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THE DOCTRINE OF MAN  
IN THE  
THEOLOGY OF REINHOLD NIEBUHR

BEING A THESIS  
PRESENTED TO THE UNIVERSITY  
OF ST ANDREWS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF THEOLOGY

BY  
PETER MARSHALL

JUNE, 1966.



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## DECLARATION

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## STATEMENT

AFTER GRADUATING BACHELOR OF ARTS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO, NEW ZEALAND, IN 1960, AND MASTER OF ARTS, WITH SECOND CLASS HONOURS IN HISTORY, FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO IN 1961, THEOLOGICAL TRAINING WAS COMMENCED IN THE THEOLOGICAL HALL, KNOX COLLEGE, DUNEDIN, NEW ZEALAND, IN 1961.

ON COMPLETION OF THEOLOGICAL TRAINING IN 1963 ADMITTANCE AS A RESEARCH STUDENT IN ST MARY'S COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF ST ANDREWS, WAS GRANTED IN OCTOBER, 1964.

SIX TERMS OF RESEARCH HAVE BEEN COMPLETED IN ST MARY'S COLLEGE UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF PROFESSOR N.H.G.ROBINSON, D.D., D.LITT.; AND THIS THESIS IS SUBMITTED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF ST ANDREWS IN APPLICATION FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF THEOLOGY.

CERTIFICATE

I CERTIFY THAT PETER MARSHALL HAS SPENT SIX TERMS IN RESEARCH WORK AT ST MARY'S COLLEGE IN THE UNIVERSITY OF ST ANDREWS UNDER MY SUPERVISION, THAT HE HAS FULFILLED THE CONDITIONS OF UNIVERSITY COURT ORDINANCE NO. LXI, AND THAT HE IS QUALIFIED TO SUBMIT THE FOLLOWING THESIS IN APPLICATION FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF THEOLOGY.

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## CHAPTER I

### NIEBUHR'S DOCTRINE OF MAN: BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVE.

Perhaps the most important task confronting the Christian Church today is so to proclaim the Christian faith that men recognize this faith as relevant to their lives, and see it as the truth encompassing and bringing into coherence the truths of their world. Modern man finds the greatest difficulty in accepting as true any affirmations which he cannot empirically verify. And if such a curtailment of the breadth of truth causes a sad limitation to the quality of life, if it causes man to question the meaningfulness of his life, then he can always turn to forms of mass amusement and escapism to avoid being discomforted. The proclamation of the Christian faith which by its nature lies beyond the limits of rational truth, is still a stumbling block to the modern Jew and foolishness to the modern Greek. But the significance of our twentieth century age is this: the modern Jew and the modern Greek, living in the strange anonymity of a depersonalized, technological age, their lives inundated by mass amusement and impersonal activity, never experience silence and peace for their own thoughts, and so know little of themselves. And if the harsh realities of life and the inexplicable tricks of fate should infringe upon man's self-created world, then he finds himself standing

before the abyss of meaninglessness, and a prey to cynical disillusionment or to sheer despair. If the Church is to speak to modern man, then it must be able to go behind this façade of modern civilization and speak to man as he really is. To do this, and to understand modern man as he really is, the Church must understand the evolution of modern civilization, the cultural, social, and historical factors which have made our modern age what it is. At the same time it must ever keep before its eyes the Biblical doctrine of man, and remember the priceless insights of the Church's theologians throughout the ages. It must apply its Biblical insights to the diagnoses of the human condition. And it must allow the predicaments of the human situation to challenge and deepen its understanding of the Biblical faith.

The reason behind the decision to examine Reinhold Niebuhr's doctrine of man is that Niebuhr has devoted a great deal of his writing and thinking to an honest examination of the cultural and the social, the philosophical and the historical heritage which has made modern man what he is. At the same time Niebuhr has maintained in his theological thinking, the essential truths of the Christian faith. Because Niebuhr's great concern has been to relate the truths of the Christian faith to the truths of the secular world, his thought offers valuable insights for the task of Christian apologetics. It is important to appreciate wherein lies the common ground between the Christian and

the honest enquirer, and to understand how a dialogue between adherents of the Christian faith and those who profess no such adherence may be established; and an examination of Niebuhr's doctrine of man is relevant to this end.

William J. Wolf has stated that "Niebuhr's most significant contribution to the restatement of Christian theology in our generation is his exposition of the doctrine of man".<sup>1</sup> But it should be noted that Niebuhr refutes any description of himself as a theologian.<sup>2</sup> Professor J. C. Bennett has pointed out that Niebuhr's theology has developed in response to his reading of contemporary history and to his reflections upon his own social and political responsibility in that history. There is some importance, he says, in the fact that Niebuhr has been a teacher of Christian Ethics and not of Systematic Theology. This has meant, says Bennett, that Niebuhr has never had to develop a rounded system of doctrine; he has elaborated a Christian doctrine of man, and a Christian view of history, rather than, for example, the Christian doctrine of God or Christology.<sup>3</sup>

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1. William J. Wolf, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Man", in Reinhold Niebuhr, ed. Kegley and Bretall, Library of Living Theology, Vol. II, (New York: Macmillan, 1961), p. 230.

2. "It is somewhat embarrassing to be made the subject of a study which assumes theology as a primary interest. I cannot and do not claim to be a theologian." Reinhold Niebuhr, "Intellectual Biography", Ibid, p. 47.

3. J. C. Bennett, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Social Ethics", Ibid, pp. 46 - 47.

The Background to Niebuhr's Thought.

D. R. Davies has remarked that Niebuhr's American birth and rearing, together with his German origin, may partly account for the unusual combination of qualities which nearly always are separate, but which are found together in Niebuhr's thought: an intense awareness of ultimate problems, and an equally intense preoccupation with the immediate, concrete, and practical next step.<sup>1</sup> It is significant that Niebuhr admits that the philosophical theories and epistemology of his theological studies bored him.<sup>2</sup> His disillusionment with this type of study - together with family needs - decided Niebuhr to forswear graduate study and turn to parish work in Detroit. Here he laboured for thirteen crucial years, and here he formulated his most important theological and political perspectives.

Detroit's population expanded, during Niebuhr's sojourn there, from half a million to one and a half millions, and the city became the capital of the Ford empire. The rapid expansion of his parish, and the "social realities of a rapidly expanding industrial community, before the time of the organization of the workers, and under the leadership of a group of resourceful engineers who understood little

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1. D.R. Davies, Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet from America, (London: James Clarke, 1945), p.11.

2. Niebuhr, "Intellectual Biography", Reinhold Niebuhr, ed. Kegley and Bretall, p.4.

about human relations" forced Niebuhr to reconsider his whole outlook. He says of these experiences, these facts "determined my development more than any books which I may have read. They forced me to reconsider the liberal and highly moralistic creed which I had accepted as tantamount to the Christian faith".<sup>1</sup>

The profound impact which the conditions of the working class made upon Niebuhr can be appreciated very quickly by a reading of his Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, a book compiled amidst the turmoil of a great industrial city. Here, we can see being formulated those basic attitudes and values which have guided Niebuhr all his life. Not least to impress the reader is the very great sensitivity which Niebuhr has to want and suffering.<sup>2</sup> This sensitivity has been one of the most important moulding forces in Niebuhr's thinking and has been one of the major contributing factors in his successful role as a Christian apologist.<sup>3</sup>

Young men fed into the assembly line where they

1. Ibid., p.5.

2. "There was in Niebuhr's social observation a profound prophetic quality, by means of which he was able to feel the struggle and suffering of people as a personal thing". D.R. Davies, Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet from America, p.24.

3. "We went through one of the big automobile factories today. So artificial is life that these factories are like a strange world to me though I have lived close to them

would soon become exhausted, both physically and mentally; men in their fifties without special training, regarded by the ethics of modern industrialism as so much junk; these men opened Niebuhr's eyes to the harsh realities of the new technological age. Pondering the unemployment problem which occurred when the Ford works changed to the production of the Model A, Niebuhr records

I have been doing a little arithmetic and have come to the conclusion that the car cost the Ford workers at least fifty million dollars in lost wages during last year. No one knows how many hundreds lost their homes in the period of unemployment, and how many children were taken out of school to help fill the family exchequer, and how many more children lived on short rations during that period . . . . What a civilization this is! Naive gentlemen with a genius for mechanics suddenly become arbiters over the lives and fortunes of hundreds and thousands. Their moral pretensions are credulously accepted at full value. No one asks whether an industry which can maintain a reserve of a quarter of a billion ought not to make some provision for its unemployed.<sup>2</sup>

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(Contd. from p. 5)

for many years. The foundry interested me particularly. The heat was terrific. The men seemed weary. Here manual labour is drudgery and toil is slavery. The men cannot possibly find any satisfaction in their work. They simply work to make a living. Their sweat and their dull pain are part of the price paid for the fine cars which we all run. And most of us run the cars without knowing what price is being paid for them." Niebuhr, Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, (New York: Willet, Clark and Colby, 1929), p.78.

2.

Ibid., pp. 154 - 155.

It was in reaction to all that he felt to be wrong in the capitalist system that Niebuhr became a socialist. "I became a socialist in theory long before I enrolled in the Socialist Party and before I had read anything of Karl Marx."<sup>1</sup>

Even more significant for the development of Niebuhr's thought was the impact which the Detroit situation made upon his understanding and proclamation of the Christian faith. Niebuhr quickly realized that it was difficult for ministers to be effective champions of social justice when the victims of social injustice were not part of their congregations, and when the beneficiaries of this injustice paid the churches' bills.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless the obvious subservience of the churches to the business interest made him "a little sick".<sup>3</sup>

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1. Quoted by June Bingham in Courage to Change, (New York: Scribners, 1961), p.134.

2. Niebuhr, "The Church and the Middle Class", The Christian Century, Vol.39 (Dec.7,1922), pp.1513-1515..

3. When the American Federation of Labour arranged a convention in Detroit in 1926 in the vain hope of attracting the industrial workers to its own craft unions, "the business community of Detroit, which had always breathed sweetness and light, showed its fangs. The Board of Commerce had all kinds of meetings in which they decided how they were going to stop this. Meanwhile the Federal Council of Churches ... sent a secretary to Detroit to ask ... what churches ... would invite labour leaders to their Sunday evening exercises. ... I, of course, together with about a dozen other persons, submitted this to my board and was enthusiastic about its acceptance. So we invited these labour speakers. Whereupon the Board of Commerce let out a tremendous blast and shrewdly sent committees that would be most influential in each particular church situation to the pastor and to the board members, to ask for the withdrawal of these invitations. The fact is that all of the churches withdrew their invitations in a rather abject way. That made me a little sick about the obvious subservience of the churches to the business interest." Bingham, op.cit., pp.137-138.

Niebuhr's early optimism was quickly shattered by the shams of conventional religion and by the insidiousness of human pride and selfishness.

The problem of how to communicate the Christian faith sorely troubled Niebuhr in his first parish. More and more the "simple, little moral homilies" he preached in accordance with the tenets of a liberal Christianity, seemed irrelevant to the brutal facts of life in an industrial city.

Now that I have preached about a dozen sermons I find that I am repeating myself. A different text simply means a different pretext for saying the same thing over again. The few ideas that I had worked into sermons at the seminary have all been used and now what? 1

The young men whom he taught in Sunday school were disinterested and inattentive and Niebuhr doubted whether he came very close to them.<sup>2</sup>

And yet, five years after his entry into parish work, Niebuhr was able to write that he was beginning to like the ministry. "I think since I have stopped worrying so much about the intellectual problems of religion and have begun exploring some of the ethical problems there is more of a thrill in preaching."<sup>3</sup> And of his Sunday school class Niebuhr wrote, "Gradually I am beginning to discover that

1. Niebuhr, Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, p.4.

2. Ibid., p.10.

3. Ibid., p.27.

my failure with the class was due to my talking too much. Now I let them talk and the thing is becoming interesting. ... the fellows are at least getting at some of the vital problems of life and I am learning from them."<sup>1</sup> These solutions to the problem of communicating the Christian message, which Niebuhr learned by hard experience, became of the utmost significance in all his apologetic writings. The ability to discern the basic moral and ethical problems of society and the ability to listen have been two of Niebuhr's greatest assets.

We find the same sensitivity in Niebuhr's thinking concerning the ultimate issues of man's existence, as we found in his concern for the plight of man in an industrial society. He writes in his Notebook,

This sickness of Miss Z's is getting on my nerves. I can't think of anything for the rest of the day after coming from that bed of pain. If I had more patients I suppose I would get a little more hardened. Talk about professionalism! I suppose men get professional to save their emotional resources. Here I make one visit in an afternoon and get all done up. Meanwhile the doctor is making a dozen. He is less sentimental, but probably does more good.<sup>2</sup>

Visiting two elderly women before their deaths helped Niebuhr to rediscover the essentials of the Christian faith. For one, faith was futile against the test of the ultimate issue - death; the other asked the young minister to read

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1. Ibid, p.3.

2. Niebuhr, Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, p.26.

psalms and prayers expressing gratitude for all the mercies of God which she had received in life.<sup>1</sup> Recalling the experience thirty years later, Niebuhr writes

I appreciated that the ultimate problem of human existence is the peril of sin and death in the way that these two perils are so curiously compounded; for we fall into sin by trying to evade or conquer death or our own insignificance, of which death is the ultimate symbol. The Christian faith holds out the hope that our fragmentary lives will be completed in a total and larger plan than any which we control or comprehend . . . . I was conscious of the nobility which was the fruit of a simple faith of a simple woman; and that was not the only time in parish duties in which I learned the meaning of Christ's prayer 'I thank Thee, Father, that Thou hast withheld these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them unto babes'.<sup>2</sup>

As we read Niebuhr's many works, we find again and again this sensitivity towards the ultimate issues of life and death. The subject of death is not regarded in any morbid way, but rather as the ultimate symbol of the mystery of life which calls in question the meaningfulness of all human activity. It cannot be ignored or evaded; rather, it challenges us to seek an even more ultimate meaning which can include the fact of death within its reach.

These common, and yet at the same time, profound problems which challenged Niebuhr in his Detroit parish, and which are recorded with very great honesty in Leaves From

1. Ibid, p. 189.

2. Niebuhr, "Intellectual Biography", Reinhold Niebuhr, ed. Kegley and Bretall, pp. 6 - 7.

the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, afford an indispensable insight into Niebuhr's mind. For here we see being formulated in a practical situation the basic theological viewpoints, the social and political attitudes, which have influenced Niebuhr all his life.

#### The Role of Niebuhr's Doctrine of Man.

In the light of his experiences in Detroit it is not surprising that Niebuhr's doctrine of man should be central to all of his thinking. In Detroit, Niebuhr was forced to recognize the selfishness and inhumanity of modern society. Along with such a recognition there grew a deeper understanding of the Biblical doctrine of human sin and the indispensability of faith in God's grace for salvation. Practical experience and the insights of a Biblical faith acted in a reciprocal relationship upon each other, in deepening Niebuhr's understanding of man. Hence it is not unexpected that this doctrine of man should play a vital part in the change and development of Niebuhr's theological, political, and social thinking. Niebuhr commenced his parish ministry as a child of liberal theology. But liberalism's blindness to the insidiousness of human selfishness, to the irrationality of human behaviour, and to the tragic element in life, led him to see that "the real basis for all the errors of liberalism is its erroneous

estimate of human nature".<sup>1</sup>

After the First World War, Niebuhr had shared in the general revulsion against international warfare, but he was never an absolute pacifist. The rejection of those pacifist views which he did hold came in 1932 over the question of the use of political coercion in the class struggle. Niebuhr believed that pacifism substituted for the doctrine of justification by faith, a sectarian perfectionism which believed it could avoid sin by refusing to engage in violence. Niebuhr's emphasis upon the importance of the doctrine of justification by faith was due to his appreciation of the profundity of human sinfulness - a fruit of his deepening understanding of man.

In his assault upon the citadel of liberalism, Niebuhr used the tools of the Marxist social and economic analysis. But Niebuhr was never an uncritical Marxist and in this instance too, we find that his final rejection of Marxism was due to his Christian understanding of human nature. Marxism believed that the new era could be inaugurated by human effort. But Niebuhr, from his understanding of human sin, was aware that every new ideal can be corrupted by human vindictiveness and self-righteousness into a new idolatry.

For a quarter of a century Niebuhr's thinking about

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1. Niebuhr, Reflections on the End of an Era, (New York: Scribners, 1934), p.48.

society was controlled by a consistent brand of Socialism. But gradually Niebuhr came to see that the uniting of political and economic power in the same hands invited exploitation and bureaucracy. The Socialist doctrinaire approach to human nature held that there were limits to human needs, desires, and ambitions, which men and women themselves would recognize. But the acquisitiveness and selfcentredness of human nature soon proved otherwise. Niebuhr read these signs in the Socialist experiments after the Second World War. But behind his particular disillusionments with Socialism lay this factor: Niebuhr's doctrine of man was never really consistent with Socialism's optimistic understanding of human nature.

In 1939, just prior to the Gifford Lectures, Principal John Baillie is reported to have described Niebuhr as being theologically indebted to Karl Barth, and politically and socially indebted to Karl Marx.<sup>1</sup> We have seen that the extent of Niebuhr's indebtedness to Karl Marx must be examined carefully. In the same way, the extent of Niebuhr's indebtedness to Karl Barth must be considered critically. There is no doubt that Barth's emphasis upon the transcendent holiness of God and upon man's inability to extricate himself from his dilemma, helped Niebuhr in his criticism of the optimism of liberalism and of the

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1. N.H.G. Robinson, Christ and Conscience, (London: Nisbet, 1956), p. 109.

utopianism of Marxism. But just as Niebuhr was not an uncritical Marxist, neither was he fully reconciled to Barth's views. From the beginning he vigorously criticized Barth's exclusively transcendent or eschatological view of life which did not concern itself with the battles for political and social justice. It is clear that the basis for the disagreement between Barth and Niebuhr lay in their understanding of man. For Barth, man and his activities have no relevance until they are created anew by faith in Jesus Christ. But for Niebuhr, man, even in his sinful state, is capable of working for a more just society; man can embrace ideals and work for the implementation of moral values, and can experience uneasiness and guilt over his inevitable failures. It is this quality in man, Niebuhr believes, which provides both a true insight into man's nature, and a point of contact for God's grace.

It can be seen that an examination of Niebuhr's doctrine of man takes us to the centre of his developing thought. It reveals the influence of his experiences in the world of men, amongst the practical problems of human life; and it incorporates the truths which Niebuhr has ascertained from his understanding of the Christian faith. It shows the way in which Niebuhr has listened attentively to the world and related what he has heard to the faith of the Christian Church.

Issues to be Examined.

One of the most important attributes of Niebuhr's work is his conversance with secular historical and philosophical thought; thus he has been able to understand more adequately the problem of proclaiming the Christian faith in the contemporary climate of opinion. He has been able to discern common ground between secular and Christian thinking. But more important is the fact that his understanding of historical and philosophical movements has enabled him to look more critically at the thought forms and the philosophies of today. The lessons which Niebuhr has learned from his study of history have prevented him from succumbing to the easy enchantments of today's solutions to the human predicament. A knowledge of how inevitably in the past, every virtue has had an associated vice, and every strength an inherent weakness, has given Niebuhr a perspective from which he is able to see the strengths and weaknesses in contemporary thinking.

In his analysis of man's essential nature Niebuhr has utilized the insights of writers and philosophers, both secular and Christian. Because he is able to discover common ground in certain vital respects, between these writers, he is able to point to the possibility of a fruitful dialogue between them; and this is a dialogue which is essential to the task of Christian apologetics. There are risks of course, in any attempts to analyse the essential

nature of man by striving for an interpretation which seeks to relate the truths perceived by the secular world to the truths perceived through the eye of faith. In considering Niebuhr's attempt we must ask whether he has always succeeded in moulding the truths of both sources into a coherent unified whole.

When we consider Niebuhr's treatment of man's sin we must ask ourselves a similar question. Niebuhr believes that though sin corrupts every aspect of man's being yet the image of God is not destroyed in man. As evidence for his contention Niebuhr points to man's ability to create limited values and a relative justice and to man's feeling that he is not as he ought to be. And as evidence for man's corrupted nature, Niebuhr turns to the doctrine of total depravity and the witness of man's conscience. The question we must consider is whether Niebuhr, in combining the evidence from these two differing sources - one, the evidence from the world, and the other, the doctrine of the Church - succeeds in presenting man's nature as a unified whole.

Since the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer there has been interest in what J.A.T. Robinson has described as 'starting from the other end' in the task of Christian apologetics. Bishop Robinson asserts that we must recognize the fact that man's question is, in the first instance, a question about man and not about God. Man, says Robinson, is in search

for the meaning of his own existence and destiny, and is more concerned with the problem of living at peace with his fellows, than he is with standing under the judgement of God. Man has a deep resistance to any attempt to start from given truths, to describe the definition in advance of experience, the believing ahead of seeing.<sup>1</sup> Hence, Robinson alleges, modern man finds the God of orthodox and traditional faith intellectually superfluous, emotionally dispensable, and morally intolerable.<sup>2</sup> For this reason he advocates an inductive approach to Christian doctrine. This is to insist that ends are only to be reached from the beginning - and the beginning for men today is from Jesus as a compelling human man, whatever more they may be compelled to see in him.<sup>3</sup>

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1. John A.T. Robinson, The New Reformation? (London: S.C.M. Press, 1965) pp. 33 - 46.

2. Ibid, Appendix I, pp. 106 - 122.

3. In fairness to John Robinson, it must be added that he is careful to advocate that reform of church doctrine and practice must begin at both ends. Starting from the inductive end, Robinson "can only begin with the statement that Christ is a perfectly ordinary human being who is unique for me in the sense that in him 'all things cohere'; he is the one who co-ordinates and vindicates for me all that I believe most deeply true ...". "I can say with the early Church 'Jesus is Lord', or with Thomas 'My Lord and my God'" (p.41). But Jesus is also One in whom the intangible, ineffable reality of 'God' dwells (p.118), and in him God takes responsibility for evil - transformingly and victoriously (P.121).

"Our theology has to be done from both ends at once - and there is no guarantee that the lines will meet. We simply have to trust the truth we serve, knowing that for our Master too it led to a cross, on which the gulf between God and man appeared at that moment wider than ever". (p.82).

Page references are to The New Reformation? (Underlining indicates author's italics.)

Because he has been concerned to demonstrate the relevance of the Christian faith to modern man, we find in Niebuhr's thinking a similar interest in modern man's search for the meaning of his own existence and destiny. But Niebuhr does not believe that we can move from Jesus, the man for other men, to Jesus the Christ, in whom the fullness of God dwells. For all his interest in demonstrating the relevance of faith to modern life, Niebuhr believes that the message that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself must judge all human pretensions and so create the faith which alone can see Jesus as the Christ.

In Niebuhr's Christian interpretation of history we can perceive this same endeavour to face honestly the imponderables of human experience, while at the same time relating the message of the Gospel, discernible only to faith, to this human experience. By so doing, Niebuhr believes that the unceasing activity of historical movement can be seen to be meaningful without denying its enigmas and tragedies. And by stressing that the meaning and end of history is only discernible by faith Niebuhr avoids the arbitrary dogmatisms which assert that their messages revealing history's nature are self-evident, and which because they bear little resemblance to the world of ordinary experience, repel the honest enquirer.

Niebuhr's social and political thinking is concerned to demonstrate the significance of his Christian understanding

of man for the social, economic, and political problems of modern society. We have seen that these problems have lain close to his heart since his Detroit days. As a result we find a creative dialogue between the Christian faith and man's world. Niebuhr attempts to relate the truths of the Christian faith to the world in order that these truths may be seen not as abstract static concepts, which, because of their rigidity, offer no guidance for man in facing the complexities of his society. Rather, Niebuhr is concerned to show that these truths provide a basis for criticism, a standpoint for perspective, and a demonstration of an ultimate source of judgement by which man may, by faith, attempt to overcome the morass of relativity which reduces his concern to cynicism.

It is clear that Niebuhr's basic problem of relating the Christian faith to the world of men - so clearly demonstrated in his work in Detroit - colours all his intellectual endeavours. In the early writings his concern lay more with the problems of society, and there are times when the two strains - an understanding of the Biblical faith, and an understanding of human society - are not moulded into a coherent interpretation of human nature. And when Niebuhr is faced with the problem of expressing in theological terms his understanding of man's nature, he uses a terminology and an understanding of man's essential nature which runs the risk of being too static for his purpose of

doing justice to the dramatic-dynamic nature of human existence. But as his thought evolves we find the truths of faith and the experience of men more adequately integrated as Niebuhr explores such categories as the relationship of Christian love to human law, and the relationship of man's relative achievements in history to history's ultimate meaning. It is in these dynamic relationships that Niebuhr finds evidence for his most fruitful exposition of his doctrine of man.

## CHAPTER II.

## THE LESSONS FROM HISTORY.

In his endeavour both to understand human nature more adequately and to proclaim the Christian Gospel more relevantly, Niebuhr makes very considerable use of past historical events. His interest in history may be described as twofold. Firstly, he believes that a knowledge of human motivation can lead to self-understanding; a knowledge of the complex causes and results of any historical drama, with its mixture of human idealism and self-assertiveness and pride, can lead to a self-knowledge which is only too well aware of the tremendous potentialities for good, and the dark possibilities for evil, in the human self. In the second place, Niebuhr believes that the study of history has positive apologetic value. By using the tools of rational analysis - tools acceptable to the secular world - he attempts to show that the classical, the idealist, the rationalist, and the romantic views of man simply do not bear a true resemblance to man as we know him. Niebuhr believes that the Christian interpretation of man may be negatively validated by the inadequacies of these alternative views, and by the degree to which these alternative views conflict with one another. Niebuhr knows that a negative proof of the Christian view cannot be transmuted into a positive one compelling conviction on purely rational grounds. But he

believes that the Christian view of man takes cognizance of the realities - the contradictions and antinomies of life - in a way in which other interpretations fail.<sup>1</sup>

Before he attempts an examination of the more modern interpretations of man, Niebuhr considers two traditional views of man: the view of classical antiquity and the biblical view. Niebuhr believes that all modern views of human nature are adaptations, transformations and varying compounds of these two views.<sup>2</sup>

The classical view of man, states Niebuhr, sees man primarily from the standpoint of the uniqueness of his rational faculties. This view has a twofold result. First, rationalism practically identifies rational man with the divine, for reason is, as the creative principle, identical with God. Individuality loses its significance, for it rests only on the particularity of the body. Secondly, this dualism between mind and body which ensues, identifies the body with evil and assumes the essential goodness of mind or spirit.

But there is, Niebuhr is careful to point out, an air of melancholy hanging over Greek life. The brevity of life and the mortality of man tempted the Greeks to melancholy. History was a series of cycles, a realm of endless recurrences, and neither Greek nor Roman classicists,

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1. Niebuhr, Faith and History, (London: Nisbet, 1949), pp. 175 - 190.

2. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol. I, (London: Nisbet, 1941), pp. 4 - 5.

Niebuhr avers, had any conception of meaning in human history. The pessimism of the Greek dramatists is, in Niebuhr's view, nearer to a Christian interpretation of life because they see human passions as something more than mere impulses of the body. The principle of order and measure is constantly defied by vitalities in human life which are creative as well as destructive. The tragedy of human history consists precisely in the fact that human life cannot be creative without being destructive, that biological urges are enhanced and sublimated by daemonic spirit and that this spirit cannot express itself without committing the sin of pride. There can be creativity in human affairs only when man's vital energies disturb the order established by the harmonizing force of mind. Thus life is at war with itself, according to Greek tragedy, and there is no solution - or only a tragic solution - to this conflict.<sup>1</sup>

The second distinctive view which has influenced all modern views of human nature is the Christian view of man. Here, says Niebuhr, there is an appreciation of the unity of body and soul in human personality. The Christian view prevents the idealistic error of regarding the mind as essentially good or essentially eternal and the body as essentially evil. It also obviates the romantic error of seeking for the good in man-as-nature and for evil in man-as-spirit or as reason. Man in the Christian view is

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1.  
Ibid, pp. 9 - 12.

a created and finite existence in both body and soul.

