

CHAPTER 1



The Calling

This memoir is intended to be a voyage returning to those moments and grounds which occasioned and made possible my theological vocation, a vocation inseparable from everything that I have known as destiny. Hence it is not the consequence of a free choice in the common sense, but is inescapably my destiny, and while I have chosen it again and again, I look upon such choice simply as an acceptance of that which I have most deeply been given. Never have I known a moment truly free of this vocation, nor have I ever been truly tempted to abandon it; it is as though it is simply an irrevocable given, one simply unchallengeable, for it is deeper than anything else which I can know, even if it ever remains a mystery to me. This is the mystery that I shall attempt to explore in this memoir, and to do so by seeking to unravel its history, or its history in what little I can remember, and just as memory itself is a deep mystery, it is nonetheless inescapable. It is certainly inescapable here.



I was born into a family that at bottom is deeply Southern, although my mother was a southerner only by adoption, and we were West Virginians, and thus border people. My family sense was most determined by my descent from Stonewall Jackson on my father's mother side, for the origins of my grandfather on my father's side were deeply hidden, and my late discovery of this origin came as an ultimate shock. The dominant figure in our family was my father's mother, who was a true Southern matriarch. She had been widowed in early

middle age, after having borne four sons. Her husband was a self-made man, and not only self-made but self-taught, who had become a lawyer through his own power, and a quite successful one, being one of the founders of West Virginia's natural gas company, and a major attorney in Charleston, West Virginia. I lived for most of my childhood and adolescence in my grandmother's large and magnificent house. Servants were my primary source of care and guidance, but I was truly ashamed of this luxurious site, and already in early childhood knew a deep loneliness. I was taught to "walk tall," and to distance myself from everything that is "common," a role imposing its own solitude, and I have known solitude throughout my life.

Above all I was immersed in images of Stonewall, again and again given the sense that his destiny was now my own, and while I knew little then of Stonewall's ultimate Calvinism, I have come to recognize that my ever fuller commitment to predestination is a consequence of my Jackson heritage. Jackson himself can be understood as having been truly mad, and I have often agonized that insanity is inherent in my family. One uncle murdered his son, another committed suicide, and my father was a deep alcoholic throughout his adult life. Nor was madness alien to our matriarch, who feigned infirmity throughout the time that I knew her, and who ruthlessly dominated her family. None were able truly to rebel against her. This was simply my given world as a child, a world in which the "normal" could only be known as abnormal. Later I could respond to Melville's Captain Ahab as the very soul of America, and an embodiment of its destiny as well. However, I did grow up in a house in which books were sacred, a house dominated by a very large and marvelous library. Reading has always been my primary vocation and avocation, and my father was here my major guide, for he had fully intended to be a professor of literature until his mother refused this path. Indeed, his father had been a genuine lover of books, who had only once violated them—when he hurled Nietzsche's *The Antichrist* into the fireplace (a premonition of the destiny of his grandson?).

I never knew this patriarch, called Tizer by his friends, and we were forbidden to inquire into his origins, which in a Southern context is inexplicable. These origins were deeply Southern, for as I eventually discovered, the Altizer clan of southwestern Virginia (and all Altizers descend from it), was dominated by a terror of miscegena-

tion, hence they were forbidden to marry outside the clan, and when I visited their graveyard, in a vast and beautiful and abandoned area now said to be cursed, I discovered that Altizer is the only name among its tombstones. Madness? Yes, but not an uncommon one in the South, and if all deep history is forbidden, surely ours was, except for the commanding figure of Stonewall Jackson, who vicariously gave me my name, Thomas Jonathan Jackson.

