

# God in the Wasteland

*The Reality of Truth  
in a World of Fading Dreams*

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## *Preface*

In 1989, I was the recipient of a significant grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts that enabled me to write *No Place for Truth; or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* This book produced only half the picture I wanted to present, however. It offers an explanation of the cultural factors that have diminished the place and importance of theology in the church, but it offers no suggestions for a remedy of the problem. I am grateful, therefore, for the opportunity afforded me through a sabbatical to begin developing the other half of the picture in this book. Here I outline the first step that I believe needs to be taken to reverse the situation I described in the first book.

My absence from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary during this time has meant that some of my colleagues have had to assume some of my responsibilities, and I am grateful to them for their help and the generous spirit with which they have provided it.

Chapter 8 of this book reports on and utilizes important research that was done for me by Rodger Rice, director of the Social Research Center at Calvin College. In an effort to measure the saliency of belief among seminarians, we asked seven seminaries for their assistance in producing a representative sampling of evangelical students. I wish to express my deep appreciation to the presidents of these seminaries for their willing cooperation as well as to those who worked so hard to make sure that the surveys were carried out effectively: Leslie Andrews (Asbury Theological Seminary), Kathleen Ericson (Bethel Theological Seminary), Keith Tanis (Calvin Theological Seminary), Lynda Bradley (Denver Conservative Baptist Seminary), Sandee Masuda-Hunt (Fuller Theological Seminary), Margaret Manning (Gordon-Conwell Theolog-

ical Seminary), and Dennis Gaines (Talbot School of Theology). It has been a pleasure to work with Rodger Rice on this project, and I am much in debt to him for his considerable sociological expertise.

The report that resulted from this survey was, unfortunately, too long to be used *in toto*. Moreover, it was also written in a form that had to be adapted a little to meet the needs of the intended audience of this book. I felt, however, that the results were so significant (this may be the most extensive and searching analysis ever made of the views of evangelical seminarians) that I have included the statistical tables in an appendix. This will at least make this work available for those who may wish to use it or build on it without burdening those for whom the material is of less interest.

While the work was being done on this survey, I was able to obtain from James Hunter the raw data from a survey he made of seminarians in 1982. This proved most valuable to us because it enabled us to run a series of comparisons. I am most grateful to him for his willingness to make this material available to us.

I sent out much of the material in this book to various friends and colleagues for evaluation. Naturally, they are to be exonerated from all blame for what follows, but I do wish to thank Greg Beale, Jack Davis, David Gordon, Os Guinness, Scott Hafemann, Walter Kaiser, and John Seel for their careful and conscientious responses. I am also grateful to Margaret Manning, my student assistant, who helped me in checking parts of the manuscript.

The very day that the manuscript of this book was being sent off to the publisher, I received a copy of Colin Gunton's *The One, the Three, and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity*, which I had ordered. It was, of course, too late to profit from his book, which contains the Bampton Lectures of 1992. He traverses much the same territory as I have here, though he does so from a more philosophical angle. Nevertheless, we appear to share many views, and I regret that I was unable to read his work before the completion of my own.

Finally, I wish to express my appreciation for those who are still serious readers in America. Without them, I and many others would be silenced. The time and attention they give to their reading flies in the face of the habits that modernity inculcates so insiduously. And so, I wish to salute their stubborn resistance to modernity! Against all the odds, may their number increase, and may the church, in consequence, once again become a place where life is given its most serious and searching analysis.



# **PROLOGUE**



## CHAPTER 1

### *An Accident in History*

*Modern man is afflicted with a permanent identity crisis, a condition conducive to considerable nervousness.*

Peter Berger

The modern world artfully simplifies, sometimes inadvertently. I was reminded of this yesterday when I unexpectedly encountered the theme of this book in bold, simple letters, right before my eyes.

I was driving down a quiet lane not far from my house. The beauty of the setting was striking. The tall, leafy trees reached over the road, forming a natural cathedral. So thick and luscious was this summer finery that only the thinnest slivers of light were able to pierce through the overhead canopy. A few horses were out romping in a field the grassy mounds of which, bright with sunshine, eventually sloped down to a river. The quietness and magnificence of this pastoral scene was broken only by some crows in irritated contention over the remnants of a small animal that had, in the night, fallen prey to a passing motorist.