Further, the Christian view understands man primarily from the standpoint of God rather than from the uniqueness of his rational faculties or from his relation to nature. Man, says Niebuhr, is made in the "image of God". Man's ability to stand outside of both himself and the world means that he cannot understand himself except as he is understood from beyond himself and the world. Man knows he cannot identify meaning with the necessary causal links in nature because he knows his freedom can transcend these links. Nor can he identify the principle of meaning with rationality since he transcends his own rational processes. On the other hand, though both mysticism and the Christian faith understand man from the standpoint of the eternal, the two nevertheless differ. For mysticism leads to an undifferentiated ultimate reality and must regard individuality and particularity as essentially evil. Thus, says Niebuhr, the Christian faith in God's self-disclosure culminating in the revelation of Christ is the basis of the Christian concept of personality and the only real ground of genuine individuality.<sup>1</sup>

But the Christian faith also asserts that man is a sinner. Man's sin is neither the inevitable consequence of his finiteness nor the result of the involvement of part of himself in physical necessity. Man is a sinner not

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Ibid, pp. 12 - 16.

because he is one limited individual within a whole but rather he is betrayed by his very ability to survey the whole, to imagine himself the whole. Only in a religion of revelation whose God reveals Himself to man from beyond himself, can man discover the root of sin to be within himself. Thus, says Niebuhr, the Christian view of human nature is involved in the paradox of claiming a higher stature for man and of taking a more serious view of his evil than do other anthropologies.<sup>1</sup>

Having outlined the two views of man which have influenced all modern interpretations, Niebuhr devotes some attention to a basic problem which has plagued all interpretations of man, before going on to examine the lessons of history. This is the problem of the relationship of vitality and form. In Niebuhr's view all creatures possess an exuberant vitality within the limits of certain unities, orders and forms. Within limits, human existence can break the forms of nature and create new configurations of vitality. This is the basis of human history, with its progressive alteration of forms. Four elements are involved in man's creativity: his vitality of nature - his impulses and drives; the forms and unities of nature - the determinations of instinct and the forms of natural cohesion and differentiation; the freedom of the spirit to transcend natural forms within limits and to direct vitalities; and finally,

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1. Ibid, pp. 17 - 18.

the forming capacity of spirit, its ability to create a new realm of coherence and order. All four elements, Niebuhr says, are involved in human creativity and, by implication, in human destructiveness. For all four elements are involved in the tension between vitality and form. Where vitality and form are correctly balanced these elements may contribute to a unique flowering of human genius. Where they are in imbalance human creativeness can issue in anarchical and depraved action.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr's interpretation of the relationship of vitality and form is similar to Paul Tillich's interpretation of the relationship between freedom and destiny, dynamics and form.<sup>2</sup> When freedom separates itself from the destiny to which it belongs, says Tillich, it becomes arbitrariness. And to the degree to which freedom is distorted into arbitrariness, destiny is distorted into mechanical necessity. In man's essential nature, says Tillich, dynamics and form are united. But under the control of the desire for self-elevation and the unlimited desire to draw the whole of reality into himself, man is driven in all directions without any definite aim and content. His dynamics are distorted into a formless urge for self-transcendence but

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1. Ibid, pp. 27 - 31.

2. Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology, vol II, (London: Nisbet, 1957), pp. 73 - 75.

nothing real is created if the form is lacking, for nothing is real without form. And yet, says Tillich, form without dynamics is equally destructive. Form without dynamics produces either legalism without creativity, or rebellious outbreaks of dynamic force leading to chaos. There is thus a continuous breaking of vitality by form and of form by vitality, but if the one side disappears then the other does also; for vitality alone leads to chaos and emptiness, as form alone must lead to rigidity and emptiness.

### The Renaissance.

Having outlined the nature of the classical and Christian views of man and indicated the perennial conflict between vitality and form, Niebuhr is now in a position to examine the varying rôle of these views and conflicts in the evolving understandings of man in history. He starts with the Renaissance understanding of man. Niebuhr argues that the tremendous emphasis upon individuality found in the Renaissance is clearly a flower which could have grown only in Christian soil, since the classical culture, to which the Renaissance is an ostensible return, lacked this emphasis completely.<sup>1</sup> The nexus between the Christian and the Renaissance individual is the mediaeval mystical idea of the infinite potentialities of the human spirit. The mystical doctrine of the divine potentiality of the human

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1. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol.I, p.22.

spirit is subtly made the bearer of the new doctrine of the uniqueness of human individuality.<sup>1</sup>

When Christian thinkers assert the influence of Christianity upon great historical movements one is always tempted to examine their claims very critically. In this case Niebuhr's views are supported by the Renaissance historians Frederico Chabod and Johan Huizinga. Professor Chabod emphasizes the continuing rôle of religion during the Renaissance.<sup>2</sup> Professor Huizinga affirmed that Renaissance art was, and remained, largely Christian in matter and in content. He reminds us that in the deeper layers of most personalities, religious faith remained unshaken;<sup>3</sup> while in his biography of Erasmus he demonstrates beyond argument the broad foundation of Christian conviction and hope which motivated one of the greatest of the humanists.

Niebuhr's view that the Franciscan theologians mediated

1. Ibid, p.65.

2. Frederico Chabod, Machiavelli and the Renaissance, (London: Bowes & Bowes, 1958), pp. 189 - 195.

The tragic happenings at the end of the fourteenth century, says Chabod, caused the reappearance of the religious problem in an even more emphatic form. "The need to justify the world and existence, nature and creature, will and fortune, and to hold fast to a moral law which seemingly can spring from no other source, brings man back to the idea of God - a transcendent God who is Lord of humanity." (P 189)

3. Huizinga, The Problem of the Renaissance, in Men and Ideas, (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1960), pp. 272 - 273.

both the individual perfectionist urge and the hope of an historical fulfilment to the Renaissance<sup>1</sup>, is supported by Huizinga who states that Franciscan preaching, poetry and mysticism "spread the idea of the 'renovatio vitae' among the widest circles, with the emphasis now falling more on the inward renewal of the individual person, then again more on the expectation of an actual secular event that would bring spiritual renewal. 'Renovatio, reformatio' became a spiritual watchword of the thirteenth century."<sup>2</sup> Huizinga considers that Paul Sabatier's biographical picture of St. Francis as a "subjective, lyric spirit who reconquered the beauty of the world for the fervent passionate devotion that introduces personal emotional need into religion..." outlines those qualities "that little by little had become associated with the concept of the Renaissance: individual sensitivity, acceptance of the world and a feeling for beauty, a personal attitude to doctrine and authority."<sup>3</sup>

The Franciscan concept of individual and historical fulfilment stems, of course, from a Biblical faith. Professor Chabod has drawn attention to the importance, throughout the Middle Ages, of the faith in the possibility

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1. Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man, vol.II, pp. 167 - 169.

2. Ibid, p.275.

3. Ibid, p.264.

of a renewal or a revival of the early Church's moral purity, poverty and humility. Appeals for this renewal became more vehement and insistent in communal Italy where the seeds of the Renaissance were ripening. And "if the 'myth' subsequently lost its religious character, assuming instead a purely human significance, the tendency to regard the ideal to which man aspired as having been realized during a specific period of past history nevertheless remained unaltered."<sup>1</sup> Professor Huizinga states that the origin of this whole chain of ideas of restoration and rebirth lies in the New Testament notion of being born again which itself was rooted in concepts of renewal found in the psalms and the Prophets.<sup>2</sup>

When we recognize the Christian influence in the Renaissance, and when we can see the sacramental, eschatological, and ethical concepts of spiritual renewal prevailing throughout the Middle Ages, and when we remember that these concepts had their origin in Biblical faith, then Niebuhr's statement that the Renaissance is clearly a flower that could have grown only in Christian soil does not appear too strong an assertion.

The Renaissance then, as a spiritual movement, says Niebuhr, is best understood as a tremendous affirmation of the limitless possibilities of human existence, and as the

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1. Chabod, op.cit., p.193.

2. Huizinga, op.cit., p.274.

discovery of the sense of a meaningful history. But, says Niebuhr, this understanding of human existence is not just the result of a Christian heritage. It has a twofold source. It stems from the classical confidence in human capacities, and from the Christian teaching of the sanctification of life and the hope of the fulfilment of history itself.<sup>1</sup> The Renaissance, Niebuhr says, transplanted the idea of individuality from Christianity to the soil of classical rationalism to produce a new concept of individual autonomy which is known in neither classicism nor Christianity.<sup>2</sup> Thus, though Niebuhr stresses the importance of the Christian influence upon the Renaissance conception of man, he is not unaware of other important influences.

Niebuhr sees also that the Renaissance emphasis upon individual autonomy is in part a reaction to the church's authoritarianism.<sup>3</sup> Professor Huizinga has pointed out that when the mediaeval mind wished to know the nature of a thing it neither analysed its structure nor enquired into its origin, but looked to heaven where it shined as an idea. Whether the question involved was political, social, or moral, the first step taken was to reduce it to a universal principle - a principle upon which the church dogmatically pronounced. Every notion concerning the world or life,

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1. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol.II, p.166.
  2. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol.I, p.65.
  3. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol.II, p.189.

Huizinga points out, had its fixed place in a vast hierarchic system of ideas.<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr is right to assert that the autonomy of the individual had to be increasingly emphasised if the essentially static mediaeval society was to allow economic, social, and cultural change.

Niebuhr is aware of these changes. In fact he sees the emergence of the Renaissance doctrine of individuality as coming to expression at this particular time because it corresponds with the emergence of the commercial bourgeois classes of the Italian city states.<sup>2</sup> Experience had taught Niebuhr to recognise the relationship between economic and social conditions and the prevailing philosophy. Hence he was able to see that the new economic power which depended upon individual initiative and resourcefulness rather than upon hereditary advantages, and which created dynamic rather than static social relationships, must see human history as a realm of human decisions rather than of inexorable destiny. Nature can now be regarded as an instrument rather than as the master of the human will. But such is the profundity of this change that a new philosophy - the cult of the individual - must help to justify it.<sup>3</sup>

The significance of these social and economic changes

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1. Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages, (London: Edward Arnold, 1924), pp. 195 - 196.

2. W.K. Ferguson's The Renaissance, (New York: Holt; 1940), brings out very clearly the importance of the economic causes of the Renaissance.

3. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol. I, pp. 69 - 70.

is further emphasized when it is seen that the mysticism which Niebuhr saw as the nexus between mediaeval Christianity and Renaissance individualism became especially favoured by the townsmen of the trading cities. H.J. Grimm states that mysticism's stress upon pious living and proximity to God was vastly more acceptable to townsmen who "found scholastic subtleties beyond them and preferred a simple, practical and intuitive theology".<sup>1</sup>

But Niebuhr saw clearly that despite the tremendous intellectual and spiritual achievements of the Renaissance, its interpretation of man must result in disillusionment; for the Renaissance accepted only one aspect of the Christian view of man and history. It accepted the fulfilment of life and history but did not see that this fulfilment is by the grace and power of God. It expected the "laws" of nature and the "laws" of reason to give meaning to the whole of history. And it could not deal with the problem of power because it accepted the classical view that "logos", reason, or any forming principle of life would bring the vitalities of history under its dominion.

In the second place, Niebuhr saw that though the Renaissance accepted the Christian view of history as dynamic, it disregarded the two-fold dynamic of history.

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Grimm, The Reformation Era, (New York: Macmillan, 1954) p.58.

It assumed that all development meant the advancement of the good and ignored the fact that every heightened potency of human existence may also represent a possibility of evil. Its eschatology looked for the fulfilment of history, whereas Christian eschatology looks for both judgment and fulfilment.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr's views are substantiated by the historical events in the Renaissance. The challenge of the new way of life turned the attention of the Italian humanists towards the application of classics and Christianity to life; "their concern was with ethics rather than theology".<sup>2</sup> Gradually a more secular attitude to life developed. "Man, rather than God, became for many thinkers, the centre of all things. And for some this life became an end in itself rather than a mere moment in a long adventure in eternity."<sup>3</sup> Music, art, and literature are "all characterized by a large scale plan, by dignity, a noble simplicity, balance and harmony...".<sup>4</sup> A new sense of the dignity of man is reflected. Yet for all this amazing flowering of the human spirit in the Renaissance, Niebuhr's judgment is vindicated. The picture of the destructive wars between the

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1. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol.II, pp.172-173.

2. Grimm, *The Reformation Era*, p.61.

3. F.B. Artz, *From the Renaissance to Romanticism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p.15.

4. *Ibid*, pp. 63 - 64.

Italian cities and the successive invasions of Spanish and French armies, led Machiavelli to portray his Prince as the saviour of his country by the use of sheer arbitrary force, and of any means beyond the bounds of traditional, moral, and ethical values, as the only possible form which would control the exuberant and undisciplined vitalities of his fellow countrymen which were so obviously leading to utter chaos.<sup>1</sup>

The final lesson Niebuhr draws from the Renaissance lies in an examination of sectarian Protestantism which he believes has some remarkable affinities with the basic Renaissance attitude to history. For the sectarian perfectionists the "inner light" was an immanent Christ corresponding to the immanent "logos" of Renaissance thought. But both ideas ignored the real dialectic between the historical and the eternal and failed to see that man's freedom, whether conceived in rational or mystical terms, contains possibilities of both good and evil.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the eschatological sects of the seventeenth century with their hope for the fulfilment of history and the realization of a perfect society also belonged to Renaissance spirituality. They took the concept of history moving towards a final crisis from the Bible, but the general mood of historical optimism prompted them to

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1. cf. Frederico Chabod, Machiavelli and the Renaissance, pp. 140 - 146.

2. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol.II, pp.173 - 183.

seek for the Kingdom of God in history, without reservation.

"The eschatological sects were superior to the main stream of Renaissance thought in possessing both a more social and a more radical interpretation of historical tasks and possibilities. Both its social and its radical notes were undoubtedly derived from Biblical prophetism. But the sects failed to comprehend the meaning of the profoundest element in this prophetism. They did not see that all history and all historic achievements must remain under the judgement of God; that the 'Kingdom of God' which we achieve in history is never the same as the Kingdom for which we pray...."<sup>1</sup>

### The Reformation.

Though the Reformation was the historical locus where the Christian conscience became more fully aware of the persistence of human sin and of the sheer grace of God's salvation, the Reformation, says Niebuhr, was in turn not devoid of error. The Lutheran Reformation believed rightly that every possible extension of human knowledge and wisdom falls short of the wisdom which knows God. It rejoiced in the grace, apprehended by faith, which overcame the sinful ego-centricity of all human knowledge. But by so doing the Lutheran Reformation delivered itself into the sin of cultural obscurantism by its indifference towards the relative distinctions of truth and falsehood which are so important in the history of culture. Faced with the problem

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<sup>1</sup>. Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man, vol.II, p.187.

of realizing justice in the collective life of man, the Lutheran Reformation was explicitly defeatist, Luther himself making a complete severance between the final experience of grace and all the proximate possibilities of liberty and justice.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, says Niebuhr, Luther places a perfectionist private ethic in juxtaposition to a realistic, not to say cynical, official ethic. He demands that the state maintain order without too scrupulous a regard for justice: yet he asks suffering and non-resistant love of the individual without allowing him to participate in the claims and counter-claims which constitute the stuff of social justice. The inevitable result of such an ethic is to encourage tyranny among rulers and indifference amongst the ruled; and this, says Niebuhr, has had a fateful consequence in the history of German civilization. "The tragic events of contemporary history are not unrelated to it."<sup>2</sup>

But if Lutheranism was threatened by antinomianism, then Calvinism, says Niebuhr, was imperilled by the opposite danger of a new moralism and legalism. Calvin's frequent tendency to define sin as carnal desire rather than as primarily self-love, contributes to a new self-righteousness:

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1. Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man, vol.II, pp.192 - 200.

2. Ibid, pp. 201-202.

for sainthood in terms of a completely disciplined life which has subordinated all desires to a dominant purpose, is a simpler possibility than a perfection which has excluded all egoistic elements from the dominant purpose. Calvin's divine law, says Niebuhr, in which Calvin finds an answer to every moral and social problem, is but a compendium collected from various places in Scripture without reference to the historical relativities enshrined in sacred canon. Further, says Niebuhr, this divine law is obscurantist because it does not sufficiently engage man's rational capacities in determining what is just and what is unjust in his relation to his fellows.<sup>1</sup>

The task which lies before men today, says Niebuhr, is to discriminate carefully between what was true and what was false in each of these movements. The triumph of the Renaissance over the Reformation does not guarantee its whole truth. Its triumph was achieved partly by the prestige of an advancing science which enabled a phenomenal increase in wealth and comfort, partly by revolutionary changes in government and industry, partly by the discovery and settlement of new continents; and all of this was accomplished in the spirit of historical optimism akin to that of the Renaissance.<sup>2</sup> But the defeatism and obscurantism of the Reformation also contributed to the triumph of the

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1. Ibid, pp. 205-211.

2. Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man, vol. II, pp. 187-188.

Renaissance; for the Reformation, says Niebuhr, failed to relate the ultimate answer of grace to the problem of guilt to all the immediate and intermediate problems and answers of life.<sup>1</sup> Even if Calvinism made some genuine contributions to the advancement of democratic justice, greater contributions towards a higher justice have been made in recent centuries, says Niebuhr, by sectarianism and by various versions of Renaissance movements. For these movements did understand both the possibilities and the obligation of rational men to use their reason in the work of establishing justice.<sup>2</sup>

The course of modern history, says Niebuhr, has justified the dynamic, and refuted the optimistic interpretation contained in modern religious and cultural movements,

1. Ibid, p.212.

2. Ibid, p.210. William Haller demonstrates the influence of classical and humanistic thought upon the radical sectarians of the seventeenth century. He shows how William Walwyn, the Leveller, quoted Seneca: "Reason is no other thing than a part of the divine Spirit, infused and plunged into our human bodies." For Walwyn, the state must grant freedom of conscience because whatever a man's reason concludes to be, true or false, agreeable or not to God's Word, he cannot choose but believe. Faith rests upon reason. By the grace of God which brings the possibility of salvation unto all men, and by the law of nature to which all are subject, all men should be equal also under the laws of England and have an equal voice in making them. Another Leveller, John Lilburne, raised the question whether the faith for which the martyrs and he suffered, was not all one with the laws of reason and conscience which God had written in the hearts of common men. Free justification was taken by Richard Overton as meaning that nature revealed to reason all that men needed for their own good. William Haller, Liberty and Reformation in the Puritan Revolution, (New York; Columbia University Press, 1955), pp. 170, 174, 272, 281.

all of which are internally related to each other by the Renaissance outlook. But modern history has also validated the basic truth of the Reformation while challenging its obscurantism and defeatism. The development of human powers and potencies and the extension of all forms of knowledge has proved that life is subject to growth. But history has proved that it is not its own redeemer, and that the identification of growth and progress is false. By these developments modern history has given the Reformation version of the Christian faith a new relevance.<sup>1</sup>

What is needed now, says Niebuhr, is a new synthesis incorporating the truths proclaimed by both movements but omitting their errors. On the one hand, life in history must be recognised as filled with indeterminate possibilities. There is no individual or interior spiritual situation, no cultural or scientific task, and no social or political problem in which men do not face new possibilities of the good and the obligation to realise them.<sup>2</sup> There is no way of understanding the ultimate problem of human existence if we are not diligent in the pursuit of proximate answers and solutions. Nor is there any way of validating the ultimate solution without constantly relating it to all proximate possibilities.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, every effort and

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1. Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man, vol.II, pp. 212-213.

2. Ibid, p.215.

3. Ibid, p.218.

pretension to complete life, whether in collective or individual terms, every desire to stand beyond the contradictions of history, or to eliminate the final corruptions of history, must be disavowed.<sup>1</sup>

The Intellectual Revolution of the Seventeenth Century.

After his examination of the lessons to be learnt from the Renaissance and the Reformation, Niebuhr turns to a consideration of the naturalistic and idealistic interpretations of man. Niebuhr is aware, of course, that the philosophies of naturalism and romanticism and idealism are, in very important ways, the logical fruits of the intellectual revolution of the seventeenth century. But Niebuhr does not make a specific examination of this revolution. The omission may be due to the fact that Niebuhr considers it sufficient to show that he is thoroughly conversant with the fruits of this revolution; for example, his denunciation of the spirit of optimism which has evolved in America from the revolution, presupposes a knowledge of this revolution. But it must not be overlooked that in Europe there has been an ever-growing stream stemming from the intellectual revolution which has increasingly influenced European thought. It expressed itself first in doubt, then in scepticism, and finally in

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1. Ibid, p.215.

an unbridled cynicism and nihilism. Thus when two World Wars shattered the myth of the inevitability of human progress, this unnoticed stream, which had often seemed to disappear from men's sight, now achieved the dimensions of a destructive torrent. For European man the "grimace of disillusion and cynicism" is not merely "under the perpetual smile of modernity"<sup>1</sup>; at times it effaces that smile completely. It is not suggested that Niebuhr is unaware of this development. When he deals specifically with the nature of man, he shows that he is not. And when he considers the naturalistic and idealistic interpretations of man he shows that he sees them as edifices of thought erected in the face of a potential scepticism. But if Niebuhr had made a specific study of the intellectual revolution of the seventeenth century with its incipient doubt and scepticism, he would have been more aware of twentieth century nihilism as an element of contemporary man's self understanding, which is as valid as man's easy optimism.

Alan Richardson describes the birth of modern science as "the most far-reaching revolution in men's understanding of nature that had ever taken place...."<sup>2</sup> "The new scientific attitude... is the most important triumph of the

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1. Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man, vol.I, p.129.

2. Alan Richardson, The Bible in the Age of Science, (London: S.C.M. Press, 1961), p.20.

human intellect since history began."<sup>1</sup> There was coming to birth in the opening decades of the seventeenth century, says Richardson, a new way of looking at things, which took its stand upon observation and induction rather than upon authority and tradition.<sup>2</sup> "Interest was now directed to the how, the manner of causation, not its why, its first cause."<sup>3</sup>

"To be rid of fear - fear of the unknown, fear of the gods, fear of the stars or the devil - to be released from the necessity of reverencing what was not to be understood, these were amongst the most urgent demands of the modern ... world; and it was because it satisfied these demands that scientific explanation was received as the revelation of truth."<sup>4</sup>

If there was an outstanding intellectual revolution in progress, then it consisted in a general transference of interest from metaphysics to physics, from the contemplation of Being to the observation of Becoming. Mechanical, materialistic explanations began to be "felt as facts", felt, that is, as affording that picture of reality, of "things in themselves which alone would satisfy contemporary demands".<sup>5</sup> With its seeming ability to control natural forces and use them for human benefit, the mind of

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1. Ibid, p.21.

2. Ibid, p.13.

3. Basil Willey, The Seventeenth Century Background, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1934), p.4.

4. Ibid, p.5.

5. Ibid, pp. 6 - 7.

man began to profess independence of God and Being.<sup>1</sup> Politics, economics, science, and art began organizing themselves as autonomous kingdoms owing no allegiance to any higher power.<sup>2</sup>

But this apparent emancipation of man had the most dire consequences for man's real situation in the world. For what kind of a world had man in reality discovered? The discoveries of Newton hinted at a vast mathematical system whose regular machine-like motions according to mechanical principles constituted the world of nature. Man's world of qualities, purposes and ideals were lost in the new world - a world of quantity, cold, silent and dead, wherein man was but a puny irrelevant spectator.<sup>3</sup> But could man have any real knowledge of the world? The Copernican theory and its mechanical philosophy brought home with increasing emphasis that things are not what they seem, neither are they what they have been said to be. The seventeenth century's concern with the epistemological problem, "Can I know anything at all of reality?" was answered by Descartes with a scepticism as complete as he could make it. Descartes was able to reconstruct his system of knowledge upon his primary principle, "I think,

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1.

J. Maritain, St. Thomas Aquinas, English translation, p.91; quoted by Willey, op.cit., p.8.

2.

Christopher Dawson, Christianity and the New Age; quoted by Willey, op.cit., p.9.

3.

E.A. Burt, The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science pp. 236 - 7; quoted by Willey, op.cit., pp. 11 - 12.

therefore I am", and thought cannot doubt itself; but for others this Cartesian scepticism was not so easily overcome. In its face Spinoza adopted an explicitly pantheistic approach: all that exists, exists in God, and man himself is a mode of eternal being.

Already in this development, we can see the roots of modern naturalism and idealism. The break-up of the mediaeval world view challenged man to assess his own significance in an impersonal world - alone. But such a challenge is too great for man. Man must either deify himself and persuade himself that he controls his world, or he must surrender his identity in strains of mystic thought or naturalistic vitality.

This consideration of the intellectual revolution of the seventeenth century should enable us to assess more accurately Niebuhr's treatment of the philosophies of naturalism and idealism. In particular, it should help us to decide upon the adequacy of his interpretation of modern man. Niebuhr sees that these philosophies fail because in them either one or the other of the two elements of vitality and form predominates. But for Niebuhr their failure is not merely theoretical. Experience had taught him that philosophies must be judged by their social, economic, and political results. He so judges these philosophies and finds them wanting.

The Loss of Individuality in Naturalism.

Niebuhr believes that the Christian faith alone can sustain an adequate concept of individuality. It achieves this, says Niebuhr, because it is only within terms of this faith that an individual may stand both inside and outside of history. "He stands inside because his faith affirms the meaningfulness of history and he stands outside because his faith asserts that history is borne by an eternal will."<sup>1</sup> The Renaissance tendencies which asserted and modified the Christian idea of individuality by accentuating the individual's historic power and freedom finally led, says Niebuhr, to the destruction of any genuine concept of individuality. Niebuhr's chief charge against the philosophies of naturalism, romanticism, and idealism is thus that they have destroyed any worthwhile and realistic concept of human individuality.<sup>2</sup>

Naturalism, says Niebuhr, seeks to reduce the whole dimension of spirit in man to an undifferentiated 'stream of consciousness'. From Hobbes onwards, he says, there is a fairly consistent denial of the significance of selfhood, certainly of transcendent individuality, running through the empirical and naturalistic tradition. Niebuhr's criticism of Hobbes takes the following form: Hobbes' individuals are but animal natures whose ego-hood consists

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1. Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man, vol.I, p.74.

2. Ibid

in the impulse of survival. But human reason extends this impulse beyond nature's impulse of survival and so creates conflicts between the equally valid claims of other individuals. Because there is, in Hobbes' thought, no rational transcendence over impulse where these claims may be arbitrated, they must therefore be suppressed and arbitrated by a political power which is the sole source of all morality. The decision to set up such a power lies significantly, says Niebuhr, in a mythical past, for human history is being interpreted as the consequence of pure human decisions without having an individual with sufficient transcendence over the social process to make significant decisions.<sup>1</sup> If the peril of anarchy can be met by a free decision in human history then, says Niebuhr, there is a contradiction in Hobbes' thought; for Hobbes has denied to his natural man the rational ability required to make free decisions in history.<sup>2</sup>

J.H. Warrender contends that Hobbes is more interested in logical, than in historical, analysis, more interested in hypothetical efficient causes, than in actual causes of things;<sup>3</sup> but this does not destroy the force of Niebuhr's criticism. Hobbes believed that man, inspired by the fear

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1. Ibid, p.74 - 75.

2. Ibid, p.107.

3. J.H. Warrender, The Political Philosophy of Hobbes, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), p.241.

of death and instructed by Reason, could design his own deliverance. What, then, is this 'reason' which is to effect either a logical or an historical deliverance? Reasoning, in Hobbes' view, is nothing else but the addition and subtraction of names, the names of images left over from sensations; and a true proposition is not an assertion about the real world. Warrender points out that both reason and deliberation in Hobbes' thought are but slaves of passion and are concerned merely with the manipulation of motives.<sup>1</sup> If Hobbes holds this sceptical view,<sup>2</sup> then it is hard to see how reason can fulfil the role in whatever sense Hobbes desired of it.

Man, says J. Plamenatz, is more deeply affected by reason than Hobbes supposed and is yet also less reasonable in the pursuits of his ends. On the one hand, through his reason man has conceptions of himself, his environment, and his relations with other creatures like himself which affect all his emotions and desires, and which alter the whole quality of his life. On the other hand, man is less reasonable in the pursuit of his ends than Hobbes supposed. Man's troubles come not from knowing how best to get what he wants, but from not knowing what he wants, from confusions

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1. Warrender, op.cit., pp. 269 - 270.  
 2. Oakeshott, (Editor), Leviathan, by Thomas Hobbes, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1946), p.XXV.

of thought and from feeling too deep to be unravelled and to which, however, only creatures endowed with reason are liable.<sup>1</sup>

Man's reason is, as Niebuhr argues, more powerful and influential than Hobbes alleges; for man's reason exploits nature's impulse of survival. But it is also less omnipotent than Hobbes suggests, for man cannot by reason set himself up as an eternal will; for, as Plamenatz says, man does not know what he wants.

Niebuhr believes that the same destruction of individuality can be found in the philosophy of John Locke. Though Locke wishes to maintain personal identity as a reality, the consciousness of pleasure and of pain, and the capability for happiness or misery which he believes constitutes identity would apply with equal validity, says Niebuhr, to animal consciousness. Though Locke insists upon the self's intuitive awareness of itself, this self awareness does not, says Niebuhr, enter into Locke's conception of personal identity, because Locke explicitly subtracts the element of transcendence involved in memory. And, adds Niebuhr, it is precisely the pure or transcendent ego, which stands above consciousness as the consciousness of consciousness and which expresses itself in terms of

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1. John Plamenatz, Man and Society, Vol.I, (London: Longmans, 1963), pp. 121 - 122.

memory and foresight, which is the real centre of human personality.<sup>1</sup>

Locke's assertion that the identity of the continuing 'I' is dependent entirely upon the consciousness man has of himself, is no adequate analysis of the concept of identity, argues R.I.Aaron. The claim that each person is conscious of himself at present and remembers himself in the past, and that he is conscious that he is now the same person as he was then, can be questioned. For, says Aaron, we can forget we did an action when, in fact, we did commit this action; and we can think we were responsible for an action when, in fact, it was committed by someone else. This points to the conclusion that we have other criteria for determining personal identity.<sup>2</sup>

Locke stated that the stripping of all memory or consciousness of all past actions would not detract from man's personal identity. The mind, says Locke, has a power to revive perceptions which it once had, with this additional perception: that it has had them before. Now, does this mean, asks Aaron, that each instance of memory is merely a fresh perceptual intuition? If so, says Aaron, then a greater difficulty would remain: the difficulty of distinguishing between perceiving and remembering. For we frequently perceive something we have perceived before, and remember to have

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1. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.I, pp.75 - 76.

