

# CHRISTIAN STUDIES

## SCHOLARSHIP FOR THE CHURCH

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From its beginnings under founding editor Michael R. Weed, *Christian Studies* has sought to offer “Scholarship for the Church,” as stated in the journal’s motto since 2008. We are pleased with this volume to introduce to our readers two new Austin Graduate School of Theology faculty members, Keith Stanglin and Daniel Napier, and we look forward to their years of service to the church with us.

Christians in America face new challenges today. We are living in what David Bentley Hart has called a post-Christian world. Churches must consider how to adjust to new realities and a cultural environment that appears in some respects less hospitable to the open proclamation and practice of historic Christian faith, while in other respects offering unprecedented opportunities for authentic and powerful Christian witness. How do we communicate the gospel by word and deed to a culture that believes it has already heard and rejected it, but which may never have seen faith working through love? How do we foster authentic transformation into the image of Christ, both in ourselves and in others?

One vital function of scholarship for the church is to raise questions and promote discussion that allows churches to evaluate options for ministry and service. This aim ties together the essays on various topics contributed to this issue by AGST faculty and emeriti. Building on the analysis of Max Scheler, Michael Weed explores the phenomena of *ressentiment*, the toxic engagement of apostates with the traditions in which they were formed. Keith Stanglin asks what use followers of Thomas Campbell have for church history, and how those impressed by Campbell’s vision might need to refine the terms in which it was originally expressed. Jeffrey Peterson explores how the liturgical calendar of the ancient church might help Christians and churches live through the year in the power of the resurrected Christ. Daniel Napier considers how revivalist approaches to conversion may actually thwart true conformity to the image of Christ and reflects on what contemporary churches might learn from ancient catechetical practices. Mark Shipp discusses the challenges of appropriating especially difficult Psalms for use in the church of Jesus Christ. Allan McNicol offers a substantive review of a recent book

on the difficult question of eschatological violence and its implications for our understanding of God's nature.

While each author speaks for himself, the reader of this issue is invited to join the ongoing discussion—and the occasional charitable argument—pursued at the faculty lunch table. We offer this collection to our readers in hopes of spurring productive discussion toward the growth of faith, understanding, and discipleship.

Finally, some changes are coming soon to *Christian Studies*, and we want our readers to be a part. Please go, right now, to your computer, type **[austingrad.edu/survey](http://austingrad.edu/survey)** in the browser window and take our *Reader Survey*! Make your wishes for the journal known!

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## *Ressentiment*

Michael R. Weed

The apostate ... is engaged in a continuous chain  
of acts of revenge against his own spiritual past.

Max Scheler

People leave regions, professions, religions, and even marriages on a fairly common basis today. Most readers will have had acquaintances who have made such major adjustments in their lives. It is not uncommon for such persons retrospectively to view the negative aspects of their pasts as difficult, but perhaps necessary episodes in their personal—even spiritual—development. Sociologically, although technically “apostates” (Greek *apostasis*, to “stand away”), such persons are commonly referred to as “leave-takers.”<sup>1</sup>

Some readers will also have acquaintances who, after having made such departures, remain negatively engaged—even preoccupied—with their pasts (professions, religions, former spouses, etc.), decades after having left them. The latter, to distinguish them from “leave-takers,” are referred to as “apostates.” Unlike the leave-taker, the apostate figuratively “backs away,” in that he or she continues to remain negatively engaged with the past.

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<sup>1</sup> “Leave takers” commonly refer to their former experiences as having been “learning experiences,” an “important phase in their lives,” etc. Cf. Stuart A. Wright, “Exploring Factors that Shape the Apostate Role,” in *The Politics of Religious Apostates in the Transformation of Religious Movements*, ed. David G. Bromley (Westport: Praeger, 1998), 96.

In addition to the above, some will have acquaintances who feel trapped within circumstances that cause resentment. Physically, psychologically, and economically, societies often sustain traditions—values and assumptions—which underlie negative practices from which persons find themselves unable to “take their leave.” Obviously, such circumstances may evoke a deep embitterment, which philosopher Max Scheler designated *ressentiment*.

