Introduction

DAVID RIESMAN has reversed Gilbert Murray's phrase to speak of "the nerve of failure" so perhaps one can transpose another phrase common today and speak of "the faith of loss." "The nerve of failure" and "the faith of loss" point to a situation in which the idols are broken and the gods are dead, but the darkness of negation turns out to be full of rich possibility. Out of the nothingness which has swallowed up all tradition there comes nihilism but also the possibility of a new ecstatic consciousness. The yes and the no, joyfulness and despair, are terribly close together. No one can say whether in this generation we shall have global suicide or New Being. The essays in this book are an effort to define some of the elements of a great religious transformation when the old is no more and the new is not yet, or perhaps better, when the old and the new are so perilously and inextricably intermixed that none of us can be sure what he will be tomorrow.

It might be well in the introduction to anchor what will at times be abstract analysis in the personal experience out of which it comes. The work of every man, even a nuclear physicist, is rooted in his personal myth, in the unique and partly unconscious meanings his work has for him. For many kinds of work it is not necessary or even particularly helpful to know the link between the work and the inner experience, but where the work itself deals with the great collective myths which are dying and being born in our time then it is useful to know something of the private myth of the writer and how it articulates with these pervasive public myths. Within the inevitable limits of self-knowledge I would like to share with the reader the personal experiences out of which this book comes.

The first Bellah to arrive on this continent came in the late seven-

teenth century to Charleston, South Carolina. He was of Scottish descent, Presbyterian, and had come from Northern Ireland. In successive generations my ancestors—preachers, farmers, tradesmen —moved West, county by county, state by state. My father was born in Texas and grew up in Oklahoma. My mother's family was of English and Scottish descent, and also Presbyterian. She was born in Arkansas where her father was a planter and she met my father at the University of Oklahoma. My father became the editor and publisher of a small-town newspaper in Southwest Oklahoma, where I was born in 1927, but he died before I was three and I grew up with my mother in Los Angeles.

I was raised among the fragments of a once coherent, Southern Protestant culture. My mother's memories of sober Sundays devoted to churchgoing, reading the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress,* and visiting the cemetery were communicated to me and indeed I seldom missed attending the Presbyterian Sunday School. There the atmosphere was conservative without being fundamentalist. I remember being shocked and a bit outraged when I first heard a public school teacher discuss the theory of evolution in the third grade, for up till then I had only known the Bible story of creation.

When I first read Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* at Harvard College it spoke to me of an atmosphere I knew well. I remembered an old gentleman speaking to my Sunday School class about "the calling." He told a lugubrious story about a young boy who had a calling from God to be an undertaker, which, the old man said, may not seem pleasant but like all honest callings is necessary and pleasing to God. Although the relatives that I knew were not at all intellectual my mother communicated to me a love of books and writing which had been characteristic of her mother and my father. I grew up with an unself-conscious American patriotism, in which no basic questions about American society ever arose, and with a trace of Southern sentimentalism about the Confederacy and prejudice against Republicans.

But I grew up not in the Bible belt but in Los Angeles in a heterogeneous neighborhood. I was exposed from an early age to people different from my family. Since my father had died when I was small I had no compelling figure with whom to identify, whose views could mold my own. My mother early looked to me for opinions. Thus I had both the necessity and the possibility of forging my own identity and worldview in adolescence out of the

fragments of the past and the diversity of the present. In the heterogeneous environment of the Los Angeles public schools the people who were most interesting to me often turned out to be Jews. Among them I found that the culture for which I had learned a formal respect at home was a living reality, especially in the realms of music and literature.

And it was in high school that I met a girl whose refusal to accept sham, whose love of life and whose quest for perfection helped me define my own direction—a girl I later married.

In the atmosphere of the Second World War when I was coming to consciousness I became progressively more liberal, both religiously and politically. With an intensity which has become much more familiar recently I began to test the ideals I had been taught against the realities of life in America and came to doubt the entire structure of religious and political beliefs that I had earlier taken for granted. In my last year in high school I began to read Marxist literature loaned to me by one or two friends.

Harvard was in many ways a liberation for me. Instead of the isolation I felt in high school I felt supported in the intellectual and cultural as well as political ideas I was beginning to develop. The atmosphere was far less radical than it was in the thirties or would be again in the sixties, but there were sizable groups and remarkably intelligent individuals who shared my views. In many ways my Marxism was but a transposition of my Protestantism: idealistic, moral, puritanical. Instead of a mythical apocalypse I looked forward to what I thought was a real one. There would indeed be a new heaven and a new earth at the end of history when man's exploitation of man had finally been overcome. For the moment my religious and political concerns were fused in a single apocalyptic vision. Christianity I no longer took seriously. Marxism fulfilled my needs for personal identity and group belonging. It provided a great escape from the constrictions of provincial American culture—it gave a sweeping view of world history which allowed me to relate critically to my past and present. But even then I had half-conscious doubts that I could at such an early age have found a completely satisfactory worldview that had answers to all questions. My search for alternative visions went on in other realms as well. While Russia never interested me, even repelled me though I tried not to think about it, I was drawn to primitive and exotic cultures. I majored in social anthropology and, long before the