2. R.I.Aaron, John Locke, (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), pp.150 - 153.

perceived before, and yet this particular perception is not itself an instance of memory.<sup>1</sup>

This inadequacy of Locke's naturalistic philosophy to maintain the true nature of human selfhood has resulted in his concept of 'personal identity' being attacked by his critics.<sup>2</sup> Their criticisms underlie Niebuhr's view that Locke has done justice to what might be called the 'empirical ego' but cannot do justice to the 'transcendent ego', the real centre of human personality.

Niebuhr believes that in the philosophy of David Hume there is instanced, again, a loss of true human individuality. Hume argues that man in experiencing perceptions, can never catch himself without a perception, nor can he observe anything but the perception. But when Hume writes, "When I enter most intimately into what I call myself I always stumble on some perception or other ...", it is pertinent, says Niebuhr, to enquire into the nature of the 'I'. It is the reality of that 'I' as subject, states Niebuhr, which challenges the validity of all purely empirical interpretations of the ego.<sup>3</sup>

Hume himself admitted the inadequacy of his theory. If the idea of the self was not traceable to any impression of sensation then the idea must be an "impression of

1. Ibid., p.138.

2. For example, cf. Antony Flew, "Locke and the Problem of Personal Identity," Philosophy, (96), January, 1951.

3. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.I, pp. 76 - 77.

inflexion", that is, a feeling of smoothness and familiarity in the transition from one perception to another as determined by the natural relations of resemblance and causation, notably in the case of memory. In other words, thought alone, when reflecting on the train of past events, is able to find personal identity. But it is precisely here that Hume has to admit that his argument breaks down; it is the possibility of reflective thinking for which he is unable to account.<sup>1</sup>

Behind this rationalistic naturalism which proclaimed such a mechanistic view of selfhood, there lay, Niebuhr believed, the revolt against feudalism of the rising middle class. Here the philosophy of naturalism became the vehicle for the new class's appreciation of the vitalities of nature and the relativities of history against the conservatism of a Christian-classical culture.<sup>2</sup> And yet the new philosophy of naturalism was no more adequate in preserving the wholeness of human nature than the culture it superceded; for man does not have the freedom to destroy his freedom over natural process any more than he has the freedom to overcome his precarious dependence upon

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1.

N. Kemp Smith, The Philosophy of David Hume, (London: Macmillan, 1941), pp. 556 - 560.

2.

Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.I, p.51.

nature.<sup>1</sup>

The end result of the loss of self in naturalism is clearly portrayed by Basil Willey. "The eighteenth century," writes Willey, "was perhaps not least indispensable as a time when, as in Hume, the illumination of reason became dark with excessive light, and reason was used to reveal the limitations of reason. Before Hume, empiricism and sensationalism; after him, the 'Copernican revolution' of Kant; before him, Nature and Reason go hand in hand; after him, Nature and Feeling. Hume was 'indispensable', if only because, by the very completeness of his destructive efficacy, he showed that man cannot live by Reason alone."<sup>2</sup>

#### The Romantic Protest.

Man could not settle down happily in his mechanistic world. The inherent scepticism of rationalistic naturalism caused him to seek security in the world of romanticism. "Romanticism, in contrast to rationalism, places content above form, the aesthetic above the moral, the concrete above the abstract. It views the universe not as a machine but as a work of art, and man as a mirror of the universe."<sup>3</sup>

Niebuhr saw that romanticism in its urge to return to the simple harmonies of nature had one advantage over

1.

Ibid, p.105.

2.

Basil Willey, The Eighteenth Century Background, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957), p.111.

3.

Alec R. Vidler, The Church and the Age of Revolution, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962), p.24.

rationalism. It saw that the freedom of the rational man was not harmless and that it was not easily conformed to the order of either nature or reason. But it failed to recognize that the freedom of man is the source of all his creativity as well as of his vices. Romantic naturalism is more profound, says Niebuhr, because it sees the wide gulf between the purely natural impulse of survival and the distinctively human and spiritual impulse of pride and power. Yet it is also more perverse, adds Niebuhr, than rationalistic naturalism because of its primitivistic effort to regain the innocence of nature.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr examines the thought of Rousseau to illustrate his contention. Rousseau, says Niebuhr, attempted to reconstitute the harmony of nature by the compounding of all individual wills into a frictionless harmony of a 'general will'. But, Niebuhr says, "there is significantly no clarity in his thought about the character of this general will. Is it the will of the majority? Or does it merely represent some ideal possibility of perfect harmony between life and life? This lack of clarity reveals the inability of romanticism to understand the nature of human freedom. It does not realize that there is no definition of a general and a unifying purpose at

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1.

Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol.I, pp. 111-112.

which any society may arrive, which the individual does not transcend sufficiently to be able to criticise."<sup>1</sup>

Because it contains no provision for criticism of itself, Rousseau's concept can, Niebuhr believes, become an instrument of tyranny in the hands of a given and momentary majority. This contention is borne out by J.L. Talmon in a very interesting study.<sup>2</sup> Talmon believes that Rousseau's philosophy is likely to become totalitarian, because it claims to grant everything in advance, to be able by definition to satisfy man's liberty, self-interest and rights. On the one hand the individual is said to obey nothing but his own will; on the other he is urged to conform to some objective criterion. But because the criterion is said to be man's better, higher or real self, man cannot complain of being coerced, for in fact, he is merely being made to obey his own true self.

Talmon believes that at the very foundation of the principles of direct and non-advisable democracy and of the expression of unanimity there is the implication of dictatorship, as, he adds, the history of many a referendum has shown. If, says Talmon, a constant appeal to the people as a whole and a constant postulation of unanimity is kept up, then there is no escape from dictatorship.

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1.

Ibid, p.112.

2.

J.L. Talmon, The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy, (London: Secker and Warburg, 1955), pp. 1 - 49 passim.

This, adds Talmon, was implied in Rousseau's emphasis on the all-important point that the leaders must put only questions of a general nature to the people, and, moreover, must know how to put the right question. The question must have so obvious an answer that a different sort of answer would appear plain treason or perversion.<sup>1</sup>

The basic error in romanticism in Niebuhr's view is its effort to ascribe to the realm of the biological and the organic, what is clearly a compound of nature and spirit, of biological impulse and rational and spiritual freedom. For, says Niebuhr, human nature knows no animal impulse in its pure form. Incorporation into the human psyche alters every biological fact and every animal impulse. Every physical impulse can develop imperial tendencies of its own, be they pride of self or contempt of the other.<sup>2</sup>

Another manifestation of the romantic protest is seen by Niebuhr, in Marxist philosophy. Marxism, says Niebuhr, discovers the dishonesty of reason in its pretension of mastery over the vital impulses of physical life. Objecting to the Hegelian derivation of the propulsive power of history from pure reason, Marxism sees this propulsive power in the dynamic of historical economical

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1. Ibid, p.46.

2. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol.I, pp. 42 - 43.

relations. Though it seeks to do justice to both natural vitality and rational freedom in history, Marxism fails, says Niebuhr, because its metaphysical basis does not allow it to interpret human nature as having sufficient freedom in its social philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

Marxist social philosophy tries to allow for vitalities which are formed partly by the superhuman historical logic and partly by human consciousness itself. But this consciousness is inconsistently emphasized because Marxist epistemology and psychology in being entirely consistent with its deterministic metaphysical basis are crudely sensationalistic and reduce rational processes to biological dimensions. Thus, says Niebuhr, by denying the depth of spirit in the structure of human personality, Marxism is consequently unable to understand the real nature of human evil. It understands the spiritual nature of dishonesty, as little as the spiritual character of the possessive and the power impulse. Marxism attributes the human tendency to hide egotistic interests behind ideals of supposedly general validity, to the mere finiteness of the human mind. But it cannot explain why the human spirit should feel under the necessity of making such pretensions. It cannot see that the creativeness of the human spirit can envisage more general realms of value transcending the mere impulses

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1. Ibid, pp. 47 - 48.

of survival and that man must seem to be loyal to this more inclusive realm even when he is not.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr's criticism that Marxism's metaphysical basis does not allow it to interpret human nature as having sufficient freedom in its social philosophy, is supported by R.N. Carew Hunt. Productive forces, says Carew Hunt, do not develop automatically; they are developed by the intelligence of men. He quotes Arthur Koestler's remark that "Marxist society has a basement-production and an attic-intellectual-production; only the stairs and the lifts are missing."<sup>2</sup> If man is to be in any real sense the master of his destiny, then, says Carew Hunt, it can be only through his ideas and opinions. But in Marxist thought, these belong to the superstructure and the form they take is determined by the substructure. Since Marx and Engels admit that an interaction takes place between superstructure and substructure, their whole thesis, Carew Hunt asserts, is undermined, since we are no longer dealing with a purely economic factor, but with one which itself has been determined in part by non-economic factors. To say after this, Carew Hunt concludes, that the economic factor must always be decisive is meaningless.<sup>3</sup>

Carew Hunt continues that though Marx's Capital

1. Ibid, pp. 48 - 50.

2. R.N. Carew Hunt, The Theory and Practice of Communism, (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1957), p.46.

3. Ibid, p.54.

purports to be a strictly scientific demonstration of the fate which ultimately must overtake the capitalist system, every page reveals Marx's abhorrence of that system. This moral indignation raises the awkward question that if the capitalist system is evil, it can only be because it is in conflict with some other objective moral principle. But the existence of any such moral principle, states Carew Hunt, has been denied.<sup>1</sup> Thus though Marxist epistemology claims to be consistent, in Niebuhr's words, "with its deterministic metaphysical basis", we find Marx writing from the point of view of a moral standard the existence of which cannot be allowed in such an epistemology.

A third manifestation of the romantic protest is to be seen, says Niebuhr, in Freudian psychology. In its interpretation of human vitalities in purely biological terms, Freudian psychology is, he affirms, in perfect accord with romanticism. The basic biological impulses are said to be sexual and their abode is the 'id', and yet, Niebuhr says, these instinctual drives have remarkably subtle strategies for escaping the censor of the conscious ego. They are, says Niebuhr, armed with the guile of spirit. Freud's admission that the little we can learn about the 'id' can be learned from the study of dream-work, reveals, says Niebuhr, the basic errors in Freudian psychology. How remarkable, comments Niebuhr, that the

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1. Ibid, p.87.

world of dreams, that curious twilight zone between consciousness and unconsciousness, should be the portal of entry into the meaning of purely biological impulses.<sup>1</sup>

Philip Rieff points out that dreams do not invariably expose those impulses which are suppressed by culture. What is found in nature, and below nature, is not invariably egoistic. Fromm, says Rieff, is right to accent the amount of intellectual 'work' in the dream. To Freud's view of the dreamer as a natural poet, one might add that we are all, insofar as we are all dreamers, naturally intellectual. The effort expended, in dreaming, to outwit the forces of culture is the one recurrent intellectual as well as artistic activity, which most people perform. The chief quality of the dream as interpreted, concludes Rieff, is not so much its meaning as the elaborateness of its meaningful disguises.<sup>2</sup>

Freudianism pretends, Niebuhr says, to explain all the complexities of man's spirit in biological terms, but fails to explain how biological impulses should have become transmuted into such highly complex spiritual phenomena. Freud's admission in his analysis of the Oedipus complex, that "it is not repression that creates anxiety; it is there first and creates repression" should have helped

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1. Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man, vol. I, pp. 44 - 45.

2. Philip Rieff, Freud: the mind of the moralist, (London: Gollancz; 1960), pp. 109 - 110.

him to realize how basic a concomitant of human freedom anxiety is, and how little it has to do with external danger. Freud would have seen, says Niebuhr, that all the aberrations with which he deals are not the consequence of the repressions of his 'super-ego' but arise out of the very character of human freedom.<sup>1</sup>

### The Answer of Idealism.

The other answer to the question of the meaning of human existence, says Niebuhr, comes from the opposite pole. Where naturalistic philosophies tend to reduce the human ego to a stream of consciousness in which personal identity is minimal, idealistic philosophies tend, in varying degrees, to identify consciousness with mind, and to equate the highest reaches of conscious mind with a divine or absolute mind, or at least with some socially or politically conceived universal mind.<sup>2</sup> But, says Niebuhr, the self has the spiritual capacity to transcend not only the natural process in which it is immersed, but also, in the principle of self-consciousness, to transcend its own consciousness. Idealism thus makes the two-fold mistake of dividing the human self too absolutely and of identifying spirit and reason too completely. Its dualism prevents it from understanding the organic relation between nature and reason, and its identification of reason and spirit obscures

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1. Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man, vol.I, p.45.

2. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol.I, p.79.

the fact that human freedom actually transcends the capacities which are usually known as 'rational.'<sup>1</sup> Thus on the one hand idealism fails to recognize to what degree finiteness remains a basic characteristic of human spirituality, while on the other hand, it loses true selfhood in the undifferentiated universal mind.

Niebuhr illustrates his contention by an examination of the thought of Kant, Hegel, and Fichte. Of Kant's critical idealism, Niebuhr says that the self is not lost in universality but maintains a shadowy existence between the universality of the intelligible self and the particularity of the empirical self. It exists by virtue of its acceptance of the moral law of the intelligible self. This means, says Niebuhr, that man is essentially cut in two; the part which is immersed in natural process is essentially evil, and the part which is subject to reason is essentially good. All the natural forces in the life of man are ruled out of the field of ethics; only respect for law is an adequate moral motive. The Kantian self, says Niebuhr, is thus involved in a hierarchy of existence consisting of the self in nature, the self as rational will transcending nature, the rational or intelligible self which is the law giver, and God who is the ultimate nexus between reason and nature.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Ibid, p.120.

2. Ibid, pp. 126 - 127.

Support for Niebuhr's allegation that true selfhood has been divided in Kant's philosophy, is found in G.C. Field's criticism of Kant.<sup>1</sup> Kant, says Field, believed that the knowledge of the nature of an action could, by itself, move men to action. But we do not, or cannot, says Field, recognize the existence or possibility of any such thing as good in itself, out of all relation to anything else. It simply has no meaning for us. If we are related to goodness, Field adds, simply as an act of cognition, something that we merely know without having any desire, feeling or emotion towards it, it would not move us to action, or, indeed, be of any practical interest or importance to us at all. Kant's idea of a good in itself thus appears to be incompatible with one of the most deeply recognized characteristics of a moral fact, namely, that for the whole self, it is somehow a reason for action.

The thought of Hegel, says Niebuhr, illustrates again the idealist view of self. For Hegel, the highest self which knows itself is identical with universal reason. Sin was practically identical with the emergence of man from the innocence of nature and was a prelude to virtue. Without the sinful assertion of individuality, man would not express the freedom which distinguishes him from nature, nor would he be able to find the ultimate synthesis

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1.

G.C. Field, Moral Theory, (London: Methuen, 1921), pp. 46 - 51.

of universality and individuality, which is true virtue. Hegel's thought, says Niebuhr, indicates a certainty that spirit and rationality are really identical and that the laws of the latter control the freedom of the former.

The full peril of Hegel's complacency, Niebuhr says, is revealed in his estimate of the virtue of the state. The state is the true universal in which the rational self emancipates itself from its particular self. This leads Hegel to appreciate the morality of man most highly at precisely the point at which it is most dubious. For, says Niebuhr, it is just at this point that imperialism is compounded, being composed of the universalism of spirit and the will to live of the finite organism.<sup>1</sup>

H.R. Mackintosh also sees Hegel's understanding of the unity of human selfhood as deficient. Where sin is seen, says Mackintosh, as the necessary mid-way point in the continuous dialectical process between innocence and virtue, it loses its irrationality and in so doing, loses much more than half its evil. Evil is that which is on the way to good, raw material which is not yet Spirit. But, says Mackintosh, this deduction of sin, however dialectically entertaining, is one more proof that moral evil forms the hard pebble stone on which, sooner or later, a purely speculative system is obliged to break its teeth. What we

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1.

Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol.I, pp. 124 - 126

start with as evil, our own and utterly damning, finally emerges from the process as good, with its own aesthetically justified place in the scheme of things.<sup>1</sup>

It is in the thought of Fichte, who represents a watershed between rationalism and romanticism, says Niebuhr, that the universalism of rationalism and idealism becomes compounded with the nationalistic particularism of romanticism and issues in a dubious, spiritual, national imperialism.<sup>2</sup> The romantic thinker, says Niebuhr, eventually recoils from a purely individual self-deification and seeks to increase the plausibility and reduce the pretension of this self-glorification by looking for the larger individual, which he finds in the unique nation. It is here, says Niebuhr, that the romanticist meets the idealist who is intent upon finding something a little more domestic and manageable than the absolute as the source of value. "Thus they both discover the nation, approaching it from different sides, but agreeing in its deification ...". "This is the cultural, though not the socio-political, history of modern nationalism in a nutshell."<sup>3</sup>

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1.

H.R. Mackintosh, Types of Modern Theology, (London: Collins, 1964), pp. 114 - 116.

2.

Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol.I, p.95. For a similar interpretation of Fichte's political philosophy see W.A. Dunning's A History of Political Theory from Rousseau to Spencer, (New York: Macmillan, 1920), pp. 137 - 148, and pp. 312 - 315.

3.

Niebuhr, op.cit., p.88.

Romanticism and idealism, concludes Niebuhr, both lose sight of the uniqueness of individuality. Romanticism understands, with Christianity, the unique and arbitrary character of historical existence and knows that the rational universalities of historical systems can neither fully contain nor fully comprehend the unique quality of the givenness of things, nor yet themselves fully transcend the contingency and irrationality of existence. Romanticism understands the fact of the goodness of creation in all of its particularity and individuality but it has, says Niebuhr, no perspective beyond creation. It merely asserts the particular and unique in nihilistic disregard for any general system of value. Idealism seeks a rational point of vantage beyond the created forms but either divides true selfhood or loses it in a stream of universality.<sup>1</sup> Idealism has no conception of the depth and wholeness of selfhood in the relationships of people with one another.<sup>2</sup>

True individuality, adds Niebuhr, can only exist where both the partial and the unique and the supposedly universal values of history can be both appreciated and judged in

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1. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol.I, pp. 96 - 97.

2. cf. H.R. Mackintosh, op.cit., p.114; and also J.S. Whale, The Protestant Tradition, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1959), pp. 265 - 267.

terms of a religious faith which has discovered the centre and source of life to be beyond and yet within historical existence.<sup>1</sup> Without the presuppositions of the Christian faith, the individual either is nothing or becomes everything. "In the Christian faith man's insignificance as a creature involved in the process of nature and time, is lifted into significance by the mercy and power of God in which his life is sustained. But his significance as a free spirit is understood as subordinate to the freedom of God."<sup>2</sup>

#### The Modern Era.

Writing in 1939, Niebuhr stated that he believed that the one unifying force amongst a variety of interpretations of mankind was the complacent conscience of modern man. Despite the manifestations at that time of man's hysterias and furies, despite the evidences of man's daemonic capacity and his inclination to break the harmonies of nature and defy the prudent canons of rational restraint, Niebuhr believed that no cumulation of contradictory evidence seemed to disturb man's good opinion of himself.<sup>3</sup>

"The final certainty of modern anthropology;" wrote Niebuhr, "is its optimistic treatment of evil." On the one

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1. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol.I, p.97.

2. Ibid, p. 98.

3. Ibid, pp. 24 - 25, and pp. 99 - 102.

hand evil is defined as man's involvement in natural impulses and necessities from which he can be freed by the increasing use of his rational powers. On the other hand, evil is said to consist of the daemonic chaos in which man's spiritual life is involved and which can be defeated by a simple return to the harmless serenity of primitive nature. The fact, says Niebuhr, that the strategies of redemption are in such complete contrast to each other proves how far modern man is from solving the problem of evil in his life. Modern optimism, concludes Niebuhr, results in a philosophy of history expressed in the idea of progress. Either by a force immanent in nature itself, or by the extension of rationality, man moves towards a perfect society.<sup>1</sup>

Modern man's optimism stems, Niebuhr believes, from the great scientific advances of the modern age; detailed empirical observation yields knowledge of the particular and the unique, while mathematical calculation gives man knowledge of the regularities and dependable recurrences of nature. Nature and reason have become the two gods of modern man, but, says Niebuhr, man does not see that he has a freedom of spirit which transcends both nature and reason. Man is

consequently unable to understand the real pathos of his defiance of nature's and

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1. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol.I, pp. 24 - 25.

reason's laws. He always imagines himself betrayed into this defiance either by some accidental corruption in his past history or by some sloth of reason. Hence he hopes for redemption, either through a programme of social organization, or by some scheme of education.<sup>1</sup>

Now though we must agree with Niebuhr that an optimistic complacency forms a significant portion of modern man's view of himself, we must ask whether it dominates man's self-understanding to the extent Niebuhr suggests. It is true that since the foregoing opinion was written in 1939, Niebuhr has emphasised the movement in Europe from complacency to despair - a despair which provided the soil for the growth of the daemonic religion of Nazism.<sup>2</sup> It is true, too, that Niebuhr's thoughts may have been directed less to Europe than to his own America where, in his own words, "the bourgeois mind has not yet faced the ultimate issues nor been confronted with the inadequacies of its own credos."<sup>3</sup> It is also true that even before the Second World War ended Niebuhr dampened the optimism of the idealists looking to the brave new future, by warning them that the world might expect years

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1. Ibid, pp. 101 - 102.

2. Niebuhr, Faith and History, p.183.

3. Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, (New York: Scribners, 1944), p.93.

of uneasy peace between the nations of the West and Russia.<sup>1</sup> And finally in his understanding of existentialism's assertion of the meaning of the present moment and the present experience in defiance of the chaos of existence, Niebuhr shows that he appreciates the importance of the elements of disillusionment and despair in man's self-understanding.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless it can be argued that if a true appreciation is to be made of the extensiveness and importance of despair and cynicism in the modern world, their origin and development and contemporary importance must be assessed. Niebuhr does deal with the rôle of anxiety in his examination of the origin of human sin, and he is aware of despair and cynicism as elements in human sinfulness. But neither in his analysis of history nor in his evaluation of the contemporary situation does he seem to attach sufficient importance to this element of man's self-understanding compared to the great emphasis he places upon man's easy optimism.

It is here that the true significance of the intellectual revolution of the seventeenth century must

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1. Niebuhr stated that the peace of the world may be maintained, perilously and tentatively, for some decades by an uneasy equilibrium between the three great powers - America, Russia, and Britain - who in place of a genuine system of mutual security may partition the world into spheres of influence. Ibid, pp. 117 - 120.

2. Niebuhr, Faith and History, p.184.

be taken into account. For its theory of epistemology taken to its logical conclusion must mean inevitably the denial of the possibility of all real knowledge and must end inevitably in nihilism. The naturalist, romantic and idealist alternatives are, in essence, a drawing back from this abyss. Now Niebuhr is aware of this particular fact but he does not consider the continuing negative side to man's easy optimism. The stream of scepticism which became noticeable in the seventeenth century has now become a major element in any contemporary understanding of man.

The element of scepticism in the thought of Descartes and of Spinoza has already been noted. Nor should we overlook Hume's words when he speaks of his "philosophical melancholy and delirium" and of finding no remedy against the "chimeras" of the study save in yielding himself to the carefree avocations of ordinary life.<sup>1</sup> Though Nietzsche bravely proclaims man's task of self-realization and self-affirmation, his vision of the death of God contains other elements. The sense of the loss of direction and the sense of drifting through infinite nothingness, show that Nietzsche was aware of the perils of nihilism.<sup>2</sup> Freud's

<sup>1</sup>Quoted by N. Kemp Smith in The Philosophy of David Hume, p.544.

<sup>2</sup>"Where is God gone... We have killed him, you and I. ... What did we do when we loosed this earth from its sun? Whither does it now move? Whither do we move? Away from all suns? Do we not dash on unceasingly? Backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an above and below? Do we not stray as through infinite nothingness? Does not empty space breathe upon us? Has it not become colder?" Quoted in Roberts, Existentialism and Religious Belief, p.181, from The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche. (Allen & Unwin), Sec.125.

inability either to deny the necessity of social discipline or to find a real cure for the psychopathic aberrations which are an inevitable concomitant of such a discipline, lead him to conclusions almost as nihilistic in their implications as Nietzsche's.<sup>1</sup>

It would seem fair to argue that there has been a tendency in the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, for philosophy to move towards two opposing poles. These poles are those of empirical and linguistic philosophy on the one hand, and of existential philosophy on the other. While it may be true that it was the triumph of scientific thinking which lead Comte to aim at the systematic unification of all known truth on the basis of scientific method,<sup>2</sup> it now appears that other motives lie behind such an aim today. For the efforts of empirical philosophy to grapple with the spiritual problems of twentieth century man have ended in abject failure.<sup>3</sup> But rather than face the alternative of disillusionment and despair, some philosophers, ironically enough, appear to advocate a drastic limiting of the kind of questions which are

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1. This is Niebuhr's own point of criticism made in The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol. I, p. 55.

2. cf. Basil Willey, Nineteenth Century Studies: (London: Chatto and Windus, 1949), pp. 188 - 189.

3. In this context, the justice of Paul Tillich's judgement upon the weakness of positivist and pragmatic philosophies as an intellectual defence of Anglo-Saxon civilization against fascist ideologies should not be overlooked. Paul Tillich, Morality and Beyond, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), pp. 85 - 86.

permissible to ask about man's nature and destiny. Thus, there can indeed be optimistic philosophies today; but they are interpretations of man which make use of those aspects of his being which readily yield to scientific investigation, while rigorously denying the meaningfulness of questions which seek knowledge of man's whole nature, spiritual as well as physical.

The most influential advocate of such a view is, of course, Ludwig Wittgenstein. According to Wittgenstein the sort of questions about the world which can be asked and answered are questions about how the world is. These are questions of natural science. When religious people wish to ask questions about why the world is, Wittgenstein holds that these sort of questions cannot be answered; because they cannot be answered in words, neither can they be asked in words. The questions and answers of religion are not capable of being expressed and it is absurd to have doubts about the answer to a question that is not capable of being expressed.<sup>1</sup> Man is therefore bidden not to ask the foolish question "why?", and thereby must deprive himself of an essential element of his true humanity. This view of the advocates of logical analysis has led Professor John Baillie to perceive in this approach what he describes as "a certain

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Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico Philosophicus, 651. Quoted by Thomas MacPherson in "Religion as the Inexpressible" in New Essays in Philosophical Theology, ed. Flew and MacIntyre, (London: S.C.M. Press, 1955), pp. 137 - 138.

painful restriction of outlook, of interest, of understanding, and of sympathy which seems to leave them the advocates as very incomplete human beings."<sup>1</sup>

The same limitations of vision can be seen in the realm of art. Kenneth Clark has written that specialization, stemming from the conquests of science, has meant that philosophy, which should concern itself with the whole of human experience, has become a highly specialized activity. In art - especially in architecture and in music - the same impulse has caused the theorists to strive for the same kind of purity. Thus, says Professor Clark, the dialectic of abstract art is exceedingly clear and logical; the eternally beautiful is that which can be measured or stated analytically in other terms. Under the impact of scientific discoveries the realm of nature now seems to the artist not only too big or too small for his imagination, but also lacking in unity. We have, says Professor Clark, lost faith in the stability of the "natural order", and indeed, we know that we ourselves have the means to bring such an order to an end. But we cannot honestly escape from our fears by taking refuge in a limited view. And yet, Professor Clark concludes, we shall not recover our

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1.

John Baillie, The Sense of the Presence of God, (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p.253.

confidence in nature until we have learnt or forgotten infinitely more than we know at present.<sup>1</sup>

The alternative to this limited view is, of course, to face the true nature of human existence in all its expressions, and this means the facing of scepticism and nihilistic despair. One of the very influential thinkers of this century, Martin Heidegger, takes Nietzsche's saying that "God is Dead" as the symbol for the destiny of Western man, and he construes it as meaning that the whole concept of an intelligible world transcending the sensible world has lost its power.<sup>2</sup> For Heidegger, man is passively thrown into an existence wherein he must seek for authentic living, always upon the knife edge of anxiety and care, and always in the face of his own inevitable death. Existentialism has no philosophy of history. Existentialist man must free himself from every idol; immersed in the absurd, in a world which sickens him, there remains one possibility: to exist to be free, to choose himself. And such freedom is the source of anguish for "freedom suffers from being the foundation without foundation of all values." In Sartre's words, man does not grow "in conformity with a

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1.

Kenneth Clark, Landscape into Art, (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1956), pp. 148 - 152.

2.

David E. Roberts, "Heidegger," in Existentialism and Religious Belief, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p.181.

preconceived idea called human nature; he grows, that is all. It is being thrown into the world, in suffering there, in struggling there, that he defines himself little by little; and the definition always remains open; no one can say who this man is before his death, nor humanity before it has disappeared."<sup>1</sup>

Helmut Thielicke has pointed out that another factor in the growth of scepticism is the disillusionment of modern man in the proclamations of absolute truth. The older generation, says Thielicke, have switched 'isms' and thus changed the essential foundations of their lives about three times during their lifetime. For the young, words in their modern degenerate propaganda form have been robbed of their specific gravity as vehicles of conviction. Complete scepticism and a conviction that all truth is purely relative results in the last 'ism' - nihilism.<sup>2</sup>

The world of nihilism is vividly portrayed in Albert Camus' novel, The Plague. Camus' world is a grotesque structure diseased in its innermost fabric. It is a world of complete confusion where phenomena can no longer be explained, for every explanation presupposes an order whose structure and coherence it is possible to discover and to

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1.