### **Christian Ministry as a Dangerous Calling**

This article will primarily examine the phenomenon of apostasy, especially as it is associated with the role of ministers. While both Christian life and Christian ministry are honorable and difficult callings, neither is without considerable and unique risks.

Regarding Christian ministry, Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned:

Whoever takes the office [of ministry] seriously must cry out under the burden.... We have to recognize that there are mortal dangers to the office and for those who exercise it.<sup>2</sup>

American theologian H. Richard Niebuhr similarly observed:

At all times human frailty and sin make the ministry, whose business it is to point to the highest reality and the profoundest faith, a morally perilous vocation.... Special temptations abound for men in this calling....<sup>3</sup>

More recently, Stanley Hauerwas has commented that Christian ministry may threaten to destroy anyone who attempts to fulfill its varied and often incompatible demands.<sup>4</sup>

The following reflections will examine a particular risk, one which fits well under Bonhoeffer’s warning of “mortal dangers.” It is suggested, however, that this particular risk is not only a temptation to ministers; it is also a risk for other Christians and non-Christians as well. To introduce the discussion we will turn to the seminal work of German philosopher Max Scheler (1874–1928), on whose insights we will draw heavily.

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<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Spiritual Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 67.

<sup>3</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), 54f.

<sup>4</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, “Clerical Character: Reflecting on Ministerial Morality,” *Word & World* 6, no. 2, (1986): 184.

### *Ressentiment*

In 1915 Max Scheler published a study of the role of repressed hostility in the development of human moral consciousness.<sup>5</sup> In this study Scheler employed the French word *ressentiment* to identify what he called a “creeping poison.” Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) had earlier used the word as a technical term for what he perceived to be an all-pervasive and destructive state of mind and outlook.

*Ressentiment* is a self-poisoning of the mind which results from suppressing negative and hostile emotions which, working subconsciously, may come to dominate a person’s entire outlook.<sup>6</sup> But whereas Nietzsche had viewed *ressentiment* as the origin of what he considered Christianity’s “slave morality,” Scheler was able to make causative connections between *ressentiment* and certain social structures and conditions in which persons find themselves.<sup>7</sup> More precisely, Scheler observed that restrictive and inhibiting conditions surrounding specific social roles, characterized by certain types of recurring situations, predispose their occupants toward the development of *ressentiment* regardless of their prior experiences or individual character strengths. Scheler further suggested that certain roles and contexts within society may be “charged with the danger of *ressentiment*.”<sup>8</sup>

Significantly, Scheler observed that restrictive traditions which are experienced as irreversible—one’s “fate” or “destiny”—are likely to transform frustration and anger into *ressentiment*.<sup>9</sup> By way of illustration, Scheler cited the manner in which social conventions and role expectations placed heavy restraints upon women in late 19<sup>th</sup> century European society. In this setting women were expected to be passive, reserved, modest, and not to admit, express, or act out feelings of distaste or anger.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Max Scheler, *Ressentiment* (New York: The Free Press, 1961), 67.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 39, 40.

<sup>7</sup> Scheler sharply differs from Nietzsche regarding Christian morality: “We believe that Christian values can very easily be perverted into *ressentiment* values and have often been thus conceived. But the core of Christian ethics has not grown on the soil of *ressentiment*” (82).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

*Ressentiment*, which may arise in such restrictive circumstances, is to be distinguished from openly hostile attitudes (hatred, anger, envy, or revenge) that “act out,” or even attitudes of which one is conscious although not “acting out.” By contrast, *ressentiment* emerges when such emotions become separated from their original object and circumstances. For Scheler, this occurs when persons are forced to systematically repress such emotions to the extent that they are not only concealed from others but camouflaged from the self as well.<sup>11</sup> Scheler contends that such repressed emotions, detached from their original source and working subconsciously, may become a “venomous mass” which embitters one’s total view of life itself.<sup>12</sup>

