

Posture and Discourse: The Perfectionism of Liberalism in H. Richard Niebuhr
Joshua Daniel | 3 November 2011

In this paper, I respond to a contemporary anxiety in theology regarding the relationship between Christian and non-Christian discourse, especially as it manifests in American theology. On the one hand, the liberal theological tradition insists that Christian discourse can be rendered intelligible to surrounding, more secular forms of thought and life, and this often motivates engagement with those forms for the sake of the betterment of shared, social life. Critics of this tradition, on the other hand, worry that this insistence on intelligibility and engagement leads to the capitulation of Christian discourse to foreign and hostile terms and criteria, and inevitably to the loss of the idiosyncrasy of the distinctively Christian identity. On my reading, much recent theology, whether directly or indirectly, is the attempt to overcome this gap, with particular positions leaning more to one or the other side. In this regard, my paper isn't blazing any new trails. Moreover, my appeal to H. Richard Niebuhr (hereafter referred to as HRN) as a figure with the conceptual resources to hold together the sides of this debate is not novel.¹ Still, HRN's fruitfulness has not been exhausted on this topic, and reading him through the work of Stanley Cavell should reveal this. Specifically, a figure of the post-liberal worry can be discerned in Cavell's account of Emersonian perfectionism, in which the self struggles between social conformity and self-reliance, moving from the former to the latter through a mode of perpetual conversion. Isn't this the Christian self, tempted by liberal capitulation but called to a visibly alternative discipleship? In fact, reading HRN through Cavell enables us to articulate a fallibilist confessional form of liberal theology that is attuned to post-liberal anxieties but avoids its

¹ See William Werpehowski, *American Protestant Ethics and Legacy of H. Richard Niebuhr*, and Timothy A. Beach-Verhey, *Robust Liberalism: H. Richard Niebuhr and the Ethics of American Public Life*

rhetorical extremes, rooted in a posture of theocentric self-reliance. On this view, extreme versions of post-liberalism end up conforming to prevailing social forces.²

I will organize my discussion around two themes that I derive from Cavell, posture and discourse. *Posture* refers to our attitudinal (or existential) comportment, our own personal stance, both towards our own selves and towards our (incompletely) self-constituting social environment. *Discourse* refers to the character of our social environment: “while of course there are things in the world other than language, for those creatures for whom language is our form of life... language is everywhere we find ourselves.”³ The conceit of perfectionism is that the self can take different postures toward discourse, can alter its stance toward the language by which it transacts with society, and thereby transform itself and its society. Perfectionism, understood by Cavell as a dimension rather than a theory of the moral life, “concerns what used to be called the state of one’s soul,” inclusive of certain notions of authenticity and personal journey, placing “tremendous burdens on personal relationships and on the possibility or necessity of the transforming of oneself and of one’s society.” Specifically, perfection is a response to the sense that one’s self is lost to the world, and that in order to find one’s self, we must refuse that world, turn our backs to it.⁴ This requires a change of posture, from one of conformity, to one of self-reliance. In order to understand this, we must understand Cavell’s Emersonian notion of selfhood. According to this notion, “‘having’ ‘a’ self is a process of moving to, and from, nexts.” The self is always double, perennially divided between its attained self, the self that converses with its social world, and its unattained but attainable self, its next self, the self that thinks another, new world.⁵ This split is a transfiguration of Kant’s metaphysical division of phenomenal and noumenal realms, into “a rather empirical (or political) division of the

² I am reading HRN through Cavell, and so through Cavell’s reading of Emerson. I do not pretend or believe that this stands in for reading HRN directly through Emerson, though this would be a worthwhile project.

³ “Finding as Founding: Taking Steps in Emerson’s ‘Experience,’” 140 in *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes*

⁴ *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, 1-2

⁵ *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 12, 8-9, xxxv

world, in which the way we now hold the world in bondage is contrasted with, reformed into, a future way we could help it to become.”⁶ Elsewhere, Cavell says that Emerson overcomes Kant’s dual worlds “by diagnosing them, or resolving them, as perspectives,” according to which, by “taking our place in the world we are joining the conspiracy, and we may join it to our harm or to our benefit.”⁷ In other words, there is no escape from our social world, and so we are necessarily complicit in its life; the question is what posture we take toward our complicity. For Cavell, the self is split between a posture towards itself and its society that is imprisoning, because it fails to recognize or resigns itself to complicity, and a posture that is liberating, resisting complicity by attempting to transform its conditions. Changing posture is a *lateral ecstasy*: finding the next self and thinking its other world tears us from our attained self and its social complicity, but this further self was always beside us, as a posture towards this world yet available in it.⁸

The posture of self-reliance is the attained self’s reliance on its unattained but attainable self, thinking another world; the posture of conformity is the failure of this reliance, and so a loss of self that is simultaneously a neglect or denial of what our world could be. For Cavell, posture is occupied in regard to discourse, which is why changing posture is a lateral achievement. He distinguishes two modes of discourse, intrinsically connected to the postures of conformity and self-reliance: ‘quoting’ and ‘saying.’ This is a distinction *within* language use, and so regards our manner of discourse. To quote is to be apologetic, ashamed, no longer upright when we speak: it is to skulk about with our inherited language because we sense that there is no room for the self, our self, in it.⁹

