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Religion and Reform in the City: The Re-Thinking Chicago Movement of the 1930s

JACOB H. DORN

Historians have produced a rich and sophisticated literature on urban reform in the progressive era before the First World War. It includes numerous studies of individual cities, biographies of urban leaders, and analyses of particular movements and organizations. This literature illuminates important variations among reformers and their achievements, the relationships between urban growth and reform, and the functional role of the old-style political machines against which progressives battled. Similarly, there are many examinations of progressive-era reformers' ideas about and attitudes toward the burgeoning industrial cities that had come into being with disquieting rapidity during their own lifetimes. Some of these works go well beyond the controversial conclusions of Morton and Lucia White in *The Intellectual Versus the City* (1964) to find more complex—and sometimes more positive—assessments of the new urban civilization.¹

Substantially less is known about efforts to reform particular cities and about the ideas and attitudes of urban intellectuals in the interwar years, especially the 1930s. Perhaps the nationalizing trends of the “Depression Decade” explain the shift of historians' attention to other subjects. After all, whereas many of the most innovative and interesting progressive causes originated in urban communities, the indisputable source of experimentation under the New Deal was Washington. This foray into the history of “Re-Thinking Chicago,” a cause whose leaders believed their city very much needed changing, suggests that we might profitably extend urban reform studies into the comparatively neglected later period.²

1. Two excellent examples of studies of reform efforts in individual cities are Zane L. Miller, *Boss Cox's Cincinnati: Urban Politics in the Progressive Era* (Oxford, 1968), and Melvin G. Holli, *Reform in Detroit: Hazen S. Pingree and Urban Politics* (Oxford, 1969). Jean Quandt's *From the Small Town to the Great Community: The Social Thought of Progressive Intellectuals* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1970) is a model of judicious interpretation of progressive intellectuals' ambivalence about the meaning of urbanization for American life.
2. The principal source for Re-Thinking Chicago is the Arthur E. Holt Papers, Chicago Theological Seminary. The Charles E. Merriam Papers at the University of Chicago Library (Regenstein Library), though less complete, contain additional documents. Shirley E. Greene, “Re-Thinking Chicago: An Experiment in Christian Community Building” (M.A. thesis, University of Chicago, 1935), covers less than two years and, as the work of a participant, lacks detachment.

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1.

Re-Thinking Chicago originated inauspiciously in a conversation in October 1933 among four clergymen. Meeting at the Quadrangle Club at the University of Chicago, Arthur E. Holt, Professor of Social Ethics at the Chicago Theological Seminary, Charles W. Gilkey, Dean of the University Chapel, Rabbi Louis L. Mann of Sinai Congregation, and Rabbi Solomon B. Freehof of the Kehilath Anshe Mayriv Temple sensed a quickening interest in the city's problems and agreed that religious institutions ought to be involved. They extended their conversation to include Charles E. Merriam, head of the University of Chicago's political science department, and Louis Brownlow, whose Public Administration Clearing House Merriam had helped bring to the university. A professor at Chicago since 1900, Merriam was a veteran of reform who had served in the city council for six years, run as the Republican candidate for mayor in 1911, and worked with a host of municipal agencies and voluntary organizations.³ No more authoritative voice could have been added to the clerics' discussion. In Merriam's view, lack of information was not the principal barrier to urban progress; the university library's shelves contained enough studies to remake civic life, if they could attract the attention of city leaders. The fundamental problem, he asserted, was the city's "lack of a 'soul.'" "Given the religious leaders' predisposition to such judgments, it is not surprising that the political scientist's words "struck fire" with them.⁴

Convinced that "the time [was] ripe for the religious idealists of Chicago to bring to bear on the problems of the city their collective thinking," the four men invited fifty others, Protestants, Catholics and Jews, and both clergy and lay, to a meeting at the International House on 6 November. The twenty-two who attended enthusiastically approved the idea of bringing together individuals and organizations committed to "re-thinking and building Chicago" and authorized Holt to appoint a committee to plan a cooperative project to that end. To the original four he added Duncan H. Browne, Rector of Saint James Episcopal Church, Paul Hutchinson, managing editor of the *Christian Century*, and Judge David F. Matchett of the Illinois Appellate Court. Thus Re-Thinking Chicago was born.⁵

From beginning to end, Holt and his associates emphasized educational

3. Barry D. Karl, *Charles E. Merriam and the Study of Politics* (Chicago, 1974), chap. 4, "The Scholar in Politics." Merriam's role in municipal affairs is also recounted in his *Chicago: A More Intimate View of Urban Politics* (New York, 1929), chap. 7, "Actual Government," and, more briefly, in Lloyd Wendt and Herman Kogan, *Big Bill of Chicago* (Indianapolis, 1953), pp. 132-137, 152, 163-165, 236, 253.