Without warning, a white pickup truck suddenly pulled out into the road ahead of me. I had to brake hard to avoid a collision. Now, Boston drivers never take an affront like that lightly, because they have learned from long experience that these infringements on decency and order are never inadvertent. In other places they may be accidental — perhaps they often are — but in Boston they are all calculated insults. The only question that remains is what to do about them.

As this old truck jerked into motion ahead of me, I noticed the

two messages on its rear bumper. The one on the left declared for McGuire, a local politician, in bold letters, and the one on the right declared for Jesus in equally bold letters. But there were additional letters, much smaller, above and below both these names. I was more than a little interested to know exactly what message this kind of driver would sport, so I accelerated to get within reading distance of the truck. My intention, I assure you, was completely innocent. But this driver, no doubt hardened by the routine combat of manners and vehicles that passes for traffic in and around Boston, looked alarmed, and, perhaps suspecting some form of retaliation, spurred forward. A dark cloud of smoke belched from the truck, signaling the driver's move to make a getaway. Not to be outdone, I accelerated with him. He pushed on even faster, a sense of imminent retribution no doubt inspiring his flight. By now we were both well above the speed limit — by no means without risk on this lane, since the local gendarmes are notorious for being entirely without compassion. I could see his darting glances in the rear view mirror as I matched each forward lurch of his truck with a spurt of my own, acceleration for acceleration. All I wanted to do was read his bumper stickers, but he was having none of it. He escaped.

As he sped off, I was left to ponder this strange way, now so ubiquitous in America, of making a stand for the truth on one's bumper. I would not want you to consider me a reactionary on this issue. Let me say at the outset that I understand the argument in favor the bumper sticker. We live in an age that is thoroughly conversant with the language of commerce in which our advertisers have tutored us. It is an age in which we pass the mysteries of life from one to another in short, pithy slogans. So why not promote Jesus along with McGuire? I have no doubt that there are good intentions behind the action. It is a way of telling others, of bringing home to them a thought that might connect with something else they know, perhaps jog some internal configuration of yearnings and desires and suggest a way home to the eternal or a way out of the morass at City Hall. Slapping on a bumper sticker is a way of standing for the truth.

But it is a peculiarly modern way, is it not? The great issues of life are compressed into a word or slogan and offered up as a commodity to any takers on the highways and byways of America. It is assumed that the consumers following the bumper are in a state of suspended dissatisfaction and that the message will answer their need. The whole exchange takes place in the impersonal language of the marketplace. No names need even be exchanged. It is commerce aimed

at need, the transaction hopefully circumventing serious thought and critical reflection entirely. In this particular case, Jesus and McGuire sat side by side on the same shelf, products suited for particular circumstances and needs. Those who needed McGuire were encouraged to purchase him with a vote; those who needed Jesus were informed that he was also available, too, and perhaps on equally convenient terms.

It might be said that this book is about Jesus and McGuire, or, as those in the trade put it, about Christ and culture. McGuire is everywhere in our modern world. He is the symbol not only of political choice but of our commerce in goods and services, the daily business of meeting needs.<sup>1</sup> Personal needs, psychological aches, the imponderable senses that move like tides in and out of the self each day, the eerie sense that all our sound and fury may indeed signify nothing, the alarms that ring in the night when our dreams throw down their apprehensions, the realization that slowly comes to us that our daily routines, so innocent in their appearance, are actually executioners that in time will crack the body and return it to the earth — for all of these needs we are now offered balms, elixirs, and remedies at a price. Medical, chemical, and professional products of all kinds are hawked everywhere, in the newspapers, on the airwaves, in the streets, door to door, on car bumpers. Yet the confusion that they sow for us is not my primary focus here; I am more concerned about the immediate by-product of this confusion, which is the difficulty that is introduced when the name of Jesus goes on the bumper alongside that of McGuire. To get at this issue, we have to look at the larger framework in which it appears, the context of our modern world. This world is the result of revolutionary changes that have taken place over the last century or more. These changes are not the work of conventional revolutionaries, however. What has happened is an accident.