Elsewhere, Cavell draws out attention to the “contrary appeals and protests and accusations and denunciations that compete for our attention every day, each asking for the loan of our

⁶ *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*, 1

⁷ “Emerson, Coleridge, Kant (Terms as Conditions),” in *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes*, 68

⁸ Cavell notes that the idea of ‘nextness’ connotes futurity and spatiality: the next self is the further self that is already next to us (*Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, xxxv)

⁹ “Being Odd, Getting Even (Descartes, Emerson, Poe),” in *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes*, 89-91

voices because each is demanding the right to speak for us."¹⁰ To quote is to loan our voice to (one of the conflicting parties within) our social world, allowing its language to speak for us; this occurs to the extent we are apologetic and ashamed about our self. Cavell's account of 'saying' draws on his Emersonian reading of Descartes: "I am a being who to exist must say I exist, or must acknowledge my existence – claim it, stake it, enact it." On this reading of the 'I think,' the emphasis is on the 'I,' and the concern is that the 'I' gets into one's thinking – the truly existent self authors itself. Similarly, to say is to say 'I' with every word we speak, to author our self as we speak, rather than be subject to, and so merely reproductive of, our society's language. To say is "to mean something in and by our words, to desire to say something, certain things rather than others, in certain ways rather than in others, or else to work to avoid meaning them."¹¹ Thus, to say is to speak with the self's voice, our own voice. Saying involves good posture in the sense of standing and sitting upright, where standing up refers to daring or risking, and sitting up refers to "being at home in the world... owning or taking possession."¹² We take possession of our world precisely by speaking with our own voice within it, that is, by relying on our next self in our every utterance, the very self who get its 'I' into its thinking of another world. To say is to take our own side when we speak, and so to possess the world by somehow transfiguring it, rather than to be spoken for by some party to some dispute that has no investment in our, or anyone else's, self.

The task of perfectionism is one of permanent conversion, from the posture of skulking, quoting conformity to that of upright self-reliance. The post-liberal critique of liberal theology can be understood along these lines: theological liberals are ashamed of the distinctiveness of their Christianity, and in their apologetic attempt to be intelligible to prevailing, non-Christian standards, end up abandoning their Christian idiosyncrasy and so

¹⁰ *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 129

¹¹ "Being Odd, Getting Even," 104-5

¹² "Being Odd, Getting Even," 91

turning Christian discourse into an extended quote of whatever narrative happens to be socially dominant. According to this perfectionism-inflected critique, the apologetic task in liberal theology is understood as glorified, discursive skulking: to isolate and emphasize aspects of the Christian tradition that can be made intelligible according to prevailing criteria is to loan the Christian voice to disputes it should have no truck with, and so to become a function of, rather than a witness to, the world. The post-liberal call is the call to conversion, away from (Constantinian, liberal) conformity to this world, toward a form of Christian self-reliance, whereby the church is understood to orient its life according to its own idiosyncratic history, narrative, liturgy, time, etc.

Consider the resonances between the post-liberal emphasis on visibility and Cavell's account of how to cope with the conditions of living in "a state of perpetual theatre."¹³ Stanley Hauerwas, throughout his work, argues for the necessity of the church to exemplify a visible (peaceful) alternative to prevailing (violent) forms of social life; any move to initiate or occupy points of contact with the world simply results in the loss of our true identity as Christians, because this identity must be embodied and performed. The secret, hidden church is the conformed church. Hauerwas goes so far as to suggest that this visibility should constitute a threat. He understands homosexuals to be morally superior to Christians precisely because the military feels threatened by them, lamenting, "If only Christians could be equally sure of who they are. If the only the military could come to view Christians as a group of doubtful warriors."¹⁴ Here, Christian identity is explicitly linked to threatening visibility. Elsewhere, in an essay entitled "The Non-Violent Terrorist: In Defense of Christian Fanaticism," in a section entitled 'Witness as Theological Terrorism,' Hauerwas asserts, "(T)hat Christians are first and foremost called to be witnesses by necessity creates

¹³ "Being Odd, Getting Even," 98

¹⁴ "Why Gays (as a Group) Are Morally Superior to Christians (as a Group)," in *The Hauerwas Reader*, 520

epistemological crises for those who do not worship the God of Jesus Christ.”¹⁵ This all sounds strikingly similar to Cavell’s claim that when I assume good posture within the world, turning away from quoting and toward saying, “my visibility would then frighten my watchers, not the other way around.”¹⁶ This theme of visibility is connected to the theme of shame, for the reversal of frightening visibility is a reversal of shame. Perfectionism calls us “to become ashamed of our shame [in our self], to find our ashamed [conforming] posture more shameful than anything it could be reacting to.”¹⁷ The shame we should be ashamed of is the failure to be properly ashamed, that is, ashamed of conformity rather than of the self. This is how Cavell glosses this, with Kantian language: “not so much that we are ashamed because we do not give ourselves the moral law – which is true enough – but that we do not give ourselves the moral law because we are already ashamed.”¹⁸ Hauerwas might say that the problem with liberal Christians is not so much that they are shameful because they fail in their discipleship to Christ – which is true enough – but that their failure of discipleship is due to their being ashamed of their Christianity. And isn’t his work provocative precisely because its rhetorical intent seems to be to shame liberal Christians, in the sense of getting us to be ashamed of our shame of ourselves as Christians?

