B. REINHOLD NIEBUHR, "INTELLECTUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY"
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Thought, ed. Charles W. Kegley and Robert W.
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Meanwhile the war was dissipating other illusions
of the nineteenth century world view which informed
American Christianity. But I was influenced in my
disillusionment more by local than by international
experience. In my parish duties I found that the simple
idealism into which the classical faith had evaporated
was as irrelevant to the crises of personal life as
it was to the complex social issues of an industrial

Two old ladies were dying shortly after I assumed
charge of the parish. They were both equally respec-
table members of the congregation. I soon noted
that their manner of facing death was strikingly dis-
similar. One old lady was too preoccupied with self,
too aggrieved that Providence should not have taken
account of her virtue in failing to protect her
against a grievous illness, to be able to face death
with any serenity. She was in a constant hysteria
of fear and resentment. While my own simple idealism
would have scarcely been equal to the test of facing
the ultimate issue, I found myself deeply disturbed
by the fact that faith was evidently of so little
account in the final test. The other old lady had
brought up a healthy and wholesome family, though her
husband was subject to periodic fits of insanity which
forced her to be the breadwinner as well as homemaker.
Just as her two splendid daughters had finished their
training and were eager to give their mother a secure
and quiet evening of life, she was found to be suffering
from cancer. I stood weekly at the bedside while she
told me what passages of Scripture, what Psalms and
what prayers to read to her; most of them expressed
gratitude for all the mercies of God which she had
received in life. She was particularly grateful for her
two daughters and their love; and she faced death with
the utmost peace of soul.

I relearned the essentials of the Christian faith
at the bedside of the nice old soul. I appreciated
that the ultimate problem of human existence is the
perilous chance of death in the way that it is
compounded; for we fall into sin by trying to evade or to conquer death or our own
insignificance, of which death is the ultimate symbol.
The Christian faith holds out the hope that our frag-
mentary lives will be completed in a total and larger
plan than any which we control or comprehend, and that
a part of the completion is the forgiveness of sins;
that is, the forgiveness of the evils into which we
fall by our frantic efforts to complete our own lives
or to endow them with significance. I was conscious
of the nobility which was the fruit of the simple
faith of a single woman; and that was not the only time
in parish duties in which I learned the meaning of

Christ's prayer: "I thank Thee, Father, that Thou
hast withheld these things from the wise and prudent
and revealed them unto babes." As for the difference
between the fate of the two old ladies, outwardly so
similar until submitted to the ultimate test, we in
the churches ought to admit more humbly than is our
wont that there is a mystery of grace which no one
can fathom. "Two women will be grinding at the mill.
The one will be taken and the other left." The Church
is a curiously mixed body consisting of those who have
never been shaken in their self-esteem or self-right-
eousness and who use the forms of religion for purposes
of self-aggrandizement; and of the true Christians who
live by "a broken spirit and a contrite heart."
Whether we belong to this latter group, which makes
up the true but invisible Church, no one but God can
know. Facing the test of death is obviously more
important than I had imagined in the days of my simple
"moralism." But I have noted, in these latter days
of Christianity's struggle with Nazi and Communist
idolatries, that defiance of malignant evil, involving
the peril of death, is also a test which proves
some obscure saints to be true conquerors, while
others less obscure may fall mysteriously and pass the
test. Indeed, one must come to the conclusion that none
of us can be certain whether we have the faith or the
courage to pass any final test. "If any man stand
let him take heed lest he fall."

My early writings were all characterized by a
critical attitude toward the "liberal" world view, whether
conceived in secular or in Christian terms. There
was, as a matter of fact, little difference
between the secular and Christian versions of the
optimism of the nineteenth-century culture. For years
I commuted, as it were, between ecclesiastical and
academic communities. I found each with a sense of
superiority over the other either because it possessed,
or had discarded, the Christian faith. But this contest
was ironic because the viewpoints of the two commun-
ities were strikingly similar, and both were obviously
irrelevant to the ultimate realities, whether in
terms of mankind's collective behavior or in terms
of individual man's ultimate problems.