1. In what follows, McGuire is more than just a political commodity; he is a construct of the circumstances of modernity more generally. For a brilliant, if acerbic, depiction of the fluid, narcissistic, consumer-oriented culture that negotiates with the likes of McGuire, a culture disconnected from place, community, and family, see the following three volumes by Christopher Lasch: *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (New York: Basic Books, 1979); *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978); and *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978).

### The Accidental Revolution

Revolutions usually happen when change has so roiled a society that little of the past remains in place. They happen when change is too rapid, deep, and broad to be absorbed and processed. Then the old ways are simply swept away; old conventions, structures, beliefs, values, and players all become obsolete.

Revolutions aim to unseat those in power. Those who exercise political power, those who have found warm and secure resting places in the status quo, those who preserve society in order to consume the lion's share of its bounty — these are the ones who feel the hot breath of the aggrieved.<sup>2</sup> Injustice — economic, racial, or social — is always the rallying cry of the revolutionaries as they storm the Bastille. When they triumph, those who were once excluded from power can bask in it, while those upon whom power had conferred its sacramental blessing are left out in the cold, stripped of their standing and usefulness. It was so when, earlier this century, the Bolsheviks were dislodged in Russia, when Mao and his armies marched to power in China, when communist regimes fell in Europe in the late 1980s, and it is so with disconcerting frequency in Africa today. It is thus that our world replaces its civilizations and political orders.

At least this is the way revolution has typically come. But today something quite different is afoot in the West. There is no question that Western culture is now being upended. What is interesting about this, however, is the relative ease with which this revolution has occurred. It has not been savage. It has held out blessings indiscriminately to all. It has been a sly, unobtrusive transformation. Nevertheless, every aspect of Western society, every nook and cranny, is now awash with change. And this change has not merely been technological in nature, as innovative products and techniques continue to alter the fabric and the rhythms of our lives. Nor has it simply been political and economic, important as these factors may have been. No, this change has in the profoundest sense been *spiritual*. It is not just the outer fabric of our life that has been assaulted by change but its inner sanctum as well. Change has intruded on the core of our being, the place where values are wrought, appetites emerge, expectations arise, and meaning is constructed. Our world has changed, and so have we.

2. See Jean-François Revel, *Without Marx or Jesus: The New American Revolution Has Begun*, trans. J. F. Bernard (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970), pp. 11-12.

Unlike all of its predecessors, this accidental revolution is not being driven either by a self-conscious ideology or by self-conscious revolutionaries. Our guerrillas are, in fact, very ordinary people, most of whom would be aghast if they could see themselves for what they are: provocateurs and agents of revolutionary change. Indeed, even the most average of Americans — the consumers of Tide and Tylenol, Listerine and Lysol, Coca-Cola and Kleenex, Lemon Pledge and Metropolitan Life — are in the center of this secular transfiguration.<sup>3</sup> They think and act in ways that look safe, predictable, and quite harmless. They are not wild-eyed and incendiary, and they do not spew out the kind of vituperation that is typical of revolutionaries. They produce little anguish, little protest, virtually no disdain. No, they are uniquely mild-mannered revolutionaries, but for all of that they have swept overboard the values that previous generations cherished. Old beliefs and conventions have ended up on many modern trash heaps, but we are neither perturbed nor vengeful. We are, in fact, quite innocent about what we are doing. We are without anger.

### *World Cliche Culture*

This story has of course been told many times and from many angles. I offered my own account in the prologue to the volume on which I am seeking to build in this book.<sup>4</sup> In that account, I distinguished between modernization and modernity, two forces that together are driving the revolutionary transformation of our world. The former is producing changes in the outer fabric of our life; the latter is altering the values and meanings that emerge from within the context of the modernized world — values and meanings that in the modern context seem altogether normal and natural.

The process of modernization is driven by four main realities: capitalism, technology, urbanization, and telecommunications.

1. Capitalism emerged as a defining force in Europe following the collapse of the old medieval synthesis, but it did not effect evident changes until the beginning of the nineteenth century, when industrial-

3. While there is no such thing as an average American, there are identifiable patterns of attitude and consumption that are characteristic of those in the middle range economically; see Michael J. Weiss, *The Clustering of America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 81.