Roger Mehl, Images of Man, (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1965), chapter on Existentialist man, p. 28.

2.

Helmut Thielicke, Nihilism, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), pp. 22 - 25.

demonstrate. And when meaning is lost, there also disappears any kind of ordering of life toward a goal, or any kind of coherence whatsoever. In Thieliicke's view, the most vital point theologically, is that Camus never faces the question of where this disjointedness of the world came from. Because positivism has destroyed the transcendent, it cannot occur to Camus that the world of men must necessarily become disjointed when man himself is dislocated and out of order. Thus, says Thieliicke, Camus is completely indifferent to the question of guilt. One cannot combat an epidemic with moral arguments. It is simply an event of nature.<sup>1</sup>

But the world of nihilism is no easy world in which to live. It has a profound effect upon man's relationships with his fellows. Man becomes something alien and sinister to himself and to others. The breakdown in meaningfulness produces the torment of irritation, boredom, and fear among people, which is graphically portrayed in Sartre's play, No Exit. Perhaps the most important contribution of existentialist thought lies in this field. These views are not the isolated perversities of a few individual writers.<sup>2</sup> Rather, they demonstrate once again that man is a being who must live in community - for good or for ill. And all the 'little' achievements of an empirical science and linguistic

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1. Ibid, pp. 96 - 97.

2. cf. Thieliicke, op.cit., p.98.

philosophy will be nothing more than pure escapism so long as they thrust aside this fact.

Now the point of this examination of modern man's self-understanding has been to show the importance and pervasiveness of the element of scepticism and disillusionment in our contemporary world. When Dietrich Bonhoeffer remarks that "man has learned to cope with all questions of importance without recourse to God as a working hypothesis,"<sup>1</sup> it is very important to note precisely which questions Bonhoeffer has in mind. If it were true that modern man was utterly complacent, then the work of the Christian apologist and preacher would be immeasurably more difficult. But if it is true that modern man can be a prey to nihilistic doubt, and if it is true that modern man, when he is rigorously honest, sees that all philosophies are acts of faith, then there is indeed a vital point of contact between the modern age and the Christian faith. It is for this reason that this element of modern man's self-understanding must not be overlooked.

What then can we say of Niebuhr's analysis of the lessons of history? In the first place it can be said that in showing the complexity of the causes and results of historical movements, Niebuhr reveals something of the complexity of human motivation and so assists us in our

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1.

Quoted by John A.T. Robinson in Honest to God, (London: S.C.M. Press, 1963), p.36.

own self-understanding. In the second place, Niebuhr's evaluation of the major philosophical interpretations of mankind has considerable apologetic value. By using the tools of historical analysis to trace the social, economic, and political fruits of these philosophies, Niebuhr is able to show how these philosophies have converged to produce the daemonic totalitarianism of the twentieth century. By demonstrating the difference between these fruits and man's allegedly certain knowledge of himself, Niebuhr is able to show that all interpretations of history and human nature are acts of faith. This is a worthwhile achievement because it means that if the tools of scholarship can reveal this fact, then Christianity can, with complete intellectual integrity, be offered as an alternative faith.

Niebuhr's analysis of naturalistic, romantic, and idealistic philosophies shows that these philosophies do not understand the complete nature of man in his physical, intellectual, and spiritual unity. He is able to show that the superficial optimism of contemporary views of man present a limited view of man. Niebuhr's evaluation of the lessons of history can also be a necessary corrective to the existentialist viewpoint. Niebuhr describes existentialism as a very accurate index of the spiritual crisis in contemporary culture.<sup>1</sup> But, says Niebuhr, in

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Niebuhr, Faith and History, p.184.

asserting the meaning of the present moment in defiance of the chaos of existence, existentialism's islands of meaning are but tiny, and are periodically inundated. Though Niebuhr does not use his lessons drawn from history to criticize the existentialist view of man and history, nevertheless his analysis does provide a worthwhile point of criticism. For man can make, however tentatively and incompletely, some effort to define himself, other than by suffering and struggling in the world. There are what might be described as 'pointers along the way.' It is here that Niebuhr's unceasing assertion of the unity of the human self is important. For he has shown to us the dire results in history of treating man either as a purely natural or as a purely spiritual creature. And in his treatment of the nature of mankind, Niebuhr is able to paint a strong picture suggesting that the real malaise of mankind is a spiritual malaise which yet affects every fibre of his being. And these are all important guideposts which it would be foolish to ignore.

CHAPTER IIIThe Essential Nature of Man

Niebuhr's analysis of the differing interpretations of man has led him to three basic conclusions; first, that these interpretations of man arrive at contradictory conclusions about the relation of vitality to form in human nature; secondly, that the perennial debate between the rationalists, idealists and romanticists is historic evidence of this contradiction; and thirdly, that these interpretations fail to find a secure foundation for the unique individuality which they ostensibly cherish so highly.<sup>1</sup>

All these errors, says Niebuhr, point to a single and common source of error: the lack of a principle of interpretation which can do justice to both the height of human self-transcendence and the organic unity between the spirit of man and his physical life. This total environment may be defined, adds Niebuhr, as one which includes both eternity and time. But this eternity is neither the infinity of time nor yet a realm of undifferentiated unity of being. It is, says Niebuhr, the changeless source of man's changing being. As a creature who is involved in the flux of time, nature, and the world, but who is conscious also of the fact that he is so involved, man proves that he cannot be involved

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1.

Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.I, p.132.

totally, that he must in some sense stand outside and beyond these structures. Man has an environment of eternity which he cannot know through the mere logical ordering of his experience. He is in the position of being unable to comprehend himself in his full stature of freedom without a principle of comprehension which is beyond his comprehension.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr believes that the one principle of interpretation which is able to include within it both the heights and the depths of the human spirit, is the Christian doctrine of man. The Christian view of man, says Niebuhr, emphasizes the height of self-transcendence in man's spiritual nature in its doctrine that man is made in the "image of God. But it also "insists on man's weakness, dependence and finiteness, on his involvement in the necessities and contingencies of the natural world, without, however, regarding this finiteness as, of itself, a source of evil in man". Man is seen as "a unity of God-likeness and creatureliness in which he remains a creature even in the highest spiritual dimensions of his existence and may reveal elements of the image of God even in the lowliest aspects of his natural life".<sup>2</sup>

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1. Ibid., pp. 133 - 134. see also Paul Tillich's remark that "while phenomenology is competent in the realm of logical meanings ... it is only partly competent in the realm of spiritual realities like religion." Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology, Vol.I, (London: Nisbet, 1955), p.119.

2. Niebuhr, op.cit., p.161.

Man's Transcendence.

We must now ask in what ways Niebuhr sees the concept of 'the image of God' as helpful in embracing the fullness of man's being. Niebuhr points out that though this doctrine has received no precise psychological elaboration in the Bible itself, the concept has influenced Christian thought to interpret human nature in terms which include man's rational faculties, but which suggests also something beyond them. Thus the first element in man's nature which the doctrine stresses is the element of transcendence in human nature. Man's spirit is conceived of as primarily a capacity for, and an affinity with, the divine. That this element is a part of universal human experience is illuminated, says Niebuhr, by the ablest non-theological analysis of human nature in modern times. Martin Heidegger defines this Christian emphasis succinctly as the "idea of transcendence that man is something that reaches beyond himself," [that] man is more than a mere something endowed with intelligence".<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr states that

the human spirit is set in this dimension of depth in such a way that it is able to apprehend, but not to comprehend, the total dimension. The human mind is forced to relate all finite events to causes and consummations beyond themselves.

It thus constantly conceives all particular things in their relation to the totality of reality, and can adequately apprehend totality only in terms of a

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The reference is to Heidegger's Sein und Zeit, p.49.

principle of unity 'beyond, behind and above the passing flux of things' (Whitehead). But this same human reason is itself imbedded in the passing flux, a tool of a finite organism, the instrument of its physical necessities, and the prisoner of its partial perspectives of a limited time and place. The consequence is that it is always capable of envisaging possibilities of order, unity, and harmony above and beyond the contingent and arbitrary realities of its physical existence; but it is not capable (because of its finiteness) of incarnating, all the higher values which it discerns, nor even of adequately defining, the unconditioned good which it dimly apprehends as the ground and goal of all its contingent values.

This paradoxical relation of finitude and infinity, and consequently of freedom and necessity, is the mark of the uniqueness of the human spirit in this creaturely world. Man is the only mortal animal who knows that he is mortal, a fact that proves that in some sense he is not mortal. Man is the only creature imbedded in the flux of finitude who knows that this is his fate; which proves that in some sense this is not his fate.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr's opinion is supported by Heidegger's examination of the human condition. For Heidegger the fundamental characteristic of human existence is care. Man finds that his being is in advance of itself, he finds himself already existing before he has found out what it means to exist. He is already concerned about the world and the human community, before he has discovered the proper relationship of these factors to his own

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1.

Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, (London: S.C.M. Press, 1936), pp. 76 - 77.

possibilities.<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that Heidegger, though a secular philosopher, yet takes account of the self-transcending character of human existence in its awareness of finitude, guilt, freedom, and destiny.<sup>2</sup> Further, it is important to note that Heidegger is concerned to defend the thesis that only metaphysics can provide a unified and inclusive view of the world as over against the sort of scientism which tries to unify knowledge by making all disciplines conform to a mathematical model. Each discipline, Heidegger contends, should study its data without distorting them. The scientist, Heidegger agrees, does pursue one legitimate way of studying what is, but he makes an extra-scientific assertion whenever he adds, 'that's all there is, there isn't any more.' As a scientist, says Heidegger, he has no right to declare that nothing outside his methods is knowable, real or worth bothering about.<sup>3</sup> Now, however different Heidegger's own metaphysics may be from the Christian faith, it is at least plain that there is common ground between Heidegger's analysis of the human condition and Niebuhr's understanding of the element of transcendence in man made in the 'image of God.' Because

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1.

D.E. Robert's essay on Heidegger in Existentialism and Religious Belief, p.154.

2.

Ibid, p.163.

3.

Ibid., pp. 174 - 175.

both see the necessity of an act of faith in face of the mystery and insecurity which self-transcendence creates, the possibility of a dialogue between them exists.

#### Man's Attitude to Death.

Another element which Niebuhr sees in the Christian doctrine of the 'imago dei' is a viewpoint on man's attitude to death. Though man is involved in the flux of nature and time, man is also a free spirit, says Niebuhr, who knows the brevity of his years and by this knowledge transcends the temporal by some capacity within himself. The sense of melancholy which the anticipation of death induces in the human spirit is not known in the animal world.<sup>1</sup> However inexorable death may be as law of nature, writes Niebuhr, the fear of death, is just as inevitable an expression of that in man which transcends nature. "It proves that he does have 'pre-eminence above a beast'; because the fear of death springs from the capacity not only to anticipate death but to imagine and to be anxious about some dimension of reality on the other side of death. Both forms of fear prove man's transcendence over nature. His mind comprehends the point in nature at which his own existence in nature ends; and thereby proves that nature does not fully contain him. The fact that he fears extinction is a negative indication of a dimension in the

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1.

Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.II, p.1.

human spirit, transcending nature."<sup>1</sup> The fear of death is not destroyed by the argument that there is no reality beyond the fact of death, concludes Niebuhr, because the very fear which this argument is meant to quiet is an indication of height and depth in the human spirit which nature as such cannot contain.<sup>2</sup>

Again we find confirmation of this attitude towards death in the thinking of a secular philosopher. In Heidegger's analysis of the human situation, death is the end whereby man's existence becomes complete, and man's capacity to anticipate death, to see it as the context within which every moment falls, is the basis for any attempt to grasp his existence, as an organic, unified whole. For Heidegger it is in the anticipation of the individual's own death that the difference between what it is to be a man and what it is to be a thing is underscored. Things are replaceable by others of the same order. But, says Heidegger, where death is concerned, no one can take my place; I have to do my own dying. Death is that unique potentiality of 'Dasein' - of 'being there' as man is - which involves being no more. And when the individual takes this potentiality upon himself he enters fully into the meaning of isolation, for death cuts off all relations to the world and to other human beings. Moreover there is no possibility of escaping the

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1. Ibid., p.8.

2. Ibid., p.10.

anxiety connected with running forward to the thought of death. One runs away, says Heidegger, from the thought of death by becoming completely preoccupied with the world of one's care; one tries to treat it exclusively as an external event, like any other event in nature; one talks about the fact that 'people die' without identifying the 'people' with 'I'. Hence, concludes Heidegger, one runs away from the kind of courage which alone can allow the full dread of death to arise and can stand face to face with it; by superficial attempts to reach tranquility man estranges himself from his innermost absolute potentiality, and in the very effort to run away, he betrays the fact that he is essentially concerned with death.<sup>1</sup>

#### Man's Freedom.

Another element which, because it is involved in his treatment of transcendence, is implied in Niebuhr's understanding of the 'imago dei', is the element of freedom. For man, says Niebuhr, is a creature of necessity and yet a child of freedom. His life is determined by natural contingencies; yet his character develops by rising above nature's necessities and accidents. Whether man dominates or submits to nature, he is never merely an element in nature. The simple

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1.

D.E. Robert's "Heidegger" in Existentialism and Religious Belief, pp. 154 - 155.

proof, says Niebuhr, is that his life is not wholly determined, but is partly self-determining. This, he adds, is a very obvious fact of experience which is easily obscured by philosophies, which either lift man wholly out of nature, or make him completely identical with it, usually for no better reason than to fit him into a completely consistent scheme of analysis.<sup>1</sup>

It is man's ability to transcend the flux of nature that gives him, says Niebuhr, the capacity to make history. Human history is compounded of natural necessity and human freedom. Man's freedom to transcend the natural flux gives him the possibility of grasping a span of time in his consciousness and thereby knowing history. It also enables him, adds Niebuhr, to change, re-order, and transmute the causal sequences of nature and thereby to make history.<sup>2</sup>

Once again we may turn to the secular world for support for Niebuhr's viewpoint. One of the most important contributions existentialist philosophy has made in our age has been its constant reiteration of the importance of freedom as an element in man's true being. Against all the claims of the social sciences and an empirical philosophy to be able to manipulate and understand man, existentialism has maintained quite adamantly the existence

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1.

Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy, (London: Nisbet, Co., 1938), pp. 292 - 293.

2.

Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.II, p.1.

of freedom in human nature. For existentialist man it is only through freedom that the possibility of existence lies. Immersed in the absurd, in a world which sickens him, there remains for existentialist man the one possibility: to exist, to be free, to choose himself. He must deny all supposed assumptions, all 'facts', all values in order to exist. His freedom consists in taking up his situation, that is, in giving it a meaning which it does not have in itself; the free act is the sole way of access to his authentic being.

And yet existentialist man does not sing a hymn in praise of freedom. Freedom for him is no comfortable soporific - rather it is the source of anguish. Though freedom may confer meaning on things and create values, it itself has no meaning. It is justified by no finality, it clings to no kind of transcendence. Insofar as it creates reasons, the free act lies beyond all reasons and thus is absurd. It is here that man is a prey to disquiet from which there is no escape. Freedom creates personality but knows nothing of a final goal for personality. Now even if we find this language extravagant and the case over-stated, we must not miss the vital point that for existentialist man it is this freedom which is the one important thing for man - even when at the same time it is

a sort of curse.<sup>1</sup>

In Paul Tillich's words, man is man because he has freedom. Every part and every function which constitutes man a personal self participates in his freedom. Freedom, says Tillich, is experienced as deliberation, decision and responsibility. Deliberation points to an act of weighing arguments and motives. As long as a person weighs motives he is not identical with any of the motives, but is above them and free of them all. Decision, says Tillich, cuts off possibilities and these are real possibilities otherwise no cutting would have been necessary. And the person who does the 'cutting' or 'excluding' must be beyond what he cuts off or excludes. The word 'responsibility' points to the obligation of the person who has freedom to respond if he is questioned about his freedom. He cannot ask anyone else to answer for him. Each of us, concludes Tillich, is responsible for what has happened through the centre of his self, the seat and organ of his freedom.<sup>2</sup>

Niebuhr has maintained his emphasis upon the importance

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Thus Mathieu, Sartre's hero in Iron in the Soul, profits from the war in which he is engaged, to achieve self-cleansing and freedom, to annihilate in himself once for all, all values. And yet he must die to achieve this, and in this final act of freedom there is in him a dissolution of character and the sloughing away of qualities which had given the man's character a certain winsomeness.

2.

Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology, Vol.I, pp. 203 - 204.

of freedom as an element in man's being. In one of his more recent works he states that common sense, art, and the law have never had any illusions about the fact of freedom. "The freedom of man does not fit into any system of metaphysics, but the historians who know that historiography is not only a science but also an art, know this because they have found freedom and uniqueness so obtrusive in the history of man that it made purely scientific accounts of men's actions impossible."<sup>1</sup> It is of interest to discover a confirmatory view in the world of secular literature and thought.

#### The Moral Nature of Man.

Though Niebuhr does not deal with man's moral nature in his discussion of man as made in God's image, yet because he sees this element of man's nature as part of man's uniqueness, it seems fair to examine Niebuhr's views of man's moral nature now.<sup>2</sup> It is clear that from the beginning of his writings Niebuhr has differed radically from Karl Barth on this issue. For Niebuhr has always acknowledged the existence and the significance of the moral element in human nature. His years of parish

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1. Niebuhr, The Godly and the Ungodly, (London: Faber and Faber; 1958), p.128.

2. But Niebuhr does discuss the moral law when elaborating the content of the metaphor 'image of God' in The Self and the Dramas of History, p.25 ff.

experience in Detroit had taught him that all human nature is a mixture of good and evil, of the moral and immoral, and that both morality and immorality are found where least expected.

In his work Moral Man and Immoral Society - a book often dismissed as cynically pessimistic - Niebuhr states that human nature is not wanting in certain endowments for the solution of the problem of society. In his organic relations with his fellow men a natural impulse prompts man to consider the needs of others even when they compete with his own.<sup>1</sup> Even the philanthropy of the man of power, says Niebuhr, is a perfect illustration of the brutal and the moral which we find in all human nature; for his generosity is at once a display of his power and an expression of his pity.<sup>2</sup> It is important to point out, adds Niebuhr, that men do possess a sense of obligation towards the good as their mind conceives it. This moral sense does not give moral content to moral judgements. It is, says Niebuhr, a principle of action which requires the individual to act according to whatever judgements of good and evil he is able to form.<sup>3</sup>

Niebuhr is well aware that such a definition of man's moral sense must allow for a great relativity in moral codes.

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1. Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, p.2.

2. Ibid., pp. 13 - 14.

3. Ibid., p.37.

Yet he asserts that in spite of the relativity of morals every conceivable moral code and every philosophy of morals enjoins concern for the life and welfare of the other, and seeks to restrain the unqualified assertion of the interests of the self against the other. For example, he says, there is a fairly universal agreement in all moral systems that it is wrong to take the life or the property of the neighbour.<sup>1</sup>

J.S. Whale has stated that man's distinctive and imperious sense of 'oughtness' has a sanctity which refuses to be bargained with or explained away.

The plain man's inescapable conviction that treachery, lies, and lust are wrong, is not a socially begotten value-judgement, a useful human convention. His sense that mercy, truth, and honour have eternal validity is no hedonistic calculus, subtly camouflaged, nor the unconscious rationalization of self-interest. Man cannot dismiss his sense of sacred obligation any more than he can escape from his shadow. The content of that felt obligation may vary from age to age, but the fact of it stands forever, and its meaning is indubitable.<sup>2</sup>

It is of interest to find one who is not a theologian making the same point. A.L. Rowse has written that underlying the flux of history there is a certain continuum to which all ethical judgements can be related, and which lead men to agree that Socrates was a good man and Nero a bad man

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1. Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, pp.116-117.

2. J.S. Whale, Christian Doctrine, (Cambridge: University Press; 1952), p.25.

and that truth and charity are better than falsehood and malice. At all times, says Rowse, men have agreed that it is better to assist their fellow creatures than to injure them, though the extent to which they have been prepared to render such assistance, and the particular form which they have felt it should take, have depended on the moral insights of their generation.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr is prepared to admit that the relativities of the moral law point to its social derivation. Because man is both an historical and a social creature, says Niebuhr, then his moral judgements are not made in a vacuum.<sup>2</sup> Emil Brunner has said that it is impossible to answer the question concerning the presence of a 'universal moral sense' with a plain 'yes' or 'no'. On the one hand, says Brunner, the 'sense of ought', the difference between good and evil, right and wrong, is present wherever there are human beings. There may even be a certain agreement in reference to the content of the idea of good and evil, right and wrong. On the other hand, because religious conceptions shape morality, how can we expect to find similarity in morals, asks Brunner, when the religious

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1. A.L. Rowse, The Use of History, (London: Macmillan; 1948), pp. 151 - 152.

2. Niebuhr, The Self and the Dramas of History, (London: Faber and Faber; 1956), p.26.

conceptions so sharply conflict? To try to find an 'original moral common sense' behind the influences of the religions of Buddhism, of the mystic or of the Moslem, of Egypt or of Greece, is, says Brunner, simply a wild-goose chase.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, while admitting the element of truth in the moral relativism of the anthropologists and sociologists, Niebuhr is not prepared to believe that human experience allows them to have the last word. His view is supported by Paul Tillich, who points out that though the belief in the cultural conditioning of ethics is still widespread in cultural anthropology and in popular understanding, there has been a sharp reaction against this view. "We have learned," says Tillich, "(partly through the insight that a living reality is a structural unity, a 'Gestalt,' and not a mechanical composite) that cultures are wholes, and that we cannot compare parts of them with parts of others, but must understand the significance of the particulars in the light of the whole. Then we may discover that the contrast of ethical demands in separated cultures is not a contradiction, but a different expression of a common fundamental principle."<sup>2</sup>

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Emil Brunner, The Divine Imperative, (London: Lutterworth Press; Sixth Impression, 1958), p. 32 - 33.

2.

Paul Tillich, Morality and Beyond, p. 32.

The possibility of moral values above the merely conditioned, is demonstrated, believes Niebuhr, in the actions of modern martyrs who have given their lives to defy the total claims of communities. These actions, says Niebuhr, vividly refute all theories, whether psychological, sociological, or anthropological, which seek to reduce the sense of moral obligation to a purely sociological phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> Again, for all the relativities of moral values, a tribute to man's unique moral nature can be seen, says Niebuhr, in the fact that men cannot pursue their own ends if they are unable to attribute universal values to their particular objectives.<sup>2</sup> This same hypocrisy, says Niebuhr, is the most significant moral characteristic of nations. The dishonesty of nations, in Niebuhr's view, is a necessity of political policy, if the nation is to gain the full benefit of its double claim upon the loyalty and devotion of the individual, as his own special and unique community, and as a community which embodies universal values and ideals.<sup>3</sup>

Having examined Niebuhr's treatment of the moral dimension in man's nature we must now consider his treatment of the origin of this moral dimension. When he discusses the origin of the moral obligations experienced by mankind there appear to be two different strands in Niebuhr's early

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1. Niebuhr, op.cit., pp. 26-27.

2. Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, p.45.

3. Ibid., p.45.

thought. In Moral Man and Immoral Society Niebuhr states that moral attitudes always develop more sensitively in person-to-person relationships. Thus, says Niebuhr, both the personality and the holiness of God, provide the religious man with a reinforcement of his moral will, and a restraint upon his will to power.<sup>1</sup> Here the use of the word 'reinforcement' implies that man has a moral will as an entity in itself, irrespective of any living relationship with God, his Creator. This hints at being the remnant of an old rationalistic, liberal viewpoint. And yet in his Interpretation of Christian Ethics, Niebuhr states that the minimal standard of moral conduct, respect for the life and property of the neighbour, is grounded in the law of love, and points towards it as ultimate fulfilment. This obligation to affirm and protect the life of others can arise at all only if it is assumed that life is related to life in some unity and harmony of existence.<sup>2</sup> And this unity and harmony of existence expressed in the law of love has its source in "a God who is both the ground and ultimate fulfilment of existence, who is both the creator and judge of the world, and who is thus involved in every moral situation".<sup>3</sup> Of course, it is the latter strand which tends to predominate, for in most of Niebuhr's

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1.

Ibid., pp. 53-54.

2.

Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, p.117.

3.

Ibid., pp. 115 - 116.

subsequent thinking true morality can exist only under the creative and judging love of God. But the significance of the former strand, where religious faith is a reinforcement of man's moral will, will become apparent later in this chapter.

#### The Rational Nature of Man.

Niebuhr's discussion of the role of reason in human nature follows a similar pattern. Man's ability to reason and to order his thoughts logically is seen as part of man's uniqueness. Again we find that from the beginning of his writings, Niebuhr portrays reason as being capable of playing a creative role in human activity. Reason, says Niebuhr, inasfar as it is able to survey the whole field of life, analyses the various forces in their relation to each other, and, gauging their consequences in terms of the total welfare, inevitably places the stamp of its approval upon those impulses which affirm life in its most inclusive terms. The function of reason for every moralist is to support, says Niebuhr, those impulses which carry life beyond itself, and to extend the measure and degree of their sociality.<sup>1</sup> Because there are unrealized potentialities in human life which, but for hope, would remain undeveloped, the optimism of the rationalists and educators is not without value.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, p.27.

2. Ibid., p.24.

The measure of our rationality, continues Niebuhr, determines the degree of vividness with which we appreciate the needs of other life, the extent to which we become conscious of the real character of our own motives and impulses, the ability to harmonise conflicting impulses in our own life and society, and the capacity to choose adequate means for approved ends. A development of reason, says Niebuhr, may increase moral capacity.<sup>1</sup>

A further fruit of reason is, in Niebuhr's view, the sense of justice. The sense of justice, upon which harmonious social relations depend, is, says Niebuhr, a product of the mind and not of the heart. It is the result of reason's insistence upon consistency. A growing rationality in society destroys the uncritical acceptance of injustice by making dominant groups more conscious of the hollowness of their pretensions, so that they will be unable to assert their interests and protect their special priveleges with the same degree of self-deception. Social relations will then be judged, concludes Niebuhr, not according to custom and tradition, but according to a rational ideal of justice.<sup>2</sup>

Once again we must pause and ask whether Niebuhr's assessment of the origin of justice is either adequate or in agreement with his definition of justice given elsewhere.

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1. Ibid., pp. 27-28.

2. Ibid., pp. 29-32.

Again it appears that in this early stage of his work Niebuhr is still influenced by a rationalistic liberalism. Is justice merely the product of the mind, the result of reason's insistence upon consistency? Or is it the fruit of something greater than the human mind and its rational processes? At the end of his work Moral Man and Immoral Society, Niebuhr states that justice in the collective life of mankind cannot be approximated "if the hope of its perfect realization does not generate a sublime madness in the soul".<sup>1</sup> It is this same sublime madness which emphasizes profound and ultimate unities in men, which produces attitudes of repentance and impulses of love, and which is the peculiar gift of religion and not of the secular imagination.<sup>2</sup>

Once again we have been able to discern two influences manifesting themselves in Niebuhr's earlier work: the rationalistic liberal outlook of an earlier age, and the influence of religious faith. Again it is the latter influence which becomes the more important. For in his subsequent writings, justice, for Niebuhr, always stands under the judgement of God. It is always a proximate achievement with a limited authority, guided and illuminated indeed by reason, but always a partial implementation of the law of love in a sinful world, and hence always

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1.

Ibid., p.277.

2.

Ibid., p.255.

standing under God's judgement and in need of His redemption.

