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THE CHURCH AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: CONTRIBUTIONS TO
CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL ETHICS FROM THE ECUMENICAL
METHOD OF THE OXFORD CONFERENCE ON CHURCH,
COMMUNITY, AND STATE OF 1937

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THE CHURCH AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: CONTRIBUTIONS TO
CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL ETHICS FROM THE ECUMENICAL
METHOD OF THE OXFORD CONFERENCE ON CHURCH,
COMMUNITY, AND STATE OF 1937

A Dissertation Presented to the Graduate Faculty of

Dedman College

Southern Methodist University

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

with a

Major in Religious Studies

by

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B.A., Journalism, Northeastern University
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May 18, 2019

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The Church and Social Responsibility: Contributions to
Contemporary Social Ethics from the Ecumenical
Method of the Oxford Conference on Church,
Community, and State of 1937

Advisor: Dr. Robin W. Lovin

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Cultural and political realities, and doctrinal differences among faith traditions challenge unified theological and ecclesial contribution to political dialogue. Within the work of the Oxford Conference of the Universal Christian Council of Life and Work on Church, Community and State of 1937, organized by Joseph Oldham, are elements of an applied understanding of social responsibility, offering resources to enable such contribution. Here, I call this “Oxford Responsibility,” defined as *a society in which its members and institutions act in accordance with human value and freedom, in obedience to the will of God, toward the achievement of justice within the limits and contingencies of human finitude, culture and history.*

Contributors, threatened by secularism and totalitarianism, built upon the thought of Max Weber, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Martin Buber regarding ethics and responsibility, and were influenced by the Christian realism of Reinhold Niebuhr. Drawing on Emil Brunner, they outlined a Christian anthropology positing dignity and freedom to the human actor. With Paul Tillich and others, the Conference countered the idea of progressive history, positing history as the location of human responsibility, where human action has consequence. These actions are

judged against the suprahistorical ideal of the Kingdom of God. The Conference bounded the church's responsibility within society to the interpretation of the Gospel and the preparation of laity for responsible work within wider spheres of society. Discernment of action proceeded through an inclusive dialogical process toward what Conference participants called "middle axioms," defined as provisional guidelines for Christian behavior within particular societal circumstances.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CFCL	<i>Christian Faith and the Common Life</i> (Oxford Series 1938)
CFS	<i>The Church and Its Function in Society</i> (Oxford Series 1937)
COPEC	Conference on Politics, Economics and Citizenship (Britain 1924)
HVD	Henry Van Dusen (Correspondence)
HRN	H. Richard Niebuhr
JHO	Joseph Houldsworth Oldham (Correspondence)
RN	Reinhold Niebuhr
WCC	World Council of Churches

To Heidi

CHAPTER ONE

THE PROMISE OF ECUMENICAL SOCIAL ETHICS

Within the sweeping global cultural and political shifts in progress during these early years of the twenty-first century, the idea that Christian churches in particular and religion in general might together critically respond to the society's issues and history's crises would appear to many to be quaint if not idealistic. Doctrinal differences within and between faith traditions would appear to preclude any proper or relevant response. National and cultural differences would seem to further inhibit any valuable contribution to a global dialogue. The very nature of religious epistemology might call into question the claim that any ecclesiastical or theological response could be entertained by those outside the tradition from whence it came, particularly within a secular dialogue. Finally, within western Christianity in particular, the very existence of an applied social ethic as a component of theology is disputed.

Can an ecumenical social ethic, in which churches collaborate around contemporary moral problems within their context, have any place in a postmodern world? The so-called "Christian Century" just past, which began with a confidence and optimism in unifying efforts for both church and state, is today followed by a world in which a search for common or comprehensive principles is found to be both suspect and ineffective. Yet at the same time, the realities of economic globalization and the transition of power within the system of nation-states that we face at the start of this century, both demand and set the stage for some type of unified theological response. Is such a response at all possible, and if so, what is its shape?

It is this paper's contention that ecumenical social ethics is not bound for this century's trash bin of anachronisms. Rather, resources for its rescue and continued relevance in the face of current crises can be found at the midpoint of the contemporary ecumenical movement, namely the 1937 Oxford Conference of the Universal Christian Council of Life and Work on Church, Community, and State, and its focus on the concept of responsibility. It was at this ecumenical conference – when religion, and the world, faced crises of totalitarianism on the eve of a second worldwide war – that the church in its diversity met to fashion a relevant response to the international threats and in the process provided a method of responsible ecumenical social ethics that offers us continuing lessons. This paper will explicate from the Conference's process and output an understanding of a responsible society and the church's particular responsibility within that society. We will call this understanding "Oxford Responsibility," defined as *a society in which its members and institutions act in accordance with human value and freedom, in obedience to the will of God, toward the achievement of justice within the limits and contingencies of human finitude, culture and history.*

In this introductory chapter we will provide the context for the work of the Oxford Conference and identify some of the key themes for responsibility with which the Conference engaged. We will then examine the theories of responsibility that were operative in the theological context of the time, before studying within the documents presented and published by the Conference to identify further the theological foundations for the theory of Oxford Responsibility. We will then further outline the ecumenical method that worked to operationalize this theory, before we conclude with suggestions regarding how Oxford Responsibility might relate within the challenges of a post-Christian and postmodern context.

The Context of the Oxford Conference

Ecumenical social ethics has been defined recently as “the shared reflection on social questions carried on by ecumenically committed churches that are themselves part of the societies in question.”¹ The contemporary work of such churches can be posited mainly within the immediate history of the post-World War II World Council of Churches (WCC) and its work among its member churches from the ranks of Protestant, Orthodox and independent denominations, and their work with the Roman Catholic Church. The definition is helpful, if not pointed, in approaching the present ecumenical milieu in which the Christian churches find themselves, and, in fact, is helpful in approaching the place of responsibility within the work of the Oxford Conference. It is, however, less well suited to encompassing the intervening ecumenical history of the latter half of the twentieth century. This history is marked by ecumenical efforts that have been defined less by deference to societal and confessional contextuality than by more universal and prudential directives, and on the other hand less by shared reflection than broad and dramatic pronouncements, that bordered on the idealistic.

Ronald Preston, in particular has criticized the later work of the Council as driven by a simplicity of thought, shaped by apocalyptic worldviews, leading to “utopian attitudes, policies and strategies.”² Likewise, in his classic critique of the WCC, Paul Ramsey, following the body’s 1966 Geneva Conference, described its work as a “social action *curia*” with a “passion for numerous particular pronouncements on policy questions to the consequent neglect of basic

¹ Julio de Santa Ana et al., *Beyond Idealism: A Way Ahead for Ecumenical Social Ethics*, ed. Robin Gurney, Heidi Hadsell, and Lewis Seymour Mudge (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), ix.

² Ronald H. Preston, *Confusions in Christian Social Ethics: Problems for Geneva and Rome* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 170.

decision- and action-oriented principles of ethical and political analysis.”³ In that text, *Who Speaks for the Church*, Ramsey reaches back thirty years to the conception of the WCC, suggesting, as does this paper, that texts and methods from those gathered at Oxford hold promise for the recovery of ecumenical social ethics, and particularly *Christian* social ethics. In speaking about Council pronouncements on war, for example, Ramsey writes, “I am suggesting ... that ecumenical ethics needs to return to Oxford and begin again,” citing the Conference as providing, for example, the “more apt *Christian* characterization” of war than even the 1948 statement that emerged from the Council’s inaugural assembly in Amsterdam.⁴

While is not this paper’s intent to provide a comprehensive history of the Oxford Conference in particular or the ecumenical movement of which it was a part, it is important to place the Conference in its context in order to explore how the resources it holds might continue to be helpful. We will begin with an overview of the ecumenical context before exploring the Conference itself.

The Oxford Conference can be placed along the timeline of twentieth-century ecumenism that begins with 1910’s World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh. From this seedling branched three principal movements within the ecumenical effort – the Continuation Committee of the World Conference on Faith and Order, the Universal Christian Council for Life and Work,

³ Paul Ramsey, *Who Speaks for the Church? A Critique of the 1966 Geneva Conference on Church and Society* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967), 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, n. 179:31,32. The Amsterdam statement claimed that “war is contrary to the will of God,” while the Oxford statement took a realist approach that claimed that “War is a particular demonstration of the power of sin in this world and a defiance of the righteousness of God as revealed in Jesus Christ and him crucified. No justification of war must be allowed to conceal or minimize this fact.”; Henry Smith Leiper, “Preface to the American Edition,” in *The Oxford Conference (Official Report)*, American Edition (Chicago, New York: Willett, Clark & Company, 1937), 162.

and the International Missionary Council. While the three would ultimately coalesce into what is today known as the World Council of Churches, each group had a distinct focus within the overall ecumenical effort. The Faith and Order movement worked to lead churches toward theological dialogue on issues of doctrine with the goal of unity between the churches of Jesus Christ. The Missionary Council worked to coordinate activities, research and meetings between denominational missionary bodies throughout the globe, and the Life and Work group, the auspices under which the Oxford Conference conducted its work, set for itself the lofty goal of explicating the content of Christian social action.

The Life and Work council held its formative assembly in Stockholm in 1925. In the official invitation, organizers wrote, “No Christian can doubt that the world’s greatest need is the Christian way of Life not merely in personal and social behaviour but in public opinion and its outcome in public action. ... In short, we hope, under the guidance of the Spirit of God, through the counsel of all, to be able to formulate programmes and devise means for making them effective whereby the *fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of all peoples* will become more completely realized through the Church of Christ.”⁵

With Faith and Order, Life and Work joined together leading to the WCC’s first assembly in Amsterdam in 1948 after the conclusion of World War II. The International Missionary Council joined them at the New Delhi assembly 13 years later.

While critics of liberalism, including Karl Barth, at the start of the so-called Christian Century heavily influenced the beginning work of the Council, the missionary zeal of the ecumenical movement reclaimed the ideal of Christendom, viewed within the lens of modern

⁵ Nils Karlström, “Movements for International Friendship and Life and Work: 1910-1925,” in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1948*, ed. Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), 541–42.

liberal thought in general and the Social Gospel movement in particular. At the 1910 conference in Edinburgh, for example, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Baron Randall Thomas Davidson, opened the gathering with the suggestion that there might be among those in attendance “who shall not taste death” until they witnessed on earth “the kingdom of God come with power.”⁶

With the years of World War I preceding their first conferences – Life and Work at Stockholm in 1925 and Faith and Order at Lausanne in 1927 – the optimism of the 1910 gathering began to suffer fissures, yet the hope for a bulwark against further war continued to be represented by the vision of a united church. The vision mirrored that of the Western state, with the ecumenical effort viewed as providing the “soul” for President Woodrow Wilson’s ultimately doomed vision for a League of Nations.

In the 1930s the political and theological optimism of the ecumenical movement confronted new and different disasters that demanded fresh thinking regarding the relationship between the church and the world. Liberal theology had placed hope in the historical progress of humanity and saw the work of the church as the accomplishment of the divine ideal within human history. New tragedies of the 1930s, however, forced a rethinking of such optimism. With the collapse of the global economy and the rise of totalitarian regimes in Germany and Russia, liberal hopes of an ideal social order could no longer stand.

The organizers of the ecumenical Oxford Conference on Church, Community, and State saw in the political and economic situation of the 1930s evidence of the world “going to pieces,” with society and human life itself succumbing to disintegration as the foundations of community

⁶ World Missionary Conference, *The History and Records of the (World Missionary) Conference: Together with Addresses Delivered at the Evening Meetings* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1910), 150.

trembled.⁷ The problem they sought to solve in the summer of 1937 was, in the words of a journal of the day, “how religion is to survive in single community which is neither church nor state, which recognizes no formal limits, but which covers the whole of life and claims to be source and goal of every human activity.”⁸

The situation presented by the rise of fascism and communism was seen by members of the movement as a struggle for the future of Christianity and the church over against a so-called secularism that demanded for itself humanity’s allegiance. How was the church to survive in and beyond this crisis? And what, beyond survival, would be the church’s role in relating to community, society, and state?

In the preconference text sent to delegates – *The Church and Its Function in Society* (CFS) – organizer Joseph H. Oldham, then secretary of the International Missionary Council, wrote, with a hint of earlier idealism, of the urgency of the task and the importance of the opportunity. His introduction is worthy of quoting at length to obtain a sense of the context as the organizers experienced it.

There is a widespread sense, which finds expression in the writings and utterances of many serious thinkers, Christian and non-Christian, that we stand to-day at one of the major turning-points in history. The basal assumptions which have hitherto given a meaning to life, and unity and stability to civilization, have lost their unquestioned validity. An epoch in the life of mankind is drawing to a close, and we are on the threshold of a new age in which new conceptions of life still struggling in the womb of time will rule men’s minds and direct their conduct. We are not concerned here to enquire how far and in what sense these assertions are true. It is not the task of the Conference at Oxford to attempt to formulate a philosophy of history. What is important for our present purpose is the indubitable fact that we live in the midst of profound and far-reaching change. The relative

⁷ Joseph H. Oldham et al., eds., *The Churches Survey Their Task: The Report of the Conference at Oxford, July 1937, on Church, Community, and State*, vol. 8, The Church, Community, and State Series (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd, 1937), 67.

⁸ Quoting from *The Tablet*, 26 June 1937. Ibid., 9.

stability of the world which existed before the war has gone. The foundations of human society are quivering. The fact itself none will dispute, but our minds become dulled by familiarity to its significance. We give it our indolent assent, and contentedly resume the tenor of our habitual attitudes. There can, however, be no true wrestling with the realities of the contemporary situation, except in so far as we allow their meaning to break through the crust of our customary thinking into those deeper levels of our being in which our experience is absorbed and organized, so that there will take place progressively, and to a large extent subconsciously, a reconstruction of our whole outlook, and a reorientation of our fundamental attitudes.⁹

Convened by the Life and Work council in July 1937, the Oxford Conference on Church, Community, and State marshaled the resources of the church – lay and ordained, pastor and scholar – to provide, if not suggest, a responsible response to the worldwide crises facing the international scene and the catholic church. Confronted with the threats to its unity and its social task, the church would receive from Oxford neither idealist resolutions nor outlines of political programs. Yet Oxford would provide a realistic assessment of the role of religion in general in forming public commitments and action, while retaining missionary notions of Christianity’s particular place in shaping the world and its international relations. Oldham would later suggest in his introductory remarks to the Conference report that the crisis that the church faced was analogous to that faced by the early Church before the Roman world. In the face of contemporary “supra-mundane” authority that demanded allegiance, the church was locked in a “life and death struggle between Christian faith and the secular and pagan tendencies of our time.”¹⁰

⁹ Willem A. Visser ’t Hooft and Joseph H. Oldham, *The Church and Its Function in Society*, The Church, Community, and State Series (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd, 1937), 13–14.

¹⁰ Oldham et al., *The Churches Survey Their Task: The Report of the Conference at Oxford, July 1937, on Church, Community, and State*, 9–10.

The Conference comprised 425 official delegates, the majority of whom came from the United States and Britain, with others from throughout the then undivided Europe, as well as from Africa, Asia, Australia and Oceania, and South America. These represented both Protestant and Orthodox traditions, including what was called the “Younger Churches” of Asia and Africa. Physically absent from the Conference were representatives from the German Evangelical Church and Germany’s Confessing Church, who had been barred from attending by Adolf Hitler himself.¹¹ Also absent was the Roman Church, which had officially declined invitations to participate. Significant among the delegates was the large representation given to Christian laity, “representing other departments of knowledge besides theology and possessing practical experience of public affairs,”¹² as well as the large block of youth who were seated as associate delegates at Oxford University’s Sheldonian Theatre, alongside scholars, writers, diplomats, nobles and clerics including John Baillie, John Bennett, William Adams Brown, Emil Brunner, Henry Sloane Coffin, John Foster Dulles, T. S. Eliot, Georgia Harkness, Phillip Kerr, Reinhold Niebuhr, William Temple, Paul Tillich, and Henry Van Dusen.

To prepare for the Conference, these and other scholars wrote and circulated advance papers on church and community, church and state, the economic order, education, and international relations, as well as the CFS volume by Willem A. Visser ’t Hooft and Oldham, which was provided to all delegates several weeks before the gathering. This text held within it a social method and ecclesiological framework that would permit the Conference to effectively

¹¹ Kenneth C. Barnes, *Nazism, Liberalism, & Christianity: Protestant Social Thought in Germany and Great Britain, 1925-1937* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 101.

¹² Oldham et al., *The Churches Survey Their Task: The Report of the Conference at Oxford, July 1937, on Church, Community, and State*, 11.

complete its work, and provided the outline of a paradigm useful not only to a church at the precipice of a worldwide war at the second third of the twentieth century, but, as this paper will argue, to the church at the beginning of the twenty-first century facing questions regarding the future of the community and the place of religion in society.

Influences on Oxford Conference Thought

The thought and method of the Oxford Conference was shaped in large part by the growing Christian realist response to the early twentieth-century idealism, exemplified by the work of Reinhold Niebuhr; other critics of liberal theology, such as John Bennett; as well as the Anglican social thought of William Temple. It was shaped as well by one critic of both liberalism and ecumenism who was absent from its proceedings. Karl Barth's theological answer to the question of the Christian's relationship to the world in history would both threaten and sharpen the Oxford effort.

Niebuhr had been one of a few tapped by Oldham in 1934 to define study topics and writers for the Conference. In his own essay on "The Christian Faith and the Common Life," in the text of the same name (CFCL), Niebuhr provided the central position of the realist perspective that would influence the Conference. "The problem [of the Christian faith and the common life] is to relate the moral ultimate of Christian faith, the law of love, to the facts and necessities of daily existence. This is a difficult problem because the law of love is not a law at all. . . . Love is an ideal which transcends all law; but the sinfulness of the human heart threatens the common life of man with anarchy if it is not restrained."¹³

¹³ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Christian Faith and the Common Life," in *Christian Faith and the Common Life*, by Nils Ehrenström, et al, vol. 4, The Church, Community, and State Series (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd, 1938), 69.

The demands of love over against the reality of sin could only present paradox for the Christian life. For example, elements of the common life such as family and nation – the Lutheran concept of the “Orders of Creation” – were establishments of nature that both expressed and threatened the law of love. This was made dangerously evident for Niebuhr and Conference participants, for example, in the nationalism of the decade’s German theology. The communities and societies in which humans lived with each other and loved God held both the promise of the Kingdom of God, but at the same time, encompassed the designs for its destruction.

Of course, this danger within sin did not render the law of love irrelevant. While it remained a “transcendent impossibility,” the Kingdom of God presented both a challenge and judgment upon the human situation. The law of love, according to Niebuhr, continually presented new “possibilities of action higher than the conventional and traditional customs and habits of men” but at the same time these possibilities were placed under the constant judgment of prophetic religion.¹⁴ While he wanted to expose the “illusion” of liberal Protestantism for its theological idealism, Niebuhr at the same time worked to preserve the reality, albeit flawed, of reason and the natural law. This provided important justification for the continuing Life and Work movement through Oxford. A non-compromising Gospel ethics required this rational supplement in order to deal with the realities of common life. Coercion, resistance, economics, politics were the necessary mechanisms for this life. “It is one of the illusions of liberal moralism, both secular and religious, that these mechanisms of society are unimportant, compared with the right moral or religious attitudes among men.”¹⁵ The church, therefore, while

¹⁴ Ibid., 81.

¹⁵ Ibid., 84.

grounded in the transcendent history of God's fulfillment of the Kingdom, Niebuhr claimed during a plenary session, also must realize that it is not lifted from immanent history. Rather, it takes on the burden and responsibility for the establishment of justice.¹⁶

While this realist alternative evident in the Conference is often seen as a response to early twentieth-century idealism, this pre-war theological effort can also be seen as a response to the Barthian critique of liberal theology at the time. Barth's crisis theology was well known to the Oxford Conference organizers. It was a theology that indeed loomed in the periphery as they worked to shape their own alternative.

While Barth declared politics as inherent to the work of theology and the church, his concern was to maintain the distinction between the two. While the church has a certain interest in the civil community, and the state has a certain ecclesial character, the church can provide no details for Christian political action, without succumbing to accommodation and compromise of the Gospel.¹⁷ To turn a Gospel "shall" into a political "ought" exposes for Barth a zeal that is disobedience, positing sin on God.¹⁸ Yet the church can act provisionally in crisis as a witness to the Gospel, when God's judgment on the world is revealed. Here the church does not act on principle, but retains the "freedom to judge each new event afresh,"¹⁹ distinguishing for the world the difference between justice and injustice, order and caprice, government and tyranny,

¹⁶ Oldham et al., *The Churches Survey Their Task: The Report of the Conference at Oxford, July 1937, on Church, Community, and State*, 36.

¹⁷ Karl Barth, "The Christian Community and the Civil Community," in *Community, State, and Church: Three Essays*, by Karl Barth, Anchor Books (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960), 162.

¹⁸ Karl Barth, "Gospel and Law," in *Community, State, and Church: Three Essays*, by Karl Barth, Anchor Books (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960), 87.

¹⁹ Will Herberg, "The Social Philosophy of Karl Barth," in *Community, State, and Church: Three Essays*, by Karl Barth, Anchor Books (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960), 57.

freedom and anarchy.²⁰ In this very act of survival the church by its witness signals the failure of the totalitarian project. By its continued existence in crisis, the church exposes the futility and meaninglessness of fascism and communism's demand for comprehensive loyalty, and remains a check on such power.

For Barth, the crisis of the 1930s called for resistance from the Church, but not of the type that separated the questions of what must be done in the face of such crisis and how action is to proceed. In his polemic against Emil Brunner's *Nature and Grace*, Barth warned that to separate these questions was to elevate human moral and sociological axioms to the level of divine commandment.²¹ Such earthly- and culturally-bound principles and orders were necessary for the functioning of community, but none could be adequately codified and no one could claim adequate authority for their definition.

Barth's work contrasted sharply with that of the organizers of the Oxford Conference in particular and the ecumenical movement in general, for which Barth showed more than slight disdain. Barth was intentional in his absence from the 1937 summer conferences with trips to the British Isles at both ends of the gatherings' schedule, first in March to deliver the Gifford lectures and again in September to accept an honorary doctorate. In a letter to Oxford organizer Visser 't Hooft, Barth wrote of the ecumenical effort, "I am evidently not up to the particular logic and ethics and aesthetics of this business, and would prefer not to hear any more about it

²⁰ Barth, "The Christian Community and the Civil Community," 162.

²¹ Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology: Comprising "Nature and Grace" by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the Reply "No!" By Dr. Karl Barth*, trans. Peter Fraenkel (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002).

for a long time.” In his later reflections he would dismiss the ecumenical effort as an exercise in compromise and accommodation.²²

Barth’s harsh denunciation of Brunner’s conception of natural theology in 1934 came as the preparatory work for the Oxford Conference was taking shape. It landed like a bomb in Geneva, where Life and Work staffers viewed Barth’s attack as a threat to the very continuation of the effort toward a Conference altogether.²³ Yet rather than derail the effort, Barth’s continued criticism of the movement proved actually to sharpen an alternative response to the crisis that would emerge in the summer of 1937, over against liberal optimism and Barthian obedience.

In his introduction in CFCL, Nils Ehrenström, then of the Life and Work research department, summarized the contrast. “The true line of demarcation ... is not to be drawn between religion and politics, Church and State, but between a political life “in Christ” – and thus restored to its God-given function – and a political life which has its integrating centre in some mere segment of human existence, which, consequently, instead of checking fundamental disorder in the world, simply perpetuates it.”²⁴ Rather than respond to the crisis with idealist resolutions, political programs, or separatist theologies, the Conference would work toward a realistic theological assessment of the role of religion in forming public commitments and action, while retaining missionary notions of Christianity’s particular place in shaping the world and its international relations.

²² Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. Bowden, John (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 261–62.

²³ Derr quotes a December 12 letter from Hans Schönfeld to J.H. Oldham, which relayed the fears of the Life and Work central staff regarding, in Derr’s words, Barth’s intemperate and misdirected essay. Derr, Thomas S., “The Political Thought of the Ecumenical Movement: 1900–1939” (Ph.D., Columbia University, 1972), 513.

²⁴ Nils Ehrenström et al., *Christian Faith and the Common Life*, vol. 4, The Church, Community, and State Series (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd, 1938), 13.

In his CFCL essay, Niebuhr named the requirements of justice comprising “tentative harmonies” and “provisional equities” within a sinful world, yet under the perspective of the prophetic ideal of the Kingdom of God, thereby bridging the chasm between Divine judgment and imperative. Without the latter perspective, moralism is marked by romanticism and self-righteousness. “It is a dangerous theology ... which does not recognize how dialectically the Kingdom of God is related to the sinful world in every moment of existence, offering both judgment and a more excellent way in consideration of every problem of justice.” To do otherwise was to acquiesce to the order of the state and to mark as insignificant relative distinctions of justice upon which “the lives and welfare of millions may depend.” It was a mistake of greatest pride for theology, in seeking to counter the utopian myths of totalitarianism, to ignore these distinctions.²⁵

On the other hand, he claimed, in “Augustinian-Lutheran Christianity the relative requirements of moral standards are treated with a scant respect, and religion becomes, in consequence, too supramoral.”²⁶ Among those who would ignore or reject such obligation, such as Barth and his sympathizers at the Conference, were those adherent to theologies that counseled Christians to an ascetic separation from the world, as well as those who were content with “eschatological judgments upon the sinfulness of all common actions.” These, he said, “are equally truant to the obligation of religion to morality.”²⁷ The material that finally emerged from the Conference held that idealism, separatism and supramoral witness were inadequate to the contemporary crisis and to the daily function of the church and Christian theology.

²⁵ Niebuhr, “Christian Faith and the Common Life,” 91.

²⁶ Ibid., 72.

²⁷ Ibid., 79.

Also influential in the preparation and execution of the Conference was Bennett, who, like Niebuhr, offered a critique of theological liberalism. Writing in 1933, John Bennett acknowledged the disintegration of liberal confidence in human reason and understanding as the revealer of religious truth, working to retain what was “cleansing” within liberalism while drawing from other sociological and political movements to begin to fashion an alternative grounding for theology. Among the contributions of liberalism, Bennett claimed, was the authority of individual insight in apprehending religious truth over against ecclesiasticism. At the same time, Bennett wrote that such insight did not develop “in a vacuum” but within continuing give and take with the ideas and commitments of others, with scripture and “all the materials which form the external authorities of Christians,” a point for ecumenism that would be vehemently disputed by Barth, but would be a critical point for Oxford Responsibility. Contra Barth, Bennett would also find helpful liberalism’s focus on historical criticism, arguing that the foundation of faith must include human’s rational apprehension of the experience of God over against “arbitrary” revelation.²⁸

Looking toward a new construction of theology, Bennett drew on Niebuhr’s understanding of social evil as addressed in the then recent *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. He also held the conviction that Christianity was in a unique historical position to unite persons from across diverse cultures and nations because of its ability to transcend national boundaries and loyalties, a theme that also would play out within the Oxford Conference.²⁹

²⁸ John C. Bennett, “After Liberalism-What?,” *The Christian Century* 50, no. 45 (November 8, 1933): 1403–4.

²⁹ Heather A. Warren, *Theologians of a New World Order: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Christian Realists, 1920-1948*, Religion in America Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 61.

Here Bennett's missional sympathies are exposed as he argues for a theology that recognizes an eternal, central and agential deity. "If there is a God at all he is not one reality among others which we discover after years of searching, but he is the all important reality upon which we depend at every moment of our lives and to which all the good in us is a response." Here then a recovery of church tradition can counter the fragmentary and competing passions of the secular world, binding together citizens of the western world across national boundaries. Somewhat optimistically, Bennett continued, "There arises the earnest hope that this Christian movement, with all its divisions and its compromising alliances with states and privileged classes may yet say a decisive word to the spiritual confusion of the world and can moderate the possessiveness of the owning groups and check the fatal drift toward war."³⁰

Besides the influence of the Christian realists, the specific mark of William Temple, then Archbishop of York, later to be named the Archbishop of Canterbury, can be seen on the Conference and its method. Of particular influence was Temple's demand for, on the one hand, Christian social engagement, and on the other, deference to technical non-theological expertise in the process of such engagement.

Temple's passion for Christian engagement is evidenced by his own direct involvement in British labor disputes, as well as his scholarly collaboration as chair of the 1924 Birmingham Conference on Politics, Economics and Citizenship, commonly called COPEC. A precursor to Oxford, COPEC focused on the British Church, rivaling Oxford's output, while reflecting some of Temple's utopian tendencies, which would fade just a decade later under the influence of Christian realism. In an Oxford essay published in CFCL, Temple works to find a way between the extremes of "the pessimism of much religious orthodoxy" that views the world as beyond

³⁰ Bennett, "After Liberalism-What?," 1405-6.

redemption, and the optimism of “modern and rationalistic philosophy.”³¹ This calls not for a compromise between the claims of God and the claims of the world, but to apply the Christian standard to “promote the greatest conformity to those standards.” As such, the “prevailing practice of the world” cannot be ignored.³²

Temple’s influence is also made explicit in his post-Oxford work *Christianity and Social Order*, which works to outline how the church is to “interfere” in matters of politics and economics. Temple claims that the church indeed must interfere in such matters, but how it interferes is subject to limits. “Religion may rightly censure the use of artistic talents for making money out of men’s baser tastes, but it cannot lay down laws about perspective or the use of a paint-brush. It may insist that scientific inquiry be prompted by a pure love of truth and not distorted by political considerations. It may declare the proper relation of the economic to other activities of men, but it cannot claim to know what will be the purely economic effect of particular proposals.”³³ The avoidance of moving into matters of the prudential, against which Temple, and later Paul Ramsey argued, was, as we shall see, a key issue for Oxford, particularly around the issues of middle axioms, which attempted to find a provisional way between the general and the particularly prudential.

Also key in Temple’s social thought, and in the work of the Oxford Conference, is the role of the Christian laity. Temple saw the Church influence on society as twofold. While prudential statements were beyond the bounds of proper church interference, Christian principles

³¹ William Temple, “Christian Faith and the Common Life,” in *Christian Faith and the Common Life*, by Nils Ehrenström, et al, vol. 4, The Church, Community, and State Series (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd, 1938), 48.

³² Ibid., 64.

³³ William Temple, *Christianity and Social Order* (New York: Penguin Books, 1942), 10.

could be discerned and used to illuminate conflicts of justice within society. It then fell to Christian citizens acting on the civic stage to act in a fashion that most closely approached these principles, as explained above. Such action, however, always involves technical knowledge and prudential judgments. “If a bridge is to be built, the Church may remind the engineer that it is his obligation to provide a really safe bridge; but it is not entitled to tell him whether, in fact, his design meets this requirement.”³⁴ As Ronald Preston points out, Temple saw that information on ethical issues cannot simply come from the Bible or from doctrine, but through empirical evidence and a diversity of expert opinion and criteria. “Those who dispute (Temple’s method) want a clear-cut Christian ethical position. ... They do not face up to the problem of dealing with contestable empirical evidence.”³⁵

The Oxford Method

The theological themes presented by the Christian realists shaped the very structure of the Oxford Conference and its output. As we have mentioned, its delegates comprised not only clerics and scholars. Nearly a quarter of the delegates were laity. Furthermore, the Conference did not seek to find consensus on its various themes. Within the volumes produced by the Conference, official reports of the sections were accompanied by texts of collected essays that offered various positions on Conference topics. The key texts within Oxford’s “The Church, Community, and State Series” included eight volumes: *The Church and its Function in Society*, which, as we have named, served as a preparatory volume for delegates, and collections of

³⁴ Ibid., 36.

³⁵ Ronald H. Preston, “William Temple: The Man and His Impact on Church and Society,” in *Archbishop William Temple: Issues in Church and Society 50 Years On: The Spring 1994 Gresham Lectures in Divinity* (Manchester: William Temple Foundation in association with Gresham College, 1994), 13.

essays representing ecumenical thought, largely published following the Conference, within *The Christian Understanding of Man; The Kingdom of God and History; The Christian Faith and the Common Life; Church and Community; Church, Community, and State in Relation to Education; and The Universal Church and the World of Nations*. Research reports comprising the Conference's official report were also published in British and American editions; the British version titled *The Churches Survey Their Task*. Henry Leiper's "popular interpretation" of that summer's ecumenical conferences in Oxford and Edinburgh, *World Chaos or World Christianity*, was also marketed in the United States as part of the official Conference texts. Other supplemental texts included William Paton's *Christianity in the Eastern Conflicts; a Study of Christianity, Nationalism and Communism in Asia* and Adolf Keller's *Church and State on the European Continent*. The Universal Christian Council for Life and Work also published a series of small study guides on the topics of *Church and Community, Church and State, The Church and Economic Order, The Church and Education, The Universal Church and the World of Nations*, and *The Nature and Function of the Church* for use in churches.

The Oxford Method comprised three patterns of contributions that can be found in this output. First was a sophisticated understanding of the church as an ecumenical society, a Church within the churches, grounded in Christian mission, and offering a unity and transcendence that defied borders of state, culture, station and class. In what would become the watchwords of the Conference, Temple wrote that the duty of the Church was to "be in very deed the Church."³⁶ In so doing, the Church could stand outside the activities of political life, yet would find itself responsible for the illumination of such activities, placing political judgment under the scrutiny of divine judgment, but avoiding commitment to prudential political programs. Second is a

³⁶ Derr, Thomas S., "The Political Thought of the Ecumenical Movement: 1900-1939," 461.

theology that at its core established the sovereignty of God in creation, and positing within God's creation the inherent freedom and dignity of the individual. Far from being simply an idea rooted in the modern project, freedom and human rights, the Conference declared, are rooted in the very structure of religion and the church. This focus on freedom undergirded the dialogical social method used within the Conference as well, and can be seen within the third theme, the concept of the middle axiom. These so-called axioms spring first from the recognition of the church's function in the political sphere, with the intention of providing provisional and nonbinding guidelines for faithful response for a decision within a particular historical and cultural context.

Regarding our first theme, the Oxford Conference expressed dissatisfaction with common characterizations of ecumenical ecclesiology. Branch theory in its attempt to define the church as a "symphonic harmony" of the parts – the various Christian traditions completing the whole as the church catholic – was rejected as sacrificing questions of truth for unity. Nor could the ecumenical effort result in either opportunism or compromise for unity's sake. Rather, the Conference posited a "Church in the Churches," that defied human definition but existed within the diversity of Christian expression. "We are therefore obliged to recognize the fact of our *disagreement* as to the *nature* of the Church as well as the fact of our *agreement* as to the reality of the Church. . . . Our present *impasse* is a sign that unity cannot be made by men, but can only be acknowledged and received when God actually gives it. . . . Unity is not achieved; but it *happens* when men listen together to God, and when He is willing to give it to them."³⁷ Unity then is found in fellowship and spiritual attentiveness, rather than agreement.

Here was, first, the growing recognition that the formerly prevailing belief – sparked by the difficulties of reconciling Faith and Order issues – that the church could find fundamental

³⁷ Visser 't Hooft and Oldham, *The Church and Its Function in Society*, 94–95.

unity regarding social ethics, if not doctrinal issues, was unhelpfully idealistic. Differences between the churches were considerable and often stark. Rather than soften the contrast or seek compromise, the Conference often let the conflicts stand. Writing on the topic of war, peace and national sovereignty, for example, The Marquess of Lothian, Philip Henry Kerr, advocated for the creation of a sovereign world federation, to replace the wounded League of Nations,³⁸ while in the same post-conference volume Princeton's Otto Piper outlined the impracticality of the idea, given, especially, the place of power relations.³⁹

Such paradox was allowed and encouraged by the relentless attention paid not to details of doctrine or ethics, but to the theological resonance across the delegation. In addressing the issue of the church and the nation-states, the podium on which the delegates argued recognized a unity that transcended ecclesial and international differences. The report on "The Universal Church and the World of Nations" stated, "This fact of the oecumenical character of the Church carries with it the important consequence that the Church brings to the task of achieving a better international order an insight that is not to be derived from ordinary political sources. To those who are struggling to realize human brotherhood in a world where disruptive nationalism and aggressive imperialism make such brotherhood seem unreal, the Church offers not an ideal but a fact, man united not by his aspiration but by the love of God."⁴⁰

Thus, compromise was not lifted up as a goal, nor was there a call for political posturing, although both were likely in evidence, a fact historians would certainly illuminate. Rather,

³⁸ Phillip H. Kerr (Marquess of Lothian) et al., *The Universal Church and the World of Nations*, trans. Olive Wyon and J. Marsh, vol. 7, The Church, Community, and State Series (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd, 1938), 18.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁴⁰ Oldham et al., *The Churches Survey Their Task: The Report of the Conference at Oxford, July 1937, on Church, Community, and State*, 169.

among the church's constitutive functions, modeled by the Oxford process, was the task to seek the realization of its essential nature as a fellowship united by common loyalty to Jesus Christ, rather than emphasizing divisions on politics, economics or doctrine.

This claiming for itself an essential transcendence and unity raised two important ecclesiological characteristics relevant to our study. Through this unity that defied borders of state, culture, station and class, the church could claim unique insight into the questions of politics and economics even while failing to reach, or even trying to reach, any consensus on the problems in context. Indeed, the church could stand outside the activities of political life, yet would find itself responsible for the illumination of such activities. Preparatory documents stated that "The Church is a worshipping community in whose worship every relative political judgment is brought to the searching test and scrutiny of an absolute and divine judgment," warning that to commit to a prudential political program would indeed abdicate this responsibility.⁴¹ The expression of political decisions, thus, was posited in the hands of the laity, with the church submitting its counsel to those with the responsibility and expertise to execute practical action.

The Oxford Conference squarely placed responsibility for the public welfare with the church and with Christians. "The obedience of men to the will of God must have ... immense and incalculable consequences in the social and political spheres. The Church, by the mere fact of its existence, is a political factor of cardinal importance."⁴² Yet over against its later critics, such political responsibility posited within the church was undertaken within a clear missional priority. In one of the few comprehensive studies of the Conference, Graeme Smith claims that

⁴¹ Visser 't Hooft and Oldham, *The Church and Its Function in Society*, 218.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 215.

the 1937 gathering was in the ecumenical missionary tradition, rather than on a parallel political track.⁴³ Smith argues that missiology trumped ecclesiology at the Conference, if the latter existed at all. The role of missiology, however, does not preclude the centrality of ecclesiology within the Conference, but complements it. The church could function congruent to its essential nature only through its continued global expansion. For the organizers, Christianity was not only an answer to the crisis of humanity, but also *the* answer.

Constituent of this response to the crisis of humanity was a theological conception of responsibility comprising human dignity and freedom, as well as concomitant historical possibility. This second theme from the Conference method would be vital to the church's ongoing place in the social order and would manifest a decade later when some of the same principals from the Conference worked for the establishment of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As John Nurser summarizes in his study, "Unless 'Christian forces' exerted themselves, it could be assumed that any [post-war world] order would be unjust – and therefore short-lived, and hostile to church – and especially missionary interest. To 'write the peace,' ... would be critical for the future of the church."⁴⁴ The organizers of the Conference realized that in order for the Christian church to perform its function in society, the recognition and maintenance of freedom for the individual, and for the church, would be required.

Furthermore, extended critiques of Marxism and Humanistic Modernism built upon preliminary statements regarding the value and dignity of humans. "In a world in which life

⁴³ Graeme Smith, *Oxford 1937: The Universal Christian Council for Life and Work Conference*, vol. 135, Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2004).

⁴⁴ John S. Nurser, *For All Peoples and All Nations: The Ecumenical Church and Human Rights, Advancing Human Rights* (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 55.

seems cheap, in which the individual often appears to be nothing more than a cog in a machine, and in which multitudes fritter away a trivial existence in a succession of new sensations and frivolous pleasures, men need to be saved from despair and an aimless existence by the reminder that they have been created for responsible selfhood as the children of God.”⁴⁵

In its process, its reports and its response to the situation with the German church the Conference made clear the responsibility of the larger Church to maintain freedom for its members and to respond to threats to Christian liberty by states, both those favoring of or antagonistic to Christianity. The report on “Church and State” claimed “The Church in its oecumenical capacity cannot remain indifferent while in various countries ... the service of the Church is made difficult or almost impossible.” The report went further, recognizing that a threat to a religion was indeed a threat to all religion, renouncing all forms of persecution against both Christians and non-Christians.⁴⁶

This focus on freedom undergirded the dialogical social method used within the Conference as well, and can be seen within the concept of the middle axiom, popularized by the Conference. These axioms spring first from the recognition of the church’s function in the political sphere, with the intention of providing provisional and nonbinding guidelines for faithful response for a decision within a particular historical and cultural context. Ronald Preston, in his extended article on the concept, explained their attempt to address the tactical problems of moral decision making in which, on the one hand, churches “stick to basic agreed moral generalities or principles, which cannot be disputed because they have no specific

⁴⁵ Visser ’t Hooft and Oldham, *The Church and Its Function in Society*, 208.

⁴⁶ Oldham et al., *The Churches Survey Their Task: The Report of the Conference at Oxford, July 1937, on Church, Community, and State*, 273–74.

content,” and on the other hand, they offer “detailed recommendations” for issues that are “too involved and the details too uncertain to warrant such a prescribed conclusion.”⁴⁷ Oldham provided its formulation.

Such broad assertions as that Christians are bound to obey the law of love or strive for social justice do not go far towards helping the individual know what he ought to do in particular cases. On the other hand, there is no way by which he can be relieved of the responsibility of decisions in concrete situations. To give him precise instructions to be literally carried out is to rob him of his moral responsibility as a person. ... Hence between purely general statements of the ethical demands of the gospel and the decisions that have to be made in concrete situations there is need for what may be described as middle axioms. ... They are attempts to define the directions in which, in a particular state of society, Christian faith must express itself. They are not binding for all time, but are provisional definitions of the type of behaviour required of Christians at a given period in given circumstances.⁴⁸

While these axioms have been interpreted as attempts to provide some universal principle as a middle way between the general and particular, they cannot be construed in this manner. They are, rather, at their core, provisional, reached through a cross-disciplinary reflection among theology, ethics and what one might call the practical disciplines, whether social science, engineering, economics, etc. They begin with a reflection on what is implicit in theology – agape, freedom, concern for the poor, for example, followed by an attempt to identify the technical and practical aspects of the problem. What facts are relevant to the situation? What are the likely consequences of various decision points? Preston elucidates the reality of the process. “If a church wishes ... to develop middle axioms in any area they must get together a group of people from relevant disciplines and from those who have practical experiences of the issues, for

⁴⁷ Ronald H. Preston, *Church and Society in the Late Twentieth Century: The Economic and Political Task*, The Scott Holland Lectures 1983 (London: SCM Press, 1983), 142–43.