Thus the *ressentiment* outlook becomes predisposed to access only those aspects of experience which reinforce its negatively tinted view of “reality.”<sup>13</sup> This distorted worldview eventually leads to a falsification of all basic values.<sup>14</sup> At this point, the *ressentiment* self does not merely deprecate unattainable goals as in the old fable of the fox rationalizing that the unattainable grapes must really be sour. Rather, from the poisoned outlook of *ressentiment*, all of life is affected to the extent that, figuratively speaking, not merely are the grapes sour, but sweetness itself becomes sour.<sup>15</sup>

Significantly, this “transvaluation of values” may also become embodied in ideologies (political, philosophical, and religious) which sustain and promote the construal of “reality” in terms of *ressentiment*’s embittered false consciousness. And while such ideologies may appear to provide “reformatory criticism,” Scheler cautions that *ressentiment* criticism is characterized by the fact that improvements in the conditions criticized bring “no satisfaction—they merely cause discontent, for they destroy the growing pleasure afforded by invective and negation.”<sup>16</sup> Such criticism, as an expression of

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 48. Nonetheless, in spite of being concealed from the self and from others, the poison of *ressentiment* may manifest itself in countless subtle and insidious ways such as a general uncooperativeness, caustic or sarcastic comments, and a tendency toward cynical humor.

<sup>12</sup> In this regard, Scheler states: “Regardless of what he observes, his world has a peculiar structure of emotional stress.... [H]e involuntarily ‘slanders’ life and the world in order to justify his inner pattern of value experience” (75).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 76, 77. Scheler here closely follows Nietzsche.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 73–4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

*ressentiment*, in reality provides no cure or solution for the real or imagined evil it criticizes. Rather, “the evil is merely a pretext for the criticism.”<sup>17</sup>

Thus, for Scheler, *ressentiment* is related to society, social organization, and political theory in a highly complicated manner. On the one hand, moral systems and political philosophes may give rise to social arrangements, customs, and practices that evoke *ressentiment*. For example, Scheler argues that democracy (“democratism”) inevitably arouses *ressentiment*. By promoting freedom and equality, democracy inevitably incites “boundless aspirations,” unrealistic expectations, and hopes which remain unfulfilled.<sup>18</sup> Scheler even suggests that the very freedom to pursue happiness produces numerous social differences and inequalities, as those who are wiser and more industrious become successful.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, *ressentiment*, driven by repressed frustration and hostility, gives rise to its own political theories, social philosophies, and moral systems.<sup>20</sup> These, however, as subconscious expressions of *ressentiment*, promote causes and espouse positive values only as a foil or mask. In essence, they are rooted in embitterment—suppressed hostility, protest, and rejection. Consequently, *ressentiment*-driven interpretations of reality, by fostering and sustaining a false consciousness, inevitably transmit the embitterment of *ressentiment*.<sup>21</sup>

Scheler’s study thus provides a vision of cultures (and sub-cultures) wherein *ressentiment*-evoking philosophies and *ressentiment*-transmitting ideologies co-exist—the latter in a parasitical dependency upon the former. Further, as social and political philosophies directly and indirectly convey

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Scheler observes that “democratism” is charged with *ressentiment*. For Scheler, democracy destroys communal values in that it detaches individuals from a sense of solidarity in which they participate, to which they contribute, and from which they draw their meaning (165).

<sup>19</sup> Thus democratic societies cast off the inequalities of traditional aristocracies only to introduce inequalities of merit. These inequalities evoke envy and inspire countless envy-driven egalitarian leveling processes.

<sup>20</sup> Scheler viewed 19<sup>th</sup> century humanism as expressive of *ressentiment* (121f).