However, Cavell’s perfectionism involves more than a recovery of distinctive self-identity, because conversion from conformity is not ultimately separation from the social world that clamors for our conformity. He explains, “Since [Emerson’s] aversion is a *continual turning away* from society, it is thereby a continual turning *toward* it.”¹⁹ In the perfectionist vision, the self and society are images of each other, understood to be structured similarly: thus, conversion is simultaneously from the attained self to the next, unattained but attainable self, *and* from the current constitution of society to its next, possible

¹⁵ In *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified*, 187

¹⁶ “Being Odd, Getting Even,” 99

¹⁷ “Being Odd, Getting Even,” 91

¹⁸ *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 48

¹⁹ *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 59

constitution. Importantly, such 'constitutional conversion' is not achieved through the re-covered, distinctive self re-making society in its image. Rather, it is a matter of constituting a form of *intelligibility*. Cavell admits that perfectionism's contribution to moral thinking is its emphatic insistence that the self become intelligible to itself.²⁰ This task of self-intelligibility, though, is not a merely private affair, in the sense of some completely non-public task, but rather a working out of the character of one's public intelligibility. He glosses the "absolute responsibility of the self to itself" as the self's responsibility "to make itself intelligible, without falsifying itself."²¹ Notice that the reflexive 'to itself' drops out of this gloss, suggesting that true self-intelligibility is a form of public intelligibility. One of Cavell's favorite quotes from Emerson is this: "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, – that is genius." Cavell's interpretation: "Genius is accordingly the name of the promise that the private and the social will be achieved together."²² Genius, as the contradiction of conformity, is not extreme idiosyncrasy, not exclusive difference from others, but the prospect of a social form constituted by the mutual gathering of idiosyncratic selves, the recognition that since "there is no getting even for the oddity of being born, hence of being and becoming the one poor creature it is given to you to be,"²³ we must determine "whether we can live together, accept on another into the aspirations of our lives."²⁴ Such a form of social life cannot claim us in advance because there is no blueprint for it, just the cobbling together of distinctive individualities. When Cavell claims, "the eventual human community is between us, or nowhere,"²⁵ this is what he means: human community can only eventuate between eventual

²⁰ *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, xxxi

²¹ *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, xxvii

²² "Being Odd, Getting Even," 92; in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 26, Cavell describes genius as "capacity for self-reliance," which is "universally distributed."

²³ "Being Odd, Getting Even," 107

²⁴ *Cities of Words*, 24

²⁵ "Finding as Founding," 133

selves, that is, between geniuses, between those who have consecrated their attained to their unattained self.

Recall that standing upright means daring, but what is dared is not simply the self, but more significantly its intelligibility. Cavell connects standing up to standing *for*, specifically 'standing for humanity,' which includes the sense of representing humanity. Again transfiguring Kant, he asserts that we enter the intelligible world "whenever another represents for us our rejected self, our beyond; causes that aversion to ourselves in our conformity that will constitute our becoming, as it were, ashamed of our shame."²⁶ The perfectionist self becomes publicly intelligible insofar as it represents the next self of another. This is how Cavell describes it within the context of a reconciled marriage: "the man shows himself anew... to be the one with whom for her the intelligible world is opened, her further self sought and acknowledged, the adventure of the human city undertaken."²⁷

Perfectionism emphasizes friendship because we can only become drawn to our next self through the example of another. For Cavell, the field of perfectionism is not an arena of debate, moral justifications, and assertions of right, but rather resembles a stage on which "instead something must be shown."²⁸ Perfectionism advances through exemplarity rather than argument, because the standards of argument are necessarily social, and so the object of (perfectionist) shame. At the same time, what the friend exemplifies is not beyond the discursive realm. Cavell refers to it as reflective judgment, which is not a judgment derived from a principle or rule, but rather "the expression of a conviction whose grounding remains subjective – say myself – but which expects or claims justification from the (universal) concurrence of other subjectivities, on reflection."²⁹ This is all part of a larger debate with John Rawls regarding the place of finality in the moral life; for Cavell, moral finality is not a function of rules, but of judgments "whose contents may then enter into a moral argument,"

²⁶ *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 58

²⁷ *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 117

²⁸ *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 112

²⁹ *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, xxvi

but “whose resolution is not to be settled by appeal to a rule defining an institution.”³⁰ The point for this paper is that what grounds social bonds for the perfectionist self can only be another (perfectionist) self, because humanity can only be represented in the self who is relying on the next self. This is why Cavell describes the human as “the unstable goal of the human, as if we represent an incomplete adventure,” and as “itself, transformed, what is to be aspired to.”³¹ Thus, the lateral ecstasy that constitutes changing posture from conformity to self-reliance is not solipsistic. The further self is next to us, available to us here and now, in the form of the friend.