⁴⁸ Visser 't Hooft and Oldham, *The Church and Its Function in Society*, 209–10.

instance as householder, worker, or citizen at whatever level of income and power, privilege or lacking it, to work on the matter.”⁴⁹

Thus the church does not simply make grand, authoritative resolutions, but must recognize both the freedom and expertise of the laity to respond to particular tasks in obedience to God while providing the theological resources so to do. In addressing the “directions of advance,” the Conference report stated, “ If the Church is to be a living force in the world its influence will be exerted through an endless multiplicity of ‘cells,’ consisting of persons who respond to a call to devote themselves to specific tasks in a limited environment.”⁵⁰ The effort, while acknowledging the freedom to respond in obedience, recognizes as well the realities and differences of culture, history and circumstance that, without such recognition, work to limit both unity and freedom.

These themes – the reality of the church and its unifying transcendence, the roots of human freedom and dignity, and the concept of middle axioms, emerged in a time of crisis for the church and for the world. These themes offer resources for a church facing crisis today that can both contextualize and transcend the cultural battles with which churches are contending. In the face of economic globalization, the failures of nation-states, and the threat of environmental disaster, for example, these resources offer a method for the church and for religion to take its necessary place within the postmodern and pluralistic context in which we live.

⁴⁹ Preston, *Church and Society in the Late Twentieth Century*, 149.

⁵⁰ Visser 't Hooft and Oldham, *The Church and Its Function in Society*, 251.

CHAPTER TWO

TWENTIETH-CENTURY FOUNDATIONS OF RESPONSIBILITY

In the years leading up to the Oxford Conference the concept of responsibility was receiving new academic attention as the West struggled to respond to the terrors of the First World War and the growing threats that would result in a second worldwide war. A variety of American, British, and European scholars, seemingly independent of each other, were wrestling with the concept, placing it within an ethical framework that would be further advanced by the Oxford Conference and the successive First Assembly of the WCC.

These ecumenists, fearful for the future of the freedom of the individual and for the mediating institutions of society, including the church, would find in responsibility the root principle for a model of ecumenical social ethics that could defend the church, society and the individual from the political cancers besieging the globe. The concept of responsibility as it related to ethics was “in the air,” as writers on both sides of Atlantic worked to offer a relevant ethical framework for the time’s geopolitical framework.¹ What role do virtue and principle, whether mundane or divine, play within ethics? How does responsibility operate in the reality of political life, if at all? What is the place of the self and the Other in society? What place does the church take in relationship to the state?

¹ Robin Lovin points out that, in particular, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth had shared discussions on the topic of responsibility, as well as the ecumenists, dominated by theologians from the United States and England, that comprised much of the Oxford discussion. Robin W. Lovin, “Becoming Responsible in Christian Ethics,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 22, no. 4 (2009): 390.

The demands of the times were not confined to theology and ecclesiology. The International Institute of Philosophy organized in 1937, the same year in which the Oxford Conference convened, would in its early years find it necessary to wrestle with the concept of responsibility, particularly with the concern of grounding philosophical interpretations on so-called universal principles that could likewise be considered as ideological assumptions.²

The primary actors we will examine in this chapter in this reframing of ethics in the years leading up to the Oxford Conference are German sociologist Max Weber; American pastor, theologian, and Oxford contributor Reinhold Niebuhr; theologian and Nazi-resister Dietrich Bonhoeffer; and Austrian philosopher Martin Buber. Their work would begin to elucidate themes regarding values, anthropology, sociology, politics, and subsidiarity, tilling the soil that would be sown further at Oxford on the eve of the World War II.

The Development of Responsibility

Before moving to this wartime framing of the notion of responsibility, we will briefly examine a broader sense of the term in the discourse of ethics. What is meant by the term “responsibility?” The word itself is a relative newcomer in moral discourse. Albert Jonsen points out that the term entered the western lexicon in the late seventeenth century and found its way into philosophical and political writing as a way to describe accountability and liability, and its scope. In the late nineteenth century, the term had established a place in philosophical discourse.³

² Richard McKeon, “The Development and the Significance of the Concept of Responsibility,” in *Freedom and History and Other Essays: An Introduction to the Thought of Richard McKeon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 62.

³ Jonsen notes that the term “responsibility” first appears in French, English and German writing in the mid-seventeenth century, including in the work of Blaise Pascal in 1656. Jonsen credits the “philosophical debut” of the term to David Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature* and notes

Jonsen identifies two patterns in the development of the term in modern moral philosophy since its introduction. The first is that of attribution, the assigning of praise or blame. The second pattern is appropriation, in which a moral actor is able to take “self-possession” of obligation and principles.⁴

As the concept developed, this pattern of accountability extended to the social and political, in which a community recognizes its obligation to the members that comprise it and to other communities that exist alongside it. In discussing this confluence of political and moral responsibility, Richard McKeon noted that the resulting challenge is to establish responsible dialogue within and between communities that advance human flourishing and secure values within and across cultures, a theme that would also engage the contributors at Oxford.⁵

In both philosophical and common use, the theme of responsibility has found most often its place in a legal or juridical context, where it is used to assign obligation, accountability, blame and praise. Its etymology is rooted in the act of justifying or responding for oneself, or on behalf of another. We have obligations or duties based on our role or position. Parenthood involves certain responsibilities in regard to one’s children. It calls one to account. Who is responsible for the success of the military campaign? Who is responsible for the failure of the banking system? It can mean being aware of our choices, the consequences of our choices as far as we can know, and making prudent decisions based on our assessment. The student made a

Alexander Hamilton’s use of the term in *Federalist Papers*. The term was more firmly established in the mid-nineteenth century in the essay “The Vulgar Notion of Responsibility and its Connection with the Theories of Free Will and Determinism” by British philosopher F. H. Bradley and in French philosopher Lucien Levy-Bruhl’s *L’Idée de Responsabilité*. Albert R. Jonsen, *Responsibility in Modern Religious Ethics* (Washington: Corpus Books, 1968), 3.

⁴ Ibid., 70–71.

⁵ McKeon, “The Development and the Significance of the Concept of Responsibility,” 86.

responsible decision to spend the afternoon writing rather than spend the day binge-watching television. If governments do not come together to reverse the emission of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, lower Manhattan in the not too distant future may be under water.

The ubiquity of the term, however, has rendered it somewhat nebulous and unsystematic, if not neglected at times, particularly when deployed in ethical theory. Wolfgang Schoberth suggests that the value of the term has grown to a level of self-evidence that has in effect emptied it of meaning both in academic discussion and in public discourse, allowing the resulting lacuna to be placed in service to whatever argument needs to be deployed. “Has ‘responsibility’ become an equivocation which allows one to stealthily go from one place to another, taking categories which gain their meanings from their direct interrelationship to one another and relegating them to anonymous, institutional structures that rob these concepts of their original meaning and yet allow them to retain their moral punch? Or even further: Has this inflationary use of the word in political and economic rhetoric led to its becoming practically worthless?”⁶

In contemporary political rhetoric in the United States, for example, the term is invoked to insist on individual accountability over against government intervention on issues of social well being, leading to a political polarization regarding the role of government and the responsibility of the governed.⁷ In such a debate, the term itself has been put in service to partisan claims, effectively closing off its use by political opponents. For example, as one

⁶ Wolfgang Schoberth, “The Concept of Responsibility: Dilemma and Necessity,” trans. Stephen Hamilton, *Studies in Christian Ethics* 22, no. 4 (2009): 424.

⁷ Mark Brewer and Jeffrey Stonecash argue that there is “a fundamental debate occurring about how much we should rely on the norm of personal responsibility as an organizing principle of society” and if “widespread opportunity still exists, and whether it is appropriate to presume individuals can control their fate.” Mark D Brewer and Jeffrey M Stonecash, *Polarization and the Politics of Personal Responsibility*, Kindle (Oxford University Press, 2016), Location 170; Chapter One, Paragraph Four.

examines the failure of the banking system in 2008, political rhetoric, on the one hand, lays the blame with borrowers who abdicated personal responsibility, taking on mortgage loans that could not be afforded. On the other hand, the banking system is blamed as establishing an exploitative system that maximized profits and shifted risks at the expense of individuals, the community and the nation. In such debate, the term becomes mutually exclusive; its use by one side or the other weaponized as affirmation of one's own argument and the complementary assumption of responsibility, and negation of the competing argument and its complementary neglect of the value. In international politics, while the expansion of responsibility is unabated, the assignment and assumption of accountability is increasingly difficult among state and non-state actors on issues of global import, such as climate change and trade.⁸

German theologian Georg Picht in his elucidation of the concept of responsibility outlines for the term a "surplus of meaning" that extends its range beyond the merely juridical to the infinite. This move Picht attributes to the concept's association with Christian eschatology, in which the human is subject to God's judgment.

It seems to me this alone explains why in German, English and French, responsibility moved from the law to ethics in general, a transition which is not found in the Latin language. Roman ethics knows nothing of the idea that the supreme judge can hold the individual responsible not only for his moral conduct, but for his very thoughts. Christian ethics, on the other hand, subordinates all human conduct to the maxim that "we must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body" (II Cor. 5:10). Only the Final Judgment could give rise to the idea that life as a whole must serve to prepare one for this Final Responsibility. As a moral concept, responsibility is therefore of Christian provenance. To put it more precisely: It is an eschatological idea.⁹

⁸ Valentin Rauer et al., "The Diffusion of Responsibility in World Politics," in *Joint Session - European Consortium for Political Research* (European Consortium for Political Research, Pisa, Italy, 2016).

⁹ Georg Picht, "The Concept of Responsibility: Introduction and Translation," trans. Winston Davis, *Religion*, no. 28 (1998): 190.

While an extended critique of Picht's claim for the infinite nature of responsibility is beyond the purposes of this paper, his analysis helps illuminate at least three significant features of the view of responsibility that were foreshadowed at Oxford – the responsible possibilities and requirements of history, the sovereignty of God and the value of the human creature, and the turn to the Other as a response to the sovereign God. The formation of these themes for the concept of responsibility developed in the years leading up to Oxford in the context of global conflict. Oxford responsibility emerged within the shadow of what Conference organizers saw as a dual threat within that conflict – that of the rise of totalitarianism and the continued influence of the modern project on social and economic thinking. Oxford's development sought to enable a realistic world in which religion would survive to ameliorate despotic and materialistic threats, and responsibility would be its organizing principle.

Weberian Foundations

The intellectual roots of Oxford Responsibility can be located in the work of sociologist Max Weber, who, in the early twentieth century, worked to elucidate a moral framework for politics that placed responsibility as the ethical norm. Weber's ethics of responsibility provides a foundational structure for understanding the developments concerning responsibility in the decades leading up to the Oxford Conference. Two key themes that would be integral to Oxford's work would be the place of the immanent and the divine in ethical theory, or more precisely, the reality of historical contingency and the authority of eschatology. The place of historical contingency concerned the ethical playing field upon which the responsible human agent operated. Weber would argue that responsible action required the accounting of consequences which likewise required the moral agent to take account of reality as it actually

could be received and foreseen, rather than as it could be perceived in its supposed perfection. Second, and in seeming contradiction to our first theme – a contradiction that we will examine – is the use of religious reasons in the framework of ethics for provision of authoritative content for the concept of responsibility. I will claim here with others that Weber, while arguing for the elimination of the transcendent within an ethical theory of responsibility, actually leaves room for and requires such framework for his ethics of responsibility. A third theme, perhaps less pronounced, but which would find further explication in the work of the Oxford Conference, was that of the necessity of attending to the plurality of voices within society and culture in the work of responsibility. These three themes would become pillars of what we will define as Oxford Responsibility, which recognizes the limits of history, the ambiguities of human culture, and the will of God.¹⁰

Did the organizers and contributors at Oxford draw from the work of Weber in their own shaping of a moral framework of responsibility? There does not seem to be explicit mention of the sociologist within the volumes nor in archival material, however scholars were certainly aware of his work. An English translation of his significant lecture on the topic – *Politik als Beruf* – was not widely available until more than a decade following the Conference, while a German pamphlet was first available in late 1919. Ronald Stone, in his historical work on Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich at Union Theological Seminary, points out possible influences. Both Niebuhr and Tillich were key contributors to the Oxford Conference. Stone writes, that as a pastor in Detroit in the late 1920s, Niebuhr was drawn to the work of Weber. For Tillich, at the University of Frankfurt, and later in his third volume of *Systematic Theology*,

¹⁰ As we have said, our definition is as follows: *Oxford Responsibility comprises a society in which its members and institutions act in accordance with human value and freedom, in obedience to the will of God, toward the achievement of justice within the limits, ambiguities and contingencies of human finitude, culture and history.*

published in 1963, the influence of Weber's view of responsibility is evident in the realist approach to history and the Kingdom of God.¹¹ The themes that emerge in Weber's ethics of responsibility as presented in his essay are evident in and were developed further in the work of the Oxford Conference.

Weber's foundational work on responsibility progressed in the midst of World War I. Weber was asked by the rector of the University of Munich to deliver public lectures being organized by a "left-liberal" student group on the topic of vocation – *geistige Arbeit als Beruf* – translated as "intellectual or spiritual work as a calling."¹² Weber recognized in the concept of vocation both a sense of profession or work, as well as the theological element of a response to transcendent or divine instruction. He had worked out this concept in his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* more than a decade earlier. For Weber vocation entailed an act of volition whereby the individual makes internal to itself that which was external. This understating would shape the ethical theories presented in the lectures.¹³

The first lecture, "Science as a Vocation" was delivered in November 1917. The second lecture, "Politics as a Vocation," which interests us here, was delivered in January 1919, following Germany's surrender in World War I. As we have mentioned, the lecture, published in Germany the same year, was translated into English in 1946 following the end of World War II,

¹¹ Ronald H. Stone, *Politics and Faith: Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich at Union Seminary in New York* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2012), 38, 296.

¹² Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David S. Owen and Tracy B. Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2004), xiii.

¹³ In their introduction to the lectures, David Owen and Tracy Strong cite an extended footnote of Weber's that "asserts that the concept of calling is particular to Protestantism," differentiating it from the "cosmically" oriented concepts within Roman Catholicism or fated concepts within Lutheranism. *Ibid.*

and has become foundational in the discussion of the concept of social responsibility within religious ethics since.¹⁴

In their commentary on the lecture, David Owen and Tracey Strong place the text within the difficult context in which it was delivered. The lecture was given at a time of national malaise over the end of what would be World War I. German society had been divided over the execution of the war, with major parties to the division coalescing around positions of nationalism and pacifism. Further, the country was torn regarding the nation's accountability for the war, with Weber decidedly defending the honor of the German fatherland. Weber was resistant to giving the lecture, yielding only when it appeared, that without other options in the heated political climate, the invitation would be extended to a critic of Germany's sentiment and action at the start of the war to whom Weber was opposed and desired to discredit.¹⁵

Thus Weber delivered his lecture in a milieu of ambiguity and angst, where the very survival of the nation and humanity were being called into question. Weber's lecture spoke into this contextual turmoil, providing neither certainty nor tranquillity, but an outline of the characteristics of the mature politician that would be required to navigate in such troubled waters. The organizers at Oxford would find themselves in a comparable contextual turmoil as it

¹⁴ Writing for the *Studies in Christian Ethics* journal dedicated to the topic of responsibility, Wolfgang Schoberth claimed that Weber's lecture "contributed like no other to this term's political and ethical popularity." Schoberth, "The Concept of Responsibility: Dilemma and Necessity," 424.

¹⁵ The critic was socialist Kurt Eisner, who would later be assassinated while preparing to take on the role of German prime minister. Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, xxxv; Wolfgang Schoberth, commenting on the ambiguities of Weber's argument in the lecture, posits that they were the result of his political agenda to discredit "a political rival whose goals Weber detested," which included the publication of alleged evidence of Germany's guilt for the war, the suppression of which aided in the myth of an innocent-and-attacked Germany. This, Schoberth points out, played a role in the eventual downfall of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Hitler. Schoberth, "The Concept of Responsibility: Dilemma and Necessity," 426.

fashioned a conception of responsibility for an engagement of political and social realities, and the church, a situation that was precipitated in no small part by the continuing German turmoil. We will say more about the particular relevance of this context below.

Considered as the century's introduction to the ethical framework of responsibility, Weber's essay, in its final pages, contrasts an "ethics of conviction" (*Gesinnungsethik*) and an "ethics of responsibility" (*Verantwortungsethik*), which are presented as alternatives to guide moral conduct. "(A)ll ethically oriented action can be guided by either of two fundamentally different, irredeemably incompatible maxims," Weber claimed.¹⁶

Weber presents an agent operating under the ethics of conviction as interested in ensuring that his actions correspond with right value, principle or intention, and thus is accountable only so far as his actions are aligned with principle. While acknowledging the limitations and ambiguities of nature and humanity, the agent need not consider these limitations in moral action, and is relieved from responsibility for the consequences of his decisions and actions. It is helpful to retrieve the first English translation of *Gesinnungsethik* as the "ethic of ultimate ends," which, while somewhat inadequate in capturing what Weber intended, does capture an eschatological undertone that would be critical in Oxford's conception of responsibility and that would later be drawn upon by Picht in his work on the concept of

¹⁶ Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, 83; The 1948 translation of the essay renders *Gesinnungsethik* as "ethic of ultimate ends." Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Routledge, 1948); The Rodney Livingstone translation used here and throughout this paper – "ethics of conviction" – was cited by Bradley Starr. He points out that others have rendered the translation as "ethics of intention," "ethics of absolute ends," or "dispositional ethic." Bradley E Starr, "The Structure of Max Weber's Ethic of Responsibility," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 27, no. 3 (September 1999): 407–34.

responsibility in 1969. This “ultimate end,” is, then, a transcendent value or principle on which the agent stands, and right actions must concur with this principle.

The agent guided by an ethic of responsibility, on the other hand, holds herself answerable for the results of actions on nature and humanity as they can be predicted, and takes account of the limits and weaknesses of other actors in moral action. Unlike the actor of conviction, the responsible actor cannot absolve oneself with claims of good intentions in the face of bad consequences. He cannot claim, as might the former, that “... the responsibility must lie not with the agent but with the world, the stupidity of men – or the will of God who created them thus. With the ethics of responsibility, on the other hand, a man reckons with exactly those average human failings. ... (H)e has absolutely no right to assume humankind’s goodness and perfection. He does not feel that he is in a position to shift the consequences of his actions, where they are foreseeable, onto others.”¹⁷

Weber is clear in his argument that the responsible actor must consider the consequences of his actions as far as such consequences can be foreseen, which raises the question of the responsibility of diligent foresight and its limitations. To what extent can the responsible actor be absolved of the bad consequences that could not responsibly be foreseen, or as later writers, such as Hans Jonas and Wolfgang Schoberth, would address, how can responsibility be maintained as the borders of foresight expand?

Setting the stage for these contrasting ethics required Weber to take seriously the realities of history and human life in general and the realities of political life in particular. Over against Machiavellian ideas of raw power for power’s sake, Weber sought to establish for the vocation

¹⁷ Regarding assumptions of human goodness, Weber draws on Johann Fichte’s use of Machiavelli’s *The Discourses*. Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, 84, n.73.

an appropriate moral framework that would allow the politician to act ethically within a morally ambiguous universe.

The sense of ambiguity and anxiety comprising the context of Weber's work and the resulting ethic was not simply the result of an acute crisis brought on by unique circumstances, but was a part of the nature of society itself, and the stage of politics in particular. Weber defined the political as that in which questions of the distribution and preservation of power are in play, either as a means toward certain goals, or as ends in and of themselves. While all political organizations – banking, labor, municipalities, private associations, and “even the political maneuverings of a shrewd wife seeking to influence her husband” – deploy power through coercive efforts, the state possesses particular authority to utilize physical violence in service to its goals. In what moral framework can such coercive and violent power operate? ¹⁸

Weber acknowledges that this plays out upon an ambiguous historical playing field populated by human actors and institutions that are both principled and unprincipled, intelligent and ignorant, good and evil. On such a field interests and values must be navigated and balanced by political operators who combine passion for a cause, responsibility comprising a keen awareness of context and the ability to anticipate and account for consequences, and a sense of proportion that allows “realities to impinge on you while maintaining an inner calm and composure.”¹⁹

Politics means a slow, powerful drilling through hard boards, with a mixture of passion and a sense of proportion. It is absolutely true, and our entire historical experience confirms it, that what is possible could never have been achieved unless people had tried again and again to achieve the impossible in this world. But the man who can do this must be a leader, and not only that, he must also be a

¹⁸ Ibid., 32.

¹⁹ Ibid., 77.

hero – in a very literal sense. And even those who are neither a leader or a hero must arm themselves with that staunchness of heart that refuses to be daunted by the collapse of all their hopes, for otherwise they will not even be capable of achieving what is possible today. The only man who has a “vocation” for politics is one who is certain that his spirit will not be broken if the world, when looked at from his point of view, proves too stupid or base to accept what he wishes to offer it, and who, when faced with all that obduracy, can still say ‘Nevertheless!’ despite everything.²⁰

The Oxford Conference would expand upon several fronts opened by Weber in this articulation of politics and history in relationship to a theory of responsibility. First is the requirement to address and respond to historical context as it actually exists rather than how one wishes it would be. To stand on conviction while refusing to see the world as it is to meet history as a child who insists on his own way without regard to the world around him. It is this immaturity and refusal to accept reality that apparently dooms the political efficacy of the ethics of conviction and its jettisoning of responsibility.

In the distinctions he makes between an ethics of conviction and an ethics of responsibility, Weber’s refutation of the ethics of conviction makes substantial use of Christian sources, particularly Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, with its exemplification of the “absolute ethics of the Gospel” and the “unworldly imperatives” therein.²¹ The Christian is to do what is right and leave the consequences to God. Furthermore, the demands of Christianity as stated in the Sermon on the Mount render politics useless at best and evil at worst. On the one hand, the commandment to the rich man to give up all that he has must be applied without discrimination or distinction to everyone, resulting in a universal coercion. On the other hand the command to eschew violence and turn the other cheek contradicts a basic political axiom that “You *shall* use

²⁰ Ibid., 93–94.

²¹ Ibid., 81, 88.

force to resist evil, for otherwise you will be *responsible* for its running amok.”²² In the real world of politics, living by these religious demands is mere childish fantasy. The mature politician knows that achieving good ends may require dubious means, and possible evil side effects, for which the mature politician must account as far as perceivable.

Furthermore, adherents of an ethics of conviction must as a matter of consistency renounce any morally questionable action, yet demonstrate their own hypocrisy as “chiliastic prophets,” – again Weber utilizes a religious reference – ready to use violence as the ultimate weapon to secure the content of their conviction. It is finally not possible to reconcile an ethics of conviction and an ethics of responsibility, as those who adhere to an ethics of conviction are “unable to tolerate the ethical irrationality of the world.”²³

Weber calls Christians to task for this inability, suggesting that they have forgotten their own foundations. Weber points to the early Christian tradition in which followers of Christ were aware and took account of a world governed by demons. The varied histories of world religions, including Christianity, view the world as comprising “unmerited suffering, unpunished injustice, and incorrigible stupidity” that point to mundane principles of “compensation and retribution . . . that we can interpret metaphysically or that are destined always to elude our attempts at interpretation. This problem, the experience of the irrationality of the universe, has always been the driving force of the entire history of religion.” The passion of religion within an ethics of conviction fails to honor its own tradition’s understanding of the world, failing to face the reality that politics, with its tools of power and violence, has made a necessary deal with the devil. “It follows that as far as a person’s actions are concerned, it is *not* true that nothing but good comes

²² Ibid., 82.

²³ Ibid., 85.

from good and nothing but evil from evil, but rather quite frequently the opposite is the case. Anyone who does not realize this is in face a mere child in political matters.”²⁴

Second, Weber acknowledges a cycle of politics that does not view history through an enlightenment lens of historical progression, but allows consequences that either advance or thwart political purpose. We will see that this finally requires a teleological viewpoint, but what is also required is a prudential way forward. This prudent action is never complete. Instead it demands a diligence, resilience and humility across a repeating cycle of hope, obduracy, and possibility in one’s own context and across generations. This is a theme to which Oxford would return.

Following this extensive effort to position an ethics of responsibility and dismiss the folly of an ethics of conviction, Weber pivots to present the paradox that provides the moral framework for this repeating cycle. The two ethics are not as incompatible as one has been led to believe, but are, in fact, mutually dependent for authentic responsibility. Weber had foreshadowed the same at his very introduction of the terms. “This does not mean that an ethics of conviction is identical with irresponsibility or an ethics of responsibility with a lack of conviction.”²⁵

After building his case for the division between the two ethics, Weber makes this surprising move to diminish the division, using religious tradition as an example of how conviction and responsibility can and must coexist. Assumedly drawing upon Martin Luther’s well-known words at the Diet of Worms, “Here I stand, I can do no other,” Weber posits Luther as the example of not simply the prudent politician, but, more generally, the mature human

²⁴ Ibid., 86.

²⁵ Ibid., 83.

being, able to hold to both conviction and responsibility. Here then the impermeable wall of distinction between the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility withers in the body of the prudent actor. Contrasting such an agent with “windbags ... drunk on romantic sensations” who fail to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions and place blame at the door of a “stupid and nasty” world, Weber finds wonder in the “*mature* human being”

... who feels the responsibility he bears for the consequences of his own actions with his entire soul and who acts in harmony with an ethics of responsibility [and] reaches the point where he says, “Here I stand, I can do no other.” That is authentically human and cannot fail to move us. For this is a situation that *may* befall *any* of us at some point, if we are not inwardly dead. In this sense an ethics of conviction and an ethics of responsibility are not absolute antitheses but are mutually complementary, and only when taken together do they constitute the authentic human being who *is capable* of having a “vocation for politics.”²⁶

Here Weber allows that conviction, ultimate ends, intention, and consequences are integral to the ethics of responsibility, and utilizes an iconic religious event to illustrate the point. Earlier in the essay Weber had posited the Christian as the foil, who must abandon conviction in the face of reality, turning to other traditions and doctrines to redeem the abdication, whether it be a move to Millennialism or an appeal to original sin. With his pivot to the place of values as integral for the mature responsible human, Weber has opened the possibility of deploying explicitly religious values as the content of conviction, a theme that would take prominence in the Oxford’s conception of responsibility.

After positing a seemingly unbridgeable gap between an ethics of conviction and an ethics of responsibility, Weber’s move to navigate the “abyss,” as he calls it, has raised questions for later interpreters. Weber has been criticized on the place of values in his thinking, and the evaluation of the provenance of the guiding norms allowable in responsible political calculation.

²⁶ Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” 92.

D. Etienne de Villiers contends that Weber's formal understanding of ethics "allows any cultural conviction, even if it is of an extreme nationalist or racist nature, to be elevated by the individual to an ultimate and thus ethical value."²⁷ At the same time, de Villiers sees frameworks in Weber's ethics of responsibility that allow for the place of thick Christian moral values within a theory of responsibility that may accommodate and engage a plurality of moral and cultural value systems. The Oxford Conference in its wrestling with responsibility, we will see, worked to place explicitly Christian moral values at the center of its theory of responsibility, yet would be cognizant of how a responsible engagement with a plurality of moral and cultural values would be required, especially with a view to historical contingency, as well as to subsidiarity and the church's social function in relation to various social spheres, such as the community, the state, economics, education, and international relations.

Stepping back from this discussion on what values might be allowed entrance into Weber's ethics of responsibility, one might ask how the irredeemable divide between conviction and responsibility is traversed in the first place. This bridging in which moral values take root in responsibility would be central in Oxford Responsibility thought.

Bradley Starr argues for a way forward, writing that the distinctions made between the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility have often been interpreted using Weber's conception of rational social action comprising value-rational and instrumental-rational social action, thus making Weber's argument internally flawed. Starr contends that the distinction instead lies in viewing the ethical frameworks as Weber presents them initially as comprehensive worldviews (*Weltanschauungen*). The worldview of the adherent of an ethics of conviction

²⁷ D. Etienne de Villiers, "In Search of an Appropriate Contemporary Approach in Christian Ethics: Max Weber's Ethic of Responsibility as Resource," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies; Pretoria* 71, no. 1 (2015): 5.

comprises a proper cosmic order of values to which human behavior can cohere. The ethic of responsibility, as presented above, corresponds to a universe marked by unavoidable and intractable conflicts of values that continue to be navigated. This distinction, Starr argues, provides space for the apparent opposition between Weber's ethics of conviction and ethics of responsibility, allowing for an ethics of responsibility to emerge as a coherent moral framework as Weber shifts the meaning of his terms from oppositional "ultimate *Weltanschauungen*," to rational social action. Weber writes in *Economy and Society*,

Value-rational action may thus have various different relations to the instrumentally rational action. From the latter point of view, however, value-rationality is always irrational. Indeed the more the value to which action is oriented is elevated to the status of an absolute value, the more "irrational" in this sense the corresponding action is. For the more unconditionally the actor devoted himself to this value for its own sake, to pure sentiment or beauty, to absolute goodness or devotion to duty, the less is he influenced by considerations of the consequences of his actions. The orientation of action wholly to the rational achievement of ends without relations to fundamental values is, to be sure, essentially only a limiting case.²⁸

Starr contends that for Weber, the relation between these types of rational social action, rather than existing in complete opposition, is better conceived as a "supplemental relation of opposites" in which the relationship between value and instrumentality must be "brokered again and again without guidance from an overarching order of values."²⁹ This does not remove the notion of moral obligation nor conscience, but introduces a concept of responsible humility in regard to action within the finite limitations of human knowledge and deliberation and the context of historical contingency. Instrumental rationality and value rationality then must

²⁸ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 26; Cited in Starr, "The Structure of Max Weber's Ethic of Responsibility," 428.

²⁹ Starr, "The Structure of Max Weber's Ethic of Responsibility," 429.

continually be brought into a deliberative process in which each is tempered by the other. This is not the case for politics alone, argues Starr. Rather, the complementarity of the ethics of conviction and the ethic of responsibility positions the latter as “more than just a political ethic,” but as a moral framework “relevant wherever values and strategies are brought together, and hence, in all areas of life,” including religion.³⁰ Weber had explicitly named such complementarity as a necessity for the authentic political actor, when drawing upon the example of Martin Luther, cited above.

Realism and Responsibility

The theological and political challenge of the supplemental nature of the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility would find itself played out in the years prior to the Oxford Conference by brothers H. Richard Niebuhr and Reinhold Niebuhr, both of whom would shape the theological conversation around responsibility, and the latter whom would deeply influence the work of the Oxford Conference in his continuing development of Christian realism and his direct contributions to and participation in the assembly.³¹ HRN would continue to address the topic of responsibility in his work, most significantly in his posthumous text *The Responsible Self*, based on his Robertson Lectures at the University of Glasgow in 1960, and his eponymous essay written in 1946 prior to the formation of the WCC published in the collection “*The Responsibility of the Church for Society*” and *Other Essays by H. Richard Niebuhr*.³²

³⁰ Ibid., 430.

³¹ In this section, through page 49, we will refer to H. Richard Niebuhr as “HRN” and to Reinhold Niebuhr as “RN.”

³² H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999); H. Richard Niebuhr, “*The Responsibility of the*

In the well-known trio of articles in *The Christian Century* on March 23 and 30, and April 6, 1932, the Niebuhr brothers played out their disagreement over the operation of responsibility in regard to American foreign policy pertaining to Japan's invasion of Manchuria the year before, which at the time outraged many throughout the globe as a case of imperial aggression. The first article was HRN's "The Grace of Doing Nothing." His brother responded with his article, titled "Must We Do Nothing?" This was followed by a reply, "The Only Way into the Kingdom of God."³³ In a broad sense, the articles addressed whether the United States should enter the conflict, yet for our purposes the arguments illuminate the Niebuhrs' thoughts grounding a theory of responsibility.

In his account, HRN set up the paradox between the sovereign activity of God in the midst of history, – reminding us that our actions as individuals and as nations fall under the judgment of God – and this over against the reality of uneasy, selfish and ineffective human choices we make in our actions. Americans, he said, and particularly the American government, were "chafing at the bit," to do something to answer what was perceived as a great injustice within the fighting in northeast Asia.³⁴ But given a lack of constructive options, as well as what he saw as questionable and self-interested American motives, there was little that America could rightly do, without consequences that could be worse than the situation itself. In such a dilemma, the responsible thing to do was what one might call an active inaction, or an active waiting for God and for God's new possibilities for right action to emerge. For HRN, any action in the face

Church for Society" and Other Essays by H. Richard Niebuhr, ed. Kristine A. Culp, Library of Theological Ethics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

³³ The three articles appear in Wayne G. Boulton, Thomas D. Kennedy, and Allen Verhey, eds., *From Christ to the World: Introductory Readings in Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 419.

of such a crisis must always be secondary to the action of God in history. We don't act without recognizing our place before God. This calls for, first, our repentance, in which we acknowledge our own fallenness, limits, and our selfishness. And then we work to recognize our own complicity, our own faults, our own sin, which contributed to the crisis, and only then do we enter a period of discernment and awareness of what new, faithful possibilities might emerge for activity in the face of the crisis. The responsible Christian action is to repent and listen for God's will.

In his response, RN provided a theme that would find itself operative within the context of the Oxford Conference and would mimic the working of Weber's mature and authentic political actor within an ethic of responsibility.

My brother draws the conclusion from this logic that it is better not to act at all than to act from motives which are less than pure, and with the use of methods which are less than critical. He believes in taking literally the words of Jesus, 'Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.' ... This is an important emphasis particularly for modern Christianity with its lack of appreciation of the tragic character of life. ... A truly religious man ought to distinguish himself from the moral man by recognizing the fact that he is not moral, that he remains a sinner to the end. ... All this does not prove, however, that we ought to apply the words of Jesus, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone," literally. If we do we will never be able to act.³⁵

The brothers generally agreed about the place of God in the world and the reality of humanity's fallenness in relation to our attempts to do God's will. But while HRN suggested that the answer was to wait, his brother's answer was that responsible Christians must act in the midst of the ambiguity with the best knowledge that they have.

An infinite God, RN believed, presents the ideal of agape, of uncorrupted, unconditional love, exemplified through the concept of the Kingdom of God. Over against this promise, the

³⁵ Ibid., 423.

human can only respond in history within the creaturely context of the finite and corruptible. In this contrasted reality, the moral actor must make choices not only in full awareness of God's pure love, but in recognition that the human and human community by nature fall short of this ideal in the context of human history, but still must choose and act.

The reality of the world is that we do not simply make perfect choices between good and evil, but, as Reinhold Niebuhr scholar Robin Lovin puts it, we must make choices between "greater or lesser evils, a little more or a little less justice, a little more or a little less freedom."³⁶

Eschatology and Responsibility

While Weber's ethic of responsibility clearly marked the space for a moral framework within the ambiguity and contingency of history, another of its main contributions that the organizers of the Oxford Conference reflected was the space Weber provided for particular religious values as a type of value-rational social action in conversation with instrumental-rational social action. For Oxford, this space would be utilized to call the church to assume a mantle of responsibility not only to itself but its place in calling the world to a responsibility as would be sought at the inauguration of the WCC and its call for the Responsible Society. The place of religious, or what we might call transcendent, values became for Oxford a central piece of its theory of responsibility, allowing moral deliberation and action within the limits of human finitude and historical contingency while subjecting those decisions to the will and judgment of God without loss of moral authority nor requiring abdication of responsibility for consequences.

In *Politics as a Vocation*, while Weber draws on the value rational social action or ethics of conviction as an element of his ethics of responsibility, he provides minimal guidance about

³⁶ Lovin, "Becoming Responsible in Christian Ethics," 397.

where such values are promulgated. However, the allusions he uses are largely drawn from the world of religion in general and Christian tradition in particular. We have already mentioned his example of Martin Luther standing on conviction in the face of consequences at the Diet of Worms. Weber writes that what is operative and effective in politics is the “trained ability to scrutinize the realities of life ruthlessly, to withstand them and to measure up to them inwardly. “In truth, politics is an activity of the head but by no means *only* of the head. In this respect the adherents of an ethics of conviction are in the right.”³⁷ The operation of responsibility then is attentive not only to self-interested consequences of political power players and to the historical context in which one operates but also to the conscience, the inner conviction, to matters of the heart. Weber is quick to warn that in even supposed matters of the heart, the risks are many. Convictions can be misguided, pedestrian, and fatuous on the one hand. On the other hand, they could be an insincere tool for self-interested power brokers. Furthermore, matters of principle and factors of responsibility are not universalizable, but subject to context, deliberation and the exigencies and capriciousness of human nature. Weber remains concerned about the maturity and authenticity of the responsible moral agent.

But whether we *should* act in accordance with an ethics of conviction or an ethics of responsibility, and when we should choose one rather than the other, is not a matter on which we can lay down the law to anyone else. We can only say one thing. We live in an age of excitement, which you may think is *not* of a ‘sterile’ kind, though excitement is one thing, and it is not by any means always the same as authentic passion. Now in such an age, conviction politicians may well spring up in large numbers *all of a sudden* and run riot, declaring, ‘The world is stupid and nasty, not I. The responsibility for the consequences cannot be laid at my door but must rest with those who employ me and whose stupidity or nastiness I shall do away with.’ And if this happens, I shall say openly that I would begin by asking how much *inner gravity* lies behind this ethics of conviction, and I suspect I should come to the conclusion that in nine cases out of ten I was dealing with

³⁷ Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, 91.

windbags who do not genuinely feel what they are taking on themselves but who are making themselves drunk on romantic sensations.³⁸

Weber draws upon the theological metaphor of making a deal with the devil as the necessity of responsible politics in which conviction and consequence are operative. Those who engage in politics, both in the necessity of daily life and as a profession, confront ethical paradoxes for which they must take account, entering into “relations with the satanic powers that lurk in every act of violence,” with violence understood as the coercive nature of political maneuvering, which we have described. Weber goes on to recognize the nature of the transcendent in responsible living. “The genius, or the demon, of politics lives in an inner tension with the God of love as well as with the Christian God as institutionalized in the Christian churches, and it is a tension that can erupt at any time into insoluble conflict.” In his contrast with the “God of love” and the institutionalized “Christian God,” Weber points to a transcendent source for the content of conviction. This moral actor must take account of this content as a guide to moral action, as a quota over against responsible compromise with coercion, and as the judge to which the actor remains responsible given the consequences of her action. For the institutionalized church that seeks to be anything other than completely otherworldly, Weber’s ethics of responsibility is an implication to make operative the transcendent values of the Christian God within an immanent political and historical landscape. The church, if it is to be the church in the world, with an interest in the matters of history, thus must take responsibility for its values and the consequences of implementing those values within the paradoxical tensions of actual reality.

³⁸ Ibid., 92.

Weber's ethic of responsibility made accommodation for a breadth of moral reasoning, and for the general and particular circumstances in which the responsible actor found herself. Within this realistic outlook, the diversity and particularity of cultures were to be considered. Again, Weber turns to religious example to make the contrast between the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility, and the responsible place of "legitimate" violence within the purview of the state. "Religious ethics has made various accommodations with the fact that we find ourselves in different cultures [*Lebensordnungen*], each of which is subject to different laws." Here Weber contrasts Hellenistic polytheism, Hinduism, and various branches of Christianity – Catholic, pacifist and "Normal Protestantism," the latter which Weber sees as particularly adept at making space for politics, absolving citizens for involvement in violence when acting on behalf of a "legitimate authoritarian state."³⁹ The burden of consequences is shifted to the politician, and, one can argue, to the church. "Whoever makes a pact with the use of force, for whatever ends (and every politician does so), is at the mercy of its particular consequences. The man who fights for his faith, whether religious or revolutionary, is particularly exposed to this risk."⁴⁰

Bonhoeffer and Responsibility

While Weber deployed religion as the compromiser of conviction, an exception that proved the rule of responsibility, the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer would solidify the notion of the religious centrality within the ethic of responsibility in the posthumously published *Ethics*. Bonhoeffer's ethic posited religion – the Christ event in particular – at the responsible center,

³⁹ Ibid., 87–88.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 89.

displacing the focus on the “isolated individual” and placing responsibility ethics within the reality of history and human relationship. Bonhoeffer worked out his thought on the place of responsibility in ethics during his active resistance to Hitler and his imprisonment at the hands of the Nazi Party in Germany. Bonhoeffer exemplifies Weber’s mature and responsible human being who faces the ruthless facts of reality and is guided in his actions by conviction and submits his actions and the consequences of his actions to judgment, claiming, like Luther, “Here I stand, I can do no other.” This invites speculation regarding possible influence of Weber’s writing, although assigning such credit for the character of Bonhoeffer would be frivolous. That said, Bonhoeffer, as he worked out his conception of responsibility in the second version of “History and Good” did reference the work of Weber as an example of a robust explication of an ethic of responsibility.⁴¹ Yet Bonhoeffer sought to provide a “fuller meaning” to the concept, seeing in it the ground of a Christian ethic that could respond to the threats facing western civilization.

Bonhoeffer’s unfinished *Ethics* was written in the years following Oxford, and the writings were not published until 1949, appearing in English in 1955.⁴² The work provides another example of the philosophical and theological wrestling with the concept of responsibility, as scholars, pastors and ecumenical leaders sought to respond to the evils of the time. One cannot claim definitively that Bonhoeffer influenced the Oxford organizers or how Oxford’s work influenced Bonhoeffer. However contact between the German theologian and the

⁴¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Ilse Tödt et al., trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott, vol. 6, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 255.