At the height of the death of God controversy, while I was on a speaking tour of Virginia colleges, I formally addressed the Virginia Military Institute, which continues to regard Stonewall as its true founder. My address was given at a solemn occasion in the institute's chapel, one dominated by an icon of Stonewall. I had been introduced by the Commandant of VMI as the first descendant of Stonewall to speak here, and this occurred only after I had been escorted by VMI's chaplain to the grave of Stonewall, where I had laid myself above his bones and prayed for his spirit to inspire me. Now before this solemn assembly, all in full dress uniform, and accompanied by their military band, I proclaimed the death of God in the name of Stonewall. Not a sound could then be heard, and the program ended as though nothing untoward had occurred. It was followed by a party lasting almost until dawn, and I sensed that this was, indeed, a genuine celebration of Stonewall. For it has been my experience that the death of God resonates far more deeply in the South than elsewhere in the country, perhaps because the South has been so obsessed with God, and unlike New England where Puritanism is little more than a distant memory, an American Calvinism continues to reign in the South, or did throughout my experience of it, and if this is manifest in a uniquely Southern literature, it is no less manifest in a genuinely Southern theology. Here, once again, I accepted my destiny.

Although my home was little more than nominally Christian, I was obsessed with Christianity throughout my youth, assembling my own little chapel where I fervently prayed. I had no real religious guidance at all, being forced thereby to find my own way. This has continued throughout my life, except insofar as I came under the influence of religious masters—primarily through reading—and when I did attempt both a monastic and a ministerial vocation, I simply failed. While a theological student, I was chaplain or acting vicar of an interracial Episcopal mission in south Chicago, St. Mark's Church, at that

time the only such mission in the Episcopal Diocese of Chicago. We were virtually ignored by all church authorities, except for my guiding pastor, Robert Reister, but this was an exciting experience for me, both in its pastoral and in its preaching responsibilities, and I was persuaded that I had a genuine vocation for the ministry. But the time came for me to be given a psychiatric examination as a prerequisite for my candidacy for the priesthood of the Episcopal Church. I unexpectedly and totally failed. This examination had been conducted at the Northwestern Medical School, given by a professor of psychiatry who had published a huge tome on psychological testing, which I was informed by his associates was the most authoritative in its field. A variety of tests and interviews had resulted in the judgment that I was truly mentally ill, or so I was informed by the dean of the Seabury-Western Seminary where I was expected to spend a final year of theological study in preparation for ordination, and I was seriously advised that I could expect to be in a psychiatric institution within a year. At last I received scientific confirmation of my madness, and while this came as a terrible shock, my beloved professor, Joachim Wach, insisted that it was an act of both providence and grace, for if I had no true vocation for the ministry, I did have one for theology, and that could most effectively be conducted outside the church.

Shortly before this examination, I was in a turbulent condition. While crossing the Midway I would experience violent tremors in the ground, and I was visited by a deep depression, one that had occurred again and again throughout my life, but now with particular intensity. During this period I had perhaps the most ultimate experience of my life, and one that I believe profoundly affected my vocation as a theologian, and even my theological work itself. This occurred late at night, while I was in my room. I suddenly awoke and became truly possessed, and experienced an epiphany of Satan which I have never been able fully to deny, an experience in which I could actually feel Satan consuming me, absorbing me into his very being, as though this was the deepest possible initiation and bonding, and the deepest and yet most horrible union. Few who read me know of this experience, but it is not accidental that I am perhaps the only theologian who now writes of Satan, and can jokingly refer to myself as the world's leading Satanologist; indeed, Satan and Christ soon became my primary theo-

logical motifs, and my deepest theological goal eventually became one of discovering a *coincidentia oppositorum* between them.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that failing the examination was a profoundly traumatic experience for me. I certainly was very close to a genuine perishing, and the one who most effectively brought hope and succor to me in that crisis was Wilber Katz, former dean of the University of Chicago Law School, who as a deeply committed Episcopalian had been my ally and primary guide at St. Mark's. Wilber offered to pay for my psychoanalysis, and when I refused this, he himself gave me genuine and extended therapy. I continue to believe that he was a pastor in the truest sense. While I was a student at the University of Chicago (1947–1954), I experienced solitude and genuine friendship simultaneously, and this has largely been true throughout my life. As a theological student I was then perhaps unique, rebelling against the Chicago liberal theological tradition, being forced to teach myself Kierkegaard and Barth, and in desperation moving from the theological field to the history of religions, where I discovered a genuine community, which we always referred to as the Sangha. During this period the University of Chicago had eliminated the credit system, and advancement was solely by way of examination. While this brought with it a genuine freedom for the student, it had disastrous effects if one attempted to transfer to another institution. In my case it would have meant the loss of three years of study, which I simply could not afford. While I never became a genuine historian of religions, I did employ the history of religions as a way into a new form of theology. This was fully accepted by Wach and the Sangha, but not, I fear, by the theological faculty. Indeed, when I was recommended for a fellowship in the history of religions, this was refused by the governing faculty committee on the grounds that I was disloyal to the Divinity School (yes, this was the McCarthy era), and even when I was the first to complete the history of religions doctoral exam with distinction, this was never recorded in my university record. It is as though I was invisible as a Divinity School student, but I have come to pride myself on being their most disloyal alumnus, even if as a radical theologian I am a rebirth of the early Chicago theological tradition, a tradition always hidden from us. The most distinguished Chicago theologian is Henry Nelson Wieman, and he did have an impact in my

