

**EAGLE OF POWER, RAVEN OF GUILT:  
HISTORICAL AND RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS  
OF THE CURRENT GLOBAL CRISIS**

**CONVERSATIONS WITH LANGDON GILKEY**

by

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*On 3 December 2001, I traveled to Charlottesville, Virginia, where I visited Langdon and Sonja Gilkey in their home. Mr. Gilkey and I had the following conversations, largely oriented around the then-recent events of September 11th and their immediate aftermath, while sitting at the Gilkey's kitchen table. I am grateful for the time that Mr. Gilkey took to share his theological observations and insights with me, but regret that they have come to publication only after his death. I thank Ms. Gilkey for her gracious hospitality during that visit.*

**JBP:** Professor Gilkey, I would like to focus our conversations primarily through one central issue: *the contemporary global crisis that has manifested itself through the events of September 11th and their aftermath.* Because people in the U.S., but also all around the world, genuinely find themselves confused, even bewildered and frightened, about the present global crisis, they are searching for practical wisdom to understand these troubled and frightening times—precisely that which you have to offer through our conversation.

Thus, in my first few questions, I want to ask you to offer a theological analysis and interpretation of, as well as a response to, the present situation—as manifested especially through the events of September 11th, and precisely in the categories of your most recent

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assessments of the world's cultural and religious situation. Through that focus, we can engage several of the specific and important themes of your theological perspective.

In light of your own theology of culture (especially, as developed in your book, *Blue Twilight*—specifically, your chapters entitled, “The Religious Right,” “American Theology since Niebuhr and Tillich,” “Plurality and Its Theological Implications,” and “The Religious Situation at the Beginning of the New Millennium”), and also in the spirit of Paul Tillich’s older analyses of the global and religious situations of the 1920s through the 1950s, how would you characterize the present global and religious situation, and what major categories of this present situation manifest themselves most prominently and urgently in light of the horrific events of September 11th and their continuing aftermath? How have you been thinking about these events and their aftermath as a Christian theologian? Also, what do you understand as most important theologically about the present global religious situation in light of September 11th?

**LG:** I must admit that I’ve been thinking mostly historically about these events and the situation, although the premise of all of these discussions is that the historical is also the theological. But I’m inclined to get at it in my own mind, first, by asking historically, “what does this represent?” My own view has slowly developed since September 11th—though, I must say, most of it lies back a long time in my whole life experience.

It seems to me that the major thing to note, without giving a political, social, and economic history of the last 500 years, is the expansion and tremendous power of the western European nations as the major aspect of what was happening in the globe. Certainly going back further, one would have to talk about the Chinese Empire, the development of India, and of course, more familiar to us, Greece and Rome. Then, one must not forget by any means, though most of us were inclined to do so, the very great development of Islamic culture after 622 C.E. in a remarkably fast way. I’ve always thought that, if Christians took as a proof of the truth of Christianity, the growth of Christianity, the growth of Islam was really much more of a miracle;

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and it swept over the world within about 100 years—into Spain, into most of southern Europe, except Italy, certainly into Greece as we know, into Yugoslavia, and was battering at the doors of Vienna in 1453. I remember encountering that first as a student, in reading Luther’s distaste for the Turks and the Muslims; and I remember thinking that Luther was not an unprejudiced man, but this was pretty heavy stuff. Then, I looked to the encyclopedia and saw that, right at that moment, Vienna was about to go. And so that’s not what we remember: we remember the Roman Empire, the collapse of the Roman Empire; and we remember the growth of Europe slowly. Also, some of us remember the Crusades—although, I’m not sure that George W. Bush knew the historical reference of that word; but, maybe he did.

Looking back a couple of hundred years more, to 1200 or 1300, the Islamic Empires were, if anything, far superior to the relatively barbaric European worlds. Through the Islamic Empires and through their, should I say, “liberal” theologians—who had envied Aristotle and tried to think out Aristotle in Islamic terms—the rise of Christian Theology in the Medieval period, especially with Albertus Magnus and St. Thomas Aquinas, came to flower. Medieval Christian theologians were dependent on Islamic Theology—as American Theology has been dependant on European Theology—and I don’t think that analogy is way off. There was no other avenue, until the Renaissance, to the Greek world. There was to the Roman world, but that went through the Christian Fathers and through the blessed Augustine. And this was what brought about the very important growth of culture and of thinking and of science in the Medieval world, and from there developed the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, then the modern world. The Ottoman world, which steadily declined to a dependent status in relation to the growing power of the West, was on the wrong side of World War I and just almost non-existent in the period between the two world wars.

The most important issue involved here is the tremendous global expansion of the West, which whirlwind we have been reaping since the aftermath of the First World War. I have some

feeling for this, because a reaction of hatred, cruelty, and expansion lay behind and caused the Japanese explosion of the 1930s to free Asia from the grip of—and a relatively benevolent grip let us say, but nevertheless a grip—the French, the Dutch, and above all the British. Between the three of them, the British ruled almost every inch of East Asia, except for China, whom they told what to do. The Europeans certainly dominated Japan and ruled the rest of Asia in one way or another. One thinks of the treaty boards in China, including Hong Kong, the possession of Malaysia and of Singapore, French Indochina as it was when I was young, and of course of the Dutch East Indies. Now, India and the Middle East, in one way or another the whole Mediterranean Basin, most of Africa, were governed by European power. I was fascinated with the novel *Shogun*, which said that, in 1601, a Portuguese ship arrived in the Pacific; and, from then on, no Japanese or Chinese ship dared come near the European ships. They ruled the sea and that gives you a sense of what happened when the West came into Asia.