That intelligibility is essential to perfectionism does not mean that perfectionism presumes some pre-established harmony between self and society. Self-reliant saying requires “your readiness to subject your desire to words (call it Whim), to become intelligible, *with no assurance that you will be taken up.*”³² It is precisely this lack of assurance, this instability, this uncertainty regarding whether or not we will become someone’s friend, which sets the perfectionist task: if there were some assurance, we would probably be quoting it rather than saying ‘I,’ instituting a blueprint rather than constituting ourselves by daring intelligibility. At the same time, if there is no pre-established harmony, there is also no pre-established dissonance. Perfectionism proposes the option that “one’s quarrel with the world need not be settled, nor cynically set aside as unseizable. It is a condition in which you can at once want the world and want it to change.”³³ If liberal Christianity can be accused of settling their quarrels with the world too quickly, than the post-liberal stance may be too-quickly cynical, too ready to be misunderstood and so feel licensed to avert to scare-tactics. One side sacrifices idiosyncrasy for the sake of intelligibility; the other sacrifices intelligibility for the sake of idiosyncrasy. The way of perfectionism is a way between these, an attempt to hold idiosyncrasy and intelligibility simultaneously: to say ‘I’ from the posture

³⁰ *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 113

³¹ *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 118-9

³² “Being Odd, Getting Even,” 93, italics mine

³³ *Cities of Words*, 18

of self-reliance is to intend a further form of intelligibility that may or may not cash out (*pace* liberalism); if that intelligibility does not cash out, than as many questions should be raised about the truth of the self's intelligibility to itself as are raised regarding the receptivity of others (*pace* post-liberalism). This way should be attractive for Christians, who both want their world, because it is good, and want it to change, because it is fallen.

I contend that HRN's thought, read as an integral whole, occupies this way, connecting posture and discourse in such a way that idiosyncrasy and intelligibility are held in tension within a form of life whose shape is perpetual conversion. Concerning discourse, he advocates "a confessional theology which carries on the work of self-criticism and self-knowledge in the church."³⁴ This can be understood as a methodological form of saying 'I,' insofar as it involves getting one's self, in this case one's historical identity as Christian, into one's thinking. HRN offers his own transfiguration of the Kantian division between noumenal and phenomenal realms with his distinction between internal and external history. External history is an impersonal account of impersonal events: "Jesus becomes, from this point of view, a complex of ideas about ethics and eschatology, of psychological and biological elements." Internal history, on the other hand, is a personal account of those events that define the destiny of a community and its members.³⁵ This is a distinction between observer and participant, neutral and committed, perspectives. The point of this for HRN is to locate revelation in internal rather than external history, which is to say, in lived practical experience rather than detached reflection, so that reasoning rooted in revelation is understood to be reasoning rooted in particularity, aspiring to aim at rather than descend from universality. He defines revelation as "that part of our inner history which illuminates the rest of it and which is itself intelligible," and as "the discovery of rational pattern" within our history. For Christians, this is Jesus Christ, "in whom we see the righteousness of God,

³⁴ *The Meaning of Revelation*, 10

³⁵ *The Meaning of Revelation*, 31-7

his power and wisdom," and from whom "we also derive the concepts which make possible the elucidation of all the events in our history."³⁶ No longer an impersonal complex of phenomena, in internal history Jesus Christ becomes the personal event that renders all others meaningful. In this way, we can understand the Christian form of saying 'I' as saying (somehow) 'Jesus Christ' in every word we speak, that is, as proclaiming the gospel in our every word.

This might suggest that saying should be aligned with internal history and quoting with external history, that confessional theology is purely a matter of the former; but this is too simple. HRN explains, "External history is the medium in which internal history exists and comes to life." External history is externalization, enabling the historical memory of the Christian community to continue, even though that memory cannot be identified with documents and institutions. Moreover, the Christian community can undertake external history "as an effort to see itself with the eyes of God," which, if successful, 'reveals' the Christian community to be a "finite, created, limited, corporeal being, alike in every respect to all the other beings of creations."³⁷ If we read this last quote in a Cavellian manner, understanding our finitude and limitations as indexes of our *partiality*, and so of our *idiosyncrasy* and not just our sinfulness, the suggestion is that external history, now as 'theo-objective' self-perception, 'reveals' the Christian community to be as idiosyncratic as any other. Admittedly, HRN's horizon for these comments is repentance: a significant aspect of the Christian community's idiosyncrasy is its recognition that it is "the chief of sinners and the most mortal of societies."³⁸ Still, this repentance is part of that idiosyncrasy; idiosyncrasy is not what is to be repented of. HRN notes that the Christian community has also learned to see itself with the eyes of finite others, by accepting or responding to non-Christian external histories of itself. In doing this, the Christian community converts these external histories