⁴² A new critical edition and translation, edited by Clifford J. Green, was published in 2005, reordering some of the material. Quotes from the *Ethics* are taken from this edition. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*.

Conference organizers was broad, deep and frequent in the years leading up to the Oxford Conference. As early as 1932 Oldham was reading, in German, Bonhoeffer's relatively unknown text, *Act and Being*.⁴³ It was likely George Bell, Bishop of Chichester and chairperson of Life and Work from 1932 to 1934, who personally introduced Bonhoeffer to Oldham in London, where they continued to meet. At the Universal Christian Council at Fanø, Denmark, in 1934, Bonhoeffer represented the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Church as youth secretary, and it was there at Fanø that the Council acted to support the representation of the Confessing Church over that of the Reich Church, which would have implications for German participation at Oxford three years later. It was also at the meeting that the proposal to focus on the topic of Church, Community, and State at the second World Life and Work Conference at Oxford was proposed and approved, driven in no small part by the German situation.

In the weeks before his return to Germany in April 1935, Bonhoeffer wrote Oldham a letter expressing optimism for the preparatory work for the Oxford Conference and offers thanks that his cousin, economist Charlotte Leubuscher, had been appointed to one of the Conference committees. He also expressed appreciation for Oldham's work on behalf of the Confessing Church delegation and "for all you have done for me."⁴⁴ Bonhoeffer remained in regular contact

⁴³ Keith Clements, *Faith on the Frontier: A Life of J.H. Oldham* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 272.

⁴⁴ "Dietrich Bonhoeffer to JHO," March 13, 1935, Box 7, Folder 6, Oldham Papers, University of Edinburgh, New College Library, Edinburgh; This letter is also published in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *London, 1933-1945*, ed. Keith Clements, trans. Hans Goedeke et al., vol. 13, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Gütersloh: C. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), 295; A history of Joseph Oldham's involvement with Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the situation of the German church is provided in Clements, *Faith on the Frontier: A Life of J.H. Oldham* See particularly the 13th chapter, "Oldham and Nazi Germany; 1933-37" pp. 289-305.

with ecumenical leaders involved in the Life and Work movement and was particularly close with Bell, who took deep and active interest in the work and situation of the German Confessing Church. It was finally Bell who orchestrated the Message to the German Church that was adopted by the Oxford Conference expressing support and solidarity with the Confessing Church.⁴⁵

That Bonhoeffer's work and ministry shaped the work of the Oxford contributors in the years leading up to the Conference and beyond is beyond question. Keith Clements points out that efforts such as the work of the Oxford Conference paved the way for reception of Bonhoeffer's work in the years following World War II. Reinhold Niebuhr published the first posthumous tribute to Bonhoeffer in Joseph Oldham's *Christian News-Letter* in November 1945 and Oldham had read the prison writings prior to their English translation, including reference to them in his 1953 text *Life Is Commitment*. George Bell delivered the sermon at a memorial

⁴⁵ As stated earlier the Nazi government had blocked representatives of the Confessing Church from attending the Oxford Conference, including Martin Niemöller, who had been arrested just days before. Bell had insisted on sending the message of solidarity to the persecuted church and faced the opposition of the two German delegates from the Baptist and Methodist Churches, who were in communication with the German embassy while at the Conference. Reports of Bell's work with Baptist Paul Schmidt and Methodist Bishop F. H. Otto Melle suggesting they deliver the message, along with the delegates' surprise at Melle's pro-Nazi address following the approval of the statement, appear to indicate that Schmidt and Belle's propaganda campaign had been undetected. Melle told the Conference that in Germany the church has "complete freedom to preach the gospel" and expressed gratitude for the Nazi's "national resurrection of the German people." He went on to claim that "God in his providence has sent a Leader who was able to banish the danger of Bolshevism in Germany and to rescue a nation of 67,000,000 from the abyss of despair to which it had been led through the World War, the Versailles Treaty, and its tragic consequences, and to give it new faith in its mission and future." Roland Blaich, "A Tale of Two Leaders: German Methodists and the Nazi State," *Church History* 70, no. 02 (June 2001): 204; Ruth Rouse and Stephen Neill, eds., *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, 3rd ed (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986), 588.

service for Dietrich and Klaus Bonhoeffer in London in July 1945 and wrote the forward to the first English edition of Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*.⁴⁶

There appears to be no direct documentary evidence of the influence Bonhoeffer may have had around the issues that emerge as a theory of responsibility from Oxford, nor how the Oxford contributions may have influenced Bonhoeffer's work with the concept. It is clear, however, that the scholarship and application of ethics in the period was focused on understanding the place of the concept of responsibility. Two significant themes emerge in Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* that would be central to the understanding of Oxford Responsibility. These themes, for which Weber laid the foundation, were the place of historical contingency and the centrality of transcendent values.

Weber, after delineating between an ethics of conviction and an ethics of responsibility, had provided space for the complementarity of principle and instrumentality within a moral framework. Weber had also implicitly allowed for the possibility that the content of principle be provided from religious convictions. Bonhoeffer would share Weber's rejection of an ethics of conviction as ineffective and dangerous, but would not equivocate regarding the centrality of religious understanding, and in particular Christian understanding, for the content of an ethics of responsibility. Bonhoeffer would also ground responsibility within the ambiguity and contingency of historical reality. Of his definition of the term "responsibility," Bonhoeffer claimed for it "a fuller meaning than is the case in everyday usage and even in cases where it has become a highly defined ethical concept, as with Bismark and Max Weber."⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Guy Christopher Carter and Clifford J. Green, *Interpreting Bonhoeffer [Electronic Resource]: Historical Perspectives, Emerging Issues* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 53–54.

⁴⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 255.

As compared to Weber this fuller meaning emerged from Bonhoeffer's positing responsibility as a religious response at the core of Christian discipleship.

We live by responding to the word of God addresses to us in Jesus Christ. ... This life, lived in answer to the life of Jesus Christ (as the Yes and No to our life), we call "*responsibility*" ("*Verantwortung*"). This concept of responsibility denotes the complete wholeness and unity of the answer to the reality that is given to us in Jesus Christ, as opposed to the partial answers that we might be able to give, for example, from considerations of usefulness, or with reference to certain principles. In light of the life that encounters us in Jesus Christ, such partial answers will not suffice, but only the complete and single answer of our life. Responsibility thus means to risk one's life in its wholeness, aware that one's activity is a matter of life and death.⁴⁸

Within Bonhoeffer's responsibility ethics, Christ is the responsible man who through God's "vicarious representative action" (*Stellvertretung*) empowers the human to assume the responsibility to answer to the will of God in heaven and to creatures and creation in history.

As with Weber, Bonhoeffer outlined what he saw as the dangers and limitations of an absolute "adherence to principles" on the part of the immature moral agent. Applying principles without consideration of others —what Weber referred to as consequences — leads to a privatization of life, ranging from a "retreat into the private sphere of bourgeois existence to withdrawing to a monastery." Alternatively, such slavish obedience can lead to religious and political enthusiasm, represented at its worst "the crazy, pushy life reformers of every possible shade."⁴⁹ The responsible life, then, is the life that acts for relationship with other agents in the actual context of history in all its ambiguity. The good is not merely a principle to which one is obligated, but is a continually discovered through active historical engagement with life in its reality.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 254–55.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 248.

This engagement in the reality of history is by definition ambiguous. Responsibility thrusts the human into decision making that cannot coalesce with principle as the guarantor of the good, but engagement in which one must discern and act in response to the context in which one operates, and in relationship with the other. There is no guarantee of the rightness of one's action and it must be submitted to the judgment of God. The same thinking emerged as a key theme within the Oxford Conference and its dialogical method. Bonhoeffer writes,

Responsible action takes place in the sphere of relativity, completely shrouded in the twilight that the historical situation casts upon good and evil. It takes place in the midst of the countless perspectives from which every phenomenon is seen. Responsible action must decide not simply between right and wrong, good and evil, but between right and right, wrong and wrong. ... This very fact defines responsible action as a free venture, not justified by any law; rather, those who act responsibly relinquish any effectual self-justification; indeed, in so doing they relinquish an ultimately dependable knowledge of good and evil. As responsible action, the good takes place without knowing, by surrendering to God the deed that has become necessary and is nevertheless (or because of it!) free, surrendering it to God, who looks upon the heart, weighs the deeds, and guides history.⁵⁰

Realizing that such a view of reality can lead to a relativity, Bonhoeffer warns that responsible action does not live at the extremes of neither conservative protection of the status quo, nor a revolutionary principle to disrupt the status quo, but connects the two. Ethics, for Bonhoeffer, are not grounded in principle, but in historicity, in all its contingency, in which the moral agent takes into account the circumstances and context in which she operates, considering the consequences of various actions, and the relationship with other actors in order to make and carry out a decision. Given the limitations of history and human finitude, the actor cannot know all the circumstances, nor consequences, nor can know if the action itself is justified, yet the action is empowered by the work done in Jesus Christ, and is submitted to God for judgment.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 284.

Responsible action renounces any knowledge about its ultimate justification. The deed that is done after responsibly weighing all personal and factual circumstances, in light of God becoming *human* and *God* becoming human, is completely surrendered to God the moment it is carried out. Ultimate ignorance of one's own goodness or evil, together with dependence upon grace, is an essential characteristic of responsible historical action. Those who act on the basis of ideology consider themselves justified by their idea. Those who act responsibly place their action into the hands of God and live by God's grace and judgment.⁵¹

We will see that Oxford plumbed this ground in its work prior to the war.

Martin Buber and Responsibility

Another prominent voice in the shaping of the concept of responsibility within moral theology in the years between the first World War and the Oxford Conference was Martin Buber, who contributed to a widening discussion regarding responsibility and ethics in his *Ich und Du* in 1922. The text was, in the years just prior to the Oxford Conference, not widely known outside of Germany. Its English translation, *I and Thou*, was first published the same year of the Conference in 1937. The text, however, directly influenced the direction of the Conference, appearing in the work of key contributor Emil Brunner, and drawing the passionate interest of Conference organizer Joseph Oldham as well. Both before and after the time of the Oxford Conference, Brunner and Buber were mutual admirers of each other's work, maintaining frequent contact through correspondence and visits.⁵² In his *Divine Imperative*, published in English in 1947, Brunner drew upon Buber's concept of *Thou*. "It is the very essence of faith in the Word of God that man always understand himself as existing in responsibility and

⁵¹ Ibid., 268–69.

⁵² In a letter to a friend in June of 1933, Buber praised Brunner's *The Divine Imperative*, commenting that Brunner "reflects something rare among theologians today: a clear and healthy perception of political uses and abuse, of the ambivalence of the state." Nahum N. Glatzer and Paul Mendes-Flohr, eds., *The Letters of Martin Buber*, trans. Richard Winston, Clara Winston, and Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), 405.

indissoluble relation to a “Thou.” Man never learns what a “Thou” really means save when he understands what responsibility means and this means nowhere save in the word of God.”⁵³

Oldham had been introduced to the work of Buber through his colleague Karl Heim, a professor of theology and missiology at Tübingen University, with whom Oldham had worked as secretary of the International Missionary Council. At the Council’s world conference in Jerusalem in 1928, Heim had served as a German delegate and speaker.

Buber’s thought on responsibility and dialogue in the text sparked a radical change in Oldham’s thinking in how the Christian position might be restated in what Oldham saw as a civilization dominated by science and technology. Speaking at Oldham’s funeral in 1969, Visser ’t Hooft commented that Buber’s work convinced Oldham that “It could be shown that the reality which the scientists described and the technocrats mastered was not the only, not even the most important, reality.”⁵⁴ Writing in 1941 in his *The Christian News-Letter*, Oldham said of Buber’s *I and Thou* that it had “attracted far less attention than its importance deserves. I question whether any book has been published in the present century, the message of which, if it were understood and heeded, would have such far reaching consequences for the life of our time.”⁵⁵ Oldham would later publish this and other essays in a text titled *Real Life Is Meeting*,

⁵³ Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1947), 487; Quoted in Jonsen, *Responsibility in Modern Religious Ethics*, 7 In his text, Jonsen credits Brunner as “one of the first theologians to make prominent use” of the term, “responsibility.” He goes on to critique Brunner’s use of the concept as an example of the religious subordination of the term within moral philosophy.

⁵⁴ Willem A. Visser ’t Hooft, “Remarks at Oldham Funeral at St. Martin’s in the Field Church, London, 3 June 1969” (Christian Frontier Council, 1969), Box 25 Folder 5, Oldham Papers, University of Edinburgh, New College Library, Edinburgh.

⁵⁵ Joseph H. Oldham, “All Real Life Is Meeting,” *The Christian News-Letter*, no. 112 (December 17, 1941); The supplemental volume to *The Christian News-Letter* was published in Great

drawing from R. Gregor Smith's English translation of Buber's phrase, "All real living is meeting" ("*Alles wirkliches Leben ist Begegnung*").⁵⁶

Buber's admirers have described him as a scholar who embodied his philosophy. The influence of his work and its promotion of responsibility and dialogue in the first decades of the twentieth century, as the world was rocked by the first World War, the challenges of modernity, and the rise of totalitarianism, would shape the contributions and process of the Oxford Conference. In the years prior to his writing of *I and Thou* Buber developed and espoused an alternative to the Jewish nationalism that had been grounded in the establishment of Zionist political security. Instead, Buber began to call for a renaissance of spirituality that could form a community defined by mutuality and responsibility, themes that would be further developed in his seminal text. Such commitment extended to his advocacy in 1921 for a détente with Arab Palestinians, warning that an exclusive Zionist nationalism would force the development of an opposing Arab nationalism. This concrete embodiment of his philosophy opened Buber to increasing dismissal by the Zionist congress, leading to his own abandonment of the project with the organization in 1929. As Hitler rose to power in the years following, Buber lamented the ambivalence of the Jewish response. Buber responded to this dilemma by opening a network of adult education centers whose mission was to promote Jewish heritage and solidarity, before leaving Germany altogether in 1938 to teach sociology at Hebrew University in Jerusalem.⁵⁷

Britain in 1942, followed by an American edition in 1953. Joseph H. Oldham, *Real Life Is Meeting*, American Edition (Greenwich, CT: Seabury Press, 1953).

⁵⁶ Clements, *Faith on the Frontier: A Life of J.H. Oldham*, 399.

⁵⁷ Dan Avnon, *Martin Buber: The Hidden Dialogue* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 26–29.

The foundation of Buber's text is its description of the human attitude to the world. In the context of his writing *I and Thou*, Buber posited in modern humanity an ontological crisis between individuality and community in which the human was distanced both from itself and from the Other, whether it be another human, or with other creatures or creation itself. Buber defined two primary relationships that describe the nature of existence, the now well-known attitudes of *I-It* and *I-Thou*, understood as the relationship between persons and things, or subjects and objects.⁵⁸ Simply put, *I* within these attitudes find its existence as subject through its relation to the Other, taken as subject or object, or, to be truer to Buber's subtlety, taken as "relationship" or object. *I* can relate to an "Other" rendering it as an objectified *It*, in which the *It* is instrumental to *I*. Such a relationship is devoid of mutuality or responsibility and instead sees the Other as something to be experienced and used. The second attitude of *I-Thou* moves beyond the categories of subject and object into, in the words of renown Buber scholar Martin Friedman, the embrace of a relationship "characterized by mutuality, directness, presentness, intensity and ineffability." While the human in relation to an object is not required to "go out of himself" to use and experience the object as *It*, *I* enters into relationship with *Thou* with one's entire being and in so doing moves into being itself. "This relation means suffering and action in one, suffering because one must be chosen as well as choose and because in order to act with the whole being one must suspend all partial actions."⁵⁹ From this comes Buber's iconic and frequent phrase "all real living is meeting," as translated by Smith, or as "all actual life is

⁵⁸ Within this text I will follow the pattern of Ronald Gregor Smith in his first translation of Buber's work, in which the eponymous "I" and "Thou" are italicized when referring to Buber's conception of these realities. *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1937).

⁵⁹ Maurice S. Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 65, 67.

encounter” as later translated by Walter Kaufmann.⁶⁰ Buber writes, “The primary word *I-Thou* can be spoken only with the whole being. Concentration and fusion into the whole being can never take place through my agency, nor can it ever take place without me. I become through my relation to the *Thou*; as I become *I*, I say *Thou*. All real living is meeting.”⁶¹

Responsive Existence

Within Buber’s dense and poetic treatise, the ground of responsibility rests in the nature of the human as one who responds to the Other, or more specifically *I* that enters into the responsive relationship with *Thou* who addresses *I*. It is in this address from and response toward *Thou* that the *I* receives its own existence. The core of human existence is the responsive relationship to the Other who makes a demand, or a call, on *I*. Buber would expand on this anthropological/ontological theme in his *Between Man and Man*. There he outlines what Friedman calls a “two-fold principle of human life,” comprising “the primal setting at a distance,” the recognition of the reality of the Other, and the subsequent “entering into relation,” the embrace of the *I* and *Thou*.⁶²

Both this distance and relation is an embodiment of the nonreducible dignity of the human, an image of the eternal *Thou*, who is God, of which we will say more below. The subjective self-encountering of the Other as a self separate from oneself reveals in the Other

⁶⁰ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970).

⁶¹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 1937, 11.

⁶² Friedman, *Martin Buber*, 92.

what Jeffrey Nealon calls “the other’s uniqueness and singularity.”⁶³ The Other cannot be confined to a self-imagining *I*, but possesses its own dignity separate from the *I* which at the same time calls for a relational response. In this recognition and response, the human self, unique among creation, is realized. Comments Friedman, “An animal does not need confirmation because he is what he is unquestionably. Man, in contrast, needs to have a presence in the being of the other.”⁶⁴ Oldham would acknowledge this in his post-war essay. “It is through our responses to other persons that we become persons. It is others who challenge, enlighten and enrich us. There is no such thing as the isolated individual. We are persons only in our relation with other persons.”⁶⁵

This human dignity comprises a freedom that is unique to the human, and allows the human to respond to the *Thou*. Buber writes of the *I* as an unbounded subject over against the objectifying boundedness that defines *It*. “The human being is not *He* or *She*, bounded from every other *He* and *She*, a specific point in space and time within the net of the world; nor is he a nature able to be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. But with no neighbour, and whole in himself, he is *Thou* and fills the heavens. This does not mean that nothing exists except himself. But all else lives in *his* light.”⁶⁶

Key in the freedom of the *I* is the freedom for responsive decision when addressed by *Thou*. Within the relationship of *I-Thou*, in which the person becomes person, Buber saw the concept of address and response. The human, while remaining in a world of objects in which one

⁶³ Jeffrey T. Nealon, “The Ethics of Dialogue: Bakhtin and Levinas,” *College English; Urbana* 59, no. 2 (February 1997): 129.

⁶⁴ Friedman, *Martin Buber*, 95.

⁶⁵ Oldham, “All Real Life Is Meeting,” 31.

⁶⁶ Buber, *I and Thou*, 1937, 8.

must use and experience, finds her humanity in responding to the address of the Other. “And in all seriousness of truth hear this: without *It* man cannot live. But he who lives with *It* alone is not a man.”⁶⁷ Response, and thus, responsibility, rather than experience, is at the core of what it means to be human. The address and call of the Other is answered by what Oldham would later call the “responsible decision,” which moves the *I* from the objectified and bounded domain of *It* into the life-affirming and unbounded community that ultimately connects with the intention of God, the eternal *Thou*.

The word “It” is a word of separation. The thing stands over against you in its separateness; you may take it, and use it, but it does not give itself to you. The word “Thou” is a word of union. When you utter it – when you are addressed and you respond – you are re-united with the pulsating life of the universe. For in every “Thou” that addresses us and calls us to a responsible decision, there speaks the voice of the eternal “Thou”, the source of all life, the creative, living spirit of God,” by which one is “re-united with the pulsating life of the universe.”⁶⁸

Buber saw in this responsiveness the cradle of responsibility. In *Between Man & Man*, published in 1947, Buber described further the concept of responsibility, which he called to be “brought back from the province of specialized ethics, of an ‘ought’ that swings free in the air, into that of lived life. Genuine responsibility exists only where there is real responding.”⁶⁹ Buber was concerned to place responsibility as the free response to the real presence and address of the Other, over against, for example, the binding of religious dogma or the justification of an ethical precept divorced from lived reality, as demanded in Weber’s ethics of conviction. A person is not an *It*, a thing, simply to be used or experienced, but is to be one with whom one enters relationship in a free and alterable space. This *Thou*, this Other, to whom one finds oneself in

⁶⁷ Ibid., 34.

⁶⁸ Oldham, *Real Life Is Meeting*, 33.

⁶⁹ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2014), 16.

relationship, is the *Thou* to whom *I* responds. The *I*, in facing the address of the Other, moves from the subject-object association of the *I-It* to enter into the responsive, and thus responsible, relationship of *I-Thou* in which *I* in her freedom becomes responsible for the Other.⁷⁰

Albert Jonsen in his study on the place of responsibility in religious ethics, would refer to the significance of Buber's move of responsibility from a specialized ethical niche to that of life lived in reality, positing the concept within an ethical structure around human freedom, decision and action.

When the responsible man is praised, when responsible decision is encouraged, when responsibility is proposed as a major ethical criterion, authors are not merely describing the necessary and sufficient conditions for ascribing praise and blame. They are exhorting men to live in a certain manner, to adopt a certain stance toward life and their role in it. They are shaping, with the help of this word, a new ideal of moral behavior. The responsible man is not merely one who is able to perform good actions; he is, in fact, the good man. His goodness consists precisely in his responsibility. This is responsibility in 'lived life.'⁷¹

The Context of Responsibility

For Buber responsibility comprising the relationship of *I-Thou* did not exist as an abstraction nor operate as an obligation, but existed in and shaped reality. The address of the *Thou* brings with it a concrete present, a situation in which the *I* must come to responsible decision in relationship to *Thou*, through which reality, over against mere time, comes into existence. "The present, and by that is meant not the point which indicates from time to time in our thought merely the conclusion of 'finished' time, the mere appearance of a termination

⁷⁰ Artur Jewula suggests that the move from "responding to" to "responsibility for" is reflected in the very level of language in which the German *antworten an* (respond to) becomes *verantworten für* (be responsible for). Artur Jewula, "The Call and the Response. Martin Heidegger and Martin Buber on Responsibility," *Argument : Biannual Philosophical Journal* 3, no. 2 (December 1, 2013): n. 6.

⁷¹ Jonsen, *Responsibility in Modern Religious Ethics*, 5.

which is fixed and held, but the real, filled present, exists only in so far as actual presentness, meeting, and relation exist. The present arises only in virtue of the fact that the *Thou* becomes present.”⁷²

The reality brought into existence by the responsible relationship of *I-Thou* presupposes both an integral freedom of responsible decision, as well as an equally responsive context in which decisions are made and deployed. Buber’s responsible relationship does not operate within a reality shaped by destiny or obligation, but allows for consequences, as with Weber’s ethics of responsibility, that continue to shape the situation in which relationships continue, addresses are made, responses are given, and further actions are undertaken. The call and response are made not in a static and immutable world set on an invariable course, but in a dynamic present that continues to be defined by the vagaries of relationships.

Buber was particularly concerned with the modern belief in rationalism and historical progress and its valuing of technology. Such reliance he saw as an anathema to freedom and an abdication of responsibility, placing such belief in a historical line of idol worship, referencing in particular late Roman polytheism. “The quasi-biological and quasi-historical thought of to-day, however different the aims of each, have worked together to establish a more tenacious and oppressive belief in fate than has ever before existed.” Citing modern “gods” of philosophy, religion, social science, and culture, Buber warned against the loss of human potentiality and personality, sacrificed to irresistible forces of law and fixed progression. For Buber, such reliance made the human a slave, an object, in an inescapable realm of *It*. “The dogma of gradual process is the abdication of man before the exuberant world of *It*. He misuses the name of destiny: destiny is not a dome pressed tightly down on the world of men; no one meets it but he

⁷² Buber, *I and Thou*, 1937, 12.

who went out from freedom. But the dogma of process leaves no room for freedom, none for its most real revelation of all, whose calm strength changes the face of the earth – reversal.”⁷³

As we have noted, Buber included in this critique the place of “specialized ethics,” that through adherence to “postulate” reduced responsibility to a “metaphor of morality,” placing limits on human freedom, and reducing the eternal *Thou* to the world of *It*, making finite an infinite God. While religion, when placing itself at risk by entering the present in relationship, brings humanity into relationship with the eternal *Thou*, and opening the possibility for concrete transformation, religion for its own sake obstructs and objectifies. “And if there is nothing that can so hide the face of our fellow-man as morality can, religion can hide from us as nothing else can the face of God. Principle there, dogma here ... behind both there lies in wait the – profane or holy – war against the situations’ power of dialogue, there lies in wait the ‘once-for-all’ which resists the unforeseeable moment.”⁷⁴ Human freedom, on the other hand, comprises the call and response of the *I-Thou* relationship in lived reality, unbound by conviction and open to consequence. The human, in this unbounded space, responds to *Thou* in the context of the situational realities with responsible decision, and in this responsibility to *Thou*, the human likewise responds to the call of the eternal *Thou*.

In human freedom the *I*, responding to the address of *Thou*, enters into an engagement with the world. For the “religious” human, engaging the world and entering into relationship with God are complementary. The human does not turn to the world out of obligation, what Buber calls the “unrest of responsibility,” but engages the world in a fashion where responsibility emerges from relationship. By the very human existence, concrete reality is engaged.

⁷³ Ibid., 56–57.

⁷⁴ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 18.

Responsibility is engaged not in the abstraction of the objective *I-It* interaction, but made real in the moments of response and decision in the concrete reality of the world. It is in this engagement, that God, the eternal *Thou*, is found.

Duty and obligation are rendered only to the stranger; we are drawn to and full of love for the intimate person. The world, lit by eternity, becomes fully present to him who approaches the Face, and to the Being of beings he can in a single response say *Thou*. Then there is no more tension between the world and God, but only the one reality. The man is not freed from responsibility; he has exchanged the torment of the finite, pursuit of effects, for the motive power of the infinite, he has got the mighty responsibility of love for the whole untraceable world-event, for the profound belonging to the world before the Face of God.⁷⁵

In Buber's formulation, reality comes into existence through responsible decision and action, all with a framework of mutuality. The community exists as an active and responsible community. "The most powerful and the deepest reality exists where everything enters into the effective action, without reserve the whole man and God the all-embracing – the united and the boundless *Thou*."⁷⁶ The community, however, like the *I*, does not abandon or escape the world of *It*, which Buber readily acknowledges as necessary for "sustaining, relieving, and equipping of human life."⁷⁷ It is the disordering of *It* that is problematic – Buber would call it evil – in which the object takes the place of relationship, dispensing with concrete reality and responsibility. Those objects that humanity must use and experience, Buber warns, must not come to "have the mastery." This includes, in particular the two components that Buber names as necessary for communal life, that of economics and the State, which Buber viewed as having taken up that very position of master rather than servant. "(T)he State is no longer led; the stokers still pile in the coal, but the leaders have now only the semblance of control over the madly racing machines.

⁷⁵ Buber, *I and Thou*, 1937, 108.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

And in this moment, as you speak, you can hear as I do that the levers of economics are beginning to sound in an unusual way; the masters smile at you with superior assurance, but death is in their hearts.”⁷⁸

The will to profit of the economy and the will to power of the State, Buber asserts, are “natural and proper” as they are aligned with the will to enter into relationship, “the living stuff of communal life” and the life of the spirit. Buber outlines a realist approach to this effort.

The statesman or the economist who obeys the spirit is no dilettante; he knows well that he cannot, without undoing his work, simply confront, as bearers of the *Thou*, the men with whom he has to deal. Yet he risks doing it, not plainly and simply but as far as the boundary set from him by the spirit. ... He is no fanatic, he serves the truth which, though higher than reason, yet does not repudiate it, but holds it in its lap. He does in communal life precisely what is done in personal life by the man who knows himself incapable of realizing the *Thou* in its purity, yet daily confirms its truth in the *It*, in accordance with what is right and fitting for the day, drawing – disclosing – the boundary line anew each day.⁷⁹

The responsible decision in the situation presented is made in the contingency of present concrete reality. It takes account of the world of *Thou* in its finite plurality, in acknowledgement of the address of the infinite eternal *Thou*. It likewise acknowledges the necessity and threat of the world of *It*, honoring the content of its utility, and remaining cautious of its power to move toward tyranny.

Responsible Dialogue

At the heart of Buber’s development is, then, the practice of “genuine dialogue,” in which humans, in a relationship of *I-Thou*, enter into the responsibility of address and response, not as a debate, but as a move toward understanding and decision. Such an understanding of interaction

⁷⁸ Ibid., 48.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 49.

would shape the process undertaken at Oxford. Oldham, in his post-Oxford essay, wrote, “The only way in which we can do justice to those realities [of society to-day] is to take ... a ‘multi-dimensional’ view of society. We must recognize ... that there is not one focal point but several, and that the whole structure of society may be fundamentally affected by technical advances which may take place in the economic sphere, or in political power, or in administration or in the possibilities of psychological influence.”⁸⁰

As stated earlier, responsible dialogue requires the acknowledgement of *Thou* as unique Other, in which difference is honored and preserved. *I* does not receive the Other as a mirror of the self, but approaches the Other in its own alterity.⁸¹ To do differently is, in the words of one commentator, to reduce the Other into a “subjective colonialism, where all the other’s desires are reduced to the desires of the ‘home country,’ the self.”⁸² The dialogue requires the human to enter into mutual relation in which the human is addressed and answers, is answered, and answers again, what Buber called “the solid give-and-take of talk.”⁸³ While Buber outlines three spheres in which the *I* engages in dialogue – with nature, with living creatures, and with humans as distinguished from other creatures and creation – it is with humans that responsible dialogue resides.

⁸⁰ Oldham, “All Real Life Is Meeting,” 74.

⁸¹ Emmanuel Levinas significantly develops the concept in new directions from Buber. Levinas acknowledges the “finesse” of Buber’s *I and Thou*, stating that he “read somewhat late his great book. ... I have read Buber then with a great deal of respect and attention, but I have not reached the point of agreeing with him.” Peter Atterton, Matthew Calarco, and Maurice S. Friedman, *Levinas & Buber : Dialogue and Difference* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2004), 33.

⁸² Nealon, “The Ethics of Dialogue,” 129.

⁸³ H. Richard Niebuhr in his 1960 Robertson Lectures would name the image of human as “man-the-answerer, man engaged in dialogue, man acting in response to action upon him” as embodied within the concept of responsibility. Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 56.

Here language is consummated as a sequence, in speech and counter-speech. Here alone does the word that is formed in language meet its response. Only here does the primary word go backward and forwards in the same form, the world of response live in the one language, *I* and *Thou* take their stand not merely in relation, but also in the solid give-and-take of talk. The moments of relation are here, and only here, bound together by means of the element of the speech in which they are immersed. Here what confronts us has blossomed into the full reality of the *Thou*. Here alone, then, as reality that cannot be lost, are gazing and being gazed upon, knowing and being known, loving and being loved.⁸⁴

In this give and take, there is not one address nor one answer, but a plurality of perspectives that require reception/listening, response/answer, and, finally, responsible decision.

For Buber these actions move between the worlds of *Thou* and *It*, requiring a repeated re-engagement of mutuality and decision. “Every response binds up the *Thou* in the world of *It*. That is the melancholy of man, and his greatness. For that is how knowledge comes about, a work is achieved, and image and symbol made, in the midst of living beings.”⁸⁵ Dialogue and responsible decision, here, are contingent, finite, and require constant attention. “(H)e will have to practise, till death itself, decision in the depths of spontaneity, unruffled decision, made ever anew, to right action.”⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Buber, *I and Thou*, 1937, 102–3.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 39–40.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

CHAPTER THREE

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF OXFORD RESPONSIBILITY

As we have seen, the organizers and delegates of the 1937 Oxford Conference had come together that summer in an attempt to find some type of unified theological response to what was perceived as a global crisis. They alleged that that crisis, comprising the dual threat of totalitarianism and secularism, threatened to reshape the foundations of modern society in ways that endangered the very existence of the church. It is the author's contention that a unifying principle underlying Oxford's response to this grave situation was a conception of the notion of responsibility, or what we are calling "Oxford Responsibility," and that such a unifying principle has continuing relevance in contemporary ecumenical social ethics.¹

We have seen that such focus on responsibility was not necessarily unique to the Conference, although formal connections with other particular theological thought are somewhat speculative. In the thought of Weber, Bonhoeffer and Buber we have uncovered themes regarding realist paradox between principle and possibility, exemplified in Weber's ethic of conviction and ethic of responsibility. We have also explored the relationship between the transcendence of ethical ideals over against historical contingency, as explored by Bonhoeffer, as well as by Weber and Buber. We have placed the core of human existence within the nature of

¹Again, we have defined the concept as follows: *Oxford Responsibility comprises a society in which its members and institutions act in accordance with human value and freedom, in obedience to the will of God, toward the achievement of justice within the limits, ambiguities and contingencies of human finitude, culture and history.*

dynamic relationship and dialogical response to the Other through the work of Buber, and we have placed these concepts within a developing ethos of Christian realism.

In this chapter we will explore the theological foundations of this idea of responsibility emanating particularly from the 1937 Oxford Conference. We will first make a brief examination of the explicit ecumenical discussion of the concept that occurred subsequent to its own work at the WCC in 1948, before returning to the particular work of the Oxford Conference, focusing in this chapter on its work concerning human dignity, history, and the Kingdom of God as they relate to our theory of responsibility.

The Ecumenical Turn to Responsibility

In the wake of World War II, the first assembly of the WCC at Amsterdam in 1948 sought to address the issues of post-war reconstruction by finding a way between the extremes of communism and *laissez-faire* capitalism. Finding such balance between complete state control and unchecked economic freedom required the identification of the mutual obligations shared across society, including the responsibilities of the church, the state and the individual. The now well-known term “responsible society” came to describe such effort, the phrase chosen prior to the assembly by organizers including Oldham, Visser ’t Hooft and Reinhold Niebuhr, repeating the central roles they played years earlier for the Oxford Conference.² The Assembly defined a responsible society as “one where freedom is the freedom of men who acknowledge responsibility to justice and public order, and where those who hold political authority or

² Paul Abrecht, “The Development of Ecumenical Social Thought and Action,” in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement: Volume 2/1948-1968*, ed. Harold Edward Fey, vol. 2, The Ecumenical Advance (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), 241.

economic power are responsible for its exercise to God and the people whose welfare is affected by it.”³

As H. Richard Niebuhr would write in the years between Oxford and the advent of the WCC, the notion of responsibility comprised accountability and community. “To be responsible is to be able and required to give account *to* someone *for* something. The idea of responsibility, with the freedom and obligation it implies, has its place in the context of social relations.”⁴ Responsibility presumed both agency and freedom, answerable to a transcendent authority, and exercised among other agents in which the actor assumes accountability for one’s choices and actions in the context of the common good. This definition worked to strike a balance between security and freedom, required by the historical context in which the Assembly labored.

The question of responsibility for such a balance that shaped this post-war response was made explicit in the Assembly’s output. Both the Church and State bore responsibility for the relative disorder of the mid-twentieth century, due to, according to Reinhold Niebuhr, an “inability and unwillingness” of persons and nations to “establish and re-establish” social justice under contingent conditions. In contrast to the crisis theology of Karl Barth, here Niebuhr presented opportunities within history for the responsible achievement of relative justice made possible by “periods of calm,” when “conflicting and competing social forces reach a state of comparative equilibrium and nations arrive at comparative concord.”⁵

³ Reinhold Niebuhr, ed., “Report of Section III: The Church and the Disorder of Society,” in *Man’s Disorder and God’s Design*, by World Council of Churches, The Methodist Edition, The Amsterdam Assembly Series (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949), 77.

⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, *“The Responsibility of the Church for Society” and Other Essays* by H. Richard Niebuhr, 64.

⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, “God’s Design and the Present Disorder of Civilisation,” in *The Church and the Disorder of Society*, by World Council of Churches, The Methodist Edition, vol. 3, Man’s

At the same time, Amsterdam worked to make it clear that vital issues were always at stake. “It is a complete abdication of responsibility to suppose that because everything human is relative there are no decisive turning-points in history. Where the highest values are at stake, to refuse to make up one’s mind and take a stand, because the issues are confused and there seems to be much to be said on both sides, may be a betrayal of humanity.”⁶

Certainly Niebuhr and the organizers of both Amsterdam and Oxford bore no illusions of the perfection of society. The ever-present realities of injustice and corrupting power precluded any utopian schemes. Yet it was the historical possibilities that demanded the ecumenical turn to responsibility that began with Oxford Responsibility. While the ecumenical idea of a responsible society often is seen as birthed at Amsterdam, it finds its conception at Oxford.

Transcendent Responsibility

We have outlined that such a definition moves from defining responsibility in mere juridical terms toward a more transcendent understanding. Here the term comprises an ethical response to the question of to whom and for what we are responsible, as posed by H. Richard Niebuhr earlier. Returning to the work of Georg Picht, we have found that he explored the lacuna opened by the modern project’s attempt to account for the term, a gap that can be filled by theological reference, he claims with the Oxford contributors. Picht points to the term’s “surplus of meaning” that transcends legal limitations. To be responsible “to” someone “for” something

Disorder and God’s Design: An Omnibus Volume of The Amsterdam Assembly Series (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949), 13.

⁶ Joseph H. Oldham, “A Responsible Society,” in *The Church and the Disorder of Society*, by World Council of Churches, The Methodist Edition, vol. 3, *Man’s Disorder and God’s Design: An Omnibus Volume of The Amsterdam Assembly Series* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949), 154.

comprises an obligation that exceeds mere legal liability. Further, as we have said, Picht claims that this move has its provenance in Christian eschatology, in which the term is used within the context of the Judgment. For Picht, as for the twentieth century theorists and ecumenists, religion provides the form of an ultimate answer to the question of authority, revealing in responsibility its transcendent nature. Responsibility thus is not simply tied to a particular authority for a particular duty but to an unlimited, comprehensive authority that lies beyond oneself and beyond even one's temporality.

Picht's analysis, along with the ethical foundations of Weber, Bonhoeffer and Buber, helps illuminate four significant features of the view of responsibility that were foreshadowed at Oxford – the sovereignty of God and the value of the human creature, the responsible possibilities and requirements of history, the immanence and transcendence of the relationship between history and the Kingdom of God, and the turn to the Other as a response to the sovereign God.

We have already mentioned the role of a transcendent authority in understanding responsibility. For Oxford that transcendent authority is the God made known in Jesus Christ, who is the creator of life, the giver of eschatological hope, and the one to whom the human is responsible. This conception of God leads further to an understanding of and respect for the transcendent value of the human person, created in the image of the sovereign and creative God. The recognition of inherent human value imputed by God calls forth a response toward the valued Other, through which the responding agent's value can itself be fulfilled as a response to God.

Second is the place of history – of both tradition and future, as well as the limits of one's immediate context – in comprehending and accepting responsibility. History is the context, the

playing field, where one is both capable of being responsible, and accountable for being responsible. It is in history where the actions of the human person are effective. For human flourishing through human relatedness to take place, the human person must be both responsible and free to act for and with the Other, and that action must have the possibility of effectiveness within the context of action, that is, immediate history. Alongside this grounded playing field is, third, the realization and transcendence of the ideal of the Kingdom of God that serves to provide eschatological hope and historical judgment.

Finally, we consider the nature of the community of responsibility-bearers who must respond to the unlimited tasks of responsibility. Here responsibility does not remain the domain of the individual but moves toward a common responsibility that demands response as well. Here one responds to the authority of the sovereign through response to the Other in history, as we have seen in the work of Buber. Within the contingencies of history and the limits of the human person, as explicated by the Christian doctrine of sin, and motivated by the Kingdom of God, such relational responsibility and historical action then assumes a dialogical aspect in order to achieve a responsible and relative justice for the flourishing of both individual and society. Thus a responsible society must allow for and encourage the repeated process of dialogue, leading to a repeating cycle of deliberation, decision and action, and judgment among its constituents and their institutions, inclusive of science, church and state, in order to define and enable relative justice.

In the remainder of this chapter, we will explore more deeply Oxford's contributions to the first three elements of this quadrilateral – that of human value, history and the Kingdom of God. In the next chapter we will explore the application of responsibility in the context of the wider dialogue that occurred and was encouraged within the Oxford method.

A Christian Anthropology

We have defined Oxford responsibility in part as requiring a society's members and institutions to act in accordance with human value and freedom, in obedience to the will of God. The context in which Oxford labored, amid the threats of totalitarianism and secularism, raised to central concern the place of the human in society. At one end of this concern was the threatened loss of the primacy of the individual in relation to the state and the economy, where the human would be merely relegated as a means rather than an end. At the other end of the concern was the romantic promise of the modern project and humanity's continued confidence in it, with its anthropocentric positing of humankind and the individual. Thus the notion of responsibility with which the Conference worked sought to renew an understanding of responsible anthropology, encompassing the perceived truths regarding the understanding of the human from science, philosophy and politics, while addressing the threats presented by these spheres.

Oxford's presentation of anthropology comprised scientific and philosophical accounts of humanity, but found them inadequate in meeting the threats against the personal individual. As suggested earlier, Oxford would claim that it is only the supernatural insights of religion in general, and Christianity in particular, complementing the insights of the human sciences and philosophy, which provide the necessary structure to respond. Oxford presented a critique of what it identified as three significant threats to an adequate and responsible concept of the human. These threats were what it called naturalistic anthropology, humanitarian modernism, and Marxist anthropology. While the insights of science, modernity and Marxism, far from being dismissed, offered necessary explications for human understanding, they were viewed as deficient at best, and detrimental at worst for the flourishing of humanity and human responsibility in response to God. Naturalism, while recognizing a level of human dignity, was

seen to reduce the human to mere material. The modernistic worldview was criticized as mistakenly positing with the human the power to understand and control the progress of history. Marxism was dismissed as denying the human a personal center, making the human a mere means in society rather than an end in itself. We now review each of these threats in turn.

