

AN EXPLORATION OF THE MODERN FAITH CONDITION

by

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(Under the Direction of William Power)

ABSTRACT

An examination of faith influenced by the thought of H. Richard Niebuhr in which faith is understood to be a universal aspect of existence that involves the interrelation of three characteristics: belief, trust and loyalty. Also included is a description of Niebuhr's understanding of radical monotheism as the ideal form of faith. An exploration of faith's status in our modern society supports the claim that increased individualism and consumerism impede the healthy faith relationships needed to embody radical monotheism. Niebuhr's understanding of faith and the consequences of fluid modernity are applied to the novel, *Life After God*, by Douglas Coupland. This particular novel provides an excellent example of one character's search for a meaningful existence and a healthy faith despite the pressures of modernity.

INDEX WORDS: H. Richard Niebuhr, Faith, Modernity, Individualism, Consumerism, Douglas Coupland, Radical Monotheism, *Life After God*

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INTRODUCTION

Faith is a complicated topic. The term gets tossed around by people with many different agendas, but are these groups and individuals really talking about the same concept? I would wager that they most likely are not. Many might claim faith is something "religious people" have -- as if faith is something one does or does not possess. No doubt there is some dimension of faith that has a religious implication, but there is also no doubt that people use this term in a variety of ways that have nothing to do with religion. We use the term to mean "I have faith *that*" which suggests the holding of a particular proposition to be the case despite sufficient evidence to support that claim. We also use the phrase "I have faith *in*" which implies that we have confidence in that particular person or value to live up to our expectations. A third way in which we use the term faith is in the sense that one is "faithful *to*" someone or something. This usage of faith implies that we live in such a way that our actions are outward expressions of our commitment to our objects of faith.

While there technically may be other definitions of the word faith, these three usages make up the three aspects of faith

that the theologian H. Richard Niebuhr explores in many of his writings, including the books, *Faith on Earth* (1989) and *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*(1960). Niebuhr's understanding of faith is tri-fold. It includes belief ("faith that"), trust ("faith in") and loyalty ("being faithful to"). Understood in this way, faith is not a topic reserved exclusively for religious discussions. Faith is a complex relationship of those three aspects that encompasses every facet of our lives. We live in faith and by faith every day whether we affiliate ourselves with a particular religion or philosophy at all. As Niebuhr notes, "we are forever being asked and asking: Do you believe me? Do you trust me? Are you trustworthy and believable? Are you faithful to me and to our common cause" (*Faith on Earth* 22)?

These realizations -- that faith is universal and a pervasive aspect of our lives -- immediately grabbed my attention and made me want to explore the topic further. Armed with this understanding of faith, one question that begs to be asked is: what does it say about our faith when people have a constant distrustful attitude or an inability to foster real, sustained commitments in their lives? Of course distrust and disloyalty are nothing new, but it seems to me that modern existence is particularly susceptible to them. We can look at certain aspects of our culture and see evidence of this decline

-- for example, the increase in divorce rates or the fact that most people can expect to hold many different jobs (sometimes in totally different careers) during their lifetimes.

When I pondered the current condition of faith in our society, my mind directly jumped to Douglas Coupland's novel, *Life After God*, which I read for the first time during my senior year of undergraduate study in a class that focused on differences in religious expression between the Baby Boomers and Generation X. I have always related to the narrator of this novel as he shares his innermost fears and feelings about his personal search for a genuine existence in a consumer culture that encourages citizens to live shallow, self-indulgent lives. With a background of Niebuhr's understanding of faith, I began to think of this novel in a new light; I realized that the narrator's struggle is really one of faith -- especially with regard to the momentous level of distrust that colors all of his thoughts and interactions.

While Coupland is probably best known for coining the phrase "Generation X," I will not be discussing that particular category in this paper. First, I am not convinced this is even a relevant category anymore because most of the phenomenons that separated GenX from the previous generations are also true of the generation following X, so the uniqueness of this age group is questionable. Second, I want to be more general in my

examination of the modern faith condition; I do not want to restrict my discussion to only one particular generation. The modern search for a meaningful existence is applicable to all ages, although the type of struggles discussed in this paper will relate exclusively to our modern consumer-driven culture as described in detail by the social commentator Zygmunt Bauman in his book, *Liquid Modernity*, and by sociologist Robert Bellah.

I have three main objectives in regards to this work which correspond to the three chapters. The first objective is to explore in detail the understanding of faith proposed by H. Richard Niebuhr -- particularly its universality and the three aspects of belief, trust and loyalty. In order to show what makes Niebuhr's understanding unique, I will compare it the philosophical view of William Lad Sessions. I will also describe Niebuhr's categories of faith as being polytheism, henotheism and radical monotheism. In the course of this discussion I will also describe my own understanding of what I call "default faith."

The second goal I wish to achieve is an understanding of what constitutes a healthy faith, focusing particularly on Niebuhr's view of radical monotheism and whether this type of faith is possible in our society today. I will argue that it is unlikely given the extreme level of individualism and the consumer mentality that pervade our society because these

specific features of our culture do not lend themselves to healthy faith relationships. Also within this discussion, I will explain Bellah's model for a healthier society which I think could at least allow the possibility for radical monotheism.

My third goal is to take the discussion from the first two chapters and apply them to Coupland's novel, *Life After God*, in an attempt to better understand the way broken faith has affected a particular individual. The narrator of the novel definitely shows signs of being worn out from the sheer exhaustion of having to find meaning in life when there are few healthy social bonds to rely on for support -- a situation many people can relate to, I am sure.

I think Niebuhr's works on faith are highly relevant in our society today despite its level of brokenness. The increased levels of depression and anxiety that burden many in our country are a symptom of pervasively defective faith bonds. I do not -- nor do I think I could even begin to -- present any specific plan of action to change this state of affairs, but I want to keep the discussion alive regarding the importance of trust and loyalty because it is by trying to maintain healthy faith relationships in all aspects of our lives that we can begin to approach a life of radical monotheism.

CHAPTER 1

UNDERSTANDING OF FAITH EXPLORED

In this first chapter, my primary goal is to come to a firm understanding of the concept of faith utilizing the thought of H. Richard Niebuhr to guide my discussion. I will describe how Niebuhr understands faith to be a universal experience not limited to the realm of religious discourse. I will then delve deeply into Niebuhr's definition of faith as *fides*, *fiducia* and *fidelitas* - belief, trust and loyalty. Finally, I will explore different types of faith, focusing on Niebuhr's categories of polytheism, henotheism and radical monotheism. To this I will add my own category which I call "default faith." I will compare and contrast these types with the six "models" of faith laid out by William Lad Sessions in his book, *The Concept of Faith*.

Faith as Universal Experience

My first endeavor is to understand whether faith is a separable aspect of human experience. Is faith confined exclusively to the realm of religion or is it something more universal? Is it something that only humans experience, or do

other creatures experience it as well? Is faith something one can distinguish from other types of experiences or is it, as Niebuhr and I myself assert, inherent in almost every part of human life? If the latter is true, how does one even know where to begin?

First of all, is faith confined to the realm of religion or, put differently, are questions of faith necessarily religious questions? If asked, many people would likely say they understand faith to be exclusively a religious matter. This may be due to the fact that the term "faith" is often taken to mean religious "faiths" -- those unique sets of practices and beliefs typically called by their particular names like "Christianity," "Judaism" or "Hinduism," for example.

Although faith is a common topic in religious dialogue, there is an aspect of faith that Niebuhr claims is universal to all humans and possibly even animals. This notion is called "basic faith" or sometimes "animal faith." Niebuhr claims, "human beings discover that without it they cannot live, that it is given with life itself" ("Life is Worth Living" 3). All living creatures have faith in the existence of an external world. Even if one denies this theoretically, there is no way to deny it practically. We must interact with objects and substances outside of ourselves. The existence of an external world is also one of David Ray Griffin's "hard-core commonsense

notions" (29). Griffin holds certain beliefs of this sort to be true, but the existence of a real, external world is one of the most fundamental (33). It is a truth that all creatures live by -- not just humans. As George Santayana claims:

belief in substance...is inevitable. The hungry dog must believe that the bone before him is a substance, not an essence; and when he is snapping at it or gnawing it, that belief rises into conviction, and he would be a very dishonest dog if, at that moment, he denied it (233).

This type of belief and trust in an external world is evidence of basic faith. In animals, this faith manifests itself through trust in their environment's ability to provide for their needs. Animals survive by this trust simply by existing according to their particular natures. Even if, unfortunately, the resources are not available, they will continue to search for a means of survival. They may even attempt to adapt to their surroundings in times of crisis.