4. Greene, "Re-Thinking Chicago," p. 4.

5. Charles W. Gilkey, et al., to Dear _____, 1 November 1933, and Arthur E. Holt to _____, 9 November 1933, Holt Papers; Greene, "Re-Thinking Chicago," pp. 5-6. The records contain no indication of how the name was chosen, but, as Robert T. Handy of Union Theological Seminary has pointed out to the author, there are striking resemblances to the Laymen's Foreign Missions Inquiry, which published its report, *Re-Thinking Missions* (New York, 1932), the year before. Both Re-Thinking Chicago and *Re-Thinking Missions*

and inspirational purposes. They would disseminate the information on Merriam's library shelves, acquaint like-minded individuals and organizations with each other and each other's work, and stimulate thinking about what the city might be. Their primary instrumentality was the conference. The three conferences they held by the end of January 1935 were "general"—that is, located downtown and intended for citywide audiences. The first, on 5–6 March 1934, covered local government, education, taxation, big business, gangsters and rackets, and the city's food supply. Holt and Merriam supplied panoramic addresses on "Who We Are and Why" and "The Need of a Philosophy and Social Statesmanship for This City." Subsequent programs on 23 April 1934 and 7 January 1935 focused on politics. These meetings drew 92, 95, and 116 attendees, respectively. Conference invitations went to "citizens" thought to be sympathetic to the aims of the cause; there seems to have been no systematic attempt to get the attention of city officials or of leaders of business, labor, professional, or political organizations. In fact, except for S. J. Duncan-Clark of the *Chicago Daily News*, a participant in Re-Thinking Chicago affairs, the planners chose not to admit the press or to seek publicity for the first conference.⁶

There were four more "general" conferences after January 1935,⁷ but then the emphasis actually shifted, following an address by Walter J. Millard of the National Municipal League on the importance of local communities, to neighborhood meetings. This change reflected the planners' own belief in decentralization and face-to-face relationships; it also seemed tactically wise to marshal support for a civic awakening at the grass roots, rather than relying entirely on meetings in the Loop. No fewer than six "local" meetings occurred in 1935: at the Englewood Baptist Church, the New England Congregational Church on the Lower North Side, the United Church of Hyde Park, and in Austin, Morgan Park, and Woodlawn. Attendance at some of these meetings exceeded that at the downtown meetings, reaching about 250 in Hyde Park and 325 in Englewood. There were minor disappointments—for example, the programs in Englewood and on the Lower North Side were too much identified with the churches in which they were held—but the educational quality was high, and the organizers believed

benefited from Rockefeller money and both incorporated contemporary social-scientific research techniques. Except for possible copying of the name, however, the parallels seem accidental.

6. Greene, "Re-Thinking Chicago," pp. 6–8, 11, 13–14, 16–17; "Citizens Look at Chicago," *Chicago Daily News*, 8 March 1934, p. 18. The author has found no other newspaper coverage of any Re-Thinking Chicago activities. Programs for all of these conferences are in the Holt Papers.
7. Program, "Fourth General Conference of Re-Thinking Chicago," 2 Dec. 1935; flier, "An Open Meeting on Youth Facing Civic Evil in Connection with the Fourth General Conference on Rethinking Chicago"; Shirley E. Greene, "Report on Inter-Racial Dinner"; "Final Report of the Executive Secretary—Shirley E. Greene," 3 March 1937, Holt Papers. Charles W. Gilkey to "Dear Fellow Citizen," 16 Nov. 1935, and 13 Feb. 1937; Program, "Re-Thinking Relations Between Chicago and Illinois," 22 Feb. 1937, Merriam Papers.

the method worth continuing.⁸ Records become fragmentary after 1935, but other local conferences were held before Re-Thinking Chicago gradually dissolved in 1937.

Linked with the conferences was the preparation of literature. Holt was the pivotal figure in Re-Thinking Chicago for several reasons: his influence among Congregationalists and within the Chicago Church Federation; his ability to tap his seminary's resources for research and other projects; his relationships with the Divinity School and the social-science departments of the university; and his pioneering record in religious field work.⁹ Consequently, the movement's literature emanated—as did much of the conference planning—from his department at Chicago Theological Seminary. Before the first conference he enlisted five students, the most important of whom was Shirley E. Green, to prepare materials for advance distribution. This arrangement gave Re-Thinking Chicago its "staff." Supervised by Holt and his colleague Samuel C. Kincheloe, a man notable in his own right for social research, the students wrote summaries of sixteen books on Chicago. Mostly monographs produced by the "Chicago School" of urban sociologists, they represented, of course, the studies to which Merriam had referred in that initial conversation.¹⁰ Holt and Kincheloe also prepared "Readings on the City of God," a survey of the idea of the "holy community" from the Hebrew prophets through Christian writings to humanistic utopias and other modern expressions.¹¹ For the conferees, these two hefty documents were a source book, partly informational (the contemporary studies) and partly inspirational (the visionary excerpts).

8. Program, "Rethinking Chicago and Chicago's South Side," 5 May 1935; Shirley E. Greene to "friends and representatives . . . in Local Communities," [Jan. 1936,] Merriam Papers. "Re-Thinking Chicago—Report of the Secretary for the Period January 7 to June 10, 1935"; Greene, "Report on Re-Thinking Southwest Chicago Conference," 8 Feb. 1937; "Final Report of the Executive Secretary," Holt Papers.