4. See *No Place for Truth; or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 53-91. The themes explored in that volume are the basis of the viewpoint I am developing here.

ization got under way, and it did not reach its full intensity until technology became both ubiquitous in society and indispensable to the functioning of capitalism. At the same time, however, capitalism has developed a profound dependence on the sorts of freedom typically provided by democratic societies. But in societies that have afforded rights of free association, unrestricted travel, and a belief in the propriety of the capitalist economy, capitalism has successfully reorganized the social structure for the purposes of manufacturing, production, and consumption. It has concentrated populations into cities and produced massive systems of finance, banking, law, communications, and transportation. In short, it has changed the shape of our world, how we relate to it, where we live, how we experience our work, and the values and expectations that we bring with us in order to be adaptable to and successful in this public sphere.

2. Technology is, of course, essential to modern capitalism. Its importance lies not simply in the fact that it facilitates the production of knowledge, makes possible medical and engineering breakthroughs, and is now indispensable to all modes of production. Equally important is the fact that it also rationalizes all of life. People who live in technologically dominated societies are prone to think naturalistically and to subject all of life to a calculus of benefits — to assume that whatever is most efficient is most ethical.

3. Modernization has also been driven by the stunning growth of urbanization, which has now spread beyond the West to become a worldwide phenomenon. In Western countries, 94 percent of the population now lives in cities of 50,000 or more. Cities create their own psychological environments because they draw into their precincts and into close contact with one another people with very different worldviews. During the twentieth century, this trend has been amplified in America by mass migrations of peoples from Asia and Central and South America. They have brought with them their own ethnic identities, cultural habits, languages, religions, and values — all of which have been brought into close proximity to one another in our cities. The new multicultural environment has produced a secular ecumenism and a powerful demand for pluralism, for mutual tolerance, for private space in which to hold one's beliefs, live one's own lifestyle, do what one wants to do. Thus far, the Constitution seems to be securing this much for each person, within the boundaries of the law, but it seems to be producing an encompassing relativism as well.

4. Finally, modern telecommunications has made us all citizens

of the whole world. Television is perhaps less a window on the world than a surrogate eye that preselects what images of the world we will be exposed to. Still, we have become witnesses of an extraordinary range of events that daily shape and shake the world. Television gives to us a psychological transcendence of space, both physical and cultural, linking us to other people around the world. The bonds that television creates, unlike those that once prevailed in the small towns of America, are entirely synthetic — even if it doesn't seem that way. The communion that television provides — the communion of common voyeurs — can seem as real as that of a local neighborhood. So it is that Americans have felt outraged by the treatment of blacks in South Africa, felt a strange camaraderie when their armed forces joined the Western allies in attacking Iraq, felt pain over the brutal dismemberment of the former Yugoslavia. And television also produces mass communal reactions to material that is bound to any specific context, to wholly homogenized information, to the fads and fashions and disconnected sound bites of mass culture. It spins out information in such abundance as to rob most of it of any value.

I have spoken of the emergence of this global cliché culture as the birthmark of Our Time. Until modernity was ushered into our world, cultures were always local. They were, by definition, sets of meanings and morals, beliefs and habits that arose in specific contexts of history and religion, a people's social organization and place in the world. Thus we have traditionally spoken of Indian culture as being discernibly different from European culture, or African from Hispanic. But today, modernization is producing comparable ways of thinking, wanting, and being in countries that are very different in terms of their histories, religion, and organization. Today, what is modern can be found, and found in about the same way, in both Tokyo and Canberra, New Delhi and New England, Paris and Cape Town. To stretch this far, to span the globe in this way, modernity must necessarily be culturally thin. It must be able to be present everywhere while denying ownership to anyone in particular. It can be exclusive to no one, neither the Japanese nor the Europeans, neither the Australians nor the Americans. It is everywhere but it can be localized nowhere in particular. And its thinness reduces life to clichés — the same clichés everywhere, served up with the same fast food, the same music, the same blue jeans and T-shirts, the same movies, the same consumer impulses, the same news. It is a generic culture, this culture of the television age, of asphalt, advertising, uniformity, and waste. And those who feed on it, those who live by

it, become generic people who also are thin, who stretch far and wide and belong nowhere in particular. They are, in the deepest sense, the “homeless” of our modern world.<sup>5</sup>