day, but not as a radical theologian, which he certainly was, but rather as a process or dipolar theologian, even if this is alien to Wieman's real work. Only very gradually was I able to discover the radical religious and theological tradition of America. American historians, with the exception of Perry Miller, have done an excellent job in disguising this, but this is a tradition with which I have come to identify, even if its deepest American ground is alien to me, a ground resurrected in the revolutionary work of D. G. Leahy.

My deepest theological conflict in my Chicago days was between my Protestant and my Catholic poles, one originally given me by the Episcopal Church, and soon I became ravaged by what Anglicans call "Roman fever." I attended or attempted to attend mass daily, was instructed by the university Catholic chaplain, read voluminously in Catholic literature—my primary Catholic master being John Henry Newman—and was deeply frustrated by the impossibility then of studying Catholicism at the University of Chicago. Yet one of my professors, Coert Rylaarsdam, spent long sessions with me, guiding me into a Catholic-Protestant union or synthesis, to which he was committed, even urging me to become a Jesuit so that I could prosecute this vocation, but I soon realized in these days prior to the Second Vatican Council that it was impossible to be a Catholic theologian in America, and Walter Ong informed me that the Society of Jesus here deterred its most brilliant members from becoming theologians because genuinely creative theological work was forbidden. Of course, it was soon forbidden in Protestantism just as it was becoming possible in Catholicism, and if there is now no real Catholic-Protestant theological dialogue, this is because we are now largely bereft of Protestant theologians, for as Tillich foresaw, Protestantism can survive only as the Protestant principle, a principle even now being incorporated within Catholicism.

This was the conflict that was the driving force in my master's thesis, "Nature and Grace in the Theology of Augustine," a thesis initiated by my persuasion that the deepest division or dichotomy between Catholicism and Protestantism derives from their profoundly opposing conceptions of nature and grace, and just as Augustine is the deepest theological influence upon both Catholicism and Protestantism, it is at this very point that his influence is most dichotomous. My thesis was that the primal relationship between nature and grace is the true center

of Augustine's theology, one which the Catholic understands as a polar relationship and the Protestant understands as a dichotomous relationship. Both Protestantism and Catholicism are genuinely Augustinian at this crucial point, for Augustine, as witness his Neoplatonic and his Pauline poles, was truly ambivalent or paradoxical in his thinking here. Yet if this ambivalence could be resolved, then here lies a way to a genuine coinherence if not union between Catholicism and Protestantism. Yet I also looked upon Augustine as the theological source of modernity itself, for I was already, even if only unconsciously, embarked upon my project of correlating Augustine and Nietzsche. I was immersed in Nietzsche while writing this thesis, and just as my later work explores the deeply Augustinian ground of Nietzsche's thinking, my earliest theological work explored Augustine within a Nietzschean perspective. My thesis was deeply affected by my conviction that it was Augustine who philosophically and theologically discovered the subject or the center of consciousness, and it was Nietzsche who first fully or decisively discovered the dissolution of that subject, and if only here philosophical and theological thinking are truly united.