hippies, was attracted to the American Indians and other primitive peoples. I was intrigued with what I thought was the wholeness and integrity of those cultures in contrast to the fragmentation I saw around me. I wrote my undergraduate honors thesis on Apache kinship systems. In my last year in college I took a course on East Asian civilization which was the beginning of an abiding interest. The aesthetic intensity of Japanese culture appealed to my parched Protestant soul and even in the midst of my Marxism I began reading about Zen Buddhism. Also as an undergraduate I was first exposed to psychoanalysis and the multiple levels of the inner life which it has revealed. Under the cover of an apparently satisfactory total worldview, multiple apprehensions of reality were growing.

The months after the disaster of the Henry Wallace campaign in 1948 were not easy ones for those in the dwindling American left. In the face of a growing persecution which was being carried out with great publicity by certain congressional and state legistative committees, and of the far more extensive purge which was quietly going on in many institutions of American society, the Marxist left turned upon itself, as the Navaho used to do in time of drought, and began to discover witches in its own midst. It was an ugly picture from any point of view and one that produced great human suffering. I never became a compulsive anti-Communist, a man trapped in a love-hate embrace with that which he has consciously rejected, but for me finally this idol too was broken.

The years of graduate school that followed were a time of spiritual vacuum. I was wrapped up in the time-consuming task of learning Japanese and Chinese and meeting the many requirements of a joint degree in sociology and Far Eastern languages. But it was also in these years that I began a tentative reappropriation of what I had earlier rejected. Talcott Parsons, and through him Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, opened up to me a view of human society and of historical development which was as sweeping as that of Marxism but in its openness and lack of dogmatism more appealing. The last years of Stalin's rule made the somber face of Soviet despotism ever clearer and I began to doubt the likelihood of any earthly utopia. For all its failures I came to believe that American society needed to be reformed rather than abandoned. In other words politically I became a liberal, but it was the chastened liberalism of a man with few illusions.

The religious need, the need for wholeness, which has been strong in me from adolescence, was partly filled in these years

through my encounter with the theology of Paul Tillich. Here was the Protestantism of my childhood transmuted through the deepest encounter with the twentieth century. The recognition of despair in Tillich's Christian existentialism corresponded to my mood. His book *The Courage To Be* with its magnificent closing lines made a deep impression on me:

> The courage to take the anxiety of meaninglessness upon oneself is the boundary line up to which the courage to be can go. Beyond it is mere non-being. Within it all forms of courage are re-established in the power of the God above the God of theism. *The courage to be is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt.*[1]

Toward the end of my graduate years the reappropriations I had been making, reappropriations not on the basis of simple affirmations but of doubt and disillusion, were tested by a new series of events. It was perhaps inevitable that I should not escape the McCarthyism which was so pervasive in American universities in those days. First my fellowship was threatened unless I would speak with "complete candor" which meant informing on all those I had ever known politically. There were those who came to my defense and my fellowship was saved for one more year. Then the offer of an instructorship after I had completed my doctoral work was hedged with vaguer but similar conditions. I turned down this proposal and accepted a research fellowship at the Islamic Institute at McGill University, starting in the fall of 1955.

The next two years were in some ways rather grim. I understand how the young men who have gone to Canada rather than Vietnam must feel. I did not know if I could ever come back to the United States or if I would be able to get an academic job even in Canada after my fellowship had ended. I don't want to exaggerate the difficulties. The Islamic Institute was a wonderful place and the work I did there opened up many new opportunities for me later. But for a while it was a kind of personal low ebb. Those were also the years of the Khrushchev revelations of the terror of Stalin's regime and not long after of the drowning in blood of the Hungarian people's uprising. Exiled from my own country there was no other in which I could place hope.

It was in this situation that the new attitude toward Christianity which I had been developing with the help of Paul Tillich came to a kind of fruition. It was then that I understood existentially the Christian doctrine of sin. I saw that the worst is only a hair's

breadth away from the best in any man and any society. I saw that unbroken commitment to any individual or any group is bound to be demonic. Nothing human can bear such a weight. The totalism of Communism and the totalism of the "Free World" are equally destructive. And I learned to see the darkness within, that we are all assassins in our hearts. If I am not a murderer it is because of the grace I have received through the love and support of others, not through the lack of murderous impulses within me. The only difference between me and the man on death row is that he somehow received less grace. Feeling all this I could no longer hate, or rather justify hatred. Since I participate in the guilt of every man there is no man I can reject or declare unforgivable. This is what the New Testament taught me in those months contradicting culture Christianity and Marxism, both of which make idolatrous commitments to particular structures and persons and foster a consequent self-righteousness. It was then that I saw that identification with the body of Christ meant identification with all men without exception.