Moving beyond this basic belief in an external world and its ability to provide for our survival, Niebuhr further claims that humans have a sense of trust in life's meaning -- not just in its reality; we believe there is some significance to life. Niebuhr claims it is impossible to deny all significance because even the justification for formulating that denial is that it would be taken as a significant statement. In other words, "the faith that life is worth living...lies deeper than any reason. Reason cannot question it because reason works on the basis of

its assumption" (Niebuhr, "Life is Worth Living" 4). Even those who commit suicide are not examples of people who lived without some sense of meaning. People who commit suicide view the *act* as significant even if they think their own life had no value or purpose. This basic underlying notion that life at least ought to have meaning entails a type of basic faith, and it is a universal human experience.

Faith as Belief, Trust and Loyalty

While there can be no doubt that the term faith has its religious implications, we now understand that basic faith is at least one form of faith that bears no explicit religious connotation. There are, however, other forms that do not necessarily rely on a religious context. By this I mean that there are conceptions of faith that do not imply belief in or the existence of a supernatural/transcendent being or realm outside of the natural world. Even atheists and people who do not consider themselves to be "religious" use faith in a variety of ways. For instance, the term can be used to mean "having faith that," "having faith in" or "being faithful to." These three meanings coincide with Niebuhr's three aspects of faith: belief, trust and loyalty. Although this understanding of faith can be used in discussions about religious faith, one can use them in day-to-day secular life as well. A husband can be

faithful to his wife; a student can believe in his teacher as a source of accurate knowledge, and a citizen can believe her nation's judicial system is fair and impartial. All these situations involve faith of some sort. Wherever there is interaction of any kind, faith is present. That faith -- understood as belief, trust and loyalty -- is present in these relationships leads us to conclude that it is not a topic confined only to the religious realm. It also is not a separate type of experience about which one can say, "that event was a faith experience, but that one was not." Even in our moments of solitude, we engage in activities that required interaction at some point because this is how we learn and are socialized. It is how we come to be aware of and understand ourselves.

If almost every one of our experiences entails faith, how do we even begin to detail faith's characteristics? I think Niebuhr's definition of faith as belief, trust and loyalty both captures the complexity of the issue while simplifying it in a way that allows for meaningful discussion. Even though I have made it clear that faith is not simply a religious phenomenon, I occasionally will explore the religious and theological implications of our everyday faith experiences. Although my primary objective in this first chapter is to understand faith as a universal and social experience, I may also hint at theological or moral ramifications of some aspects of faith. In

my second chapter, however, I will explore these issues to a greater extent.

One might think Niebuhr's definition of faith as the interweaving of belief, trust and loyalty seems too simple, but this simplicity is quite deceptive. In preparation for this topic, I would often begin to formulate one point, but then I would realize I needed to backtrack and explain another point first. However, that second point would require an explanation of something that needed the first point as background. In other words -- faith is complex and dynamic. It is not something one logically understands by starting with point A and moving to B then to C, thus concluding D. We can distinguish aspects of faith and understand each one as unique, but each aspect is inseparably tied to the others and requires an understanding of the whole in order to fully understand each unique role. In *Faith on Earth*, Niebuhr compares the complexity of faith to that of an organism, so "what we are doing is more like the work of an anatomist who seeks to dissect out of the body a complex nervous system than like the work of a logician who proceeds from *infima species* to *summum genu*" (45). Faith, in other words, can be understood as a distinct aspect of experience, but it influences and is influenced in turn by other facets of life as well. It cannot be understood in isolation.

One reason faith cannot be logically deduced, Niebuhr asserts, is because it is circular in nature (*Faith on Earth* 17-22). We move from one object to another in order to explain the others. Thus we start with one object of faith, but to explain our basis for that faith, we assert our faith in another object or belief. Niebuhr uses the example of the various objects of faith in the Christian tradition. A Christian might say their faith is in Jesus, but what they know of Jesus comes from the Bible. What they know of the Bible, however, has often been passed down through the Church or through their denomination's tradition, but then leaders or founders of these traditions claimed to be inspired by God, but again, the Christian's understanding of God often is interpreted via scripture and a particular understanding of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Even what one might consider a direct experience of God is colored by his or her tradition's beliefs -- even if these beliefs are ultimately rejected.

The complex and dynamic nature of faith indicates that faith is necessarily a social phenomenon; this quality becomes more apparent when we discuss faith as belief, trust and loyalty. Faith exists wherever there is interaction between subject and object. Even upon a first meeting between two persons -- before each knows anything about the other -- each person has particular expectations regarding behavior, and each has learned

a particular way of speaking and interacting that is brought to that first moment. Just greeting someone is engaging them in a faith relationship because one acknowledges another and is advancing oneself as an object with which to interact. With this knowledge of faith as social in nature, we begin to examine further the three aspects of faith that H. Richard Niebuhr laid before us. The first aspect, belief, seems simple enough. One must be able to make some claim about your object in order to have faith in it and to be faithful to it, but belief itself is not so cut and dried because belief is social in nature. We gain our knowledge through social interactions -- our language and our methods of reasoning are all learned. Subjects do not exist apart from objects, but they both exist among and in relation to many other subjects and objects. Niebuhr warns against trying to stand outside of the subject/object relationship because neither can exist without the other. As Niebuhr puts it:

No data are given to us without a sensing, no ideas without a conceiving, no values without a desiring, no world without a knowing, no selves and no gods without a believing. On the other hand none of these activities is present in the self without the objects toward which they are directed (*Faith on Earth* 27).

Thus, there is no point in seeking to understand how an object exists in and of itself, because it does not. It exists only in relation, as do we ourselves as subjects. Much of what we know

and believe regarding the various objects we encounter entails trust of some sort. A great deal of our knowledge has been gained by trusting others. We rely on scientists or other "experts" who have firsthand experience that justifies their extension of this knowledge to others. If we believed only in what we ourselves saw or experienced, we would have to deny many propositions that we would never normally think to question -- that the earth is round, for example, or that atoms exist. These things we "believe" rather than "know." Niebuhr makes a point to distinguish the two. He makes reference to A.E. Taylor's work, "Knowing and Believing," when he explains:

True knowing, whether in perception or by "the mind's eye" is "direct and immediate apprehension of truth." Belief, then...is an indirect relation to the object about which we hold something to be true (*Faith on Earth* 32).

Both believing and knowing involve some degree of trust because we would not be able to filter even our own experiences without trusting those who helped us develop into a thinking, reasoning adult. What Niebuhr suggests further is that believing implies a trust in some type of authority other than our own. Niebuhr clarifies that just because one holds a certain belief based on trust in the authority of another does not mean the belief is necessarily invalid or inferior to knowledge. The key is finding the proper mean between being overly skeptical and overly gullible, and this involves using reason to inform and

criticize beliefs. Therefore, reason is not absent where belief is concerned, but it is also important not to be overly skeptical because without trust in the knowledge of others, we would have a very limited knowledge of only our own particular, personal experience.

A perfect example of valid belief based on the authority of others is given by Douglas Coupland, whose fiction I will discuss in the final chapter. In his book, *Life After God*, a character describes how a group of blind people once asked her to take their photograph. Her friend remarked on the irony of the situation, and she responds, "'Exactly. But the strange thing was, they still believed in sight. In pictures. I'm thinking that's not such a bad attitude'" (338). Niebuhr would agree. That group of blind people had *reasonable* trust in the authority of those who claim to experience sight.

There is one more distinction to be made regarding belief before moving on; Niebuhr points to the existence of two types of belief. The first type includes beliefs people can hold without changing any aspect of their lives; the other type are the beliefs people hold that inspire response. The first type of belief corresponds to what Niebuhr calls "dead faith" while the latter he considers "living faith." He writes:

It seems to be generally agreed that there is such a thing as assent to propositions and that this is a part of faith; but it is also agreed that such belief does not by itself

modify conduct, while there is a faith that radically affects attitudes and behavior (*Faith on Earth* 11).

There is a difference between simply accepting a particular proposition (although it is a necessary first step) and being inspired by beliefs such that one is compelled to respond with acts of loyalty. It is this "living faith" that we will now seek to understand more thoroughly.

As we mentioned previously, the three aspects of faith -- belief, trust and loyalty -- can be distinguished from one another, yet they are inseparably linked. Trust and loyalty, however, are the focus of Niebuhr's, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*. In this book, Niebuhr defines faith as "the attitude and action of confidence in and fidelity to, certain realities as the sources of value and the objects of loyalty" (16). Belief is still implied in this definition, because, as noted, "where there is no *fiducia*, no trust, there can be no believing" ("Triad of Faith" 6). However, the relationship between trust in and loyalty to objects of value is at the heart of Niebuhr's understanding of faith. One way to think about the difference between trust and loyalty, Niebuhr suggests, is to recognize that trust is the passive aspect of faith while loyalty encompasses the active side. The fact that trust is passive means that it is evoked by something given to the subject. It is "that which gives value to the self" (Niebuhr,

Radical Monotheism 16). As we discussed in the first section, we cannot exist without some basic form of trust, so there is no such thing as the *absence* of trust; there is only broken trust or distrust.