The sheer ubiquity of this public environment is what makes the naturalistic, materialistic, secular assumptions of everyday modern life seem so axiomatic, so completely beyond reproach. Few question the propriety of disengaging the public and private spheres of our lives as the new pluralism demands. We shuttle easily from the private world of family, friends, and perhaps neighborhood to the public world of professional and impersonal relationships, in which we know other people only in terms of their functions — the doctor, the plumber, the accountant. The anonymity of the public sphere facilitates the acceptance of new values by diminishing their significance. What difference does it make what the plumber’s religion is, or politics, or sexual preference, so long as the pipes are fixed properly? What difference does it make whether the strangers around us are good or bad so long as they serve us professionally? Wherever anonymity increases, accountability diminishes.

The public sphere, dominated as it is by the omnipresence of bureaucracy, systems of manufacturing, the machinery of capitalism, and the audible confetti spewing out of countless radios and televisions, makes it virtually impossible to think that in *this* world God has any meaningful place. He may have a place somewhere, but not here, not in the public square! Perhaps he belongs within a person’s soul, submerged there within their private intuitions, but there is no place for him in the structures of our commerce and communications. The truth is that the public dimension of our chrome and plastic world, our cities with their high rises and high rents, admits to no interest in the divine presence, seeks no grace, and asks for no forgiveness. It looks to pluralism as the way out of this awkward dilemma. Let the citizens take care of their relationships to God as private individuals, each in his or her own way, if this is what they wish to do, but let the rest of the world remain free of ranting about God, the supernatural, and moral absolutes.

The conquest of modernity can be gauged in a number of ways, but one of the most interesting is the shift in the way we view life at the point of its termination. An analysis of obituaries published in the *Salem (Massachusetts) Evening News* between 1786 and 1990, for ex-

5. See Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Modern Consciousness* (New York: Random House, 1979).

ample, highlights all of the marks of the transition into the modern world that I have been describing. Three of these stand out in particular.

1. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, most obituaries made some mention of the character of the deceased; by the end of the century this was rarely the case.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, a person's occupation was seldom an important detail in obituaries at the beginning of nineteenth century, but by 1990 it had become the key means by which a person was identified.<sup>7</sup> This substitution of function for character is consistent both with the rise of anonymity in our large, complex, and specialized world and with a new sense that it is inappropriate to define a person on the basis of character in a public context that offers no consensus concerning (and, if it comes to that, is not much interested in) what constitutes good character.

2. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, obituaries were largely written in religious language, much of it specifically Christian.<sup>8</sup> By the beginning of the twentieth century, the use of such language had vanished entirely. This is consistent, of course, with the secularization of our public life. Not insignificantly, the frequency of the mention of pain and suffering in these obituaries declined in tandem with the loss of religious language. Perhaps the decline of a common Christian world-view diminished our capacity to deal with death and suffering.

3. Obituaries published at the beginning of the nineteenth century typically made some reference to the individual's involvement in community life. Between 1810 and 1830 the number of these references declined sharply, and by 1900 they had vanished completely.<sup>9</sup> It

6. In 1786, 80 percent of the obituaries made reference to character. By 1810, this figure had fallen to 71 percent; by 1830, to 45 percent; by 1900, to 10 percent. After that, no such references are found. These figures, along with those in the following three notes, are taken from an unpublished paper by Eric Nelson entitled "Changes in the Public Portrayal of Death" (1991) and are cited here with his permission.

7. In 1786, only 15 percent of the obituaries mentioned the person's occupation. By 1900, this figure had grown to 70 percent. It then declined for a time, but by 1990 it had rebounded and increased to 80 percent.

8. In 1786, 79 percent of the obituaries used religious language in speaking of the person's death. By 1810, only 70 percent did; by 1830, only 20 percent; and by 1900, such references had vanished completely.

9. In 1786, 65 percent of the obituaries spoke of the connection the person had had with the community and often of the person's contributions. By 1810, this figure had fallen to 57 percent; by 1830, to 11 percent; and by 1900, this form of measuring and identifying the deceased had fallen into disuse entirely.

is just one of many indications of the fact that our culture has come to place increasingly less value on ties to community.