In 1957 I accepted an appointment without conditions and returned to Harvard. The dark clouds of McCarthyism had almost blown away. During most of the decade that followed, the period when the essays in Parts I and II were written, there was room for cautious optimism, not only about America but also about most of the rest of the world. America seemed to be facing up to the scandal of racism and a period of "liberalization" seemed to have set in in Eastern Europe. Nothing in my experience justified any kind of elation but there did seem to be a basis for what I might call a pessimistic optimism which characterizes my writings of those years. My essay on religious evolution, which states the main presuppositions underlying my book, *Tokugawa Religion,* and the earlier essays in this collection, is not a paean to progress for I point out that at every stage the increase in freedom is also an increase in the freedom to choose destruction. But all the same there is a judicious confidence in the Reformation as a model for ideological transformation in the modern world. The papers in Part II are all based on a dialectic of comparison between the great changes in the West which the Reformation heralded and contemporary changes in various parts of the world. The fundamental assumption behind these papers is that modern Western society, especially American society, in spite of all its problems, is *relatively* less problematic than the developing societies with their enormous difficulties in economic

growth and political stability. Though my position is far more cautious than that of other American social scientists who have been concerned with the problem of "modernization" it partakes to some extent of the same ethos.

Perhaps my paper on "Civil Religion in America" written late in this period (1966) epitomizes this earlier attitude at the same time that it contains seeds of a new orientation. It is a strong endorsement of core American values, at least in their most self-critical form, but it also, especially in response to the deepening involvement in the Vietnam War, expresses a fundamental doubt about the future.

The essays in Part III reflect a changed situation and a changed reaction on my part. Behind them lies my dismay at the failure of our society to move quickly and efficiently to correct racial injustice, distress at the growing turbulence, much of it meaningless and self-destructive, in the academic community and above all horror at the profoundly immoral and unjustified war in Vietnam. These experiences have led me increasingly in the last few years to feel that the problems of American society, not of the developing societies, are the really most serious ones today. But my thinking has also been influenced by the emergence of a counter-culture in America, a culture of imagination and not of calculation. Even with all its pathological fringes the liberation of the expressive life which we have seen in the hippie movement and more broadly in popular culture in recent years seems to me of great significance. This too seems to be saying that we can take nothing for granted in our culture. There are entirely new possibilities which we must open up.

The move from Harvard to Berkeley in 1967 was an outward expression of an inward change. Harvard is in many ways the finest institution of Protestant culture in this country, confident and self-assured in its own value-commitments in a way most American universities are not. I have seen it at its best and I have seen it at less than its best but in any case after twenty years of close association with it it is an integral part of my life. As against the magisterial certainty of Harvard Berkeley stands in sharpest antithesis: not the calm order of Protestant tradition but the wide-open chaos of the post-Protestant, post-modern era. For all of its inner problems, for all of its tensions with an increasingly unsympathetic environment, Berkeley evinces the intensity, the immediacy, the openness and the precariousness of an emergent social order. For one trying

to grapple with and define what that order is it is a good place to be.

Most of the essays in Part III were written in Berkeley. As against the pessimistic optimism of the earlier papers the later ones evince a kind of optimistic pessimism. Perhaps Yeats expresses the mood:

> All things fall and are built again,
> And those that build them again are gay.[2]

In this situation the playful radicalism of Norman O. Brown seems to me healing while the solemn radicalism of Herbert Marcuse seems destructive. I have learned much from the youthful outpouring of recent years but I am no more inclined to idolize this group than any other. They have brought new styles of freedom, new modes of access to the unconscious, but these styles and modes have been remarkably fragile and have easily disintegrated into cultural nihilism or political fanaticism. Behind the mask of the struggle for liberation one often sees the hard face of the authoritarian who will strangle the young rebels of the next generation.

These last papers do not signal a retreat from political responsibility. They do imply, more strongly than ever, the rejection of any kind of political totalism. But they suggest that in the present situation a politics of the imagination, a politics of religion, may be the only sane politics. There is no hope in any of the competing absolutisms. If the forces at war are locked in their own deathlike scenarios perhaps the only responsible politics is to unmask the pretensions of all the contending parties and give witness to the enormous possibilities in human experience, in a word, to waken the actors out of their trance. To this end a human science can perhaps join with a human religion to help create a human politics.