Loyalty or fidelity makes up faith's active side. It is loyalty that both proves one's trust in an object while simultaneously showing oneself to be worthy of trust. Loyalty in a life of faith is more than simple fidelity to one or various objects of faith. It is loyalty to the cause or causes of that object as well. Besides the three aspects of faith Niebuhr defines, he also uses the term "triad of faith" to mean the relationship between a subject, an object, and the cause that binds them together ("Triad of Faith" 7). This bond between subject and object is also more meaningful when the subject freely chooses a life of fidelity to the object and their cause because then the bond is more fulfilling to all involved. Loyalty given out of fear, however, breeds distrust. Loyalty should, instead, involve an I/Thou mentality, a subject I will explore further in my second chapter.

Sessions' Models of Faith

Having first described H. Richard Niebuhr's understanding of faith, I will now seek to show how it compares with another view. I will first compare the six "models" of faith -- as

described by William Lad Sessions -- to Niebuhr's categories of polytheism, henotheism and radical monotheism. Relevant to this discussion is an explanation of what I call "default faith" which relies somewhat on Paul Tillich's understanding of faith as ultimate concern.

In his book, *The Concept of Faith*, William Lad Sessions provides a philosophical discussion of faith. Like Niebuhr, Sessions understands faith to be an extremely complex topic, but unlike Niebuhr, he does not understand faith to be universal in any particular form. So while Niebuhr views belief, trust and loyalty as aspects of faith for all people, Sessions claims that faith is a complex category that manifests itself in many forms that vary from person to person. Also, some of these forms may have little or nothing in common with one another. Sessions distinguishes between the terms category and concept when he claims there are many conceptions of faith, but these conceptions do not form any type of overarching *category* of faith. He does admit that some features could link these concepts together, but if this is the case, it is more like, "an extended family whose various members are all different, sharing no single feature or group of features, but who are more or less closely related by differing kinds of likeness and by some partially overlapping common features" (Sessions 7). In order to understand the larger category of faith, Sessions provides

six examples, or "models," of faith that humans live by. He claims that each model "has a kind of objective and publicly ascertainable structure that enables it to measure the messy actual world and thereby to serve the cause of understanding" (Sessions 9). He clarifies that one would be unlikely to ever find an actual person who exhibits one model alone in its pure form. Rather people tend to blend or change from one form to another.

I will not here go into the details of each model, but I will summarize each one very briefly just to give a sense of how Sessions divides up his types of faith. The first model is the Personal Relationship Model which is characterized by a sustained relationship between two people who share a bond of love and loyalty. The object of faith is also the cause of the faith bond and the subject considers the object authoritative (Sessions 20). The Belief Model is characterized by a focus on the act of believing despite sufficient evidence for these beliefs. In this model firmly and confidently holding a belief to be true is the most important act of faith one can exhibit (Sessions 20-21). The third model is the Attitude Model which emphasizes the holding of a particular worldview by the subject. This view profoundly affects the way a subject interacts with and relates to the world (Sessions 21).

The fourth model of faith is the Confidence Model, which is probably the most difficult to understand because Sessions claims this is a type of faith with no object. Faith under this model is a "state of being conscious characterized by an underlying sense of tranquility, serenity, peace or assurance in the face of such perturbations as doubt, despair, and anxiety" (Sessions 21). It is a feeling one holds over a sustained period of time. The Devotion Model is understood as adherence to a particular way of life. In this model, the way of life itself is the ultimate object of faith (Sessions 21-22). And finally, the sixth model of faith is the Hope Model. The object of faith under this model is an intense desire and expectation of some future good that is unlikely to occur, but that the subject anticipates despite this fact (Sessions 22).

While Sessions admits that these models are by no means exhaustive, he does see them as genuine examples of different kinds of faith. I find his approach to the topic of faith interesting, but the understanding of faith that I want to support, based largely on Niebuhr, is quite different. Sessions claims, in his opening chapter, that he finds something lacking in most discussions of faith as they deal mostly with a)objects of faith, b)degrees of faith (strong vs. weak faith), c)consequences or ramifications of faith, or d)evidence for or against a particular faith (11). What he seeks to create, in

contrast, is a "portrait of faith" that is not influenced by any particular religious tradition (Sessions 11). He achieves this goal to some degree, but I think Niebuhr does as well. I suppose that Sessions might say that Niebuhr's definition falls mostly within the Personal Relationship Model or Devotional Model, although his understanding of radical monotheism might fall somewhere in the Attitude Model. However, what I find appealing about Niebuhr's understanding of faith that is lacking with Sessions is the notion that faith has certain aspects that are commonly experienced by all persons.

Sessions claims that his models might share a family resemblance, with certain models having certain characteristics in common but no one attribute that is common to all. I agree with this claim, but if Niebuhr's definition of faith as belief, trust and loyalty is the means by which we understand the category of faith (to use Sessions' term) we find that each of the models Sessions describes involves at least one -- if not all -- of the aspects to some extent. Even the Confidence Model which is faith that has no object (as Sessions claims) involves some type of trust in or loyalty to the state of being that is achieved or, at least, the practice that brings about the self awareness that characterizes this model. What Niebuhr might say about these models of faith is that most, if not all, of them represent various degrees or aspects of faith -- some which

would be considered broken or distorted since they often focus on one particular aspect of faith to the exclusion of others. The Belief Model, for instance, holds the belief of propositions to be the sole end of faith. Under Niebuhr's understanding of faith, however, proper belief is only one aspect of faith, and it should always be informed by reason.

Niebuhr's Types of Faith

Instead of establishing models of faith, Niebuhr classifies faith in terms of the number of objects in which one trusts and to which one is loyal. Based on this categorization, Niebuhr claims there are three types of faith: polytheistic, henotheistic (choosing one object while recognizing there are other possibilities), and monotheistic. For Niebuhr an object of faith is, in a sense, a person's god or God (*Radical Monotheism* 24). This is why he chooses labels that typically refer to the number of "gods" to which one is devoted. He does not mean to suggest that these terms necessarily correspond to religions classified as polytheistic, henotheistic or monotheistic. For Niebuhr these categories are meant to be a valid description of any type of faith -- even if it is secular. In other words, even an atheist can have many gods according to Niebuhr, and a polytheist could exhibit monotheistic *faith* if

one understood his or her different gods to be part of one unified system or worldview.

Based on this classification, most people have polytheistic lives of faith, moving from one object to another throughout their lifetimes. They might, however, at any given time, have just one object of faith and thus fall into henotheism. People are often loyal to many objects including their families, friends, their nation, or their occupation. They trust sometimes in their religious traditions or sometimes in a life of wealth or power; this is common. A truly monotheistic faith, according to Niebuhr, is virtually unknown in this world -- so much so that Niebuhr calls this type of faith not just monotheism but *radical* monotheism. For Niebuhr this type of monotheism is only possible if your object of faith is being itself. He writes:

for radical monotheism the value-center is neither closed society nor the principle of such a society but the principle of being itself; its reference is to no one reality among the many but to One beyond all the many, whence all the many derive their being, and by participation in which they exist. As faith, it is reliance on the source of all being for the significance of the self and of all that exists (*Radical Monotheism* 32).

While many Christians might claim that holding the one true God as their object of faith is monotheism, Niebuhr guesses that their faith is actually often placed in the Bible or possibly their particular Church community, and both of these leave room

for exclusion of those who believe differently (*Faith on Earth* 116-117). But when being itself is one's object of faith, the well-being of all that exists is the cause to which one is loyal. Therefore, because one's object of trust and loyalty is truly ultimate and all encompassing one is, in turn, loyal to all that exists. As Niebuhr continues from the previous quotation:

it is the assurance that because I am, I am valued, and because you are, you are beloved, and because whatever is has being, therefore it is worthy of love. It is the confidence that whatever is, is good, because it exists as one among the many which all have their origin and their being in the One - the principle of being which is also the principle of value (*Radical Monotheism* 32).

Default Faith

Niebuhr's types of faith revolve around objects of faith, but what about people who cannot claim to have any ultimate object of faith in their lives? Which category do these people fall into? One might say they are polytheistic because, if they have no one ultimate object of faith, they must disperse their trust and loyalty among many various objects throughout their daily life. This may be true. People often cannot help but have faith in and through their families, their countries, their jobs and their friends all at once. I want to argue, however, that there is a state of being that is even more removed from

objects of faith than this. I will call this state "default faith."

To clarify, I am not suggesting that it is possible to live without the faith encounters that are necessary for existence. We all must exhibit forms of trust and loyalty at most times, even if it is to ourselves. When I suggest that one can live a life of distance from one's object(s), I am actually meaning this more in the line of Paul Tillich and his understanding of faith as ultimate concern that he outlines in his book, *Dynamics of Faith*. It is impossible to live outside of subject/object relationships, but I think it is possible to live a life in which there is very little if any conscious concern, trust or loyalty for one's object(s).