**JBP:** Add to that the Americas.

**LG:** Exactly, one can add to that the Americas. The globe was painted in European colors and there's no doubt about that. Beginning in 1601, through 1900, through and until the middle of the twentieth century, this was the global situation.

I experienced the Japanese explosion. We also experienced the Chinese explosion—again of anger, of distaste, of hatred, not of terrorism in this case, but a war. Washington didn't understand a thing about it, about all of this, that this was a reaction of a national group, rather than Marxism, though Marxism was the vehicle of this. But it wasn't as essentially Marxist as it was nationalistic in China and in Vietnam. Now, as far as I can see, we've had the Japanese, the Chinese, the Vietnamese explosions of throwing off Western control. If we could have seen that, we would not have tried to replace the French in Vietnam—that's exactly what we were trying to do, replace the French, in the eyes of the Vietnamese. The French had been wise enough, and beaten up enough, to get out. But we didn't see that.

In all of this, we've forgotten, and I've forgotten and don't know that much about, that another great empire (the Islamic Empire), besides the Chinese and the Japanese and so on, with its own memories of glory, had been pushed to the side, humiliated, ruled in effect, and left with uncreative, absolutist—and relatively corrupt—kinds of government, and that this was the remaining festering sore of the Western conquest of the world. As a result of the Second World War, of course, the United States had taken the place of Europe as the spearhead of global dominance. I'm not being at all non-resistant here, and such a civilization has values and must defend itself: but it ought to know its own ambiguity, its own history and the causes.

These factors long precede the cause of Israel and the Palestinians. We can understand, to a great extent, the Palestinian anger—though we can also understand the necessity, the obligation to support Israel. That's one of the most impossible situations either to solve or to understand intellectually. There are grounds for tremendous sympathy for both sides, it seems to me. I don't want to speak as any kind of an expert on that situation.

**JBP:** In *Reaping the Whirlwind*, you have developed a theology of history, in which you described features of the decline of Western culture, all under a metaphor of divine judgment from a Jewish and Christian biblical text: Hosea 8:7. Recently, comments by Jerry Falwell, a fundamentalist Christian, and Osama Bin Laden, an Islamic extremist, have delivered remarkably similar assessments about the terrorist attacks of September 11th: to the effect that those horrible events represented God's or Allah's judgment on the United States (Falwell, of course, attributing the cause for that divine judgment to God's displeasure with homosexuality and other activities or policies with which Falwell disagrees; and Bin Laden finding the cause for this divine judgment in the support of Israel by the U.S.). Now, even though generally Christianity and Islam differ quite significantly from one another in many ways, in light of your understanding of the major features in our contemporary situation, why do the fundamentalist Christian and the Islamic extremist theological interpretations of these recent atrocities resemble

one another so closely? To ask this another way, what factors make it possible for two such different religious traditions to respond so similarly to the atrocities of September 11th?

**LG:** If one asks, does the present situation result from the judgment of God, of course, I'm not with Jerry [Falwell] and with Pat [Robertson] on the particular causes of that. Rather, I'm pointing to the kinds of things that they support too unequivocally for me, mainly capitalism if you will, though I don't think capitalism is to blame here. I mean the economic and political dominance of what they would regard as God's civilized world. And I think that their view only adds to the fuel of the divine displeasure as far as I'm concerned. We should resist [terrorism], but we should be humble in our resistance. With the fall of France, that kind of theological attitude from Reinhold Niebuhr invoked my interest in the Christian Faith: that one must resist, make choices, but, on the other hand, know one's own sins. Now, the big difference between the two of them—and I don't mean that this makes either of them better—is that Falwell and Robertson found the causes of this to be in the evils of our own culture. As far as I heard Osama, he found the causes of these events to be in our culture, the other culture for him. I didn't hear, I don't hear much repentance on the part of Osama bin Laden; of course, I don't feel there was any repentance on the part of Falwell or Robertson.

**JBP:** No.

**LG:** No, other people were doing these horrible things, not they themselves; and I think that's an error. That's non-biblical from beginning to end.

**JBP:** The evaluation and repentance should start with the church first.

**LG:** Yes, start with yourself. Fundamentalist analyses—and these two [Falwell and Osama] illustrations of Fundamentalism are good—always are too darned concrete and very unprofound in what they find the Lord to be doing. Whether they're talking about creation, or what have you, there's nothing subtle about it. I don't mean that my own analysis is particularly subtle: it's historical. But it points, in the same way as the fundamentalists were seeking to do,

to the roots of a problem. The first sermon that I ever preached was in China, when the [Second World War] had started. I pointed out that the Allied cause, while just, was as ambiguous as anything. We had empires that were ruling the world: we had better remember that and, in this sense, repent, and be humble, and be willing to forgive the Japanese. At that time, the Japanese were all around us, and they were being infinitely cool; and, I must say, a lot of the people in the congregation in Beijing, mostly missionaries, didn't agree with me at all. With the fall of France, Niebuhr's way of looking at things struck me as so superior to the academic, to the naturalist, the Orthodox Christian, and Fundamentalist Christian viewpoints. This was right on the button, and I suppose I'm here a child Reinhold Niebuhr: I don't want to take credit for any of this.

