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Carnell

Rudolph Nelson

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CHAPTER I

The narrow ridge and the cognitive bargain

On a warm December afternoon in 1977, I parked my rented car outside the Alameda County Courthouse in Oakland, California, and sat for a few minutes before keeping my appointment with the County Medical Examiner. I had gone first to the palatial Claremont Hotel, in the hills between Oakland and Berkeley, overlooking the bay. Ten years earlier, the body of Edward Carnell had been found in his room at the hotel, an hour before he was scheduled to deliver a luncheon address to the delegates of a Roman Catholic ecumenical congress. He had been dead since the previous evening. Now I was about to read the coroner's report, which the present Medical Examiner had promised to pull for me.

As I entered his office, I saw that he had been studying the contents of the file. He found, he said, something rather strange about it. I assumed he must be referring to the fact that a theological seminary professor had died in circumstances that raised the question of suicide. But that was not what had caught his attention. He pointed out that whereas the office usually received a half-dozen or so requests for copies of the coroner's report on such cases, this file had an entire second envelope filled with requests, dozens of them, from all over the country. He could not figure it out. It did not take long to solve the mystery. Shuffling quickly through the letters, I recognized some of the names: the nationally famous pastor of a large Southern Baptist church, a right-wing fundamentalist college president, a writer of militant religious pamphlets, an executive of a hyperconservative separatist denomination. Even the unfamiliar names – some of them – were easily classifiable: pastors of independent fundamentalist churches in the Bible Belt, or laypersons whose very words betrayed unintentionally and not very subtly the thirst for damaging information. An Indiana minister had requested several copies.

It was all too clear what had happened. Edward Carnell, with a background himself of impeccable fundamentalist credentials, had become an

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object of intense criticism in the last decade of his life because of what some considered dangerous ideas. Now, having heard that he had died mysteriously in a hotel room, 400 miles from home, the guardians of the true faith had gathered around the body, hoping to find evidence of a tarnished reputation that would invalidate his unacceptable ideas.

For reasons I will explain, by this time I was already firmly committed to writing a biographical study of Carnell. If I needed further confirmation of my decision, I found it that morning in Oakland. I sensed anew that in the life and death of Edward Carnell there was a *story* to tell, an important story that might touch a nerve in the human spirit.

My own interest in Carnell goes all the way back to 1948 when I was a student at Providence Bible Institute in Rhode Island. As a graduation gift, an ex-roommate gave me a copy of Carnell's first book, *Introduction to Christian Apologetics*, winner of a \$5,000 prize in a contest sponsored by a religious publishing house. As more of his books appeared – *A Philosophy of the Christian Religion*, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr* – I bought them for my own growing library, where for years (I admit with some embarrassment) they remained unread. There was one Carnell book I did read: *Television: Servant or Master* (1951), a balanced approach to this rambunctious new medium of communication and a refreshing recognition that the rigid fundamentalist stand against Hollywood motion pictures had suddenly been rendered defunct. During this time I also began meeting young men and women who had studied under Carnell at either Gordon College or Fuller Seminary. Invariably they remembered him as the best teacher they had ever had, a man who perpetually agonized over whether or not he was communicating clearly to his students the profound complexities of his philosophical and theological material.

My interest in Carnell deepened significantly in the early 1960s, shortly after I had joined the faculty of a Christian liberal arts college – the same institution from which I had been graduated in 1948. Then, as Providence Bible Institute, it had still been reasonably content to be identified as *fundamentalist*. Now it had changed its name to Barrington College and – like Carnell, like a whole generation of restless erstwhile fundamentalists, myself included – much preferred to be known as evangelical. For some the shift brought traumatic complications over the years. Sometime early in the 1960s I heard that Carnell had suffered a breakdown and that his psychological troubles were related to merciless criticism leveled against him by those who disapproved of what they interpreted as defection from a conservative theological position. When the news came in 1967 that Carnell had died, and when the rumor began circulating that he may have committed suicide, some of us who by then had drifted to the outer margins of evangelical acceptance (and had begun ourselves to hear

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criticism from those more theologically orthodox) felt toward him a deep and genuine kinship.

I do not mean to say that I think of myself as a spiritual and psychological blood brother to Edward Carnell. I could never live the kind of life he chose, and my personality, tastes, and inclinations are so vastly different from his that I have had trouble imaginatively projecting myself into his experience. But my life and Carnell's have occupied at least one significant area of common ground: a persistent concern with the foundational problem of Christianity's credibility. I had had difficulties with Christian belief almost as far back as I can remember, although for long periods of time I buried them. Carnell was important to me because he had developed an apologetic for Christian orthodoxy that refused to turn its back on modern threats to belief.