The word "default" has various meanings, but one in particular is relevant to my usage of the term. According to *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, default can mean "a choice made without active consideration due to lack of viable alternatives" (187). So what I am suggesting is that it is possible to live "by default." This occurs when one goes through life without formulating any particular aims or goals. He or she simply exists in a suspended or static state of being wherein actions are taken only as a means of continued existence, but without any guiding purpose -- without a center.

Tillich claims that it is one's ultimate concern that gives one his or her center, so being without an ultimate concern "is being without a center. Such a state, however, can only be approached but never fully reached, because a human being deprived completely of a center would cease to be a human being" (106). If this is the case, then I am suggesting that default faith is the closest approximation a person can attain to having no center. The ultimate concern is what guides a person through life, and it "is also the promise of ultimate fulfillment which is accepted in the act of faith" (Tillich 2). People living by default faith do not have this expectation of ultimate fulfillment, however. Of course they may hope for some better state of affairs or desire a life filled with greater purpose, but they lack the motivation needed to attain this goal. This is either because they do not think there are any genuine possibilities for a meaningful life, or they have no idea how to attain their desired ends. People living by default faith see no other "viable alternatives" due to their inability to recognize them or reach for them.

It is probably clear by now that a person who lives by default faith is not in a happy situation. This life is characterized by a sense numbness or stagnation. The person who lives in this way likely feels a sense of disconnectedness from others and maybe even from the self since he or she has nothing

guiding and giving purpose in encounters with others. The resulting question from this discussion of default faith is whether it truly constitutes a fourth type of faith or is simply a broken version of one of Niebuhr's other three categories -- a distorted henotheism or drastic polytheism, for example. I think it is both, in a way. There is no question that default faith is broken faith, and it could be considered polytheistic, since a person cannot avoid interacting with many different objects in the course of their life. If this is polytheism, it is a degraded form of this faith since people living by default faith attach very little, if any, meaning to their objects which in turn prevents them from being encountered in any genuine I/Thou manner. While Niebuhr understood radical monotheism to be the best form of faith, even in polytheism one is capable of exhibiting lasting bonds of trust and loyalty to their many objects. In default faith, however, one moves from object to object with no profound attachment to any one in particular. The subject of default faith will come up again in chapter three in my discussion of Douglas Coupland's book, *Life After God*. For now, though, I turn to a more detailed exploration of what constitutes a healthy faith and whether this type of faith is a possibility in our modern society.

CHAPTER 2

THE STATE OF FAITH IN MODERN SOCIETY

In the first chapter I discussed my understanding of faith -- based on the thought of H. Richard Niebuhr -- as a universal experience and a dynamic interweaving of belief, trust and loyalty. I explored these aspects in detail and compared this understanding of faith with the philosophical approach of William Lad Sessions. I also described Niebuhr's concept of radical monotheism as the best, most fulfilling type of faith. In this chapter, I will further describe faith in terms of its healthy and broken forms. I will also explain why a radically monotheistic type of faith is difficult to embody in our current culture. I will argue that this difficulty stems from the individualism and the consumerism that pervades our culture because these phenomenon obstruct the healthy faith relationships required to exemplify a radically monotheistic faith.

Broken Faith

Although Niebuhr supported the notion that it is impossible to live without some type of faith, he recognized that faith is,

more often than not, broken in some way or another. Since Niebuhr understands faith to be acts of belief, trust and loyalty, it follows that a broken faith would entail imperfect forms of one or all three of these aspects of faith. In the first chapter, we already discussed Niebuhr's understanding that proper belief lies somewhere between being overly skeptical and overly unquestioning. Being too credulous is accepting statements based on the authority of others without using reason to guide one's trust of that authority. Being too skeptical involves being too distrustful and holding beliefs that are based only on first-hand or sense experiences.

Imperfect trust is all too common in our world today. We are often suspicious of people whom we do not know or whom we consider to be outsiders; there is increased distrust between political powers and religious institutions, and people often distrust their own abilities to succeed in their endeavors. Although we may recognize that distrust is not a healthy state, we may argue that we only distrust for good reason because we have all experienced too many disappointments in life. We often feel betrayed by the people we care about or by politicians who are supposed to have the interest of citizens at heart, but use their positions for personal gain. We feel betrayed by our workplaces when they "downsize" with only their stockholders' interests in mind instead of the needs of their employees. But,

despite these disappointments, we cannot function without trust, so how are we to cope in the world when we need to trust but are afraid of the consequences of being too naive? This is a difficult question to answer, but I think this is another case in which reason and experience are useful tools for guiding one to a place where one gives the benefit of the doubt to others but does not allow that trust to be abused.

Loyalty is another aspect of faith with which many people struggle. The bonds that hold people and institutions together seem to be dissolving faster all the time. Some reasons for this will be discussed later in this chapter. Divorce rates increase; people freely move from one church or even one religion to another, and it is not unusual for a person to hold several jobs or even careers during his or her lifetime. Now many would say that what I have just described as a lack of loyalty should not be seen as negative because these are all examples of increased personal freedom. I agree that freedom is a positive thing, but as with all aspects of faith, there should be a balance between extremes. People often expect all the benefits that come with various relationships or community memberships, but they do not want to have any responsibilities that limit their avenues for personal satisfaction. Healthy acts of loyalty should then consist of one recognizing his or her own responsibilities to others while being free to seek new

opportunities if the bonds are damaging to the individuals involved somehow.

Radical Monotheism

Niebuhr understood radical monotheism to be the best means of accomplishing these goals toward a life of healthy belief, trust and loyalty. Polytheistic faith is unsatisfactory because divided loyalties can lead to a life of disappointment or anxiety. Niebuhr describes polytheism as "egoism in which an unintegrated, diffuse, self-system depends for its meanings on many centers and gives its partial loyalties to many interests" (*Radical Monotheism* 29). When one's causes are many, that person is a self without a true center, and this leads to a life of fragmentation. To clarify, although Niebuhr writes from a Christian perspective, his criticism of polytheistic *faith* is not necessarily a criticism of polytheistic *religions* - for example, Hinduism. Even people who claim to be monotheistic may live a life of polytheistic faith, so Niebuhr is not necessarily claiming monotheistic religions are better than polytheistic ones. A healthy life of faith is possible as long as one has a unified system that organizes his or her many loyalties, and this is *possible* in polytheistic as well as monotheistic religions.

Even a henotheistic faith, although adhering to only one object of loyalty, is less preferable than monotheistic faith because in choosing one object, there are necessarily other objects that are excluded or seen as outside one's realm of loyalty. Niebuhr saw some Christian views of the church as an example of this type of faith. He is critical of Christians who understand the church to be a closed community that is separated from the world (*Radical Monotheism* 60). Nationalism is also a type of henotheism that encourages creating a sense of belonging by some to the exclusion of others. This is the primary danger in a henotheistic faith. Even claiming God as the object of faith can be risky because any particular conception of God could change or prove to disappoint as well -- particularly, Niebuhr claims, when we personalize God (*Faith on Earth* 67). By personalizing God we open ourselves up to the possibility of feeling as if God has not been loyal to us or that God cannot be trusted if something goes wrong in our lives.

Recall that faith is not only the bond between subject and object; it also encompasses the cause to which they both are loyal, the cause that binds them together. In a radically monotheistic faith one's object is being; therefore, the cause to which one is loyal is the "realm of being" or the "principle of being." This loyalty has no bounds. As Niebuhr explains this "universal loyalty:"

is loyalty to all existents as bound together by a loyalty that is not only resident in them but transcends them. It is not only their loyalty to each other that makes them one realm of being, but the loyalty that comes from beyond them, that originates and maintains them in their particularity and their unity. Hence universal loyalty expresses itself as loyalty to each particular existent in the community of being and to the universal community (*Radical Monotheism* 33-34).

If one lives by a radically monotheistic faith, Niebuhr argues, one cannot separate a thing's existence from its value because, in doing this, some things have the possibility of seeming either more valuable than others or more capable of contributing to their common cause. Niebuhr writes:

Monotheism is less than radical if it makes a distinction between the principle of being and the principle of value, so that while all being is acknowledged as absolutely dependent for existence on the One, only some beings are valued as having worth for it (*Radical Monotheism* 32).

Instead of thinking that some beings have greater worth, radical monotheism requires loving every person as neighbor, even if he or she is an enemy on some less significant level.

The primary means of attempting to embody radical monotheism is through a proper I/Thou mentality that shapes and forms every aspect of one's life and interactions. An I/Thou relationship is just that -- relationship. As Martin Buber understood it, I/Thou (or I/You) means there is a possibility for encounter -- for recognizing in a "Thou" another "I." This is as opposed to relating to another as an "It" to be experienced and then tossed aside. Of course we cannot have perpetual encounters with one

Thou. We must eventually relinquish the tie that binds us to a Thou. As Buber writes, "the individual You must become an It when the event of relation has run its course. The individual It can become a You by entering into the event of relation" (84). It is this openness to encountering a You rather than an It that allows for the possibility of radical monotheism. But this type of encounter, as I will suggest, is difficult to achieve in our modern culture.

