americans thought they wore a metaphysical mantle entitling them to a supreme place in world history and that, as a result, the glorious prophecies about America would be fulfilled. They may have established that that optimism is historically unwarranted—or at least unfashionable for late-twentieth-century American histo-

rians—and is therefore to be rejected. But have they surveyed the wreckage left when the exceptionalist paradigm and its optimistic spirit are abandoned?

When Americans identified the sacred with their secular history, they blocked their escape from secular history.²⁰ Their European cousins could see their secular histories as fraught with ambiguity and as clearly in declension from the ideal world; but then, such realism was not particularly costly because, when secular history seemed most inhospitable, this more or less logocentric and idealistic people could repair to the ideal world. But when Americans affirmed that the sacred was embodied in their own actual history, they blocked their escape to an ideal refuge beyond this history. Admittedly, Americans were officially optimistic about their historical possibilities. But, after all, history was all they had, and it is dangerous to be less than optimistic about the only thing one has. By comparison, historical pessimism was cheap for the European, who tended to have a metaphysical home beyond history. But when the twentieth century drove Americans to acknowledge that they had been deluded in their optimistic belief that their prophecies would be fulfilled, that acknowledgement led to a different sort of pessimism. Just as they, like other exceptionalist nations, had been unusual in identifying their own history with the sacred, now they were unusual in experiencing a historical failure that was at the same time a failure of the sacred.

Within this story lies the significance of American pluralism for determining American attitudes. When Americans sought to identify their history with the sacred, they affirmed that a divine providence unified, made one and whole, their history. But, as America's lack of a traditional culture, its history of immigration, and its recent international and domestic problems suggested, historical monism never had been quite right for America. All along there had been a pluralism tugging at the sleeve of American religious chauvinism. This historical pluralism, together with its implication that God is broken in the swirl of historical particulars, may have bred an incipient pessimism even in such reputed optimists as Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, and John Dewey.²¹ In any case, by mid-twentieth century, the lessons of history frontally attacked America's chauvinistic monism. A newly manifest secular pluralism opened America, not simply to

the implicit pessimism of the American Romantics, but to the explicit pessimism of the postexceptionalist culture.

Because the pluralism was qualitative as well as quantitative, the problem was aggravated. Because a God beyond history was not treated as knowable and usable by the nation (so that the activity of the sacred must be sensed in history or not at all), and because American history is morally ambiguous, the implication was either that the sacred must be abandoned or declared morally ambiguous. With a qualitative plurality, one where evil is as prominent as good, there is little empirical basis for the conclusion that American history is guided by anything consistently good. In a nation that has abandoned extrahistorical moorings and then begun to recognize itself as morally ambiguous, is there any basis for a spiritual culture, let alone for religious critics?

To illustrate: for many Americans, the Vietnam War was a shock not merely because the United States was stalemated by a third-world guerrilla army or because the world would not make way for American manifest destiny or because the world was unmanageably complex. More importantly, Vietnam was a shock because America appeared to be more a menace than a force for good. Admittedly, many people were able to fit that war into an exceptionalist interpretation, seeing it as a noble effort blocked by those who failed to appreciate its nobility. Nevertheless, for many people, Vietnam undermined claims to America's underlying goodness and fostered a sense of the moral ambiguity of America.

If, from an American perspective, the sacred is to be found either in history or not at all, then the simple conclusion is that America's God was either morally ambiguous or dead. Because there is no theologically orthodox way to see the ambiguity of the sacred, many Americans are pushed toward the denial of the sacred or to an unusual view of the sacred and, in either case, toward an aggravated pessimism. Neither Bercovitch nor Noble seems to recognize that this pessimism, whether theological or nontheological, appears for many to be the only answer.

Bercovitch's and Noble's "abandon optimism" prescription rests on theological reasoning that is, itself, problematic. Such reasoning can be found in the writings of Reinhold Niebuhr, whom Noble treats as the great prophet for the historians' paradigmatic shift of the 1940s and 1950s. It rejected the two-worlds

notion (a corrupt Europe and an innocent America), the virtuous American republic notion, the jeremiad motif that expressed these notions, and the grand categories behind these notions. These rejections ended American historical interpretation as it had been known. In naming a theologian the leader of the historian's revolution, Noble cites Thomas Kuhn's contention that "the person who provides leadership for the radical restructuring of the set of hypotheses on which a scientific community has been operating is often an outsider to that particular field."²² Niebuhr's attack on the exodus myth and its pretensions to innocence and virtue was implicit in his 1932 *Moral Man and Immoral Society* and was stated most completely in his 1951 *The Irony of American History*.²³ Niebuhr had hoped that his instruction would affect how America acts: if Americans see the irony of their own history, if they become conscious of the contradiction between their historic pretensions and the lessons of recent history, at least they will be more capable of acting so as to avoid the foreign policy disasters that otherwise await America.

