

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

systems, no one argues that condemnation of Soviet or Nazi concentration camps is simply a matter of "conditioning." Watson contends that objectivity does not mean that answers to questions are known, but rather that the tools which answer unanswered questions are sound. Before Neptune was discovered, astronomers did not *know* that a new planet existed, but made an objective judgment that a new planet could well exist. Similarly, critics prepared to make objective judgments do not *know* what these judgments will be in advance, but are certain the logical tools used to conduct their inquiries are reliable.

Philosophers have begun to question skepticism in recent years, with such works as Sir Peter Strawson's *Skepticism and Naturalism* (1985). Watson hopes the doubting of skepticism continues. "Such matters," he stresses, "need to be reopened."

Liberalism's End?

"The Liberal Ethic and the Spirit of Protestantism" by Richard Fox, in *The Center Magazine*, (Sept.-Oct. 1987), P.O. Box 4068, Santa Barbara, Calif. 93140.

American liberalism, argues Fox, a historian at Reed College, has traditionally found allies among such "celebrated religious spokesmen" as Martin Luther King, Jr. But in the 1980s, while leaders in other professions (actors, psychologists, and even astronomers) support the liberal agenda, there is no theologian "to link liberal politics to spiritual meaning or transcendent purpose."

Why did liberal theology decline? Fox traces the seeds of decay to the teachings of Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971).

In *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), Niebuhr maintained that the progressive liberal theology of his time was naively utopian. Communal striving toward the New Jerusalem was not possible, because the fragmentation of America into special interest groups meant that a national consensus (or, perhaps, a moral consensus) could not be achieved. Christians, Niebuhr taught, should try to improve the world by somehow "inject[ing] a tension into secular society," urging secular men to look beyond amoral efficiency toward the transcendence of God and the manifest need for social justice.

Niebuhr did not explicitly state how his goals were to be achieved. Moreover, Fox argues, by belittling "the quest for communal fellowship," Niebuhr underestimated the ability of ordinary people to determine the nature and purpose of a virtuous life. Because of these flaws, Niebuhr's "Christian realism," while a major influence on such 1950s liberals as Adlai Stevenson and Hubert Humphrey, faded after Niebuhr's retirement into the secular *Realpolitik* of the Kennedy administration.

Two recent books attempt to continue Niebuhr's search for a "public theology." In *The Naked Public Square* (1984), Richard Neuhaus argues that a moral consensus can be achieved if Americans ignore the views of elites and return to Biblical virtues. In *Habits of the Heart* (1985), Robert Bellah urges Americans to return to the republican vision of working with others in common tasks.

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Both authors, Fox concludes, fail to see the extent to which America has become secularized. When some mainline Protestant churches have become places where God is merely "a beaming, glad-handing spiritual consultant," he asks, how can the social transformation necessary to restore communal life be achieved?

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Smelling the Past

"Remembering Odors and Their Names" by Trygg Engen, in *American Scientist* (Sept.-Oct. 1987), Sigma Xi, 345 Whitney Ave., New Haven, Conn. 06511.

"Memory can restore to life everything except smells," novelist Vladimir Nabokov once wrote, "although nothing revives the past so completely as a smell that was once associated with it." Nabokov's insight has recently been confirmed by science.

Engen, a psychologist at Brown University, identifies two distinct types of olfactory memory: the ability to call up the sensation of a particular odor and the ability to identify a smell when presented. New research has illuminated these differences.

Until recently, researchers classified odors by the "smell prism," developed by German psychologist Hans Henning over 70 years ago. The prism separates all odors into six categories, such as "flowery," "spicy," or



Wine tasters use smell to distinguish subtle differences among vintages, although they generally have only average skill in identifying other odors.