The basic ramification of a radically monotheistic faith is that it entails a way of life that guides and becomes evident in all aspects of one's life. Radical monotheism is not necessarily a faith tied to a religious tradition, although one's religious affiliations can certainly enforce and contribute to a radical faith. As Niebuhr puts it:

The consistent ethics of radical faith is not constituted by the attachment of certain ethical rules to religious beliefs but by the requirement and the empowerment to consistent action in all realms and offices in which the self acts....Radical faith, therefore, is either expressed by the self in all its roles and relations, or it is not expressed at all (*Radical Monotheism* 48).

So this type of faith definitely has ethical implications -- that affect one's way of life, for example -- but this does not mean that it corresponds to Sessions' Devotional Model because in that model, faith's object is the way of life itself. For Niebuhr, the way of life is not the goal: it is the means by which one expresses loyalty to the cause.

The purpose implied in Niebuhr's assertion of radical monotheism as the best possible type of faith is that this faith leads to a more fulfilling existence for both subject and object. Since faith is inherent in all of one's existence, if faith is broken or perverted in some way, that fact necessarily affects one's whole life. When one lives with feelings of distrust -- whether in others or in oneself -- this can lead to a life that is riddled with fear and disappointment.

Also, having too many objects of loyalty can lead one into confusion because a person can only extend oneself so far. There is a danger that if one spreads one's loyalty among too many objects, one will end up not really being loyal to anything at all in a meaningful way. This can also lead to feeling disconnected from others because to be truly close to another person, one has to be open to encountering that person as a You/Thou instead of an It. This allows for the possibility of a deeper sense of trust and loyalty that is necessary for meaningful relationships with others. Even if an encounter is brief and has no lasting meaning, simply treating the other person as a neighbor is all that is required. Acting out of loyalty breeds trust that can breed further loyalty. Recognizing this potential in all encounters is the beginning of radical monotheism.

The Modern Condition

The idea of radical monotheism certainly sounds refreshing and wonderful, but we all recognize that one would be unlikely to find someone perpetually living by this type of faith in actuality. I would argue that it is nearly impossible because healthy faith is not one-sided -- it requires relation. Of course people have always had to deal with disloyalty and distrust in their lives across all times and places, but our current modern culture provides new barriers to the actualization of Niebuhr's vision of a radical faith. The amount of personal freedom in our culture today has contributed to an increase in the desire for self-gratification and fulfillment. Our consumer-driven culture has also contributed to an environment that hinders healthy bonds of trust and loyalty, and this breakdown of social bonds, plus the high price put on personal freedom, has resulted in a society in which immense pressure is placed on individuals to forge their own destinies -- a task which many, if not most, people are not able to accomplish without proper supports. For my discussion on the modern condition of faith I rely heavily on Zygmunt Bauman's book, *Liquid Modernity*, and various works of Robert Bellah. Both of these commentators on society have pinpointed the devastating results of our increasingly individualistic culture.

Of course most of us in America today would never want to claim that freedom is a negative thing, and I do not wish to say that it is either. But the modern quest for greater personal freedom and self-fulfillment is virtually incompatible with what Niebuhr would consider healthy faith -- let alone radically monotheistic faith. We seek greater freedom without necessarily considering what this is freedom from or freedom for.

Bauman stresses the fact that our culture is one categorized by fluidity. He acknowledges that cultures have always changed over time, but, in the past, when one social structure was overturned, those who did the overturning usually had some sense of another structure they wished to use as a replacement for the old one. In our fluid culture, however, change happens so rapidly that people are not able to grasp any particular structure before everything changes and they have to start again (Bauman 2-3). Bauman argues further that our current fluid condition is unique for a few different reasons. First, our state of distrust is such that people, in general, have given up on the possibility of there being some state of perfection to attain in the future (29). A second aspect of our current condition that is new is that the increase in individualism has led to the mentality that each person is responsible for solving his or her own problems (29). And finally, our culture is characterized by constant change and coming up with "the next

big thing," yet we have no overarching goals that we are working toward. As Bauman says, we used to worry about the means to a desired end, but now we have the means but do not know which aims to choose (61).

Too much arbitrary freedom is a mixed blessing; it is comforting to know that no decision is ever final and that mistakes can be made right, but if there is no wrong choice there is also no right choice, and any decision made can be second guessed which could lead to one never being truly satisfied. In times of fear about oppressive institutions, there was more concern for enhancing personal freedom, but now, Bauman suggests, people have come to expect that they can either participate in or avoid interaction with institutions to a great extent (5). Robert Bellah's description of the differentiation of systems is pertinent to this point. By this Bellah means that the different aspects of culture have become separate entities in which individuals feel they can choose to participate or not ("Stories as Arrows" 110-111). Of course, as Bellah notes, we cannot exist wholly apart from institutions.

He writes:

while we in concert with others create institutions, they also create us: they educate us and form us -- especially through socially enacted metaphors they give us, metaphors that provide normative interpretations of situations and actions. The metaphors may be appropriate or inappropriate, but they are inescapable (*Good Society* 12).

We rely on institutions to socialize us, so even if one were able to truly live a life of solitude away from the rest of humanity, that person's ideals would still have been formed by institutions, whether family, school, etc. We rely on institutions for support in our development as human beings, yet we also crave the freedom to act as we see fit. But this freedom, if unguided, is meaningless or even harmful. As Bellah further claims, "autonomy, as valuable as it is in itself, is only one virtue among others and without such virtues as responsibility and care which can be exercised only through institutions, autonomy itself becomes...an empty form without substance" (*Good Society* 12).

Our culture is characterized by the assumption that people have the freedom to choose a life of participation in various institutions even though this is not technically true. Bauman summarizes the effects of this self-gratification on our social bonds perfectly. He writes, "bonds and partnerships tend to be viewed and treated as things meant to be consumed, not produced; they are subject to the same criteria of evaluation as all other objects of consumption" (Bauman 163). Bellah has devoted much of his research to the effects of this type of consumer mentality on various institutions. In many of his works, he has shown that a world in which people see institutions as means to their own personal ends, is a world in which people are able to

select which religion or combination of religions they wish to participate in -- even if it is no religion at all. Religion is seen as something that should meet the needs of the individual rather than the individual being loyal to a particular tradition throughout his or her lifetime. A religious path might not even require one to interact with others at all, since some people understand religion to be a personal, inward quest (Bellah, "Stories as Arrows" 4-6).

Families also are examples of institutions viewed as a means to a personal end. People think marriage and children are a choice that adds to their own personal fulfillment. Bellah claims that whereas families used to be more child-centered, they have become increasingly parent-centered (*Good Society* 46). I myself wholeheartedly support an expanded view of what constitutes a family because it is not who makes up the family that matters but the level of commitment to the family unit that makes it a healthy institution. Yet, even with a broader understanding of family, the level of commitment seems increasingly relative to its ability to provide self-satisfaction for one or all of its members.

The workplace is another arena in which bonds are degrading more quickly in our liquid society. Companies care more about their profit-margins than the effects these decisions have on their employees. Sadly, employees often see this as the way of

the world -- that there is no other alternative so they simply accept it. Bellah describes an interview with a woman who, after enhancing her company's profits considerably, was phased out once the company was bought out by a larger corporation (*Good Society* 20-23). Instead of being outraged at the fact that she was being fired for doing a good job, she just accepted it and said she would begin a new career selling antiques instead. The uncertainty about one's future in the workplace is not only a ramification of a consumer-driven culture, but it also brings the problem full circle because, when people do not know what tomorrow brings, they focus more on instant and self-gratification. They think they should have what they want now in case the opportunity is not there tomorrow. In support of this claim, Bauman writes:

In the world in which the future is at best dim and misty but more likely full of risks and danger, setting distant goals, surrendering private interest in order to increase group power and sacrificing the present in the name of a future bliss does not seem an attractive, nor for that matter sensible, proposition (163).

The result of this increased desire for self-fulfillment, consumed social bonds, and greater personal freedom is a radical individualism that has had many damaging consequences. When people no longer rely on institutions to shape and give meaning to their lives, that burden falls on the individuals themselves. As Bauman notes, "'individualization' consists of transforming

human 'identity' from a 'given' into a 'task' and charging the actors with the responsibility for performing that task and for the consequences (also the side-effects) of their performance" (31-32). This burden is greatly abetted by our consumer culture in which individual choice and self-satisfaction are the driving forces. People have come to expect that they are free to make personal choices regarding most aspects of their life such as family, religion, career path, etc. Thus, their futures are full of possibilities. This can be a wonderful thing but also a very frightening thing because if a choice ends in an unfavorable result, then the entire blame is placed on the individual, which can cause great pressure and fear to make correct choices.