Scientific Anthropology

Regarding the scientific account of the human, Oxford's focus was on naturalistic accounts of anthropology, illustrated at the time by the work of Bertrand Russell. Russell held that the human is to be sufficiently understood by the explanations of the natural sciences, without appeal to the supernatural or to a higher ground for human significance or obligation. Such philosophy led to perceptions both in the scientific and religious communities, as well as in popular wisdom, that this was evidence of an incompatibility of natural and supernatural understandings – evolutionary theory being a prominent example for Oxford, as it remains today. Yet Oxford viewed such a separation as neither necessary or warranted, but instead the result of a “mutual trespass.”⁷ Oxford claimed that the scientific method remains valid for exploration into the natural world by humans. Religion, then, explores matters of an extra-scientific sort, including questions of value that are beyond the reach of science.

What Oxford worked to outline was not a defeat of natural science for the sake of religion's standing, but the discrediting of naturalism, which denied the fullness of human value. This philosophical outlook outlined at Oxford held that “the material universe needs nothing but material, at any rate purposeless, factors for its explanation; that man is simply the creature of

⁷ Thomas E. Jessop, “The Scientific Account of Man,” in *The Christian Understanding of Man*, by Thomas E. Jessop, et al, vol. 2, The Church, Community, and State Series (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd, 1938), 27.

these factors and is completely destroyed by them; that his values are at best biological conveniences, entirely relative to his time and circumstance; and that every trace of his achievements will one day be annihilated. With such a philosophy no Christian can be friendly. *This* is the so-called science with which religion is and must for ever be in conflict.”⁸ An understanding of humanity required attention to the total human experience, both reason and emotion, sense and spirit. It also required a recognition of value, necessary for both the scientific and religious examination, yet denied within the naturalistic claim.

Yet, in regard to the human animal, natural science indeed made a value claim, a claim that was in fact necessary for science’s continued validity. Wrote British philosopher Thomas Jessop, then the Ferens Professor of Philosophy at the University of Hull, value-claims are the “hidden presupposition of all discourse,” as necessary for the natural science as for transcendental interpretations of humanity.⁹ Without such a claim scientific epistemology disintegrates. In Jessop’s view, the value claim that natural science posits to the human is that of dignity, a term one might expect from later theological discourse. “The distance that divides the modern man from the Neolithic man of nearly ten thousand years ago, and the vaster difference that divides even the latter from the highest of the brutes, is a measure of our dignity within the natural order open to scientific investigation.” The ability for abstract thought, the presence of speech, the development of culture, for example, distinguishes and dignifies the human from the lower animal. Scientific confirmation of human dignity, however, is insufficient, for science is unable by its limits to find within human dignity the “cosmic significance” to move beyond

⁸ Ibid., 29.

⁹ Ibid., 40.

materialism.¹⁰ Such significance is to be explored in the arena of religious thought, and in the understanding of responsibility.

Modernist Anthropology

Alongside the inadequate naturalistic view of humanity, Oxford, secondly, outlined the Enlightenment's resultant modernist worldview, which had come to shape conventional thinking that Oxford likened to utilitarianism and pragmatism. Such a worldview, Oxford contributor Robert Calhoun, then a professor of historical theology at Yale, labeled "humanitarian modernism," understood as "an active, conscious preoccupation with the present, that is, with affairs in the forefront of one's own time, and comparative disregard for their larger backgrounds. ... The past, especially the obstinate urgent past embodied in living tradition, is disparaged; and the incessant sweep of temporal process toward the future is treated as though it were, in all essential respects, compliant to human understanding and control."¹¹ The "humanitarian" modifier concerned the religious foundations that Oxford saw forming around modernism, comprising persons whose faith was in themselves and their fellow humans, rather than a supernatural other, operating with the hope and promise of a "manifest destiny" for humanity and "a desire to make the world a better place" through charitable works, social welfare programs and political power.¹² Fueled by not an insignificant factor of contemporaneous Christian thinking – as well as advances in the social sciences, expansion of

¹⁰ Ibid., 12.

¹¹ Robert L. Calhoun, "The Dilemma of Humanitarian Modernism," in *The Christian Understanding of Man*, by Thomas E Jessop, et al, vol. 2, The Church, Community, and State Series (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd, 1938), 45.

¹² Ibid., 48.

modern capitalism and democracy, and centuries of colonialism and social Darwinism – humanitarian modernism fostered an ethic of natural law, extolling the classical and theological virtues sans the realist concept of human finitude that would play a role at Oxford. “In its exultation of personality, and its efforts to adapt institutional patterns to human needs, modernism makes its closest approach to Christian faith. Its mistake is in taking human persons as ultimate.”¹³ Contemporary discussions of responsibility have raised similar concerns. Picht, for example credits modern ethics with distorting the concept of responsibility in which the reasonable self is seen as the ultimate moral authority, a move for which the groundwork was laid by the pre-modern church, with its understanding of the relationship between salvation and individual conscience. What such a conception has led to is a continued difficulty for theology to respond adequately to the modern project, which Oxford was attempting to do by grounding human nature in responsibility. Without such an effort, as Picht would warn three decades later, “the concept of ethical responsibility will serve merely as a superficial cliché, or a cheap formula for hastily reconciling the individualistic ethics of the past with social ethics.”¹⁴

In an extended excursus on American pragmatism, Calhoun suggested that in a modernist worldview one might get close to responsibility through a self-interested and progressive utilitarian effectiveness in which “each self must take, subjectively, the roles of other selves, and identify himself overtly with those processes of change which make toward the harmonization of many interests, of many persons. The goal is progressive achievement of socially conditioned satisfactions for as many of these as possible.”¹⁵ The Christian anthropology proposed at Oxford

¹³ Ibid., 57.

¹⁴ Picht, “The Concept of Responsibility: Introduction and Translation,” 192.

¹⁵ Calhoun, “The Dilemma of Humanitarian Modernism,” 67.

moved beyond the limits of modernism, however. The move to responsibility takes place within a system that posits within human “animality” a creatureliness “shot through with felt responsibility.” The human is responsible to its creator and responsive to the creator’s summons through nature and revelation, giving the human its distinctive, albeit fallen, status. “This Christian faith sees far more clearly than modernism, and by so much is more realistic about man. It sees him as at once less admirable in his present actuality, and more profound in his ultimate significance, than modernism takes him to be.” The allegiance of humankind thus moves beyond itself and nature toward a “faith-realist” responsibility to authority and to the Other, without which self and society is doomed to disintegrate. “That summons is partly conveyed, though by no means automatically interpreted, through the processes that go on within man, and in nature around him; which have their ultimate meaning not simply as being themselves, but as being vehicles for the divine word to which man is not merely subjected, but *responsible*, having therein his distinctive status as man.”¹⁶

Calhoun works to expose modernism as sin itself, a denial of responsibility, as it tends toward “self-indulgence and self-glorification,” rendering the Christian perspective as irrational at best and insulting at worst. His explication is worth quoting at length.

The conflicts which arise thence are among the most profound and most destructive with which we have to cope in ourselves. Not merely pain, nor frustration of particular desires, nor collision of individual wills, nor even social conflicts between competing groups. These can be endured, inside fairly wide limits, without essential disintegration of human selves; and within somewhat narrower limits, they can even be regarded as conducive to growth toward maturity. Of the really disruptive processes which break down human selfhood, ... some spring directly from the self-contradiction which is sin – man’s vain attempt to deny his own humanity by denying his responsibility to God. Thence arise the destructive tensions within individual selves. ... Thence arise also, in large part, the insidious treacheries, prides, and fears which take shape in the

¹⁶ Ibid., 71, 73.

oppression of weaker groups by stronger; and ... issue in the ghastly inhumanities of despotism and war. It is this profound self-contradiction in man, this denial of the responsibility which makes him human, that breaks down selves and societies from within. Natural disasters can be weathered, human struggle endured and turned to account, so long as men are true to themselves by acknowledging claims superior to their own wills. But when irresponsibility becomes the rule, both selves and societies disintegrate.¹⁷

Here then responsibility comes to define the very nature of humanity and posits as a central organizing principle for a Christian ethic, implying, as William Schweiker recently notes for the theme of responsibility, “a distinctive, non-reducible outlook and orientation in life.”¹⁸

Marxist Anthropology

The third system to which Oxford contrasted its responsible anthropology was that represented within Marxist sociology. As with the critiques of naturalism and modernism, the Oxford writers worked to demonstrate the insights in and connections with the Marxist system of thought, presenting the Christian worldview not as a conquering alternative, but as the necessary component for humankind’s flourishing. Indeed, essayist Nicolas Alexeiev, who had taught philosophy of law at Moscow, Crimea, Prague and Berlin, would conclude that both Marxists and Christians were obliged not only to live together, but also to work together “in the reconstruction of the world and in the realization of social justice.”¹⁹

In Alexeiev’s review of the historical developments of Marxist thought from Marx and Engels forward through their Leninist disciples, he finds frequent connections between Marxist

¹⁷ Ibid., 76–77.

¹⁸ William Schweiker, “Responsibility and Moral Realities,” *Studies in Christian Ethics*, no. 22 (2009): 480.

¹⁹ Nicholas N. Alexeiev, “The Marxist Anthropology and the Christian Conception of Man,” in *The Christian Understanding of Man*, by Thomas E Jessop, et al, vol. 2, The Church, Community, and State Series (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd, 1938), 137.

and Christian thought, particularly in the areas of anthropology, eschatology and social praxis. From these points of connection he works to demonstrate further the divergence between Marxism and Christian thinking, illuminating the practical shortcomings of Marxism, as well as the folly of Christians' unreflective acceptance and absolutizing of Marxist doctrine.

“It is serious error, often committed by historical Christianity, to elevate any theological, philosophical, or social-ethical teaching to the position of an absolute truth which can never be surpassed; or to proclaim any one Christian teacher as alone orthodox; but it is this practice which Marxism has taken over from historical Christianity,” Alexeiev wrote, further suggesting that eastern religion's “synthetic” process of dealing with diversity, rather than the western exclusive tradition of dealing with heresies, might offer a superior wisdom. In this approach to explicating anthropology, Alexeiev foreshadows Oxford's dialogic process in which particular contingent truths and expertise of various social spheres engage toward the purpose of responsible action. “Thus if we agree that Christian philosophy does not necessarily contain truths which should be regarded as absolute, we should concede that other philosophical, ethical, and social ideas which have not sprung from Christian belief may be instructive.”²⁰

Regarding points of connection between Marxism and Christianity, Alexeiev acknowledges that anthropological similarities between the seemingly discordant systems of thought might surprise, yet he finds in early Marxist sociology an anthropology, in contrast to the materialistic cosmology of later Marxism. This anthropology he sees rising out of philosophical and theological debate in response to Hegelian idealism. For early Marxism, the human is not an isolated individual but still remains primary as a “man in society.” Here the emphasis on the social nature of man is similar to Christian thought, although only in a “second, derivative

²⁰ Ibid., 135.

element,” he concludes. Drawing on Reinhold Niebuhr and Ernst Troeltsch, Alexeiev posits within Christianity the necessary dialectic of individualism and community, suggesting that the personhood of the individual finds its meaning in responsibility within society. “Christianity postulates such a mutual interpenetration of the individualistic and the universal elements that priority has to be given not to the individual but to the social whole: the individual personality is thus regarded as issuing from the human community.”²¹

Within Christian anthropology, as opposed to Marxist thought, the person in community is not subsumed by the universal, but remains as a responsible agent. “(M)an in his relation to God, as being created ‘in the Word,’ is essentially a responsible creature, that is, a ‘centre’ of responsible and free decisions, being called upon to determine the direction of his own life. This sense of responsibility constitutes the real nature of man, but it is completely absent from Marxism.” Within Marxism, the human in society has no personal center, but is merely the sum-total of those relations in society. In this the human does not function as an end in and of itself, comprising ultimate value, but is “only an instrument for the purpose of creating the society of the future; merely material to be operated on by society” in which the individual is shaped into the impersonal.²²

The Marxist rejection of an idealistic anthropology does hold with Christianity an understanding of a material nature of the human as well as the value of the creative human. However, the Marxist rejection of the transcendent human posits within its thought only the means for a class-ethic. This ethic is marked by vice whereas an ethic of virtues is placed within

²¹ Ibid., 114–15.

²² Ibid., 131–32.

Christian thought. “For this reason such ideas as an inner ethical imperative or responsibility to God or to one’s conscience are entirely foreign to Marxism.”²³

A second point of connection between Marxist and Christian thought is that of eschatology. In line with the realist influence of the Conference, the ideal Christian expression of the unity of the individual and the universal is posited beyond history in the Kingdom of God. Such eschatological doctrine Alexeiev finds comparable to Marxist theory’s presentation of the final collapse of society. Yet what Marxist theory is unable to abide is the Christian ideal of love inherent in Christian eschatology and its limited and practical implications as justice. While both Christian and Marxist apocalyptic imagery points to social disorder and dysfunction, and reveals the need for social solidarity, Christian doctrine stops short of social revolution, or even eschatological identification with particular social programs. Social programs “can only create a god-fearing life on earth: it cannot create the Kingdom of God.”²⁴

This however does not forbid any action or interaction of the part of the Christian. Both the Marxists and Christians “can to some extent work together in the same direction. The Christian should and can participate with the Marxist in the reconstruction of the world and in the realization of social justice.”²⁵ But it must be approached with a realization of both the truths shared between the systems of thought, and the inevitable contradictions that will be faced in so doing.

²³ Ibid., 134.

²⁴ Ibid., 116.

²⁵ Ibid., 137.

Brunner's Responsible Existence

With these threats and deficiencies from naturalistic, modernistic and Marxist thought, Oxford was thus poised to secure the responsible personality as the foundation for Oxford responsibility. The Oxford Conference outlines the idea of the human as an agent who is created as free, transcendent and independent and is endowed by its creator with value. Such attributes result in a "responsive actuality." This comprises an understanding of the human as a responsible agent who can both conceive of his responsibility and make an effort to meet the responsibility.

In his Conference essay Emil Brunner also reviewed the four common approaches to the anthropological question, approaches that Brunner viewed as foundational in the conflicts with communism and fascism.²⁶ First is a naturalistic or materialistic anthropology that regards the human as merely part of the world in general and the animal world in particular, albeit a uniquely differentiated part, plumbed by Jessop and Alexeiev in the same volume. The second approach is that of idealistic anthropology, positing divinity or spirit as fundamental to human existence,

²⁶ The inclusion of Brunner's essay in the volume was highly contentious, as shown in an extended exchange of letters between Joseph Oldham and his American counterpart Henry Van Dusen, who strongly objected to its acceptance because of its polemical nature, its divergent viewpoints and its supposed poor scholarship. Oldham's persistent insistence on its inclusion, however helped shape a diversity of voices in the volume, including Robert Calhoun, who wrote to Van Dusen in reluctant support of Brunner. "For myself, I am convinced of the soundness of both his heart and his head, He is a fine-heart-warming person, for all his impulsiveness and belligerency. ... My confidence in Oldham's resourcefulness is high, but I think many of his compatriots disapprove of his partiality to Brunner, and will be hard to persuade. Brunner also, of course, is suspicious of all attempts to get him to modify his venomous slurs ... and is keenly conscious of the Barthian pistols at his head, waiting only too eagerly for an excuse to fire. All in all, it looks as though the test of our readiness for ecumenicity is already upon us in a very acute form, and the very first volume may convict us of sin rather than encourage us to hope for speedy salvation. Just to jettison Brunner now would be a woeful confession of failure, because in some sense he is obnoxious to both Liberals and Barthians precisely because he has a good deal in common with each. Yet how to make a genuinely catholic understanding emerge from the present confusion of tongues I do not see." "Robert Calhoun to HVD," July 7, 1936, Box 8 Folder 3, Oldham Papers, University of Edinburgh, New College Library, Edinburgh.

with the desire and ability to search for truth *qua* truth. The third approach is romantic, in which the human is distinguished by its creativity, and the fourth Brunner calls synthetic anthropology, an unsystematic view of the human comprising body, mind and spirit within a mysterious unity, upon which “all science, philosophy and religion” builds.²⁷ Brunner found these “natural” doctrines, however, lacking in the resources to answer the primary question of human existence surrounding what he called “responsible existence.”

In contrast to other elements of the natural world the human is distinguished by self-awareness and self-determination. These are “the wonderful and dangerous privileges of human existence. *Man is the being who understands himself and in this self-understanding decides or determines what he will do and be.*” As with Jessop, Brunner claims that questions regarding the nature and destiny of the human can be answered only in part by empirical science. Ultimate origins and goals move the human by degrees into the realm of theology, for the human is “a ‘theological’ being, that is, his ground, his goal, his norm, and the possibility of understanding his own nature are all in God.”²⁸

Brunner finds within the question of the nature and destiny of the human, with its contradiction surrounding what the human is and ought to be, the concept of responsible existence. More so than the differentiating abilities of creativity and intellect that science finds in the human, it is this responsible existence that differentiates the human from the rest of the world in general and the rest of the animal world in particular. “(T)he one characteristic which

²⁷ Emil Brunner, “The Christian Understanding of Man,” in *The Christian Understanding of Man*, by Thomas E. Jessop, et al, vol. 2, The Church, Community, and State Series (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd, 1938), 149–50.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 145, 142.

distinguishes man from all other creatures known to us is not his intellect nor his power to create culture, but this simple and impressive fact: that he is responsible and personal.”²⁹

Responsibility, then, is the distinctive and unique feature of human existence, prior to biology, rationality, spirituality and creativity. Inherent in this feature of responsibility is the fact that all humans are aware to one degree or another of his or her responsibility and its affect on his or her life and destiny. “(I)n *all* that he does he is responsible, even if he himself is ‘irresponsible,’ that is, even if he acts without recognizing his responsibility, or even in opposition to it.”³⁰

Brunner claims that neither the naturalism that is indicative of Marxism nor the idealism that is indicative of Fascism is able to speak to the nature and destiny of the responsible human, for the former can find no source or authority for responsibility and the latter can provide no adequate account for the human contradictions of responsibility without damage to human personality. It is Christian revelation that provides the answer to the question of the source and goal of responsibility and the concomitant nature and destiny of the human.³¹

The source of man’s responsibility is the same as its content, namely, unselfish, spontaneous love; it is this love which makes him responsible, and it is this love again which he owes to his neighbour. Further, the Christian answer, where it reveals the nature of true responsibility also reveals the actual depth of the

²⁹ Ibid., 151.

³⁰ Ibid., 157.

³¹ In a companion essay, Austin Farrer tempers somewhat exclusive Christian language regarding anthropological frameworks. “It is evident that all philosophies, religions, or views of the world, excluding those that are purely skeptical and including most that pretend to be so, have something to say about the true type of human life. It is equally plain that the subject matter about which they try to speak is the same as that about which the Christian doctrine does speak: equally plain that while all are, by the Christian standards, more or less wrong, all are more or less right as well.” Austin M. Farrer, “The Christian Doctrine of Man,” in *The Christian Understanding of Man*, by Thomas E Jessop, et al, vol. 2, The Church, Community, and State Series (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd, 1938), 190–91.

contradiction in man as he actually is. Finally, the Christian answer, by unveiling the secret of human personality, is able both to achieve the removal of the contradictions and the restoration on integral personality and union with persons.³²

This content for responsibility is summed up in three statements of faith: that the human was created in the image of God – the doctrine of *imago Dei*; that through sin the human enters into a state of opposition to the human’s destiny – the doctrine of *peccatum originis*; and that in life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the original nature of the human and the human’s fallen state is both revealed and restored to its original unity – the doctrine of *restitutio imaginis*.

The concept of the *imago Dei* is key to the idea of Oxford responsibility. The gap left by science as described by Jessop in attributing dignity to the human is filled within this context, as suggested, as well, by Buber. Rather than using the concept of dignity, however, Brunner focuses on “the element of transcendence” in which the human seeks its ground and meaning, found ultimately in relationship to God. This is the distinctive characteristic of the human. The element of transcendence enables a relationship with God in which God speaks to the human and the human is able to respond. Such responsiveness entails responsibility. “In ordinary language we express this by saying that man is the being who is responsible. This is his distinctively human quality, to a being who is responsible to God.” Brunner names this human quality “responsible existence.” As a quality, responsible existence is inherent in human existence, distinguishing the human as a person, defined as the being created by God for relationship with God. “The *anthropo-tropos theos* – the God who is turned towards man – creates the *theo-tropos anthropos* – the man who is related to God.”³³

³² Brunner, “The Christian Understanding of Man,” 152.

³³ *Ibid.*, 155, 157–58.

Given that the nature of God is love as described by *agape*, the content and aim of responsible existence is thus divine love. It is this divine love to which the human responds in faith in accordance with the human nature and destiny. “Man is not first of all a human being and then responsible; but his human existence consists in responsibility. And man is not first of all responsible and then in addition he possesses a relation to God; but his relation to God is the same as his responsibility. Therefore it is his relation to God which makes man man.”³⁴

The expression of the human’s responsive love to God can only be expressed in relatedness to others. Brunner calls this “responsive actuality” or “responsible love.” God’s *agape* posits value on the object loved, in contrast to the sense of *eros*, which loves that which is desired for its value. Because the human related to God cannot love God the way that God loves the human – value cannot be added to God through human response – it is the fellow-human who becomes the object of love. “Man’s love of God must therefore find concrete expression in the love of his neighbour. This is not stated as a command; it is the very essence of love to go ‘downward,’ not ‘upward.’”³⁵ The human person, a totality of mind and spirit, is a social being who loves, not simply an isolated being who thinks. Brunner has developed this thought in his text published in English the same year as the Conference, *Man in Revolt*, drawing upon the thought of Buber regarding human existence as conceived in the relationship to the Other – that of I and Thou – which, as we have seen, heavily influenced Oldham and his organization of the Conference.

This conception of what Brunner’ called “responsible existence” can also be seen at work in the companion essay by Walter Horton. Horton, at the time the Fairchild Professor of

³⁴ Ibid., 159.

³⁵ Ibid., 160.

Theology at Oberlin, posits human responsiveness as that which is the image of God. “The image of God, then, must be interpreted as *man’s capacity to respond gratefully to the divine love that patiently seeks him out, and to show his gratitude for God’s patient mercy by exhibiting a similar magnanimity to his neighbours, even though they be his enemies.*”³⁶

Sin, Relationship and Freedom

This “responsible love,” of course, within human history presents a paradox. If the source and goal of human existence is found in the love of the Other which comprises responsible existence, such existence is consistently negated, since the human in history, although aware of this responsibility, often proceeds in opposition to it, demonstrating that the awareness of responsibility is deficient in some fashion. Indicative of the realist thought at play at Oxford, Brunner finds in Christian doctrine of original sin more satisfying answers than those provided by naturalism or idealism. The doctrine of “naturalism,” Brunner claims, can not point to that which makes humans responsible, and, while “idealism” might posit authority “in some spiritual law or value,” it fails in explaining the human conflict with responsibility. The human is a sinner, an “existence-in-opposition” that is an “actual existence ... diametrically opposed to his origin.”³⁷ Such existence perverts the human relationship to God, neighbor and self, resulting in the loss of meaning into a situation of wrath, selfishness and divided personality. Such an existence makes the truly responsible existence ambiguous and impossible. It converts responsible love to an unmet obligation marked by guilt, and places the will in bondage, thus

³⁶ Walter M. Horton, “The Christian Understanding of Man,” in *The Christian Understanding of Man*, by Thomas E. Jessop, et al, vol. 2, The Church, Community, and State Series (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd, 1938), 223.

³⁷ Brunner, “The Christian Understanding of Man,” 152, 162.

requiring a legalistic morality. The human is thus understood as a contradiction, aware of responsibility, yet acting irresponsibly, moved by love to value the neighbor, yet placing the neighbor into service as an object for that which has no personal value – such as culture, the state or the market.

A truly responsible human being would be one wholly united to God, truly humane. Our human existence always contains elements of inhumanity; and in all humanity there still exists a spark of humanity. It is the same with our existence as persons. We are personal; but our personal existence is always at the same time impersonal; we are dominated by abstractions; we make the human element the means of the impersonal – civilization, the State, the power of “something.” We seek to master God and man by means of ideas. We fall a prey to the world and its goods.³⁸

Both Brunner and his colleagues at Oxford worked to posit with Christian doctrine both the revealing truth of the human predicament and its supernatural reconciliation. They also wanted to ensure that the historical divide between the earthly and the divine remained realistic, accounting for human institutions and the Christian’s place within them. Wrote Pierre Maury, a former secretary of the World Student Christian Federation, “The communion of grace always transcends national frontiers like all human frontiers; it is *communio sanctorum*; but it is lived in the national community where God has brought us into the world. It is in our earthly fatherland that we await the true fatherland, which is heavenly. Because God has ‘put us in our place,’ we do not hold this place to be indifferent, and we love our people with a love which *gratefully recognizes* a Divine intention in it and which is *responsible*, and engages our Christian loyalty.”³⁹

³⁸ Ibid., 166.

³⁹ Pierre Maury, “The Christian Doctrine of Man,” in *The Christian Understanding of Man*, by Thomas E. Jessop, et al, vol. 2, The Church, Community, and State Series (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd, 1938), 267–68.

Such existence in contradiction manifests itself in contrasts between single and the plural, the general and the particular. The human, having lost his or her center of meaning, swings between the extremes of individualism and collectivism, the former emphasizing personal independence and freedom, the latter connection to the wider community. Furthermore, as evidenced by the totalitarian battles of the day, the place of human differentiation is perverted. At one extreme, human differences are emphasized so that what unifies humanity is thoroughly discounted. Here the Germany of the 1930s is the example of the racial state. At the other extreme, Brunner cites rationalistic humanism with the deification of human reason over against the emasculation of human particularity, as evidenced by the communist implementation of Marxism with its idea of a world State. It is responsible existence as understood within a Christian anthropology that retains the differentiated individual as a responsible social being. “(F)rom the point of view of the Christian faith we accept neither abstract cosmopolitan humanism nor a view of race which denies the essential unity of all men. But the point of view of differentiation, of individuality, is subordinate to that of unity. The fact that every human being is responsible, that is, is called by God to be a personal being, to communion with Himself and with his fellow-men, is incomparably more important than the fact that human beings differ from one another in individuality, sex, nation, and race.”⁴⁰ The responsible human knows himself, engages the Other as a responsible self, and remains responsible to God.

The responsible existence required a maintenance of the balance between the individual and society. Drawing upon Aristotelian sociology, Horton added to Brunner’s analysis regarding the careful balance necessary between the extremes of individualism and collectivism, writing that while the human is a social animal and requires society for flourishing, the individual cannot

⁴⁰ Brunner, “The Christian Understanding of Man,” 168–69.

thrive in a totalitarian society that threatens to “swallow him up in the mass.”⁴¹ Horton warns as well against the “anarchic individualism” possible within democratic and capitalist systems, suggesting that the truth of the church as a community of free individuals offers a check toward a mean between the extremes.

Indeed, the plurality of humankind is indicative of the human’s social nature. It is the fact of such plurality that imposes the human destiny in relationship. Austin Farrer, author of the 1957 Gifford Lectures on the freedom of the will, wrote at the time “The plurality of men belongs as much to our existence as the unity of God does to His, and the end of man must be a social one.”⁴² This social end comprises a responsibility to justice as impartiality and a “loving-kindness,” understood as support for the protection and achievement of the neighbor’s good, a responsibility that is open to discovery by reason. The presence of these two aspects of responsibility – fairness and charity – require, however, a third element, according to Farrer; that of liberty of the human will.

“(M)en’s attainment of their good must come through the exercise of their own choice and will.”⁴³ For an intention toward a good to have meaning for the human, the freedom of the will is required. Indeed, for the will to be considered functioning as its end presupposes the freedom of volition. Yet such a presupposition is not sufficient. The healthy will comprises more than the free movement of volition, but also the freedom to act on the voluntary choice. Thus, the function of the will minimally understood posits with the human the ability to recognize its highest aspiration in either absolute or particular circumstances through earnest reflection and to

⁴¹ Horton, “The Christian Understanding of Man,” 231.

⁴² Farrer, “The Christian Doctrine of Man,” 202.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 203.

act upon this reflection through the movement of the will. Acknowledging the realist paradox of goals and limits to human aspirations, he continued that neither would have any meaning “unless man were an aspirant and, therefore, a free creature: if he had not a power to aspire after his end and to conform his actions to his aspirations.”⁴⁴

Freedom of the will has two important implications for responsible existence in general and Christian practice in particular, that is the articulation of the good upon which the will reflects and chooses, and the concomitant dialogical necessity for adequate clarity for such action. Regarding the articulation of the good, Farrer writes, “No man will be a hero in the service of an ideal he has but faintly seen, nor in that of the most luminous vision, if his will power is slight.”⁴⁵ Here he points to the fact of the divided will which finds its salvation in Christian revelation.

The prior understanding behind this perversion of the will, however, is the general – albeit limited – ability of the intellect and will to receive a conception of the good to be sought and to choose to act to accomplish the object of that good. Regarding the goods of justice and kindness, Farrer asserts there can be reasonable agreement. There is less agreement, however, about the particular goods one must obtain for self and the Other to meet such responsibility, a concern suggestive of Oldham’s middle axioms.

Thus while two of us may coincide exactly in our definitions of these great social virtues, our views of their practical application may be poles asunder, in so far as we differ in our estimation of the goods to be distributed by justice or sought by loving-kindness. So the practical meaning of our social morality will depend on our individual morality – on our opinion about the hierarchy and balance of activities, but also on our belief in supernatural goods.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ibid., 206.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 207.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 202–3.

Even with the optimistic presumption regarding definitions, the plurality of perceived goods to be pursued would seem to make any agreement beyond the individual improbable. Even for the human will that aspires to obedience to God as the highest good, made known through the revelation of Christ, there is plurality presented both by the limitations on the will and the contingencies of history. The goods to which one responsibly aspires and pursues within the greater goods of justice and kindness thus cannot be identified either through individual intellect and will, nor, once identified, can their place be held in perpetuity. The details of responsibility are promulgated through the human relation to the Other in history. The responsible will is exercised in meeting.

For the Christian, the fact of human free will comes to define as well as be defined within an ecclesiology in which doctrine takes on a dynamic character within the responsible church. In his concluding remarks on the topic, Farrer writes, “(T)he codified experience of the true conscience in Christ cannot be treated as an oracle which will answer all questions. History does not wholly repeat itself, and a new situation will require a new decision, which cannot be deduced simply from established principles. Such a decision, if it is right, cannot indeed be out of harmony with the mind of the Church hitherto: but harmony is a difficult thing to dogmatize upon: it cannot be settled by syllogizing.”⁴⁷ Instead, in a continual process of settling, unsettling and resettling, judgment of the good and the “ethical expediency” of its practical pursuit emerge from a responsible dialogue within human existence. It is this responsible dialogue, built upon the foundational understanding of the valuable and transcendent human, that finds responsible

⁴⁷ Ibid., 211.

existence in engagement with the Other, that would drive the Oxford Conference's explication of the church's social function and place within the responsible society.

The Concept of History

We have seen in the work of the Oxford essayists the placement of responsibility at the core of an understanding of Christian anthropology that recognizes human dignity, finiteness, and freedom engaged in a turn to the Other in community. This work, including Farrer's work on the autonomy of the human will and action, further points toward the place of history in Oxford's theory of responsibility, addressed in the Conference series' third volume, *The Kingdom of God and History*.⁴⁸ Here, Oxford contributors worked to counter modern and contemporary understandings of progressive history that threatened human freedom and responsibility and the role of the Church over against the State.

Undertaking this particular effort was a significant challenge for the Conference organizers. Throughout the first several months of 1936, Oldham labored over the list of contributors, going so far, to the consternation of his North American counterpart, Henry Van Dusen of New York's Union Theological Seminary, as to shift Paul Tillich from his work on Christian anthropology to the third volume. Oldham had lamented that the very project could be intractable given the nature of historical interpretation. Writing to Van Dusen in April of that year, Oldham worried that the distinctions between non-Christian and Christian interpretations of history might come across as too slim, given that "so-called non-Christian interpretations to a

⁴⁸ Herbert G. Wood et al., *The Kingdom of God and History*, trans. E.L. Allen and Olive Wyon, vol. 3, The Official Oxford Conference Books (Chicago, New York: Willett, Clark & Company, 1938).

considerable extent derive from Christian ideas and the Christian interpretations incorporate elements of truth that find expression in the other doctrines.”⁴⁹

Each contributor, then, was asked to submit an essay on the Christian interpretation of history as a lens in which to view contemporary challenges, holding in perspective particular non-Christian interpretations, providing distinctions that exposed the implications of various secular theories, which, they viewed as effectively removing from humanity both freedom and responsibility for social progress, as well as the subsumption of the Church into the State. Running throughout the seven essays was a critique of the idea that history progressed in either a fixed movement toward an inevitable conclusion, particularly toward an ideal fulfillment. The introductory essay was written by Herbert G. Wood, then a director of Studies at Birmingham’s Woodbrooke Settlement and later a dean at the University of Birmingham, known for his work in form criticism and arguments for the historicity of Jesus. Wood called for a reexamination of the view of history as an irresistible force, particularly in light of the political upheavals of the time. Such a view rendered impotent the idea of free will, removing responsibility from the nature of humanity, resulting in a “moral relativism” exemplified for the organizers in the “idealism of Hegel and the dialectical materialism of Karl Marx.”⁵⁰ To be responsible, the human, and humanity’s institutions, including the church, required a concrete platform or playing field on which to enact free agency, rather than a stage on which a script is directed by material or spiritual forces.

⁴⁹ “JHO to HVD,” April 23, 1936, Box 8, Folder 2, Oldham Papers, University of Edinburgh, New College Library, Edinburgh.

⁵⁰ Herbert G. Wood, “The Kingdom of God and History,” in *The Kingdom of God and History*, by Herbert G. Wood, et al, The Official Oxford Conference Books, vol. III (Chicago: Willett, Clark & company, 1938), 7.

The “essential” theme running through the Conference writings on the topic, as summarized by Wood, was “the distinctive character of history as the sphere of human responsibility. History is not the mere continuation of some natural process.”⁵¹ Rather, history operates with the consequential reality of human action resulting in tangible progress or decline.

Alongside the work to disavow an understanding of history as subject to comprehensive fixed forces, the Conference contributors also worked to posit history’s ultimate meaning within a Christian worldview. In his introduction, Wood continued, “Indeed apart from Christianity it is difficult to discover any meaning in history.”⁵² The Christian view of history, Wood explained, could be summed up in two significant conclusions. First, drawing upon Augustine, was the reality of the conflict between “the unalterable character of fundamental moralities” and “political immorality,” otherwise described in realist terms as the “community of charity and the community of self-will.” The second conclusion he drew from the essays was an understanding of the positive contribution of the church to “historical life,” – a contribution that he saw rejected by rationalists and idealists alike. Here Wood pointed to both the European foundations of medieval Christianity – political power justifying itself before a divine ruler and an eternal law – and in more contemporary effects, such as democratic movements and manumission.⁵³

Wood’s summation of Conference thought on the topic places the Oxford Conference in a unique position in the history of the ecumenical movement. As a Life and Work conference concerned with the intersection of faith, culture and politics, the emphasis on the centrality of Christ within historical understanding, and history’s relationship with the Kingdom of God,

⁵¹ Ibid., 6.

⁵² Ibid., 7.

⁵³ Ibid., 8–10.

places the Conference within a missiological stream, as argued by Graeme Smith in his research on the Conference. Smith claims that the reports of the Conference finally recommended a process toward an “ongoing inculturation of Christianity.”⁵⁴ While it is not the intent of this paper to argue whether the Oxford Conference can be considered part of the missionary stream of contemporary ecumenism, we will argue that in the face of the modern and totalitarian threats to the voice of the Church, the organizers viewed its rescue and protection as imperative to the overall flourishing of human society, understood as a society shaped by freedom and responsibility.⁵⁵

Each of the contributors worked to counter various foundations and theories of history that abetted advancing state control over against human freedom and responsibility. Their output provided an understanding of metahistory, critiquing relevant secular and political views of the nature of history and its meaning in contrast with a Christian understanding of history as illuminated by the doctrine of the Kingdom of God and the prudential relationship required by the intersection of history and the eschatological Kingdom. Wood’s reference to Hegel and Marx recognized within their thought the idea that history moved in a defined fashion with progressive or inevitable result. What particularly troubled the organizers about the implications of

⁵⁴ Smith, *Oxford 1937*, 61.

⁵⁵ Following his work for the Oxford Conference, Joseph Oldham would establish with colleagues a group dubbed “The Moot” to discuss the nature of society and religion’s role within it. Throughout their sessions over the decade following the Oxford Conference, Oldham would be preoccupied with the establishment of an “Order” of influential laypersons who, according to Keith Clements, could be “mobilized for action on behalf of the values of freedom and responsibility, and a defence against the dangers of a creeping totalitarianism from within.” Keith Clements, ed., *The Moot Papers: Faith, Freedom and Society 1938-1944* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 14.

Enlightenment and Modern thought, particularly Marxist or Hegelian theory, was the subsummation of religion and humanity into the state.

History, Progress and Human Agency

Within the essays, two professors then at New York's Union Theological Seminary – Eugene W. Lyman and Paul Tillich – provided extended discussion of the concept of history. Lyman was at the time a professor of the philosophy of religion, and Paul Tillich, who, after his censure by the Nazis while a professor of philosophy at the University of Frankfurt, had been brought by Reinhold Niebuhr to Union in 1933 as an associate professor of philosophical theology.

In his broad examination of historical theory, Eugene W. Lyman described the prominent view of history antithetical to religious thought and action as “the evolutionary optimistic view” in which, he claimed, the idea of progress and the idea of development had coalesced into a general natural law of development that served as the fundamental force in human history and progress. Examining the influence of the work of Herbert Spencer, Georg W.F. Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, John Dewey, Émile Durkheim and others, Lyman wrote that the evolutionary optimistic view of history, its contributions to intellectual advancement notwithstanding, had brought civilization to a crisis point, leaving “human thought in a dilemma between a relativism which is equally available [he would otherwise call it “rudderless”] for any form of power politics or economic exploitation, and a complete pessimism, if absolute ethical and spiritual standards are somehow maintained.”⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Eugene Lyman, “The Kingdom of God and History,” in *The Kingdom of God and History*, by Herbert G. Wood, et al, vol. 3, The Official Oxford Conference Books (Chicago: Willett, Clark & Company, 1938), 89.

What were the particular sources of this hopelessness? The side of progress found its root in eighteenth-century rationalism, exemplified by the Social Darwinism of Spencer, which Lyman described as the view that human institutions and individuals progress from lower to higher forms through free competition, particularly laissez faire economics. In application, such an understanding of history “led to the view that progress will come to pass slowly but surely, no matter what ends are pursued by individuals or social groups. Political states may practice power politics and individuals may conduct business for profit only, without reference to the welfare of mankind.”⁵⁷ Regarding the “injurious consequences” of this theory’s application, Lyman quoted John Dewey, naming it as the most “vicious and demoralizing ethic” in the history of humanity.⁵⁸

Here the human actor, while maintaining some agency, forfeits the responsibility for the results of his or her actions beyond their contribution to the inevitable progress of “survival of the fittest,” the phrase coined by Spencer in 1864 within *Principles of Biology*. While the theory could lead to a “reverent agnosticism,” it served, in the Conference’s view to empty religion of its motivating value, leaving “little ... to fulfill man’s deeper longings for eternal reality and for spiritual transformation, or to motivate him for resisting the mounting evils of economic individualism and unrestrained nationalism.”⁵⁹

Lyman also posited to a Hegelian-inspired theory of development a self-referential authority, leading to a dangerous historical relativism. He discussed Hegelian thought’s contributions to the rise of nationalism, critiquing the spiritualization of historical development,

⁵⁷ Ibid., 78.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 80.

combining a historical relativism with an ethical relativism in which ethics is divorced from a transcendent source and lodged in the social structure or state, thereby providing sanction for nationalism. While the theory did comprise a strong social emphasis and idealism that could lead to efforts for reform, such efforts would likely be bound by conservative limits defined by the status quo, with responsibility lodged with the state.

Alongside this critique, Christopher Dawson, an independent Christian historian, and one of the few Catholics involved in the Conference, addressed the apparent meaninglessness of history inherent in Romanticism. While it had introduced the concept of historical sense, in which humanity acknowledges the organic and social nature of culture at the expense of “noble self-sufficiency and maturity,” Dawson would counter with Catholic arguments that this historical consciousness, rather than leading to the relativity of, quoting from Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*, “access ... to the labyrinth of imperfect civilizations and to every form of semibarbarity that has at any time existed on earth,” history finds its meaning in religion and metaphysics, particularly through a Christian understanding of history.⁶⁰ “Catholicism ... showed little sympathy to the idealist movement. ... Its attitude to history was at once more traditionalist and more realist than that of Protestantism and it did not readily accept the idea of an inevitable law of progress.”⁶¹

⁶⁰ Christopher Dawson, “The Kingdom of God and History,” in *The Kingdom of God and History*, by Herbert G. Wood, et al, vol. 3, The Official Oxford Conference Books (Chicago: Willett, Clark & Company, 1938), 197.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 213.

Tillich and Historical Responsibility

Tillich, as he would later develop within the third volume of his *Systematic Theology* nearly a quarter-century later, worked to counter the liberal idea of historical progression with an understanding of history and its religious interpretation as bi-polar, arguing finally from that point that this understanding required from the church a responsibility for political engagement in their context of both time and geography. The churches, he wrote, could only dismiss the questions about the relation of eschatology and history “at the cost of a complete withdrawal from the life of the present day. They are summoned to reflect upon the great solutions of their past and to seek for a new solution, expressed in some powerful symbol, which will meet the need of the humanity of the present day in its questionings and its despair.”⁶² That symbol would be the Kingdom of God.