The truth is that I was unable to resolve or even truly conclude my master's thesis. Perhaps this is simply impossible, but that very blockage was a deep turning point for me, and I became convinced that I simply could not work within our existing theological traditions. Hence I had a real theological reason for entering the study of the history of religions, and I became persuaded that a new theological ground could be discovered by way of a voyage to the East. While this is seemingly a commonplace in full modernity, no theologian had chosen this path, and even today we are virtually bereft of genuine East-West theologies; or, insofar as they exist, they have come from the East and not the West, and at no other point is there a greater rift between the rhetoric of our theological discourse and its actual accomplishments. Of course, I was a rank amateur in the history of religions—I never learned the languages that I should have, though Wach tolerated this because he knew who I am—but I did make a serious attempt to understand Mahayana Buddhist philosophy, and while this was wholly for a theological purpose, I continue to believe that this is a genuine route into a truly new theology.

I did not meet Mircea Eliade until after I had left Chicago, but our initial encounter was a deep one for me. I shall never forget how he

described to me what he intended to be his magnum opus, a comprehensive work ranging through the deepest expressions of both literature and religion, and seeking to demonstrate in their highest and purest expressions a full and pure *coincidentia oppositorum* of the sacred and profane. No one whom I have known has influenced me more deeply than Eliade; certainly I owe him an incalculable debt, but perhaps his deepest gift was his very support: No one else has encouraged me more deeply, or opened more vistas to be discovered, vistas inseparable from a truly new theology; Eliade knew the deep necessity of such a theology, and knew it as has no theologian. Indeed, Eliade has a unique understanding of the radical profane, one he could realize by way of his very knowledge of the pure or radical sacred, for Eliade's is a dialectical understanding, and one most deeply grounded in an ultimate *coincidentia oppositorum*. Moreover, Eliade envisions a primordial eclipse or death of God, one occurring by way of the eclipse of the primordial sky god and the consequent advent of what we know as religion, which in this perspective is itself the consequence of a primordial fall. So, too, Eliade, as an Eastern Christian, could know a uniquely modern death of God as having its origin in the very advent of Western Christianity, but this advent itself is a repetition of the primordial death of God, and an advent that will finally culminate in a *coincidentia oppositorum* between the sacred and the profane.

Clearly such a *coincidentia oppositorum* is a deep ground of all my work, so if only at this point I am a genuine Eliadean, and initially my real theological voyage was made possible by an opening to the truly sacred ground of the radical profane. Hence I was ever more fully drawn into Nietzsche, the purest thinker of the radical profane, and this most decisively occurred while I was teaching at Wabash College. Moreover, in June of 1955, while reading Erich Heller's essay on Nietzsche and Rilke for the seventh time in a library at the University of Chicago, I had what I have ever since regarded as a genuine religious conversion, and this was a conversion to the death of God. For then I truly experienced the death of God, and experienced it as a conversion, and thus as the act and grace of God himself. Never can such an experience be forgotten, and while it truly paralleled my earlier experience of the epiphany of Satan, this time I experienced a pure grace, as though it were the very reversal of my experience of Satan.

But now I knew that “Satan” is dead, and has died for me. The identification of God and Satan is Blake’s most revolutionary vision, but at that time I had only begun an exploration of Blake, and had no explicit awareness of any such identification, so that I could not then name that God who is dead as Satan. But I could know God as the God who is truly dead, and at bottom I knew that this was a genuine theological understanding of God, and one demanding a transformation of theology itself. Then I was impelled to begin the process of reversing my deepest theological roots, and this initially occurred by way of a reversal of that Barthianism which I had so deeply absorbed. This took place over many months when I returned to Indiana, spending most of my evenings intensively thinking about Barth while drinking bourbon and listening to the original recording of *The Threepenny Opera*. Somehow I was purged, or think that I was, for there are those who continue to identify me as a Barthian, and it is true that Barth is the only modern theologian whom I profoundly respect.