<sup>21</sup> “When the reversal of values comes to dominate accepted morality and is invested with the power of the ruling ethos, it is transmitted by tradition, suggestion, and education to those who are endowed with the seemingly devaluated qualities” (77–78).

visions of reality, it is inevitable that *ressentiment*-fostered ideologies may transmit repressed feelings of hostility toward ultimate reality, or repressed hatred of the Creator.<sup>22</sup> This insight enables Scheler to recognize the possibility of different modes and expressions of *ressentiment*.

### **Spiritual *Ressentiment***

In this context, Scheler makes the enlightening observation that the role expectations of the Roman Catholic priesthood, reflective of Catholic theology, place priests at risk to a “spiritual” version of *ressentiment*.<sup>23</sup> Following Nietzsche, Scheler contends that more than any other profession, the expectations of the priesthood render priests especially vulnerable to the “creeping poison of *ressentiment*.”<sup>24</sup> The priest is required to control—repress or even deny—his emotions at all times in order to present an image of selflessness and peacefulness. Performing his role in the midst of an hierarchical and political community, he is at all times expected to conduct himself in a subservient and apolitical manner. His professional role is one of submission and acquiescence. The priest, Scheler contends, is in effect called to martyrdom as a policy.

Scheler further observes that the rigorous demands of the priestly role may give rise to feelings of anger, hostility, and envy. These, repressed by the priestly policy of martyrdom, may mutate into a form of spiritual *ressentiment* which Scheler designates that of “the apostate.”<sup>25</sup> Here Scheler suggests the distinction of three types of the apostate phenomenon: the “convert,” the “true apostate,” and the *ressentiment*—or “covert apostate.”

First, there is the technical “apostate” who literally “stands away,” defects from, or renounces his or her former beliefs and deepest convictions—religious, political, legal, or philosophical—and makes new commitments. This person, although technically an apostate from the perspective of those sharing his or her former allegiances, is more aptly described as a “leave-

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 66.

taker” or “convert.”<sup>26</sup> Having broken with his or her past, the convert leads a post-conversion life shaped and guided by new beliefs and commitments.<sup>27</sup>

Second, there is the overt or “true apostate” who, although openly renouncing the commitments entailed by his or her ostensibly rejected beliefs, nonetheless remains negatively engaged with his or her former beliefs and associations. This person does not so much “turn away” as “back away.”

The true apostate, although seemingly having broken with his or her past and easily mistaken for the convert, is driven more by animus toward his or her former beliefs and commitments than drawn by new loyalties. Not uncommonly, the positive value of the true apostate’s new beliefs and commitments is that they provide a basis from which to continue to criticize, mock, and ridicule former beliefs. In this regard, Scheler observes that

[T]he true “apostate” is not primarily committed to the positive contents of his new belief and lives only for its negation. The apostate does not affirm his new convictions for their own sake....<sup>28</sup>

Not surprisingly, the true apostate continues to criticize, mock, and ridicule his or her past beliefs. According to Scheler, the true apostate remains “engaged in a continuous chain of acts of revenge against his or her own spiritual past.”<sup>29</sup>

Scheler concludes that, unlike leave-takers or converts, who break with their pasts, the overt or true apostate tragically remains trapped as a “captive

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<sup>26</sup> For the sake of accuracy one may distinguish between the convert and the defector, the latter simply drifting away to no particular alternative belief or affiliation. Unlike the convert or the apostate, the defector is neither attracted to a new belief nor repelled by old beliefs; the defector is indifferent. Cf. Ross P. Scherer, “Apostasy and Defection,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*, ed. William H. Swatos, Jr. (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 1998), 28.

<sup>27</sup> Some studies suggest a relationship between apostasy and both personality structure and the religious atmosphere in which one is socialized (e.g., those experiencing religious conflict in their families are most likely to leave later). Cf. Andrew M. Greeley, *The Denominational Society* (Glenview: Scott, Foresman and Co, 1972), 237–244.