The burden and anxiety of creating our own identities and futures is furthered by the fact that, in our society, institutions and other means of support are seen as a means of helping individuals cope with their own problems on their own. People are not only expected to carry the burden of creating their futures, but they are expected to deal with the resulting consequences on their own as well (Bauman 34-36). People look to others, not for help with their problems, but as examples of people who have solved their own problems, thus showing them how to cope on their own. Bellah claims that the basic result of this lack of support is that, amidst broken bonds in family,

workplace, and other institutions and avenues of personal fulfillment, there is no place of guaranteed comfort on which we can count (*Good Society* 45). This is a grim realization; although many people do find comfort in their families or friends or religious affiliations, there is still a sense that it is truly up to the individual to use the resources available to them to fix any problems that occur in their lives.

This increase in individualism within our society also makes it almost impossible for people to think about the common good. Bellah observes that the result of a society that is characterized by individuals seeking self-fulfillment by means of a consumer lifestyle "minimizes, if it does not neglect it altogether...any larger moral meaning, and contribution to the common good, that might help it to make sense." Instead, he claims further, "when things go wrong, we tend to blame individuals...but we don't question the morality of the institutions themselves" (*Good Society* 43). By these statements he means that when people see their problems as solely a consequence of their own actions, it negates the possibility for any communal change because people do not see their plights as necessarily connected to those of other people.

The consequences of this radical individualism and consumer-driven culture on our faith relationships should be apparent by now. Distrust and a lack of commitment and loyalty are common

experiences for all of us. Rising divorce rates, changes in religious affiliations, greater distrust of political leaders are all signs of the breakdown of these faith bonds.

Furthermore, an independent life is what most people expect and strive for -- even amidst their personal relationships. We live near others, yet we rarely have genuine I/Thou encounters with the person on the street or in our arenas of consumption. We exist in the same space, but we are only passers by. The goal is not to engage more than necessary. Bauman suggests our attitude toward public spaces is that:

If physical proximity...cannot be completely avoided, it can be perhaps stripped of the challenge of "togetherness" it contains, with its standing invitation to meaningful encounter, dialogue and interaction...Let strangers...be seen but not heard or if hearing them cannot be escaped, then, at least, not listened to (105).

I am often aware of this propensity for shutting out strangers in my encounters at one of my workplaces, one that involves customer service in a retail environment. A typical encounter involves a person telling me what they want and I seek to meet that need, or if I am at the cash register I simply process the transaction. Most of the time this process is routine, but it is not necessarily unpleasant. Occasionally, however, I have customers who engage me personally more than is comfortable; they might ask me about my life or they tell me some very personal story. These encounters are unsettling

because of my expectation that personal information is solely meant to be shared only with those with whom one has a close relationship. While these occasional encounters may seem uncomfortable, I am also sympathetic because it seems as if the need to reach out and engage anyone, even a stranger, is so strong for these people; I cannot help but think maybe they feel isolated and cut off from others for some of the reasons discussed here.

Faith's Possibility for Reconstruction

As I just mentioned, unusual personal encounters with customers at my retail job might make me uncomfortable on one level because of the expectation that we are to just go about our personal consumer endeavors as separate individuals, but I also sometimes find myself admiring people who make the effort to reach out to others. Even if they are doing so for their own personal fulfillment, the fact that they break this common behavioral expectation in order to have just the possibility for a meaningful encounter is, I think, quite brave. I view this effort as an attempt to enter into some type of I/Thou relation in a culture in which this definitely is not the norm but should be. The I/Thou is implied in H. Richard Niebuhr's understanding of radical faith: every person one encounters is a person one hopes to trust and be loyal to. Of course, these occurrences

may be windows into the possibility of radical faith for an individual, but with the state of our society as described in the previous section, it is unlikely that a community as a whole would be able to achieve such a state of faith. How do we even begin to imagine a society that is radically monotheistic when individuals do not even see their weal and woes as connected to those of other individuals?

Bauman offers no real answer to this question, but Robert Bellah puts a good deal of thought into it. First of all, institutions need to be viewed, not as oppressive aspects of our lives that seek to limit our personal freedom, but as avenues for individuals to seek fulfilling life choices. Of course for this to be the case, political institutions need to think of their constituents, not as clients, but as citizens whose welfare is in their hands. In other words, it should not be a question of how much government, but of how government can enable greater participation by its members while acting in a way that appeals to the common good of all citizens instead of ignoring the needs of some to give greater freedom to others (*Good Society* 27).

Also, people need to think of themselves as *belonging* to a community instead of *using* the community for their own ends. Having this communal mentality does not mean that all members must think alike and agree on everything. Bellah writes:

A genuine community is not based on uniform and unquestionable consensus. It shares a past which gives it a sense of identity and a future which gives it hope, but it is open to argument, even conflict, about what its shared history and its future engagements mean and should be. A genuine community does not crush but empowers individuals ("Stories as Arrows" 120).

So what Bellah sees as key, and I think Niebuhr would agree, is that individuals need to interact with one another. They need to encounter one another in order to form their common goals.

A model for this type of participation, while not perfect, that encompasses many of the aims Bellah is getting at, is sports (*Good Society* 28-42). In sports there is a collective "team" to which all are loyal. There are standard rules of conduct and behavior, yet there is also room for individual achievement and excellence. Decisions, while they may not be totally democratic, are made for the good of the whole and for the sake of the common cause to which they are all committed. This is the type of healthy institution that Bellah envisions. He writes, "sports teach and form character. But so do all institutions: in this they are not so much unique as exemplary" (*Good Society* 40). By this, Bellah means that we are formed by our institutions regardless of their state, so we should strive to have the healthiest ones possible. Of course, even in this model there is the possibility for corruption, but being part of a community does not mean one is not able to criticize and seek

reform, but the object of trust and loyalty should be clearly defined or else there is confusion.

Can Bellah's vision of an ideal institution be considered radical monotheism? Maybe not as such, since the existence of one community necessarily implies the existence of those who are excluded. However, I think that as long as communities engage one another with an I/Thou mentality instead of as enemies or outsiders, this model has much to offer.

Now that we have examined the current state of faith relationships in our society and the means by which they could possibly be healed, I turn in the next chapter to an examination of a work of fiction that follows one particular character's struggle to find identity and meaning as he encounters all the issues that have been discussed so far.

CHAPTER 3

FAITH IN DOUGLAS COUPLAND'S, *LIFE AFTER GOD*

Life After God is a short, yet profound, novel written by Douglas Coupland in the early 1990's. Coupland is probably best known for coining the phrase "Generation X" in his novel that bears that title. *Generation X* is a book that explores the lives of three young people in Palm Springs who all move there to escape their lives of boredom and conformity while seeking to find out what it means to live a life of purpose and meaning having been raised by television, fast food chains and malls. The format of *Generation X* is itself unique given that it is teeming with various pop-culture references, quotations, comic strips, GenX terminology, and advertisements, thereby showing visually what the characters are wading through in their day-to-day lives. The stories they tell one another reveal their most personal fears and thoughts as they try to figure out how to translate these personal realizations to their actual lives.

Life After God is similar to *Generation X* in that it is written in the form of a first-person narrative, and it has an unconventional format. It is literally a small book; the words are big, and sections are rarely more than a few pages long with

a large hand-drawn picture preceding each one. The chapters are not in chronological order, and often there are pages that stand alone as random thoughts of the narrator and that do not fit into any greater story in particular. This gives the illusion that the reader is truly inside the narrator's head. As the title suggests, *Life After God*, explores the consequences, both good and bad, of being the first generation raised without religion. Obviously, this does not apply to all people of his generation, but it is true for the narrator and his closest friends.

Like *Generation X*, this novel explores one person's quest to find his place in the world since he has reached a point in which he feels lost without purpose. Although he felt free and joyous as a child, the narrator now realizes that there is an emptiness he does not know how to fill. He describes this insight when he writes:

Life was charmed but without politics or religion. It was the life of children of the children of the pioneers -- life after God -- a life of earthly salvation on the edge of heaven...yet I find myself speaking these words with a sense of doubt. I think there was a trade-off somewhere along the line. I think the price we paid for our golden life was an inability to fully believe in love; instead we gained an irony that scorched everything it touched. And I wonder if this irony is the price we paid for the loss of God. But then I must remind myself we are living creatures -- we have religious impulses -- we *must* -- and yet into what cracks do these impulses flow in a world without religion? It is something I think about everyday (273-274).

Although my focus will not primarily be the narrator's lack of religious guidance, this quotation represents an important topic that warrants further discussion. Specifically, once the burden of adulthood is realized, how does one cope with the fact that the needed supports are lacking? Also, how does faith manifest itself when its object is merely one's own earthly happiness? These are the questions I intend to explore more fully in this chapter using my discussions of faith and the modern condition from the previous chapters as a guide.