In his later works Niebuhr outlines the limitations of reason. Insofar as human reason really frees the human spirit from the necessities and contingencies of nature, it creates the possibilities of moral action. But insofar as this emancipation is never complete and rationality is never discarnate, it accentuates the disharmonies of nature. The same reason which challenges natural impulses and necessities in the interest of a higher good, can raise these very impulses into the semblance of an ultimate good.<sup>1</sup>

Nor, says Niebuhr, in Volume I of The Nature and Destiny of Man, are the laws of reason and logic capable of fully comprehending the total meaning of the world. This is attested to, says Niebuhr, by the fact that life and history are full of contradictions which cannot be resolved in terms of rational principles. Furthermore, he adds, a mind which transcends itself cannot legitimately make itself the ultimate principle of interpretation by which it explains the relation of mind to the world. Rational thought identifies the God of religious faith with the god of reason. But, says Niebuhr, the real situation is that man who is made in the image of God is

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Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy, p.241.

unable, precisely because of those qualities in him which are designated as 'image of God,' to be satisfied with a God who is made in man's image. By virtue of his capacity for self-transcendence, man can look beyond himself sufficiently to know that a projection of himself is not God.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most significant criticisms of Niebuhr's understanding of reason comes from Paul Tillich. For Tillich there are two concepts of reason, the ontological and the technical. The ontological, says Tillich, predominated in the classical tradition from Parmenides to Hegel, while the technical has predominated since the breakdown of German classicism and the rise of English empiricism. Ontological reason is the structure of the mind which enables the mind to grasp and to transform reality. The denial of reason in the classical sense, says Tillich, is anti-human because it is anti-divine. Technical reason, on the other hand, is described as reason reduced to the capacity for 'reasoning'; for only the cognitive side of the classical concept of reason remains.<sup>2</sup>

It is worth devoting some attention to an examination of Tillich's understanding of reason, because it is from his ontological understanding of reason that Tillich

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1. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.I, pp.177-178.  
 2. Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology, Vol.I, pp.80-81.

criticizes Niebuhr's view of reason. We must consider the validity of Tillich's own understanding. Reason, says Tillich, in both its ontological and technical structures, points to something which, though common to both, also transcends them both in power and meaning. 'Essentially' both reason and this reality beyond should be one. But if we ask, with J.H. Heywood Thomas how we know that there is essentially this union, it appears Tillich has no answer other than that this was what was held by the philosophers of the classical tradition.<sup>1</sup>

Reason, continues Tillich, which affirms and actualizes its structure without regarding its depth, is autonomous. Heteronomy, on the other hand, says Tillich, issues comments from 'outside' on how reason should grasp and shape reality. Both autonomy and heteronomy, he asserts, are rooted in theonomy; that is, autonomous reason united with its own depth. Why the term 'theonomous' is appropriate here, comments Thomas, is difficult to understand. When Tillich says that "since God (theos) is the law (nomos) for both the structure and the ground of reason, they are united in him," Thomas comments that the only reason for this assertion seems to be that the term 'being' is used both of the object of philosophy and of the nature of God.<sup>2</sup>

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1.

J. Heywood Thomas, Paul Tillich: An Appraisal, (London: S.C.M. Press; 1963), p.49.

2.

Ibid., p.49.

With this ontological understanding of reason - of which we must at least ask several questions - Tillich evaluates Niebuhr's understanding of reason. Reason of the logos type, says Tillich, is seen as an element within the divine life, the principle of man's self-manifestation to himself and to everything separated from him. "Reason in this sense is the universal power of form and meaning. It is present in the structure of reality and in the structures of the mind which correspond with one another, and which make knowledge and aesthetic intuition, ethical insight and political justice possible. Such reason is divine in its essential nature and does not admit any confrontation, with faith. Reason in this sense (as logos) is the principle of that which creates faith: namely, revelation."<sup>1</sup>

Now Niebuhr, says Tillich, does not distinguish this 'high' concept of reason from the 'low,' or calculating type of reason. He is right, continues Tillich, when he denies that reason, in the technical sense, can attain to knowledge of God. For this, says Tillich, is not only impossible; it is also religiously condemnable because it represents an attempt of man to force God down to man through cognitive endeavour. But, says Tillich, Niebuhr

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Paul Tillich, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Knowledge," in Reinhold Niebuhr, edited by Charles Kegley and Robert Bretall, pp. 36-37.

is wrong when he asserts that this is all that one can say about the relation of reason to man's knowledge of God. For, concludes Tillich, reason is more than arguing reason.

In his reply to Tillich, Niebuhr denies that he has confused calculating reason with the classical or logos type. This, says Niebuhr, is a serious misunderstanding because it is with classical reason that he is chiefly concerned. Far from depreciating it, Niebuhr states that he knows that God must be, or have, reason of this type and that the human self also has this logos type of reason as part of its unique creative power. But, says Niebuhr, the self has a freedom which cannot be equated with this reason; and God has freedom beyond the rational structure.

The Bible attributes the power of creation to him [God]. Tillich says he must have 'the power of being.' I agree; but I think the idea of creation points to a mystery beyond any system of rational intelligibility. If we try to incorporate this mystery into a system of rational intelligibility, 'the power of being' is interpreted as a vast reservoir of potentiality. The idea of God as primarily the structure of things attributes creative force to form, as contrasted with the formless stuff. It is quite true that whenever we speak of 'being' we speak ontologically. But since ontology is the 'science of being' it has its limitations in describing any being or being per se which contains mysteries and meanings which are not within the limits of reason. Among these are both the human self in its mystery of freedom within and beyond the rational structure of mind, and the divine mystery which certainly implies the 'power of being' but the mystery of God's creative power is certainly beyond the limits of a rational

ontology.<sup>1</sup>

In this debate over the rôle of reason in human nature it appears that Tillich's understanding may make a greater appeal to the modern mind. It is less of an intellectual affront and it forms part of an ordered metaphysical whole. But Niebuhr's understanding is truer to a Biblical theology and it is also truer to the practical realities of human experience as distinct from mere intellectual endeavour. For this reason it is to be preferred.

#### Man and his Knowledge.

Another element in man's nature and activity which indicates his uniqueness lies, Niebuhr believes, in man's search for, and understanding of, knowledge. Man's ability to know, in Niebuhr's view, is an activity involving the whole man, his intuitive awareness, his involvement with other selves, as well as his rational processes. No indication from empirical facts, says Niebuhr, can yield a conclusion about ultimate meaning, because every process of induction presupposes some canon and criterion of meaning.<sup>2</sup> Scientific method is obviously most potent, continues Niebuhr, when we limit the question to specific and narrow ends and ask what is desirable to

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1. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism," in Reinhold Niebuhr, ed. Kegley and Bretall, p.432.

2. Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy, p.14.

achieve the end of health, or of security, or of the national interest. But every specific end is enmeshed in a vast system of ends and means and we cannot ascertain the desirability of an immediate end without making value judgements about the total schemes of meaning in which such judgements are made. We cannot, says Niebuhr, criticize these total schemes of meaning scientifically, for every scientific procedure presupposes them.<sup>1</sup>

It is of interest to consider the views of Professor C.A. Coulson, Rouse Bell Professor of Applied Mathematics in the University of Oxford, on the rôle of scientific thinking. A scientific law, says Professor Coulson, is essentially a description of the results of observations; it does not control events but is a means of correlating experiences. The pattern to which these laws refer, is a pattern built around concepts, for science grows by the progressive building of grand conceptual schemes. These patterns, says Coulson, are mental constructs of our own, and their ultimate sanction is that they fit together. Scientific truth means coherence in a pattern which is recognized as meaningful and sensible.<sup>2</sup>

The conceptual schemes mentioned by Professor Coulson

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1. Niebuhr, Christian Realism and Political Problems, (London: Faber and Faber; 1954), p.88.

2. C.A. Coulson, Science and Christian Belief, (London: Oxford University Press; 1955), pp. 35-36.

are described by Niebuhr as the hidden dogmas which reveal the impossibility of observing the 'things themselves' without a framework of meaning. By the natural scientists, says Niebuhr, they are assumed to be limited and to be subject to constant re-examination in the light of empirical evidence. But in fact they have often proved themselves powerful enough to determine the evidence by which they were supposed to be tested.<sup>1</sup> Professor Coulson issues a warning against the dogmatisms of science. Scientific truth, he says, must ultimately be thought of as a whole, and not as 'a bit here and a bit there.' He quotes with approval Whitehead's remark that "the notion of the complete self-sufficiency of any item of finite knowledge is the fundamental error of dogmatism. Every such item derives its truth and its very meaning, from its unanalysed relevance to the background which is the unbounded universe..."<sup>2</sup>

Presuppositions and underlying concepts, says Niebuhr, can demonstrate their dogmatisms by leading to conflicting results. Thus the word 'scientific' can connote two meanings: it can mean 'empirical' or 'humility before the fact;' or it can mean 'rational' which could imply that empirical methods must avail themselves of strictly

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1. Niebuhr, The Self and the Dramas of History, p.129-130.

2. Coulson, op.cit., pp. 44-45.

logical tools to avoid caprice. But it may also imply that rational coherence is regarded as the test of truth. In the latter case, says Niebuhr, the two connotations of 'scientific' would stand in contradiction because the test of rational coherence might prompt men to deny obvious facts because they violated, or appeared to violate, the test of rational coherence.<sup>1</sup>

But if the scientific observer in the realm of nature has difficulty in achieving objectivity, then, says Niebuhr, the observer in the realm of history has even more difficulty. For the challenge to the latter to transcend the limits of this bias is a moral rather than an intellectual one - it is addressed to the self rather than to the mind. And, adds Niebuhr, if it is a self that must be appealed to, then no scientific method can compel a self to cease from engaging in whatever rationalization of interest may seem plausible to it.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, this difficulty has not prevented the investigators of human affairs from taking over from the world of science what they believe to be true scientific method. Despite the fact that no genuine scientist would regard his method as infallible, the investigators of human affairs claim that it can produce incontrovertible results. Niebuhr rightly condemns this use of scientific method and

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1. Niebuhr, Christian Realism and Political Problems, p.14.

2. Ibid., pp. 91-92.

its spurious results, but he does not point out that this same scientific method has been given an authority which few scientists would allow. The fault does not lie with the scientists but a superficial and optimistic understanding of science which accepts its presuppositions as self-evident.

When truth is identified with rational consistency, says Niebuhr, and when the paradoxes of life and reality are measured by the canons of human logic, then true knowledge is never achieved.<sup>1</sup> The various forms and aspects of existence are catalogued into various categories, and then, because the categories are rational, it is claimed the contents also are rational.<sup>2</sup> But coherence, in Niebuhr's view, can never be the basic test of truth. Things and events have a uniqueness and freedom which may lead them to stand in rational contradiction to each other, and this uniqueness is destroyed by a premature co-ordination to a system of meaning.<sup>3</sup>

A faulty understanding of scientific method has identified it with a limited empiricism. Niebuhr rightly points out that a scientific empiricism recognizes only sense data as facts. But who would deny the validity of the concept of fact, says Niebuhr, to such realities as the

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1. Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy, p.216.

2. Niebuhr, Ibid., pp. 222-223.

3. Niebuhr, Christian Realism and Political Problems, p.166.

self's freedom, the self-corruption of that freedom in self-concern, or the self's historical character?<sup>1</sup> No advance in technique, continues Niebuhr, will ever enable empiricism to find the free and responsible self - it may be known, in introspection and dramatic encounter, but not by methods of empiricism which make the self into an 'object' of empirical enquiry.<sup>2</sup> It is because the transcendent, responsible self is so inaccessible to science that a scientific culture is so prone to deny it in order to reduce the human world to a dimension which can be grasped by the 'scientific method'.<sup>3</sup> The correlation of all historic facts, says Niebuhr, requires imagination, wisdom and humility which are not properly defined as "scientific." These attitudes require existential commitments, denials of self-interest, and recognition of the finiteness of all human knowledge in which the self rather than the mind is involved.<sup>4</sup>

When Niebuhr places inverted commas around the words 'scientific method' and 'scientific' it appears that he is thereby signifying a particular attitude and a particular approach in scientific study. But he does not indicate

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1. Niebuhr, The Self and the Dramas of History, p.144.
  2. Niebuhr, The Self and the Dramas of History, p.145.
  3. Niebuhr, "The Tyranny of Science," Theology Today, Vol.X, January 1954, No. 4, p.466.
  4. Ibid., p.471.

whether he regards this approach as a logically coherent ordering of verifiable data, or whether he sees it as merely a parody of the proper methods of science. If he is taking the former view, and it seems likely that he is, then he does not make it clear that empiricism is a vastly different thing from what we now conceive as genuine scientific method. Niebuhr is, in fact, designating as scientific method, what is really a narrow view of the workings of science which does not examine the value judgements and hypotheses upon which all science must develop. It is certainly not the view or the method of all genuine scientists.

It is precisely the virtues of imagination, wisdom, and humility which Niebuhr says cannot be defined as scientific, that Coulson describes as being the hallmark of the true scientist. The scientist brings to his work, says Coulson, honesty, integrity and hope; humility before the created order of things, co-operation with his fellows, patience, and, above all, judgement, for science cannot exist without judgements of value.<sup>1</sup> Greatness in science, says Coulson, is associated not with facts but with imagination. Linked with this is the element of doubt; it is as if before a new creative idea could come, the mind

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Coulson, Science and Christian Belief, pp. 54-55.

had almost to be broken. The central character of doubt, of humility, and of freedom of enquiry, which is sacred, requires, asserts Coulson, the intrusion of things conventionally described as spiritual.<sup>1</sup>

Again, we find Niebuhr stating that science cannot answer questions about the desirability of certain human and historical ends, because the ends above the level of natural necessity are a part of a value scheme in which each value gets its meaning from a total system of meaning which is imaginatively, poetically and religiously projected.<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr's view is tenable only if the popular and superficial, empirical view of science is held. Coulson quotes with approval the opening words of Professor M. Polanyi in the Riddell Lectures of 1946. The suppositions underlying our belief in science "appear to co-extend with the entire spiritual foundations of man, and to go to the very root of his social existence".<sup>3</sup>

But if Niebuhr's criticisms do not apply to a genuine understanding of scientific method, they certainly apply to the naively optimistic, popular view of science so often typified by the social sciences. Unfortunately it is this latter view which predominates to such a degree that it has influenced the philosophical outlooks of the day.

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1. Ibid., pp.42-43.

2. Niebuhr, "The Tyranny of Science," Theology Today, Vol.X January 1954, No.4., p.468.

3. Coulson, op.cit., p.54.

Thus Niebuhr is right when he says that philosophy, which once examined the presuppositions of the sciences in the interests of a consistent view of total reality, has specifically abdicated this synoptic function.<sup>1</sup> Hence, the logical positivists, says Niebuhr, are busy proving that all propositions above the level of natural science are lacking in norms of truth and are therefore useless. Yet the logical positivists, says Niebuhr, have made one contribution to truth. They are right in suspecting an ontology constructed from the falsely elaborated laws of logic and canons of reason. Such an ontology, asserts Niebuhr, is no more than the projection of the belief that 'being' is 'rational,' or that pure being is an undifferentiated realm in which all logical propositions are at once true and false.<sup>2</sup>

And so, Niebuhr says, at the price of freeing us from the tyranny of a rational or a supra-rational metaphysics, modern philosophy has established the tyranny of science more securely. This generalization is true only if by 'modern philosophy' we mean logical positivism and, to a lesser extent, linguistic philosophy, and if by 'science' we mean the popular misconceptions about true science. The questions which philosophy refuses to face, says Niebuhr, are delegated to the psychological and social scientists who

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1. Niebuhr, "The Tyranny of Science", op.cit., p.468.

2. Ibid., pp. 468-469.

conduct their enquiries as if their field were a realm of nature.<sup>1</sup> But what Niebuhr does not add is that their alleged results are just as suspect to the scientist who is aware of the fallibility of scientific method, as they are to any other thoughtful person.

So far, the discussion of Niebuhr's theory of knowledge has led us into a critical examination of alternative theories. It is justifiable now to ask of Niebuhr what then is his own doctrine of knowledge. "The difficulty of writing about Niebuhr's epistemology", states Paul Tillich, "lies in the fact that there is no such epistemology. Niebuhr does not ask 'How can I know?'; he starts knowing."<sup>2</sup> It is part of the uniqueness of man, Niebuhr believes, that man simply starts knowing; he knows he can transcend himself, his environment, and his history, and even consider his own end. One hint that Niebuhr gives as to the way in which man attempts to comprehend his real nature lies in Niebuhr's understanding of myth.

It is the genius of true myth, says Niebuhr, to suggest the dimension of depth in reality and to point to a realm of essence which transcends the surface of history. Since myth cannot speak of the trans-historical without using symbols and events in history as its form of expression,

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1.

Ibid., p.469.

2.

Tillich, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Knowledge," Reinhold Niebuhr, p.36.

it invariably falsifies the facts of history as science sees them, in order to state the truth. But mythical thought, states Niebuhr, is not only pre-scientific, it is also supra-scientific; it refers to the transcendent source and end of existence without abstracting it from existence. In this sense the myth alone is capable of picturing the world as a realm of coherence and meaning, without denying the facts of incoherence. Its world is coherent, says Niebuhr, because all facts in it are related to some central source of meaning, but it is not rationally coherent because the myth is not under the abortive necessity of relating all things to each other in terms of an immediate rational unity.<sup>1</sup>

But Tillich rejects the concept of myth and substitutes for it an ontological understanding of theology. It is precisely here, says Tillich, at the rejection of the ontological question within theology, that Niebuhr's epistemology appears in his technical understanding of reason. And yet, says Tillich, faith need not stand over against reason, for faith is the state of the rational person in which he is grasped by that which re-establishes reason in its integrity. In this sense, says Tillich, faith is rational; it is reason moved and shaped by its own depth. And the transcendentalism of Niebuhr's

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1.

Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, pp.22-36.

interpretation of man and history would gain in strength if that which is beyond human possibilities and historical progress were understood as the depth-dimension of ourselves and our world.<sup>1</sup>

The second place in Niebuhr's thought where Tillich thinks a hidden epistemology may be observed, lies in Niebuhr's struggle against ontology within the Christian framework. Niebuhr, says Tillich, understands ontology as a way of reducing the dynamic-dramatic history of creation, fall, salvation, and consummation into a static system which is determined by rational necessity. But, says Tillich, if being is understood as the power of being, the contrast between static and dynamic disappears, and the God who is the Lord of time and of history is both. Everything man as a centred self does, has the double character of responsibility and necessity. There is destiny in everything we decide in freedom. And there is freedom in everything we experience as destiny - and this, Tillich insists, is an ontological way of speaking.<sup>2</sup>

The third element in Niebuhr's doctrine of knowledge is, in Tillich's view, Niebuhr's emphasis upon the conflict between Jewish and Greek elements in Christian thought. But, says Tillich, there appeared in Greek thought something

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1. Tillich, op.cit., pp.36-38.

2. Ibid., pp.39-41.

universally valid without which it would be impossible for Christian theology to express itself in universal fashion. The question of being is as essential for human nature as the question of God, and the Logos in which the structure of being appears is valid for every human being. The Church, says Tillich, used the term 'Christ' with its dynamic - historical implications, but it also used the term 'Logos' which is essentially strange to Israelite forms of thought and imagination.<sup>1</sup>

In reply to Tillich's threefold criticism Niebuhr states that he believes that the point at issue between them is the problem of the relation of faith to reason. In answer to the first point Niebuhr says, "I know of no way of inducing ... faith by purely rational grounds". "I can find no way of proving by any epistemological method that God, the creator, is revealed as forgiving love in the drama of Christ's life, death and resurrection".<sup>2</sup>

In answer to Tillich's second criticism Niebuhr states that he does not believe that ontological categories can do justice to the freedom either of the divine or the human person. The self has a freedom which cannot be equated with Tillich's logos and God has a freedom beyond the rational structure. It is of course true, Niebuhr admits,

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1.

Ibid., pp.42-43.

2.

Niebuhr, "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism," Reinhold Niebuhr; ed. Kegley and Bretall; p.432.

that every kind of freedom is involved in destiny. But, says Niebuhr, if philosophers try to comprehend the patterns of historical destiny within a framework of ontology, they make nonsense of history.<sup>1</sup>

It is interesting to digress for a moment and remember Niebuhr's point that linguistic philosophy can make a valuable contribution in evaluating undifferentiated ontological concepts of being. J. Heywood Thomas, whom Tillich described as his logical critic,<sup>2</sup> states that Tillich defines philosophy and theology in such a way that they are necessarily correlated, if not indeed identical - at least in some respects. "Philosophy necessarily asks the question of reality as a whole, the question of the structure of being. Theology necessarily asks the same question, for that which concerns us ultimately must belong to reality as a whole..."<sup>3</sup> By defining philosophy and theology in the same way and then deducing that every theologian must be concerned with the basic question of philosophy, Tillich, says Thomas, is merely uttering a tautology of the form  $X = Y$  and  $Z = Y$  so that  $X = Z$ . Since theology is the study of reality which has as its object the real which is related to it existentially, then, says Thomas, philosophy which is also the study of reality

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1.

Ibid., pp. 432-433.

2.

J. Heywood Thomas, Paul Tillich; An Appraisal; p.186.

3.

Tillich, Systematic Theology, Vol.I. p.24.

becomes theology whenever it has any existential concern. One wonders, concludes Thomas, whether Tillich is prepared to maintain the converse of this thesis and say that when he expounds Christianity, sometimes he is expounding universal and philosophical truths.<sup>1</sup> It is this alleged correlation between philosophy and theology which enables Tillich to forge the link between faith and reason which so offends Niebuhr.

The same correlation enables Tillich to state that theology is as dependent on formal logic as is any other science. It enables him to deny that dialectical thinking is opposed to formal logic. What happens, says Tillich, is that a static ontology gives way to a dynamic one.<sup>2</sup> Hence whatever dynamic or transcendent element in the human self or history Niebuhr might use to criticise Tillich's ontology, Tillich can simply reply that it is included in his dynamic ontology. And yet can this correlation stand close examination? It is achieved by ascribing to theology a principle of semantic rationality which demands that the various connotations of a word should be centred upon a controlling meaning. This seems to mean, says Thomas, that some kind of highest common factor of the connotations thereby becomes the meaning of the terms. Semantic rationality is then assumed because all the connotations of

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1. Thomas, op.cit., pp. 41-43.

2. Ibid., p.27.

the word will centre around this focus. The rationality of this procedure, states Thomas, is a sheer illusion born of the confusion of similarity or identity of language with similarity or identity of meaning.<sup>1</sup>

Tillich's third criticism deplored Niebuhr's mistaken emphasis upon an imaginary conflict between Hebrew and Greek thought. In reply Niebuhr states that he believes both modes of thought are necessary. Without the Hellenic understanding of 'logos' we could not understand the structure of being which has given rise to our sciences and philosophies. Niebuhr's point is that when we deal with aspects of reality which exhibit a freedom above and beyond structures, we must resort to the Hebraic dramatic and historical way of apprehending reality.<sup>2</sup> In view of the importance Tillich places upon the Greek connotation of the 'logos' concept in the New Testament, it is important to note a considerable reappraisal of the meaning and derivation of the 'logos' concept especially in St. John's Gospel.<sup>3</sup> This reappraisal shows that the logos

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p.29.

<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism, "Reinhold Niebuhr, p.433.

<sup>3</sup> C.H. Dodd states that the logos doctrine can, in great part at least, be interpreted upon Old Testament presuppositions - the creative, active 'word of the Lord.' But it is also a concept closely similar to that of Wisdom, the hypostatized thought of God projected in creation. It has parallels with Philo's logos doctrine but Philo's logos is not a purely Greek concept. It has in it the sense of power stemming from the Hebraic 'word' which gives the metaphysical term a dynamic meaning. But it does also contain the sense of meaning, plan or purpose of the universe as the thought of God and it is only in Greek that a term is available which means both 'thought' and 'word.' C.H. Dodd, The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel, (Cambridge University Press: 1960), Chap.12, pp.263-285.

concept probably owes more to Hebraic than to Greek thought and cannot be construed as being "essentially strange to Israelite forms of thought and imagination". This means that the early Church was not forced to adopt a purely Greek concept in order to make its faith understandable. The real threat of Greek rationalism and Oriental mysticism came in the second century and it was a danger which the early Church recognized and fought against.

It therefore seems fair to say that Tillich's three-fold criticism of Niebuhr cannot be sustained. Niebuhr believes that Tillich's ontological understanding of faith cannot do justice to man's freedom, to man's ability to transcend every given structure. Tillich believes he has answered Niebuhr's objection by postulating a concept of being which incorporates both faith and reason, both the dramatic and the static dimensions of existence. But in so doing, Tillich portrays a concept of being which lays itself open to the attacks of the linguists. In an effort to do justice to the dramatic nature of being - so essential in Niebuhr's view - Tillich constructs an ontology which has rightly been attacked for its lack of consistency. Here we may say that Niebuhr's understanding is nearer the truth than is Tillich's. But whether Niebuhr finally succeeds in doing justice to the essential nature of man,

whether he avoids the pitfalls of a too static understanding of man's nature, remains to be seen.

Man - The Mystery of his Existence.

A continuing theme through all of Niebuhr's writings about man is the element of mystery in all of human experience. The final question about our existence, says Niebuhr, is whether it makes sense. Life is full of contradictions and incongruities, not to speak of tragic dissonances. And these, continues Niebuhr, are not resolved either by the religious revelations of the seers or by the philosophers who are intent to reduce the realm of meaning to some simple pattern of intelligibility. We live our lives, he says, in various realms of meaning, which do not quite cohere rationally. Our meanings are surrounded by a penumbra of mystery, which is not penetrated by reason.<sup>1</sup>

The ultimate mystery in which man is involved, says Niebuhr, is the mystery of creation. In our modern scientific culture we have assumed that the mystery has been overcome by charting the endless, causal chains in the evolutionary process in which things come to be. But there is one chink in the realm of meaning and rational intelligibility. This chink, says Niebuhr, is the fact that no previous cause is a sufficient explanation of a

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1.

Niebuhr, The Godly and the Ungodly, p.123.

subsequent event. Nothing explains the irrationality of the givenness of things.<sup>1</sup>

We know, continues Niebuhr, only that all contingent existence points beyond itself to an unconditioned mystery of being. And philosophical forms of theology, Niebuhr insists, which try to digest this mystery rationally, oscillate between the definition of 'being' in the Aristotelian description of the eternal structure of being, and the Neo-Platonic conception of the undifferentiated 'ground of being.'<sup>2</sup> Once again Niebuhr stresses the use of myth in drawing our attention to the element of mystery in all existence. The absurdities of the primitive myths of creation, he says, must not obscure the profundity of the permanent myth which guards the mystery of creation and sets the limits for all rational pursuits which are always in danger of finding the world self-explanatory and self-fulfilling.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Ibid., pp. 124-125.

2. Ibid., p.126. No doubt Niebuhr had in mind Tillich's philosophical theology when he made this remark. Therefore it is interesting to note Thomas's verdict on Tillich's philosophy. When Tillich says Philosophy is an understanding of 'being as such' or 'reality as a whole' this, says Thomas, reveals how Tillich fuses different philosophical traditions; for the former is Aristotelian and the latter is borrowed from nineteenth century Idealism.

J. Heywood Thomas, Paul Tillich: An Appraisal, p.34.

3. Ibid., p.126.

We may turn again to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger for a similar view of the element of mystery which pervades all human experience. Man, says Heidegger, uses his freedom to forget the mystery; he becomes preoccupied with his own fragments of specific knowledge and with gathering truths about objects. But mystery is not abolished by being ignored and this turning away from mystery to the manageable, which Heidegger calls 'erring', results in the basic error of estrangement from oneself.<sup>1</sup> In keeping with his rejection of rationalism, Heidegger suggests that the poet and the true philosopher await that word from Being-itself which will enable them to express the mystery. D.E. Roberts comments that Heidegger's hints concerning the relationships among poetry, metaphysics and religion have very broad implications "and many of us - and this would certainly include Niebuhr - have discovered that some of the poets, dramatists and novelists of our day have a deeper insight into Christian symbols, even when they reject them, than the analytical philosophers - even when they happen to be theists."<sup>2</sup>

### The Nature of the Self.

So far we have examined under various headings Niebuhr's treatment of the essential nature of man. We

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1.

D.E. Roberts, "Heidegger," Existentialism and Religious Belief, p.170.

2.

Ibid., p.186.

have seen how Niebuhr regards the elements of transcendence, of freedom, and of man's attitude to death as specific illustrations of what it means to say that man is made in 'the image of God'. That man's ability to reason is also part of the image, is indicated by Niebuhr's remark that "obviously the rational faculty is a very significant part of the unique capacity which is indicated by the metaphor 'image of God'".<sup>1</sup> Though he does not say so specifically it would seem reasonable to include the moral element in man's nature in Niebuhr's understanding of man made in the image of God. Yet it is questionable whether we should try to show how much Niebuhr has included in his understanding of this metaphor, for he seems more interested in man's unique nature than in elaborating the content of a Biblical doctrine. So much was his interest directed, at the beginning of his career, towards the unique as such in man's nature, that we were able to discern two strands in Niebuhr's thought. In considering Niebuhr's treatment of man's moral nature and the quality of justice, we could see both a Biblical and a liberal, rationalistic influence.

But in the unfolding of Niebuhr's thought we can see a definite movement away from the extolling of man's rational nature. There is a deepening awareness of the dramatic and the dynamic qualities in man's nature and a

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1.

Niebuhr, The Self and the Dramas of History, p.15.

much greater interest in the uniqueness of human selfhood. If we ask ourselves why this development took place we can see the answer in the kind of life Niebuhr lived during these years. In addition to his academic work, Niebuhr immersed himself in many of the most vital social and political questions not only of America, but of the world. The editorship of various journals and the constant flow of articles upon innumerable controversial issues kept Niebuhr in constant touch with the most basic urges and activities in human life. A reading of these articles reveals not only a mind well-informed and capable of incisive assessment and opinion, but also a mind which at times speaks with remarkable prophetic power. And in all this involvement in national and world problems there is, in Niebuhr's thought, a continual interaction between his concern with the affairs of men and his Christian faith. One can sense how the problems of the world have driven him again and again to question the Christian faith for clarification and guidance. And we can sense too how his faith has forced him to see the problems of the world in a new and different light. There is, through all this period, a constant circular movement from the affairs of men, to faith, and back again to the affairs of men.