But, you recall, I had not even read Carnell's books. They remained as dust collectors on the shelf. Precisely. If Edward Carnell played a role in preserving my faith, at least for a time, it was surely in a way he never intended. He was a talismanic figure who had read Kant and Hegel and Hume and Nietzsche, who had dealt also with those more problematic and perhaps more subtly dangerous thinkers, Kierkegaard and Reinhold Niebuhr, and who had ventured into the labyrinthine lair of the unbelieving Beast and emerged safely orthodox with not one but two doctoral degrees to hang as trophies in his study: a Th.D. from Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. from Boston University in successive years. Knowing he had those credentials, who needed actually to *read* his books?

By the time Carnell died in 1967, I was beyond the point where his books, read or unread, could have changed the course of my life. For about this time I was forced to acknowledge that for some twenty years my own faith had been suffering a steady process of erosion. The word erosion almost always carries pejorative connotations, and I certainly did not use it in those years to describe what was happening to me. I would have been much more pleased with the self-congratulatory notion that I was a sculptor chipping off superfluous matter in the effort to uncover a beautiful work of art. In the sculpture metaphor, what I was losing was not worth keeping anyway, and I would be left with a smaller core of Christian affirmations in which I *really* believed. But then parts of the core started to chip away too. I wondered if there was enough stone left to make a work of art. The erosion metaphor was the right one after all. It is one thing, though, to lose a few inches a year off the Atlantic shoreline. It is quite another thing to feel ominous subterranean rumblings and discover that the river of doubt has been eating away under the ground and that one's whole house of faith inevitably will soon be poised on the edge of the abyss.

Having glimpsed this much of the future, I knew that I could not

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merely sit back and watch faith erode. I concluded that I must sink a column of steel into solid rock – into some foundation that would not erode – and build a new house, however modest and unimpressive it might be. The solid rock had to be a complete honesty (as much honesty as I was capable of, at least) about my religious beliefs. If necessary I would think the unthinkable – and not in any dilettantish or merely academic way. I was through playing intellectual games.

The break with the past was not easy – not for one brought up in strict Protestant fundamentalism, trained for “full-time Christian service” in a Bible Institute, and spiritually nurtured throughout four undergraduate years at Brown University by Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship. Add to that a liberal seminary education at Boston University School of Theology, a two-year stint as part-time pastor of a small-town church, and a decade on the faculty of an evangelical Christian college. I do not wish to attach more importance to all this than it deserves; I am simply making the point that I was solidly and actively entrenched in the conservative Christian tradition.

I might very well have stayed where I was. Some in my position could legitimately have done so. I could not. I resigned from the college faculty for several reasons, the most important of which was the annual requirement of signing a “Statement of Faith.” At this point in my evolving faith journey, my adherence to several items in the institution’s creed was so problematic as to raise in my own mind a serious question of personal integrity. Whatever resentment I felt over the conviction that I had to leave was soon far outweighed by the inner freedom to find out who I really was under all those layers of ill-fitting loyalties.

In order to bring Carnell back into the picture, I must explain briefly what I did for the next four years after resigning from the Barrington College faculty. Having sneaked into the teaching profession through the back door without completing requirements for a doctoral degree in literature, the field in which I was teaching, I realized that if I decided to stay in higher education there was only one road to take. I enrolled in the American Civilization doctoral program at Brown University. It is difficult for me to identify with the horror stories others tell about graduate school. I was a starving man at a feast. I also enjoyed an unexpected bonus: course work in my three fields (American literature, social and intellectual history, and religion) as well as my dissertation project seemed to fall into place to help make sense of my own experience and of the religious tradition in which I had grown up. Ironically (it *seemed* ironic to me at the time, much less so now), recognizing and accepting the fact that I had cut all my ties with creedal and institutional Christianity freed me to appreciate the values, as well as to see more clearly the shortcomings, of that background. The more deeply I probed, the more I saw to explore. With graduate work behind me and an appointment to

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the English department of the State University of New York at Albany, I knew that in addition to scholarly writing in my primary discipline, I would be continuing my research into American religious history. On reflection, it occurred to me that Edward Carnell, with his background in and deep commitment to both fundamentalism and evangelicalism, might provide a useful focal point for my interests and concerns.