It is apparent while reading this novel that the narrator is experiencing a broken faith of some sort, but in what way? I will argue that, at certain times, the narrator exhibits what I have described as "default faith." I will explore what the ramifications of his faith have been and what he understands to be a healthier faith by the last chapter. While this novel is rife with intriguing topics that most definitely inspire much thought, many do not fit into the scope of my present inquiry, but along the way I will discuss some recurring themes and how these fit into my greater discussion of faith and broken faith in particular. I admit that much of my inferences about the main character's thoughts and actions are mine alone and not necessarily what Coupland was intending when he wrote *Life After God*, but he left so much unspoken and unexplained that I do not think Coupland would suggest that it is inappropriate to

speculate to such a high degree. First, I will give an overview of the narrator and his worldview.

The Narrator's Faith Condition

It is obvious from page one that the narrator is undergoing a faith crisis of some kind. He is exhausted simply as a result of being himself -- from maintaining his own existence. He says, "I just wanted to borrow somebody else's coat -- borrow somebody else's life -- their aura. I seemed to have lost the ability to create any more aura on my own" (3). What we learn at the very beginning is that he has a young daughter and that he is currently going through a divorce -- not by his own choice. His feelings of loss and hopelessness come out as he tells his daughter three stories of various animal characters that had high hopes for themselves, but each made bad decisions that ruined their dreams. Immediately he regrets telling his daughter stories about "these beautiful little creatures who were all supposed to have been part of a fairy tale but who got lost along the way" (24). Just pages before this, the narrator speculates about what makes human beings unique; what traits make a human uniquely human, thereby giving meaning to their lives. One cannot help but think his comment regarding his "fairy tales" is really a comment about his own life and possibly even the entire human condition. In other words, the

human condition is one characterized by the struggle to find fulfillment and purpose.

The narrator was reared without any religious affiliations, yet he does seem to believe in God. He even prays at one point -- but more in passing, not in a way that would indicate he expects any kind of response. His feelings about religion are also rather indifferent. He has nothing against religion (he cites Christianity in particular), but he feels no connection to it. At one point he is driving through the desert listening to a Christian radio station on which believers are talking about how Jesus turned their lives around. He says, "they sounded like their lives had once been so messed up and lost as they spoke; at least they were no longer so lost anymore -- like AA people. So I figured that was a good thing" (184). He does not deny the real existence of this religious life for those who experience it, but he does not see himself as capable of that same connection because of his upbringing.

Probably the most obvious observation about the narrator is that he is riddled with fear and anxiety, but it is not due to any specific event or reason -- he is just anxious about his existence in general. He fears he is incapable of experiencing life fully, and this fear permeates his entire being. This fear does manifest itself, however, through two prominent themes. First of all, the narrator fears he is unable to feel or

experience emotions as he did when he was younger. In some ways, this scares him immensely, but in other ways he does not care at all -- which is what worries him most. His ex-wife also claims that when she was young life was full of wonder, but the older she gets she realizes she cannot recapture that same sense of wonder (138). The narrator also reveals that he believes that a person has had all of their important experiences by the time they are thirty; thus, anything experienced after that just does not carry the weight it would have before. He expresses this belief as he thinks about his friend, Cathy, who is wasting her own precious years being attached to boyfriends who do not care about her. He says he fears "all of her memory would...be used up in sadness and dead ends and being hurt, and at the end of it all there would be...nothing -- no more new feelings" (49).

The second focus of his fear is his inability to connect to others and the feeling of loneliness that results. The second chapter describes the narrator at a time before he met his wife when he purposefully chose a life of solitude in the hope that it would help him have an "Epiphany" that would somehow show him how to be a happier person. He says, "I had thought I was finding consolation in solitude, but to be honest I think I was only acquiring a veneer of bitterness" (30). He spent that year in a shabby motel with no job. This probably contributed to his

fear of loneliness later on because he knew from experience that he could not be happy without being connected to other people (62-63). The breakdown of his marriage only solidifies this fear of being unable to share genuine intimacy and relation with another person. He admits, "I felt as though the world lived inside a warm house at night and I was outside, and I couldn't be seen -- because I was out in the night. But now I am inside that house and it feels just the same" (142). Even getting married had not given him lasting consolation from his loneliness, so he continues to doubt in his ability to love and be loved.

Consequences of Modern Condition Revealed

Almost every repercussion of "liquid modernity" and the rise in individualism that I discussed in the second chapter is revealed in the life of the narrator. He experiences the breakdown of social bonds that occurs, partially, as a result of a consumer driven-culture, and this dissolution means he lacks the support of healthy faith relationships. He also feels a great amount of pressure to create for himself a happy, fulfilled life. This pressure causes fear, anxiety and depression which he eventually gets under control only by taking medication. This fear, I argue, is the result of the narrator's realization that he is the creator of his own fate; he

recognizes that his "life story" is wholly up to him and that he has few, if any, pointers or supports to help him along the way.

That the narrator and his peers are immersed in a consumer-driven culture is obvious based on the sheer volume of references to brand names by the characters. The narrator references specific fast food chains and department stores in every story, thereby showing that he is accustomed to a large number of options. Although he never equates this mentality either with the breakdown of his relationships or his feelings of loneliness and isolation, he hints at this connection. First of all, his wife leaves him because she "fell out of love" with him -- not because he did anything wrong. Her desire to sever one relationship in order to find her own means of self-satisfaction is an indication that she is focused on making herself happy despite the consequences to others.

Another consequence of living in a society driven by consumption is that when there are many choices, one never has a sense of realized accomplishment because there are always more choices and new possibilities leading to a perpetual cycle of self-gratification followed by dissatisfaction and disappointment. The narrator pinpoints this experience, although he equates it with a feeling one has when they are younger. He observes:

When you're young, you always feel that life hasn't yet begun -- that "life" is always scheduled to begin next week, next month, next year, after the holidays -- whenever. But then suddenly you're old and the scheduled life didn't arrive. You find yourself asking, "Well then, exactly what was it I was having -- that interlude -- the scrambly madness -- all that time I had before" (147)?

This realization, I think, is the result of living in a society that encourages us to think that life is never complete. We are not really living until we achieve: a, b, c. And even when we achieve that, there is always another set of standards to live up to, and people think that they are not truly living life until they obtain these items or goals. Of course, it is good to set new goals, but to let ourselves think we are not complete people *until* we achieve these goals is a sign of consumerism and a society that values people only by *what* they have and not *how* they live their life as they seek to achieve their goals. I would argue that this leads to people having a lowered sense of value that weakens their attachment to institutions since they do not see themselves as contributing members of society unless they obtain a certain lifestyle.

The lack of healthy social bonds in the narrator's life has driven him to an existence that is rife with broken faith relationships, ones in which distrust and disloyalty are the norms. He does not trust in humanity's ability to take care of itself. An entire chapter is devoted to the idea that the world will be destroyed by nuclear weapons. He grows up thinking this

will definitely happen at some point which shows a lack of faith in political institutions to care for the greater good. He tells a story about a Civil War soldier who was forever devastated and changed by the magnitude of death and destruction he witnessed at Gettysburg, illustrating again the narrator's frequent contemplation of his belief that people are capable of great evil.

A basic distrust of other individuals is also revealed when the narrator finds himself stuck in the desert (admittedly on an errand that is not exactly legal), and he must walk at night in search of the nearest town for help. As he walks, he realizes someone is walking behind him. Instead of being grateful that someone is there who might be of service -- which turns out to be the case -- his mind immediately flashes to every horror movie he has ever seen, and he is sure that this person means him harm. Finally, besides his distrust of others, the narrator also has a fundamental distrust in his own abilities -- his ability to love, be loved, lead a life of meaning -- and this kind of broken faith is probably the most destructive of all since it keeps him from being open to others in a way that could lead to healing his fractured existence.

The quotation above, discussing the narrator's realization that people live their whole lives waiting for "life" to begin and then realizing it never does, is also an indication of what

happens when individuals are responsible for creating their own identities. They continually seek the realization that they have become the person they were meant to be, but it may never come because there is no standard to indicate when it has been achieved. The fact that the narrator must resort to medication in order to make him "functional" also is a result of the pressure he feels. He admits "I think I am a broken person. I seriously question the road my life has taken and I endlessly rehash the compromises I have made in life" (309).

One facet of despair over past mistakes is that the narrator feels the pressure to make his life a story, and he thinks that if his story goes nowhere, his life lacks purpose. Throughout the novel, the narrator exhibits a fascination with animals of all kinds, and he makes a few telling statements that explain this fascination. In one section he says he thinks "birds are a miracle because they prove to us there is a finer, simpler state of being which we may strive to attain" (80-81). Later, in another chapter, the narrator's brother explains that humans are cursed because they experience time as linear, thus we are "forced to interpret life as a sequence of events -- a story -- and that when we can't figure out what our particular story is we feel lost somehow" (223). He notes, however, that animals -- in this instance, dogs -- are not cursed in this way. They live moment to moment, always in the present. It seems as if the

narrator's love of animals is due, in part, to the fact that he envies them their simple existence, free of anxiety over figuring out who they are. They do not have to wonder whether they are living up to their unique animal responsibilities. By simply existing they are being true to themselves, but he on the other hand, constantly must seek to understand his purpose and place in the world without any significant guidelines.