### *Costs and Benefits*

It is surely one of the great anomalies of our modern world that the connection between welfare and well-being, between the outward circumstances of prosperity and the inward sense of satisfaction, has come unstuck. It was clear even before the end of the nineteenth century that the transformation of the world through modernization into the sleek thing that it has become would not be realized without some inward cost. In fact, the arrival of the modern world has involved a complete rearrangement of the benefits and costs of living.

The benefits of a modernized world are obvious and innumerable. Modernization has liberated us from the provincialism of small towns, opened the world to us, linked us to anyone, virtually anywhere in the world. With our technological achievements we have made our world more comfortable, in some ways safer, certainly more productive. In this century alone we have come close to doubling our life expectancy. We have enlarged our knowledge of the world, secured freedoms once only dreamed of, expanded rights, opened the doors of education, lifted hopes, and mightily multiplied our prosperity.

But in order to enjoy these manifold benefits, we have had to pay some stiff costs. Modernization has also blighted our lives by cutting our connections to place and community, elevating our level of anxiety, and greatly diminishing our satisfaction with our jobs. It has spawned pervasive fear and discontent. It has contributed to the breakdown of the family, robbed our children of their innocence, diluted our ethical values, and blinded us to the reality of God.<sup>10</sup> It has made us shallow. It has made us empty.

By the end of the nineteenth century, some of these concealed costs had already been paid. The sunny, triumphant optimism that had accompanied America's growth began to dim. Writers of the period began to note the signs of anxiety — what William James called “over-tension and jerkiness” — that were rapidly becoming a defining American characteristic. Some blamed it on the weather, but James offered little encouragement to that theory. No, the problem lay inter-

10. For an interesting assessment of costs and benefits of modernization, see Donald B. Kraybill, *The Riddle of Amish Culture* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 250-60.

nally, he said, in the undue sense of urgency and haste that was driving Americans. As an antidote he proposed belief in the “Gospel of Relaxation.”<sup>11</sup> There is doubtless something to be said for this gospel, at least as a mechanism for survival amid the multiple and competing demands that the modern world places upon us, but it is altogether inadequate as an answer to the difficulties that modernization has heaped upon us. And this has become increasingly evident throughout the twentieth century.

Between 1945 and 1973, the average family income in America increased by two-thirds in constant dollars, unemployment dropped from a high in the Depression of one in three to less than one in ten by 1993, and the American Way of Life rapidly became a byword in many parts of the world. But study after study conducted during this period suggested that although newly prosperous Americans had the money and the leisure time to own and do a multitude of things that had been mere dreams for many of their parents, they were increasingly less satisfied with their lives. City streets became less and less hospitable at night, drugs became more and more prevalent, inner cities began to rot, and a whole generation of baby-boomers became painfully alienated both from their parents and their society. As “economic welfare increased in this country during the postwar period,” Angus Campbell has said, “psychological well-being declined.”<sup>12</sup> Those who thought that affluence could be made to compensate for or offset the drain on the human spirit that modernization has exacted were sorely disappointed. While we now bask in relative plenty, the very means of amassing that plenty — the reorganization of our world by the processes of modernization — has diminished our soul.

### **Flight from the Center**

We will miss entirely the importance of the new arrangement of costs and benefits if we view them simply as factors on one side of a scale or the other. So many of both the benefits and the costs are related to

11. See Richard Weiss, *The American Myth of Success: From Horatio Alger to Norman Vincent Peale* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), pp. 167-68. Jackson Lears has explored this nineteenth-century restiveness and disaffection under the rubric of antimodernism in *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

12. Campbell, *The Sense of Wellbeing in America: Recent Patterns and Trends* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), p. 6.

the central issue with which Our Time must now reckon: the loss of its center. The world is now filled with so many competing interests, so many rival values, so many gods, religions, and worldviews, so much activity, so many responsibilities, and so many choices that the older symphony of meaning has given way to the random tumult of the marketplace, to a perpetual assault on all of the senses. At its starkest, it is the transition from Mozart to Guns n' Roses, from Aquinas to infomercials, from Milton to gangsta rap. We may now have everything, but none of it means anything anymore. The most we seem able to do is to take daily inventories of personal needs and then try to match up people, products, and opportunities with them. The irony is that this psychological hedonism, in which self is the arbiter of life, is self-destructive. Not only are we betrayed; we betray *ourselves*. Meanwhile, we also pay the price of destroying all interest in the Transcendent, the sole source of genuine meaning in life. God, the supernatural, moral absolutes — these have become strangers in our modern, secularized world. We are like Yeats's falcon, increasingly oblivious to the voice of the falconer. The center no longer holds. All is flung to the periphery, where its meaning is lost.