9. After serving as a pastor from 1904 to 1919 and as secretary of his denomination's Social Service Commission from 1919 to 1924, Holt had come to Chicago in 1924 as successor to Graham Taylor. For accounts of his substantial contributions at CTS, see Arthur C. McGiffert, Jr., *No Ivory Tower: The Story of the Chicago Theological Seminary* (Chicago, 1965), pp. 186–196, and Jacob H. Dorn, "The Rural Ideal and Agrarian Realities: Arthur E. Holt and the Vision of a Decentralized America in the Interwar Years," *Church History* 52 (1983): 53–57.

10. Holt to Gilkey, 21 Dec. 1933; "Re-Thinking Chicago. (Summaries of Sixteen Books on Chicago)," n.d., Holt Papers. Additional titles were included in later lists of recommended books distributed through Re-Thinking Chicago.

11. Greene, "Re-Thinking Chicago," pp. 9–11. "Readings on the City of God" originated earlier and seems to have gone through changes of content as it was used for different groups in the 1930s. One version, prepared by Holt and Kincheloe for the Congregationalists' Tower Hill Convocation in Michigan, is dated for use in 1931. The version used at the first Re-Thinking Chicago conference is forty-two mimeographed pages and contains sections on: "The City of God As Seen By the Hebrews," "The New Jerusalem of Early Christian Thought," "St. Augustine's City of God," "The City of God After the Reformation," "Humanistic Utopias," "The City of Democratic Fellowship," and "The Meaning of the Search for the City of God." Other materials from Re-Thinking Chicago were later used at the Tower Hill Convocation. See Holt and Kincheloe, "The Action of the Idealistic Forces on the Government and Citizenship of Local Communities," 4–7 Sept. 1934, Holt Papers.

Holt's "staff" added other educational materials by early 1935. Greene, who became secretary of the movement, interviewed officers and staff members of twenty-two public and private agencies and wrote descriptions of their purposes, methods, locations, constituencies, and attitudes toward cooperation in reform. It probably also was Greene who summarized important speeches from the early general conferences.¹² These basic documents—book précis, "Readings on the City of God," descriptions of agencies, and speeches, together with brief policy statements—seem to have circulated in various combinations and formats for the remainder of the movement's life.

2.

Re-Thinking Chicago was a remarkable attempt to unite religious ideals with the latest social-science research on urban life. A "striving after an ideal community has been a constant factor in religious experience," wrote Shirley Greene. Revived periodically by prophets and prophetic groups, the idea of holy community took different forms as social structures changed. "Always giving [society] ideal expression, always critical of its failures and always looking beyond the present to a future 'day of the Lord' when the New Jerusalem shall be established," the conception of holy community expressed "man's constant desire for a coherent social relationship."¹³ This ideal was one "root" of Re-Thinking Chicago. The other was social research, centered in the universities, but increasingly used by the churches since early in the century.¹⁴ The two sources often had been separated, to their mutual detriment. Re-Thinking Chicago was to rectify this error by creating what Greene called "an alliance of the social scientists with the social idealists."¹⁵

Chicago was the perfect place for such an alliance to prosper. It was the home of the influential "ecological school" of urban sociology led by Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess. Viewing the city as a laboratory, as the basis for a truly empirical social science, they and their students and colleagues in the other social sciences collected, charted, and analyzed enormous amounts of data. Much of their work was coordinated by the Local Community Research Committee, created in 1923 and supported by the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Fund. Dedicated in 1929, the university's Social Science Building was a grand landmark to this collaboration.¹⁶

12. Greene, "Re-Thinking Chicago," pp. 14–15. "Report on Twenty-Two Non-Partisan Civic Agencies in Chicago," n.d., Holt Papers. "Summary of Material Presented in Re-Thinking Chicago Meetings," n.d., Merriam Papers.

13. Greene, "Re-Thinking Chicago," p. 45.

14. Social research was used, for example, by the rural-church movement, the Inter-Church World Movement in the steel strike of 1919, and H. Paul Douglass in his studies of urban churches.

15. Greene, "Re-Thinking Chicago," pp. 78–79.

16. T. V. Smith and Leonard D. White, eds., *Chicago: An Experiment in Social Science Research* (Chicago, 1929), esp. chap. 1, "The City as a Social Laboratory," by Robert E. Park, and chap. 2, "The Local Research Committee and Social Science Building," by White. See also Karl, *Merriam and the Study of Politics*, pp. 143–155.

These Chicago scholars produced monographs of two types. "Problem" studies focused on phenomena considered to be antisocial or asocial and explained their distribution in various areas of the city. These studies constituted a kind of urban pathology. They included Nels Anderson's *The Hobo* (1923), Ernest R. Mowrer's *Family Disorganization* (1927), Ruth S. Cavan's *Suicide* (1928), Clifford R. Shaw's *Delinquency Areas* (1929), Paul G. Cressey's *The Taxi-Dance Hall* (1923), E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Family in Chicago* (1932), and Walter Reckless's *Vice in Chicago* (1933). The second type, "community" studies, were fewer in number and focused on "natural areas" in the city. Louis Wirth's *The Ghetto* (1928) and Harvey W. Zorbaugh's *The Gold Coast and the Slum* (1929) represented this type.¹⁷ The latest and best in scholarship, these books all were included in Re-Thinking Chicago's summaries or reading lists to inform the movement's religious idealism.