The relation between the personal search for meaning and wholeness which I have sketched above and the work which follows is a close one. Some of the intellectual influences on me have been mentioned above and others can be discovered from the inspection of footnotes in the various chapters. But the work is not the product just of intellectual influences but of the experience of a particular person at a particular place in history. I have discussed my reaction to successive phases of the history of my society but those phases have not dictated my reaction. Others have reacted very differently. One's life and work are an effort to find a form which will reconcile inner needs and outer pressures. The form itself is unique and personal

even though both the inner needs and the outer pressures are transpersonal. In my life there has been a long preoccupation with fragmentation and wholeness and it is this which has made religion such an abiding concern.

In the beginning of my life there was a culture and a family which was incomplete, though, in the sense that I yet had no alternatives, total. In attempting to find a form which would be more complete and more satisfying in late adolescence I adopted the totalistic religio-political system of Marxism. Though this ideology played a valuable integrative role at an important transition stage it proved ultimately to be as much of a straitjacket as an uncritical acceptance of established religious and political values had been. After the rejection of Marxism there was no way back even if I had wanted one. A return to the bosom of American society in the middle fifties could only be made by the suicidal sacrifice of my own integrity. For me the search for wholeness from then on had to be made without totalism. A critical stance toward every society, ideology and religion was thenceforth essential. This did not mean that there was no longer any basis for values nor even that various aspects of tradition could not be appropriated. The loss of faith could become the faith of loss. The self-critical, self-revising, nontotalistic aspects of the tradition could be reclaimed. With respect to Christianity this meant Christ crucified, the assertion of faith in spite of the brokenness of every human structure. With respect to America this meant a society dedicated to its own transcendence, to the realization of human values. In neither case was there a total commitment to the existing church or state but rather to that within them which is always questioning their existing reality. Nor did the reassertion in broken form of a commitment to the Christian and American traditions exclude a deep involvement with other traditions and cultures. Wholeness was not to be obtained through exclusion but through a multi-layered inclusion.

In much of my work up until about 1965 there is to be seen an effort to discern a new system which would be an alternative to Marxism but rival it in sweep and comprehensiveness. To some extent this was a modern apology for liberal society and an attempt to show its relevance to the developing areas. I am by no means ready to repudiate this stage of my work, though I am increasingly aware of its limitations. I still believe that some equivalent of Protestant individualism and voluntaristic social organization is a

necessary phase for any person or group who would fully participate in the potential freedom of the modern world.

More recently my attention has turned to the problems of post-Protestant man, man who is not only post-traditional—for Protestantism and some of its functional equivalents, among which I would place humanistic Marxism, are already post-traditional—but also in a sense post-modern.

This post-modern phase cannot be seen as simply a continuous projection of the major trends of present relatively modernized societies. Theorists of modernization have been tempted to assume that once a certain degree of individualism, civic culture and industrial development were achieved the future of a society was essentially non-problematic. It is hard in 1970 to make that assumption. In fact we do not know where the most advanced societies are going. The more we understand the recent past the better, but the future is a new project full of contingency. The best guides in a time like this may not be the systematic theorists, the public opinion pollers or the scanners of indices and indicators, but poets and ecstatic aphorists like Norman O. Brown. If modernization has brought far greater knowledge, wealth and power than men have ever had before, then, potentially at least, we are freer than men have ever been and our future is more open to make it what we will. But the same resources which can bring us freedom can also be used for oppression and control. Men are not oppressed by armies and unfair economic systems alone. They are also oppressed by dead ideologies which can be locked into personalities and societies and program them on a course of fatal disaster, often in the name of "realism" and "necessity." Under these conditions we have need more than ever for the dreamers of dreams and the seers of visions. Freedom of the imagination, the ability to live in many realities at once, may be our strongest weapons in the struggle for human liberation. The essays in Part III are concerned with these issues.

The theme of loss, I now realize, is even more pervasive in this story than I had thought when I touched upon it in the beginning of this introduction. It is a story of loss: the lost father, the lost religion, the lost ideology, the lost country. And yet it is not, finally, a story of existential despair. Even Tillich who was so important in expressing my feelings at certain moments was not in his somberest moods wholly convincing. For the deepest truth I have discovered is that if one accepts the loss, if one gives up clinging to what is irretrievably gone, then the nothing which is left is not

barren but enormously fruitful. Everything that one has lost comes flooding back again out of the darkness, and one's relation to it is new—free and unclinging. But the richness of the nothing contains far more, it is the all-possible, it is the spring of freedom.[3] In that sense the faith of loss is closer to joy than to despair.

The chapters of this book must stand finally on their own merits, on the cogency of their arguments and the clarity with which they order the empirical data. But the experience out of which they come, which I have tried to discuss in this introduction, is not irrelevant to them and if they succeed it will be not only because they contain convincing arguments but by their capacity to order the common experience. They are attempts to find patterns of meaning in a world where all the great overarching systems of belief, conservative and radical, have lost their viability. These essays are expressions of "belief," in Wallace Stevens' words, "without belief, beyond belief."