I have already used the terms “fundamentalist” and “evangelical” as if there were general agreement on what they mean. Of course there is not. Each term activates different sets of conditioned responses that jeopardize meaningful discussion. “Fundamentalism,” having become part of the common lexicon, is especially troublesome. We *think* we know who the fundamentalists are: They are the benighted others. For eighteen months, while Iranians held American diplomatic personnel hostage in the Teheran embassy, nightly television shows reported the actions of their “Shiite fundamentalist captors.” The media thereby reinforced an already existing tendency to identify fundamentalism with religiously based fanaticism anywhere in the world, adamantly resistant to rational persuasion, intellectually out of touch with modernity. However vague we might be about our own religious commitments (if any), it is reassuring to know we are not fundamentalists. Our actual knowledge about fundamentalism, though, is often just a notch or two above absolute zero.

“Evangelicalism” evokes a different response. Americans have learned that former President Jimmy Carter is an evangelical but are not quite sure about President Reagan. We know that Billy Graham is an evangelical but wonder whether Jerry Falwell might be more accurately classified a fundamentalist. Whereas virtually everyone confidently presumes to know what fundamentalism is, the term *evangelicalism* is more likely to elicit either a blank look or an unexamined assumption that it must be merely another name for fundamentalism. Even in supposedly informed discourse, both terms are used with a minimum of precision and with little historical awareness of the connections between them.

Here is what I mean when I use the terms in this book. When American Protestantism faced intellectual crises in the late nineteenth century, precipitated chiefly by Darwinism and higher criticism of the Bible, a long struggle began between factions that supported conflicting strategies. The conservative wing argued that the liberal receptivity to modern learning undermined essential Christian doctrines. Between 1910 and 1915, some in this group published a series of pamphlets collectively called “The Fundamentals,” written by a number of British and American scholars and popular religious figures, presenting the conservative arguments against modernism on a range of controversial issues. By the time the battle heated up in the 1920s, the antimodernists had been given the name fundamentalists. After they were put to rout in the 1925 Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee (over the evolution issue), they retreated be-

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hind the impenetrable walls of antimodernist ideology. Some fundamentalists followed the strategy of remaining within the major denominations as a leavening influence; others gave up the struggle and became separatists with varying degrees of militancy. For a number of reasons, the dividing line between these two groups was often indistinct. Whatever the ecclesiastical strategy, though, to be a fundamentalist was to be an enemy of modernism. Carnell was nurtured in this tradition.¹

Twentieth-century evangelicalism was a later development, although it has nineteenth-century roots. When fundamentalism hardened its resistance to modernity after 1925, it did not by any means give up the fight. It changed the battle strategy. At the same time as the liberal denominations were going through a religious depression (parallel to the nation's economic depression), the fundamentalists were thriving.² They developed their own institutional network of churches, denominations, mission boards, Bible institutes and colleges, summer conferences, and radio programs. Although still a despised minority in the culture as a whole, by the late 1930s they found several reasons for thinking that a national religious revival might be on the way. Consistent with this new optimistic outlook, in the 1940s a new generation of fundamentalists decided it was time to reenter the modern world. Forsaking what they judged to be the much too negative orientation of an older fundamentalism, which established its identity by what the group opposed, they began to move positively in a number of directions. Most significantly for our purposes, many of their young scholars who were interested in the fields of philosophy, theology, and biblical studies enrolled in the top graduate schools of the country and emerged to take important academic positions within the fundamentalist educational network. At first they were not at pains to slough off the label fundamentalist, but as the 1940s progressed they showed an increasing preference to be known as evangelicals. When I use the term *evangelical* in this book, I am referring to these heirs of the 1920s fundamentalists. They have also been called "new evangelicals" and "post-fundamentalists."³ Whereas they differed hardly at all from the fundamentalists in their theology, they affirmed the necessity of answering the threat of modernity by a response more effective than a retreat behind the fortress walls of militant ignorance.

This was the evangelicalism for which Carnell was a sort of intellectual bellwether from the time he emerged from his graduate study at Harvard Divinity School and Boston University, through his career at Fuller Theological Seminary (the movement's premier educational institution) as professor and then president. No one in the evangelical renaissance was more influential in shattering the legacy of fundamentalist withdrawal from modernity and insisting that evangelicals confront the toughest issues of modern times. The life and writings of Edward Carnell became a lens through which I could see and understand more clearly both my

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own heritage and certain important developments in American religious history.