**JBP:** At this point in our history, Reinhold Niebuhr is particularly significant.

**LG:** I think so. Now, the blessed Paul Tillich could very easily have said this kind of thing. But, as I've said many times, I've heard him say: "well, you know, I've come to this country, I'm not about to say what's going on here. The citizens of this country were open to me." Tillich wasn't like many of the immigrants who were ready to point the finger: he never did. He said, "they welcomed me." I'll never forget Tillich saying, "over there sits a genius, ask him [Reinhold Niebuhr]." He used to say that to the seminary students who would ask him questions about the political world: "no, come on, there's a genius over there, ask him." Tillich's insight into the decline of culture that he identifies in his analysis of late 19th-century European culture is a very persuasive one. The culture, at that point, was certainly chewing itself to bits. I think it recovered, but recovered largely through the good services of America: and I thank God for Woodrow Wilson who taught F.D.R. about the kind of peace that would be created; and I think we should give F.D.R. credit for that point, both the resistance and the thoughts of a new kind of peace which he passed on and wasn't able to implement. But the peace treaty of both, in Europe and in Japan, were the seeds of the creative growth for the rest of

the twentieth century. As I've said many times, when the eagle of power sits on your right shoulder, the raven of guilt sits on your left shoulder: and this was true of Europe. As power left the Greek city states and moved to Macedonia and to Rome, so power left the European states and moved to the United States and of course to Russia, after the Second World War. The reality of ambiguity (let's not say sin, though I think sin lies back of all of these things), in the role of the powerful is a character of history; and it's a character of twentieth-century history. And you pay for that.

**JBP:** So are you saying that limits, which you would describe as tragic rather than evil per se, would afflict all powers, whether or not those powers are involved in sinful social injustices?

**LG:** Yes, you can begin to catalog their sins, but they're not the cause; and, certainly, I would have a different list than brothers Falwell and Robertson. But that's to be expected: I have a different list than the Republicans probably.

**JBP:** Perhaps the list [of sins] that you and I would make would include some things that they would consider the highest values of the European Culture.

**LG:** Yes, exactly. When I was going to Europe in 1939, a Junior in college at the time, I found a Britisher on the boat going over; and I hounded that poor guy—I think, with objectionable enthusiasm—about how evil the British Empire was. And I remember that the poor guy was running around the deck, and I'd follow him. Then, during the Vietnam War, when I was in Toronto, a Canadian came up to me and sat down while I was having coffee: he worked me over, in exactly the same way. I remember smiling to myself, as I held up my arms to withstand the blast, thinking of my innocent self-righteousness in 1939—because we [the U.S.] didn't exercise power in 1939. That's when I developed the thesis that the eagle of power has a buddy, the raven of guilt.

**JBP:** I don't think I've heard you use those metaphors before, but I'm glad that you did today. Have you published that idea anywhere?

**LG:** I don't think so. Anyway, I think that the Palestinian-Israeli situation represents one of the subservient causes for the events of September 11th and serves for Muslims as a powerful symbol of the fact that Western powers are anti Islamic. And another fact, which apparently was the initial one for Osama, was that there were infidel troops in Islamic sacred spaces. Certainly, the relation of the Islamic empire, even in its declining years, to Christians was not as antithetical as Osama: that is, Muslims, Christians, and Jews were intertwined in Islamic culture. At that point, I think that Islamic people and Islamic scholars are justified in saying that the recent extremism is not characteristic of all Islam. I'm inclined to say that, for Islam, theocracy is one of the natural implications of the religion as such, in a way that is not the case for Buddhism—though there's been a history of this in Buddhism and Hinduism and Christianity. All of them, however, have a prophetic stance against the nation, and even a sacred nation, even the chosen nation, a prophetic stance that makes a theocratic nationalism or nationalistic theocracy something rare and difficult within either the Jewish religion or the Christian religion.

**JBP:** The drive toward a theocratic nation does seem to be something, though, that the Christian fundamentalists hold in common with Islamic fundamentalists?

**LG:** Yes, I know; to make it "Christian America" would be to go very closely to the kind of thing that Islam represents. At that point, though, the Saudis, the Iranians, the ruling group in Afghanistan, and Osama particularly, are certainly examples of the purifying, clarifying wave in the history of Islam against corruption, a drive toward getting back to the basics. I'm just glad that this hasn't been so characteristic of Judaism, though it's there in Judaism in the right-wing of Israel. There's no question about it, and it's there in our own fundamentalist groups in the U.S. As you rightly say, if they unpack their whole agenda, this would certainly be the case with

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the creationists who believed that they were going to take over the Republican party in the 1990s; and, when they did, they would make the U.S. into “Christian America.”

**JBP:** Fundamentalists seem still to be aiming for that goal. In your own work, however, you have described one of the characteristics of our present situation as a rough parity between the different religious traditions. As your comments today imply, this rough parity is something we recognize in the West perhaps more than is recognized in places like Iran or Afghanistan.

**LG:** The notion of rough parity among religions is simply and solely a child of the European Enlightenment: I’ve got to admit it. When I was in graduate school—I laugh about this now—we all thought that the Enlightenment was the worst thing that ever happened to the West. In those blessed days back in the late 1940s and ’50s, the fundamentalist revival was not at all a factor. We still shared the assumption of the first part of the twentieth century that fundamentalism was on the way out. You don’t find four lines in Reinhold Niebuhr’s work about this. That fundamentalist revival really didn’t take place until the 1960s, ’70s, and so forth. I never saw the fundamentalist revival as a real problem in the first part of my life. Well, “Inherit the Wind,” is a good example, the wonderful movie about the Scopes Trial.