Like most historians and political scientists who have used Niebuhr's insights, Noble omits any theological underpinning for his own Niebuhrian interpretation of history—even though theological underpinnings function as the *sine qua non* for Niebuhr's view of history. Niebuhr's religious anchorage is especially clear in his category of irony, which he compares to the categories of pathos and tragedy. The pathetic view sees the self as a victim of circumstances; the tragic view responds to historical ambiguity by merely accepting the self's complicity in historical evil. The ironic view not only makes the self conscious of its pretensions, but it gives the self a measure of control—blocking the excuses of both the pathetic victim of circumstances and the tragic collaborator with an inexorable evil. But here the linchpin is inserted: irony is possible only for one able to transcend his or her historical situation. Only from such a transcendent position can one have enough distance to see the good intentions beneath bad pretensions, to be contrite about the worst extremes caused by those pretensions, and to be able, thereby, to revise one's attitudes. Further, such transcendence is achieved only "on the basis of the belief that the whole drama of human history is under the scrutiny of a divine judge who laughs at human pretensions without being hostile to human aspirations."²⁴ The point is that "con-

sciousness of an ironic situation tends to dissolve it," but—and this must be added—this consciousness can be acquired only through faith in a particular God.²⁵ Consequently, for Niebuhr, the insights derived from religious faith not only do not contradict the facts of our historical civilization, but "are, in fact, prerequisites for saving it."²⁶

The unrecognized irony of Niebuhr's *The Irony of American History* is that its attack on American presumption (that America is informed by God or some higher good), is made possible by Niebuhr's own parallel presumption (that he is informed by God). The book's attack on American national optimism (that America contains the sacred in its history) arises from Niebuhr's personal optimism (that he has contact with the sacred beyond history). It is possible that Niebuhr's failure to acknowledge the irony in his own condemnation of irony made him all the more unsympathetic with the irony of America. Having hidden his own presumptions, it was easier for him to be harsh with those who have their versions of the same failings.

This criticism is not to say that Niebuhr is wrong when he claims that the exceptionalist myth makes America optimistic to a fault. Nor are Bercovitch and Noble wrong when they claim that America is inordinately optimistic. Nor do I object to the irony of Niebuhr's optimism: that his critique of American optimism is fueled by his own hidden optimism. Nor, realistically, do I object even to Niebuhr's failure to acknowledge his own optimism. After all, what self-respecting opponent of national optimism can confess his or her own private optimism?

However, I do regret Niebuhr's failure to anticipate the effect of his attack on American pretensions. Niebuhr, as well as other Americans, needed some kind of personal optimism. Could he not have anticipated, then, the pessimism that would follow when he and others convinced Americans to abandon just the optimism he, himself, seemed so much to need?

On the whole, I contend, American intellectuals have abandoned their optimism, have acknowledged that their predecessors were wrong to find an unambiguously sacred reality operating in their history, and are quick to recognize that Americans are not a blessed people and never were. This acknowledgement appears to have undermined the exceptionalist spiritual culture out of which their predecessors had worked and to have bred a

pessimism in just those intellectuals who might once have been religious critics.²⁷ The question remains: How can American intellectuals negotiate with that pessimism in order to regain a sense of the whole?

If they are to negotiate successfully, then it may be a mistake to focus on their sin (Niebuhr) or on their moral ambiguity (Bercovitch and Noble). If the exceptionalist myth is believed and still instills optimism, then perhaps contrition is needed. However, if the problem is not excessive optimism but excessive pessimism, a heavy dose of contrition may aggravate rather than cure their condition. Analogously, Valerie Saiving notes that it is dangerous for male theologians who see pride as “man’s” principal problem to tell women to become self-sacrificial. For, says Saiving, women typically suffer, not from excess ego, but from a profound loss of ego, not from the stereotypical masculine sin of pride, but from the sin of passivity or acquiescence, of yielding to circumstance.²⁸ Consequently, self-assertion may be the proper Christian virtue for women, and self-sacrifice may be the masculine medicine that poisons women.

That is to say, if the illness is misdiagnosed, the prescription can be wrong. For American intellectuals captured by pessimism, the best answer may not be the one that rails against American pretensions but the one that finds—even amid pluralism, relativism, and historicism—new practical grounds on which to speak positively about American responsibilities. American intellectuals, particularly American religious critics, if they are to be publicly effective, need a vision out of which they might acquire the confidence, once again, to address the public.