<sup>28</sup> Scheler, 66–7.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

of his or her past.” Again, any new “faith” merely provides a frame of reference for assaulting and rejecting the old.<sup>30</sup>

The third type of the apostate is perhaps the most interesting (and damaging). It is the covert, or *ressentiment* form of the apostate role. Distinct from the convert and in contrast to the true or overt apostate, the covert *ressentiment* apostate remains in the party, movement, or church which is the source of his or her embittered animus. With the *ressentiment* apostate, no clear or even conscious break is made with the beliefs and associations of the movement or group from which his or her *ressentiment* is derived. Rather, the *ressentiment* apostate represses or sublimates his or her dissatisfaction with an “inner defection” from the church’s or movement’s beliefs and practices while remaining, to all appearances, fully committed to it.<sup>31</sup>

Of crucial importance is the spiritual dimension of religious *ressentiment*. While political theories deal with reality, religious views involve ultimate reality in an immediate and personal manner. Reacting to restrictive social practices, however long established, is not the same as reacting to restrictive religious structures. While Scheler suggests that “priestly policy” forces the priest to repress his dissatisfaction, the true nature of the problem lies much deeper. Roman Catholic ecclesiastical policy is believed ultimately to be grounded in the divine authority of the church. Accordingly, a priest’s dissatisfaction or quarrel is not merely with priestly policy; it is with ultimate reality—it is with the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. As an expression of *ressentiment*, however, this deeper anger and its shocking implications remains concealed from consciousness in the true *ressentiment* apostate while the energy of sublimated anger manifests itself in numerous ways.

Like the overt apostate, the *ressentiment* apostate engages in acts of revenge against his own spiritual past. Unlike the overt apostate, however, the *ressentiment* apostate engages in subtle acts of sabotage against the religious tradition of which he or she remains a part. Importantly, the true nature and purpose of these acts as expressions of *ressentiment* are disguised from the covert apostate himself as much as from others. Not infrequently, the *ressentiment* apostate’s preoccupation with supposed faults and foibles of his or her

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

religious tradition are often masked with humor and presented as manifestations of sensitivity; they may even be portrayed as efforts to reform the religious tradition.

Nonetheless, however masked, the voice of *ressentiment* is primarily characterized—and disclosed—by its embittered and occasionally cynical and sarcastic tone. As an expression of *ressentiment* criticism (“the perceived evil is merely a pretext for the criticism”), the apostate’s critique is driven by hostility, revenge, and envy. The goal of such criticism is not reform but the satisfaction of ridiculing, maligning, and undermining the religious tradition to which fate (or God) has bound him or her.

### **The Minister and *Ressentiment***

Returning to our initial concern regarding dangers and risks of Christian ministry, we would suggest that *ressentiment* (and its spiritual form as described in above) is a risk for all ministers and perhaps to a lesser degree all Christians—especially for those in traditions committed to passing on distinctive beliefs and practices of the historic Christian faith. Before looking more directly at that issue, however, we return to Scheler’s vision of a culture which both evokes and transmits *ressentiment*.

Since the Enlightenment, which was spawned in reaction to Western culture’s spiritual past as much as it was drawn by the vision of unrestricted reason,<sup>32</sup> modernity has gravitated toward a *ressentiment* culture.<sup>33</sup> One might observe that *ressentiment* is a particular temptation for Christians who are intellectuals and whose self-confidence (and perhaps pride) may provide them with more capacity both for criticism and for self-deception than the average believer. Today, in the aftermath of the Enlightenment, we find ourselves living among powerful social and intellectual forces which convey

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. Crane Brinton, “Enlightenment,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 2, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 519f. Brinton argues that both the Enlightenment and the romantic reaction to the Enlightenment repudiated much Christian belief and were powerful dissolvents of Europe’s Christian culture.

<sup>33</sup> William Mallard, “Apostasy,” in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, ed. Rodney J. Hunter (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 51. From the perspective of pastoral care, Mallard raises the issue of whether the culture of modernity, constitutes a “vast unfocused apostasy.”

heavy deposits of anti-Christian animus.<sup>34</sup> The destructive effects of these forces are well known: loneliness and social alienation, secularism, moral relativism, suspicion of authority, and widespread confusion.