In his Oxford essay, Tillich argues that history, rather than being governed by nature or its own independence, finds its content in free human social activity. He makes four points about the concept of history. First, history comprises a “remembered” history, with both a subjective element – historical consciousness or memory – and an objective element – historical tradition or event. In regard to the subjective element of this “bi-polar” understanding, Tillich describes history as a contribution unique to the human, for it is only the human who can bring to history historical consciousness. This consciousness, which occurs through the human’s free purposive activity, in turn creates the objective historical tradition. Given Tillich’s understanding of the relationship between essence – being – and existence – nature, natural progression is removed from the historical process, given that the natural is a result of its essence, while human existence

⁶² Paul Tillich, “The Kingdom of God and History,” in *The Kingdom of God and History*, by Herbert G. Wood, et al, trans. Olive Wyon, vol. 3, The Official Oxford Conference Books (Chicago, New York: Willett, Clark & Company, 1938), 107.

is in opposition to human's essence.⁶³ Tillich's argument that nature, while having a share in the making of human history, has no history of its own, given that its existence is a result of its essence, requires for history existence's free purposive activity, thus making history dependent, not on a natural progression, but upon human freedom. Tillich expands on this in the second volume of his systematics. While nature is finite necessity, and God is infinite freedom, the human is finite freedom, making possible the move from essence to existence.⁶⁴ Tillich argues that this transition is denied by both idealism and naturalism, particularly in naturalism's denial

⁶³ While an extended description of Tillich's theological conception of the relationship between essence and existence is beyond the scope of this paper, it is helpful to briefly elaborate for our particular purposes some definition from his *Systematic Theology*. Drawing from the Platonic concept of form or idea, Tillich, after admitting the general ambiguity of the terms, lists possible definitions of essence. In part, he writes, "The basic ambiguity ... lies in the oscillation of the meaning between an empirical and a valuating sense. Essence as the nature of a thing, or as the quality in which a thing participates, or as a universal, has one character. Essence as that from which being has 'fallen,' the true and undistorted nature of things, has another character. ... Why has this ambiguity persisted in philosophy since Plato? The answer ... lies in the ambiguous character of existence, which expresses being and at the same time contradicts it – essence as that which makes a thing what it is (ousia) has a purely logical character; essence as that which appears in an imperfect and distorted way in a thing carries the stamp of value. Essence empowers and judges that which exists." In his list of the possibilities for the meaning of existence, he writes that "It can mean the possibility of finding a thing within the whole of being, it can mean the actuality of what is potential in the realm of essences, it can mean the "fallen world," and it can mean a type of thinking which is aware of its existential conditions or which rejects essence entirely. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 202–3.

⁶⁴ Describing the historical implications of finite freedom, Tillich writes, "Man is free, in so far as he has language ... which liberate(s) him from bondage to the concrete situation to which even the highest animals are subjected; ... as he is able to ask questions about the world he encounters; ... as he can receive unconditional moral and logical imperatives which indicate he can transcend the conditions which determine every finite being; ... as he has the power of deliberating and deciding, thus cutting through the mechanisms of stimulus and response; ... as he can play and build imaginary structures above the real structures to which he, like all beings, is bound; ... as he has the faculty of creating the world of technical tools and products, the world of artistic expressions, the world of theoretical structures and practical organizations. Finally, man is free, in so far as he has the power of contradicting himself and his essential nature. Man is free even from his freedom; that is he can surrender his humanity." Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 2:31–32.

of the human predicament as represented in the doctrine of original sin. Naturalism “does not try to answer the question of why man is aware of negativity as something that should not be and for which he is responsible.”⁶⁵ While negating naturalism, Tillich does not remove nature from neither human existence nor its responsible character. The human responsibility inherent in finite freedom is bound with the element of what Tillich names human destiny, comprising the biological, psychological, sociological and geographical foundations of nature that influence human action.⁶⁶ Humans have the freedom to act and to make history, and, even with the limits of finite freedom and nature, are responsible for the consequences of those history-making actions.

In an accompanying chapter by Edwyn Bevan, a then fellow at Oxford’s New College, the argument for human volition alongside Divine intention was further presented. Positing natural processes’ essences as the domain of the will of God, Bevan writes of the individual encounter with history as an encounter with both the essence of the natural and the consequences of the totality of human volition that has come before, on to which the human in the new context performs. Drawing upon the realist philosophy of Nicolai Hartmann that posited within the human the unique attribute within nature of purposive activity, Bevan writes, “(W)e, by our voluntary choices each in our own measure, determine what the next moment in history is to be. The future will be different according to what men decide now.”⁶⁷ The responsible human acts within the context of the consequences of human action come before, and with the present

⁶⁵ Ibid., 2:30.

⁶⁶ Tillich, “The Kingdom of God and History,” 110.

⁶⁷ Edwyn Robert Bevan, “The Kingdom of God and History,” in *The Kingdom of God and History*, by Herbert G. Wood, et al, vol. 3, The Official Oxford Conference Books (Chicago: Willett, Clark & Company, 1938), 43.

consequences of his own actions for which he is responsible, and that responsibility extends to consequences in the future, although, as contemporary discussions of responsibility point out, the scope of that responsibility is contested.⁶⁸

Tillich describes a responsibility that is inherently social, expressed as a consciousness of “special vocation” within historical groups that are unified by particular meaning and value.⁶⁹

Tillich expands on this in his systematics, explaining, like Buber, that individual humans become actualized in encounter with others in a community. It is these communities that are the “direct bearers” of history and vocational responsibility, yet this responsibility does not exist as a reality independent of the individual humans that comprise them. It is the individuals in their sociality who remain the responsible center for “willing and acting.”⁷⁰

Tillich also argued that historical time is qualitative rather than quantitative, over against physical or biological time. Historical time has a beginning, a center – which he would later define as the Christ event – and an end. Thus historical time has the possibility of innovation enabled by the action of free purposive human activity that can break through the cyclic time of nature and biological evolution. Rather than a steady progression, each historical time period exists with its own character and contribution within the totality of history. “Billions of years before and after man appeared on the earth neither continue nor frustrate the meaningful direction of history. Neither the end nor the beginning of history can be designated on the plane of physical time.”⁷¹ With this argument, Tillich establishes history as the concrete, real playing

⁶⁸ See Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

⁶⁹ Tillich, “The Kingdom of God and History,” 111.

⁷⁰ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 3:312.

⁷¹ Tillich, “The Kingdom of God and History,” 113.

field for free and consequential human social action, for which the human within the context of their community and of their time is responsible.

The Kingdom of God

With the ideas of progressive history set aside, along with its concomitant positing of ultimate meaning in a final stage of history, the contributors to the Oxford volume drew upon Christian doctrine as the interpretive methodology for history, particularly Christian eschatology and the doctrine of the Kingdom of God. In this thinking, the finite human acting in freedom in a contextual history is responsible to an infinite meaning beyond history.

While the preceding Life and Work discussion at Stockholm drew upon elements of Social Gospel thinking regarding the Kingdom of God, despite attempts to bracket doctrine, the discussion at Oxford picked up the theme directly, placing it in a new and transparently central position for ecumenical thinking for social ethics.⁷² In the Christian concept of the Kingdom of God, they argued, historical existence found its meaning while leaving with human agency the responsibility for consequential action. The Kingdom of God provided a content for history in which a final realization, rather than moving progressively toward its end, remained

⁷² Graeme Smith points out that the topic of the Kingdom of God and history was divisive at the Stockholm Conference. Smith, *Oxford 1937*, 135:152; In his chapter regarding the early Life and Work movement Nils Ehrenström writes that conference organizer Archbishop Nathan Soderblöm named the theme as the “chief issue of the Conference, not printed in the programme.” The opening addresses from F.T. Woods, the Bishop of Winchester, called for the establishment of “the Kingdom of God on earth,” while Bishop Ludwig Ihmels of Saxony called such thinking “disastrous.” Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, eds., *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 547; William Temple would reference the controversy in his essay for CFCL, calling the idea of building the Kingdom of God a “Pelagian notion” and stating that “Our task is not to construct the Kingdom, but to live in the conditions of this world as those who, by the grace of God through the redemption effected in Christ, are citizens of the Kingdom” Ehrenström et al., *Christian Faith and the Common Life*, 61–62.

transcendent, beyond history, but at the same time provided an immanent aspect that operated within history. The Kingdom of God pointed toward God's activity within concrete history, inviting human agents to take responsibility as co-creators within history. The Kingdom of God, likewise, provided not only the objective aim for historical action, but also provided the evaluative criteria for the exercise of responsibility. Within this interpretative framework emerged the social method for the Oxford Conference in which the free human agent is responsible to God; is responsible for her actions, which are historically consequential; and those actions are evaluated by what Lyman would call "the moral will of God," and Tillich would name the "ultimate criterion."⁷³

Covenant, Revelation and Existence

The writers of the volume drew upon Christian eschatology as the counterpoint to inadequate modernist systems. Contrasting the Christian interpretation of history with his outline of the evolutionary optimistic view, Lyman drew upon three characteristics of the Christian interpretation of history that comprise, finally, the doctrine of the Kingdom of God. These characteristics are covenant, revelation and existence.

First is the Judaic conception of "ethical monotheism" as represented in the tradition of God's covenant relationship with the people of Israel. In this covenant, a historical people are provided a divine deliverance and are held to a responsibility to a divine criterion. "The covenant relation involved the obligation of obedience and loyalty to the moral will of God." Drawing upon the prophetic writings of the Hebrew Scriptures and beyond, history is provided the

⁷³ Lyman, "The Kingdom of God and History," 90; Tillich, "The Kingdom of God and History," 138.

meaning that ancient paganism and modern rationalism are unable to deliver, in which the covenantal relationship “rests back on God’s moral will and in which men bear a responsible and active part.”⁷⁴

The second element of the Kingdom of God as the methodology for the interpretation of history is the fact of divine revelation in which divine “eternal values” can be promulgated and received. Such values provide the basis of history’s meaning and the content of responsibility. Furthermore, the eternal values move within history, providing basic foundations and new truths contingent on time and context, judged by tradition. “Each of the special divine acts in history involves a further revealing of eternal values with no diminution in the significance of those already revealed. ... And when one sees [in other historic events] further divine acts and new revealings of eternal values, these can only be acknowledged when they are in harmony with the supreme religious value which is revealed in Jesus Christ.”⁷⁵

Finally, Lyman squarely posits within history’s meaning a Christian conception of what this author would call “dynamic existence,” understood as events in history that are “concrete realities with reference to which eternal values are decisive norms, or structural principals, and apart from which those values have only abstract logical significance.” As Tillich would contrast essence and existence, Lyman posited a historical existence within Christian thought in which events themselves have consequence and meaning over against “illusory appearances or shadowy and confused expressions of eternal essences,” which he credited to Indian and Greek thought. Within this dynamic existence, the moral will of God is made known through embodiment in historical agents who not only have an obligation and responsibility to God but to

⁷⁴ Lyman, “The Kingdom of God and History,” 90–91.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

one another, creating a “spiritually dynamic community” in which the will of God is further promulgated and enacted.⁷⁶

These characteristics – covenant, revelation, and dynamic existence comprise the concept of the Kingdom of God as both the immanent ground of history while transcending all that encompasses history, providing history with its direction and meaning. In his description of this interpretation, Lyman moves toward the homiletical.

Since history is the realm of man’s purposeful activity and moral responsibility in dependence on the moral will of God, its ultimate explanation can never be in terms of naturalistic determinism but must always be in terms of the activity of the living God – saving men, holding men responsible, ... and binding men together in an organic unity. ... History thus has a direction determined by the eternal values of God’s nature and by his active willing toward their realization, and it has a goal in the community of love which is the body of Christ. The goal of the community of love is itself transcendent-immanent. It cannot be completely realized in history, since God and the meaning of his love transcend history, and hence it implies an eternal life which is beyond the bounds of this earthly existence. But no other limits can be placed to its realization in history.⁷⁷

In his essay, Tillich posited the concept of the Kingdom of God as a “symbolic expression of the ultimate meaning of existence,” relating the “unconditioned meaning of existence to actual existence.”⁷⁸ Rather than pointing exclusively toward a final fulfillment, the Kingdom of God gives meaning to the actions within concrete history, while at the same time never allowing these actions at any one time to lay claim to fulfillment of the concept. Tillich points to the Augustinian tradition of the contrast of the two Kingdoms to understand this active relationship. “The Kingdom of God is expected to triumph over the kingdoms of this world; it is a dynamic power acting in history, materializing itself in history although never becoming

⁷⁶ Ibid., 93–95.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 96.

⁷⁸ Tillich, “The Kingdom of God and History,” 116.

identical with history.”⁷⁹ For Tillich, the Kingdom of God as the suprahistorical interpreter of history restored the distinction between human existence and human essence that progressive theories of history erased, securing to the human the characteristics of agency and responsibility. “There is no progress with respect to the creative works of culture or with respect to the morality of mankind. The first is impossible because creativity is a matter of grace, not of growth; the second is impossible because morality is a matter of free decision, and consequently not a matter of delivery and tradition.”⁸⁰ Likewise, theories that reduced history to the level of nature, Tillich claimed, erased distinctions of truth and goodness, reducing the human to an autonomous self. Idealistic theories, such as those of Plato and Neo-Platonism, positing meaning in an eternity severed from historical activity, emptied history of meaning, and thus the human from accountability. The human, accountable to the meaning of history, remains free and responsible.

History as Applied Theology

In regard to the methodology of the Christian interpretation of history, Tillich employed his idea of bi-polarity, placing the responsibility for political engagement as constitutive for historical existence. These poles comprise the Kingdom of God, which provides the subjective “religious-transcendent” interpretive root, alongside the objective “political-immanent” root, which involves political action in the broader sense, understood as those reflective activities the goals of which are the formation of community. The criteria and values for historical interpretation are provided by the concept of the Kingdom of God, while the immanent root provides the material for the dynamic and concrete action that participate in and are measured by

⁷⁹ Ibid., 117.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 113–14.

the religious-transcendent root, but are not constitutive of it. “This bi-polar method ... does not ... mean that the theological decisions are subjected to the political ones, neither does it mean that political decision acquired theological dignity. It rather means that the divine claim over the world is not kept within an abstract transcendence but is used for evaluating and molding actual reality. Religious interpretation of history is *applied theology*.”⁸¹ Here, Tillich worked to ensure the integrity of the suprahistorical meaning of history, while allowing for its embodiment in what would necessarily be the conflicted space of historical existence.

In the third volume of his *Systematic Theology*, Tillich would expand on this conflicted space, particularly with his discussion of historical ambiguities, in which the goals of human activity in their contingent and finite limitations both reach and fall short of the ultimate aims of the religious-transcendent root.⁸² Historical actors, or interpreters, operating within historical context, engage in concrete action and reflection on that action in historical context, not abstract reflection apart from history. This immanent reflection draws the actor into engagement with the Other, revealing both the transcendent values governing the action and the values’ judgment upon the action. “The purpose of this process of reflection on the part of one who is acting historically is to help him to perceive the spiritual presuppositions on which his action is based and further, by the ‘give and take’ of discussion with those who hold views, either to justify, or, if necessary, to alter his own basic principles, and thus to give spiritual weight and the power to create community to historical action.”⁸³ Responsible historical action both requires and creates

⁸¹ Ibid., 109.

⁸² Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1963, 3:339.

⁸³ Tillich, “The Kingdom of God and History,” 128.

historical community, in which actors acknowledge and engage each other, and are responsible to each other, and to God, for their dialogue and action.⁸⁴

This responsible community, in which ideas are exchanged, values are delineated, decisions are implemented, and consequences are judged operates within a historically contingent and contextual field. In the historical continuum, progress and decline are achieved in dynamic circumstances in which settled tradition and the status quo of power are continually contested and submitted to the community. In his opening address, Reinhold Niebuhr, who had not contributed directly to the Oxford volume on the topic of the Kingdom of God and history, pointed to this contested space. He addressed the relationship between the Kingdom and history, emphasizing the finite and contingent characteristics of culture and time, and the Kingdom of God's positing of responsibility for the world on its historical actors. "While the gospel which we preach reveals a world which in its ground and its fulfillment transcends human history, it does not abstract us from this present history with all of its conflicts and tragic disappointments

⁸⁴ In discussing Tillich's writing on historical ambiguity and the role of demonic in secular history, it is appropriate to note the ongoing reevaluation of his work in light of longstanding revelations regarding his sexual promiscuity; his relationship with his wife, Hannah; and his general treatment of women, a critique of male theologians that is not confined to Tillich. In an essay working to redeem Tillich's theology in light of critical dismissals resulting from his sexual attitudes and behavior, Russell Re Manning of Bath Spa University suggests that Tillich's focus on ambiguity may point to a subversion of the liberal modern project in favor of a commitment "to the embrace of difference and to the fractured – and fracturing – polyvalence of life, in all its forms, conditioned and unconditioned." An extended examination of ambiguity, sex, and history as it relates to Tillich's theology is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the notion of immanent historical ambiguities comprising the failure of finite and contingent human activity in reaching its ultimate – represented in the values of the Kingdom of God – as well as Tillich's attention to the role of the demonic forces of history as destructive of meaning, inform the notion of Oxford Responsibility, which does not allow the reality of Tillich's thinking and action to proceed untouched. Russell Re Manning, "Life, Sex, and Ambiguity," in *Les Ambiguïtés de la Vie Selon Paul Tillich: Travaux Issus du XXIe Colloque International de l'Association Paul Tillich d'Expression Française*, ed. Marc Dumas, Jean Richard, and Bryan Wagoner (De Gruyter, 2017), 48.

of arrogant hopes.”⁸⁵ Cultures across geography and across time carry the ongoing responsibility for moving from the abstract to the concrete. “Every human civilization is a compromise between the necessities and contingencies of nature and the Kingdom of God with its absolute love commandment.”⁸⁶ What Niebuhr would call “the law of love” inherent in the concept of the Kingdom of God posits within our concept of Oxford Responsibility obedience to the will of God discerned and exercised in political engagement toward the repeated achievement of justice within society.

In his essay on the topic, Heinz-Dietrich Wendland, who at the time was moving from Heidelberg to Kiel, argued for the centrality of Christian responsibility for the interpretation of history, recognizing it as a consistent operation. “(W)e have to speak the *concrete Word* of Christian interpretation which *changes with each change in historical existence*.”⁸⁷ Wendland warned against conceptions of Christian interpretation that posited the Kingdom of God as “purely transcendent,” with no responsibility for the task of the interpretation of contemporary realities, as well as a “*secularized Christianity*” that submitted the Gospel to political and philosophical expediency. He acknowledges the challenges inherent in avoiding such misconceptions.

The transition to the concrete theological statement which interprets the present always brings with it *some elements of secular historical existence*; these elements are drawn from the connection of this existence with space and time and the life of a particular people; they spring from the distinctive quality of the historical consciousness. . . . This procedure is *necessary*, because we can only

⁸⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Christian Church in a Secular Age,” in *Reinhold Niebuhr: Major Works on Religion and Politics*, ed. Elisabeth Sifton, vol. 263 (Library of America, 2015), 736.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 741.

⁸⁷ H. D. Wendland, “The Kingdom of God and History,” in *The Kingdom of God and History*, by Herbert G. Wood, et al, trans. E.L. Allen, vol. 3, The Official Oxford Conference Books (Chicago, New York: Willett, Clark & Company, 1938), 191.

form our judgments by starting from the concrete historical position in which we stand.⁸⁸

Politics and political decision making was, for Wendland, a key historical element in play within Christian interpretation, and one that could not be avoided theologically. Responsibility for the political could not be escaped. “Even in a theology which lies quite beyond politics and historical realities this is in some sense present, though concealed; for there is no one who does not take some part, be it only by negations, in the political world. Even the person who rejects every political decision within the state system to which he belongs commits himself by that very fact to a decision.”⁸⁹

While Wendland was careful not to minimize what he saw as the boundary between the Kingdom of God and secular historical existence, he maintained for the human actor in community the freedom and responsibility for historical action, subject to the judgment of God. Like Tillich, Wendland recognized the ambiguities inherent in historical action, rising from the intersection of the divine and the demonic in human activity, neither of which can be definitively ascribed to historical events in binary fashion.

Both Wendland and Tillich addressed the issue of the demonic as an operative force in history, seeing in these forces, the call to historical responsibility. Wendland defined the demonic as a will opposed to God, creating an illusion of power and autonomy for the historical actor that must be confronted. Tillich used his notion of bi-polarity to find in the demonic the push toward responsible historical action. This bi-polarity comprises the *kairos*, containing the ultimate meaning of history, and the context of Christian historical action which itself is bi-polar,

⁸⁸ Ibid., 189–90.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 190.

containing both demonic elements – defined as “that destructive, blind, chaotic element which is implied in all powerful creating movements and drives them toward final dissolution” – and the situational demand of the *kairos*.⁹⁰ Here the demonic is the creative element of history that must be responsibly engaged in its bi-polarity, or the action is emptied of its meaning. For Tillich, the demonic threats of the present time were autonomistic capitalism, nationalism, and authoritarianism, for which “the protagonists of the Christian view of history” were responsible to confront.⁹¹

In these two significant volumes – *The Christian Understanding of Man* and *The Kingdom of God and History* – the Oxford contributors had established the ground for Oxford Responsibility, which we have previously defined as *a society in which its members and institutions act in accordance with human value and freedom, in obedience to the will of God, toward the achievement of justice within the limits, ambiguities and contingencies of human finitude, culture and history*. This responsibility was shaped by their explication of the dignity and agency of the human; the rejection of progressive history for an immanent historical existence in which actions have consequences within a contested space; and a historical space imbued with meaning, delivered by the transcendent values of the Christian doctrine of the Kingdom of God, that calls the responsible agent into engagement for the common good. The work of the Conference and its subsequent volumes would work to define the applied particularities of this responsibility.

⁹⁰ Tillich, “The Kingdom of God and History,” 117.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 136.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE APPLICATION OF OXFORD RESPONSIBILITY

In this chapter we will examine the practical foundations of Oxford Responsibility as applied within the ecumenical social method of the Oxford Conference. We have seen that the social method followed by Oxford found its foundation in its understanding of the nature of God as creative, loving and relational, who has revealed as the goal of creation the values of the Kingdom of God, exemplified by the law of love. Further we have examined Oxford's understanding of theological anthropology positing the human as possessive of an inherent dignity and autonomy that makes humans at their core responsible. At the same time, Oxford understood that human dignity, freedom and value that support responsibility existed alongside human finitude, exemplified by the limits of human knowledge and the reality of sin, yet these limits made the human no less responsible. Further, we have seen that this responsibility is enacted within a history open to the consequences of human culture and action. We have further shown that, within Oxford Responsibility, the subjective exercise of this responsibility to the Other comprises the realization of authentic human existence through engagement with the Other. Finally, we have seen that the values of the Kingdom of God expose human existence and action as present in historical context and contingency, and thus are under the judgment of the Kingdom of God and its demand for political engagement in history.

In the following pages we will see how the Oxford Conference both applied and envisioned social responsibility moving from this foundation. We will begin with an examination

of how the Conference conceived of ecclesiology, answering the question of where a living responsibility resides. We will posit within the very nature of the church the responsibility for engagement in history and particularly how this responsibility largely rests not in its direct responsibility to various societal spheres, such as the state or the economy, but in its responsibility to the laity. We will also show how the Lutheran concept of “Orders of Creation” and the Roman Catholic concept of subsidiarity influence the location of social responsibility, further accentuating the responsibility of the church toward the empowerment of the laity. Further we will identify key actors of responsibility – the “who” of responsibility. We will see how the Oxford effort was relentless in its justification for and inclusion of laity within the responsible decision-making process. We will also show how, housed within this decision-making process, Oxford Responsibility operates with the demands and limits explained by Christian realism, which, at the same, time posits on the human actor continuing responsibility. These understandings then lead to the development of the concept of middle axioms, as the applied ethical fulcrum between general ethical directives and partisan specificity. We will then conclude with a deep look into the further application of the Oxford method, using as an example the Conference’s sectional work on “Church and Community.” We will find in Oxford Responsibility the possibilities of ecumenical social ethics that may find a dynamic unity in a common faith that, at the same time, moves Christian communities deeper into an incarnational reality of God active in an ambiguous history. Within this process, finite differences toward imperfect justice find infinite meaning in God’s commandment to love.

Joseph Oldham and the Vision for the Oxford Conference

In his preparatory work for the Oxford Conference, Joseph Oldham was at pains to position the work of the Oxford Conference as the beginning of a continuing process of engagement that would move the church in its ongoing responsibility within society and culture. In his extensive correspondence and collaboration with his co-organizer in New York, Henry Van Dusen, in the years leading up to the Conference, Oldham belabored the point that the work of the Oxford Conference would not find its completion in the summer of 1937, but would have “any real meaning only if it is thought of in terms of the next twenty years. If we think we have to complete our job by the Oxford Conference, it just has no sense at all, since the thing cannot be done. We are only at the first beginnings of what must necessarily be a long and continuing process.”¹ Van Dusen saw in Oldham’s strategy an impediment to gaining support for the work of the Conference, both intellectually and financially; writing that such a process would not “quicken interest in the total undertaking”² Oldham was steadfast. For him, the responsibility of the Conference was in the end the responsibility of the Church to engage the vital issues of the time in the context and contingencies of history, through a broad and continuing dialogue comprising the church and wider society, toward the achievement of long-term justice. This task was not the lone responsibility of a church comprised of clerics and academics, but was, at its core, a responsibility of the laity. The angst, passion and felt urgency was evident in Oldham’s correspondence, where he lamented the condition of the church in face of global threats to its

¹ “JHO to HVD,” January 24, 1936, Box 8, Folder 1, Oldham Papers, University of Edinburgh, New College Library, Edinburgh.

² “HVD to JHO,” March 17, 1936, Box 8, Folder 1, Oldham Papers, University of Edinburgh, New College Library, Edinburgh.

existence and the need for a reorientation toward responsibility for the church and for Christians who comprised it.

(T)he issue with which I am fundamentally concerned is one which ... makes an appeal to all who sincerely desire to face the realities of life. Just in proportion as it is fully and honestly faced will the Oxford Conference count for something real in the life of the world. What is most fundamental in my attitude in regard to this issue is the result, to a very large extent, of contact with the type of man both here and in America, who is taking on his shoulders the load of responsibility for world affairs. More and more as I come into contact with people of this kind I feel that they are getting down to their job much more seriously and effectively than many of the people in the churches. We religious people are so ready to be satisfied with what is merely a talking shop; if the Oxford Conference is allowed to be only that – and there is a real danger that it may not be much more than that – the men who matter most in the world today are going to have very little use for it. If those who come to the Conference, or at least a considerable proportion of them, are resolute and determined men who are free from all illusions and who realise that the most that the Oxford Conference can do is to give some guidance and direction in the carrying out of tasks which will claim the dedication of their whole lives, it will be abundantly worth holding.³

The tension between Oldham and Van Dusen continued up until the very start of the Conference, with Van Dusen concerned about the essays and the process that would be followed at the Conference, complaining that papers were too lengthy, diffuse and analytical, and lacking adequate conclusion and recommendations. Van Dusen was also generally concerned that the diversity of contributors and participants might also prove problematic.⁴ Yet Oldham was confident that an organic process of dialogue respecting the peculiarities and sensitivities of the various contributors would result in significant and important dialogue during the delegates' time together. The goal was not to move into the Conference with predetermined outcome, but to equip persons with the thought and data necessary for dialogue and decision in ambiguous

³ “JHO to HVD,” April 8, 1936, Box 8, Folder 2, Oldham Papers, University of Edinburgh, New College Library, Edinburgh.

⁴ See Warren, *Theologians of a New World Order*, 61.

circumstances. “I feel about the reports that whatever their defects enough hard thinking has been done and enough clarification of the issues to make possible during the days at Oxford a good bit of work (if the people are there to do it) which would have been quite impossible without the preliminary thinking. . . . The permanent value of the work of the Oxford Conference will depend on whether it can provide a starting point for thought in the future.”⁵ Oldham saw in the process not only an urgency, but a spiritual humility that was open to the movement of God, which both revealed historical limitations and human finiteness without abdicating responsibility for action, especially on part of the Church. “It may be part of God’s dealing with the Church that we have said something significant and impressive but knowing our own weakness and setting ourselves humbly to learn how we may serve God’s purpose in our generation.”⁶

Oldham stubbornly insisted on this organic process that saw cultural context, historical contingency and human finitude not as obstacles to be circumvented or jettisoned for sake of agreement, but as integral to what we are calling Oxford Responsibility. In a letter to Rev. Henry-Louis Henriod, joint General Secretary of the World Alliance for International Friendship and Life and Work, Oldham insisted that the Conference be organized as to be nimble and able to respond and refocus the agenda as issues emerged in the unpredictable context of the time. “This is not going to resemble any ordinary conference for which the programme can be planned in advance. It is going to be a meeting of the Churches at a critical moment in human history and

⁵ “JHO to HVD,” June 30, 1937, Box 8, Folder 6, Oldham Papers, University of Edinburgh, New College Library, Edinburgh.

⁶ Ibid.

in the history of the Church, when the whole future of Christianity may depend on the right decisions being reached in regard to vital issues.”⁷

A Responsible Ecclesiology

Within the twentieth century ecumenical movement, the debate and divide between doctrine and praxis in general, and ecclesiology and ethics in particular, had been a steady theme, as illustrated by the continuing divisions between the Faith and Order, and Life and Work areas of the WCC. The Oxford Conference, building upon the foundations of its immediate predecessors, however, had within it an ecumenical vision of ecclesiology that did not simply complement or coexist with its social ethics, but rather presented a mutually dependent relationship between the pair.

Recent commentators have claimed, however, that ecclesiology was not a major point of discussion at the Oxford Conference, pointing to organizers’ later attempts supposedly to backfill an ecclesiological foundation to the work done there.⁸ Indeed, Ehrenström, in his recollections of the Conference, acknowledges that its purpose precluded the development of “any coherent and unified conception of the Church.”⁹ Yet the motto, “Let the Church be the Church!”, which, while not appearing in the Conference’s published material, did become the Conference’s defining cry, leading one to inquire of the “controlling insights” that participants and those influenced by its work placed and found within the Conference’s output.¹⁰ It is the author’s

⁷ “JHO to Henry-Louis Henriod,” February 19, 1936, Box 8, Folder 1, Oldham Papers, University of Edinburgh, New College Library, Edinburgh.

⁸ Smith, *Oxford 1937*, 40.

⁹ Rouse and Neill, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948*, 591.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, n. 591:2; *ibid.*, 591.

contention that with this central operating ecclesiology, delegates constructed a process for responsible social ethics that ignored neither the nature of the church nor its mission.

Preparations for Oxford proceeded without the unrealistic notion under which delegates of 1925's Universal Christian Conference on Life and Work at Stockholm began deliberations. The Stockholm gathering had deliberately been scheduled to meet apart from that year's Washington meeting of the World Conference on Faith and Order, despite suggestions to the contrary. It began with the motto, "*Coummunio in adorando et serviendo oecumenica*," with the underlying optimistic organizing principle that "doctrine divides, but service unites." By focusing on the church's response to contemporary issues at the exclusion of concerted doctrinal discussion, it was hoped that Life and Work could advance the aims of Faith and Order through social cooperation, breaking down the "walls and prejudices" between denominations.¹¹ Subsequent proceedings disavowed delegates of the notion that churches could easily transcend doctrinal disagreement through a focus on praxis. In his history of the Conference, written three decades later, Ehrenström credited Stockholm with beginning a tense evolution of Life and Work in struggling together with Faith and Order to move beyond doctrinal, denominational, and national interests, laying the groundwork for Oxford and its concept of responsibility.¹² The idea of ignoring differences in order to reach consensus was neither tenable nor warranted. Rather, any progress toward ecumenical unity and effectiveness would require attention to the nature and mission of the church itself. Lutheran Archbishop of Sweden, Nathan Söderblom, a key organizer of the Stockholm Conference, reminded the delegates in his closing sermon of the urgency of the task. Drawing upon the remarks of a layperson who had earlier addressed the

¹¹ Rouse and Neill, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948*, 540.

¹² *Ibid.*, 549.

Conference, Söderblom claimed for the church the duty to offer “confidence in the inner light and its attending moral courage” to those distressed “men and nations” who seek “safety where experience ... shows there is no refuge.”¹³ Söderblom, who died in 1931, and members of the continuation committee that led to Oxford, realized a keen connection between confession and action, as well as the realistic urgency of the ecumenical task in bringing the two together.

The Oxford Conference’s focus on Life and Work did indeed work to provide an answer to a three-fold question of ecclesiology – what is the church, what is the church for, and who or what comprises the church? – without jettisoning or trivializing confessional issues, a charge that the Life and Work section has long endured since the formation of the WCC begun soon after the Conferences of 1937.¹⁴ While the history of the ecumenical movement’s interpretation of

¹³ Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope, eds., *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), 17.

¹⁴ Geoffrey Wainwright, in his article on the history of the ecumenical movement’s conception of ecclesiology, claims that while the first two questions have presented little problem for the churches, it is the third, that of composition, that has created the most disagreement. He outlines eight “intuitions” regarding the identity, nature, unity and mission of the church. 1. There is only one church with its institutional and spiritual boundaries intact. This view is associated with Cyprian of Carthage. 2. The Augustinian perception, supported by the council of Trent, held valid baptism outside the church, given Christ as the subject, but held them ineffectual until conversion to the true church. 3. The reformation view of *vestigia ecclesiae* recognized the presence of Christians with access to the means of grace outside the recognized reformed community. The Roman church, likewise, has in modern times recognized Protestants as “separated brethren.” 4. The Lutheran Augsburg confession position posits the church as “event,” where “the church is a gathering of believers in which the gospel is purely preached and the sacraments are administered according to the gospel. 5. The Anglican “branch theory” holds that there is one catholic church with internal temporary division. 6. Pietistic ecclesiology posits Christianity as a “religion of the heart,” with the church comprising “true believers everywhere,” emphasizing spiritual unity over institutional unity. 7. The evangelistic model practiced an open sacramentality in line with an invitational gospel and welcoming church. 8. The secular approach, credited by Wainwright to the Life and Work movement, posits the church in service to the world’s needy, at the expense, he says of “doctrinal and institutional components.” Nicolas Lossky et al., eds., *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991), 159–62.

ecclesiology is beyond the purpose and scope of this paper, it is its contention that the Oxford Conference supposed and developed an ecclesiology regarding the nature and composition of the church that was not merely instrumental, but integral to its conception of the social function of the church.

The Streams of Ecclesiological Thought

In CFS, the preparatory text provided to delegates by Visser 't Hooft and Oldham, organizers took as their fundamental starting point a “fresh consideration of the meaning of Church and the nature of its mission.”¹⁵ They did not seek to answer the question from the perspective of an end in denominational reunion, which admittedly was the “special responsibility” of the Conference of Faith and Order. Rather, they sought to develop a realistic understanding of the church’s nature that accounted for its divine *esse* as well as its paradoxical life in the penultimate earthly kingdom. Two parallel streams of this ecclesiological thought flow through the Conference’s output, converging in the idea of a Church within the churches with a particular responsibility for ecumenical dialogue and contextual action.

The first stream takes serious account of the diversity of ecclesiological thought across the denominational spectrum. Indeed, the first section of the foundational text written by Visser 't Hooft outlined common and individual doctrinal conceptions of the Church including those of the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed and other Protestant churches, as well as modernist conceptions that “attempt to adapt Christian truth to the findings of science and to the contemporary secular philosophies.”¹⁶ This stream proceeded with neither

¹⁵ Visser 't Hooft and Oldham, *The Church and Its Function in Society*, 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

the intention of minimizing any differences, nor finding path to compromise. Instead the Conference posits this diversity of thought as integral to the nature of the church within the tension of the ideal and actual. To claim the ability to do otherwise – to conceive of an ecclesiological standpoint beyond the existing viewpoints of the various denominations – was to create an ecumenical utopia. Preparatory material stated “a standpoint which transcends the actual standpoints of the Churches does not exist.” To construct such a standpoint would create “a new and different Church.” The ecumenical effort could not progress unless ecumenists recognized the permanent reality of the churches’ very lack of unity on the topic of the church. “It is a *conditio sine qua non* of any oecumenical work that each Church, and the oecumenical movement as a whole, should realize this fact, and not try to cover it up by ambiguous language. ... It is only by a frank facing of real differences that advance can be made.”¹⁷

The tenor of the document echoed that of Karl Barth’s essay for the Edinburgh Conference that would follow Oxford. Both rejected a branch theory that held each individual church as a composite ingredient of the Church as a whole. Such a conception paid scant attention to the actual and fundamental differences existing between denominations that could not be reconciled without rejecting some in favor of others, or crafting a wholly new formulation, which would effectively deny “the validity of those conceptions of the Church which claim to be true, and not merely to be aspects of a many-sided spiritual harmony.”¹⁸ Here the ecumenical effort maintained as fundamental the freedom and imperative to make claims for Christian truth without compromise. As Barth wrote, “If we listen to Christ, we cannot believe in

¹⁷ Ibid., 92.

¹⁸ Ibid., 93.

one of the alternatives and hold the other also to be Christian; our life is lived within the differences which divide the churches, and not in a region which transcend them.”¹⁹

The search for unity did not call for agreement or compromise, nor idealistic “doses of love, patience, and tolerance.” Barth pointed out that while necessary and effective in other aspects of earthly life, within a church striving for unity such sentimental methods were futile, hopeless and anathema to the Gospel, “unless the churches are dead already” in their weak efforts to obey God.²⁰ The fact of the church in the differences was for both Barth and the Oxford organizers the result of human finitude and sin, “the impossible thing which has intruded itself, as guilt which we must take upon ourselves, without the power to liberate ourselves from it,” wrote Barth.²¹ These themes regarding the reality and imperative of this paradox would be taken up more specifically in CFCL by writers including William Temple, Reinhold Niebuhr, John Bennett and others. Perhaps with a glance to Stockholm, Visser ’t Hooft and Oldham concluded, as well, that the “present *impasse* is a sign that unity cannot be made by men, but can only be acknowledged and received when God actually gives it.”²² This dynamism, then, eschewed any attempt to provide a static conception of the church. Rather, it saw the church as finding its being and mission within historical reality. In his review of the history of the Churches, making distinctions between the Roman Catholic Church; the churches in Great Britain, Europe and the United States, and the “Younger Churches” of Asia and Africa, Visser ’t

¹⁹ Karl Barth, *The Church and the Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 22.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Visser ’t Hooft and Oldham, *The Church and Its Function in Society*, 95.

Hooft emphasized the perpetual need to attend to the historical context of the church, claiming that “it is impossible to understand a Church apart from its concrete setting.”²³

According to Barth, this did not, nor could not, require that an ecclesiological space be found apart from the reality of divided churches in order to settle doctrine or ethics. Barth, not surprisingly, insisted that churches, individually when necessary, but together as well, ask themselves if they are indeed following the voice of Christ, “or just some magical, aesthetic, or rationalist bent?”²⁴ In wrestling with this question and confronting the mundanely inevitable differences and contradictions between the churches that would be made evident in the exchange, the true church, the church in the churches, would be made visible. This ecumenical understanding was the ground for the work of the Oxford Conference, recognizing the reality of a unity that is the church within the churches, but refusing to attempt the task of concretizing the nature of the church, which would risk obscuring the reality of the true, unified church. As we have cited earlier, Visser ’t Hooft wrote,

The position is, then, that we believe together that there is a Church in the Churches, but that we cannot say together how and where it exists, or how and where it functions. . . . It is . . . humanly speaking, impossible to discover how out of [the] different approaches we may come to one common conviction as to what the Church in the Churches really is, and how it should be concretely expressed in oecumenical form. There is no “way out” of this situation. For every so-called “way out” proves in fact to be an element which complicates the situation even more. We are therefore obliged to recognize the fact of our *disagreement* as to the *nature* of the Church as well as the fact of our *agreement* as to the *reality of the Church*. . . . Unity is not achieved; but it *happens* when men listen together to God, and when He is willing to give it to them.²⁵

²³ Ibid., 59.

²⁴ Barth, *The Church and the Churches*, 55.

²⁵ Visser ’t Hooft and Oldham, *The Church and Its Function in Society*, 94–95.

The reality of both unity and diversity, requiring a consistent engagement across divisions of culture and doctrinal understandings, in which men and women listen to God and to each other, constituted a responsible ecclesiology. The very nature of the church, as is the nature of the human, is responsible. Within this understanding the church is the responsible church when it acknowledges through its words and actions the value and dignity of the human actor, and the reality of God's presence within the Other.

The second ecclesial stream we find within the Oxford Conference work is grounded in the church's obedience and responsibility to God, and its responsibility to discern the will of God and proclaim the Gospel. The Conference then would be more than an attempt to study and illuminate the contrasts of the churches within the Church on matters of social ethics, but to "be ready, if God wills, to speak on behalf of the *Ekklesia Theou*." The Conference output would provide guidance to members of the Church, a Church transcendent of human-made boundaries of the state and the churches, in meeting the challenges of the world that resisted solutions from the "pagan or semi-pagan philosophies and principles" that totalitarian political schemes presented.²⁶ The Conference would not define how it would be used, but would be ready to be used as a witness to the reality of the reign of God.

Such a move would affirm the Barthian demand for obedience to the Word of God, in which political action moves from and analogous with the Gospel, but proceeds further into the reality of political history, grounding the temporal work of the church in a Christian anthropology and the doctrine of the Kingdom of God. We have seen that within this stream, Conference writers explored the relation of the Kingdom of God and history, grounding there the ongoing social function of the church. Prominent here is Paul Tillich's essay, in which he writes

²⁶ Ibid., 97.

of the Kingdom not as a completion, a restoration of an original position, or a “unity of eternal essences,” but a “becoming” within the historical struggle.²⁷

Analogous to this line of thought, the Conference saw its own effort for unity as a light to the church’s nature and potential in history, illuminating not only the reality of differences and commonalities, but of the effects of culture and sin on that very perception of reality. “In its light we become troubled in our consciences about the self-satisfaction and complacency of our Churches, and learn to pray that God may give us the unity which we ourselves are unable to realize.”²⁸

A responsible ecclesiology at Oxford thus moved beyond what Barth could abide, as we have mentioned earlier, with contributors insisting that the Church, in its responsibility, must engage historical context and contingency through a dialogue that comprised church and society, recognizing the possibility of God’s revelation within the process. The process would deeply engage the whole of the church, beyond the academy and the pulpit.