In this chapter we have been able to see, within this circular movement, a development away from a more rational

understanding of man towards a more Biblical-Hebraic understanding of man; towards an understanding which stresses the dynamic wholeness of the human self. Thus in The Self and the Dramas of History, published in 1955, Niebuhr states that by defining the uniqueness of the human self, by emphasizing the three dialogues in which it is involved, rather than by emphasising the Greek understanding of reason, a more accurate content may be given to the metaphor 'image of God'.<sup>1</sup>

The self, says Niebuhr, is a creature which is in constant dialogue with itself, with its neighbours, and with God. The self maintains a constant internal dialogue in which it approves or disapproves its actions or even itself. It could not carry on this dialogue without using its reason, says Niebuhr, for the self in one of its aspects in making the self in another of its aspects its object of thought, uses conceptual images for this procedure. But this is not the 'rational' or 'intelligible' self judging or excusing in contrast to the 'sensible' self; they are merely two foci of the same self.<sup>2</sup>

One aspect of the self's internal dialogue, continues Niebuhr, is the relation of the conscience to the will. The will is defined by Niebuhr as the self organized for the attainment of either a short or a long term purpose.

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1. Niebuhr, The Self and the Dramas of History, pp.15-16.

2. Ibid., p.18.

But the consistency with which a self pursues such ends is not an intellectual achievement. It is the achievement of the self rather than of its reason for there is no power in reason as such to compel consistency. Conscience, Niebuhr defines as any aspect of the self's judging its actions and attitudes in which a sense of obligation in contrast to inclination, is expressed. But the self's capacity for transcendence makes for the indeterminate character of all human desires, adds Niebuhr, and therefore of the corresponding indeterminateness of the qualms of conscience about the legitimacy of these desires and lusts. Both are the fruit of a self-transcendence which can offer either restraints upon ambitions or justification for selfishness.<sup>1</sup>

Another aspect of the self's internal dialogue can be seen in the activities of memory and foresight. Here the self is able to transcend the given moment and is therefore trans-temporal in one dimension of its being. And in another dimension the self is non-spatial, for its imagination is free to rove over the boundaries of time and space. The real self, says Niebuhr, is both in time and beyond time, spatial and yet non-spatial, and though this outrages the sense of rational coherence, it is a fact of daily experience.<sup>2</sup>

The second dialogue, says Niebuhr, is the self's dialogue

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1. Ibid., pp.24-31.

2. Ibid., pp.35-37.

with other selves. Here, the self faces the other self as a mystery which can never be fully penetrated. The self may see another as an instrument for its purposes and as a completion for its incompleteness. But, says Niebuhr, it is an empirically observable fact that the self does not fulfil itself most fully when self-realization is its constant aim. There must be an element of reservation and reverence for the independent and unique life of the other, whose otherness includes a final mystery; while at the same time, adds Niebuhr, the self as a unique centre of life is indeterminately open to other selves.

The freedom of the self over its rational faculties enables the self, says Niebuhr, to discern a mystery and a meaning pointing to a mystery of creativity and it is from this freedom that man's religious sense is derived. The task of penetrating the ultimate mystery prompts many responses, continues Niebuhr, but they could all be placed in three general categories. Firstly, the self seeks to break through a universal rational system in order to assert its significance ultimately, either individually as in romantic and existentialist thought, or in an unconditional commitment of the self to a collective self. Secondly, in mysticism, there is a heroic effort by the self to transcend all finite values and systems of meaning, and to arrive at

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Ibid., pp.42-45.

universality and 'unconditioned being.' Thirdly, and it is here that Niebuhr finds his third dialogue, Christianity and Judaism interpret the self's experience with the ultimate in the final reaches of its self-awareness as a dialogue with God.<sup>1</sup>

This third dialogue, says Niebuhr, assumes the personality of God - an assumption which rationalists and mystics find untenable. The discontinuity between the self and God, which this dialogue assumes, makes explicit faith indispensable, but it also prevents the self, either from usurping the place of the divine for itself, or from imagining itself merged with the divine. The mortality of the collective self and its threat to the individual self demonstrates its inadequacy, says Niebuhr. Existentialism ends in the quasi-idolatrous attitude of making the individual his own creator and end, while the mystics never succeed in eliminating the particular self. Therefore, concludes Niebuhr, the thesis of the Biblical faith, that the self is in dialogue with a God who must be defined as 'person' because He embodies both the structure of being and a transcendent freedom, is more valid than these alternative theses. The Biblical thesis, states Niebuhr, requires a more explicit act of faith because it leaps a gap of discontinuity between man and God, and because it dares to give a specific

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1.

Ibid., pp.73-76.

meaning to the divine which is relevant to the partial and fragmentary meanings of history.<sup>1</sup>

And yet for all this movement away from a more rational understanding of man to a more Biblical and therefore dramatic and dynamic understanding of selfhood, we must ask whether even this development in Niebuhr's thought does justice to the whole truth about man. For all the interaction between the human predicament and the Christian faith in Niebuhr's thought it is still the examination of the human condition which is uppermost in his mind. In this last attempt to give content to the meaning of the metaphor 'image of God' it seems fair to say that the first two dialogues are a searching and sympathetic analysis of the varied impulses and insights of the self. But it is the kind of analysis that any sensitive and honest observer could make. It does not have any particularly religious connotation. Here Niebuhr's concern is still with the unique and imponderable, as such, in the human personality.

In the third dialogue Niebuhr shows the inadequacies of alternative theses to explain man's desire for personal fulfilment in an atmosphere of mystery. Once again this is an approach from the same direction. But in this third dialogue Niebuhr does thrust the Biblical doctrine of God before our attention. God is Personal Being who judges and saves men. Yet how men experience this dialogue and how they

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp.76-84.

comprehend its significance is not elaborated. In fact, one wonders if one can adequately discuss man's dialogue with God without considering man's dialogue with himself and with other selves. And one wonders whether it is possible to truly elaborate man's dialogue either with himself or with others, without at the same time considering the effect of his dialogue with God upon these relationships.

#### Man in the Light of God's Revelation.

So far we have devoted all our attention to examining one source of Niebuhr's doctrine of man - the analyses of the human situation. We have been aware all along of the other source - an understanding of man in the light of God's revelation of His purpose for humanity. Niebuhr sees this revelation as two-fold; a revelation of God to the individual which is described in personal religious experience, and a revelation of God through social, historical experience.

William John Wolf has described the transition from the understanding of man in the light of his self-knowledge to an understanding of man in the light of general revelation, as a critical area in Niebuhr's thought. By a 'transition' Wolf does not mean a change from reliance upon one source to a subsequent reliance upon the other. Presumably he means Niebuhr's facility for drawing upon one source and then upon the other, for he describes both sources as intimately conjoined, as being in reality both sides of the same coin.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>William John Wolf, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Man," Reinhold Niebuhr ed. Kegley and Bretall, p.236.

But the question we are left with at the end of Niebuhr's understanding of man's essential nature, is that though there are indeed these two sources of Niebuhr's doctrine of man, and though the Biblical and revelatory source grows in influence, it is still over-shadowed by the analysis of the human situation. That the relationship between the two sources is a 'critical area' in Niebuhr's thought is due not simply to the necessity of identifying both sources; rather, it is 'critical' because we must ask ourselves if both sources receive the attention commensurate with their importance.

In his elaboration of the second source of his doctrine of man, Niebuhr says, that, firstly, since all men have in some fashion the experience of a reality beyond themselves they are able to entertain the more precise revelations of the character and purpose of God as revealed in prophetic history.<sup>1</sup> Then, in the realm of personal religious experience Niebuhr follows John Baillie's thought, and says that the experience of God is not so much a separate experience as an overtone implied in all experience. The soul which reaches the outermost rims of its own consciousness, says Niebuhr, must also come in contact with God, for He impinges upon that consciousness. There is a dim recognition of the insufficient and dependent character of all finite life which implies the consciousness of the

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Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.I., p.136.

reality upon which dependent existence rests. And, says Niebuhr, an equally important characteristic of the experience of God is the sense of being seen, commanded, judged and known from beyond ourselves, even when such impingement places man in the agony of despair.<sup>1</sup>

Now this experience, so described, says Niebuhr, is in some sense identical to, or associated with, what is usually called 'conscience'. The significance of the Biblical interpretation of conscience, states Niebuhr, lies precisely in this: that a universal human experience - the sense of being commanded, placed under obligation and judged - is interpreted as a relation between God and man in which it is God who makes demands and judgements upon man.<sup>2</sup> This understanding of conscience stems, obviously, from Niebuhr's second source - the Biblical revelation concerning man's nature. But we must compare this statement about man's conscience with another statement made by Niebuhr and ask how well these statements are 'conjoined'. Here, conscience is defined as "any aspect of the self's judging its actions and attitudes in which a sense of obligation, in contrast to inclination, is expressed."<sup>3</sup>

Another illustration of the character of revelation in

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1. Ibid., p.137.

2. Ibid., p.139.

3. Niebuhr, The Self and the Dramas of History, p.25.

our relation to God can be seen, says Niebuhr, in the analogy of man's approach to other human personalities. When we deal with persons, continues Niebuhr, we have evidence that we are dealing with a 'Thou' of such freedom and uniqueness that a mere external observation of its behaviour will not only leave the final essence of that person obscure, but will actually falsify it, since such observation would debase what is really free subject into a mere object. This person, this other Thou, says Niebuhr, cannot be understood until he speaks to us, until his behaviour is clarified by the 'word' which comes out of the ultimate and transcendent unity of his spirit. In the same way, concludes Niebuhr, the God whom we meet as 'The Other' at the final limit of our consciousness, is not fully known to us except as specific revelations of His character augment this general experience of being confronted from beyond ourselves.<sup>1</sup> But the question which we must ask of Niebuhr here is this: if there are specific revelations of God's character to man, then in what way do these revelations affect man's understanding of his relationship with God, of his relations with his fellows, and therefore of his own self-understanding?

In answer to such a question Niebuhr states that man does not know himself truly except as he knows himself confronted by God.<sup>2</sup> This confrontation contains three

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1. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.I., pp.139-140.

2. Ibid., p.140.

elements. The first, says Niebuhr, is a sense of reverence for a majesty and of dependence upon an ultimate source of being.<sup>1</sup> Faith concludes that this same Thou which confronts us is also the source and Creator of the whole world. And here Niebuhr does show clearly the way in which faith in the Biblical doctrine of a Creator and creation does give man true knowledge of himself. For Niebuhr does set out clearly the evidence for believing that such a doctrine is the only ground upon which the full height of the human spirit can be measured. Only here can the unity of the human spirit's life in body and soul be maintained as against the creeds of naturalism, mysticism or idealism. And only here can the essential meaningfulness of the human spirit in the finite world be asserted, and, on the other hand, a limit set for its freedom and self-transcendence.

The second element in man's confrontation by God, says Niebuhr, is the sense of moral obligation laid upon one from beyond one's self and of moral unworthiness before a judge. This element is elaborated, continues Niebuhr, in the Biblical doctrine of God as Judge. But we must pause and note another explanation of the sense of moral obligation given by Niebuhr. It comes from his analysis of the human situation and this time it does not seem to complement the former source. Here Niebuhr says that "perhaps it would be

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1. Ibid., p.141.

correct to surmise that the universalities of the 'moral law' are derived from intuitions of the self about the essential nature of its self-hood. To this essential nature belong on the one hand, its biological structure, and, on the other hand, its social nature."<sup>1</sup>

The third element in this confrontation, says Niebuhr, is the most problematic element in religious experience, the longing for forgiveness.<sup>2</sup> This element raises the question of the relationship of God's justice and His mercy, and is formulated in the Biblical doctrine of God as Redeemer. But at the moment we are trying to relate the two sources - the Biblical, and Niebuhr's analysis of human existence - in an assessment of Niebuhr's understanding of the essential nature of man. We are not yet ready to examine Niebuhr's doctrine of man the sinner, and the salvation of man. Niebuhr states that the longing for forgiveness is part of common human experience.<sup>3</sup> But he does not expand upon this statement nor show how he justifies it. Instead he goes on to outline the Biblical doctrine of the Atonement as the answer to this longing of man.<sup>4</sup> It is for this reason that Niebuhr's treatment of this third element in this confrontation of man by God does not help us at this particular moment, in our

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1. Niebuhr, The Self and the Dramas of History, p.26.

2. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.I., p.141.

3. Ibid., p.154.

4. Ibid., pp.154-160.

assessment of his treatment of man's essential nature.

The main difficulty with Niebuhr's assessment of man's essential nature is that he does not always mould his two sources into a consistent whole. His analysis of human existence is clear - at times profound - and it does place him in dialogue with the world of men. But at times this source seems to stand strangely alone. And when we consider Niebuhr's examination of the Biblical revelation of the nature of man, we can see that his treatment is sound. But here too, the same error seems, at times, to be made, for the Biblical source is not always related to the former source, to form a wholeness of truth. On the one hand we find that Niebuhr uses the Biblical doctrine of the creation of the world and of man to complete the meaning of man's freedom and transcendence which man experiences in his life. Niebuhr uses the doctrine to show the source of the mystery which impinges upon all of man's schemes of reason and knowledge, and to show the unity of man's personality which coheres with the facts of human experience. But on the other hand, when we examine Niebuhr's treatment of man's conscience and man's moral nature we seem to find two differing views of these aspects of man's being. These two views stem from the dual source of Niebuhr's understanding of man's essential nature.

And yet there cannot, in truth, be two views of these vital aspects of man's nature; it must be the Biblical revelation which completes and clarifies the truths ascertainable in the world of human experience.

Though Niebuhr draws upon the Biblical truths revealing man's essential nature, there is one vital truth which he does not seem to stress sufficiently. This truth is that man only has a human nature insofar as it is gifted and sustained by God. Paul Ramsey in his Basic Christian Ethics states that the Christian interpretations of man's dignity affirm something about man in relation to God, and not just something about man as such.<sup>1</sup> In John Baillie's view the truth is that there is in man no nature apart from revelation.<sup>2</sup> And Emil Brunner remarks that man is only man in virtue of the claim made on him by God.<sup>3</sup> The point that all three writers are making is that any investigation of any aspect of man's essential nature cannot rely purely upon an analysis of the human situation, for any aspect of man's essential nature exists only by virtue of its relation to God.

This point is illuminated, G.E. Thomas believes, if we examine what we mean by 'image' when we use the term

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1.

Paul Ramsey, Basic Christian Ethics, (London: S.C.M. Press; 1953), p.277.

2.

John Baillie, Our Knowledge of God, (London: Oxford University Press; 1959 ed.), p.41.

3.

Emil Brunner, The Divine Imperative, (London: Lutterworth Press; 1958, 6th Imp.), p.66.

'image of God'. For an image, says Thomas, is nothing by itself; it has its existence and character from that of which it is the image.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, he continues, man's essence should be defined by reference to his relationship of likeness to God, not by analysis of his nature apart from that relationship. In Brunner's words, "we would do well to understand 'image' in the sense of reflection, that is, an existence which points back, or refers back to something else".<sup>2</sup> The human self, continues Brunner, is nothing which exists in its own right, no property of man, but a relation to a divine Thou.<sup>3</sup> The essential being of man, as man, is identical with his relation to God.<sup>4</sup>

This approach leads Paul Ramsey to describe the image of God in man as a relational quality; nothing within the make-up of man considered by himself apart from a present responsive relationship to God, says Ramsey, has the form or power of being in the image of God.<sup>5</sup> Or, to use Brunner's words: "The being of man... is not something finished but it is a being-in-self-knowledge and a being-in-self-determination but a self-knowledge and a self-determination which is not primary but secondary; it is a self-knowledge and a self-determination on the basis of being known and determined".<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> George E. Thomas, Christian Ethics and Moral Philosophy, (New York: Scribners; 1955), p.157.

<sup>2</sup> Emil Brunner, Man in Revolt, (London: Lutterworth Press; 1955, 5th Imp.), p.96.

<sup>3</sup> Emil Brunner, God and Man, (London: Macmillan; 1936), p.156.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.157.

<sup>5</sup> Ramsey, op.cit., p.254.

<sup>6</sup> Brunner, Man in Revolt, p.97.

It has been pointed out that in the debate between Niebuhr and Tillich, Niebuhr was nearer the truth than Tillich, But Niebuhr's understanding of man's essential nature is also not devoid of error. Niebuhr's concern to portray man's essential nature by an examination of the attributes of that nature gives his interpretation a certain static quality. It must never be forgotten that the qualities inherent in man's essential nature are gifted and sustained by God. It is not sufficient to emphasize the dramatic-dynamic nature of these qualities. Their very existence, and indeed man's essential nature as such, depends solely upon God who calls them into existence, and, who by His unbroken relationship with man, sustains and nurtures man's essential nature.

Now if Niebuhr had stressed this indispensable Biblical truth in his analysis of man's essential nature, he would not have left himself open to criticism from two different quarters. All that we have examined in this chapter - man's transcendence, his freedom, his attitude to death, his reason, morality, and knowledge - must never be regarded as innate qualities as such, in man's life. In his strenuous efforts to examine human existence in such a way as to establish a dialogue with the secular world, Niebuhr may, at times, inadvertently give the impression that these attributes of man's essential nature are merely part of man's uniqueness as a creature. Of course a more careful examination of

Niebuhr's thought will reveal that these attributes have a more ultimate source. But unless each of these attributes is evaluated not only by its rôle in human experience but also by its relation to a creative God; unless the understanding of these attributes shows that both sources have contributed to a unified wholeness of truth; unless, more basically still, each one of these attributes is proclaimed to be a relational quality, owing its continued existence to the on-going creative love of God; unless these things are so, then Niebuhr's position is still open to criticism. For if Niebuhr gives the impression that these attributes are part of man's essential nature as such, then he must explain whether these attributes continue to exist in man the sinner. If Niebuhr wishes to maintain that they do continue to exist - and nowhere does he indicate that he believes that these attributes do not continue to exist in man - then far from being charged with Barthianism, Niebuhr can be accused of minimizing the seriousness of sin. But if Niebuhr wishes to hold that every attribute is pervaded by sin - and it is quite clear that he does wish to hold this - then he can be charged with reducing the essential nature of man to a bare abstraction. But by stressing the relational quality of these attributes Niebuhr could overcome both charges. For, on the one hand, the relational quality of these attributes stresses the fact that their continuance is not due to any

virtue whatsoever in sinful man, but depends upon God alone. And, on the other hand, every attribute may be corrupted by sin, but this does not reduce any attribute to a bare abstraction; the prodigal is still his father's son for all his sinfulness, and his sonship is a meaningful term.

CHAPTER IVMan the Sinner

We now come to the most important aspect of Niebuhr's doctrine of man - the nature of man as sinner. It is not possible to understand either Niebuhr's doctrine of man's salvation, or his interpretation of history, or his analysis of man's social and political activities, unless we come to grips with Niebuhr's understanding of man the sinner. In fact, so much is this the case, so much does the element of human sinfulness pervade Niebuhr's understanding of man, that it can be argued that it is not justifiable to treat man's essential nature as an entity. Nevertheless Niebuhr does believe that man has an essential nature, and in so believing, and in asserting that it is because man has an essential nature that he is able to sin, Niebuhr differs radically from Karl Barth. For though Niebuhr demonstrates the manner in which sin can and does pervert every element in man's essential nature nowhere does he hint that this essential nature has been destroyed, and frequently, as we have seen, he offers us evidence of its continuing existence.

One further point must be made at the outset of our examination of Niebuhr's doctrine of man the sinner, and that is this: if there was any justification for our criticism that the two sources of Niebuhr's doctrine of man's essential nature were insufficiently welded together then the same

criticism cannot be levelled at Niebuhr's interpretation of man the sinner. Here, at every step, we find the Biblical doctrine<sup>1</sup> illuminating the meaning of man's proud and tragic endeavours to find security in the world, and we find these multifarious activities of men confirming the Biblical judgment that man is a sinner in every aspect of his being.

### The Source of Man's Sin.

Man's sin, says Niebuhr, is occasioned, though not caused by the contradiction of finiteness and freedom in which man stands. "Man is insecure and involved in natural contingency; he seeks to overcome his insecurity by a will-to-power which overreaches the limits of human creatureliness. Man is ignorant and involved in the limitations of a finite mind; but he pretends that he is not limited. He assumes that he can gradually transcend finite limitations until his mind becomes identical with universal mind."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Niebuhr expounds a Biblical doctrine of sin and is right in assuming that the Bible has a consistent and unified theme elaborating the meaning of sin. In this context E.A. Burt's criticism, that the Bible has divergent interpretations and that Niebuhr's concept of sin is not Biblical but twentieth century, is ineffectual. E.A. Burt, "Some Questions about Niebuhr's Theology," Reinhold Niebuhr; ed. Kegley and Bretall, pp. 356-359.

2. Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. I, pp. 190-191.

The occasion for man's temptation to sin, continues Niebuhr, lies in man's greatness and in his weakness, in his unlimited and in his limited knowledge. Man is both strong and weak, both free and bound, both blind and far seeing. Man stands, says Niebuhr, at the juncture of nature and spirit, and is involved in both freedom and necessity. But his sin is never the mere ignorance of his ignorance, it is always partly an effort to obscure his blindness by overestimating the degree of his sight and to obscure his insecurity by stretching his power beyond its limits.<sup>1</sup>

The realization of the relativity of his knowledge subjects man to the peril of scepticism. "The abyss of meaninglessness," says Niebuhr, "yawns on the brink of all his mighty spiritual endeavours. Therefore man is tempted to deny the limited character of his knowledge and the finiteness of his perspectives."<sup>2</sup>

In short, man, being both free and bound, both limited and limitless, is anxious. Anxiety is the inevitable concomitant of the paradox of freedom and finiteness in which man is involved. Anxiety is the internal pre-condition of sin. It is the inevitable spiritual state of man, standing in the paradoxical situation of freedom and finiteness. Anxiety is the internal description of the state of temptation. It must not be identified with sin because there is always the ideal

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1. Ibid., p.193.
  2. Ibid., p.194.

possibility that faith would purge anxiety of the tendency towards sinful self-assertion.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to note Niebuhr's statement that anxiety is not sin. Anxiety, says Niebuhr, must be distinguished from sin partly because it is its precondition and not its actuality, and partly because it is, as well, the basis of all human creativity. Man is anxious because he knows he is limited and also because he does not know the limits of his possibilities. He cannot do anything and regard it perfectly done, because higher possibilities are revealed in each achievement. Thus, continues Niebuhr, the pretensions of final truth by the statesman or philosopher are always partly an effort to obscure a darkly felt consciousness of the limits of human knowledge, as well as being dogmatic assertions about the ultimacy of a system of truth. For example fanaticism is always a partly conscious, partly unconscious attempt to hide the fact of ignorance and to obscure the problem of scepticism.<sup>2</sup>

It is for this reason that Niebuhr contends that the basic source of man's temptation to sin is not the inertia of 'matter' or 'nature'; rather, he says, it resides in the inclination of man either to deny the contingent character of his existence in pride and self-love; or to escape from his freedom in sensuality.<sup>3</sup> The Biblical

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1. Ibid., pp. 194-195.

2. Ibid., pp. 195-197.

3. Ibid., p.197.

teaching about temptation, says Niebuhr, is that the situation of finiteness and freedom in which man is tempted to break and transcend the limits which God has set for him, would not be a temptation of itself if it were not falsely interpreted by the Serpent.<sup>1</sup> The idea that the situation of finiteness and freedom is a temptation once evil has entered it, and that evil does enter it prior to any human action is expressed in Biblical thought, continues Niebuhr, by the conception of the devil.<sup>2</sup> This is to say that man's rebellion against God is not an act of sheer perversity, nor is it an inevitable result of man's situation of finiteness and freedom. Man's situation becomes a source of temptation only when it is falsely interpreted. And this false interpretation is suggested to man by a force of evil which precedes his own sin.<sup>3</sup>

We find a similar assertion that evil precedes man's sin in the thought of Emil Brunner. Man, in Brunner's view, does not sin purely out of defiance and rebellion. He is led astray by sin. Evil forces were already there before him, man is not great enough, says Brunner, to discover sin and introduce it into the world. Only he who understands that sin is inexplicable knows what it is. Sin, concludes

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1. Ibid., p.192.

2. Ibid., p.269.

3. Ibid., p.192.

Brunner, is the one great negative mystery of our existence, of which we know only one thing, that we are responsible for it, without the possibility of pushing the responsibility on to anything outside ourselves.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr believes that an analysis of the relation of temptation to the inevitability of sin may make it plain why man sins inevitably, yet without escaping responsibility for his sin.<sup>2</sup> Man's freedom is the basis of his creativity, but it is also his temptation. "Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom", but this same freedom which tempts to anxiety also contains the ideal possibility of knowing God. The anxiety of freedom, asserts Niebuhr, leads to sin only if the prior sin of unbelief is assumed. This, says Niebuhr, is the meaning of Kierkegaard's assertion that sin posits itself. No matter how far back in human history we may go we cannot escape the paradoxical conclusion that the situation of finiteness and freedom would not lead to sin if sin were not already introduced into the situation.

This, is in the words of Kierkegaard, the 'qualitative leap' of sin and reveals the paradoxical relation of inevitability and responsibility. Sin can never be traced merely to the temptation arising from a particular situation or condition in which man as man finds himself or in which particular men find themselves. Nor can

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1. Emil Brunner, Man in Revolt, pp. 131-132.
  2. Niebuhr, op.cit., pp. 266-270.

the temptation which is, compounded of a situation of finiteness and freedom, plus the fact of sin, be regarded as leading necessarily to sin in the life of each individual, if again sin is not first presupposed in that life. For that reason even the knowledge of inevitability does not extinguish the sense of responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

### The Debate with Paul Tillich.

The theologian who has differed from Niebuhr perhaps more radically than any other in his interpretation of man's sin is Paul Tillich. To understand the nature of this difference we must pause to examine Tillich's thought on this issue. Tillich takes a similar view to Niebuhr when he says that the essential being of man is not an actual stage of human development, which can be known directly or indirectly, but rather that man's essential nature is present in all stages of his development, though in existential distortion.<sup>2</sup> But when both theologians consider the symbol of man's essential nature before the Fall, they differ radically. For Niebuhr, the perfection before the Fall is the higher possibility of self-realization through self-giving, which exists before every act in which the self actually resolves its problems by seeking itself more narrowly than it should.<sup>3</sup> For Tillich, perfection

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1.

Ibid., p.270.

2.

Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology, Vol.II, p.38.

3.

Reinhold Niebuhr, "Biblical Thought and Ontological Speculation," Paul Tillich, (New York: Macmillan, 1959, ed. Kegley and Bretall), p.224.

before the Fall is rather a state of "dreaming innocence". The word 'innocence', for Tillich, points to a non-actualized potentiality. But this state of dreaming innocence is driven beyond itself by man's awareness of his finitude. This awareness, says Tillich, is anxiety; all creatures are driven by anxiety, for finitude and anxiety are the same. But in man freedom is united with anxiety and this anxiety is one of the driving forces towards the transition from essence to existence. It is this possibility of the transition to existence which is experienced as temptation.<sup>1</sup>

Tillich described freedom as the possibility of a total and centred act of the personality, an act in which all the drives and influences which constitute the destiny of man are brought into the centred unity of a decision. In this way the universe participates in every act of human freedom and represents the side of destiny in the act of freedom.<sup>2</sup> By using this analysis of finite freedom Tillich sets out to show in two interrelated ways the motifs of the transition from essence to existence.

The first way which Tillich explores is the polarity between freedom and destiny. The divine prohibition not to eat from the tree of knowledge in the Genesis story, presupposes, says Tillich, a kind of split between creator and creature, a split which makes a command necessary.

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1. Tillich, op.cit., pp.38-40.