It is in this social and intellectual climate that contemporary Christian communities endeavor to exist and in which Christian lives must be shaped by churches which model and convey substantive Christian faith—a faith that exposes and illuminates the spiritual dearth of the surrounding moral, intellectual, and spiritual confusion. It is in this climate that ministerial identities are being defined. Thus it should not be surprising that many ministers are as confused and frustrated as are their congregations. Nearly two decades ago George Barna’s research found that ministers “are the single, most occupationally frustrated professionals in America.”<sup>35</sup> No doubt many factors contribute to this situation, but drawing on Stanley Hauerwas (and others), two factors stand out as contributing to an environment in which ministers are at risk to a variety of spiritual ailments, including *ressentiment*.

First, Hauerwas suggests that ministers face the disparity between the theological ideal and the sociological realities of the ministry.<sup>36</sup> Theologically, the church is a community devoted to passing on an authoritative tradition—an ancient body of teachings and practices. Most ministers are called to convey this tradition through a life of godliness, gentleness, and patient trust in the Father’s presence and action among his people.

Sociologically, however, many churches are considerably different from the theological ideal. In an egalitarian, democratized, anti-authoritarian, technological, progress-oriented, therapeutic, entertainment-saturated, secular society, the traditional “theological ideal” of the ministry is increasingly difficult to sustain. Congregational expectations placed on ministers reflect contemporary sociological realities more than the theological ideal. Rather than his knowledge of scripture or theology, the minister is more apt to be evaluated by his congregants according to how well he succeeds at being “part social worker, part counselor, good with young people, an engaging

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<sup>34</sup> Brinton, “Enlightenment,” points out that most contemporary views that reject Christianity for some secular faith have their origin in the Enlightenment (521).

<sup>35</sup> George Barna, *Index of Leading Spiritual Indicators* (Dallas: Word, 1996).

<sup>36</sup> Hauerwas, “Clerical Character,” 183.

speaker, fair administrator, moral exemplar, and a host of other functions.”<sup>37</sup> Not surprisingly, ministers responding to the conflicting claims of the theological ideal and the socio-political realities may find themselves frustrated, confused, unappreciated, possibly angry, and having “authority problems.”<sup>38</sup>

An additional risk in the minister’s situation is the response which he has made to the first factor. That is, for several decades, a dominant trend in ministerial education has been to shape the minister’s self-understanding after the professions of law and medicine. This move has been motivated by two concerns: recovering prestige for the ministry and increasing ministers’ competence in modern churches. Unfortunately, as Hauerwas, Dennis Campbell, Brooks Holifield, Edward Farley, William Willimon, and others have pointed out, the minister-as-professional movement, however well-intended, has created a number of problems.<sup>39</sup>

Contemporary ministers are increasingly assessed in terms of their mastery of managerial, administrative, and organizational techniques and their ability to produce visible, quantifiable results, or “successful—numerically growing—churches.” Hauerwas has gone so far as to criticize preoccupations with redefining ministry and ministerial competence by shifting to methods and techniques as “implicitly atheistic.”<sup>40</sup> Further, Hauerwas and Willimon have argued that widespread adoption of such methods has resulted in both liberal and conservative ministers sliding into a “practical atheism.”<sup>41</sup> That is,

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>38</sup> Over forty years ago this writer worked for a religious publishing company that held retreats for ministers. The ministers were obviously under enormous pressures. They felt that they, and perhaps more significantly their wives and children, were held to higher standards than other congregants, such as required attendance at every church-related event (including, e.g., youth events, Ladies Bible classes, baby showers, etc.). Given such conditions, embitterment was not uncommon among ministers and their families. My impression is that these circumstances may have changed in large and/or urban congregations.

<sup>39</sup> Hauerwas, “Clerical Character,” (187), for example, notes that as the minister views himself as a professional, he may become even more frustrated at not receiving proper recognition. Further, Hauerwas suggests that there is every likelihood that the minister may even become resentful for being held accountable to those others who are not experts.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 192, fn. 21.