The Ordering of Society

The concepts of subsidiarity and sphere sovereignty provided foundation for what would be Oxford’s unyielding commitment to the role of the laity in its theory of responsibility. While the church had its particular role in and of itself within overall society, it also maintained a level of responsibility for the proper social functioning of other segments of society. This included the equipping of laity for their responsible work within these spheres, which were, in fact, the prime

²⁷ Tillich, “The Kingdom of God and History,” 118.

²⁸ Visser ’t Hooft and Oldham, *The Church and Its Function in Society*, 95.

area of historical action for the laity over against the formal representatives of the church, as we will address further below.

Systematic theologian Werner Wiesner of Halle, Germany, wrote in CFCL of the role of the church in regard to the social spheres that comprise human culture. While humans could not dispense of the cultural institutions of gender, family, nation and state without being irresponsible, responsibility required attention by the church in moving persons to shape them according to divine will. “For as social institutions give a form to our intercourse with each other, they cannot be regarded as ethically neutral territory; we are as responsible for the institutions in which our intercourse is carried on as for that intercourse itself. Hence, all quietism which would leave the social order to itself, and forget our responsibility to shape it according to the Will of God [*sic*] must be rejected.”²⁹

Where the church abdicated its responsibility in this function was in assuming the role for itself, rather than addressing the responsibility of equipping laity, in the field, so to speak, for the work of vocation informed by Christian values. Oldham decried the “lack of clarity” on behalf of the church that “impeded and paralysed” laypersons in their responsibility for historical action in their context. For this work, laity certainly required a depth of theological scholarship and needed such thought to be placed in service to the contingent and contextual demands of history. To be responsible however, theological thought required conversation with sister components of society. Drawing from the work of Cambridge’s C. H. Dodd, who would contribute to the volume on *The Kingdom of God and History*, Oldham cited the need for the church to “grasp the

²⁹ Werner Wiesner, “The Law of Nature and Social Institutions,” in *Christian Faith and the Common Life*, by Nils Ehrenström, et al, vol. 4, The Church, Community, and State Series (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd, 1938), 127.

whole first-century Gospel in its temporary, historical, and therefore actual reality, and then make the bold and even perilous attempt to translate the whole into contemporary terms.”³⁰

Theological thought, Oldham argued, required engagement with voices beyond the field, not simply as sources, but as equal partners in the endeavor. This did not mean simply cross-disciplinary academic cooperation, but “living and direct” engagement beyond the church and academy. “Theological thought will acquire a new relevance to the actual life of our time, if opportunities can be created for theologians to meet in personal conference with those responsible for the conduct of public affairs and of industry, with representatives of labour, with educators and members of other professions, and learn from them at what points Christian doctrine is relevant to their responsibilities, experience, problems, and needs.”³¹

Orders of Creation

To support this engagement of the church with wider society, Oxford worked to recognize the sovereignty and activity of God in God’s creation, drawing on concepts such as the Lutheran concept of Orders of Creation. Brunner, publishing in 1932 *Das Gebot und die Ordnungen*, which would be translated as *The Divine Imperative*, outlined in his ethic the concept of the created “Orders”, which he defined as general laws of creation for the preservation and continuation of life that confront and engage the human in a communal context. These orders are more than laws, but are “those existing facts of human corporate life which lie at the root of all historical life as unalterable presuppositions, which, although their historical

³⁰ Visser ’t Hooft and Oldham, *The Church and Its Function in Society*, 164–65; Oldham cites Dodd’s 1936 inaugural lecture at Cambridge *The Present Task in New Testament Studies* *ibid.*, n. 165:1.

³¹ Visser ’t Hooft and Oldham, *The Church and Its Function in Society*, 165–66.

forms may vary, are unalterable in their fundamental structure, and at the same time, relate and unite men to one another in a definite way.³² It is in these “spheres of life” that order the common life where God’s will meets humanity. In his *Nature and Grace*, that had received such repudiation from Barth, and had so rattled the Oxford Conference organizers, Brunner described the ordinances as “the constant factors of historical and social life.” Particular orders, such as marriage, Brunner distinguished as an “ordinance of creation,” as it was divinely instituted. Others he placed in the category of “ordinance of preservation,” which he saw as a theological response to the reality of sin, such as the ordinance of the State.³³ Within these two classifications Brunner identified the orders as marriage and the family; labor and economics; law and state; culture comprising science, art, education and ‘free forms of community;’ and faith and church.

The Orders played a significant role within the Oxford Conference, not only by providing some structure around the discussion of the nature of society to which the church engaged, but also the occasion for the Conference’s opposition to the rise of German nationalism and its impact on the German church and the Jewish people. Within CFCL, several contributors addressed the nature of the Orders as instituted or willed by God, with the volume leaving the matter unresolved by design. Reinhold Niebuhr, in his extended discussion of natural law, called the “undue religious reverence for the ‘order of creation’ ... particularly dangerous, because in human history the partial loyalties of the natural world always contain an element of sin which

³² Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, 210.

³³ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology: Comprising “Nature and Grace” by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the Reply “No!” By Dr. Karl Barth*, 29–30.

does not belong to the order of nature.”³⁴ Heidelberg’s Martin Dibelius affirmed Brunner’s distinctions, differentiating the orders of historical life, and, with Niebuhr, acknowledging the ambiguity introduced by sin within created life, which, he pointed out, “some German theologians call it demonic.”³⁵ In contrast, while recognizing the historical limitations on the Orders, Wiesner argued that God had given “to historical and personal powers the authority to rule and judge us. It is not to ‘the State’ and ‘the nations’ as impersonal institutions that we are subject. The only question for the Christian is: Who has the power and, therefore, the divine authority? – whether a king, or a dictator, a national leader or a parliamentary majority.”³⁶

The tensions and differences in interpreting the Orders and the relation of responsibility to them were evident and were allowed to stand, with a realist lens taking a prime place in interpretation. While Oxford did not explicitly identify them as such, its research sections can be aligned with Brunner’s delineation of the Orders. As we have outlined, the research sections focused on Church and Community; Church and State; Church Community and State in Relation to the Economic Order; Church, Community and State in Relation to Education; and The Universal Church and the World of Nations. In its work in these areas, the Conference was organized so as to illumine in process and content the responsibility of the church in relation to the so-called ordinances. As part of this process, the organizers labored to delineate these responsibilities in a fashion that redeemed and confirmed the role of the church, while respecting and empowering the particular purviews of the various orders. This did not mean, however, that

³⁴ Niebuhr, “Christian Faith and the Common Life,” 80.

³⁵ Martin Dibelius, “The Message of the New Testament and the Orders of Human Society,” in *Christian Faith and the Common Life*, by Nils Ehrenström, et al, vol. 4, The Church, Community, and State Series (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd, 1938), 24–25.

³⁶ Wiesner, “The Law of Nature and Social Institutions,” 126.

the church would be neutral in these relations, but would in its responsibility attend upon the ordinances of God to hold the ordinances of society accountable to God's will, empowering those Christians in their vocations outside of the church to take their freedom and responsibility to work for justice within creation and history.

Subsidiarity

Such an effort resonated with the Roman Catholic principle of subsidiarity, described in the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* from Pius XI in 1931 during the years in which the Oxford Conference was being planned.³⁷ Subsidiarity is generally understood as a principle in which responsibility flows through a hierarchy of societal groups and institutions to the lowest or most foundational level that can reasonably be expected to achieve a particular social good. As Charles Curran points out in his work on Roman Catholic ecclesiology, there is a tendency that the church at its highest levels usurps roles and responsibilities better left to lower levels. Subsidiarity would instruct that “the higher level should help the lower level do all that it can and only take for itself that which cannot be done properly on the lower level.”³⁸

³⁷ Pope Pius XI wrote in his encyclical commemorating the 40th anniversary of Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, “(I)t is a fundamental principle of social philosophy, fixed and unchangeable, that one should not withdraw from individuals and commit to the community what they can accomplish by their own enterprise and industry. So, too, it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and a disturbance of right order to transfer to the larger and higher collectivity functions which can be performed and provided for by lesser and subordinate bodies. Inasmuch as every social activity should, by its very nature, prove a help to members of the body social, it should never destroy or absorb them.” Pius XI. *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), para. 79. David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, eds., *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 60.

³⁸ Charles E. Curran, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today: A Synthesis* (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 1999), 9; Drawing from John Mahoney, “Subsidiarity in the Church,” *Month* 21 (1988); 968-74. *Ibid.*, n. 1.29.

The principle would contribute to Oxford's contributions, particularly regarding issues of the State. Ehronström, in a text originally intended for distribution to Conference delegates, but not published until after the Conference, draws on the concepts of orders and subsidiarity, particularly in relation to the state. Citing Luther's concept that "God wills the diversity of institutions and associations" as a "universal Christian conviction," Ehronström acknowledges Protestant wariness regarding Catholic doctrine regarding subsidiarity and the state, yet works to draw the two concepts together, quoting at length from Brunner's work. "The functions of marriage, of the family, of economics and technique, of culture and education are not primarily concerned with the purpose of the state at all save in the fact that the state creates the framework for these institutions. Since, however, all these functions are menaced by evil, the state intervenes in order to compensate for the disintegration in fallen human nature. But so far as all these orders are concerned its function is clearly a subsidiary one."³⁹

Likewise, Conference contributor William Temple, writing in the years following the Conference, would affirm the constructive nature of the relationship between societal groups and institutions, suggesting that "wider loyalties" are put to use to check the more narrow

³⁹ Drawn from Brunner's *Totaler Staat und christliche Freiheit*. Nils Ehrenström, *Christian Faith and the Modern State: An Ecumenical Approach*, trans. Denzil G. M. Patrick and Olive Wyon, vol. 9, The Official Oxford Conference Books (Chicago: Willett, Clark & Company, 1937), 145–46; Ehronström, acknowledging the priority of the state, claimed as well a priority for the church, recognizing the state's common ambivalence to "the considerations and concerns of the Christian ethos. ... The central problem with which we are wrestling and must continue to wrestle in ecumenical Christendom is a twofold one: What freedom and independence must the church demand for the development of its own life in order that it may rightfully fulfill its God-given task? Further, what standards does the Christian understanding of life set up to guide our attitude toward the different problems of the relation of the authority of the state to the individual life of the various social institutions ... and in what does the concrete responsibility of the church and of Christians consist in this sphere." *Ibid.*, 149, 151.

commitments.⁴⁰ These narrow commitments would include those “organic” cultural institutions, such as economics and religion that developed in human society, which, according to Ehronström would retain their “ontological purity” over the wider loyalties, such as the state.⁴¹

While shaping the parameters of the Conference’s research sections and published output, the influence of the concept of subsidiarity also informed the work of the Conference in two other significant ways. First, it demanded that the scope of involvement move beyond the church’s mere internal reflection on the various spheres toward the inclusion of persons outside the church with particular expertise in the areas of concern, which we will discuss below. Second, it posited that such inclusion was not merely instrumental for the work of the church, but was integral to the church’s self-understanding and responsibility.

Sphere Sovereignty

Along with the work done with the Orders, the Oxford organizers would also resonate with the work of the late nineteenth century Calvinist theologian Abraham Kuyper, who developed a less hierarchical explication of “sphere sovereignty,” further developed by philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd in the mid-twentieth century. Dooyeweerd’s work sought, in part, to maintain for the concept its religious foundations. “Sphere sovereignty guarantees each societal sphere an intrinsic nature and law of life. And with this guarantee it provides the basis for an original sphere of authority and competence derived not from the authority of any other

⁴⁰ Temple, *Christianity and Social Order*, 53.

⁴¹ Ehrenström, *Christian Faith and the Modern State*, 146.

sphere but directly from the sovereign authority of God”⁴² Sphere sovereignty recognized in the distinct orders this divinely-created responsibility for a unique social contribution for the right ordering of the social structure, along with an interrelationship between the spheres that, when operating responsibly, both enabled and respected the unique position of the respective sphere. Writes Kuyper, “All these spheres interlock like cogwheels, and precisely in acting upon one another and in meshing with one another, they produce the rich, multifaceted variety of human society. But this also brings with it the danger that one sphere may break in upon another like a jerky cogwheel that shears off one cog after another until the operation of the entire machine is disrupted.”⁴³

Conference organizers saw in Kuyper’s work the foundation for the necessary work of the church across various societal spheres, particularly in regard to the relation between church and state. In its commission study prepared for the Conference, the Ecumenical Council in the Netherlands noted, for example, what they viewed as Kuyper’s rare “stand for a more organic social order, but as State and Church as such have held aloof,” noting the exception of the Roman Catholic encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno*. Critiquing what it saw as the State and the Church’s acquiescence to the individualistic doctrines of economic freedom, the Dutch delegation heralded the labor movement, unsupported by the church, as an example of bridging “the gulf between Christianity and the further development of economic relations.”⁴⁴

⁴² From Herman Dooyeweerd. *Roots of Western Culture* (1959) in James W. Skillen and Rockne M. McCarthy, eds., *Political Order and the Plural Structure of Society*, Emory University Studies in Law and Religion 2 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 285.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁴⁴ “Memorandum of a Commission Set up by the Ecumenical Council in the Netherlands, for Study of the Subjects Proposed for Discussion at the Oxford Conference of 1937” (Geneva, undated), 16, Folder 213.11.3.12/10, World Council of Churches Library and Archives.

Within society, the church had a responsibility and an authority to engage with other spheres of society, placing upon them the church's finite and dynamic discernment of the will of God for justice. Those Christians in the labor movement, equipped with the values of the Gospel and the church's best discernment, would, in their respective vocations, take their responsibility and authority for the application and advancement of that justice through their relationships and their technical decisions and actions toward the achievement of justice.

Responsibility and the Laity

For Oldham, the church's responsibility within the Oxford Conference was to mobilize "the best Christian thought of the world" that would intentionally include lay voices along with the input of the theological elite, which he saw as a unique and providential opportunity.⁴⁵

Oldham expressed such hopes in correspondence with Francis P. Miller, who was at the time the chair of the World Student Christian Foundation, and would go on to help found the Council on Foreign Relations. Responding to Miller's critique of the Conference preparation and supposed lack of American participation, Oldham wrote of those involved in the preparatory work. "I am not disposed to limit this inner circle of collaborators to academic people. We are definitely trying to make links with people who are concerned with the active life of the world, with the younger generation and with the working man."⁴⁶ In this effort toward a wider conversation Oldham saw not only as a corrective to a narrow academic view, but a necessary starting point to make the work of the Conference effective and applicable on national and global scales. To not

⁴⁵ "JHO to John Mott," November 14, 1934, Box 7, Folder 5, Oldham Papers, University of Edinburgh, New College Library, Edinburgh.

⁴⁶ "JHO to Francis Miller," June 3, 1936, Box 8, Folder 2, Oldham Papers, University of Edinburgh, New College Library, Edinburgh.

include such voices was an abdication of responsibility on behalf of the church, and, as Oldham had indicated, a waste of time.

From the beginning of the preparations, Oldham was ever vigilant in working to expand the circle of contributors beyond the ecumenical elite comprising theological scholars and dominant ecclesial leaders. In a letter written to Archbishop Temple in July of 1933 Oldham sought to organize a meeting at the archbishop's office in York that would specifically bring in lay persons for the planning of the Conference. In the letter he suggested among others the American-born British writer and poet T.S. Eliot. "He has the essentially lay mind and would, I think, make a contribution which we are not so likely to get from any of the others." Oldham was particularly concerned with breaking from the norms of ecumenical discussion bound to conservative frameworks. He recounted his first meeting with Eliot in which he mentioned the name of the prominent ecumenist and missionary movement leader John Mott, himself a layperson, to which Eliot reportedly asked, "Who is John Mott?" to which Oldham replied "You have delighted me by your question since it shows that I have at last really got outside the religious world."⁴⁷ Eliot would serve on the Oxford Conference's Advisory Council in Great Britain, along with other prominent laypersons, and go on to serve as a delegate to the Conference, presenting on the church as an ecumenical society. He would later be part of Oldham's The Moot in the years following.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ "JHO to William Temple," July 18, 1933, Box 6, Oldham Papers, University of Edinburgh, New College Library, Edinburgh.

⁴⁸ The letterhead of the Advisory Council shows prominent laity along with theologians and clergy, including Thomas Boase, a British art historian who would later serve as vice-chancellor at Oxford; H. Wilson Harris, editor of *The Spectator*, member of the League of Nations Union, and later MP from Cambridge University; The Marquess of Lothian, Phillip Kerr, a member of the House of Lords, a diplomat, and later ambassador to the United States (Lothian would also contribute to the Oxford volumes); Baron John Radcliffe Maud, then dean of University College

In the introduction to the report of the Conference, Oldham emphasized what he sought to embody in the composition of the Conference, namely a diversity of thought from throughout the church and society, that would include a significant number of laity, for it was within the laity that responsibility and the mundane power for the transformation of society resided. Any mission that the church would accept would be first, from God, but, second, would be carried out by the laity. Along with delegates appointed by the various Churches, the Universal Christian Council had consulted for additional delegates from among the laity, representing “other departments of knowledge besides theology and possessing practical experience of public affairs. It would have been absurd for the Conference to have considered the relation of the Church to the common life, to government, to the economic order, and to international questions without the help of those who had expert knowledge and experience of actual responsibility in these fields.”⁴⁹

A review of the Oxford volumes published following the Conference confirms Oldham’s relative success in including laypersons at the core of the effort. These contributors, while not necessarily representing the “working man” of Oldham’s rhetoric, but comprising a cross-section of largely western male elite, they offered viewpoints beyond the appropriate boundaries of the church institutionally, ecumenically and ecclesiologically. These voices included academics from the United States, Great Britain and throughout Europe, from fields including education, international relations, law, pedagogy, philosophy, political science, and psychology. Three of

at Oxford; and Arnold Rowntree, a former MP, businessman and philanthropist. “Eric Fenn to Suzanne de Dietrich,” March 11, 1937, 1, Folder 213.11.3.12/13, World Council of Churches Library and Archives; Derr, Thomas S., “The Political Thought of the Ecumenical Movement: 1900-1939,” n. 465.33.

⁴⁹ Oldham et al., *The Churches Survey Their Task: The Report of the Conference at Oxford, July 1937, on Church, Community, and State*, 11–13.

the five research sections were chaired by laypersons with vocations outside the church and theological academy.⁵⁰

The Church's Function in Society

As we have seen, the concepts of subsidiarity and sphere sovereignty provided foundation for Oxford's unyielding commitment to the role of the laity in its theory of responsibility. While the church had its particular role in and of itself within overall society, it also maintained a level of responsibility for the proper social functioning of other segments of society. This included the equipping of laity for their responsible work within these spheres, which were, in fact, the prime area of historical action for the laity over against the formal representatives of the church. The Oxford Conference argued that it was the laity to whom responsibility moved in regard to God's activity in public affairs, and it was the Church's responsibility to equip the laity for that work through an inculcation of Christian values, spiritual formation, and a commitment to historical action.

⁵⁰ Political scientist Walter Moberly, who was at the time chair of Great Britain's Universities Grants Committee, chaired the section on Church and Community. Swiss scholar of International Law and president of the International Committee of the Red Cross Max Huber chaired the section on Church and State. Baron John Maud of Oxford's University College, led the section on Church, Community, and State in Relation to the Economic Order. Theologians chaired the remaining two sections. Henry Sloane Coffin, president of New York's Union Theological Seminary, led the section on Church, Community, and State in Relation to Education; and John MacKay, president of Princeton Theological Seminary, chaired The Universal Church and the World of Nations. Among the many contributors from the laity to the Oxford volumes published following the Conference were Ernest Baker, then professor of Political Science at Cambridge, writing on "Church and Community;" diplomat John Foster Dulles, who penned "The Problem of Peace in a Dynamic World;" and Philip Kerr, the Marquess of Lothian, writing on "The Demonic Influence of National Sovereignty." Oldham et al., *The Churches Survey Their Task: The Report of the Conference at Oxford, July 1937, on Church, Community, and State*.

In discussing the Church's function in society, Oldham made three distinctions, first, between the Church of faith, and the Church as an institution; second, as a congregation in worship and as acting in the world; and third, the distinction between clergy and laity.

Over against the Church as comprising persons active and united in discipleship to Jesus Christ, the Conference also understood the Church as a cultural institution, albeit connected to the divine, organized for worship, education, support and service. Drawing upon Troeltsch's distinctions between "church" and "sect," Oldham described the established western Church as one in which tensions with the world had largely relaxed, bringing forth Churches that, in the words of Reinhold Niebuhr, were "mixed bodies" in which "the Christian name becomes little more than 'a quasi-religious and quasi-cultural enterprise, which is frequently content to add a pious phrase to whatever values, cultural, social, and political, the community may be pursuing.'"⁵¹

The Church comprised persons that were a worshiping community with various degrees of commitment to the principles, commitments and responsibilities inherent within the Gospel of Jesus Christ. At the same time among those persons were "a company of redeemed persons transplanted into a new sphere of life in which their actions are determined by new principles" and a commitment to "a God who has a will and purpose for the world."⁵² The Church then existed for the world and fulfilled its mission as it was attentive to God's mission within the world. That mission would be achieved through the equipping of laity to act out of their own freedom and historical context for the transformation of society.

⁵¹ Quoting Reinhold Niebuhr from *The Christian Century*, 4 November 1936. Visser 't Hooft and Oldham, *The Church and Its Function in Society*, 114.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 116.

(I)f the Christian faith is in the present and future to bring about changes ... in the thought, habits, and practices of society, it can only do this through being the living, working faith of multitudes of lay men and women conducting the ordinary affairs of life. The only way in which it can affect business or politics is by shaping the convictions and determining the actions of those engaged in business and politics. It remains inoperative and unproductive except in so far as it becomes a principle of action in the lives of those who are actually carrying on the work of the world and ordering its course in one direction or another. Obvious as this truth is ... it does not, in fact, fill any large place in the picture called up in our minds when we use the word Church. The word does not in the least suggest the work of the world. It suggests Sunday, and what happens on Sunday. We can hardly exaggerate the loss resulting from this restriction of meaning.⁵³

The Oxford Conference interpreted this restriction of meaning as an abdication of responsibility that threatened to subsume the Church to State and secular forces that further threatened human freedom and existence.

While recognizing the Church's "constitutive functions" – the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments – the Conference warned that the Church's attempt to protect its authority in regard to these functions at the expense of wider expressions of the Church contributed to this abdication. Oldham lamented a growing clericalism that shifted the responsibility of the laity to that of benefactors for the institution of the church, rather than for the transformation of society in service to God's will. "Insistence on the essential, constitutive functions may lead too easily in practice ... to a disastrous ecclesiasticising of the Church, so that it becomes primarily an affair and interest of the clergy and pastors and theologians rather than a community of redeemed men and women joyfully serving God in the ordinary concerns of the common life."⁵⁴ The Church as an organized institution was not an end for itself, but existed

⁵³ Ibid., 117.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 156.

for the sake of the world and was operative in the work of the laity, to whom it had the responsibility of equipping for that work.

In his chapter on “The Witness and Action of the Church in the Corporate Life” in CFS, Oldham drew from Brunner’s *The Divine Imperative*. ““Retreat from the actual world would mean that ‘real action would be entirely withdrawn from the influence of the Christian ethic. It is *here*, in this borderland between technical action and ethics – in economics, in politics, in public life – that the great decisions are made. If the Christian ethic fails at this point, it fails all along the line.’”⁵⁵ The theme set for the Conference rooted Christian ethics in actual history to create a bulwark against a view of religion as a retreat into personal piety or eschatological idealism, that, while offering balm for the capriciousness of life’s vagaries, worked as a diversion from the responsible task of entering into the struggle for human freedom and community. Instead, theology and ethics served to move the church into the concrete experiences of the common life through its equipping of the laity for the mission of God in the contexts in which they lived and worked.

This equipping was not necessarily about empowering isolated action, but action resulting from Christian fellowship and solidarity, and obedience to the will of God. For the church, in this responsibility, Oldham outlined three “lines of advance,” themes to which the Conference worked to facilitate. These lines included, first, the integration of the church’s spiritual and pastoral ministries to the contingent and contextual tasks of the common life; second, concrete ethical guidance regarding the sphere of public conduct, not only through didactic measures, but in an increase in intentional mutual support and discernment, and, third, building upon the two former themes, the increase of the utilization of small groups, including

⁵⁵ Ibid., 189–90.

groups based on geographic context, that could address issues at the neighborhood and community level, as well as groups organized by vocation, much like professional guilds. This advance would, Oxford claimed, lead to societal transformation from within, saving it from “the aridity and shallowness of secularism” through the inculcation of responsibility in the daily tasks of common life, described by pioneering psychologist William James as “invisible molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual, stealing in through the crannies of the world like so many soft rootlets, or like the capillary oozing of water, and yet rending the hardest monuments of man’s pride, if you give them time.”⁵⁶

These tasks were not the tasks of the organized church. The task of the organized church were to provide the thought and tools necessary to discern the will of God and to empower acts in accordance with the Gospel of Jesus Christ such that laity might act with responsibility in their context. The church in its responsibility was to equip the laity with the moral imagination to enter into the vocation of ministry within the context and contingencies of history. It was in this role that the power of the church would be released. “It is not the function of the clergy to tell the laity how to act in public affairs, but to confront them with the Christian demand and to encourage them to discover its application for themselves.”⁵⁷ At the core of this responsibility was the prophetic and teaching office of the church, which the organizers of the Conference saw as particularly urgent in the situation in which the church found itself on the eve of World War II.

⁵⁶ Oldham quotes from *Letters of William James*, vol. ii, p. 90. Ibid., 203.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 209.

The Education and Responsibility of the Laity

In its social responsibility the church's attention is not given over to the establishment of a social program or the control of political structure, but on the inculcation of responsibility to the laity which comprise it. In the volume concerning the role of the church and education, Oldham wrote "Because of the indissoluble unity of the human person the Church must hold unwaveringly to the truth that the Gospel is something that is beyond human control and, hence, outside educational processes, and at the same time be profoundly and actively interested in those processes, lest they interpose insuperable hindrances to the understanding and receiving of the Gospel."⁵⁸ Writing with Visser 't Hooft, he places on those receiving the Gospel the responsibility for affecting the world. "(I)f the Christian faith is ... to bring about changes ... in the thought, habits and practices of society, it can only do this through being the living, working faith of multitudes of lay men and women conducting the ordinary affairs of life."⁵⁹

Here then the church assumed a responsibility for education, not only to provide the necessary "disciplined sense of obligation" but, more importantly "the unfettered development of the individual's capacities" especially concerning the preservation of liberty, obedience to God, and the concomitant responsibility to one's neighbor and the conditions that make such service possible.⁶⁰ The Oxford Conference sought to embody this responsibility in its production of post-conference volumes and study guides, meant for the consumption and discernment of the churches and the laity who comprised them.

⁵⁸ Oldham, J.H. "Some Concluding Reflections" in *Church Community, and State in Relation to Education*, Clarke, Fred et. al. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1938) 227.

⁵⁹ Visser 't Hooft and Oldham, *The Church and Its Function in Society*, 117.

⁶⁰ Oldham, J.H. et al. *The Churches Survey Their Task*. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1937. 142-143.

This points again to the role of the church in working to discern the will of God in the context of history. Ehrenström writes, “(I)t is imperative for the Church to gain a clearer sense of the meaning of her own ethos, its central affirmations, main criteria, and its practical implications, both for the ordinary pursuits of daily life and for the exercise of Christian responsibility towards the larger issues of a changing society.”⁶¹ This clearer sense of meaning would come through the processes such as that being engaged by the Conference, which demanded that differences in Christian thought and conviction be made apparent in continuing dialogue, with goal of not simply finding commonalities or solutions, but to maintain an openness to the issues in the face of the reality of human history. Ehrenström noted for example, the conflicts within the papers collected for CFCL, including contributions from William Temple, Reinhold Niebuhr and John Bennett.

The reader will soon become aware of the great, and to some extent irreconcilable, differences, which emerge in these papers; they reflect the tragic divisions in the Body of Christ which also exist in the social realm, divergencies [*sic*] which are not only conditioned by legitimate differences of judgment on the actual situation and its demands, but also by the central convictions of faith. . . . But it is impossible to discover what the authentic Christian ethos is and what it means for the present world by concealing these divisions; it can only be done by an honest facing of facts and by bringing all these difficulties out into the open.⁶²

These differences included Reinhold Niebuhr’s discussion of rationality in relation to Christian faith and ethics over against Wiesner’s opposition to Natural Law thought in theology.⁶³

⁶¹ Ehrenström et al., *Christian Faith and the Common Life*, 8.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶³ Niebuhr had written “The dimension of an ethical system are [*sic*] in the realm of art; and art is the form of faith. But the details of an ethical system have the same relation to the outlines set by faith as has the engineering of the architect to the art of the architect. There can be no social ethic for the common life without the contribution of reason.” Niebuhr, “Christian Faith and the Common Life,” 93; Wiesner, on the other hand, had written, “Scripture does not set over us as divine laws any impersonal and static orders, whether ascribed to creation or to preservation, nor

In his essay, Dibelius posited that such a dialogue required both a recognition of the need for “radical obedience” to the will of God in a context in which all that is “relative and provisional.” Thus, Dibelius argued, the character of the Christian ethic is dynamic, developed in the context of historical contingency and human finitude. “For [the Christian ethic] there is no absolutely binding static doctrine of values or goods or virtues. God speaks ever afresh to men, by bringing them into new situations. The preaching and teaching of the Church must accordingly seek to understand the radical obedience of faith ever anew, and to teach its application to changed situations.”⁶⁴ The work of Christian formation and the discernment of the will of God in history was an ongoing task of the church.

In the Oxford Conference volume, *Church, Community, and State in Relation to Education*, contributors addressed the overall threats to education in general presented by totalitarianism and secularism, as well particular threats and opportunities in relation to Christian education in particular. In addressing the perceived crisis in Christian education, James W. D. Smith, then general secretary of both the Scottish Sunday School Union for Christian Education and the United Council for Missionary Education, illuminated the lacuna that opened up within education in relation to the spiritual within human existence through the particular focus on the object of the human as a political, economic and biological entity. He saw this as evident within a Russian ethos of atheism, as well as in a repudiation of Christian ethics in Germany. True to the contributions of Reinhold Niebuhr’s Christian realism, Smith posited with the responsibility

any rational human structures such as the State, but personal powers.” Wiesner, “The Law of Nature and Social Institutions,” 126.

⁶⁴ Ehrenström et al., *Christian Faith and the Common Life*, 34.

of the church the need to recognize these contextual forces in which religious or spiritual worldviews were minimal or absent.

The Church does not exist to create a social Utopia nor can it ally itself with political or social groups. But it should act as a ferment within the life of society, cleansing and re-creating the social and economic fabric by the proclamation of Christian values and by the thought and life of its members. This demands a high standard of spiritual sensitiveness, for the pressure of current standards is subtle and persistent. The prophetic note is constantly in danger of being stifled by the weight of tradition and the Church is apt to respond too slowly to the ethical implication of social and industrial changes.⁶⁵

The emphasis on Christian formation beyond theological inquiry for its own sake as an urgent responsibility for the survival of the church in society was echoed by Philipp Kohnstamm, then director of the University of Amsterdam's Institute of Education. Trained in thermodynamics and philosophy, Kohnstamm warned against the intellectualization of Christianity over against faith formation. "Far be it from me to deny the importance of theological formulation, as though one should claim that Christian living, and therefore Christian education, are possible without knowledge and so without instruction. But the more I have studied, not only children and young people, but adults as well, the clearer has it become to me that doctrine can only really mould life when it is itself the expression of an experience that is anchored deeper in our personality than any purely intellectual knowledge of understanding."⁶⁶

While the church as an organized society would stand outside the activities of the social and political life, its responsibility to society would be discharged by the responsible lives and actions of the laity who comprised the church. It was these persons for whom the church was

⁶⁵ Fred Clarke et al., *Church, Community, and State in Relation to Education*, trans. E.L. Allen and L. Goodfellow, vol. 6, The Church, Community, and State Series (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd, 1938), 126.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

accountable for responsible formation spiritually, didactically and practically. The church in this relationship would, like the state, find itself in a unique societal position, acting not as an autonomous sphere of influence alongside other autonomous units, but as one with responsible oversight across society. It would be the laity, taking their diverse places within society, who would exercise this influence and oversight. As Oldham summarized, “The Christian laity participate in these activities [of social and political life]. Transformation from within is immeasurably more effective than any influence that can be brought to bear from without.”⁶⁷

Cambridge political scientist, Ernest Barker, warned that a church that sought to withdraw from the world, and to move its members into this renunciation of the world, was both anathema to the mission of God and to human freedom and could be considered a form of Christian totalitarianism. Human freedom required that an individual be free to engage community across multiple commitments and loyalties, each with different, and at times, competing duties. This was the reality of contingent historical action, as well as a requirement of Christian responsibility. It was the duty of the church to equip the individual with the moral and missional development “to conciliate different loyalties, and to bring different duties, when they conflict, into harmony.” Baker continued to outline the responsibility of the church and its members.

If the church has a mission to the whole community, its members must take their place in groups other than the church and carry the mission of the Word into these groups. ... The uniqueness of the church, as a society among the other societies of the community, is not the uniqueness of a self-contained and total society which peculiarly absorbs its members. It is the uniqueness of a society operating as a leader, *through its individual members*, in the service of other societies and of the whole community – a society which fulfills, *through them*, in those other

⁶⁷ Visser 't Hooft and Oldham, *The Church and Its Function in Society*, 191.

societies, and in the whole community, the mission imposed upon it by its custody of the Word and the motion of the Spirit.⁶⁸

Here Oxford Responsibility situates the human actor, rooted in dignity and freedom, in historical context and contingency. In that situation the actor is confronted with relationship with the Other as indicative of human existence at the core of responsibility. This core component requires the church, in its responsibility to the laity, and its responsibility for their education and formation, to remain keenly and continually attentive to context and contingency of historical action as well, in relationship with other societies within community. While the church is not responsible for the economy or the states' operations, for example, it takes a responsible place in moving the laity to realize and become equipped to accept their own responsibility for how the economy and state runs. Here the church acknowledges that God is active in history, and takes its role as that which sheds light on this activity, such that the laity can engage with missional imagination the incarnational work of God in the context of history.

Christian Realism and the Oxford Conference

Within the method followed by the Oxford Conference and in its output, one can see the significant influence of the work of Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian realism. Oldham's interest in the work of Reinhold Niebuhr steadily increased as preparations for the Oxford Conference progressed, leading to an invitation to Niebuhr join the preparatory group and to submit an essay as a representative of younger theologians within the Conference discourse. Niebuhr, eight years into his position at New York's Union Theological Seminary, had published several significant texts providing post-World War and post-Social Gospel arguments toward a new Christian

⁶⁸ Kenneth S. Latourette, ed., *Church and Community*, vol. 5, *The Official Oxford Conference Books* (Chicago, New York: Willett, Clark & Company, 1938), 58–59.

realism that would help shape the Oxford Conference. These texts included *Does Civilization Need Religion?* (1927); *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932); *Reflections on the End of an Era* (1934); and *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1935), the latter which was included on a recommended bibliography for the ongoing work of the delegates.⁶⁹

The essay assignment was first considered for the volume on *Church and Community* and later for CFCL in which it ultimately appeared. Commenting on some dissatisfaction with the progress on the overall volume, Oldham wrote in February 1936 that Niebuhr's work was resonating in Britain and his concerns were "among the most important that must be faced by the conference and for this reason we are extremely anxious to give him the opportunity of raising these issues in this volume."⁷⁰

The Laws of Love and Justice

In the essay explicating the elements of Christian realism, Niebuhr rejected the idea of total human depravity, allowing for the ability of the human actor to recognize the "law of love" as a foundational element of human existence and social harmony, "the basic requirement of the aggregate existence of humankind."⁷¹ As established in Brunner's work within *The Christian Understanding of Man*, "the human agent is able to act and to take responsibility for her actions.

⁶⁹ In a letter to Francis Miller in 1933 Oldham expressed "great disappointment" in the "first reading" of Niebuhr's text which is assumed to be *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, claiming "I was not as much impressed as you were by the realistic part, in which he seems to me only to be saying what was better said by (Friedrich) Naumann and (Ernst) Troeltsch." "JHO to Francis Miller," March 2, 1933, Box 6, Folder 8, Oldham Papers, University of Edinburgh, New College Library, Edinburgh.

⁷⁰ "JHO to HVD," February 4, 1936, Box 8, Folder 1, Oldham Papers, University of Edinburgh, New College Library, Edinburgh.

⁷¹ Niebuhr, "Christian Faith and the Common Life," 69.

Set against the so-called law of love, was the fact of freedom and human finitude within the actor, exemplified by the presence of sin and self-interest. Such paradox presents love as a possible impossibility in which love is rendered as an obligation that continually misses the mark of the law, replaced by laws of justice. Justice, then, accounts for the obligation of love and the reality of sinful self-interest, negotiating divisions between the interests of the self and the Other. In Christian faith, these perennially inadequate divisions are made subject again to the law of love. "Upon certain levels of life the requirements of justice are the highest imperatives. This paradox really contains the whole problem of the Christian faith and the common life. The problem is to establish tentative harmonies and provisional equities in a world from which sin cannot be eliminated and to hold these provisional and tentative moral achievements under the perspective of the Kingdom of God."⁷²

Niebuhr's Oxford colleagues, aware of the wider ecumenical movement's criticisms regarding a lacuna within the Life and Work conference's attention to theology, commented on the astuteness of Niebuhr's submission, particularly on his account of sin in his anthropology. In a December 1936 letter to Oldham, Hans Schönfeld, while criticizing what he saw as a thin theology in William Temple's submission, saw in Niebuhr's essay for the volume a deep theological astuteness in which Niebuhr "adopts a much less optimistic position and ... represents a wholly different insight into the demonic depths of human life."⁷³

Niebuhr's work here places within our concept of Oxford Responsibility both the responsibility for the engagement with history, and the reality of history's contingent nature. The

⁷² Ibid., 72.

⁷³ Quoted in Derr, Thomas S., "The Political Thought of the Ecumenical Movement: 1900-1939," 393.

fact of human finitude and the resulting tentative harmonies that fall short of the judgment permits no lasting confidence in historical achievement of justice, and tolerates no acquiescence to continuing injustice.

Niebuhr critiqued liberal Christianity's inattention to the doctrine of sin, reducing it to an ethic of prudence in moving between self-interest and others. Instead Niebuhr placed the reality of sin as a constant and comprehensive aspect of human action that consistently must be viewed from the perspective of the Kingdom of God. "In every human moral act there is either an element of positive rebellion against God and against life in its total requirements, or a falling short of the highest possibility."⁷⁴ Yet within these moral acts within history, the ideal of love represented by the Kingdom of God was dialectically related to faith. The acts presented not only these perils, but also, according to Niebuhr, a promise for "possibilities of actions higher than the conventional and traditional customs and habits of men. ... The love ideal is therefore not merely a transcendent impossibility which has no relevance to actual situations. There is no moral and social situation in which the love commandments does [*sic*] not present new possibilities of conduct."⁷⁵ The responsibility for historical action, submitted to the judgment of God, places a continuing call upon human action and imagination, abjuring absolutes and claims that love has been satisfied. In an address to the Conference, Niebuhr warned against the "religious profanization of truth which blandly appropriates the truth in Christ for every human vagary and prejudice, for every relative insight and temporal perspective."⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Niebuhr, "Christian Faith and the Common Life," 73.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 81.

⁷⁶ Niebuhr, "The Christian Church in a Secular Age," 740.

Engaging Secularity

Niebuhr had been given time on the Conference agenda for a plenary address in the evening of first full day of the Conference, July 13, 1937, where he presented on the topic of “The Church Faces a Secular Culture.” The lecture was described by Oldham in the Conference report as a “brilliant analysis of the present situation.” A summary of the address served as the report’s introductory section on “The Contemporary Situation.”⁷⁷

In describing modern civilization in that address, later titled “The Christian Church in a Secular Age,” Niebuhr equated rationalistic and romantic humanism as a progression of self-glorification, as exemplified in the Gospel story of the prodigal son, in which human freedom is grasped without recognition of human limits nor as the occasion for sin. The modern rationalistic impulse, Niebuhr claimed, sought an autonomy that provided its own meaning and ethic. “It mistakes the image of God in man for God Himself. It does not realize that the freedom by which man is endowed in his rational nature is the occasion for his sin as well as the ground of morality. It does not understand that by this reason nature’s harmless will-to-live is transmuted into a sinful will-to-power. It is by this reason that men make pretentious claims for their partial and relative insights, falsely identifying them with absolute truth.”⁷⁸ Without a corrective grounding in the gospel, civilization was bound for the “mighty famine” of Jesus’ parable, “a catastrophe as so certain a consequence of the anarchy of its conflicting national passions and

⁷⁷ Oldham et al., *The Churches Survey Their Task: The Report of the Conference at Oxford, July 1937, on Church, Community, and State*, 34ff.