2. Ibid., pp. 48-49.

This cleavage, asserts Tillich, is the most important point in the interpretation of the Fall. For it presupposes a sin which is not yet sin but which is also no longer innocence; it is the desire to sin. Tillich suggests calling the state of this desire 'aroused freedom'. His explanation of man's temptation to sin is ontological in nature. In the state of 'dreaming innocence' freedom and destiny are in harmony, but neither of them is actualized. Their unity is essential or potential, it is finite and therefore open to tension and disruption. This tension occurs in the moment in which finite freedom becomes conscious of itself and tends to become actual. This is what Tillich calls the moment of aroused freedom. But in the same moment, says Tillich, a reaction starts, coming from the essential unity of freedom and destiny. Dreaming innocence wants to preserve itself. This reaction is symbolized in the Biblical story, says Tillich, as the divine prohibition against actualizing one's potential freedom and against acquiring knowledge and power. Man is caught between the desire to actualize his freedom and the demand to preserve his dreaming innocence. In the power of his finite freedom, concludes Tillich, he decides for actualization.<sup>1</sup>

The difficulty with Tillich's argument at this point is

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1. Ibid., p.40.

that the Biblical story records a prohibition against acquiring knowledge of good and evil, not merely against acquiring knowledge and power. To know good and evil implies disobedience and rebellion, a positive act of will to transcend the limits set by God. And we must ask what Tillich means by the divine prohibition being the symbol of dreaming innocence wishing to preserve itself. Does Tillich mean that the divine prohibition can be demythologized into such purely psychological concepts as the fears and insecurities of men and the urge to return to the security of the womb? Niebuhr with his stress upon man's feeling that he is 'without excuse' because his self-seeking violates the structures of his existence, is truer both to the Biblical teaching and to the facts of ordinary experience.<sup>1</sup>

Tillich makes the same analysis from the inside, from man's anxious awareness of his finite freedom. At the moment when man becomes conscious of his freedom, the awareness of his dangerous situation gets hold of him. He experiences a double threat, which is rooted in his finite freedom and expressed in anxiety. Man experiences the anxiety of losing himself by not actualizing himself and his potentialities, and the anxiety of losing himself by actualizing himself and his potentialities. He stands

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<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr, op.cit., pp. 218-219.

between the preservation of his dreaming innocence which does not experience the actuality of being, and the loss of his innocence through knowledge and guilt. The anxiety of this situation is the state of temptation. Man decides for actualization, concludes Tillich, and thus produces the end of dreaming innocence.<sup>1</sup>

This interpretation of man's temptation and Fall enables Tillich to preserve the universality of sin along with man's responsibility for his sin. The individual act of existential estrangement is not the isolated act of an isolated individual, it is an act of freedom which is embedded, nevertheless, in the universal destiny of existence.<sup>2</sup> As an individual act, sin is a matter of freedom, of responsibility, and of personal guilt. But this freedom is embedded in the universal destiny of estrangement in such a way that in every free act the destiny of estrangement is involved, and, vice versa, that the destiny of estrangement is actualized by all free acts. No mechanistic, biological, psychological, sociological or educational theory can explain estrangement, claims Tillich. Nor can any of them explain man's feeling of personal responsibility for his acts in the state of estrangement. But they do contribute, says Tillich, to an understanding of the element of destiny in the human predicament.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Tillich, Systematic Theology, Vol.II, pp.40-41.

2. Ibid., p.43.

3. Ibid., pp.64-65.

Against this understanding of destiny Tillich insists that man can and does transcend his environment with every word he speaks. Man is free to make his world into an object which he beholds, and he is free to make himself into an object upon which he looks.<sup>1</sup> But we must ask this question: if human freedom is as great as this, then is there no possibility that it may transcend man's destiny? Can human freedom not surmount those elements which Tillich has just stated as contributing to an understanding of destiny? We must ask with Niebuhr whether Tillich's description of man's character of finiteness and freedom fully establishes the uniqueness of human freedom over temporal events?<sup>2</sup>

Tillich's interpretation of the Fall of man enables him to conjoin the Biblical doctrines of Creation and Fall. "Fully developed creatureliness is fallen creatureliness." "To be outside the divine life", says Tillich, "means to stand in actualized freedom .... Seen from the one side this is the end of creation. Seen from the other side this is the beginning of the fall."<sup>3</sup> Niebuhr objects to this conjoining, saying that it makes one story out of two stories, the one symbolizing the beginning of history and the goodness of creation, and the other, the corruption of

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1.

Ibid., p.70.

2.

Niebuhr, "Biblical Thought and Ontological Speculation," op.cit., p.220.

3.

Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology, Vol.I, p.284.

freedom in history. It is important, states Niebuhr, that the two stories be separated because the separation points, on the one hand, to an actual historical state in which there can be unity of life with life, showing that the character of man, even as separated and particular existence, contains possibilities of relating himself harmoniously with other life. The problem of evil in a world which God made and 'saw that it was good' is unsolved, but, says Niebuhr, if we attempt to solve the problem of evil ontologically, we end with the difficult conclusion that temporal existence is really evil. On the other hand, continues Niebuhr, the separation symbolizes the fact that every act of estrangement, of isolation, or of imperialism is a "fall" from a more ideal possibility of relating life with life in terms of love.<sup>1</sup>

Such a formulation, says Niebuhr, makes history more real, for it does not set it in contrast to some symbolic period before creation when all particular things were not yet separated existences. Rather, it sets every historical act, achievement, and event in contrast to the primordial and the eschatological, that is, to innocency and perfection. Thus every historic decision, which must be either for the self, or for God and the other, has a historic urgency and reality which it cannot have if its fate of self-seeking

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1. Niebuhr, op.cit., p.224.

is identified with its fate of being a self.<sup>1</sup>

In answer to Niebuhr's criticism, Tillich states that Creation and Fall coincide in so far as there is no point in time and space in which created goodness was actualized and had existence. Actualized creation and estranged existence are identical. God creates the newborn child, but, if created, says Tillich, it falls into the state of existential estrangement. Creation is good in its essential character. But if it is actualized it falls into universal estrangement through freedom and destiny.<sup>2</sup> But this is merely to preserve the mystery of the universality of sin by turning the mystery into an ontological necessity. Of course Tillich tries to avoid this by stating that the leap from essence to existence has the character of a leap, and not of structural necessity. "In spite of the tragic universality, existence cannot be derived from essence."<sup>3</sup> But we must ask if Tillich has anywhere indicated that there are other factors involved which would allow any real alternative to the inevitability of this process from essence to estranged existence.

J. Heywood Thomas believes that Tillich in his attempt to demonstrate the universality of the doctrine of the Fall and Original Sin, wavers between understanding the more-than-

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1. Ibid., pp. 222-225.

2. Tillich, Systematic Theology, Vol. II, p. 50.

3. Ibid., p. 50.

empirical character of the doctrine as a logical statement, and making the necessity a matter of contingent truth. Thomas prefers Niebuhr's aphorism that sin is inevitable but not necessary, because it brings out the paradox of the doctrine more clearly. It is true, says Thomas, that Tillich does not want to affirm that sin and finitude are synonymous; but it is also true that he does not succeed in preserving the distinction intact. "For it seems to me", says Thomas, "that he makes it necessary for man, if he is to become man, to become sinner also, since he says that individuality involved separation from the ground of being, and sin is defined as the rupture of the original essential unity of Creator and creature." For whatever the doctrine of Original Sin means, states Thomas, the myth of the Fall clearly points to the fact that we need not have sinned. If sin is implied in the order in which we find ourselves, if it is necessarily bound up with finitude, then it can no longer be considered our responsibility.<sup>1</sup> Tillich's doctrine of Original Sin, concludes Thomas, is a curious

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The same point is made by D.E. Roberts: "Is it not tantamount to saying that the actualization of finite freedom makes sin not merely universal but inevitable?" "... the actualization of finite freedom is, from one point of view, the telos of creation, and from another point of view the ruination of creation." D.E. Roberts, "Tillich's Doctrine of Man," Theology of Paul Tillich, ed. Kegley & Bretall, p.126.

mixture of Neo-Platonism and Existentialism.<sup>1</sup>

The Universality of Sin and Human Responsibility.

In his interpretation of the paradox of the universality of sin and man's responsibility for his sin, Niebuhr elaborates the Pauline teaching about the nature of sin. Sin is to be

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J. Heywood Thomas, Paul Tillich: An Appraisal pp.125-128. It is interesting to examine the Biblical exegesis which lies behind Tillich's thinking. According to the Genesis story, says Tillich, man comes from dust and returns to dust. He has immortality only as long as he is allowed to eat from the tree of life, the tree which carries the divine food, or the food of eternal life. The symbolism, says Tillich, is obvious. Participation in the eternal makes man eternal, separation from the eternal leaves man in his natural finitude. (Systematic Theology, Vol.II, p.77). By 'immortality' Tillich presumably means a quality of life, but man's immortality does not depend upon his eating of the tree of life. The myths of many peoples tell about the existence of a tree of life whose fruits grant immortality, states Gerhard von Rad. The mention of two trees in the story, says von Rad, is the result of a subsequent combination of two traditions. "... there is only one tree that plays any rôle, the tree of knowledge." (Genesis Gerhard von Rad, London: S.C.M. 1961, p.76).

The fascination of this statement about good and evil, continues von Rad, lies in its lack of restriction, its intangibility; it is intentionally mysterious and gives room to all whispering secret fantasies. What knowledge of good and evil means is the possibility of an extension of human existence beyond the limits set for it by God at creation, an increase of life not only in the sense of pure intellectual enrichment but also of familiarity with, and power over, mysteries that lie beyond men.

Therefore Tillich's exegesis is wrong. Man has immortality only so long as he refrains from eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. To eat of this fruit is to rebel, to disobey God and thus destroy the quality of life. Tillich's interpretation is therefore also mistaken. It is not participation in the eternal that makes man eternal, and the separation of man from the eternal, which leaves him in his natural finitude, is not the result of the anxiety of dreaming innocence driving beyond itself. It is obedience which gives man's life the eternal quality and it is prideful disobedience and self-assertion which destroys this quality.

regarded, says Niebuhr, as neither a necessity of man's nature nor yet as a pure caprice of his will. It proceeds rather from a defect of the will, for which reason it is not completely deliberate; but since it is the will in which the defect is found, and the will presupposes freedom, the defect cannot be attributed to a defect in man's nature.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr uses the sin of modern religious nationalism to illustrate the close relationship between the universality of sin and individual responsibility. The religious nationalist is tempted to his attitude of self-glorification by feelings of inferiority accentuated by the historical vicissitudes to which his class and nation have been subjected. Yet his sin is not inevitable. It represents, says Niebuhr, a 'conscious' defiance of more universal standards of loyalty which had been consciously established. Law makes sin more explicit. This defiance adds an uneasy conscience to the general insecurity and results in stronger measures to avoid the final breakdown. Because they 'professed themselves wise'

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Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.I, p.257.

Niebuhr draws attention to Pascal's frank acceptance of the logical absurdity of the doctrine of Original Sin: "In fact if man had never been corrupt he would enjoy in his innocence both truth and happiness with assurance; and if man had always been corrupt he would have no idea of truth and bliss. But wretched as we are, and more so than if there were no greatness in our condition, we have an idea of happiness and cannot reach it. We perceive an image of truth and possess only a lie... Certainly nothing offends us more rudely than this doctrine, and yet without this mystery, the most incomprehensible of all, we are incomprehensible to ourselves." *Pensées*, 434.

they 'became fools.' From this we can see, says Niebuhr, that the distinction between original sin and actual sin cannot be made as clearly as is often assumed. The actual sin follows more inevitably from the bias towards sin than is usually assumed. On the other hand the bias toward sin is something more than a mere lag of nature, or physical impulse, or historical circumstance. There is less freedom in the actual sin and more responsibility for the bias toward sin (original sin) than moralistic interpretations can understand. The bias toward sin from which actual sin flows is anxiety plus sin. Or in Kierkegaard's words, sin presupposes itself.<sup>1</sup>

The fact of man's responsibility for his sin is attested, says Niebuhr, by the feeling of remorse or repentance which follows the sinful action. The self, which is privy to the rationalizations and processes of self-deception which must accompany the sinful act, cannot accept, and does not accept, the view that its sin is determined by previous acts. Its discovery that some degree of conscious dishonesty accompanied the act means that the self was not deterministically involved in it and demonstrates the freedom possible in the moment of action. No matter how deeply involved the self may be in its own deceptions and how insensitive to its own actions, habitual sin, asserts Niebuhr, cannot ever destroy

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Ibid., pp.264-266.

the uneasy conscience so completely as to remove the individual from the realm of moral responsibility to the realm of amoral nature.<sup>1</sup>

The vertical dimension of the experience of remorse and repentance explains why there is no level of moral goodness upon which the sense of guilt can be eliminated. In fact, says Niebuhr, the sense of guilt rises with moral sensitivity.<sup>2</sup> And this fact, he continues, throws a significant light on the relation of freedom to sin. The ultimate proof of the freedom of the human spirit is its own recognition that its will is not free to choose between good and evil.<sup>3</sup>

We cannot, therefore, escape the ultimate paradox that the final exercise of freedom in the transcendent human spirit is its recognition of the false use of that freedom in action. Man is most free in the discovery that he is not free .... The Pelagians have been too intent to assert the integrity of man's freedom to realize that the discovery of this freedom also involves the discovery of man's guilt. The Augustinians on the other hand have been so concerned to prove that the freedom of man is corrupted by sin that they have not fully understood that the discovery of this sinful taint is an achievement of freedom.<sup>4</sup>

Niebuhr is aware that his treatment of the universality of human sin and man's responsibility for sin involves him

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1. Ibid., pp.270-271.

2. Ibid., p.273.

3. Ibid., p.274.

4. Ibid., p.276.

in a logical contradiction. He endeavours to remain true to the facts of human experience; that men have the indefinable feeling that they are not the kind of persons they ought to be; and that in being thus aware they are demonstrating a freedom over their situation which reveals that they are not conditioned by their situation. Such a freedom makes man responsible. The doctrine of Original Sin, says Niebuhr, expresses a relation between fate and freedom which cannot be fully rationalized, unless the paradox be accepted as a rational understanding of the limits of rationality, and as an expression of faith that a rationally irresolvable contradiction may point to a truth which logic cannot contain. By "a rational understanding of the limits of rationality" Niebuhr means the mind's recognition that the laws of logic are not always able to reconcile dimensions of human experience into a logically coherent whole. There is no resource, says Niebuhr, in logical rules, to help us understand complex phenomena, exhibiting characteristics which seem to require that they be placed in contradictory categories of reason. Loyalty to all the facts, concludes Niebuhr, may require a provisional defiance of logic, lest complexity in the facts of experience be denied for the sake of a premature logical consistency.<sup>1</sup>

Man's responsibility, Niebuhr believes, is demonstrated

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1. Ibid., pp. 278-279.

by the fact that no man, however deeply involved in sin, is able to regard the misery of sin as normal. Some memory of a previous condition of blessedness seems to linger in his soul; some echo of the law which he has violated seems to resound in his conscience. This universal testimony of human experience, says Niebuhr, indicating his position in opposition to Barth, is the most persuasive refutation of any theory of human depravity which denies that man has any knowledge of the good which sin has destroyed. Faith in Christ, continues Niebuhr, could find no lodging place in the human soul were the soul not uneasy about the contrast between its true and its present state. Men who have fallen deeply into the wretchedness of sin are never easy in their minds; and their uneasiness is frequently increased by some vivid reminder of the innocency of their childhood, or the aspirations of their youth.<sup>1</sup>

#### The Relation of Sin to Man's Essential Nature.

So far in this chapter we have examined Niebuhr's understanding of the occasion and nature of man's sin, the nature of man's temptation to sin, the universality of, and man's responsibility for human sin. We must now consider the relationship of man's sin to his essential nature as outlined in the previous chapter. In particular we must ask whether man's essential nature is irretrievably

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Ibid., pp.281-282.

damaged by sin or whether it can be described as surviving in any realistic sense. We must examine Niebuhr's treatment of the 'image of God' in man and decide whether in Niebuhr's thought the image remains a meaningful concept in sinful man.

Niebuhr states that it is impossible to do justice to the concept of the image of God and the perfection of that image before the Fall, without making a distinction between the essential nature of man and the virtue of conformity to that nature.<sup>1</sup> Here we must remember that by 'perfection' Niebuhr means no abstract concept but rather the higher possibility of self-realization through self-giving which exists before every act.<sup>2</sup> And by the 'essential nature' of man Niebuhr is referring to the attributes of self-transcendence, freedom, reason, memory, and morality which signify man as man; it is the irreducible uniqueness of man and nothing can change this essential nature and structure, says Niebuhr.<sup>3</sup> Man's freedom to act contrary to the requirements of this essential nature justifies the distinction, argues Niebuhr, between the essential structure and nature and the virtue of conformity to it. Man may lose this virtue

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1. Ibid., p.285.

2. Niebuhr, "Biblical Thought and Ontological Speculation," The Theology of Paul Tillich, ed. Kegley and Bretall, p.224.

3. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.I, p.285.

and destroy the proper function of his nature, but he can do so only by availing himself of one of the elements in that nature, namely his freedom.<sup>1</sup> In other words, Niebuhr appears to feel that this distinction is justified because man's freedom may be used to so distort the virtue of conformity to the essential nature of man, that a casual observer might doubt the existence of this essential nature. For despite the efforts of man to utilize his freedom in order to sin against God and his fellow men, his essential nature still remains; the freedom which can be used to portray such a disturbing picture is still the freedom of the essential nature of man.

To this essential nature of man there belongs, says Niebuhr, on the one hand, all man's natural endowments and determinations, his physical and social impulses and his sexual and racial differentiations. On the other hand, man's essential nature also includes the freedom of his spirit, his transcendence over natural process, and finally his self-transcendence. The virtue and perfection which correspond to the first element of man's nature are usually designated as the natural law. It is the law which defines the proper performance of his functions, the normal harmony of his impulses, and the

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Ibid., p.286.

normal social relation between himself and his fellows within the limitations of the natural order. Since every natural function of man is qualified by his freedom, there is, warns Niebuhr, always an element of confusion in thus outlining a law of nature. It has nevertheless, concludes Niebuhr, a tentative validity, for it distinguishes the obvious requirements of man's nature as a creature in the natural order from the special requirements of his nature as a free spirit.<sup>1</sup>

The virtues which correspond to the second element in man's nature, that is, to the freedom of his spirit, are, says Niebuhr, the virtues of faith, hope, and love. Faith in the providence of God is a necessity of freedom, because, without it, the anxiety of freedom tempts man to seek a self-sufficiency and a self-mastery incompatible with his dependence upon forces which he does not control. Hope deals with the future as a realm where infinite possibilities are realized and which must be a realm of terror if it is not under the providence of God, for in that case it would stand under either a blind fate or pure caprice. Love is a requirement of freedom because however closely men may be bound together by the ties of nature, the uniqueness and individuality of each spirit will prevent them from relating themselves

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1.

Ibid., pp. 286-287.

to one another in terms which will do justice to both the bonds of nature and the freedom of their spirit if they are not related in terms of love.<sup>1</sup>

Professor N.H.G. Robinson has attacked what he considers to be the hard and fast line which Niebuhr has drawn between a structure and its corresponding virtue.<sup>2</sup> Professor Robinson considers that Niebuhr, in his endeavour to show the all-pervasive influence of human sin, has left of man's essential nature nothing but a bare abstraction. Though Niebuhr wishes to differ from both Barth and Brunner, Professor Robinson asks how far Niebuhr's distinction that "the blindness of the eye does not remove the eye from the human anatomy" carries him? How does it compare, asks Professor Robinson, with Brunner's distinction between 'form' and 'content' of the imago dei? Is not Niebuhr saying pretty well the same thing continues Professor Robinson, as Barth, when Barth says that "man is man and not a cat"? Though Niebuhr is severely critical of any doctrine of total depravity, his distinction, says Professor Robinson, between structure and virtue, which renders virtue corrupted and makes structure a bare abstraction, will not enable him to escape such a doctrine.<sup>3</sup>

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1.

Ibid., pp.287-288.

2.

N.H.G. Robinson, Faith and Duty, (London: Victor Gollancz; 1959), p.78.

3.

Ibid., pp.65-66.

It does not help, believes Professor Robinson, to describe the virtue of conformity to man's essential nature as completely lost and thus leave the essential nature as a mere form. One does not first of all think, and then begin to think well or ill; and one does not first of all act, and then begin to act in a way that is good or bad. To think or act at all, says Professor Robinson, one must do so more or less well or ill already, for by the very nature of the act, by definition, to think is to acknowledge and partly realize a standard of rationality, and to behave as a moral being is likewise to acknowledge, and partly realize a standard of morality. "The structure without the virtue in some measure", concludes Professor Robinson, "is an unreal and inconceivable abstraction, for it is the very nature of this structure to have more or less of this perfection."<sup>1</sup>

Professor Robinson states that Niebuhr "lays great stress upon the distinction which he [Niebuhr] draws between the essential structure of man's nature ... and ... the virtue and perfection which corresponds to that structure and ideally belongs to it".<sup>2</sup> Now it is important to examine carefully the stress which Niebuhr does lay upon this distinction. The essential nature of man, contains, says Niebuhr, on the one hand, all of man's

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1. Ibid., pp.78-79.

2. Ibid., p.65.

natural endowments and determinations, his physical and social impulses and his sexual and racial differentiations. But nowhere in all of Niebuhr's writings do we find any attention devoted to an exposition of the significance and nature of these endowments in themselves. Niebuhr states that the virtue and perfection which correspond to this element in man's essential nature are usually designated as the natural law. It is the law, says Niebuhr, which defines the proper performance of man's functions, the normal harmony of his impulses and the normal social relation between himself and his fellows; it distinguishes the obvious requirements of man's nature as a creature. And having made this definition Niebuhr attempts no further elaboration of its meaning - indeed in his other writings he appears to have an entirely different understanding of natural law.<sup>1</sup> For if we

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For example, "The principles of 'natural law' by which justice is defined are in fact not so much fixed standards of reason as they are rational efforts to apply the moral obligation, implied in the love commandment, to the complexities of life and the fact of sin....". Faith and History, p.21<sup>4</sup>.

cf. also A.P. d'Entreve's definition of natural law. "For if we admit that the very assertion of natural law is an assertion that law is a part of ethics, its essential function can appear only as that of mediating between the moral sphere and the sphere of law proper. The notion of natural law partakes at the same time of a legal and of a moral character."

"This point where values and norms coincide, which is the ultimate origin of law and at the same time the beginning of moral life proper, is, I believe, what men for over two thousand years have indicated by the name natural law." A.P. d'Entreves, Natural Law, (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1951), pp. 116 and 122.

Any discussion which takes into account ethical considerations must allow for man's freedom

separate man's freedom from our understanding of natural law how can we talk in any real sense of natural law as the proper performance of man's functions, the normal harmony of his impulses and the normal social relation between himself and his fellows? Is there any action of man, however insignificant, in which his freedom does not play a vital part?

Niebuhr states that the natural law, the virtue corresponding to the first element in man's essential nature, has, in his own words, only a tentative validity. Because every natural function of man is qualified by his freedom, there is always, admits Niebuhr, an element of confusion in thus outlining a law of nature. His justification for this distinction lies in his belief that it distinguishes the obvious requirements of man's nature as a creature in the natural order from the special requirements of his nature as free spirit. But can we speak meaningfully of man's requirements as a creature? Man does not see himself merely as a creature and in his freedom exploits and manipulates his creaturely attributes. Now it is this same freedom which forms such an integral part of his essential nature which also forms an indispensable part of man's virtue of conformity, or lack of conformity, to his essential nature. For both man's realizations and

his repudiations of the virtues corresponding to his essential nature are acts of freedom. Because man's freedom qualifies every aspect of his nature as a creature and because this same freedom plays an integral part in the virtues conforming to this essential nature, the claim that Niebuhr lays great stress upon the distinction between man's essential nature and the virtues and perfection corresponding to it, demands careful consideration.

The second element in man's essential nature includes, says Niebuhr, the freedom of his spirit, his transcendence over natural process and his self-transcendence.<sup>1</sup> This description of the second element in man's essential nature can justifiably be elaborated to include those elements of man's essential nature which were outlined in the previous chapter. Thus, by the "freedom of man's spirit" Niebuhr means that man's life is never wholly determined, but is partly self-determining. By man's "transcendence over natural process" Niebuhr is referring to man's ability to see beyond the contingent and arbitrary realities of physical existence. It is this transcendence which enables man to know the brevity of his years and to anticipate his own death. Man's self-transcendence enables him to experience a sense of

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1.

Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.I, p.287.

oughtness; his moral sense is the basis of moral codes which express concern for the welfare of others and attempt to restrain self-interest. The same transcendence enables man to utilize his rational faculties and render himself capable of planning a creative role in human activity. The knowledge thus possible for man in his essential nature involves the whole man; it includes intuitive awareness, involvement with other selves as well as rational processes. And man in his essential nature is able to experience the contradictions, incongruities and tragic dissonances of human existence for he can sense that nothing can explain the irrationality of the givenness of things. The self in its dialogue with itself can judge or vindicate itself; it can experience the qualms of conscience. In its dialogue with others, the self can experience both the mystery of the other self and the possibility of fulfilment in the other self. And, finally, in its dialogue with God, the self experiences the sense of being commanded, judged and known from beyond itself.

In his criticism that Niebuhr has made too hard and fast a distinction between man's essential nature and the virtue of conformity to that nature, Professor Robinson argues that Niebuhr has reduced this essential nature to an academic abstraction and thereby prevented any real

point of contact for the Christian revelation.<sup>1</sup> Professor Robinson believes that in his treatment of the 'imago dei' Niebuhr has accepted too many of Barth's presuppositions. One of these presuppositions, which, he says, Niebuhr sometimes accepts, "is that in theology man is to be treated, not in relation to the peculiarly human situation, but in the abstract, as the bare product of God's creative activity...".<sup>2</sup>

Now bearing in mind what Niebuhr envisages as man's essential nature can we really describe this nature as an academic abstraction? Professor Robinson himself says that if there is a point of contact at all in human life for the Christian Gospel then surely the moral experience of men is at least one such point.<sup>3</sup> As we have seen Niebuhr does not deny the existence of moral experience in man's essential nature. Nor does Niebuhr deny the role of reason in human creativity, nor the intuitive awareness of a higher truth, nor the qualms of conscience, nor the religious dimension of life. We must ask how frequently we find Niebuhr considering man in the abstract and not "in relation to the peculiarly human situation!". As we have already seen, Niebuhr's assessment of man's

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1.

N.H.G. Robinson, Christ and Conscience, (London: Nisbet; 1956), p.118.

2.

Ibid., p.120.

3.

N.H.G. Robinson, Faith and Duty, p.59.

transcendence, freedom, attitude to death, man's moral and rational nature, and his dialogue with himself and others, is perhaps too indebted to a consideration of these elements of man's essential nature within the peculiarly human situation. And we must remember the elements of man's essential nature which Niebuhr includes in his understanding of the 'imago dei' before we decide whether Niebuhr's concept of the 'imago dei' envisages man as "the bare product of God's creative activity." For after all, Niebuhr includes amongst these elements comprising the 'imago dei' those of man's transcendence, man's freedom and rationality, his attitude to death, and his dialogues with himself, with other selves and with God. These cannot be considered abstract concepts, for Niebuhr both finds evidence for their existence and recognizes the creativeness of these elements within "the peculiarly human situation".

When Professor Robinson refers to Niebuhr as sometimes accepting one of Barth's presuppositions, he is referring to Niebuhr's concept of the essential nature of man when it is distinguished from the perfection which should correspond to that nature. But we have seen, in the first place, that Niebuhr in his description of man's essential nature allows man a vastly more important and responsible nature than does Barth. Indeed when we see

how Niebuhr includes the feelings of moral obligation and the qualms of conscience in the essential nature of man and, at the same time sees the locus of the virtue of conformity to that nature, in man's ineradicable feeling of obligation, we can see how limited this division, in fact, is. In the second place, we must assess the importance of Niebuhr's assertion in this one chapter, of a distinction in man's nature, over against the whole corpus of his writing.

Professor Robinson quite justifiably criticises this artificial division of man's unity of nature. It is, as he says "a mistake to treat as separate and different what are merely distinguishable aspects of the same thing."<sup>1</sup> But Niebuhr makes this distinction once, and makes it presumably to remind us that though the virtue of conformity to man's essential nature may be so corrupted as to make us doubt the existence of man's essential nature, yet despite obvious evidence of the corruption man's essential nature remains. And the freedom which is part of man's essential nature is the same freedom which enables man both to achieve a higher state of perfection, and to experience guilt because of his lack of perfection. For these reasons it seems that Niebuhr himself would see this distinction between man's

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1.

N.H.G. Robinson, Faith and Duty, p.81.

essential nature and the virtue corresponding to that nature as in reality "merely distinguishable aspects of the same thing". It seems questionable on the basis of Niebuhr's treatment of man's nature in this one chapter to align Niebuhr with Karl Barth.

Niebuhr states that sin cannot destroy the structure by virtue of which man is man,<sup>1</sup> nor can anything change man's essential nature and structure.<sup>2</sup> Yet, on the other hand he states, equally categorically, that every natural function of man is qualified by his freedom<sup>3</sup> and that all man's 'natural' or 'rational' standards and norms are therefore involved in sin.<sup>4</sup> Does this mean that there is a vital part of man's nature uncorrupted by human sin, or, on the other hand does it mean that every aspect of man's being is totally corrupted by sin? We have already noted that Niebuhr's portrayal of man's essential nature as outlined in the previous chapter lays him open to this two-fold attack. In reality Niebuhr wishes to affirm both that man's essential nature remains and that this same essential nature may be corrupted by sin. This appears to be Niebuhr's understanding of the doctrine of

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1. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.I, p.289.

2. Ibid., p.285.

3. Ibid., p.287.

4. Ibid., p.297.

total depravity. For Niebuhr, man is not totally corrupt in the sense that he is as bad as he can be, but rather in the sense that the depravity produced by sin permeates all human life and that even man's virtue is not unaffected by it.

Neither in his chapter dealing with man's essential nature and its corresponding virtues, nor in his other works, does Niebuhr regard man's essential nature as an academic abstraction. Because Niebuhr believes that man's essential nature includes the freedom of his spirit, his transcendence over natural process, and his self-transcendence, then his understanding of man's essential nature must include a creative, moral dimension. Paul Ramsay points out that there is in Niebuhr's thought, a permanent structure of human personality, and certain immutable aspects of human existence.<sup>2</sup> It is true that one must search carefully in Niebuhr's writings in order to discover the content which he allows to man's essential nature. If Niebuhr had been more specific, he would have implied that there is a content belonging to man's essential nature which is immune from sin. But Niebuhr's lack of elaboration should not tempt us to overlook the

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cf. J.S. Whale, Christian Doctrine, p.42.