All of this lies beneath the writing of my first book, *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology*, yet this was only the first step in my new theological voyage, and while the book truly embarrasses me now, I am most distressed that its all too faulty execution hides and obscures its real intention, and to this day it is the only book on this extraordinarily important subject. It was written while I was teaching at Emory University in Atlanta, where I came under the impact of Walter Strauss, Gregor Sebba, and John Cobb, and also under the impact of the New Testament scholars William Beardslee, James Robinson, Robert Funk, Norman Perrin, and Hendrik Boers, all of whom became progressively radical while at Emory. It was as though Emory was a truly radical center, or surely it was so theologically. Such an environment would be impossible to imagine today, but that was a time of breakthrough theologically, and above all so in America, that new America which at that very time was becoming the dominant power in the world. If America was now the new Rome, we sensed that a deep destiny had been thrust upon us. Most concretely, theology had to be liberated from its deeply European theological ground, and this surely occurred in a uniquely American Bultmannianism, one dissolving if not reversing the neo-orthodox ground of modern European theology. Emory was the center of this radical Bultmannianism, for at this time it was New Testament scholars who were our most radical

theologians, and while certainly the work of Bultmann himself and his German followers was a fundamental ground of this movement, it was in America that this radical hermeneutics became most open and decisive, and it had a profound impact upon me. Of course, modern biblical scholarship has always been an ultimate threat to theology, ever more fully unearthing a vast distance between theological language and its biblical ground, but not until the Second World War, when Bultmannian demythologizing was born, did this distance become fully manifest. Bultmann and his European followers could not break from a neo-orthodox theological ground, this first occurred in America, and ironically most fully occurred at the very center of the Bible Belt.

Demythologizing was most deeply directed at an original Christian apocalypticism, one that continues to this very day; it is a historical recognition of that apocalypticism which impels demythologizing, one which is perhaps deepest in our new apocalyptic world. Then theological upheaval inevitably occurs, one from which my work is inseparable, but in the 1960s this seemed to be occurring universally, and apparently occurring in a new and universal apocalypticism. This was a time when American radicals could identify America itself as Satanic, Satanic in its imperialism, its capitalism, its racism, its demonic war in Vietnam; yet America was nevertheless vibrantly alive, and most alive in its very radicalism, which then pervaded not only all of the arts, but theology itself, which helped to drive older radical theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich to a new conservatism. I could rejoice when Tillich later declared to me that the real Tillich is the radical Tillich, but at that time the theological battle was most openly and perhaps most deeply waged in the Catholic world; Catholic conservatives could identify both Teilhard and Rahner as Satanic, but in the sixties Catholic and Protestant radicals were united. We still lack a study of theological radicalism in the sixties. Few are aware of how pervasive it was, and if I had to cite a book which most purely embodies it, that book could only be Norman O. Brown's *Love's Body*.

Upon the completion of *Oriental Mysticism and Biblical Eschatology*, I recognized that I had to return to Eliade, and to do so by writing an Eliadean theological book, a book whose original title was "The Dialectic of the Sacred," ultimately published as *Mircea Eliade and the*

Dialectic of the Sacred. It was intended to lay the groundwork for a theological *coincidentia oppositorum*. This book, too, was under the impact of my Emory friends and associates, and most so in its literary interpretations; literature and theology was then a promising new field, and while it has come to little in the theological world, it is richly present in literary studies, as I fully discovered when I later embarked upon a study of the Christian epic. Yet for the first time Nietzsche was the very center of my theological thinking, and what is most radical in this book is its identification of Nietzsche's vision of Eternal Recurrence as a genuine renewal and resurrection of a uniquely biblical Kingdom of God. It is just thereby a *coincidentia oppositorum* of the radical sacred and the radical profane, thereby renewing in a radically profane world that Kingdom of God which Jesus enacted and proclaimed, and most clearly so in that total and apocalyptic Yes which is here enacted. This is the book which most openly establishes the foundations of my theological work, and ever since I have been persuaded that Nietzsche is our purest uniquely modern theologian, and even our purest theologian since Augustine himself.