Fundamentalism was certainly there in Tennessee, but the North didn’t experience fundamentalism at all. The view was that this is going out like the buggy: I mean, these fundamentalists don’t have shoes; they ride in buggies, and they don’t have cars; they don’t use machinery; they don’t have this, that, and the other, and that’s that part of their culture—well it was. The interesting thing is that fundamentalism has grown up and prospered within the technologically-advanced culture of the North, and in California, Oklahoma, and Texas. The Southern Baptist Convention is a marvelous example of this; these are as bourgeois as anything.

**JBP:** That’s true, though economically things have changed for that culture. Fundamentalist Baptists are no longer poor and uneducated, limited largely to rural areas.

**LG:** And they're not on the edge of culture. When you enter the culture, they're in the middle of culture in the broadest sense of the word, absolutely. During the mid-twentieth century, the Enlightenment seemed to be what had blown "biblical religion," as we called it then, out of the situation; but "biblical religion" wasn't fundamentalist, which I realized with startling clarity, when I began to have to fight the creationists. If you look at my *Maker of Heaven and Earth*, there's hardly a reference to science in it. Nature was not one of the things that we were talking about. I realized that the Enlightenment had not really caused the problem for the biblical view of history or of nature. But it was the development of the scientific world, beginning with geology. And that's why I always tell my fundamentalist creationist friends: "don't you go back to San Diego in your Buick; you have to take an Oxcart, because your car uses fossil fuel; and they call on geologists, not preachers, to get that oil out of the ground." But anyway, that made me appreciate the Enlightenment and the scientific movement as helping Christianity find out what Christianity was, as an aid to the interpretation of Christianity.

Anyway, getting back to the original question about religions, the possibility of the idea of the rough parity of religions is an idea arising from the Enlightenment; but the other cause of it, the other background of it, is what we were talking about previously, the breakup of the empires. The empires vanished, crumbled; and the European political power, I mean governmental power, military power, withdrew to Europe: so that out of this withdrawal came a relatively chaotic situation politically, militarily, and so forth, in each one of these places formerly occupied and dominated by European powers, though not in Japan. With the crumbling of the European hegemony, came a new cultural autonomy. This is the time in which Buddhism began to be exported through missionaries; and, as I've said several times, the missionary movement changes its flow—and both Vedanta and Buddhism begin to appear in all kinds of ways in the West. And one has a positive development in all of these. Now Buddhism particularly began to flower and to export itself.

**JBP:** We even have a Hare Krishna Temple in Dallas.

**LG:** Well I can remember, when I was visiting Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, down one of the streets was a Vishnu Temple. That wasn't there in the 1920s and '30s. Now, whether there is rough parity on both sides of the dialogue, is an interesting question. The trial run on this rough parity was obviously the dialogues between Judaism and Christianity, which go back a good deal before this—and Niebuhr and Tillich were very instrumental in developing that. They were tremendously interested in that problem, and both of them, of course, saw the anti-Semitic elements developing in Europe very clearly in the 1920s and '30s into poisonous form. The problem of dialogue with the Jews was something that they thought about and carried on, so that they were well known in this respect. I must say that my father [Charles W. Gilkey] was very much involved in that also.

**JBP:** I'm glad that you mentioned your father, because he delivered the Barrows Lectures in New Delhi, which address many of the issues that we're discussing right now. He strongly advocated developing dialogue with other religions.

**LG:** Yes, well, this was something in which the liberals really believed. Father believed in this too, and father was not alone at that point. This position was then an implication of their concept of the social gospel. And, within that, was the great virtue of tolerance, an element of the most importance to the liberal movement, tolerance of other denominations, tolerance of other theological points of view. The National Council of Churches was built on that possibility, and the World Council of Churches was built on that possibility. That was liberalism, and that was the Enlightenment. Tolerance and community were the two great virtues of twentieth-century liberalism. In that sense, the historical roots of the notion of rough parity among religions include liberalism, as well as the Enlightenment and the crumbling of empires. Well, even Thomas Aquinas had been very tolerant of various points of view, including those of

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Aristotle. But there was always: “and I answer that.” I think that’s not rough parity. Rough parity among religions is a child of the Enlightenment.

**JBP:** So the notion of rough parity still is more of a Western impulse?

**LG:** Yes, I think so. Dialogue occurs, because we’re one world; and the West is the dominant factor in the world. And here’s where I find amusing my own repudiation of the Enlightenment. We are children of the Enlightenment, thank the good Lord, and of liberalism, which is itself a child of the Enlightenment. And that element remained within, strangely, the Neo-Orthodox movement. I mean even Karl Barth, who didn’t like religion, but wasn’t about to make one religion superior to other religions. Now that’s a pretty dialectical position that could well be sniffed out suspiciously. I must say, as a North American, I’m inclined to look at European Neo-Orthodox theology as more Euro-centric than the North American forms of that theology at that point. They didn’t think much of the Western world, but it wasn’t quite as self-destructive as it turned out in 1918 and the 1920s, when Rudolf Bultmann and H. Emil Brunner were making their wonderful theological statements. So, although I don’t think they were tolerant of other religions, they weren’t about to blast them—and they didn’t. They inherited a good deal of the liberal tendencies, which is astounding when you think of how they theologically argued with liberalism. But Brunner went to Japan and gave lectures. I don’t think Barth ever did. He went to America; that was enough. With Tillich, though, you really got something.