However, although readers may be willing to grant me the appropriateness of my own interest in Carnell and recognize the legitimate interest of those whose personal backgrounds or professional responsibilities intersect fundamentalism or evangelicalism in various ways, not everyone shares these interests and concerns. Willy Loman's wife plaintively insisted that "attention must be paid" to the life and death of her very ordinary salesman husband. Should attention be paid to Edward Carnell? Does his importance transcend the parochialism of his own religious milieu?

A sizable number of twentieth-century historians have spent their professional lives elaborating the insight that American religious history holds the key to the American character: Perry Miller, Sydney Ahlstrom, William McLoughlin, Martin Marty to name just a few. Ahlstrom refers to "the Great Puritan Epoch" – a "unified four-hundred-year period" in the English and American experience.⁴ McLoughlin discusses "the pietistic spirit of American culture itself," by which he means not narrow fundamentalist religiosity but "the sense of religious commitment and ideals that Americans inscribe to democracy and their way of life."⁵ Both Ahlstrom and McLoughlin focus particularly on the decade of the sixties as a time of radical reorientation in America's religious faith and life and in its sense of its own identity. For Ahlstrom the sixties marked the end of the Puritan era:

The decade of the sixties was a time, in short, when the old foundations of national confidence, patriotic idealism, moral traditionalism, and even of historic Judaeo-Christian theism, were awash. Presuppositions that had held firm for centuries – even millenia – were being widely questioned.⁶

McLoughlin interprets the sixties in the context of a series of "great awakenings" – periods of "fundamental social and intellectual reorientation of the American belief-value system, behavior patterns, and institutional structure."⁷ Basing his schema on a formulation of cultural change developed by anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace, he designates five of these periods, loosely dated as follows: the Puritan Awakening in both England and America (1610–40), leading to the beginning of constitutional monarchy in England; America's First Great Awakening (1730–60), leading to the founding of the American republic; the Second Great Awakening (1800–30), leading to the solidifying of the Union and the rise of Jacksonian democracy; the Third Great Awakening (1890–1920), leading to the rejection of unregulated capitalism and the beginning of the welfare state; and the Fourth Great Awakening, which began around

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1960 and is still in progress.⁸ Although evangelicals tend to equate awakenings with religious revivals, the McLoughlin concept clearly casts a much wider cultural and historical net.

The postwar “turn to religion” . . . went much deeper and wider than prayer breakfasts, mass evangelistic campaigns, and anti-Communist crusades. It constituted a general re-orientation of the whole social and intellectual climate of Western society, just as America’s previous Great Awakenings had done. In the history books of the future, this revival will be associated with the rise of existential philosophy, neo-orthodox theology, the election of the first Roman Catholic President, the *aggiornamento* of Vatican II, the peace movement and the civil rights movement, the revival of pacifism, the war on poverty, and the quest for a new politics.⁹

Periods of reorientation, however, are profoundly unsettling. Normally we can process new information and experiences by relating them to familiar data. As Suzanne Langer says, “Our most important assets are always the symbols of our general *orientation* in nature, on the earth, in society, and in what we are doing.” Under the mental stress that results when these symbols are threatened, “even perfectly familiar things may become suddenly disorganized and give us the horrors.”¹⁰

According to Anthony Wallace, the first stage of a revitalization movement poses exactly that kind of threat; it is “the period of individual stress.” In McLoughlin’s words, it is a time

when one by one, people lose their bearings, become psychically or physically ill, show what appear to be signs of neurosis, psychosis, or madness, and may either break out in acts of violence against family, friends, and authorities or become apathetic, catatonic, incapable of functioning. Emile Durkheim described this as “anomie,” or loss of identity. Often anomic individuals destroy themselves by drugs, alcohol, or suicide. By their friends, and by society in general, these early victims of social disjunction are seen as deviants, misfits, persons too weak or too psychologically infirm to cope with life. They are sent to ministerial or psychological counselors (medicine men) or to hospitals and asylums to be cured or to “readjust.” But as the number of these individuals increases, the institutional bonds of society begin to snap.¹¹

I shall not try to match up the details of Carnell’s life with every trait on that list. It is a fact, however, that simultaneously with the first stage of the Fourth Great Awakening, Carnell was going through his own “period of individual stress” that clearly falls within the McLoughlin–Wallace guidelines. In April 1959, he resigned from the presidency of Fuller Seminary because of deteriorating health. Serious bouts with depression, exacerbated by insomnia and a growing dependency on barbitu-