⁷⁸ Niebuhr, “The Christian Church in a Secular Age,” 731–32.

ambitions.” It was only faith in a God revealed in the Cross of Christ that could move civilization to survive the “vicissitudes of history” and “rescue human existence” from despair.⁷⁹

Drawing on the themes he would publish in his collection of essays following the Conference, *Beyond Tragedy*, Niebuhr echoed the arguments regarding history and the Kingdom of God that Tillich would plumb for the Conference, in which the church finds itself responsible as a historical actor, shaped by the transhistorical fulfillment of the promise of the Kingdom of God. “Christianity is a faith which takes us through tragedy to beyond tragedy, by the way of the Cross to a victory in the Cross. The God whom we worship takes the contradictions of human existence into Himself.” At the same time, while the Christian gospel offers the historical actor meaning through the myth of the Kingdom of God, it does not remove the actor, nor the church, from responsibility for history, “with all of its conflicts and tragic disappointments of arrogant hopes. We are in the world and God’s Will, His Judgment and His Mercy impinge upon our daily actions and historic problems.”⁸⁰ Oldham summarized this for the Conference report. “The Gospel which transcends all particular and contemporary social situations can be preached with power only by a Church which takes its share of the burden of these situations. The Church cannot therefore evade the responsibility of seeking to establish peace and achieve and perfect justice.”⁸¹

In his address and in his essay, Niebuhr squarely placed the responsibility for the historical burdens of working toward the values of justice and peace within society both with the church and the individual Christians who comprised the church.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 733–36.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 736.

⁸¹ Oldham et al., *The Churches Survey Their Task: The Report of the Conference at Oxford, July 1937, on Church, Community, and State*, 36.

For the church, Niebuhr warned that it would be “truant to the obligation of religion to morality” if it counseled its disciples toward a withdrawal from the world as the antidote to sin, or if it relied on eschatological judgments as the sufficient remedy for social ills.⁸² The church was to be engaged in history, as he would argue in regard to faith’s relation to the Orders of Creation. For those of the Christian community with particular responsibility for the administration of society, such as business and the state, Niebuhr advised the church to prepare such actors against the temptation to disavow responsibility for the organizing of community. Such refusal could be brought on by what he would elsewhere characterize as the cynicism and despair sparked by recognition of human finitude and historical capriciousness.

A Christian pessimism which becomes a temptation to irresponsibility toward all those social tasks which constantly confront the life of men and nations, tasks of ordering the productive labor of men, of adjudicating their conflicts of arbitrating their divergent desires, of raising the level of their sympathies, such a pessimism cannot speak redemptively to a world constantly threatened by anarchy and suffering from injustice. The Christian gospel which transcends all particular and contemporary social situations can be preached with power only by a Church which bears its share of the burdens of immediate situations in which men are involved, burdens of establishing peace, of achieving justice, and of perfecting justice in the spirit of love. Thus is the Kingdom of God which is not of this world made relevant to every problem of the world.⁸³

Oldham, in his correspondence to Van Dusen in July 1936 names the church’s understanding of the relationship with the concept of Orders of Creation as central to the work of the Conference and lauded Niebuhr’s attention to the issue. “It is the problem of the layman and in my view it is in many ways the most important issue before the Conference. Whether we agree with Niebuhr or not, the questions he raise [*sic*] in his paper seem to me quite central and

⁸² Niebuhr, “Christian Faith and the Common Life,” 79.

⁸³ Niebuhr, “The Christian Church in a Secular Age,” 737.

Christian opinion at the present time through the world is in the most hopeless confusion and fog regarding them.”⁸⁴

For Niebuhr, the Christian support of German nationalism and the country’s justification of Jewish oppression, as well as the United States’ long history of oppression against African-Americans, was rooted in a misappropriation of the dialectical relationship between faith and the Orders of Creation. In his essay, Niebuhr defined the Orders – family, race, and nation, for example – as the “communities established by the forces of nature.” These communities are further shaped by human history, particularly by the limits of sin, resulting in “inchoate expressions of the law of love and a threat to its dominion.” Yet the human actor and community are responsible to engage the historical playing field in full awareness of this paradox. “Since the very genius of gospel ethics is that it makes no compromises and offers no philosophy or strategy for dealing with the relative requirements of a sinful world, it becomes necessary to supplement gospel ethics with some strategy for dealing with the immediate requirements, the day-to-day necessities of a world in which the anarchy of sin must be checked sufficiently to allow some degree of human co-operation.”⁸⁵ It would be the work of the Conference to provide the church and its laity such a strategy.

True to Schönfeld’s assessment of the darkness of Niebuhr’s analysis, Niebuhr concluded his essay with a litany of the paradoxical reality of the historical playing field in which responsibility was exercised.

The love as revealed in Christ is not some ultimate possibility of an eternal existence beyond this world. It lies at the very foundation of our world. But on the

⁸⁴ “JHO to HVD,” July 31, 1936, Box 8, Folder 3, Oldham Papers, University of Edinburgh, New College Library, Edinburgh.

⁸⁵ Niebuhr, “Christian Faith and the Common Life,” 79, 82.

other hand man is alienated from this law of his existence, not because he is temporal but because he is sinful. ... In the contrition of this awareness and in the knowledge of the true situation, revealed in the Cross, it is always possible for man to make the Kingdom of God the norm of his behavior rather than to accept the distorted world as the norm. In that sense the love of the Kingdom is always a possibility. On the other hand the acceptance of the norm does not guarantee its realization. Even the redeemed man remains under the law of sin.⁸⁶

This understanding of the historical reality of sin and the transhistorical reality of the Kingdom set for the Oxford Conference the context for its practical work of social responsibility.

Middle Axioms and Responsibility

With its notion of ecumenical responsibility in relationship to the spheres of society, the core role of the laity that comprise the church, and the realist lens in which it viewed the application of responsibility, the Oxford Conference developed, presented and followed a methodology for responsible dialogue and engagement that Oldham named as middle axioms. Springing from the recognition of the church's function in the political sphere, these axioms, though perhaps inaptly named, were intended to provide, not necessarily a middle way in terms of a compromise, nor static norms, but rather provisional and nonbinding guidelines for faithful response in society toward a decision within a particular historical and cultural context.

Ronald Preston, in his extended article on the concept, explained their attempt to address the tactical problems of moral decision making in which, on the one hand, churches "stick to basic agreed moral generalities or principles, which cannot be disputed because they have no

⁸⁶ Ibid., 97.

specific content,” and on the other hand, offer “detailed recommendations” for issues that are “too involved and the details too uncertain to warrant such a prescribed conclusion.”⁸⁷

It was Oldham whom provided the first formulation, referring to the concept of middle axioms as early as 1930 in a manuscript sent to Lambeth Palace regarding race relations, which revealed his understanding of historical context and contingency in the application of the concept. However, in this particular case regarding race, hindsight finds his explication troublesome, revealing as well the limitations and abuse of the idea.

In the attempt to apply Christian principles in a concrete case, there is need of what may be called ‘middle axioms’, i.e., a formulation of what would appear in the light of the Christian view of life to be the governing principle of action in regard to a given situation. The idea of trusteeship for weaker peoples is an illustration. It is not an ultimate principle, since, with the advance of the backward race, trusteeship must give place in the end to a different relations, namely, that of partnership. But it offers definite guidance for action at a particular stage.⁸⁸

As presented in our introductory chapter, Oldham provided delegates a definition of the concept of middle axioms in CFS.⁸⁹ While Oldham is credited with the naming of middle

⁸⁷ Preston, Ronald H. *Church and Society in the Late Twentieth Century: The Economic and Political Task*. London: SCM Press. 1983. pp. 142-143.

⁸⁸ Joseph Houldsworth Oldham, “The Christian Attitude to Racial Relations” February 2, 1930, 2–3, Box 5 Folder 4, Oldham Papers, University of Edinburgh, New College Library, Edinburgh.

⁸⁹ “Such broad assertions as that Christians are bound to obey the law of love or strive for social justice do not go far towards helping the individual know what he ought to do in particular cases. On the other hand, there is no way by which he can be relieved of the responsibility of decisions in concrete situations. To give him precise instructions to be literally carried out is to rob him of his moral responsibility as a person. It is not the function of the clergy to tell the laity how to act in public affairs, but to confront them with the Christian demand and to encourage them to discover its application for themselves. Hence between purely general statements of the ethical demands of the gospel and the decisions that have to be made in concrete situations there is need for what may be described as middle axioms. It is these that give relevance and point to the Christian ethic. They are an attempt to define the directions in which, in a particular state of society, Christian faith must express itself. They are not binding for all time, but are provisional definitions of the type of behaviour required of Christians at a given period in given circumstances.” Visser ’t Hooft and Oldham, *The Church and Its Function in Society*, 209–10.

axioms, the ground for such thinking had been tilled in the mid-1920s by the work done by the British church at the Conference on Christian Politics, Economics and Citizenship (COPEC), held in Birmingham, which William Temple had chaired. In its volume on *The Social Function of the Church*, COPEC discussed its process that was not unlike that followed by the Oxford Conference. COPEC referenced the “conference method” of the Student Christian Movement, in which persons together move from an understanding of fundamental issues of Christian doctrine, particularly the nature of God and humanity, toward an analysis of the social situation and a subsequent move toward action.⁹⁰ In contrast to Oldham’s method however, COPEC served to provide particular recommendations for Christian action, whereas the Oxford Conference worked to leave space for decision making to those holding the particular responsibility for doing so within the various spheres of society.

The Oxford Conference developed the concept of middle axioms beyond COPEC’s deductive efforts as a method to address the urgency felt by the organizers. For Oxford, the crisis faced by the world was theological in origin. Increasing insecurity brought on by the advance of technology, economic determinism, urbanization and increasing pluralism, had reduced the human being to an isolated individual in search for lost community. In such isolation the human would seek restoration of some form of community values within populist and autocratic movements.⁹¹ Oxford thus sought to move the church to accept its function as the promulgator of community values and the enabler of action upon those values against such movements.

⁹⁰ John Kempthorne, ed., *The Social Function of the Church*, vol. 11, C.O.P.E.C. Commission Reports (London: Longmans, Green and Company, 1924), 99.

⁹¹ Graeme Smith, in his analysis of Oldham’s program for Christian missions, relates Oxford’s concerns to contemporary concerns regarding globalization. He further argues that Oldham and other organizers’ missionary vision included an alternate version of Christian totalitarianism,

Moving from Dialogue to Action

In Oldham's pre-conference pamphlet, *Church, Community and State: A World Issue*, he reflects on H. G. Wells' *The Shape of Things to Come* as a portent of the future of society, calling the author, for whom Oldham had great respect, "a prophet of the world state." Wells, according to Oldham, counseled that the future must be grasped by "an aggressive order of religiously devoted men or women, who will try out and establish and impose a new pattern of living upon our race." Oldham continues, "The new world government will be as relentless as existing dictatorships in suppressing contrary opinion. It will not brook the competition of rival religious systems. It will have no place for Christianity."⁹²

Likely influenced by the work of Buber, Oldham saw Judeo-Christian anthropology as the answer to modern individualism. Writing in the same pamphlet he stated that the Christian view of the "supremacy of the personal ... is the recognition of the bounds set to the infinite expansion of the individual self by the obligations owed to other selves. There is no way in which one can be a person except through the give and take, the claim and response, of personal intercourse. Persons can be persons only in mutuality. ... The personal life is in its essence the acceptance of the responsibilities of community."⁹³

This view of human dignity, freedom and relationship as integral to human personality and community, along with a Christian understanding of the nature and purposes of God, which

thus rejecting not the form of political totalitarianism but its contextual context. The theme of Christian totalitarianism continued beyond the Conference throughout Oldham's meetings of The Moot through 1944. Graeme Smith, "Christian Totalitarianism," *Political Theology* 3, no. 1 (November 2001): 36; Clements, *The Moot Papers*.

⁹² Joseph H. Oldham, *Church, Community, and State: A World Issue* (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1935), 13.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 38.

comprise Oxford Responsibility, shaped Oldham's method of middle axiom as the responsible answer to a world in which church and faith were on the threshold of succumbing to modern and autocratic forces. The method sought to retain and restore the church's voice in the world.⁹⁴

Oldham and the Oxford Conference did not necessarily delineate the deliberate steps involved in a middle axiom approach, yet Visser 't Hooft in a later analysis of the use of middle axiom thinking in ecumenical social thought during the first decades of the WCC summarized what he perceived as the four steps that he called the "Oldham Method." The first was to identify those persons who could best provide churches an understanding of the issues or crisis facing society, or what Visser 't Hooft called the "Diogenes stage." Second, which Visser 't Hooft considered the first part of a "Socratic stage," involved conversation with these persons, to further identify the fundamental issues to which the church might turn its attention as part of its mission to the world. Third, the second part of the Socratic stage, was to design an interdisciplinary approach to the issues under study, "particularly a dialogue between theologians and lay people." Finally was the effort to present the results of this work to churches "for study and appropriate action."⁹⁵ This final point, while positing with the church the responsibility for engagement with and for society, did not retain for the institutional church the responsibility for decision and implementation, but moved that responsibility into the minds and bodies of the

⁹⁴ Oldham's method foreshadows the work of Jeffrey Stout, who argues that the inclusion of religious premises within civil discourse is integral for contemporary democratic process. In his text *Democracy and Tradition* he writes that "(o)ur fellow citizens are going to go on disagreeing with one another about how to rank highly important values no matter what we do. And none of us knows how to bring racial antagonism, poverty, misogyny, and mistrust to an end. We had better work hard, nonetheless, to keep the democratic exchange of reasons going, for that is the best way we have of holding one another responsible." Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 7.

⁹⁵ Willem A. Visser 't Hooft, "Oldham's Method in Abrecht's Hands," *Ecumenical Review* 37, no. 1 (January 1985): 4-5.

women and men engaged in the work of society. It is these persons who were called to bring to these sources a critical evaluation in light of their context, to move toward a decision, and to implement a decision into action. Within the concept of Oxford Responsibility, the retention of this particular responsibility was grounded in the freedom and dignity of the historical actor in her context.

Later commentator Duncan Forrester also identified various stages of middle axiom thought. These focused not on the procedure, as did Visser 't Hooft's method, but on what he identified as a deductive logic of the process. Forrester posited the first foundational level as that of a general understanding of "essence of Christianity" held in common by the church across denominations or confessions. Here Forrester referred to Oldham's reference to the "ethic of inspiration" that was not about obedience to static norms but "faith in a living, personal God who has disclosed His grace and His will in Jesus Christ."⁹⁶ It is interesting to note that Visser 't Hooft's outline, as Forrester would later critique regarding middle axiom thought as a whole, does not adequately account for such Christian deposit or relationship. The Christian Realism that guided the process would come under the same criticism.⁹⁷ The second level identified by Forrester was the identification of fundamental ethical principles generally shared throughout society. The third level he defined as the integration of principle and ends through mediation

⁹⁶ Duncan B. Forrester, *Beliefs, Values and Policies: Conviction Politics in a Secular Age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 24; Quoting Visser 't Hooft and Oldham, *The Church and Its Function in Society*, 235.

⁹⁷ In his extended critique of Reinhold Niebuhr's natural theology in his Gifford Lectures, Stanley Hauerwas writes that "Niebuhr's theology seems to be a perfect exemplification of Ludwig Feuerbach's argument that theology, in spite of its pretentious presumption that its subject matter is God, is in fact but a disguised way to talk about humanity," and later names Niebuhr's account of human knowledge of God as "a pale theism." Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), 115, 122.

within the context and contingency of history. “In other words, theology and empirical analysis must come together in the formulation of middle axioms.”⁹⁸ The final stage, as with that of Visser ’t Hooft, is that of implementation in which the process has moved beyond the competence and responsibility of the church and theological academy to lay persons. Interpreting middle axiom thought in this regard, Forrester writes, “It is seldom legitimate or proper for the church as an institution to endorse a particular policy or programme.”⁹⁹

In pointing to what he claims was the Church’s return to the middle axiom approach in the late 1980s and 1990s during Scottish constitutional debate, William Storrar claims that the church moved from the deductive approach Forrester posited regarding the Oldham method, to an interactive approach in which concrete experience lead to retrieved ethical principle and theological tradition, “which together acted as the catalytic elements” in fashioning the appropriate middle axiom.¹⁰⁰ Storrar’s characterization of an interactive approach for middle axioms in the late twentieth century coheres with the thought and process developed in 1937 by the Oxford Conference, accurately reflecting the organizers’ intentions. While the method certainly had deductive qualities, the focus at Oxford was on dynamic interdisciplinary relationships and contextual realities in which space was provided for a conversation between principles and experience, and where frameworks could continually shift as contingencies required. This becomes most evident in the final step in the process, in which the responsibility for decision and action devolves to subsidiary decision makers.

⁹⁸ Forrester, *Beliefs, Values and Policies: Conviction Politics in a Secular Age*, 25.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ William F. Storrar, “Where the Local and the Global Meet: Duncan Forrester’s *Glocal* Public Theology and Scottish Political Context,” in *Public Theology for the 21st Century* (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 423.

The dynamic and contingent nature of middle axioms was demonstrated, for example during the years of World War II with the Church of Scotland's Commission for the Interpretation of God's Will for the Present Crisis, chaired by John Baille of Edinburgh's New College. The commission defined middle axioms as "secondary and more specialized principles which exhibit the relevance of the ruling principles to the particular field of action in which guidance is needed.' These 'are not such as to be appropriate in every time and place and situation, but they are offered as legitimate and necessary application of the Christian rule of faith and life to the special circumstance in which we now stand.'"¹⁰¹

The Oxford Conference in its preparatory work, with its significant focus on the inclusion of a range of lay voices, sought to develop a system to lead toward such action-oriented axioms for contextual circumstances. One could not argue that delegates to the Conference comprised the range of voices later envisioned by Preston, who advised, as we have noted, that to develop middle axioms related to a particular area or issue, organizers must gather together a diversity of persons from various disciplines and stations of life, including those who have practical experience with the matters at hand. Rather the delegates in 1937 largely represented an expert class, as later critics, such as Ramsey and Forrester, have pointed out. Yet the volumes they produced were intended to be engaged – in Visser 't Hooft's final stage – throughout the church at its various levels – general, judicatory, congregational – as way of discerning further the will of God in a given context.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 420–21.

Responsibility to History and to God

In a memorandum regarding the work of the various sections of the Conference, Oldham acknowledged Barthian critique regarding positing the sanction of God's will upon a human "ethic of inspiration," over against an "ethic of ends." He saw in the concept of middle axioms, however, a way to maintain a focus both on divine command in relationship to God across various contextual situations that required human decision and action, guided as well by the corrective of a realist doctrine of sin, that would be outlined by Reinhold Niebuhr throughout the work of the Conference.¹⁰²

As we have said, middle axioms were not attempts to provide universal principles as a middle way between the general and particular, but were provisional at their core. These guidelines, rather than principles, were reached through a cross-disciplinary reflection among theology, ethics and what one might call the practical disciplines, whether social science, engineering, economics, etc. While criticized for their lack of theological foundation, they begin with a reflection on, as much as possible, what could be identified as foundational in theology – agape, freedom, concern for the poor, for example. This was followed by the interdisciplinary task of defining the practical and technical issues to be considered, the opportunities available for action, and the possible consequences involved.

This process sought to maintain a responsibility to the will of God, which would both illumine the process and judge the outcome. For Oxford this was found in an approach to doctrine and ethics that did not posit timeless and absolute norms, but approached doctrinal and ethical directives as elements of a dynamic process rooted in a relationship with God. In his

¹⁰² Visser 't Hooft and Oldham, *The Church and Its Function in Society*, 236; Derr, Thomas S., "The Political Thought of the Ecumenical Movement: 1900-1939," n. 22:14.

explication of the axial process, Oldham drew on the work of William Temple and his Gifford Lectures, delivered during the preparatory process. Temple had written,

The living God is indeed at work – fully at work – in Nature, in human experience, and in the course of history. But He is at work as a Person, exhibiting the identity of His character in the infinitely delicate variations of adjustment to varying circumstance. He is not at work there as a static principle, always acting in the same way, though reserving in His transcendence a capacity to intrude with variation into the uniformity of His own immanent action; He is at work there as a living Person, expressing His constancy through appropriate variations, which are guaranteed against caprice or incoherence by that transcendent self-identity in which they are grounded.¹⁰³

As Buber had critiqued the obstacles presented by fixed doctrine, so too did Temple and the Oxford organizers, positing faith not as a strict orthodoxy, but as a “personal fellowship with the living God,” confirmed by doctrine.¹⁰⁴

In his Richard Lectures delivered at the University of Virginia in 1945, Oxford contributor John Bennett also defined Oldham’s middle axioms dependent on Christian principle understood in relationship and context. Bennett conceived them as a Christian ethic to guide persons “in determining the goals which represent the purpose of God for our time,” clearly integrating a need to engage the mission of God in the context of history. “These are not absolute and all-inclusive goals but the next steps our own generation must take. The Kingdom of God in its fullness lies beyond our best achievements in the world but God does have purposes for us that can be realized. To live for them is to live for the Kingdom now.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ William Temple, *Nature, Man and God: Being the Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Glasgow in the Academical Years 1932-1933 and 1933-1934* (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1953), 299.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 322.

¹⁰⁵ John C. Bennett, *Christian Ethics and Social Policy* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1946), 76–77.

The seeming paradox of Christian mission coupled with a reluctance to declare universal principles opened the Oxford Conference's middle axioms to criticism in ecumenical circles. Some perceived in the concept a dangerous gap between practical decision-making and the ethical norms of Christian faith, criticism not unknown to the wider concept of Christian realism that guided the Oxford Conference. Constantijn L. Patijn, a Dutch politician and ecumenist lamented in the study *The Church and the Disorder of Society*, published in 1949 following the First Assembly of the WCC in Amsterdam, that in dealing with decisions of a technical character, "(n)ot the intentions of the driving spirit, but the knowledge and skill of the responsible man are in many cases from an ethical point of view decisive. This prompted John Bennett to note within the text that Patijn did not "do justice to the place of the proximate norms that should guide the social strategy of the church," providing examples of middle axioms that adhered to the "objectives of the churches" without prescribing the "institutions or the programmes by which they are to be made possible. One such example he provided was that "the Church should seek to overcome involuntary racial segregation."¹⁰⁶

Responsibility in Context

In the same volume, Reinhold Niebuhr pointed to the Oxford Conference, in its method and directives, as conceiving church as a "means of grace to all of us in more fully apprehending the meaning of the universal Christ, who speaks to each and to all nations and peoples."

Explicating this further in an extended note within the essay he wrote, "The Oxford Conference

¹⁰⁶ World Council of Churches, *Man's Disorder and God's Design*, The Methodist Edition, An Omnibus Volume of The Amsterdam Assembly Series Prepared under the Auspices of The First Assembly of the World Council of Churches (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949), III, 159; *ibid.*, nn. III, 159, 1.

sought to find a middle ground between a Christian view which offered no general directives to the Christian for his decisions in regard to social and political institutions, and the view which tried to identify the mind of Christ too simply with specific economic, social and political programmes. For the ecumenical movement, in the opinion of many, this middle ground is still the proper basis of approach.”¹⁰⁷

William Temple in his 1942 text, *Christianity and Social Order*, had also addressed the responsibility of Christians to be aware of Christian principles and “to denounce as evil what contravenes them, ... (and) to judge how far particular evils are symptoms of a disease deeper than themselves, and ... to ask how far the whole existing order is contrary to the Natural Order.” Like Oldham, Bennett and Niebuhr, and other co-organizers of the Oxford Conference, Temple made the distinction that it was not the particular duty of Christians to know the technical remedies, but it was the duty to call upon responsible institutions to pursue particular objectives within society for the development of “individual personality in the widest and deepest possible fellowship.” These objectives, many of which were the topic of the COPEC volumes, he named as the support of healthy family life; the provision of education; secure and adequate income; the space for individuals to have a voice within their vocation and labor; basic freedoms, including worship, speech, assembly and association; and stewardship of natural resources for the present and future of the human race.¹⁰⁸

In contrast to COPEC, the Oxford output preserved the differences within the process in its effort to maintain responsibility for the layperson in reflection and action. While some, such as Storrar, have described middle axioms as an attempt by the church to reach an interpretive

¹⁰⁷ World Council of Churches, *Man's Disorder and God's Design*, III, 28; *ibid.*, nn. III, 28, 1.

¹⁰⁸ Temple, *Christianity and Social Order*, 74–76.

consensus on particular social or public issues through a synthesis of “relevant empirical evidence and Christian theological and ethical perspectives,” the Oxford Conference’s effort itself stopped short of seeking such consensus, opting to place interpretive tools in the hands of those close to the discernment and decision-making process.¹⁰⁹ To do otherwise was to remove responsibility from the community.

Ramsey, in his *Who Speaks for the Church?*, posited to the church the responsibility for clarifying the ethical grounds for considering various policy options, decrying ecclesial resolutions that labeled specific policy decisions as right or wrong, or as moral or immoral, which Ramsey dismissed as Protestant casuistry. Ramsey made the claim that the church acted responsibly when it acted as a theoretician, providing perspectives to consider and protections against the weaponization of “false doctrine” that threatened to “trammel policy choices or preclude decisions that might better shape and govern events.” Churches, he said, “should seek to clarify and keep wide open the legitimate options for choice, and thus nurture the moral and political ethos of the nation.”¹¹⁰

The Conference sought itself, and advised the church likewise, to avoid making grand, authoritative resolutions, instead recognizing both the freedom and expertise of the laity to respond to particular tasks in obedience to God while providing the theological resources so to do. In addressing the “directions of advance,” the Conference report stated, as we noted earlier, that for the church to be an effective institution in a responsible society, its influence would be applied through “an endless multiplicity of ‘cells,’” comprising persons called to the particular

¹⁰⁹ William F. Storrar, “Scottish Civil Society and Devolution: The New Case for Ronald Preston’s Defence of Middle Axioms,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 17, no. 2 (August 1, 2004): 38.

¹¹⁰ Ramsey, *Who Speaks for the Church?*, 152–53.

tasks in the particular time and context.¹¹¹ The effort, while acknowledging the freedom to respond in obedience, recognized as well the realities and differences of culture, history and circumstance that, without such recognition, work to limit both unity and freedom.

Middle axioms, then, were understood by the Oxford Conference as an attempt to provide guidance and a level of clarity that might lead to action toward a detailed policy conclusion, not the conclusion itself. By doing so, the moral actor is informed beyond his mere opinion. More importantly, his responsibility is maintained within the context of community, as space for decision-making is provided and protected. The provisional and contingent nature of the methodology protects the ecumenical responsibility of the churches as well, within the context of history. There remains a need for ecumenical response, and the need cannot, in the nature of cultural context and historical contingency, be considered settled or absolute. The process is dynamic and responsibility requires that it endure. The process must be done again and again, forcing the responsible church continually to be conversant with itself, with its laity and with society.

As Preston outlines, “Once it is granted that churches as such have a social responsibility, and should give some guidance to their members in exercising theirs, there is a case for thinking that the method of seeking middle axioms in this broad and flexible way is usually the best method of doing so. ... It takes the religious overtones out of politics whilst insisting that it is a necessary arc of Christian obedience.”¹¹²

¹¹¹ Oldham, J.H. *The Church and its Function in Society*. 251.

¹¹² Preston, *Church and Society in the Late Twentieth Century*, 155–56.

Responsible Directions

In addition to the volumes produced for the church's deliberative consumption following the sessions, the Oxford Conference issued five distinct reports published within the official report of the Conference, *The Churches Survey Their Task*. These reports addressed Church and Community; Church and State; Church, Community, and State in Relation to the Economic Order; Church Community, and State in Relation to Education; and The Universal Church and the World of Nations. The Conference also included within the volume longer reports on Church and Community, and Church and State, based on revisions to the original advanced draft of the report distributed to delegates, drawing upon extended discussions within the Conference.

The reports sought to bring together a report on the state of ecumenical social thought regarding the particular Christian values that provided the foundation of deliberation on the particular topic and context at issue, providing at its conclusion various suggestions for penultimate Christian action for the contextual development of middle axioms that would guide particular applications. They, along with the volumes of essays in the Oxford Conference series, worked to maintain a broad focus that would allow churches and Christians to retain the responsibility for discernment and effective action in the particular contexts of ministry where justice would be sought and achieved, taking into account respective history and culture. In a 1966 reissue of the report, Harold Lunger of Texas Christian University wrote of the pioneering work of the Conference in establishing a pattern of ecumenical effort involving advance study and research, small group and plenary discussion, and commending of reports for further study and action by the church. He recognized that the output of the Conference "did not seek to be 'prophetic,' pointing out the direction which Christian thinking *ought* to move, but rather set forth the actual beliefs of the delegates. When, as in the case of Christian participation in

warfare, there was no agreement, this was frankly recognized and the divergent views were set forth as clearly and forthrightly as possible.”¹¹³ Such an effort respected the realistic and contingent nature of the process that Oxford saw as integral to the method of ecumenical social ethics.

The popular reissue of the report three decades after Oxford occurred in the context of the ecumenical Geneva Conference on Church and Society of 1966 in which questions regarding the Church’s responsibility concerning social issues were of particular concern. In his critique of the Conference, Ramsey addressed the distinction and limits between the Church’s offering “direction” with “decision-oriented or action-related economic, social and political analysis following from Christian themes,” or “directives” aimed at particular formulations of policy, which Ramsey argued, as did Oxford, were beyond the responsibility and capability of the Church.¹¹⁴

In response to what he perceived at Geneva’s directives on the American conflict in Vietnam –“findings ... zealously to be made into precedential determinations of responsible decision and action in the political life of this nation” – Ramsey perceived the Church as crossing a societal boundary that irresponsibly placed “religious fervor behind a particular partisan political point.” He argued that the church could not both speak with authority and responsibility on political or social questions and at the same time offer “particular prudential recommendations to the leaders of the nations.”¹¹⁵ He argued for a return to the process that unfolded at Oxford that avoided both forced consensus and binding, directive pronouncements,

¹¹³ Harold L. Lunger, “Introduction,” in *Foundations of Ecumenical Social Thought: The Oxford Conference Report*, by Joseph H. Oldham (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), xiv–xv.

¹¹⁴ Ramsey, *Who Speaks for the Church?*, 45.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 45, 30–34.

but worked toward directions of thought to guide prudential action, based on careful study of theology and technique. “(E)cumenical ethics needs to return to Oxford and begin again.” At the same time, thirty years later, Ramsey expressed concern of what he saw as the contemporary pragmatism of Christian realism “driving out justice from ecumenical consideration.”¹¹⁶

Church and Community

For Oxford, realism and justice were two sides of the same coin. The effort to provide realistic directions toward justice as a resource to the church, as we have mentioned, earlier had been modeled by COPEC, which sought to provide, in a phrase not used at Oxford, “definitive objectives” in its reporting on various topics. Like Oxford, however, COPEC saw these “objectives” as penultimate guides toward the development of practical objectives in context. Oldham’s method, however, resisted moves toward the level of specificity sometimes found in the COPEC recommendations and resolutions.¹¹⁷

As we have noted the Oxford Conference in its reports included two longer reports on “Church and Community” and on “Church and State.” In his analysis of Oxford’s work on church and community in relation to the WCC’s 2004 study of *Ethnic Identity, National Identity, and the Unity of the Church*, Eddy Van der Borgh notes that the Conference’s decision to revise

¹¹⁶ Ibid., n. 109:32.

¹¹⁷ COPEC’s range of topics were also more granular than those of Oxford, comprising *Education, The Home, The Relation of the Sexes, Leisure, The Treatment of Crime, International Relations, Christianity and War, Industry and Property, and Politics and Citizenship*. It also, like Oxford, produced volumes on *The Nature of God and His Purpose for the World*, and *The Social Function of the Church*, along with a volume on the history of Christianity’s social effects. Some volumes, unlike the core Oxford volumes, also included “Questions for Discussion” to facilitate use by church and the laity. *C.O.P.E.C. Commission Reports, Vols. 1-12* (Longmans, Green and Company, 1925).

and include these longer reports are indicative of their central importance to the Conference.¹¹⁸

We will turn to the report on Church and Community, as a way to assess the output of the Oxford Conference in relation to our theory of Oxford Responsibility.

The “Longer Report on Church and Community” was based on the original draft document that had been prepared and distributed to delegates prior to the start of the Conference. Based on discussion within the section on Church and Community, chaired by political scientist Walter Moberly, the section report was revised and approved by the committee, giving Moberly authority to complete final revisions after the Conference. The shorter report was the version that had been approved by the plenary with final revisions by the section. A significant addition to the longer report was a section on “The Church and Race.”

At the conclusion of the report, the section provided for the church “The Direction of Advance,” placing responsibility on the church for, first, further study, and second, immediate action. “There are problems in the relation of Church and community on which further oecumenical thinking is necessary before effective Christian action can be taken; and there are certain concrete steps which can be taken at once.”¹¹⁹ These preliminary, if not penultimate, middle axioms, encouraged further study and action pointed toward their continuing development in the various contexts of the church around the world. Before we delineate these results we will look at the work of the section that led to the directions, particularly in the areas of nationalism and the encounter with the secular.

¹¹⁸ Eddy Van der Borcht, “Oxford Revisited: A Re-Reading of the Report on Church and *Volk* at the Life and Work Conference in Oxford 1937 as a Contribution to the Ethnat Study of ‘Faith and Order,’” *Exchange* 33, no. 4 (2004): 381.

¹¹⁹ Oldham et al., *The Churches Survey Their Task: The Report of the Conference at Oxford, July 1937, on Church, Community, and State*, 235.

Church and Volk

Oldham had set a tone for the Oxford Conference's focus on Church and Community in his pre-conference pamphlet *Church, Community and State: A World Issue*, published in 1935, in which Bishop Bell wrote an introduction. In it he outlined the plan for the 1937 Conference and a program of study, including a list of books including Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, and, in German, Buber's *Ich und Du* and Brunner's *Das Gebot und die Ordnungen*. The publication followed the Conference planning meeting at Fanø in 1934, during which the Life and Work commission confronted representatives of the German national church, declaring support of the Confessing Church. The commission stated "that autocratic Church rule, especially when imposed upon the conscience in solemn oath; the use of methods of force; and the suppression of free discussion are incompatible with the true nature of the Christian Church."¹²⁰ In his pre-Conference pamphlet, Oldham addressed questions regarding the place of the state in supporting community, "responsible for fostering the good life of the community," while using its authority "not to suppress and limit, but to serve, promote and multiply freedom."¹²¹

These questions, raised in the context of the rise of German nationalism and spreading totalitarianism, would engage the work of the section. Its work would proceed in solidarity with the Confessing Church. The Conference itself would issue a message regarding its support for the Confessing Church and the absence of a delegation from the German Evangelical Church. "We are greatly moved by the affliction of many pastors and laymen who have stood firm from the first in the Confessional Church for the sovereignty of Christ, and for the freedom of the

¹²⁰ Barnes, *Nazism, Liberalism, & Christianity*, 96–97.

¹²¹ Oldham, *Church, Community, and State: A World Issue*, 26.

Church of Christ to preach His Gospel.”¹²² This theme of dedication to Christian values operative within life lived in social communities, including that of the nation, would focus the questions of the section’s efforts.

Important for the work of the section was to identify the context in which the church operated. In his essay within *Church and Community*, Ernest Barker worked to define for wider discernment the concept of community, an idea he saw as encompassing concepts such as society, people and nation, encompassed in the German conception of *Volk*, which had been outlined in Oldham’s pre-conference work. There Oldham had identified the complex term with “the reality of a communal life rooted in a community of blood and soil and historical experience.”¹²³ Within the Conference’s Longer Report on the topic, Moberly and his committee, which included Barker, broadly defined community in the context of “the Orders,” described as “the web of organic corporate relationships which surround [each person’s] life in concentric circles of ever-widening radius – his family, his neighbourhood, his race, his people, his nation, all humanity.”¹²⁴ Community in this sense constituted a whole in historical relationship with one another, sharing a common social life and form.

In Germany, the context of national community, embodied in the concept of *Volk*, presented to the Conference’s work a particular urgency. In Barker’s essay he explained, “It is important to notice at this point that our world ‘community’ is a multi-colored sort of word. It has many areas of operation. The German word *Volk* is a unitary word,” before providing several

¹²² Appendix A in Oldham et al., *The Churches Survey Their Task: The Report of the Conference at Oxford, July 1937, on Church, Community, and State*, 275.

¹²³ Oldham, *Church, Community, and State: A World Issue*, 26.

¹²⁴ Oldham et al., *The Churches Survey Their Task: The Report of the Conference at Oxford, July 1937, on Church, Community, and State*, 217.

pages of defining the term by way of describing what it was not, as compared to other nations' conceptions of community.

The report went on to describe a working context of social disintegration, exemplified by the rise of German nationalism. To assess the reality of *Volk*, the term needed to take its place within God's economy, where it, within the notion of the Orders, could be viewed as both as a divine gift, and at the same time marked by sin.

The ties of common blood, soil, tradition, culture, and purpose which constitute the national community ... are given of God, who creates the individual life in and through the life of a specific community. On the other hand, it must be said with the greatest emphasis that, as with every divine gift, the gift of a nation has been and is being abused by men and made to serve sin. Any form of national egotism whereby the love of one's own people leads to the suppression of other nationalities and minorities, or to failure to respect and appreciate the gifts of other people, is sin and rebellion against God.¹²⁵

The task of the church was to oppose the deification of *Volk*, which opposed and destroyed relationships across community boundaries. While the citizen owed loyalty to the nation, loyalty did not require absolute obedience, and, in fact, sometimes required "vigorous opposition to the general will."¹²⁶

In his essay within the Conference volume, French cleric Marc Boegner added that while "God uses the nation itself ... as a means of preserving humanity from worse disorders," the church would abdicate its responsibility to God if "she were to allow her members to believe, either that the service of the nation can be equated with the service of God, or that it has an absolute character, or that anyone save God has the right to determine what their patriotism

¹²⁵ Ibid., 226.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 227.

ought to be.” Echoing a theme heard during the Conference Boegner went on to claim the best service the church could offer the nation was in fact “to be the church.”¹²⁷

The controversy regarding Brunner’s conception of the Orders notwithstanding, here Christian values of the God who created humanity are operative. As we have seen, humanity, created in the image of God, is embedded with an inherent dignity, autonomy and responsibility. The human actor is responsible to the Other, and in that recognition confronts the dignity and autonomy of the Other. The section in its directions for advance included at the conclusion of the report would address such issues presented by the German use of *Volk*, as we will see below. However, future generations would find fault in the Conference’s compromise with nationalism in general, especially within the essays contained in *Church and Community*, and for the lack of specificity in dealing with what, certainly in hindsight, was a great evil perpetuated on humanity. While the organizers could not know the level of atrocities to come, their correspondence shows they were certainly aware of the direction in which Germany under Hitler was headed. Ramsey points to Thomas Derr’s work for the Geneva Conference in which he asks at what point the church might be justified in opposing or supporting specific policy objectives.¹²⁸ In its social function, the church faces a danger that in the effort to be responsible, there may be a temptation to irresponsible timidity, or irresponsible overreach.

¹²⁷ Latourette, *Church and Community*, 71, 77ff.

¹²⁸ Ramsey quotes from Derr’s essay on “The Development of Modern Ecumenical Political Thought” in Z. K. Matthews, ed., *Responsible Government in a Revolutionary Age*, vol. 2 (New York: Association Press, 1966), 301ff; Ramsey, *Who Speaks for the Church?*, 47.

The Social Life of the Christian

Another theme within the report was how Christians as individuals and as a corporate body were to interact with community. “What duty had the Christian Church toward the general social life of the world, its institutions, civilizations, and culture?” Again, the report identified the Christian values that could begin to shape such an answer. First, they offered the declaration that for the Church, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ was “authoritative in every department of life.” At the same time, the report recognized with Brunner that Christian revelation did not necessarily displace ethical and technical knowledge from other sources. The witness of God could be perceived “in industry and commerce, art and literature, sport and many other spheres of social life.”¹²⁹ Drawing on natural law thought, the report placed within the common life standards for justice and temperance drawn from secular sources.

The continuing question throughout the report that would be advanced further in its suggested directions, was that of the level of compromise permitted or required by the Christian in her dealing with society. The report drew from Niebuhr’s then unpublished work for *The Christian Faith and the Common Life* in outlining the paradox of the ideal of the law of love and an understanding of provisional justice. Within the report itself, the writers appeared to straddle the division among Christians, calling for continued reflection within its directions, yet the emphasis was certainly on the inevitability and responsibility of active engagement on this side of the Kingdom. The report acknowledged no “clear and simple solution” to the problem of compromise, drawing upon the history of the division evidenced by Ernst Troeltsch’s distinction between “church” and “sect” types, as well as the reality of human finitude that manifests as

¹²⁹ Oldham et al., *The Churches Survey Their Task: The Report of the Conference at Oxford, July 1937, on Church, Community, and State*, 205–7.

compromise. “There is no such thing as a life without compromise, not only in the legitimate sense of adaptation to given conditions, but also in the deeper and sinful sense of avoidable failure in faithful discipleship.”¹³⁰ Within this reality, the report posited a contextual responsibility for Christian communities to identify their duty more clearly, actually invoking a missional spirit to engage the “new and active centres of moral and social authority” that were rising within what the Conference already perceived as a post-Christendom world.¹³¹

Directions for Advance

In its recommendations for further discernment by the church toward “a fuller insight into the will of God for the common life to-day,” the report called for a deep process for understanding the mind of God, along side a realistic understanding of the realities of history, leading to the formulation of what can be called preliminary middle axioms to guide action. The report acknowledged that the Conference, even with the long and rigorous process, could only “clear the ground for such an advance, by bringing out as clearly and trenchantly as possible the issues which at present divide us. The work thus begun must now be carried forward.”¹³²

The items identified for further study by the church and by groups of Christians demonstrate the influence of Christian realism on the work of the section. The first item called for work toward “(t)he Christian understanding of God’s intention for the common life. How far does the law of love which is to govern the inner lives and intimate personal relations of Christians apply also to their wider corporate relationships?” On this question it pushed further,

¹³⁰ Ibid., 217.

¹³¹ Ibid., 201.