Arthur Holt had received his Ph.D. at Chicago in 1903 in the field of ethics, but he steered the social ethics department at CTS more in the direction of empirical research. Practical field work became a key element in the seminary's curriculum. Faculty and students at CTS conducted important research projects for the Chicago Congregational Union and the Church Federation, and Holt wrote laudatory articles on the contributions sociology could make to the churches, including one on "The Ecological Approach to the Church."¹⁸ In fact, Holt's importance for bridging the distance between social scientists and social idealists was as great as that of anyone in his generation.

For their part, the social scientists were also idealists, despite Shirley Greene's compartmentalization. As given as they were to quantification and description, they brought the values of their small-town, Protestant childhoods to their urban investigations, and they saw their work as aiding reform and uplift.¹⁹ Merriam's biographer, Barry Karl, has written that these scholars were trying "to communicate to the newer, urban generation they were training some of the essentials of their own sense of 'soul.'" Chicago supported their "small-community orientation" by providing examples of both evils to reform and successful attempts at reform. The evils may have seemed greater than the victories, he observes, "but they shared a quality of idealism more characteristic of the middle American town of the early

17. Milton M. Gordon, *Social Class in American Sociology* (Durham, N.C., 1958), pp. 21–52, provides an excellent summary. See also Smith and White, *Chicago*, chap. 9, "Studies of Institutions," by Ernest W. Burgess.

18. Dorn, "The Rural Ideal and Agrarian Realities," pp. 54–57. Arthur E. Holt, "The Contribution of Sociology to the Making of the Minister," *Crozer Quarterly* 3 (1926): 423–439, and "The Ecological Approach to the Church," *American Journal of Sociology* 33 (1927): 72–79. For testimony to Holt's significance from the university scholars, see Smith and White, *Chicago*, pp. 148–152.

19. For statements by Park and Burgess that their research would benefit social and civic agencies, see Smith and White, *Chicago*, pp. 14–15 and 138.

twentieth century than of the older cities of the east coast."²⁰ In these respects, their outlook was fundamentally similar to that of Holt and other Protestant leaders.

Chicago suffered, the scientists and idealists agreed, from a lack of loyalty to the whole. Though they used different words, their basic terms of reference were remarkably similar. In the small community, loyalty to the whole had been easy. Face-to-face relationships supplied, in Holt's words, both "neighborly control" and "the social imagination by which a man puts himself in the other man's place." In contrast, the city was a collection of self-centered units or groups with no *common* purpose; as Merriam had put it, it had no "soul." Holt spoke of a "tangled mass of old world loyalties" and a "towering pyramid of vocations" which perverted the city's functions from service to profit and kept it from fulfilling its promise.²¹ Echoing Holt, Greene saw as the central need an understanding of the city as a "collection of functions integrated around the principle of mutual service": "the sin of selfishness and self-seeking" must yield to an "organic social unity." Though listing needed structural reforms, a seven-point "civic creed" drafted by Holt for *Re-Thinking Chicago* affirmed this preoccupation with the ideals of service and citizenship.²²

Charles Merriam's diagnosis was not much different. Asserting that "the typical difficulty is that arising from disorganization," he described "a competition among races, religions and classes for first place in the citizens' affections which push[ed] the city into a secondary position." He continued, "The city is in constant struggle with these group symbols, not to destroy them, but to make them a part of a common group, to integrate them in the life of the community, to induce men to think in terms of the common enterprise of which they are a part; to develop personalities, policies, symbols that cut across the lines of other loyalties and raise the flag of the City itself, supreme for local purposes over all others."²³ Another Chicago scholar, the philosopher T. V. Smith, linked the work of description and analysis with the creation of a sense of community in the 1929 volume commemorating the achievements of the Chicago social scientists. Himself a participant in *Re-Thinking Chicago*, he further demonstrates that idealists and social scientists stood on common ground. Only by knowing the various processes that made up the life of the city, he wrote, could one "sense it as one process" and thereby gain "sensitive appreciation" and "moral devotion."²⁴

This movement was a remarkable union of science and moral vision,

20. Karl, *Merriam and the Study of Politics*, pp. 16–17, 143–144.

21. Arthur E. Holt, "Our Common Perversion," *Christian Century* 52 (1935): 850–852, and "The City of God in Chicago," *Chicago Theological Seminary Register* 26 (1936): 11–12.

22. Greene, "Re-Thinking Chicago," pp. 28–29, 71, 74–75.

23. Merriam, *Chicago*, pp. 171–172.

24. Smith and White, *Chicago*, chap. 12, "Social Science Research and the Community," esp. pp. 244–246.

evocative of an earlier Protestant hegemony in American culture. In the religious camp, people like Arthur Holt paid homage to the scientific method as applied to society by Chicago's pioneering scholars. For their part, the social scientists wove moral and cultural values throughout their work. They shared much by way of background, training, professional and civic affiliations, and political perspective. Moreover, they seemed to represent, a potentially influential combination of forces as they undertook to uplift their city to a higher quality of life than it had formerly known.