**JBP:** Your thoughts about the principle of tolerance within liberal theology raises another question. In your thoughts about justice and culture, you have also developed and used the category of “the intolerable,” in reference to dangerous cultural and political expressions, such as the theocratic aims of various religious groups like the Christian “Religious Right” in the U. S. and the Islamic extremists in Iran and Afghanistan, which is relevant to our conversation about the events of September 11th. In light of both your understanding of the “rough parity” of

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all religions, and your commitment not merely to tolerating other religious communities and traditions but also even to encouraging openness to revelation that comes through religious traditions that differ from one's own religious traditions, how do you explain an application of the category of "the intolerable" to certain values, practices, and aims of extremist or fundamentalist religious communities? Would you describe what you mean by the notion of the intolerable in culture, particularly as different religions encounter one another—especially in the extreme forms about which you have already spoken? In other words, what are some of the ambiguities, paradoxes, or contradictions latent within the diversity of the rough parity among the many religions?

**LG:** That's a good way of putting it. I was thinking of fundamentalist Christianity in the United States and creationism. North American fundamentalism is as it is partly because of the benevolent presence of mother law in this country and the Constitution, the separation of church and state. The fundamentalists' adherence to that presence is an interesting question, but that's what has to happen. Therefore, there is a certain tolerance on their part, necessary for other forms of Christianity, other churches, Jews, and the Islamic people in our midst; I don't really know how much their leaders believe in that as well as accept it. I don't have any idea of what Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, or any other leaders of that movement, think about that. They talk about "Christian America." The implication of second-class citizenship is undoubted for anybody who is not a born-again Christian and so on. I don't think that the genuine dialogue of listening to the other would be characteristic of them.

The current vitality of fundamentalist Christianity in this country raises an interesting issue. In the 1920s and '30s, we understood fundamentalist religion to have a very short future. That conclusion could now be made about the future of *liberal* Christian religion, though I expect that liberal Judaism has a pretty good future. Well, the United States seems to be very religious, and so I'm not sure at the end of the last century whether my own feelings, and they're

not based on anything but feelings, about the decline of the West has been more perhaps feelings about the decline of Christian theology, the decline of the Christian church.

**JBP:** You have talked about the decline of the West in general, but also of Christianity in the United States in particular. Yet, the world has experienced a spike of growth in conservative as well as fundamentalist forms of Christianity.

**LG:** Not of liberalism, though.

**JBP:** Certainly. Along those lines, we see in theology right now a great growth in the popularity of the form of post-liberalism that George Lindbeck has proposed. Lindbeck has talked about himself as a post-liberal and talked about his own perspective on this as *the* perspective on post-liberalism. You, however, understood yourself as a post-liberal in the early 1950s, in Reinhold Niebuhr's sense of that term. Yet, at this time, there is a growing popularity of the Lindbeckian form of post-liberalism. This family of post-liberalism ultimately traces back to Karl Barth's version of post-liberalism, not, Reinhold Niebuhr's form of post-liberalism.

**LG:** Yes, absolutely. This was the power of Barth and why Barth became so important. As the culture became demonic, the church speaks to itself on its grounds alone. Barth was a socialist, but I take his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* as the essential Barth. The position that he took in that work made Barth the theologian on the continent for the German Confessing Church, for the Dutch, for the resistance movement in France, and so forth—because the culture was demonic. And Reinhold Niebuhr never experienced that; both he and Tillich would have had the idea that a culture can be demonic. They continued to understand Christianity as essentially related to culture, however, both in terms of dependence and in terms of obligation or responsibility. Barthianism doesn't admit the dependence on culture, which is absurd. For Barthians, culture is the enemy, although they see the obligation in terms of activity. Barth was a loyal socialist and hauled out his rifle as a member of the Swiss Guard. But this wasn't ingredient to the understanding of the faith. Nonetheless, via Bart, the anti-

Enlightenment feeling came into theology. Well, it entered certainly with Niebuhr too, to some extent with Tillich less, and we all absorbed it—the dependence of theology on its cultural base, the relativity of theology—which, incidentally, the Neo-Orthodox always recognize, interestingly enough. Even Barth does.

That sense of relativity, that's Troeltsch, probably quite disliked by the Barthians, but nevertheless very much ingredient to that whole movement which was an implication of liberalism. Theology itself is relative to its culture. I disagree with Lindbeck, on the grounds that, when the church is speaking to the church a relevant word, the church is speaking in the terms of its culture. Christians exist in the culture and act in the culture, day-by-day, twenty-four hours a day. We are not responsible just for the parking lot of the church or the accounts of the church; but we're responsible for the community, for its tolerance, for its justice. And this responsibility must be reflected in the theological word of the church, in its preaching and its teaching, and in its theology—both the dependence and the responsibility. But I suspect that Barth developed the sense of the independence and autonomy of the church in its preaching from the word of God, because of a growing sense of the demonic in culture.

The fundamentalists, however, glory far too much in the culture and regard it as something God-given, so that their non-engagement with the culture is quite different from the Barthian or even the Lindbeckian lack of conversation with the culture. Rather, for fundamentalism, such non-engagement means that they don't have to tackle the culture in any way, except for the things that they don't like—such as homosexuality, which they consider to be sin or a vice. This is characteristic of much Christian piety: to see sin as vices and not to look at the ways of the world, so to speak, in terms of power, in terms of injustice, in terms of war. I don't see them finding themselves against all war or against the military—not at all.

**JBP:** Or against the excesses of capitalism.

**LG:** No.

**JBP:** You began your career in theology, strongly oriented by Reinhold Niebuhr's Neo-Orthodox theology, tempered by Tillich's theology through the years as well, nonetheless influenced by similar strains in the thought of both theologians. Although you have often articulated your respect for Karl Barth's theology, you have also said repeatedly, in both lectures and publications, that Barth's theology did not influence the development of your own neo-orthodox perspective—attributing the primary Neo-orthodox influence to Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich (in qualified ways).