Default Faith in Action

In reading *Life After God*, it is obvious that the author exists in a broken faith condition -- he does not know what he believes, he is unable to trust others, and he does not trust himself enough to show true commitment and loyalty. It seems, even, that the narrator is exhibiting signs of default faith at certain points. Default faith is a term I use to describe a particular type of faith condition -- often a faith crisis -- in which a person has no particular object of ultimate concern or even anything he or she could call a genuine object of faith. Thus, the person lives in a state that is like a numb existence without any motivating force behind it other than just continued being. There is no overarching purpose guiding one's interactions. One has minimal attachments to the various objects encountered, but no lasting bonds of trust or loyalty to speak of.

The narrator's "hotel year," as he calls it, is definitely an example of someone living in this suspended state of faith:

I spent my days lying on my bed staring at the ceiling, listening to the drunken brawls in other rooms, the squawk of other TVs and the smashing of other mirrors. My fellow tenants were a mixture of pensioners, runaways, drug dealers and so forth. The whole ensemble had made a suitably glamorous backdrop for my belief that my poverty, my fear of death, my sexual frustration and my inability to connect with others would carry me off into some sort of Epiphany (29-30).

This is a perfect example of what I mean by default faith. He has isolated himself in hopes of gaining some insight into life's meaning. He must have some sense of trust in his ability to achieve this insight or he would not have cut himself off in this way, but once he takes this initial step he finds himself living a suspended existence where he does not know how to achieve his original goal. He simply bides his time hoping it will come to him even though he does nothing to try to find it himself. He does not even see his own life as something that is lived. He only experiences the feelings and stories of *others* around him while ignoring his own predicament. Eventually, he realizes that it is not working and goes back to his "real" life; once he does this he falls in love, thus finding an object of ultimate concern. But he never shakes his fears completely.

Another period of the narrator's life that exhibits some aspects of default faith is the time that immediately precedes his "writing" of this book. Throughout the novel, the narrator

is speaking from some present situation that he does not reveal to the reader until the final section of the book. We eventually find out the narrator, Scout (he reveals his name now as the narrative of his current predicament is unraveled), is writing from inside a tent in the middle of the wilderness where he has gone in search, once again, of an Epiphany.

This new search for life's meaning occurs after a period in Scout's life in which he was relying on anti-depressants to lessen the anxiety and despair that he was feeling as a result (so I argue) of the pressure placed on him to create his own story and figure out life's meaning and purpose on his own with no real supports. The anti-depressants, he admits, made him a more productive member of society -- which was fine with him -- but he eventually realizes that his life is devoid of purpose; he is simply living in a fog. This is a type of default faith as well. It is not the state of severe depression that laced his earlier experience of living at the hotel, yet it is still categorized by a certain numbness. He does his job without complaint and is even rather successful at it, so he does have loyalty to that and to the various friends he introduces us to along the way. We, therefore, cannot claim that he has no objects of faith at all, but he definitely seems to have no ultimate concern. He is content to live his life of routine and flattened moods because it is better than the constant fear he

felt before. So although this existence is not one of utter despair, once some his old feelings start to "cut through the fog" Scout realizes that life must be more than this to be considered truly living, but instead of shrinking in fear from this momentous burden, he decides to face it head on (318).

Scout's Epiphany

The event that ultimately causes Scout to wake up, as it were, is something unexpected that happens when he is not even looking for it. He is on a business trip in New York when he sees on the news that the presidential inauguration is to occur the following day in Washington D.C. The momentous aspect of this event touches him in a surprising way, so much so that instead of going home to Vancouver the next day he travels to D.C. and "crashes" at the apartment of his brother's friend (317-319). Scout is so excited at the prospect of the next day's ceremony that he decides not to take his pills because he wants to continue feeling this depth of emotion that has been lacking for so long (321).

This experience is a breakthrough for him, in a large part due to the fact that he finally feels as though his life is a story again. At the inauguration -- amidst the crowd and loud music -- he realizes, "I was actually *feeling*. My old personality was, after months of pills and pleasant nothingness,

returning. Just a little bit...but my essence was already asserting itself" (326). I think the reason that event is so profound for Scout is because by participating in it he feels as if he is a part of something greater than himself. Thousands of people have suspended their everyday lives in order to come together and celebrate a common tradition. All of these people with their individual lives -- their own personal losses and triumphs -- let go of all this for one day to be part of a community with a shared history. This is an experience Scout is not familiar with since he has grown up shunning affiliations with any particular group and, thereby, remaining closed off.

His trip to Washington D.C. is just the beginning for Scout. He calls in sick to work for a week while he comes off his medication, and when he does, he realizes that he still has a lot of things to work out for himself, so he heads to the wilderness where he is writing his story. He describes the reason for his trek when he tells us, "as long as there is wilderness, I know there is a larger part of myself that I can always visit, vast tracts of territory lying dormant, craving exploration and providing sanctity" (344). He knows that if there is any part of himself waiting to be found and awakened, he will find it here.

Scout does finally have his Epiphany, and he reveals it in the final pages of the novel. The Epiphany is really a secret

that he has been hiding from himself throughout his life, but now that it is uncovered, he can deny it no longer. He admits to us:

My secret is that I need God -- that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond being able to love (359).

Scout finally submits to the fact that he is dependent on something greater than himself and that he can trust this transcendent reality to give him strength and purpose. By admitting and accepting the need to depend on something other than himself, Scout realizes he is allowed to let go of the pressure he has placed on himself to fix everything in his life on his own. The jaded ironic existence that he and his friends created for themselves led only to loneliness and despair, so by letting go of his desire to be totally independent, he realizes he will be better able to open himself up to the possibility of genuine relationships with the people around him.

Based on this Epiphany, does Scout quit his job or take other steps to open himself up to new friends and old? We never find out for sure. The final paragraph only portrays Scout submerged in a cold mountain lake -- seemingly a baptism of sorts intended to purge his old mentality so he can begin anew. He equates this water with the hands of God which he now realizes he needs. He says of these hands that they are "the

hands that care, the hands that mold; the hands that touch the lips, the lips that speak the words -- the words that tell us we are whole" (360). So we do not know what Scout's life has in store for him as the novel closes, but we do know that he has had a breakthrough in his life of faith. Is he now going to live a life that is radically monotheistic? It is possible, but even if he does not live a life of radical faith he at least is on the way to a more fulfilling existence. By recognizing that there is something bigger, something outside of himself to which he can cling in trust, he is better able to feel something for the people around him; he wants to share life and experience it fully. Even if he is disappointed, he knows that he is, as he says, whole. He is a whole person, even if he does make wrong decisions. He feels some of the burden lifted that has been weighing him down. He knows that by shutting himself off from others, he limits his options of finding happiness, but by opening himself up to and caring for others, he is actually more free because he is ready and willing to experience what life has to offer.

CONCLUSION

Scout realizes by the end of *Life After God* that a fulfilling existence requires genuine I/Thou relationships. This is also one of the main points I have tried to support throughout this paper. A healthy life of faith, even if it is not radically monotheistic, must have an openness to these types of encounters. The current state of our society makes radical monotheism virtually impossible, I think, but I also think that individuals still can seek to embody this ideal in their day-to-day interactions. Scout, at one point in the novel, has an insight regarding this idea. He thinks of how we will occasionally have these small moments in the course of our day that stick with us for some reason because they pull us out of our own heads. He gives the examples of sharing an elevator ride with a bride in her veil or having a child randomly strike up a conversation with you. And Scout guesses:

If we were to collect these small moments in a notebook and save them over a period of months we would see certain trends emerge from our collection...we would realize that we have been having another life altogether, one we didn't even know was going on inside us. And maybe this *other* life is more important than the one we think of as being real...So

just maybe it is these small silent moments which are the true story-making events of our lives (254-255).

I think this idea is so fascinating because it suggests the possibility for something close to a radically monotheistic faith. These moments he describes that we pass over as unimportant are precisely the moments that show us our potential to reach outside of ourselves in order to seek relation with others. These are moments in which we come away from our own personal problems and self-centered agendas and look at another person and recognize that we are participating in something special by entering into this encounter, even if it is fleeting. If we seek life's true fulfillment through these moments of relation instead of through the obtaining of some future goal -- although it is important to *have* future goals -- I think we would be more trusting and able to commit to one another to a greater degree. We would know that we are a part of something bigger than our own personal dramas.

I said in the introduction that I offer no solutions to the state of broken faith as it exists today, but that just recognizing a problem exists is a first step. While Niebuhr absolutely defended Christianity as a valid means to having a positive life of faith, I have intended merely to show that his understanding of faith is universal in the sense that it can be

applied across the board to any institution including any particular religion.

Once faith is understood as belief, trust and loyalty, it is difficult not to see it at work everywhere you look, and if this turns out to be the case for those reading this paper, then I have achieved a great deal.

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