³⁶ *The Meaning of Revelation*, 50

³⁷ *The Meaning of Revelation*, 46-7

³⁸ *The Meaning of Revelation*, 46

into events within its own internal history. This is *not* capitulation: "Though [the Christian community] knew that such stories were not *the* truth about it, it willingly or unwillingly, sooner or later, recognized *a* truth about it in each one." The Christian community can discern these as divine judgments and make them "occasions for active repentance."³⁹ While such external histories of the Christian community would be those done by non-participant observers, these histories are still the product of some internal history, that is, of some particular community with its own meaningful past and destiny. Psychoanalytic or socio-biological accounts of the Christian community, for instance, are *idiosyncratic* external histories; despite possible pretensions to some sort of objective neutrality, these accounts proceed from communities which arose historically and whose future is no more assured than that of religious communities.⁴⁰ This suggests a vision of the Christian community's interaction with other communities that pivots around encounters between idiosyncrasies, not around a-historical kernels of truth shorn of their historical husk.⁴¹ At the same time, some intelligibility is achieved between them, at least in the direction of the Christian community to the others. To this extent, a non-Christian community can stand as the Christian community's friend, specifically in Cavell's Emersonian sense whereby the friend represents not only 'another myself' as in Aristotle, but more significantly represents a challenge, 'contesting' the Christian community's 'present attainments.'⁴² Who (besides God) is to say that intelligibility cannot work in the other direction as well?

Confessional theology, according to HRN, is not a discourse confined to internal history, but includes our own efforts at external history of ourselves, as well as receptive encounters with others' external histories of us. I consider this form of confessional theology to be fallibilist because it is structurally open to correction and criticism, which, if

³⁹ *The Meaning of Revelation*, 44

⁴⁰ HRN's strategy for accounting for this in *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* is to understand all communities as faith communities, that is, as communities whose members are bound by relations of trust and loyalty to each other and to the community's cause. More on this soon.

⁴¹ The allusion is to Adolf von Harnack

⁴² *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, 59

understood to come ultimately from God, come proximately from finite others, who can be understood as 'confessing' themselves. Still, confessional theology is self-reliant because it remains rooted in its internal and externalized history. To accept correction and criticism from others is not to accept them wholesale, but rather to discern that they have exemplified something that 'reveals' failures on our part and the need for betterment; stated differently, it is not to accept their criteria as superior, but rather to recognize that their criteria is 'reasonable' enough to enable them to utter a truth about us. HRN does not explicitly contrast confession with conformity, but rather with self-defense, which he calls "the most prevalent source of error in all thinking and perhaps especially in theology and ethics." Self-defense is the attempt at self-justification, and so the denial "that man is justified by grace," as well as (or, thus...?) the denial that we could better ourselves through the example of others.⁴³ In other words, self-defense is the attempt to insulate a particular way of life and thought from the potential criticism of other ways. Self-defense would thus seem to be an excess of self-reliance rather than a capitulation to prevailing standards; this potentially obscures the comparison to Cavell. In order to understand how self-defense is a form of conformity, of 'quoting,' we need to see how HRN connects discourse and posture.

HRN's term for our fundamental posture is faith, which comes in different forms that render different modes of discourse. Early on he suggests that the standpoint of faith, being directed toward God or idols, is "probably identical" with that of practical reason, having values and a destiny: "inner history, life's flow as regarded from the point of view of living selves, is always an affair of faith."⁴⁴ Faith as posture is not simply cognitive, but more significantly personal, dispositional, affective, even embodied, an attitudinal (HRN would not be afraid to say *existential*) relation to what or who gives us worth and so enables us to perceive worth. The anthropology here centers on the heart as orienting the mind and

⁴³ *The Meaning of Revelation*, xxxiv

⁴⁴ *The Meaning of Revelation*, 42, 40

will.⁴⁵ Later, HRN specifies his account of faith, describing it as the double movement or relation of trust and loyalty: trust in some center of value that confers worth on the self, loyalty to that center by promoting its cause.⁴⁶ Following the Protestant tradition that mutually defines faith and god, HRN holds that the center of value we trust and to whose cause we are loyal, is for practical purposes our god.⁴⁷ Moreover, faith is the *reciprocal*, and not just dual, relation of trust and loyalty. Our trust in some god is a response to and acknowledgement of that god's loyalty to us.⁴⁸ This explains why faith in the form of idolatry is practically reasonable, to a limited extent: it makes sense to be *exclusively* loyal to our nation if, for some reason, we trust that it is responsible for *all* that is good in our lives.⁴⁹ The character of the god we trust determines the character of the cause to which we are loyal, and this in turn determines the character of our relations with others. In other words, faith creates community: we come to trust those who are faithful to our cause and then become loyal to them as our initial trust is satisfied by their loyalty.⁵⁰ On the one hand, the connection between faith and community is a matter of extent; as we will soon see, the 'bigger' our god, the 'bigger' our cause, and so the 'wider' our network of relations. On the other hand, this connection determines not only our sphere of recognition, as though we could simply ignore or be indifferent to those outside of it, but also the affective character of our recognition of all others.