3.

Defining their mission as deliberative rather than activist, the movement's leaders hoped that Re-Thinking Chicago would lead to action, but they did not want the conferences as such to spearhead crusades against this or that evil. Though there was "some disposition" at the first conference on 5-6 March 1934 to "strike into immediate civic action," the group held back for several reasons. Shirley Greene's reconstruction of the discussion is instructive. Specific objections to an activist stance included the need for further information, a desire for greater clarity of purpose, the predominance of members of the clergy at the conference, the existence of many civic-reform agencies already in the field, and the fear that the group's fortunes might fall with those of any issue or candidates to which it attached itself. Some of these reasons were justifications for *postponing* a program of action, while others (such as the existence of other reformist organizations) would be permanent barriers to an activist posture. The decision was reached—and never significantly altered—to play a reflective and philosophical role in relation to the city as a totality. Re-Thinking Chicago would seek to develop a "general philosophy of the city" which would aid other, more narrowly focused groups in their work.²⁵

The second and third conferences dealt with politics, and hence with a more manageable range of issues than the first. In each instance, the participants nearly endorsed a course of political action but drew back. The second conference, held on 23 April 1934, shortly after a primary election, featured Henry Bentley of Cincinnati, chairman of the Cincinnati Charter Committee.²⁶ He portrayed a Cincinnati which, run almost continuously for forty years by an oft-corrupt Republican machine, had transformed itself by simple changes in its charter. Under the home rule allowed in Ohio,

25. Greene, "Re-Thinking Chicago," pp. 12-13.

26. Merriam, who had helped locate the International City Manager Committee at the University of Chicago, may have introduced Bentley to Holt and other Chicagoans. Karl, *Merriam and the Study of Politics*, pp. 144-145. Holt had Bentley speak to a small group at CTS before addressing Re-Thinking Chicago. Holt to Henry Bentley, 4, 11 April 1934; Bentley to Holt, 6, 16 April 1934; Typed notes for CTS speech, April 1934, Box 12, Henry Bentley Papers, Cincinnati Historical Society.

Cincinnatians in 1924 reduced their council from 32 to 9 members, replaced ward representation with at-large elections, established a nonpartisan ballot in city races, and introduced a city manager with full administrative authority. The Charter Committee won control of the council in the first election under the new system and repeated its victories in 1927, 1929, 1931, and 1933, establishing unique continuity for reform.²⁷

Bentley's principles of nonpartisanship, efficiency, and an honest ballot were self-evident truths to this audience, and he echoed their Social Gospel assumptions about the bearing of religion on public affairs as well. Both he and Murray Seashengood, Cincinnati's mayor from 1926 to 1930 and then president of the National Municipal League, had spoken in Chicago before; that occasion had given birth to a Chicago City Manager Committee. Though the sequence of contacts and influences between organizations is unclear, it appears that Bentley's appearance before Re-Thinking Chicago was significant not only for introducing ideas that surfaced again in that forum, but also for drawing some of its leaders into the city manager movement. In 1935 the City Manager Committee's advisory board included Holt, Rabbi Mann, and at least five other persons connected with Re-Thinking Chicago.²⁸ And, once begun, the relationship between Bentley and Holt continued for several years.²⁹ Yet, for all the interaction, there is no indication that Re-Thinking Chicago as a group organized support for the city manager plan.

Political concerns remained in the forefront of the movement as the Democratic party consolidated its power in Chicago. The local Republican party had once been formidable, and Re-Thinking Chicago people had usually been affiliated with that party's progressive wing. But Republican fortunes had plummeted. Part of the explanation lies in the corruption and chicanery of William Hale Thompson, mayor in 1915–1923 and 1927–1931. He had vitiated civil service, played to ethnic, racial, and religious prejudice, politicized the school board, and connived at making Chicago a wide-open town. Thompson-era scandals damaged the GOP nearly beyond repair, and

27. Henry Bentley, "The Story of Cincinnati," in "Summary of Material Presented in Re-Thinking Chicago Meetings," pp. 97–103, Merriam Papers; "How Cincinnati Did It," *Men and Events: The Bulletin of the Union League Club* 11 (March 1934): 16–17.

28. *Men and Events* 11: 4, 15; *Bulletin of the Chicago City Manager Committee* 1 (June 1935): 1–4. The five other members known were: Duncan Brown; the Rev. Hugh Elmer Brown, First Congregational Church, Evanston; the Rev. Ernest G. Guthrie, Director, Chicago Congregational Union; and professors James G. Kerwin and Paul Douglas of the University of Chicago. See also H. Barry McCormick, chairman, Chicago City Manager Committee, to "Dear Fellow Member," 13 January 1937, Holt Papers; and Greene's glowing remarks about Bentley and nonpartisanship in "Re-Thinking Chicago," pp. 13–14, 61–64.