<sup>41</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, “Ministry as More than a Helping Profession,” *The Christian Century* (Mar 1989): 282.

biblical and theological realities are becoming subordinated to secular methods, goals, and assumptions; and when they conflict, the minister's theological preparation is subordinated to practical concerns (such as numbers in attendance). In David Wells' words, in most denominations in America the shift is being made "from truth to technique."<sup>42</sup>

When theology becomes resistant to being managed or manipulated according to modern secular tastes and techniques it becomes an irritant to popular versions of Christianity. To the degree that theology—reflection upon basic beliefs and practices of the historic Christian faith—becomes a deterrent to numerical and financial progress or success, it also becomes a source of aggravation. In such circumstances, ministers may become bitter and resent being restricted by their respective theological traditions.

Thus the minister's contemporary situation may make him especially subject to frustration, disillusionment, depression, authority problems, and cynicism. In other words, the ministry may make one more subject to *ressentiment* than many if not most other professions. Consequently, it is important to remind ourselves of five things.

First, *ressentiment*-criticism is not without valid insight. The problem is that any legitimate insight may become part of the broader perspective of a false and embittered consciousness and succumb to a distorted vision of reality.

Second, it is important to note that as repressed anger and hostility are transformed into *ressentiment*-criticism and *ressentiment* ideologies (e.g., Marxism), *ressentiment* may be transmitted or passed on separate from its original setting or circumstances. Others finding themselves in circumstances of deep frustration and dissatisfaction may be drawn to *ressentiment* interpretations as a way of contending with their own circumstances. To the extent that one can view the circumstances of his or her personal problems and frustrations as caused by sources other than one's own inabilities, mistakes, or faithlessness (traditionalism, Campbell's "Baconian rationalism," etc.), he or she will be attracted to perspectives and resources which enable him or her to do so. It is important to remember that we now know far more about a num-

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<sup>42</sup> David Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 248.

ber of personal problems which may be repressed and fused into Scheler's "venomous mass" which poisons one's total outlook.<sup>43</sup>

Third, not only are intellectuals uniquely susceptible to constructing *ressentiment*-transmitting "envelopes," they are also vulnerable to the sins of intellectual pride, arrogance, and self-deception. What Paul Johnson says of writers is also true of intellectuals:

I have spent my entire working life among writers and I know very well that cast of mind which they habitually possess, and which harbors huge resentments of the world as it exists, is not necessarily motivated by selfless altruism. To praise God is not usually the writer's intention.... More likely it is to express a grievance or work off a resentment or articulate a personal longing or simply to rage.... Writers are sinful and fallen and unsatisfactory man writ large.<sup>44</sup>

Fourth, I would remind us that however it presents itself, *ressentiment*-criticism is not intended to correct or reform anything; it delights in destruction for its own sake. In its religious form, the underlying intent is to damage, undermine, or invalidate a religion or religious tradition. *Ressentiment*-criticism is indelibly marked by bitterness, refusal to entertain contrary evidence, and a distorting vision of reality. In the religious sphere, *ressentiment*-criticism frequently expresses a deep and insatiable need for revenge against one's own spiritual past.

Finally, I am suggesting that Christian ministry may be one of those social contexts which, in Scheler's words, is "charged with the danger of *ressentiment*." I am also suggesting that currently circulating are reconstructions of church history, analyses of contemporary Christianity, and proposals for the future which, whatever the merit of their individual insights, sound suspiciously like the rhetorical voices of *ressentiment*-driven ideologies.

See to it that no one fail to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness spring up and cause trouble, and by it many be defiled.

Hebrews 12:15

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<sup>43</sup> For example, unresolved conflicts with parents, resentment of certain childhood—and adulthood—authority figures, etc.

<sup>44</sup> Paul Johnson, *The Quest for God* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 79–80.



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