The posture that HRN links to confessional discourse is *radical monotheism*, the form of faith that finds its center of value in God, understood as the "One beyond all the many, whence all the many derive their being, and by participation in which they exist," and as "the principle of being which is also the principle of value." Radical monotheism places trust and loyalty in God, who is beyond all being because the creator of all beings, and

⁴⁵ See Timothy A. Beach-Verhey, *Robust Liberalism: H. Richard Niebuhr and the Ethics of American Public Life*, 106-9

⁴⁶ *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 16-22

⁴⁷ *Meaning of Revelation*, 40-2

⁴⁸ *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith*, 47

⁴⁹ Of course, HRN's conviction is that trusting that all value comes from some finite source is unreasonable in itself.

⁵⁰ *Faith on Earth*, ??

beyond all value because the lover of all beings. For HRN, the radicality of this faith consists in its identification of the principle of being with the principle of value, or more theologically stated, of the creator with the redeemer. As trust, "radical monotheism depends absolutely and assuredly for the worth of the self on the same principle by which it has being; and since that principle is the same by which all things exist it accepts the value of whatever is." Insofar as the self recognizes that its value is bound to its being, and that its being is bound to that of all beings, the self trusts that 'whatever is, is good.' To trust in God is to be assured of the value of all being because God values them. As loyalty, radical monotheism "is directed toward the principle and the realm of being as the cause for the sake of which it lives." To be loyal to God, the principle of being, is to be loyal to God's cause, the realm of being, that is, to value all beings.⁵¹ Recalling that faith creates community, it might seem as though radical monotheism somehow creates the universal community, but we need to be careful here. God creates the universal community of being; radical faith in God creates a finite community that is open to this universal community, which in confessional theology takes the form of being vulnerable to outside criticism. The point is significant: in radical monotheism, cause and community are disarticulated, because the cause is understood to transcend the community.⁵² The main competitor to radical monotheism is *henotheism*, or social faith, in which the self finds its center of value in its "position in the enduring life of the community," and finds its corollary cause in that community's "continuation, power and glory." Simply put, in social faith, the self's community *is* its cause.⁵³ The result is a posture of self-defense: because there is no gap between one's community and the cause that orients one's moral life, that life will inevitably be self-defensive, a perpetual maintenance of the finite life of one's finite community, which is unlikely to be open to the judgments of others, finite or divine. Radical monotheism is characterized by precisely such openness.

⁵¹ *Radical Monotheism*, 32-3

⁵² *Faith on Earth*, 60-1

⁵³ *Radical Monotheism*, 25

On this view of faith, the emphasis is on extent: radical monotheism underwrites a moral concern oriented to the widest possible sphere, while social faith does so to a narrow sphere. HRN's later discussion of faith, in *The Responsible Self*, shifts the emphasis while maintaining the insight. God is no longer described as the principle of being, but as radical agency, as the doer of the radical deed by which we exist as the particular beings we are, a deed that God enacts in every finite action upon us, but is not to be confused with any one of them.⁵⁴ In response, radical faith now identifies, not being and value, but power and value. Faith is now mainly a matter of trust or distrust, a shift that parallels the shift in theology: where God is understood as power bearing down on us, it is appropriate to emphasize the more passive aspect of faith. Meanwhile, faith now takes on a hermeneutical character. Because the radical action that constitutes us is 'in but not of' the finite actions that impinge upon us, it must be interpreted. For HRN, the options are stark: "The inscrutable power by which we are is either for us or against us," that is, power is either good or evil, and more theologically stated, God is either friend or enemy.⁵⁵ To interpret God as enemy, and so power as ultimately death-dealing, is to have negative faith, which manifests as a radical, theo-cosmic distrust: if God is our enemy, than surrounding finite agencies become suspect rather than trustworthy. We come to categorize agencies as good or evil, that is, as supportive or destructive of our lives, and the result is a posture of self-defense, underwriting an "ethics of self-maintenance."⁵⁶ In other words, radical distrust manifests as social faith. HRN understands salvation as deliverance from this self-defensive posture, and redemption as the freedom to fundamentally reinterpret power. Grace, received through Jesus Christ,⁵⁷ enables us to interpret God as friend, power as ultimately life-giving, and the life of all beings "as occurring in a universal teleology of resurrection rather than a universal teleology of entombment." Such radical trust is a posture that underwrites "the ethics of life,

⁵⁴ *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*, 109-14

⁵⁵ *The Responsible Self*, 118-9

⁵⁶ *The Responsible Self*, 139-41, 98-9

⁵⁷ For HRN's Christology relevant to this discussion, see "Responsibility and Christ," 161-78 in *The Responsible Self*

of the open future, of the open society."⁵⁸ At stake here is not just extent, but character. The God of radical faith is not only 'big,' but friendly, which means that not only is radical faith's scope of moral concern 'wide,' but every finite other within that scope is to be ultimately affirmed as our friend, despite hostile appearances.