29. Bentley to Holt, 26 April 1934, Box 12, Bentley Papers. After the untimely death of Arthur M. Barnhart, a Chicago philanthropist, Bentley explored the possibility that Barnhart's family might underwrite Re-Thinking Chicago. Bentley to Stuart Haydon, 29 May 1936; Haydon to Bentley, 17 May and 2 July 1936; Walter J. Millard to Bentley, 28 May 1936, Box 13, Bentley Papers.

his rascality alienated good-government Republicans.³⁰ Charles Merriam had been a constant adversary to Thompson, and despite long-standing Republicanism, he and others in Re-Thinking Chicago, including Graham Taylor and Rabbi Mann, had supported the Democrat William E. Dever, mayor from 1923 to 1927.³¹

Another major factor behind the new Democratic hegemony was ethnic support. Though Thompson had support from a few immigrant groups and from blacks, the Democrats were far more effective in this regard in the long run. The presidential candidacy of Al Smith in 1928, if not itself a watershed, was at least the primary element in a series of developments amounting to a watershed. Not only was the national Democratic party welding the ethnics, now voting in record numbers, to itself; in Chicago, the rise of Anton Cermak was having the same effect. Bohemian, Catholic, and "wet," Cermak was, in John M. Allswang's words, "an archetypal ethnic politician—probably, with Fiorello LaGuardia, the best there ever was." Elected mayor in 1931, Cermak carried every ethnic group except Italians and blacks, and he moved quickly to bring those two into his coalition before his assassination in early 1933.³² A final factor favoring the Democrats was, of course, the immense popularity of Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal.

To the Re-Thinking Chicago reformers, conditions in 1934 were certainly better than they had been in "Big Bill's" last term. Many reformers supported Cermak against Thompson in 1931. Cermak's successor, Edward J. Kelly, though very much a machine boss, was also by all accounts an improvement over Thompson. At the state level, Judge Henry Horner, a member of Rabbi Mann's congregation and "professional honest man," had become governor in 1932, to the delight of the reformers.³³ Nevertheless, a machine was a machine, and nonpartisanship ran deeply through urban progressivism. The Democratic sweep of Chicago in November 1934 caused misgivings, if not alarm. Three Chicago-area Republican Congressmen went down to defeat, and Democrats won every city court seat, all county offices, and every county commission seat elected in the city.³⁴

Thus, the third Re-Thinking Chicago conference, on 7 January 1935,

30. Wendt and Kogan, *Big Bill of Chicago*, written by two Chicago newspapermen, is a sprightly but generally reliable account.

31. Karl, *Merriam and the Study of Politics*, pp. 79–97; John M. Allswang, *A House for all Peoples: Ethnic Politics in Chicago, 1890–1936* (Lexington, Ky., 1971), pp. 173–175. Dever was from the ward of Graham Taylor's Chicago Commons settlement, and Taylor's political organization supported his aldermanic career as well as his mayoral administration; Louise C. Wade, *Graham Taylor: Pioneer for Social Justice, 1851–1938* (Chicago, 1964), p. 192; Thomas L. Philpott, *The Slum and the Ghetto: Neighborhood Deterioration and Middle-Class Reform, Chicago, 1880–1930* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 85–86.

32. Allswang, *House for all Peoples*, pp. 105, 160.

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 180–181. Two hundred members of the University of Chicago faculty endorsed Horner. For a judicious recent assessment of Kelly, see Roger Biles, *Big City Boss in Depression and War: Mayor Edward J. Kelly of Chicago* (DeKalb, Ill., 1984).

34. *Chicago Tribune*, 7 and 8 Nov. 1934.

presented a variety of perspectives on the political situation and what might be done—all of them more or less hostile to the machine. Paul H. Douglas, a member of Chicago's economics department (and later Democratic senator), concluded that "the Democratic situation is about hopeless" and called for third-party action. Walter J. Millard of the National Municipal League, Herbert Bebb of the City Club, and Mrs. Louise L. Wright of the League of Women Voters described their organizations' work and offered tactical suggestions.³⁵ The conference instructed its continuation committee to look into obtaining mailing lists to use in support of independent aldermanic candidates in April. But nothing came of this effort either: Shirley Greene found some civic agencies willing to share their lists, but he persuaded the committee that the time was too short to mount effective campaigns.³⁶ On 2 April Mayor Kelly was re-elected by 788,150 to 166,571 votes, sweeping all fifty wards and breaking all records. The ten Republicans in the Council also supported him.³⁷

On only two other occasions do the records show Re-Thinking Chicago taking specific, practical action. One instance was when the Hyde Park-Kenwood conference of 5 May 1935 heard about plans for the commercial development of Burnham Park along the South Side's lakeshore; they passed a resolution of protest to the city council. The other involved co-sponsorship with about ten other organizations of an "Honest Elections" convention in Orchestra Hall in March 1936.³⁸

Their basic conception of mission and naive set of methods explain at one level why Re-Thinking Chicago conferees kept on meeting and talking instead of settling on a focused agenda for change, political or otherwise. Various policy statements all testify to their persistence in this course. Their purpose was to provide "centers of acquaintance" where "civic-minded individuals" might discover their "corporate strength," learn the facts about conditions "which call for intelligent re-thinking and reconstruction," and be aroused to cooperative effort. Their method was that of "conference, discussion and education." They would offer no endorsement of any political platform or candidates. Re-Thinking Chicago would give intellectual and moral support to churches and other civic groups, which would have to do the rest.³⁹

One wonders, however, whether there were deeper reasons for inaction.