**LG:** Yes, that's absolutely right, we can even list the books that I've published recently that reflect those two influences.

**JBP:** In that light, to what extent, after all this time and through the various moments that represent the shifts in your theology through the years, would you continue to define or consider yourself to be Neo-orthodox theologically?

**LG:** Well, when I wrote my recent book on Niebuhr, I was writing the book about my own theology.

**JBP:** With a heavy tribute there, not just the tribute of theological analysis!

**LG:** Yes, a personal tribute.... I really loved Paul Tillich, and I admired his work. But I didn't have that same feeling.

**JBP:** Niebuhr's prophetic perspective has emerged again as extremely relevant in our situation.

**LG:** Oh yes, I think so, and my remarks today almost reproduce my own statements in the sermon that I preached in China and to which I referred earlier, which grew out of the shocking experience at the fall of France. And hearing Niebuhr the next week, suddenly finding a way of looking at that, I found settling, grounding. Up to that point, and I've said this in my book on Niebuhr, the ambiguity which Americans felt was very much a part of our upbringing. I don't mean to blame this on the generation after the First World War; they were not pacifists.

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But they didn't want anything to do with war. War was the munitions-makers, the empires, and so forth—and America, bless it's heart, doesn't want anything to do with this. Well that was the way we were; and that was why Avery Dulles (now Cardinal) and I, two Harvard seniors, established the Keep-America-out-of-the-War Committee at Harvard. We invited a famous Irish senator from Massachusetts to speak. We didn't know him; we just knew that he wanted to keep America out of the war. He said that Hitler was evil, but, if you want a real evil, the British Empire was the real evil. You could see the irony of this: Roosevelt had appointed Kennedy as the Ambassador to Great Britain at that point. The two values of justice and peace seemed to oppose one another. The demands of justice were that you go fight; the demands of peace were that you don't go fight.

In Niebuhr's thought, I saw how that universe could be resolved. You have God who transcends all our values. Now, how good that is in the long look or in God's eyes I don't know, but it helped the problem there. Humility, repentance, and resistance became possibilities that made sense—and I gobbled up Niebuhr's books. And I still find that tremendously helpful. The West, in a sense, has been under the divine judgment for the whole century that I've been alive; and the divine judgment works itself out in a history of violence and destruction that, as I say, begins with, as far as I can see, the Japanese. Now the German and the Italian revolts were revolts against the cruelty and ambiguity of the Treaty of Versailles, though obviously the Germans were in large part to blame for World War I; but still they were crushed by the treaty at the end of World War I and that's why I take Woodrow Wilson as a great figure here. He said that, if you crush the Germans this way, they'll be back in twenty or thirty years. By God, he was right! If there'd been a crushing treaty in both Japan and Germany after World War II, you can be sure we would have paid the bill for that.

**JBP:** Niebuhr helped you to negotiate the conflict between the aspiration to peace, on one hand, and the aspiration for justice, on the other. But you began to see this conflict early in your life.

**LG:** That conflict arises from the ambiguity of liberalism.

**JBP:** The notion of “the intolerable,” in your later theological work, seems to be another way that you try to negotiate this kind of conflict.

**LG:** Well it’s trying to get a name for why you say, “yes, we should be repentant, we should be humble and obviously do all we can to overcome what has caused this thing; but we have to resist.” Now, that was the experience of the fall of France, of Hitler, the Japanese empire. I remember when I arrived in Peking. I looked around and thought, “if I were Chinese, I would take up arms; I would go West and fight the Japanese.” Resistance was important, but Pearl Harbor had not occurred and had not brought me to that conclusion: as far as I was concerned, it was the experience of Peking. “The intolerable,” and that’s the experience—now you must name the thing that makes you resist, right? And the category of “the intolerable” is my attempt to name what creates that. Our own sin creates the need for repentance, remorse, efforts to change it. If you ask why is it that you find you have to resist, however, it is that something is intolerable. The first thing on that list was Adolf Hitler; the second was the Japanese Empire. I finally had to name that experience.

The situation to which I addressed the concept of “the intolerable” was the idea of a militant Christian America which would be intolerable—intolerable to you and to me, as well as to others outside of the United States, to which we would become a resistance movement. Now that’s the source of the word “intolerable.”

**JBP:** That category applies even to a situation like the Taliban society in Afghanistan.

**LG:** Oh yes, I would say so. You know, the terrorists attacked us for reasons we don’t know—though I find it quite incredible to think that many of the people in the Taliban

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organization wanted to attack the United States. But it's an interesting question: what business the Taliban would be of ours, if the terrorists hadn't fired on us? I'm inclined to think that a nation should go to war only when it's own interests are deeply threatened and not because it finds something unjust. Now you bring pressure—what kind of pressure we would be interested in bringing on Afghanistan is an interesting theoretical question. Hitler was a different issue than this. Roosevelt was quite right in seeing that Hitler was really a danger to us, although I'm not sure how much the U.S. thought Japan was a danger to us. The word "intolerable," then, refers to something that evokes your resistance. I hesitate to use words like "outrage," "self-righteous," and so forth, because I think a very clear sense of the ambiguity of our role must accompany all such resistance.

**JBP:** This ambiguity appears in a variety of ways. Commitment to the parity of religions does raise a serious issue, because religious traditions (like Christian fundamentalism or Islamic extremism) do exist that include very restrictive societies as very much part of their worldviews. So, on the one side, serious aspects of the intolerable appear to us in some religious communities, thus eliciting our commitment to resistance; and, on the other side, we remain committed to religious parity as well as to the toleration and dialogue implied in that commitment. The conjunction of these two commitments constitutes quite an ambiguous situation for us.