¹³² Ibid., 236.

asking at what level Christians were responsible “to bring all social life into conformity with the mind of Christ,” how corporate relationships should be guided by the paradox of the “natural morality of justice” and the “supernatural morality of redemptive love,” and if “the sphere of these relationships is subject to no ideal standard but only to the inner necessities arising out of the need of preserving human life from chaos?” The second item broadly asked the churches to consider “(t)he problem of compromise for the Christian. Third, bringing the wider discussion to the various geographic and cultural contexts, bodies were to consider the “true significance of the claims of the “Orders,” especially “Volk” and “Nation,” and their relation to the claims of the universal Church and the family of God,” and, finally, on the nature of race, the trenchant question regarding “the desirability or unwisdom of intermixture of races,” a question that the report qualified, revealing the technical context of the time, as “partly scientific.”¹³³

The report went on to identify 12 immediate steps that could be taken by the church as result of its work in identifying the place of Christian foundations and the realities of context.

These were:

- 1) For every congregation to respond to the work of the Holy Spirit by realizing in its own life unity across “all difference and barriers” of class, social status, race and nation, reminiscent of the work done in responding to the concept of *Volk*.
- 2) For churches at various levels to join together ecumenically for worship and service. Here again, was the call for the church to recognize its responsibility to be the church, reaching across boundaries toward unity.

¹³³ Ibid., 237.

- 3) For all Christians to demonstrate “a more passionate and costly concern for the outcast, the under-privileged, the persecuted, the despised in the community and beyond the community.” It called out for particular recognition the rise of anti-Semitism as a significant sign of social disintegration, calling for not only “the weak rebuke of words but the powerful rebuke of deeds.” This effort, the report continued, comprised the unity of the church as well.
- 4) The Church should attend to the real conditions of human life at the various levels in which life is lived and in the contexts where life is lived. These included “misunderstandings between old and young, tension between men and women, health, housing, employment, recreation in their distinctive rural and urban forms. Thus the Church should seek to express God’s concern for every man in his own neighbourhood and vocation.”
- 5) The Church, and particularly, what it called “the younger churches” – located in nations in which Christianity was in a minority position – should pay particular attention to rural areas where opportunities for social transformation were particularly ripe.
- 6) With a similar concern for the waning power of the church in various contexts, the section called for the Church to raise “the general level of conscience” in communities with “new, prophetic, daring social experiments.”
- 7) The Church should engage society with its particular expertise, making itself available as a “healing and reconciling” agent in community and national “conflicts, misunderstandings, and hatreds.”

- 8) For Churches who hold significant power within their national context, they should oppose persecution of other Churches and barriers to their development, again drawing upon the work done on the German situation.
- 9) Churches should promote united study and action between various Churches.
- 10) Christians within a particular vocation or industry were encouraged to gather for prayer and discussion regarding the respective issues and practical concerns of their common life. “Herein is a special responsibility of the laity,” the report continued, in its call for ongoing dialogue between Christians, which the Conference output was intended to facilitate.
- 11) Individual Christians should seek to bring Christian values into the political sphere through their support of those representatives who do their work “in the light of Christian principles” and to themselves “undertake responsibilities in local and national government.” Here again was a particular responsibility of the laity to bring religious values into public dialogue and action.
- 12) Offering a final broad objective pointing to the law of love, perhaps providing the hoped for answer to the Christian inquiries called for in the first set of directives, the report implored all Christians “to seek simplicity and discipline in personal living to go beyond the accepted standards of the community in the direction of the love revealed in Christ.”¹³⁴

One can see in these suggestions that the Conference did not seek to offer general directives, but to encourage the continuing formation of middle axioms at various levels of the church – individual, congregational, denominational, national, etc. The responsibility for the

¹³⁴ Ibid., 237–39.

transformation of society rested in these conversations and decisions, based on what we have claimed as the content of Oxford Responsibility. Acting on the foundation of human value and freedom, with a provisional understanding of both the will of God within the limits of human finitude, culture and history, these responsible members of society would work toward the realistic goal of justice within history.

CHAPTER FIVE

DIRECTIONS FOR ADVANCE

In the early 1930s, Joseph Oldham and his contemporaries in the Life and Work movement came together to confront what they perceived as a dual crisis for the church and for the world. As we have seen, the Conference perceived the rise of totalitarianism and the advance of secularism as forces that would subsume the church to their own purposes, rendering it irrelevant and without voice. At the same time, the organizers perceived that the social concerns brought by the rise of these two forces, with detrimental effect on human value and freedom, could be answered most effectively, perhaps exclusively, through the doctrine and practice of Christianity.

The organizers sought in the years prior to World War II to maintain and expand a vital space for theology and the church in a post-war world. They looked forward to a generation where the values of human dignity and autonomy would anchor a realistic worldview where the limits of history and human agency would be acknowledged over against political and rational idealism. While this was, in part, a response to the idealism of the Social Gospel movement and its confrontation with the tragic nature of World War I, the Conference may have retained a sense of optimism for its own work, which would prove tenuous as well in the face of the atrocities of the Nazi regime, the dropping of American atomic bombs, and later conflicts in Korea, the Middle East and Vietnam, as well as Cold War politics.

Certainly, with its own grounding in Christian realism through the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr and others, its keen understanding of the contingencies of history, and the finitude of human agency, those gathered at Oxford did not have the naiveté to believe their work would result in the elimination of political and technical threats, however, they did labor that the church would regain and retain a place in which such threats could be ameliorated. Their work, for example, was integral to the formation of the WCC in 1948, which would continue for a time to use elements of Oxford Responsibility in its work before moving to other methodologies, as critiqued by Ramsey and others.

In the midst of that collaborative work, several of the Oxford group were integral as well in garnering American support for the development of the United Nations in 1942 and its Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Historians have credited the Oxford Conference as the inspiration to John Foster Dulles in working with other Conference colleagues, including Edwin Aubrey, John Bennett, Georgia Harkness, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Henry Van Dusen, in forming, within the United States' Federal Council of Churches, the Commission to Study the Bases of a Just and Durable Peace. The commission's work has been recognized in helping to shape American support in the churches for the formation of the United Nations, particularly through what Dulles called the effort "to arouse Christians generally to their responsibility and opportunity." Heather Warren notes the influence of what we are calling Oxford Responsibility in this effort. "These theologians' realist analysis of the causes of the world crisis, particularly their ideas about corporate sinfulness and their rejection of the inevitability of progress,

translated directly into advocacy for political measures to check governments that would violate basic human rights and the sovereignty of weaker countries.”¹

The social and theological leaders that comprised this self-named Theological Discussion Group, not unlike Oldham’s The Moot, worked to bring together theological grounding, political expertise, and an ecclesiology that posited responsibility with the Christian laity to engage the wider society.² Their work not only sought to secure military victory in the European war through a repudiation of American isolationism, working to convince the United States of its own responsibilities, but looked forward to establishing a post-war order that would foster peace, freedom, democratic governance, and international cooperation which has lasted deep into the first quarter of the twenty-first century.³

¹ One particular liturgical development of this effort was the establishment in 1940 of World Communion Sunday, which embodied a sacramental global unity with political responsibility. Warren, *Theologians of a New World Order*, 100, 107.

² The Theological Discussion Group had been organized by Henry Van Dusen in 1933. As mentioned earlier, in contrast to Oldham’s effort, Van Dusen rejected the inclusion of a broad range of voices for fear that such diversity would doom discussions to vague generalities. *Ibid.*, 61.

³ We have noted that the Oxford’s Conference positing of human freedom and dignity, along with its focus on the ordering of society in concepts such as sphere sovereignty, not only was manifest in a concern for human rights, but for the securing of religious freedom. In writing about the crisis of expanding totalitarianism and its deleterious effects on persons and affront to the sovereignty of God, Nils Ehrenström saw in the effort for religious freedom the roots of human rights. He wrote, “The struggle to delimit the sphere of the state ... has been continually fought out, and the achievement of political freedom in the modern world is indeed a by-product of this struggle for religious freedom.” The focus of securing of religious freedom within the work of the Conference and the subsequent collaborative work by the Theological Discussion Group and The Moot merit continuing study. Ehrenström, *Christian Faith and the Modern State*, 142.

A Return to Context

As we move toward the second quarter of the century, the foundation shaped in part by Christian responsibility for the post-war alliances and freedoms has developed visible fissures. Today, the church, in particular the western church, finds itself in a situation not unlike that confronting the organizers and delegates at Oxford, facing threats, both external and internal, that work to render its theological and practical voice impotent and irrelevant to its contexts and to wider culture. We might repeat the assessment offered by Joseph Oldham eight decades ago.⁴

The foundations of human society are quivering. The fact itself none will dispute, but our minds become dulled by familiarity to its significance. We give it our indolent assent, and contentedly resume the tenor of our habitual attitudes. There can, however, be no true wrestling with the realities of the contemporary situation, except in so far as we allow their meaning to break through the crust of our customary thinking into those deeper levels of our being in which our experience is absorbed and organized.⁵

At their risk of being accused of hyperbole, commentators have drawn attention to the parallels between the contemporary context and the situation faced by society in the early 1930s.⁶ It will be the job of political scientists, sociologists and historians to offer the ongoing analysis of the contemporary situation that is beyond both the scope and the limited historical perspective possible within this paper. However, given that Oxford Responsibility emerged within an intentional understanding and response to its context, it is important as we consider its contemporary relevance to point to some significant social markers that can situate implications of Oxford Responsibility, particularly for the American church. While there are many such

⁴The extended quotation can be found on page 7.

⁵ Visser 't Hooft and Oldham, *The Church and Its Function in Society*, 13–14.

⁶ See, for example, Tim Lister, “Are We Sliding Back to the Chaos of the 1930s?,” *CNN*, July 22, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/07/21/europe/world-returns-to-1930s-intl/index.html>.

markers, we will begin here with mention of two contextual issues – the rise of populist movements and changing demographic landscapes.

Particularly in the United States and in western Europe, populist anxieties sparked by globalization – especially around concentration of capital and economic power, migration trends, the broad presence of political and economic refugees, and wide demographic shifts – have fed a variety of nationalist movements, including those in traditionally democratic states.⁷ At the same time populist politics and the rise of social media technology has provided wide platforms for identity politics that target persons based on gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity, exemplified by a rise in white nationalism and other hate groups.⁸ The frameworks and alliances built to encourage human freedom through the growth of liberal democracy and international checks and balances, put in place following World War II, and the establishment of international organizations such as the WCC and the United Nations, which the Oxford Conference helped put in place, have been weakened. We will ask in these concluding pages if Oxford Responsibility and the Oldham method have any resources to offer in such a context.

⁷ One such example is the 2016 British referendum, popularly known as “Brexit.” This called for the United Kingdom’s exit from the European Union, which traces its roots to treaties agreed upon in the 1950s, soon after the end of World War II and the establishment of the United Nations. Likewise in the United States, the current presidential administration has followed a policy that has destabilized international agreements and alliances, including, for example, withdrawal from the fledgling Paris Climate Accords in 2017, alongside unconventional overtures to traditionally autocratic leaders across the globe.

⁸ According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks so-called hate groups in the United States, the total number of such groups rose to a historical high in 2018, growing 30 percent in the previous four years. Identified white nationalist groups rose 50 in the previous year. Black nationalist groups, that the SPLC described as generally anti-semitic and anti-LGBT, rose 13 percent in the same 12-month period. Heidi Beirich, “Rage Against Change: The Year in Hate and Extremism,” *Intelligence Report of the Southern Poverty Law Center*, no. 166 (Spring 2019): 36.

Among the significant demographic trends relevant to our examination are the changing racial and ethnic composition of the nation; the aging of the American population; as well as the changing religious landscape of the United States and the world. Demographers have long reported the shift in American demographics toward increases in Hispanic and Asian ethnic populations, with predictions that by mid-century Whites will no longer constitute a majority in the nation.⁹ Furthermore, the religious landscape across the globe is shifting as well. The Pew Center projects that by 2050 the number of Muslims worldwide will equal the number of Christians, and that adherents of Hinduism and Judaism will also grow. A plurality of Christians will live in sub-Saharan Africa. Globally, those persons who do not affiliate with any religion will be on the decline, but will increase in the United States and in much of Europe.¹⁰ If the Oldham method within Oxford Responsibility is to have any footing within a contemporary societal framework, it would need to take more seriously than did its originators an expanded definition of diversity. Included in this shift would be an intentionality beyond that of ecumenical Christian and secular conversation, toward interfaith efforts, as well as multi-cultural efforts that eschew the subtle colonialism that was inherent in the 1937 effort.

⁹ The Pew Research Center reports that population in the United States has grown more racially and ethnically diverse and predicts that by 2055 there will be no one racial or ethnic majority. This shift largely has been and will continue to be driven by immigration particularly from Latin America and Asia. The other shift will be an aging population. While the global population tripled in the last half of the twentieth century and the start of the twenty-first century, it is projected to slow with growth strongest among the elderly as a percentage of the population. D’Vera Cohn and Andrea Caumont, “10 Demographic Trends That Are Shaping the U.S. and the World,” *Pew Research Center: Fact Tank*, accessed March 12, 2019, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/31/10-demographic-trends-that-are-shaping-the-u-s-and-the-world/>.

¹⁰ Conrad Hackett et al., “The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050” (Pew Research Center, April 2, 2015), 5, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>.

A Return To Oxford

The work done for the Oxford Conference was a substantial ecumenical undertaking spanning several years of intensive preparation and communication across international and cultural boundaries, pursued with an urgency, in all seriousness, to save the church and to save the world. Those who wrote, shared and debated essays; corresponded repeatedly across oceans; and sat in meetings during an Oxford summer, as well as those who pored over Oxford's texts in denominational cabinet rooms, faculty offices, and church parlors, were energized to bring theology and faith to bear on real-world problems. They further worked to place ultimate responsibility for prudential decision making at the appropriate levels – outside of the church, with the laity, in the world – where actions were most relevant and effective. At its core, the Oxford Conference put theology in service to the church and the world.

On an international level, the method and theme modeled by the Oxford Conference continued to drive the work of the WCC until the Geneva Conference on Church and Society in 1966, which comprised wide international participation, including significant representation from third-world nations, as well as the presence of Roman Catholic religious and laity. In addressing the continuing responsibility of the church, controversies arose regarding how social ethics could appropriately relate to changing cultural conditions in society and the various models of ecclesiology that emerge through social action. Critics such as Ramsey and Preston have commented that at Geneva, the ecumenical movement began to move from a focus on middle axioms toward more prudential statements, which Preston described as “the disease by which the passing of resolutions produces a sense of significant achievement,” which Oxford, as a study conference, assiduously worked against.¹¹

¹¹ Preston, *Confusions in Christian Social Ethics*, 26.

Ramsey's criticism of the WCC as a "social action *curia*" is a criticism that has continued to follow the work of the Council.¹² In recent years, the WCC has also faced budget pressures and staff layoffs, a situation that following its 10th Assembly in the Republic of Korea in 2013 was called "bleak."¹³ Its reliance on the church in the United States has also exacerbated financial pressures, as overall ecumenical support in the nation has faltered, particularly at the local and regional levels. The work of the Council is often lost, consumed only by those with a particular interest in the topic. Preston lamented the situation in his semicentennial look at the Oxford Conference.

There is a large quarry of useful material from Oxford onwards. It is hard to believe it has been adequately digested. And the temptation is to overlook it and continually make fresh starts. It is the *tendencies* in the material which are important and have, I think, a good deal of inherent informal authority. The details matter less, especially the resolutions which tend to be grandiose and vaguely general, exaggerating the influence and practical possibilities open to [the WCC and the churches] ... In its original form the material is accessible only to a minority. The WCC is entirely dependent on national Councils of Churches, and after that the churches themselves, to popularize it. On the whole they do not. ... Ecumenical matters tend to come last in time and money when denominational interests have first been attended to.¹⁴

It would appear that an ecumenical conference on the scale of the Oxford Conference – with its preparatory work, its publishing output, and that output's utilization by the church in its context – would be prohibitive financially and logistically, although advancements in telecommunications might offer some effective possibilities. Certainly the core question is whether the churches have a will for such work. As mentioned at our beginning there are

¹² Ramsey, *Who Speaks for the Church?*, 13.

¹³ S. Wesley Ariarajah, "Mission and Ecumenism Today: Reflections on the Tenth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Busan, Republic of Korea," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 38, no. 2 (April 2014): 62.

¹⁴ Ronald H. Preston, *The Middle Way: Theology, Politics and Economics in the Later Thought of R.H. Preston*, ed. R. John Elford and Ian S. Markham (London: SCM Press, 2000), 111.

resources from Oxford that provide thought and methodology for a world and church in crisis, even 80 years since. In our concluding pages, we will name some of those opportunities. What new expressions of ecumenical social ethics might be possible and at what level?

Expanding the Table

When contemplating an undertaking such as the Oxford Conference, one is immediately confronted by what would be various organizational challenges – financial and logistical, as well as theoretical. As we have mentioned, among those challenges would be the need for a greater attention to diversity. While the Oxford Conference worked to bring diverse voices to the table, particularly the technical voices from beyond the church professionals, there were voices missing. In a context driven by populist crises, income inequality, shifting demographics, and a multifarious religious landscape, one must ask who is part of a new ecumenical, or interfaith, dialogue and how can it be implemented?

The Oxford Conference relied on experts – bishops, clerics, academics, nobles, political leaders, writers, scientists – who had the deep grounding in issues as well as the skills to engage, not to mention the time and money to participate. Oldham talked about including the “working man” but in large part, the working class, and the underclass, were not at the table. One might look to Buber, if not later liberation theologians, to consider which “Others” are excluded in ecumenical undertakings, and how this exclusion might lead to an ineffectual and irresponsible arrogance. In his analysis of middle axiom thought, Duncan Forrester writes, “Experts, civil servants, and ecclesiastics also have their interest, their prejudices, and their blind spots – particularly perhaps the frequent inability to understand their own limitations. ... That is why it is so important to involve as full participants in the discussion those who are poor and powerless,

the people who are more the recipients than the makers of policy. These are the people who know where the shoe pinches.”¹⁵

Another obstacle to the responsible practice of intentional diversity is a retreat into tribalism and continued colonialism. In an article on the vitality of mission within Hispanic/Latino Christianity, Carlos Cardoza-Orlandi cautions the church from retreating from faithful ecumenical efforts and moving into tribal affiliations defined by class, ethnicity and, even, ecclesial denomination. He also confronts ecumenical and mission efforts that objectify the “Other” as the needful recipient of the church’s offer of proclamation and salvation. “This pattern of mission and ecumenics is not adequate for the challenges that Christian churches face today. This pattern requires a geopolitical structure, provided by Christendom, that is no longer functional.”¹⁶

As we have noted from Graeme Smith’s work, the organizers at Oxford, while recognizing shifts and threats to the religious landscape, assumed such a geopolitical structure. Yet the notion of responsibility that informed the Conference, with its focus on context and relationship, enables ecumenical social ethics to advance in a new space with both an expanded sense of mission that recognizes the movement of God in various geopolitical contexts, and a cultivation of a posture of humble steadfastness that allows for and models continuing social intercourse across contexts and cultural boundaries. The options and implications regarding the application of social thought to the issues and concerns before church and society, while always remaining contingent, would require a new level of missional transparency. This transparency

¹⁵ Forrester, *Beliefs, Values and Policies: Conviction Politics in a Secular Age*, 20.

¹⁶ Carlos F. Cardoza-Orlandi, “‘Now You See It, Now You Don’t’: Mission and Ecumenism in a Hispanic/Latino Perspective,” *Theology Today* 54, no. 4 (January 1998): 505.

extends beyond prudential decisions toward the development of related communities. In the crossing of boundaries, we are reminded of Buber's understanding of authentic human existence that so influenced the Oxford Conference. Here, the human finds her existence in the subjective relationship with the Other. Who we meet and how we meet at the table, and what boundaries are crossed in so doing, is of theological significance.

A Challenge to the Academy

In considering the implications of Oxford Responsibility for our time, the question of how the table is set confronts the theological academy in particular. The contemporary context, with its shifting political and religious landscape, further informed by our notion of Oxford Responsibility, charges the theological academy to consider its mission, its curriculum, its pedagogy and its outreach.

Oxford Responsibility confronts theology to consider its historical situation and context, and to examine the norms it brings to the discussion. The Oxford method brings in voices to the table that heretofore may not have been considered and uses alternative criteria to assess validity in the discourse. Forrester, in his argument for the middle axiom approach to move beyond a type of theological and political aristocracy, notes the difficulty, writing that “tensions and the disturbance” will be introduced in the process. At the same time, from his academic context, he notes with apparent prejudice that those on the underside “are often angry, muddled, and naïve,” often lacking the “capacity for rigorous, disciplined thought which higher education is intended to nurture.” Forrester, while seeking the instrumental “experience, insights, and attitudes” of the poor and powerless, here has set academic expertise as the established norm for social thought, to the point of calling into question whether, as the objective beneficiaries of academic rigor, the

“previously excluded” possess even the potential for critical thought.¹⁷ From the start, this privileges certain technical expertise and devalues, or, at least, qualifies, other technical expertise. What are the postures the academy takes toward the “sources” of theology and do they need repositioning?

In further regard to the norms and sources for theological scholarship, Oxford Responsibility charges the academy to continue to pay attention to context in what is validated as appropriate scholarship and practice. This is a significant challenge, not only to the theological academy, but to wider academic culture, which would be asked by Oxford Responsibility to consider the recognition of a discipline’s composition that is shaped by cultural context, and, further, how a discipline’s overall practice, within a context, informs and is informed by the academy’s theoretical work. This is particularly relevant within a theological discipline that purports to engage in questions of the nature of God and humanity in the context of history. There are various examples of the privileging of certain theology and theological disciplines over against those considered “soft” or “contextual,” leading to the establishment of an accepted norm of what valid theological scholarship comprises and what is anathema to such scholarship.¹⁸ Yet

¹⁷ Forrester, *Beliefs, Values and Policies: Conviction Politics in a Secular Age*, 21.

¹⁸ A Spring 2017 email exchange between faculty at Duke Divinity School, which went widely public, points to a divide between an accepted norm of what valid theological scholarship comprises over against practical or “contextual” theology. Dr. Anthea Portier-Young through a bulk email had invited faculty, students and staff to attend a workshop that would address the history of racism, with the intention of advancing work toward racial equity at the school. Dr. Paul Griffiths, in an email to the faculty, rejected his colleague’s invitation and exhorted his other colleagues to decline the invitation as well, that he characterized as opposed to the mission of the school, which he saw as requiring faculty to remain resolutely focused on orthodox scholarship and teaching. Condemning the proposed workshop as “intellectually flaccid,” “illiberal,” “totalitarian” and “anti-intellectual,” he reminded his colleagues that they “should be tense with the effort” of their scholarship, “thrumming like a tautly triple-woven steel thread with the work of it,” before ending his email with the title of the African-American-inspired folk song of the 1960’s civil rights movement, “Keep your eyes on the prize.” Rod Dreher, “Duke

Oxford Responsibility would claim a contextuality and dynamism to all theology. With Forrester, our work with responsibility reminds the academy that its experts are not the “Guardians dreamed up by Plato in the *Republic*, who know the Good, and therefore what is good for others as well as for themselves. They are rather men and women, with skills and insights which are of great importance, but occupying a place in society which can limit their insight and empathy, and subtly distort their values.”¹⁹

This said, Oxford Responsibility does not ask of the academy to lessen its attention to scholarship, but to deepen it in service to the church. It further reminds, if not demands, of the theological academy, that purports to train not only scholars, but also leaders for the church of Jesus Christ, that pedagogy prepare students for the effective integration of theology and practice so that such leaders may work to prepare laity for their responsibility within society. The significant research undertaken by the organizers of the Conference, as we have seen, filled volumes. The doctrinal topics on which Oxford focused – the nature of God and humanity, history and eschatology, and ecclesiology – remain as critical for the church as they were in 1937, yet the Oxford method also suggests a renewed attention to matters of soteriology, spirituality, social ethics, political science and the social sciences as they relate to the social function of the church.

Divinity Crisis: The Documents Are Out,” *The American Conservative*, accessed March 14, 2019, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/duke-divinity-crisis-griffiths-documents/>. Certainly, the content of the workshop was appropriate for theological, sociological, political and pedagogical critique, yet Oxford Responsibility would ask the theological academy to consider and model practical engagement with the social issues of its context, and to bring into the discussion the fuller community in which scholarship is practiced. This dissertation’s author was at the time a staff member at Duke Divinity School and attended the workshop in question.

¹⁹ Forrester, *Beliefs, Values and Policies: Conviction Politics in a Secular Age*, 20.

David McAllister-Wilson, dean of Wesley Theological Seminary, in his text calling for the renewal of theological education as central to the renewal of the church, argued for increased scholarly attention to Christian apologetics, particularly regarding the authority of the Bible, the interaction between science and religion, and interfaith dialogue. He also called for seminaries to pay additional attention to the creation of missional leaders, who would serve as public theologians in their leadership contexts, and would be adept at empowering the laity, which we have seen was a core value of the Oxford Conference. Careful to distinguish empowerment from delegation, McAllister-Wilson wrote, “(W)e know from organizations as formerly rigid as the military, organizational structures are becoming flatter, knowledge is shared, and power – the ability and energy to do things – comes from the multiplying effect of everyone committed to the mission.”²⁰ Oxford demonstrates that for the church, this is not a new idea. Yet Oxford sharpened this, claiming that empowering the laity was not merely instrumental to the work and mission of the church, but was inherently constituent of the mission of the church itself, particularly that mission that is beyond the physical and social boundaries of the church. The laity engage their responsibility to use their knowledge and power in the world where the institutional church, if it is to remain responsible, does not itself go.

This work will require the academy to pay deep attention to the church, not to be directed by it, nor to direct it, but to engage as a partner in the endeavor in which theology and practice are subjected to common critique. As we have stated, Oxford Responsibility puts theology in service to the church and to the world. The question in our context is whether theology can be a

²⁰ David McAllister-Wilson, *A New Church and a New Seminary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), 100–105.

partner in moving discourse forward for the mission of the church toward the establishment of justice in society.²¹

A Challenge to the Church

We have noted that Christianity's growth has moved from the Occident to the Global South, including Africa, Asia and Latin America. It continues a precipitous decline in the West, where the landscape for mainline Christianity is shifting on a seismic scale. The Public Religion Research Institute, based in Washington, D.C., has reported on the rapidly changing racial and religious demographics in the United States, pointing to the "death" of the dominance of white Protestant Christianity in the country. Robert Jones of the Institute begins his data-rich text from 2016 on the topic with an "obituary," writing, "After a long life spanning nearly two hundred and forty years, White Christian America – a prominent cultural force in the nation's history – has died."²²

²¹ In 2016, while visiting Iona Abbey in Scotland, the dissertation's author had opportunity to have breakfast with New Testament scholar and ecumenist John Drane, formerly of the University of Aberdeen and current co-chair of the Mission Theology Advisory Group of the Archbishops' Council of the Church of England and of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. During that conversation, Drane was asked what he might advise his younger self about his work as a theologian. He said, to paraphrase, "I would tell my forty-year-old self to pay more attention to the church, rather than focus only on the discourse of the theological academy." Drane went on to critique what he saw as a continued narrowing of the academic conversation, in which guilds talk only to themselves. This sentiment, informed by Oxford Responsibility, suggests a continued needs for the integration of theological education, particularly in its pedagogy.

²² The Public Religion Research Institute reports that while white Christians in 2014 still comprised a plurality within American religion, the group had decreased below the majority to 47 percent, with nonwhite Christians accounting for 24 percent, followed closely by the unaffiliated at 22 percent; five percent listing affiliation with "Other religion," and two percent choosing "Don't know/refused." Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016), 1, 47.

The crisis for the American church goes beyond the demographic challenges facing a once dominant white church. The Oxford Conference's concerns about the threat of secularization within society and the possibility of the church's powerlessness against its onslaught has seemed not simply to have come true, but to have developed into a reality in which one mimics the other. The church, seeking relevance in the face of crisis, has, in many circumstances, moved from a concern about mission and responsibility to a concern about mere survival in the marketplace. Robin Lovin has suggested that the Christian realism that motivated Oxford toward a responsibility for its social context has, in the face of increasing social fragmentation and polarization led to the church's theological retreat from the world in one form or another.²³

In their popular and influential text, *Resident Aliens*, Duke University's Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon advocate for a "Christian Colony" shaped by an ethic of conviction over against the values of the world. "(T)he Sermon, if believed and lived, makes us different, shows us the world to be alien, an odd place where what makes sense to everybody else is revealed to be opposed to what God is doing among us."²⁴ Here the community that matters is the Christian community, in retreat from the world, responsible only to itself, albeit under the judgment of God. The Christian is to place herself in clearly-marked borders between the church and the world, within a clearly-defined Christian narrative that decides who is within

²³ Robin W. Lovin, "Church in an Amoral Time: Reimagining Christian Realism," *The Christian Century* 136, no. 5 (February 27, 2019): 26–29.

²⁴ The authors here refer to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 74; In his critique of Christian Realism in his Gifford Lectures, Hauerwas claims that Reinhold Niebuhr's theology "reflects the loss of truthful Christian speech and hence, of faithful Christian practice." Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, 140.

and without those borders, jettisoning an idea of Oxford Responsibility for the wider world.

Those outside the Christian community do not, indeed, cannot, recognize the activity of God in the world.

A lack of responsible engagement with the world has, ironically, helped push the church into the arms of the market, in which the church does not offer a Gospel for which one should give his whole being, as Oldham had insisted in the early preparations for the Oxford Conference. Rather the church seeks its own existence alongside competing elements of the marketplace, replacing both an ethic of conviction and an ethic of responsibility with a business plan to attract its object of religious consumers. Journalist and United Church of Christ cleric G. Jeffrey MacDonald chronicles the trend of the church's mimesis of market culture, using as examples North Carolina's Forest Hill Church in Charlotte, which designed its Warehouse 242 congregation for young adults, who had indicated via a marketing survey a preference for worshipping separately from older persons; as well as other "niche churches ... catering to ever-narrower market segments." MacDonald also points out that executive pastors among the nation's fastest growing churches often cite business texts as the most formative regarding ministry, including texts that explicitly position the church as "just another enterprise trying to make a sale." Quoting from one such text, he writes, "Whether your product is a candidate, a hamburger, or the word of God, the challenge is the same. How do you connect with a fast-changing public and get them to buy what you're selling?"²⁵ MacDonald also suggests that retreat into the market has seen a concomitant retreat from Christian values toward a further

²⁵ Quoting from Douglas Sosnik, Matthew Dowd and Ron Fournier. *Applebee's America: How Successful Political, Business, and Religious Leaders Connect with the New American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 2006) p. 2. G. Jeffrey MacDonald, *Thieves in the Temple: The Christian Church and the Selling of the American Soul* (Philadelphia: Basic Books, 2010), 104–5, 111–12.

mimicking of the wider culture. Drawing upon the work of David Gushee of Mercer University, he proposes that what is required is a deepening of spiritual and moral formation, centered on engagement and dialogue with the Other. “We need a deepened commitment to prayer for our churches. We need to address the moral formation of our people and our clergy ... and [we need a] deepening of the moral and spiritual vision of dignity and sacredness in every human life, especially those lives that we’re tempted to consider unworthy of such dignity.”²⁶

A New Oxford

A question to be considered is whether Oxford Conference thought can begin to restore a moral vocabulary that addresses dignity, freedom and responsibility, and to what extent have the demands of the market overtaken such imagination in policy and practice. As Robin Lovin observed, “(C)hurches, universities, charities, arts organizations, and businesses are increasingly concerned about survival in a marketplace that is organized to satisfy desires, not to raise aspirations.”²⁷

In his attempt to clarify the proper meaning of responsibility within Christian moral discourse, Albert Jonsen takes counsel from Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, who, as we have noted, called for responsibility “to be brought back from the province of specialized ethics into that of lived life.”²⁸ Here the term is put into use amidst the demands of ideology and the real life

²⁶ MacDonald cites a 2009 survey from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life on “The Religious Dimensions of the Torture Debate.” The research claimed that 71 percent of Americans saw the use of torture in interrogating terrorist suspects as justified, with 79 percent of white evangelicals making similar claims, along with 63 percent of mainline Christians. *Ibid.*, 90.

²⁷ Lovin, “Church in an Amoral Time: Reimagining Christian Realism,” 27.

²⁸ Quoted in Jonsen, *Responsibility in Modern Religious Ethics*, 4.

of humans in general, and, for Jonsen, Christians in particular. Writing three decades after Oxford, Jonsen posits the term as a push to members of the ecumenical church not simply to seek understanding between each other, but “to become aware together of the challenge posed to Christianity itself and of their common resources to meet the challenge.”²⁹ This was the very challenge of Oxford in which its concept of responsibility emerged, in which responsibility serves not simply as a component of ethical thought but as a normative and central principle.

The concept of Oxford Responsibility can serve the ecumenical church again, not through a restoration of a grand ecumenical council, although it might be welcome, but through an intentional restoration of study and dialogue across the church, and the church’s empowerment of dialogues across communities. We might call for the cultivation of “Little Oxfords” in the life of the church in its various contexts at the congregational, neighborhood, community, regional, and denominational levels, where these conversations can take place, and where laity can be inculcated with moral imagination for wider dialogue and action.

In his text *Democracy and Tradition*, Jeffrey Stout explored the place of religious conversation within a secular democratic community. While a study of how the work of the Oxford Conference might interact with the significant political and philosophical work regarding the place of religious reasons within democratic tradition is rich with possibilities, for our narrow purposes we focus on his insight into public conversation and the inculcation of morality in democratic discourse.³⁰ Over against secular liberalism that finds no place for religious reasons

²⁹ Ibid., 8.

³⁰ Stout defines conversation as “an exchange of views in which the respective parties express their premises in as much detail as they see fit and in whatever idiom they wish, try to make sense of each other’s perspectives, and expose their own commitments to the possibility of criticism.” Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 10.

in a public dialogue, and what he calls “new traditionalism” – in which he would include the work of Hauerwas – which refrains from the dialogue altogether, Stout argues that a democratic vision of morality emerges in a multitude of voices that form a community whose members are responsible to one another. That community must include religious voices as well. Within our concept of Oxford Responsibility, this places upon theology and the church that responsibility to enter into that dialogue, and to maintain the moral imagination to recognize in the diversity of voices a common revelation of God. Stout, in examining the contemporary relationship between the religious Right and political power, claims the return of religious reasoning into the public dialogue as a life or death issue, not unlike the urgency of the Oxford Conference. “If the religious Left does not soon recover its energy and self-confidence, it is unlikely that American democracy will be capable of counteracting either the greed of its business elite or the determination of many whites to define the authentic nation in ethnic, racial, or ecclesiastical terms.”³¹

The call for “Little Oxfords” may be an opportunity for the restoration of the mission of the church in the face of commodification and secularization through the utilization of models that engage the community in dialogue and action in new and broad ways.

One such innovation was Scotland’s Iona Community, founded the year following the Oxford Conference. The community began as a fellowship of Church of Scotland pastors following a rule of life for the renewing of the church’s work for justice and peace in the world, and in attending to the spiritual formation of the church. Oldham knew of the community and discussed the possibilities of its work and the work of other such new communities in

³¹ Ibid., 300.

implementing the responsible thought developed at the Oxford Conference. These communities he saw as integrating the work of faith into practice, in consideration of the opportunities and limitations of historical context. Oldham's concern was how new imaginative communities, which were taking seriously both spirituality and engagement in society, could best be held together in a common faith.³² The community has sustained itself and today operates using an action-reflection model, integrated with intentional spiritual formation, for engagement with a wider community.³³

Communities such as that on Iona have come to be categorized within the Protestant tradition as neomonastic. This new monasticism comprises persons forming an intentional community that follows a "rule of life" and is focused on the formation of disciples, generally laity, through attention to doctrine, spiritual practice and intentional engagement with the world toward the establishment of justice. These communities are inward focused as to formation of

³² During a meeting of The Moot in January of 1944, Oldham and Alexander Miller discussed the creation of new faith communities, such as the Iona Community, that dealt with "the total historical situation in the faith expressed in dogma" and how these varied communities might find explicit theological connection with one another. Miller, who would go on to serve on the religion faculty at Stanford University, at the time was working with the founder of the Iona Community, the Rev. George Macleod, Baron Macleod of Fuinary. Macleod had founded the Community in 1938 at the site of the ruins of St. Columba's sixth-century monastery on the Scottish island of Iona, bringing pastors and laborers together for its restoration. Miller suggested that the theological academy was ignoring such communities and that, perhaps, there might be a "synthesis of theological thought with practical experiment" following the end of World War II, with Oldham suggesting that such new movements were "dependent on the Holy Spirit ... and therefore hazy." Clements, *The Moot Papers*, 658–59.

³³ The Community describes itself as "a dispersed Christian ecumenical community working for peace and social justice, rebuilding of community and the renewal of worship. We are ... (a) community of men and women from different walks of life and different traditions in the Church engaged together, and with people of goodwill across the world, in acting, reflecting and praying for justice, peace and the integrity of creation; convinced that the inclusive community we seek must be embodied in the community we practice." Iona Community, *The Iona Community*, accessed March 16, 2019, <https://iona.org.uk/>.

Christians for the purpose of outward action in the world in the contexts where its members work – as teachers, doctors, businesswomen, and students.³⁴

In contrast with the communities envisioned in the new traditionalism, these communities are positioned to respond to concepts such as Oxford Responsibility in rebuilding moral imagination at various levels of community. Lovin writes, “We have experienced a devastating loss of social capital in the very places that used to be best at creating it. . . . This is the point at which I begin to think that the idea of the church as an alternative community with its own distinctive values and virtues might be the best response to our situation.” Lovin compares such a community with Germany’s Confessing Church, which held space over against the Nazi destruction of church and society. In contemporary context however, Lovin sees such communities as a holding action to empower laity with a vocation to rebuild social capital where they live and work.

It will require people who understand their religious identity and have a realistic assessment of the world around them. They will also need a special kind of commitment to each other that supports them when they venture to raise questions about goods and goals that most people no longer understand. . . . It would miss the point if all of these activities are seen only as alternative ways of doing and being, with no intention to change things beyond the community of faith. The Saturday morning service project and Tuesday evening Bible study need leaders who raise the larger question, “How do you share what is meaningful to you in this place, and in this work, in the other places where you spend your life?”³⁵

³⁴ See Elaine A. Heath and Larry Duggins, *Missional. Monastic. Mainline.* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014); and The Rutba House, ed., *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, New Monastic Library (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005).

³⁵ Lovin, “Church in an Amoral Time: Reimagining Christian Realism,” 29.

Responsibility in the Neighborhood

The creation of “Little OxforDs” where persons engage theology and context that enables responsible action and reflection are evidenced by the growth of neomonastic communities, as well as other intentional efforts, including continuing education programming, to empower the laity for effective ministry and vocation.³⁶ In Oxford’s CFS, Oldham wrote about general lines of advance in relation to such preparation of the laity for responsible ministry. Oldham began with three directives. These were the effective relating of spiritual and pastoral ministries of the church to the realities of the common life; provision of a clearer understanding of the ethical implications of the Gospel, utilizing “fresh and constructive thought;” and the increase of small groups “for the purpose of mutual help in Christian witness and action,” including the formation of educational programming for functional groups, such as professional guilds. Within these directives, Oldham called for a move into the neighborhood.³⁷

No Christian congregation can escape its responsibilities to its immediate neighbourhood. If through the faithful preaching of the Gospel men and women commit themselves to war against the devil and all his works, the first duty is to find out what injustices there are to be removed and what miseries and want to be relieved in the immediate neighbourhood. The life of the Church would be revitalized if in every parish or congregation there were groups of Christian men and woman banded together for this purpose, and developing through the discipline of the conflict with social evil a growingly sensitive Christian conscience.³⁸

³⁶ One such recent example of such an effort for laity is a nascent program called Neighborhood Seminary, a two-year program for laity that seeks to prepare persons to enter into mission in their context using a pedagogy combining monthly collaborative coursework from a theological scholar partnered with a local ministry practitioner; formative work with trained spiritual directors; and intentional community engagement with local leaders. The program was begun at Duke University in July 2017 before being released as an independent effort in November 2018, working with groups in western North Carolina and northern Virginia. The dissertation’s author is currently consulting to the program.

³⁷ Visser ’t Hooft and Oldham, *The Church and Its Function in Society*, 195–97.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 197.

These were the contextual spaces for middle axioms to be engaged and implemented, where setting and circumstance could be considered, action engaged, and God's judgment discerned. These were the spaces from which laity would be formed for their vocational realities that could move toward the Responsible Society the ecumenical movement envisioned. The fervor Oldham had for such spaces is worthy of quoting at length.

May not the formation of such cells of Christian witness and service be the distinctive Christian contribution to the social and political struggles of our time? To be effectively changed a social system must be changed from within in all its parts. ... The only order which can be a really better order is one in which there is a greater sense of responsibility of men towards men, and that responsibility is something that grows through exercise and must be learned and practised in lesser spheres before it can be effectively exercised in wider fields. It has to be learned first in the family, in the neighbourhood, in local government, in professional associations, in various social groups. ... If we try to envisage a Church fully alive to its responsibilities in the social and political spheres, ought not the picture in our minds to be one of the growth of a multitude of centres of spontaneous activity in which Christians associate themselves to bear the Christian witness in their neighbourhood or profession, to war against evil where they encounter it in daily life. ... In proportion as such groups increase there would arise a force in the life of a people capable of transforming its institutions and of bringing about a true revolution.³⁹

However we might assess Oldham's call for a Christian revolution, the Oxford Conference and its theologically-grounded concept of responsibility, operating with a realist foundation supportive of human freedoms and cognizant of human limits, provides a theology and methodology for a recovery of ecumenical, interfaith and trans-societal dialogue, beginning, as we have outlined in our concluding chapter, on the local level. Oxford Responsibility has within it the theological and missional imagination that can be a revitalizing force within Christian congregational life. Such a revitalization would comprise a move toward the restoration and expansion of broad dialogue and common action where Christianity and religion

³⁹ Ibid., 198–99.

can take their proper place, encouraging an engagement with the Other as neighbor. In this responsible society, human dignity and value are continually reaffirmed over against those forces that seek to negate them. Further, the church may continue to speak to the reality of those forces, without a retreat from the responsible achievements toward justice on this side of the Kingdom of God.

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