35. Summaries of these speeches are in "Proceedings of Three Re-Thinking Chicago Conferences," pp. 90–92, 95–96, Merriam Papers.

36. Greene, "Re-Thinking Chicago," p. 17.

37. *Chicago Tribune*, 3 April 1935.

38. Greene, "Re-Thinking Chicago," p. 28; Program, "Honest Elections Convention," 27 March 1936, Box 13 Bentley Papers.

39. *RE-THINKING CHICAGO: Statement of Policy*, n.d., and "RE-THINKING CHICAGO: 'A New Philosophy and Statesmanship for Chicago,'" n. d., Holt Papers; "AFTER RE-THINKING CHICAGO WHAT? (Suggestions for follow-up of a local Re-Thinking Chicago Conference)," n. d., Merriam Papers.

Progressives before the First World War also believed in reflection, discussion, and information. But they rarely held back from attempts to establish their conception of a Christian social order. The situation in the 1930s seems to have been different. Perhaps a sense of futility—about resisting one-party dominance or achieving any of their ideals—influenced Re-Thinking Chicago. If so, this venture would illustrate nicely Robert T. Handy's argument that a "Second Disestablishment" of American Protestantism occurred during the interwar years. According to Handy, profound social and intellectual forces brought the long Protestant era in American life to an end by the mid-thirties. Especially important was the radical pluralism caused by mass immigration, which displaced "evangelical Protestantism as the primary definer of cultural values and behavior patterns in the nation." This second disestablishment was in many respects more difficult to accept than the first, the legal disestablishment that had taken place after the American Revolution.⁴⁰ It seems altogether plausible, in the light of Handy's conclusions, to believe that the Re-Thinking Chicago people still held the old vision of a Christian (that is, Protestant) society but could no longer sustain the morale or buoyancy that had characterized prewar progressive crusades.

4.

Shirley Greene resigned as secretary in March 1937 to move to Merom, Indiana. There he served as pastor of a Congregational-Christian church and director of the Merom Institute, an organization which Holt had set up as a "Christian thought center" for rural America.⁴¹ With his departure, Re-Thinking Chicago rapidly petered out. By 1939 the only ongoing activity was a project of the Chicago Pilgrim Fellowship, the Congregational youth organization, to write biographies of important Chicagoans, similar to the earlier literature.⁴²

In its roughly four years, Re-Thinking Chicago undoubtedly achieved some worthy goals. It helped to educate hundreds of people about Chicago, its history, institutions, and problems. It probably heightened the civic consciousness of those who participated. It set forth images of the ideal city that could serve as sources of dissatisfaction with things as they were. It may have stimulated neighborhood projects of which we are unaware.

Nevertheless, for all the stature of its leaders and participants and for all the effort expended, Re-Thinking Chicago did not amount to much. In and of itself, if measured by its impact, it is not very significant historically. Its limitations were due in part to the preference for talk over action and an

40. Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 195–196.

41. Dorn, "The Rural Ideal and Agrarian Realities," pp. 64–65.

42. Edwin W. Still, *A Base for Building: Handbook for the Chicago Pilgrim Fellowship Rethinking Chicago Project* (Chicago, 1939).

obvious hesitation whenever an opportunity for action appeared. They were also due to an agenda that, except for myopia on the subject of race,⁴³ nearly covered the waterfront of urban issues. The movement's programs covered far too many topics for participants to gain either a sense of direction for action or faith that they could achieve their objectives. While the leaders preserved both the movement's reflective character and an important understanding of the interconnectedness of urban life, they did so at the expense of any practical improvements they might have made in Chicago's conditions or institutions.

If Re-Thinking Chicago is important, it is as a mirror of some features of Protestant liberalism (and compatible segments of Reform Judaism) in the 1930s. Reinhold Niebuhr's critique of liberalism's idealism and naiveté had been gaining ground since the publication of his *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932). But Re-Thinking Chicago demonstrates the lingering hold of the liberal confidence in reason, good will, and information as instruments of change toward a better future. Reading between the lines, one suspects that the leaders and planners emphasized meetings, discussion, and publications not so much because they were necessary preliminary steps toward action, as because they believed these efforts had an inherent salutary effect in themselves. Education, mutual understanding, and good feelings—means Niebuhr deemed inadequate to the ends of peace and justice—seem to have been central still to the Re-Thinking Chicago group. This attitude is surprising, because a number of those persons associated with the programs were in other aspects of their careers known to be hard-headed, action-oriented, pragmatic, and realistic in relating their means to their ends. Arthur Holt's analysis of the needs of American farmers, though marked by strains of idealism, had a striking quality of realism about the power relationships among social groups. In dealing with Chicago's problems, however, he displays simply a lack of realistic strategies and methods to effect change.