**LG:** Absolutely. Actually, with the notion of religious parity, we're thinking of Judaism, Buddhism, a benevolent Hinduism, and so forth. It's a little harder to get Islam into that; and I must say I hope that I'm not prejudiced. I taught the history of religions at Vassar for three years. I don't think I did a very good job of it, but I loved that course. I remember thinking all three years that I taught the course: "well I've got to talk about Islam now: how am I going to do it with any real empathy."

**JBP:** When theocratic forms of religion appear, the real questions begin to emerge.

**LG:** That's the intolerable. In all these theocratic cases that I'm speaking about, these are essentially ideological struggles—including explicitly anti-religious political and cultural movements such as Stalinism. Not even Stalinism, however, was the kind of personal threat that fascism and fundamentalism were—though it's exactly the same thing. I mean Stalinist ideology, as Reinhold Niebuhr rightly said, is religion. It's interesting that the word "ideology" originally referred to a non-religious theory of the world or government. From the twentieth-century perspective, as Niebuhr certainly made plain, Stalinism had a myth about history that it believed—and it's a religion. The Communists hate religion as a rival. So they doubly hate Christianity. The Taliban are a *religious* example of the same kind of thing, a theocratic government by an ideology. Whether religious or secular, it is an ideology, a worldview, and a commitment. And that means that the way to handle this thing is infinitely tricky. There are no politics without some kind of a worldview, without some kind of a commitment, without an ideology.

**JBP:** In Tillich's assessment of the world's situation during the Second World War, he identified capitalism as a major feature and problem to be overcome. He identified the disintegration of capitalism or the protests against capitalism as part of the situation. To what extent do you perceive that the dynamics of capitalism are still involved in our present situation, specifically for such groups like those who initiated the recent terrorist acts against the United States?

**LG:** I'm just a reader of the *New York Times* here and don't pretend to say anything with any authority on this. My own feeling is that it is capitalism, but the idea that the Taliban are reacting against capitalism seems to me to not get to the whole issue. The reaction is against the tidal wave of the Western economic, political, and cultural world. Sin would exist in a socialist West as it does in the capitalist West. The Soviet Union didn't in any way mitigate this kind of pressure. It's that whole tidal wave that just is absolutely engulfing their civilization and

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pushing them to the side, pushing them out, beating them with the fragments of this culture, fragments only which are mediated to them through (for them) otherwise fairly despicable forms of political and economic life. They don't get democracy: but the influence of democracy on them requires them to create a kind of an absolutism that can talk to democracy. To deal with democracy, Saudi Arabia doesn't kick out our oil people and so on—though they might despise them. We are able to get in there, but not because they are capitalists.

**JBP:** To alter the direction of our conversation a bit, I have another question about theological influences on your thought. You devoted your dissertation to a study of the Christian doctrine of creation, the larger part of which became your book, *Maker of Heaven and Earth*. Your dissertation develops a strong critique of the thought of A. N. Whitehead, which continues into *Naming the Whirlwind*. When you published *Reaping the Whirlwind*, however, you discuss Whitehead again, but in a different way, a very positive way. Certainly, it's a critical appropriation, but nonetheless a more positive response to Whitehead. Now you've devoted books to a study of Niebuhr's theology, your primary influence, and to a study of Tillich's theology. You haven't devoted an entire book to Whitehead. But, to what extent would you continue to sense an indebtedness to process theology as a movement itself, but also to Whitehead in particular?

**LG:** I would distinguish those two. And that doesn't mean that process theology is not genuinely Whiteheadian, though I don't think Hartshorne is as close to Whitehead as everybody thinks he is. Actually, I had projected a book on Whitehead, thought that's one book I would like to write. I'm not sure I have the energy to do that anymore, and I'm sure that I haven't the interest to do it anymore. I find my life full enough of things. Well I'm 82.

I was more Whiteheadian than anything else in *Reaping the Whirlwind*. *Reaping the Whirlwind* sought to start with the empirical view of history as passage and to look at historians and social scientists and philosophers of history to see what makes history tick, and how to

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understand history ontologically—which I thought methodologically necessary in order to understand what a theological view of history was. You’ve got to get the structure of history, the ontology of history, in your mind, if you’re going to talk sensibly in the modern world about it. *Reaping the Whirlwind* was the largest constructive endeavor of my career. I think that what came out of it, and I’m glad that I’d studied Whitehead, was pretty close to Whitehead, very much. This analysis of the present situation, the way the past feeds into the events of the present and leads on to the events to come of the future, that’s the character of history; and I think that Whitehead is quite right.

Now, Whitehead sees God setting before the world the possibilities. Now that’s a difficult notion. Whitehead didn’t see, as clearly as someone who lived after Hitler, that one of the possibilities that God presented was Hitler—in this sense, this is the best illustration of the progressive character of Whitehead.

**JBP:** The liberal background.

**LG:** Yes, oh absolutely. It is Edwardian and a good example of the theory of progress being a metaphysical theory: God grows in value.

**JBP:** In *Maker of Heaven and Earth*, you made strong statements against natural theology, coming from the Neo-orthodox antipathy against arguments for the existence of God. Gradually, by the time you published *Reaping the Whirlwind*, that argument for God had come back, but through Whitehead, not through the classical arguments.

**LG:** I had written this argument as an analysis of passage, which certainly is a natural theology, as I stated in *Reaping the Whirlwind*.