The posture of radical faith enables confessional discourse. As radical monotheism, it ensures that our moral cause transcends our community of discourse, rendering us vulnerable to the judgments of others as we pursue our own idiosyncratic way. As radical trust, it affirms that the ultimate context of all finite being is life and not death, enabling us to approach others, particularly the ones who judge us, as friends who will ultimately help us on our idiosyncratic way. Radical faith affirms that non-Christians, precisely in their non-Christian idiosyncrasy (which may manifest as hostility towards Christians), can stand as friends to Christians, challenging us to self-reliance when we fall into conformity. In turn, radical faith articulates the possibility that Christians can stand as friends to non-Christians, helping them perfect their own idiosyncratic self-reliant posture. Just as accepting non-Christian judgment does not necessarily mean capitulation to non-Christian criteria, so offering judgment to non-Christians does not have to take the form of provoking capitulation to Christian criteria, which is what I take the form of witness as theological terrorism to intend. Of course, if we take seriously the notion of confession, the offering of judgment as Christian friends to non-Christians may in fact lead to them abandoning their old criteria for the sake of Christian criteria. My point is that this possibility is best understood as the outcome of a process of conversation in which Christians and non-Christians approach each other as friends who represent mutual challenges, so that the Christian who offers judgment, accepts judgment just as often. The theological warrant for this is radical faith's interpretation of the universe as a singular cosmic friendship, whereby

⁵⁸ *The Responsible Self*, 142-3

common phenomena are taken as “signs of cosmic generosity.”⁵⁹ As we have seen, for HRN non-Christian judgments of the Christian community are divine generousities because they occasion the repentance required by the Christian life. This is not a saccharine, naïve vision, that is, it does not deny the reality of hostility and death, but rather contextualizes them so that they are discerned to contribute to the ultimate end of life.⁶⁰ To discern that one who judges me is ultimately my friend is not necessarily to hold warm feelings for him, nor to ignore any hostile intentions that might motivate his judgment. It *is* to recognize him as someone whose judgment, proceeding from his own idiosyncratic vision, deserves my attention and reflection, despite hostility, precisely because it is to trust that God is utilizing that hostility to aid us in perfecting our own posture of radical faith. Moreover, that cosmic friendship structures the universe underwrites, but does *not* guarantee, the possibility of intelligibility between idiosyncrasies. Confessional discourse remains a risk, but it is one we can bear because of radical faith.

I contend that radical faith is a form of self-reliance, specifically *theocentric* self-reliance. For HRN, selfhood is constituted by faith,⁶¹ particularly in the sense that the character of our selfhood is constituted by our interpretation of radical power. Whether we relate to God as friend or enemy determines whether we relate to finite others as friends or enemies, and thereby determines whether we ourselves become friendly or hostile. HRN famously describes the Christian life as the ‘permanent revolution’ of the heart, which he later glosses as the permanent “reinterpretation of all our interpretations of life and death.”⁶² Consonant with this, he understands radical monotheism “more as hope than as datum, more perhaps as a possibility than as an actually,” for radical faith emerges as a modification

⁵⁹ *The Responsible Self*, 165

⁶⁰ This is probably indebted to an aesthetic vision present in Augustine and Edwards, in which just as darkness is necessary for overall beauty, so evil is somehow necessary for overall moral beauty.

⁶¹ *Faith of Earth*, 83: “we live as selves by faith”

⁶² *The Responsible Self*, 143

of social faith.⁶³ In other words, the Christian life is not characterized by some final attainment of radical faith, but rather the permanent conversion of our social faiths into radical faith, which is a conversion of our hostilities into friendly generousities. In Cavell's perfectionist terms, the Christian life is the permanent conversion from the posture of conformity that characterizes social faith to the theocentric posture of self-reliance that characterizes radical faith. Radical faith is the present self's reliance on the next self who interprets God and God's universe as friendlier than it appears, and since radical faith is received through grace, such self-reliance is simultaneously a reliance on God. While Cavell refers to the capacity for self-reliance as genius, we might call the capacity for theocentric self-reliance *apostleship*,⁶⁴ but this should not occlude the idiosyncrasy of individual Christian selves inherent in HRN's vision. Radical faith's interpretation of the radical action that constitutes the self is provoked by an experience of that action which "is unique, though it is repeated by millions of selves."⁶⁵ In other words, that theocentric self-reliance includes a reliance on God does not threaten the idiosyncrasy of the present self or of the next self that is also relied upon. The Christian life of permanent revolution is lived *within*, not only *by* the Christian community, and it is the theocentric self-reliance of individual Christians that enables the recognition of and resistance to sin within that community. More significant for my paper is that this theological vision can incorporate Cavell's account of friendship as the social bond that underwrites the conversion that characterizes perfectionist and Christian lives. Radical faith, interpreting God as friend to the universe and so constituting us as friends to others, enables us to discern our next Christian self in anyone, even a hostile anti-Christian. Because radical faith understands God to work in and through all persons and

⁶³ *Radical Monotheism*, 31

⁶⁴ This distinction is taken from Kierkegaard, but not its content: I'm fairly certain that Kierkegaard would be worried that my account of HRN's notion of radical action 'immanentizes' God. See Kierkegaard, "Of the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle."