Re-Thinking Chicago may also serve as a mirror on liberal Protestantism's social base. A profile of Protestant clergy and civic leaders probably would be narrower than that of ordinary parishioners. Nonetheless, an examination of the participants in Re-Thinking Chicago meetings suggests serious social isolation for Protestant liberalism as a whole. The most complete list of conferees contains the names of ninety-two persons who attended the meetings on 5-6 March 1934. No fewer than thirty-one are identified by the abbreviation "Rev." At least twenty-two others were associated with religious institutions. This was a distinguished group—a virtual "Who's Who" of Chicago's liberal religious establishment. It included President Albert W. Palmer and Professors Arthur C. McGiffert, Jr., and Wilhelm Pauck of CTS, Edward Scribner Ames of the University Church of the

43. Though there was no recurrence of the race riot of 1919, race relations remained troubled. Thomas L. Philpott shows in *The Slum and the Ghetto*, pp. 141-142, that of all ethnic and racial groups, blacks alone were restricted to a "ghetto."

Disciples, Ernest Fremont Tittle of Evanston's First Methodist Church, Perry J. Stackhouse of the First Baptist Church, Douglas Horton of the United Church of Hyde Park, and Henry Nelson Wieman of the University of Chicago Divinity School. Those in the parish ministry served affluent, liberal congregations along the Lake Shore, in Hyde Park, or in such suburbs as Evanston and Oak Park. Though diverse in background, the three rabbis listed all led elite Reform congregations near the university, which were composed of the most acculturated of Chicago's Jews. There was no Catholic priest, no one identified with an ethnic Protestant, Holiness, or Pentecostal denomination, and no pastor of a working-class congregation. A second group of between fifteen and twenty representatives of civic and social agencies, including the Council of Social Agencies, YWCA, League of Women Voters, and Women's Club, likewise had impressive names but a narrow base.⁴⁴

Though Greene claimed that clerical dominance was less pronounced in later meetings, it remained, he suggested, a case of carrying coals to Newcastle. The constituency was limited to "polite middle class areas where Protestant churches and civic agencies are thickest." "The great labor groups, foreign groups, the political system, big business and the metropolitan press, do not know that we exist." The failure of efforts to enlist Catholics and foreign-language groups testifies to the crippling isolation of the reformers from the great mass of Chicagoans (sixty-four per cent of whom were foreign stock in 1930) and their associational life.⁴⁵

Finally, Re-Thinking Chicago reflects a profound ambivalence within Protestant liberalism with regard to the city itself. Noting in American literature a "recurrent refrain" of "the need to maintain the city, to see it as the center of what will be the new life," Warren Susman has cautioned against easy generalizations about the anti-urbanism of intellectuals. There is often something more than hunger for an idyllic rural or small-town past, he concludes. The city might be seen as full of problems, but these were challenges to be accepted, not reasons for giving up the whole thing as a lost cause.⁴⁶ There was much to suggest such a positive attitude in the conference programs and literature of Re-Thinking Chicago. In addition to the "Readings on the City of God," some effort went into producing sermons, hymns, and liturgical materials to celebrate the city. Here and there one finds a hopeful openness to new possibilities.

44. "RE-THINKING CHICAGO . . . March 5-6, 1934. MEMBERS OF THE CONFERENCE," Holt Papers. For information on Rabbis Mann, Freehof, and G. George Fox of South Shore Temple, see John Simons, ed., *Who's Who in American Jewry: A Biographical Dictionary of Living Jews in the United States and Canada*, 3 vols. (New York, 1938), 3: 288, 296, 703.

45. "Final Report of the Executive Secretary," Holt Papers; Greene to "friends and representatives . . . in Local Communities," Merriam Papers; Allswang, *A House for all Peoples*, p. 20.

46. Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1973), pp. 249-251.

Nevertheless, a debilitating anti-urban animus did run through the Re-Thinking Chicago movement. Its leaders brought to their critique of Chicago not only the moralistic perspective of their small-town backgrounds, but also the view from Hyde Park and similar white, middle-class, liberal Protestant enclaves. Arthur Holt's polemics against urban selfishness represent the movement's negativism at its most extreme end. President Arthur C. McGiffert of CTS recalled years later that Holt "never succeeded in identifying himself with the city, as did Graham Taylor. He tended to interpret his urban studies drastically rather than sympathetically. . . . He gave his students the impression that he hated the city."⁴⁷ It should not be surprising that, even in seeking to celebrate the city, Re-Thinking Chicago drew inspiration from ideal cities envisioned by prophets and utopians, not actual historical cities. The distance between its ideal images and the real Chicago for which it was endeavoring to design a new philosophy and a new statesmanship was too vast a chasm for Re-Thinking Chicago's leaders to cross. Despite a certain positive attitude toward the challenges of urban life, their judgment upon Chicago was too severe and their complaints too numerous.

This result was unfortunate, because the talents and positions of the participants made this an extraordinary group of individuals. Without these flaws in perspective and technique, they might have made of Re-Thinking Chicago something more than an illuminating case study of religion and urban reform in the 1930s.

47. McGiffert, *No Ivory Tower*, p. 190.