**JBP:** You have stated in a number of publications that you came from a Baptist family. Your background is Baptist, of the formerly Northern Baptist Convention, now the American Baptist Churches/USA, not of the Southern Baptist Convention.

**LG:** My mother was Congregationalist.

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**JBP:** And your father served as Pastor of Hyde Park Baptist Church, a church affiliated with the former Northern Baptist Convention.

**LG:** Those were the two leading liberal groups in the northeast. Now they [American Baptist Churches/USA] have fundamentalists in there too. There was always a struggle in there, but [the liberals] kept winning. And father would always go to the meetings and come home a bit bruised. The Congregationalists, of course, were well known for their liberalism, though the daddy of all of this was Walter Rauschenbusch—no doubt about it. The Northern Baptists were the first to establish liberal seminaries and universities in the northeast: Andover-Newton, Colgate-Rochester, and the University of Chicago were right out of the beginnings of this, interestingly enough, in the 1890s. That was before many places were liberal, before Presbyterians or Episcopalians or anything. The Northern Baptists were at the forefront, and that was very much the Baptist background that I had.

**JBP:** You published an essay in an encyclopedia on Baptists, which I read a few years ago. You talk about two different forms of Baptist life in that short essay: a fundamentalist version of Baptist community; and Baptist community with an emphasis on social justice. But I also read an essay by your father, Charles Gilkey, called, “The Distinctive Baptist Witness.” In that essay, your father talked about items that he characterized as the distinctive Baptist witness: the spiritual competence of the individual before God, the protest against all binding humanly-constructed creeds, the appeal against all dictatorship in church and state, and freedom of conscience. How would you assess the influence of those particular features of the Baptist heritage, thoughts, and vision on your own theological method and maybe even on the content of your theological interpretations of Christian doctrines?

**LG:** I’m inclined to think that what you believe is largely determined by where the evil seems to lie. And, in that sense, I think that liberalism at its best felt the encroaching authority of

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communities of faith and doctrine, of class, of state, as their major enemies. That's what this is, and it had tremendously creative results; there's no doubt about it. But it's one side of the story.

The reality of the world from which the liberals originated and which they resisted was the reality of communal authorities. The reality of our world is of community-less individuals, where the hope for community, family, and church is felt very deeply by the otherwise empty individual. The individual without a community is empty and subject to all kinds of absolutisms. The breakup of community in Germany, after the First World War, the breakup of all the various systems of authority, allowed absolutism to rush into that vacuum. Fundamentalism grows in America because the natural and social communities of life have been threatened by economic, political, and social developments. The one place where a community appears is in their evangelical groups. They have a saving character to them. There's no doubt that fundamentalism is a real community, a community of, at its best, confession and acceptance. And such communities can become demonic. Hitler offered community to the German people, and they were very glad to have it. The Japanese Empire offered community to a disrupted Japan, disrupted by the flood of Western things on it, and that's the same in Islam. Religions that have grown up in the U.S. in the post-1950s world are religions that offer in some sense community to people as well as their own spiritual autonomy. In that sense, you have to add community too, which raises some issues about the Baptist emphasis on the competence of the individual before God.

**JBP:** In light of these issues, what major tasks face us as Christian churches and Christian theologians in our present global situation? What guidelines would you offer for addressing this present situation?

**LG:** Looking at the roots of the situation in our own ambiguity, whether we're talking about the fall of France or about September 11th, both the creativity and the sins of the past led to our present situation: and we all share in both of those. There are new possibilities, but also

possibilities of sin in the next moment, and that's the structure of the sermon let us say.

Christians always remember that the future is not just good possibilities, but also destructive possibilities.

An interesting difference occurs when you have a scientific invention; it's always the good possibilities that scientists identify. They really believe in progress: and each new invention has tremendous possibilities. They also have destructive possibilities. And it's interesting; later, they all say, "yes, we saw that." Of course, you can't get the thing out on the road, can't have people welcome it, can't have funding grants, if you identify the destructive possibilities. The church must see the demonic possibilities in all of these things and warn against them. Well, here I'm not sounding so different from Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson; but, still, they've got the right structure here.

As well as the possibilities for reactions to good, now obviously back of that lies a whole theological point of view about one's own sin: what is sin, in terms of one's understanding of what the ambiguity is, and what is creativity? The demonic in the future, for our fundamentalist friends, would be homosexuality and abortion and so forth—the evil people on the other side. Although World War I was understood in these terms, that was not the case for World War II. One can thank the churches in England especially, and in this country, Niebuhr among them, that did not see the Second World War as a battle of good and evil. Especially the Christian churches in England, with all the pressure on them, didn't see it that way. I don't think there would be enough Christians in England to do that one way or another at the present time. I'm not at all sure that, if the U.S. were more pushed, the evangelical movement in the U.S. would begin to see the ambiguity of the U.S. as an aspect in this whole situation.

That's where the Disciples of Christ church, the Congregational churches, Baptist churches, the Episcopal church, and the Presbyterian church would have a real role, if anyone would listen to them. Actually, they're not enough part of the national voice at this point,

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probably, to make too much difference. They were then. Now, of course, the major public voices are evangelical and fundamentalist. Then, the voices of American liberal Christianity were the ones on the radio. That's something I remember all during my youth: Harry Emerson Fosdick, of Riverside Church in New York, and the University of Chicago chapel were beamed on the radio all over the east. So everybody knew Fosdick's name, and the preachers who came to the University of Chicago chapel would have been heard in Kentucky and Indiana and Illinois. That was the religious establishment.