The transition from a world in which God and his truth were accorded a central and often public place to one in which they have neither did not happen overnight, of course. It came in fits and starts, amid confusion and sometimes conflict. A longer view indicates that it came in two basic stages, however. In the first, God began to disappear from public view, and the whole noisy human enterprise took his place. In the second, the whole human enterprise was itself displaced and the organizing center of life was assumed by the extraordinarily pervasive and impersonal forces that modernization has unleashed on the world. We have thus become the pawns of the world we have created, moved about by the forces of modernity, our inventions themselves displacing their inventors in an ironic recapitulation of the first dislocation in which God's creatures replaced their Creator and exiled him from his own world. As it turns out, we too have lost our center through this transition. We have become T. S. Eliot's "hollow men," without weight, for whom appearance and image must suffice. Image and appearance assume the functions that character and morality once had. It is now considered better to look good than to be good. The facade is more important than the substance — and, that being the case, the substance has largely disappeared. In the center there is now only an emptiness. This is what accounts for the anxious search for self that is now afoot: only the hungry think about food all the time, not the well

fed, and only those in whom the self is disappearing will define all of life in terms of its recovery, its actualization.<sup>13</sup>

Thus it is that we have come into the modern world. We have left behind a predominantly agricultural and rural life and exchanged it for an urban and mechanized culture. Our world is now arranged around large cities, centers for the production of the goods and services that our capitalism requires, marketplaces of information and technology. Most Enlightenment ideas fit snugly into this new culture — except for the Enlightenment dogma about inevitable progress, which is now sinking in the quicksands of modern self-doubt. We have ended up with much more, but we ourselves have ended up being much less. We have become spiritual vagrants in the modern wasteland, wanderers with no home to return to. The inner terrain of our lives — including the soil in which our Christian faith grows — is constantly shifting. What are the implications of this? Could it be that our faith is as modern as it is Christian because of the psychological soil in which it is rooted? How could it be any otherwise?

These questions won't seem all that threatening to most of us because, in our innocence, we see no alternative to being modern. After all, what alternatives are there? The Amish may look quaint and admirable from a distance, but most of us dismiss as quixotic and doomed their efforts to hold the modern world at arm's length. No, our faith must go with us as we walk the labyrinthine paths of modern life. It must go with us as we traverse the world each night with the help of television cameras that linger tearless over the worn and spent bodies of the starving of Africa, the broken and bleeding bodies of the war-ravaged in Eastern Europe, the abused and drug-ridden bodies of our own streets. It must reside with us on our sofas and our highways as we receive the daily pounding of advertisements, two million of them by the time we turn sixty-five, the bright starlets and muscled men who have sold their ability to seduce to the highest bidder. It must span the yawning chasm between our public and private worlds, between the home in which we struggle to effect some measure of control and the corporation in which we are controlled, between the arena of personal relations and the arena of professional relations, between the circle of friends and family in which we count for something and wilderness of Big Bureaucracy in which we do not. We must ask of it flexibility — enough flexibility to stretch across these and the countless

13. For an extended development of this theme, see my *No Place for Truth*, pp. 137-86.

other worlds of meaning, each with its discrete language and symbols, that make up modern life.

It seldom crosses our minds that what we are asking may be entirely impossible, or, if not impossible, so difficult that only the most sagacious and iron-willed could hope to keep straight the way. That, at least, would be a natural enough conclusion to draw after surveying the convolutions within the Protestant world during the twentieth century. There have been many moments of success, but there has also been a persistent entanglement in the culture that has produced much weakness. This century has demonstrated with a kind of ruthless insistence that the effort to be both modern and Christian produces deep and perhaps insoluble problems. I believe that our efforts to be both modern and Christian, to relate McGuire to Jesus, accounts for much of what has happened in evangelicalism in the years since the end of World War II, and it is to this topic that I now want to turn.