⁶⁵ *The Responsible Self*, 115

things, it can regard the change of faith-postures as lateral ecstasy without endangering God's transcendence.

If radical faith is a posture of self-reliance, than the posture of self-defense engendered by social faith and radical distrust can be understood as one of conformity. The propensity of this posture is towards hostility: interpreting God and God's universe as hostile motivates us to defend the truth and rightness of our own community against others, rather than to make it available and vulnerable to external criticism. Slouching into this dynamic counts as conformity for HRN because it is the plight of all finite, historical communities, including the Christian community, the plight from which we need saving. Apologetic strategies that attempted to secure an a-historical essence of Christianity, immune to the vicissitudes of time, conformed in this sense because the flight from history is a flight both from idiosyncrasy and from the possibility of external criticism. If Christianity is reduced to timeless truths, than its encounter with other communities will not be an encounter of idiosyncrasies with the possibility of intelligibility between them, but rather a mutual sloughing off of idiosyncrasy for the sake of transparent intelligibility; another community's idiosyncratic judgment can always be chalked up to expendable history. Such Christian apologetes may not appear hostile, but post-liberals are right to suggest that they betray hostility toward their own tradition and the traditions of others. At the same time, post-liberal strategies that emphasize the incommensurability of Christian discourse from surrounding forms of discourse can also be understood to conform in this sense, for by taking idiosyncrasy to its highest pitch they deny the possibility of intelligibility itself, leaving little room for external criticism to be anything but meaningless babble. As I noted above, this seems to license intentionally hostile forms of confession, seemingly meant to traumatize others into capitulation. By questioning this tactic, I am not expressing nostalgia or hope for some moment in time when Christian life will not conflict with other forms of life; I believe the finitude of human forms of life entails conflict between them. Rather, I am

expressing concern about the posture we assume in the face of inevitable conflict. Post-liberals vigorously embrace the conflict that liberal apologetes denied, but have thereby capitulated to the prevailing posture, which approaches the world as a field of social hostilities, where bare contention overwhelms intelligibility.

What HRN offers to theology is a form of fallibilist confessionality, whereby Christians are not ashamed of their idiosyncrasy, but rather claim it and confess it, exemplifying it as an available and worthy form of life. Such exemplification makes the Christian life accessible to others, not through some form of public reason or rational argument, but rather as an 'occupy-able' posture, formed by an idiosyncratic history and so forming idiosyncratic judgments. Accessibility to others means vulnerability to their criticisms, but a fallibilist confessionality is grateful for this rather than threatened by it, because it is enabled to respond to it as a legitimate avenue of divine judgment. This, in turn, entails the possibility that non-Christians may come to hold a similar gratitude toward Christian judgments. Perhaps it is the exemplification of such gratitude, through the patient entertaining of external criticism and thoughtful response to it, which is the distinctive contribution that the Christian community can provide in public life, rather than the distinctiveness of its identity against over against other identities.⁶⁶ Perhaps it is such gratitude that will persuade others, and remind us, that the Christian form of life is worthwhile. Cavell notes that perfectionism is not the attempt to ensure that we live above reproach;⁶⁷ HRN would agree that this attempt is wrong-headed, specifying that the Christian life involves a certain form of responsiveness to reproach, which I am calling gratitude. In light of this, the post-liberal concern for distinctiveness and incommensurability seems to be a concern for living above reproach, even for washing one's hands of a messy world. HRN's fallibilist confessionality does not assume in advance

⁶⁶ Nigel Biggar, in his *Behaving in Public: How to Do Christian Ethics*, argues that Christians should focus on 'integrity, not distinctiveness,' that is, on fidelity to and coherence with particularly Christian theological convictions, but not on visible difference from non-Christian communities: "One is a virtue; the other is an accident of history" (8).

⁶⁷ *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, xxiv, 113

intelligibility between the exchanged judgments of idiosyncratic communities, but understands that the possibility of such intelligibility is woven into the fabric of God's ultimately beneficent universe. I consider this a form of liberal theology because it recognizes that the Christian community's history and discourse is embedded in the histories and discourses of surrounding communities, and was so embedded at the outset. While the contours of this embedded-ness are certainly a matter of historical accident, the fact of it is a matter of divine intention. The liberal theologian's ability to discern and endorse this fact as the structure of divine generosity, and thus to pursue a fallibilist confessionalism, depends on her occupying a perfectionist posture, the permanent conversion, in the face of social hostilities, from self-defense to theocentric self-reliance. Thus, HRN's fallibilist confessionalism can be understood as a perfectionist form of liberal theology.