Despite the fact that I had published two books and many articles, I still had not become a genuine writer. This, I believe, occurred with the writing of my third book, *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake*. I wrote it while on sabbatical in Chicago, where I established a deep relationship with Eliade, which continued until his death. I participated in the Tillich-Eliade seminar on theology and the history of religions, and was able to conduct a genuine theological dialogue with Tillich himself. This was the time of a comprehensive theological breakthrough for me. I was working upon the most radical of all Christian visionaries, discovering an inspiration which I had never known before, attempting to identify myself with Blake, and finding that a total reversal of all Christian imagery and symbolism is the very way to its resurrection for us, a resurrection which has already occurred, and is even now our most ultimate ground. It is not insignificant that theology has so resisted our profoundest visionaries. All of them have been truly and comprehensively heterodox, only here can we discover the deepest heresy, and discover it in the very depth of such vision. Certainly there is every reason for condemning Blake, but if he is the true inaugurator of a uniquely modern imaginative world, he is just thereby the inaugurator of a truly

new religious or sacred world, and a new world or new apocalypse that is simultaneously Christian and universal at once.

At first I could find no publisher for my Blake manuscript, and in returning to Emory I was caught up in a new theological fervor which was beginning to grip the country. This occasioned my writing of *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, which immediately became a theological scandal, perhaps simply because of its title, for there is little evidence that more than a few have actually read the book. And so far as I know, for the first time a book was published with a deeply negative criticism included on its very jacket. Yet I admired its publisher, the Westminster Press, which was then a major theological publisher, and it surely took courage for them to publish this book. A storm had broken out even before it was published, initiated by the *New York Times* and *Time* magazine. Their articles on the new death of God theology were remarkably responsible: a *Time* editor called me to check with me exactly what they said about my theology, and despite its necessary brevity I could only concur. The truth is that journalists read the new theology more responsibly than did many, if not most, theologians, and for two years radical theology was at the forefront of the mass media; it was as though the country itself was possessed by a theological fever, and a radical theological fever, one in which the most religious nation in the industrial world had suddenly discovered its own deep atheism, and while it was accidental that this should focus upon a few theologians, it is not accidental that such a discovery occurred, or that it has subsequently passed into a mass amnesia.

Throughout this period my deepest comrade was William Hamilton. We had corresponded for many years, but only fully came to know each other when he invited me to visit his theological seminary, Colgate-Rochester in New York, where he was under deep attack. We then formed an alliance, which subsequently resulted in the publication of several of our articles under the title *Radical Theology and the Death of God*. While we are very different theologically, we also share many common motifs, and it was Bill who most effectively goaded me in the direction of a fully kenotic or self-emptying theology; but Bill is a genuine pastor, as I am not, and also one who has mastered more than any other theologian the new world of the mass media, having created and conducted a national CBS weekly television series on the death of God, and doubtless this was a major factor evoking the theo-

logical scandal which occurred soon after this. The scandal revolved around the public furor caused by theologians embracing the death of God and doing so in the name of faith itself. Frankly, both Bill and I are preachers, but I am a Southern preacher, as he is not; we often appeared together publicly, each speaking as preachers, and each evoking both positive and deeply negative responses. I sensed that I could be hated much more than Bill, indeed hated more purely than any other theologian, but Bill could often win us acceptance, and he surely could write for the public as I could not. Yet I was much more deeply supported by friends and colleagues than was Bill, as witness the response of our respective institutions: Bill was no longer allowed to teach theology, while Emory fully supported me in this time of crisis, and did so under intense public and private fire. Legally, Emory is a Methodist institution, and the Southern Board of Methodist Bishops publicly demanded my immediate dismissal, just as a great many alumni and supporters of Emory publicly declared that they would cease all support of their university if I were not fired forthwith.

However, it is also true that when the president of Emory, Sanford Atwood, refused to dismiss me, and this was reported on the front page of *The New York Times*, the Ford Foundation immediately sent some of their executives to Emory to assist it, whereas previously Emory had almost always failed in its Ford Foundation applications. Administrative calculations later reached the judgment that Emory had lost and gained about an equal amount because of the scandal; still later their alumni magazine published a long article on the affair which advanced the thesis that the scandal had made Emory into a national institution. Be that as it may, theology then enjoyed national and even world attention which is inconceivable today. Books and innumerable articles appeared about American radical theology throughout the world, dozens if not hundreds of theses and dissertations were written about the death of God theology, symposiums on it seemed to be occurring everywhere, and our books were translated into many languages.