2.

Ramsay mentions the practical universality of the prohibition of theft and murder, and the organic unity between physical impulses and the spiritual dimension of human personality. Paul Ramsay, "Love and Law", Reinhold Niebuhr, ed. Kegley and Bretall, p.92.

important references to the content of man's essential nature which he does make. Niebuhr believes that though man's essential nature is corrupted by sin, it is not thereby destroyed. And though sin may destroy the proper function of this nature, this does not mean that man's essential nature is impossible of a partial realization.

Niebuhr's reasons for making this distinction between man's essential nature and the virtue of conformity to that nature, were two-fold. In the first place, as has been pointed out, man's freedom may corrupt and destroy the proper function of man's nature. Niebuhr's distinction draws attention to the fact that though sin may corrupt the proper function of man's nature, it does not thereby destroy that nature; for the very freedom which allows man to sin is itself an element in man's essential nature. In the second place, the distinction eliminates the mistaken belief of Catholic thought that it is possible to divide human nature into a completely lost original justice and an uncorrupted natural justice.<sup>1</sup> Catholicism's mistake was to overemphasize the extent of corruption on the spiritual side of man's nature, while seriously underestimating the degree of corruption on the natural side.

In his treatment of human nature in the first volume

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Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.I, p.292.

of the Gifford Lectures we have what is, in fact, Niebuhr's first careful elaboration in theological categories, of his understanding of man's nature. In order to do justice to the concept of the image of God in man, Niebuhr believes that it is necessary to make this distinction between man's essential nature and the virtue of conformity to that nature. The distinction allows him to safeguard two truths. The first is that the proper function of that nature is utterly corrupted by sin. But the second truth is that despite this corruption of sin which infects every aspect of man's essential nature as well, the essential nature of man is nevertheless not devoid of content. We have considered the content which Niebuhr sees as still existent in man's essential nature. It seems a fair judgement to conclude that we cannot describe this essential nature simply as a bare abstraction, on the evidence Niebuhr presents either in this chapter in the Gifford Lectures or elsewhere in his writings.

But though this distinction safeguards these truths, it allows a somewhat static presentation of man's essential nature. An impression can be created that the values inherent in this essential nature exist by their own right and by their own strength. This leaves Niebuhr open to the criticism that either sin has not affected

the existence of these values in man's essential nature, or, if it has affected these values, and their existence is still insisted upon, then it must be explained in what sense they continue to exist.

Niebuhr's endeavours to maintain what appears, at first glance, to be a contradictory position would have been strengthened had he stressed the relational nature of the qualities and attributes which go to make up man's essential nature. Then his adamance in maintaining that nothing can change the essential nature of man would have been vindicated. For man's true humanity remains not because sin does not permeate some element in his nature, but because God calls into being and sustains these attributes in man. No achievement or goodness in man maintains his essential nature; it is brought into being and sustained by the sheer grace of God; and no matter how much a man may sin he cannot cut himself off from God's love. And on the other hand, Niebuhr's belief that the sin which enters into man's freedom - the second element in man's essential nature - and thereby corrupts every aspect of man's nature as a creature, would also be vindicated. For there is no contradiction in believing that these relational attributes can remain, while man is able, at the same time, to corrupt every attribute with his own pride and self-will.

Man's Essential Nature and its Corresponding Virtue

We have examined Niebuhr's treatment of man's essential nature and considered the question of the content of this essential nature. We must now turn to an examination of the virtues and perfection which correspond to man's essential nature. Two main questions must be considered. In the first place we must consider whether this virtue and perfection exists as requirement only, or whether it exists as both requirement and realization. If there is a partial realization of this virtue and perfection, and if man's essential nature is more than an abstraction, then we are led to our second question: can the distinction between man's essential nature and the perfection corresponding to this nature, be described as a hard and fast line?

Niebuhr describes the virtue corresponding to man's nature as a creature, as the natural law or justice, while the virtues corresponding to his freedom - the second element in man's essential nature - are described as the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. This description has led Professor Robinson to ask if there is a single virtue or whether there are two virtues. The unity of man's nature, and consequently of his virtues, is stressed in principle, states Professor Robinson, but

disappears almost completely from the detailed presentation.<sup>1</sup>

If Niebuhr wishes to maintain that natural law and justice and original justice - the theological virtues - are to be distinguished only in a provisional and tentative fashion, then, says Professor Robinson, it seems impossible to hold that one persists as requirement only, while the other appears partly as requirement, partly as realization. "In other words Niebuhr is confronted by a dilemma, for either he must make the distinction between natural and original justice much harder than he apparently intended, allowing that the one persists as requirement only and the other partly as requirement and partly as realization, or else he must contend, against every appearance of the facts, that even natural justice totally eludes the natural life of humanity and persists only as a law which is universally disobeyed."<sup>2</sup> Either alternative, says Professor Robinson, is unsatisfactory. The latter, he says, is plainly false, while the other involves its author in self-contradiction, since in more than one passage he has insisted that the distinction between natural and original justice must not be pressed too far.

It is clear that Niebuhr does not regard natural justice as totally unrealized. His remark that "the

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1. N.H.G. Robinson, Faith and Duty, pp. 63-64.

2. Ibid., p.69.

freedom of man sets every standard of justice under higher possibilities, and the sin of man perennially insinuates contingent and relative elements into the supposedly absolute standards of human reason",<sup>1</sup> plainly indicates that Niebuhr believes that man can achieve partial standards of justice. Professor Robinson notes Niebuhr's remark and would agree with it. But he says, because Niebuhr allows that man's perfection is experienced as requirement only, and because Niebuhr insists that the division between man's natural justice and original justice is merely provisional and tentative, then to insist that man's natural justice represents realization as well as requirement, while man's original justice is experienced as requirement only, is surely contradictory. The strength of Professor Robinson's argument depends upon his statement that Niebuhr sees man's original justice and perfection existing as requirement only. But before we examine this statement we must consider a further criticism which Professor Robinson makes at this point.

If Niebuhr teaches that there is a natural justice and an original justice corresponding to the two elements in man's essential nature, then does this mean, asks Professor Robinson that there are two moralities? "Yet

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1.

Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.I, pp.297-298.

it is a plain implication of the moral consciousness", states Professor Robinson rightly, "that morality is one thing and not two, that its claim is a single claim upon us."<sup>1</sup> But Niebuhr, having made the tentative distinction between natural and original justice, immediately points out that this same distinction "obscures the complex relation of human freedom to all of man's natural functions, and the consequent involvement of all 'natural' or 'rational' standards and norms in sin."<sup>2</sup> And though Niebuhr describes the virtue corresponding to man's character as a creature as 'the natural law' we would search his writings in vain in the hope of finding an elucidation of this kind of 'natural law!'

Paul Ramsay points out that it is possible to find two inseparable but distinguishable sources and bases for the first principles of human conduct in Niebuhr's thought. The first source is love as the norm for freedom, and the second consists of principles based upon definition of the human essence insofar as man does have his being within determinate limits. Both these aspects of the natural moral law, says Ramsay, belong inseparably together and constantly interplay with each other. Thus Niebuhr speaks of a justice which can be

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1. N.H.G. Robinson, op.cit., p.81.

2. Niebuhr, op.cit., p.297.

interpreted as grounded in structural reason and nature, pointing towards and finding fulfilment in, and being judged by love.<sup>1</sup> But we find an increasing emphasis upon the fact that freedom endows all natural impulses with new dimensions and transmutes and transfigures almost every given structure. "There is not much", says Niebuhr, "that is absolutely immutable in the structure of human nature except its animal basis. Man's freedom to transmute this nature in varying degrees, and the unity of the natural and the spiritual in all the various transmutations and transfigurations of the original 'nature'." [sic.]<sup>2</sup> Thus it seems fair to say that in Niebuhr's thought natural law has never been simply the virtue corresponding to man's nature as a creature. Rather it has been the product of both the structures of man's essential nature and the law of love which is the appropriate norm for man's nature as freedom. It is the latter element which predominates and though there are partial moral and ethical achievements in history, every moral and ethical system is seen by Niebuhr as being judged by the law of sacrificial love.

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1.

Paul Ramsay, "Love and Law," Reinhold Niebuhr, ed. Kegley and Bretall, pp. 89-93.

2.

Niebuhr, Faith and History, pp. 207-208.

We must now return to Professor Robinson's criticism that Niebuhr sees man's virtue and perfection existing as requirement only, thereby making an unreal distinction between man's natural and original justice. First, we must examine what Niebuhr does say about the locus and content of original justice. Sin, says Niebuhr, cannot eliminate the sense of obligation towards the essential nature of man, which is the remnant of his perfection.<sup>1</sup> Disease in any part of an organism affects the whole but there is still some health so long as there is life, for the very pains of disease are a testimony to this hidden health. It is not possible, says Niebuhr, to assign a particular locus to the residual health in the diseased body, but it is possible to find a locus for the consciousness and the memory of an original perfection. The original righteousness which sinful man has supposedly lost is, in reality, present with him as the ultimate requirement of his freedom. For it is in the moment of self-transcendence that the consciousness and memory of original perfection arises.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, because man is not merely creature but also free spirit and because every moral norm stands under higher possibilities by reason of his freedom, there is no moral standard at which the human spirit can find rest short of the standard

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1.

Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.I, p.289.

2.

Ibid., pp. 293-294.

of 'faith, hope and love.'<sup>1</sup>

This character of the theological virtues as 'law' to sinful man is perfectly revealed, says Niebuhr, in the 'thou shalt' of the law of love. The 'thou shalt's' of the law of love state an ultimate condition of complete harmony between the soul and God, its neighbour and itself in a situation in which this harmony is not a reality. If it were a reality, the 'thou shalt' would be meaningless. If there were not some possibility of sensing the ultimate perfection in a state of sin, the 'thou shalt' would be irrelevant. We are interested, says Niebuhr, in validating the law of love as a vision of health which even a sick man may envisage, as the original righteousness which man does not possess, but which he knows he ought to possess.<sup>2</sup>

The specific content of this higher law, this original righteousness, contains, says Niebuhr, three terms. First, the perfect relation of the soul to God in which obedience is transcended by love, trust and confidence. Faith in God's ultimate resolution of the contradiction in which man stands clarifies man's knowledge of that contradiction. Yet even when this is not clearly seen, says Niebuhr, some echo of the

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1.

Ibid., p.303.

2.

Ibid., pp. 303-304.

commandment, "Be not anxious"; comes to man in his anxiety. The serenity of faith is not his possession, but he knows that it ought to be. Even in Stoicism there is defined something of the trust and serenity which sinful man knows to be his ultimate good. This, states Niebuhr, is a part of the ultimate perfection which man does not have but which he knows he ought to have.<sup>1</sup>

The second term in the content of original justice experienced as law is the perfect internal harmony of the soul with itself in all of its desires and impulses. The anxious self invariably makes itself its own centre and end; but since the self transcends itself in infinite regression, only God can be its centre and end. Because the self can never persuade itself that it is its own adequate centre and security there are always a suggestion and a memory of an ideal possibility in which this inner disharmony has been overcome. This memory, says Niebuhr, refutes every doctrine of total depravity. "The sense that an obedience which is less than love is not normative, even though it is universal, is the 'justitia originalis.' It is the sense that there ought not to be a sense of ought; it is the 'thou shalt' which suggests that there are no 'thou shalts' in perfection."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Ibid., pp. 308-309.

2. Ibid., pp. 309-311.

The third term in the specific content of this higher law, this original righteousness, is the perfect harmony of life with life. The law of love is a requirement of human freedom in that the freedom of the self and of the other both require it. The freedom and uniqueness of the other raise moral requirements above any scheme of justice, and the other has special needs and requirements which cannot be satisfied by general rules of equity. Love, says Niebuhr, is thus the end term of any system of morals. It is the moral requirement in which all schemes are fulfilled and negated. "They are fulfilled because the obligation of life to life is more fully met in love than is possible in any scheme of equity and justice. They are negated because love makes an end of the nicely calculated less and more of structures of justice."<sup>1</sup>

Professor Robinson states that Niebuhr, for the most part speaks of perfection being present in man, not as realization, but as requirement. Thus the critical question arises concerning the validity of this concept of a structure which lacks its corresponding virtue and perfection, but in which that perfection persists as requirement and law. Niebuhr fails to see, says Professor Robinson, "that one does not add the slightest degree of

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Ibid., pp. 311-313.

credibility to the theological portrait of sinful man by adding to his total depravity, the memory, vague or clear, of his perfection, the totally ineffective knowledge of what he ought to be, the uneasiness of a thoroughly bad conscience .... If we sinful men were wholly and completely corrupt, .... we could not be even dimly aware of our predicament".<sup>1</sup> It remains impossible, concludes Professor Robinson, to conceive of a totally corrupt being with a thoroughly bad conscience.

But we must note that Professor Robinson's understanding of the term 'total corruption' differs from Niebuhr's interpretation. For Niebuhr the term means that every element and every aspect of man's nature is corrupted by sin but it does not mean that man is wholly and completely corrupt in the sense he is as bad as he can be and is incapable of any goodness. Therefore it need not be impossible to conceive of a totally corrupt being with a thoroughly bad conscience.

Professor Robinson supports his case with the justified criticism of Niebuhr's metaphor that 'the blindness of the eye does not remove the eye from the human anatomy'. For after all, the presence of a blind eye contributes nothing to a man's memory of what it is

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N.H.G. Robinson, Faith and Duty, p.70.

to see. And if a man has always been blind he will not understand what it means to see any more than present-day man understands the purpose of his appendix. But it must be remembered that this metaphor is but one of a number which Niebuhr uses.<sup>1</sup> The metaphor which Niebuhr uses most frequently - and the one which he seems to feel is most adequate - is the metaphor of the diseased body and residual health. Disease in any part of the body affects the whole body. But so long as there is life there is some health and the very pains of disease are a testimony to this hidden health. Niebuhr plainly indicates that he believes not that man fails to achieve any virtue, but rather that man fails to achieve perfection. The viewpoint which these metaphors are designed to illustrate is further substantiated when we examine Niebuhr's treatment of the perfection which corresponds to man's essential nature.

The key to the question as to whether Niebuhr sees the perfection and virtue corresponding to man's essential nature as existing as requirement only, or as both realization and requirement, lies in a statement of Niebuhr's which we have already mentioned. Niebuhr states

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Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.I, p.282. The metaphors are disease and health, the insane mind and its coherences, the disorder of war and the interdependence of nations and internal and domestic peace.

that because man is not merely a creature but also spirit, and because every moral norm stands under higher possibilities by reason of his freedom, there is no moral standard at which the human spirit can find rest, short of the standard of faith, hope and love. Now it is plain that Niebuhr's purpose here is to attack the complacency of men who believe that they have achieved perfection. But it is equally plain that Niebuhr accepts the fact that there are moral norms and moral standards achievable in society; what he will not accept is the claim that these norms and standards have achieved perfection.

Man's ability to sense the ultimate of perfection in a state of sin which makes the 'thou shalt' of the law of righteousness relevant for him; the echo of the commandment "Be not anxious"; the suggestion and memory of an ideal possibility in which the self's inner disharmony is overcome; the sense that there ought not to be a sense of oughtness; all this demonstrates Niebuhr's belief in a 'point of contact' in man for God's grace, and in so doing, demonstrates the degree to which Niebuhr differs from Karl Barth. But Niebuhr goes further and shows that the perfection demanded of man is capable of some realization in this world.

In his description of the first element in the

content of the original righteousness in man - the perfect relation of the soul to God - Niebuhr states that Stoicism defines something of the trust and serenity which even sinful man knows to be his ultimate good.<sup>1</sup> Reason, the central element in the Stoic system, or in any rational system, can be the instrument by which the self-as-subject condemns the partial and prejudiced actions of the sinful self.<sup>2</sup> The implication here is that rationality can achieve a limited order - a limited good - in society. And in discussing the third term in the content of original justice, Niebuhr states that the freedom and the uniqueness of the other self raise moral requirements above "any scheme of justice". The other self, continues Niebuhr, has special needs and requirements which cannot be satisfied by "general rules of equity". The obligation of life to life is "more fully met" in love than in any scheme of equity and justice. The obvious implication here is that man does achieve general rules of equity in society and that he can implement schemes of equity and justice. Because Niebuhr makes these statements in the same chapter as his statement that man experiences the virtue and perfection corresponding to his essential nature as requirement only, it seems fair to conclude that Niebuhr

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1. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.I., p.309.

2. Ibid., p.301.

teaches that man cannot achieve perfection in this world and that, though all of his endeavours are pervaded by sin, he is not devoid of virtue and achievement in his life.

When Professor Robinson examined Niebuhr's concept of natural justice, he considered that Niebuhr's remark that "the freedom of man sets every standard of justice under higher possibilities", seemed to imply that Niebuhr held that natural justice is not totally unrealized.<sup>1</sup> Now that we have examined Niebuhr's concept of original justice we have found similar and stronger remarks and, if we are to be consistent in our judgments upon Niebuhr's thought, we must allow that he does not consider original justice as being totally unrealized, either. And if this is so, if both natural and original justice are capable of some realization in this world, then Professor Robinson's charge that there is a self-contradiction in Niebuhr's understanding of natural and original justice cannot be sustained.

Even where Niebuhr's prime concern is to establish the profundity and all-pervasiveness of human sin, we have found that man is still held to be capable of partial achievements of virtue. And when we examine Niebuhr's work as a whole we find that this same balance

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N.H.G. Robinson, Faith and Duty, p.69.

is held. As early as 1932 Niebuhr warned that the emphasis in Barthianism upon the difference between the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man was so absolute, that man was convicted, not of any particular breaches against the life of the human community, but of being human and not divine. Creation and Fall were practically identified and, everything in human history being identified with evil, the 'nicely balanced less and more' of social morality lost all significance. This tendency, said Niebuhr, led very readily to a moral, social, and political indifferentism.<sup>1</sup>

In his work, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, Niebuhr states that while the final heights of the love ideal fulfil, as well as condemn, the moral canons of common sense, the ideal is involved in every moral aspiration and achievement. Out of the obligation, however dimly felt, to grant others a fair opportunity to maintain life, there develop, says Niebuhr, the various schemes of justice and equity, and, in the ideal of equality, which is the regulative principle of justice, there is an echo of the law of love.<sup>2</sup> In the second volume of The Nature and Destiny of Man, Niebuhr writes that the perpetual recurrence of the principle of

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1. Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, pp. 68-69.

2. Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, pp.113-119.

equality in social theory is a refutation of purely pessimistic conceptions of human nature, whether secular or religious. Equality as a pinnacle of the ideal of justice implicitly points towards love as the final norm of justice; for equal justice is the approximation to brotherhood under the conditions of sin.<sup>1</sup> And in Faith and History, Niebuhr writes that there are provisional meanings in history, capable of being recognised and fulfilled by individuals and cultures; but the final meaning can only be anticipated by faith. There are provisional judgments upon evil in history; but all of them are imperfect, since the executors of judgment are tainted in both their discernments and their actions by the evil which they seek to overcome. There are renewals of life in history, individually and collectively; but no rebirth lifts life above the contradictions of man's historic existence.<sup>2</sup>

It appears that when Niebuhr is considering the specific nature of sin in man, and when he is dealing with man in his social and political relationships, he holds that, in both cases, man experiences the perfection corresponding to his essential nature both as realization

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1. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.II, p.264.

2. Niebuhr, Faith and History, p.243.

and as requirement. This answers the first of the two questions we asked earlier. To the second question, 'Does Niebuhr's distinction between the essential nature of man and the corresponding virtues and perfection constitute a hard and fast line?' we must answer in the negative. The freedom which Niebuhr sees as the second element in man's essential nature and which he sees as qualifying every natural function of man, is the same freedom which enables man to experience the virtues and perfection corresponding to that essential nature, as both realization and requirement. In man's essential nature freedom enables man to stand above the natural flux, and experience the qualms of a questioning conscience and the promptings of a moral nature. And in the virtue and perfection which would represent the normal expression of that nature, it is the freedom of man in the moment of self-transcendence, in which the consciousness and memory of original perfection arise. It is in the realm of freedom that man both experiences original righteousness as the demand of law, and achieves limited moral and ethical goals which point the way to virtue and perfection. Because this dimension of freedom forms such an indispensable part of both man's essential nature and the perfection corresponding to that nature, and because Niebuhr, while distinguishing between man's creaturely

nature and its corresponding natural law, shows interest neither in man's essential nature as a creature nor in the natural law corresponding to that nature, it is hard to see the justification for stating that Niebuhr draws a hard and fast line between the two. Niebuhr says that it is impossible to do justice to the concept of the image of God without making a 'distinction' between man's essential nature and the virtue of conformity to that nature. His work makes it clear that it is a distinction to which he refers and not a hard and fast line - a distinction which helps highlight aspects of a human nature which Niebuhr understands as a unified whole.

Professor Robinson has one further criticism to make within the context of this discussion. Even if Niebuhr did allow a small measure of realization in man's ability to conform to his essential nature, his position, says Professor Robinson, would be no more tenable. It would now become impossible to maintain, as we must, that all men are equally sinners and equally in need of the grace of God. It is not at all plausible, argues Professor Robinson, to hold that all men, while attaining to some extent, have also failed and fallen short at precisely the same point. Before God there is no difference; in that final consummation of all sin there are no differences of degree. But how can we retain this

insight, asks Professor Robinson, if we grant that all have gone some distance towards the realization of perfection? We cannot retain it, concludes Professor Robinson, except by means of a gigantic coincidence which renders the whole position untenable.<sup>1</sup> But is it impossible to hold that all men are equally sinners before God, while, at the same time, allowing that all men make differing degrees of progress towards the realization of perfection? Professor Robinson himself says that before God there are no degrees of sinfulness. We need not allege that men, while attaining perfection "to some extent", have "by means of a gigantic coincidence" "fallen short at precisely the same point." The perfection which a Holy God intends for man is so far above the achievement of the most selfless of saints that we can speak meaningfully of an equality of sin and yet allow varying degrees of achievement pointing to perfection. Before God the saint who has travelled farthest along the road towards perfection and the self-centred, prideful sinner who exploits his fellowmen, stand equally as sinners. However great the gap between their relative achievements, they are equally sinners before the love and righteousness of God.

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N.H.G. Robinson, Faith and Duty, p.72.

The Manifestation of Man's Sin.

Having examined Niebuhr's understanding of the meaning and nature of human sin, we must turn now to an examination of his assessment of human sin as it is manifested in human behaviour. Niebuhr states that it is "our present interest ... to relate the Biblical and distinctively Christian conception of sin as pride and self love to the observable behaviour of men".<sup>1</sup> In order to elaborate the viewpoint that sin in human behaviour manifests itself most clearly in the form of pride, Niebuhr distinguishes between three types of pride: pride of power, pride of knowledge, and pride of virtue.<sup>2</sup>

There is a pride of power, says Niebuhr, in which the human ego assumes its self-sufficiency and self-mastery and imagines itself secure against all vicissitudes. It does not recognise the contingent and dependent character of its life, and it believes itself to be the author of its own existence, the judge of its own values and the master of its own destiny.<sup>3</sup> Closely allied to this pride

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1. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.I., p.200.

2. Ibid., pp.200-216.

3. Ibid., p.201. This form of the pride of power is particularly characteristic, says Niebuhr, of individuals and groups whose position in society is secure. Niebuhr illustrates his point from the Old Testament: second Isaiah's denunciation of Babylon, first Isaiah's warning to Israel's rulers, and Ezekiel's prophecy of doom against Egypt.

is the lust for power which has pride as its end, and which is prompted by a darkly conscious realization of the ego's insecurity. This is the sin, says Niebuhr, of those who, knowing themselves to be insecure, seek sufficient power to guarantee their security, inevitably of course at the expense of other life. Greed as a form of the will to power has been a particularly flagrant sin in the modern era, asserts Niebuhr, because modern technology has tempted man to overestimate the possibility and the value of eliminating his insecurity in nature.

Because man seeks to overcome social as well as natural insecurity, the peril of a competing human will is overcome by subordinating that will to the ego and by using the power of many subordinate wills to ward off the enmity which subordination creates. The will-to-power is thus inevitably involved in the vicious circle of accentuating the insecurity which it intends to eliminate. But the more man establishes himself in power and glory the greater is his fear of tumbling from his eminence, or of losing his treasure, or of being discovered in his pretension. The will-to-power is thus an expression of insecurity even when it has achieved ends which, from the perspective of an ordinary mortal, would seem to guarantee complete security. The fact that human ambitions know no limits must therefore be attributed not merely to the

infinite capacities of the human imagination but to an uneasy recognition of man's finiteness, weakness and dependence, which become the more apparent the more we seek to obscure them, and which generate ultimate perils, the more immediate insecurities are eliminated. There is no level of greatness and power, concludes Niebuhr, in which the lash of fear is not at least one strand in the whip of ambition.<sup>1</sup>

The second form of pride, the intellectual pride of man is, says Niebuhr, a more spiritual sublimation of his pride of power. All human knowledge is finite knowledge gained from a particular perspective, but it pretends to be final and ultimate knowledge. The philosopher who imagines himself capable of stating a final truth merely because he has sufficient perspective upon past history, is clearly, asserts Niebuhr, the victim of the ignorance of his ignorance. For intellectual pride is the pride of reason which forgets that it is involved in a temporal process and imagines itself in complete transcendence over history. But the real fact is that all pretensions of final knowledge and ultimate truth are partly prompted by the uneasy feeling that the truth is not final and also by an uneasy conscience which realizes that the

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Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.I., pp.206-207.

interests of the ego are compounded with this truth. The vehemence with which the foe is accused of errors of which the self regards itself free betrays the usual desperation with which the self seeks to hide the finiteness and determinateness of its own position from itself.<sup>1</sup>

There is no manifestation of intellectual pride, says Niebuhr, in which the temptations of both human freedom and human insecurity are not apparent. If man were not a free spirit who transcends every situation in which he is involved, he would have no concern for unconditioned truth and he would not be tempted to claim absolute validity for his partial perspectives. If he were completely immersed in the contingencies and necessities of nature, he would have only his own truth and would not be tempted to confuse his truth with the truth. Yet, on the other hand, if man were wholly transcendent, he would not be tempted to insinuate the necessities of the moment and the vagaries of the hour into the truth and thus corrupt it.<sup>2</sup>

The third form of pride, moral pride, is revealed when the self judges itself by its own standards and finds itself good. It judges others by its own standards

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1. Ibid., pp.208-209.

2. Ibid., p.210.

and finds them evil when their standards fail to conform to its own. This, says Niebuhr, is the secret of the relationship between cruelty and self-righteousness. When the self mistakes its standards for God's standards it is naturally inclined to attribute the very essence of evil to non-conformists. Moral pride, continues Niebuhr, thus makes virtue the very vehicle of sin, a fact which explains why the New Testament is so critical of the righteous in comparison with 'publicans and sinners'.<sup>1</sup> The sin of self-righteousness, concludes Niebuhr, involves us in the greatest guilt; it is responsible for our most serious cruelties, injustices and defamations against our fellowmen. The ultimate sin is the religious sin of making the self-deification implied in moral pride explicit, of claiming divine sanction for our relative attainments. Religion, by whatever name, is the inevitable fruit of the spiritual nature of man; and religious intolerance and pride is the final expression of his sinfulness.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout all this discussion of man's sin of pride it has been assumed, states Niebuhr, that an element of deceit is involved in this self-glorification. The Biblical analysis of sin, he says, is filled with references to the function of deception in the economy of

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1.

Ibid., pp. 211-216.

sin. Since man's determinate existence does not deserve the devotion lavished upon it, man must practise some deception in order to justify such excessive devotion. The desperate effort to deceive others is an attempt to aid the self in believing a pretension it cannot easily believe because it was itself the author of the deception. The knowledge of the truth which the essential self possesses, can never be so completely obscured, as to make the lies in which the sinful self involves itself either superfluous or wholly convincing. The sinful self needs these deceptions because it cannot pursue its own determinate ends without paying tribute to the truth. The fact that this necessity exists, concludes Niebuhr, is an important indication of the vestige of the truth which abides with the self in all its confusions and is thus an interesting refutation of the doctrine of man's total depravity.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr makes a distinction between group pride and the egotism of individuals because he believes the pretensions and claims of a collective or social self exceed those of the individual ego. The group, says Niebuhr, is more arrogant, hypocritical, self-centred, and ruthless in the pursuit of its ends than the individual. By this means human pride and self-assertion reach their

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Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.I., pp.216-220.

ultimate form, and the nation pretends to be God. Collective pride is man's last, and in some respects most pathetic, effort to deny the determinate and contingent character of his existence. The very essence of human sin which is in it, concludes Niebuhr, can be convicted only within terms of a religion of revelation in the faith of which a voice of God is heard from beyond all human majesties.<sup>1</sup>

The Equality of Sin and the Inequality of Guilt.

Niebuhr states that though the doctrine that all men are equally sinners in the sight of God is an indispensable expression of the Christian understanding of sin, this belief seems to weaken all moral judgments which deal with the 'nicely calculated less and more' of justice and goodness as revealed in the relativities of history.<sup>2</sup> We must be careful, he says, in relating the Biblical truth that all men are sinners to the other truth that there is nevertheless an ascertainable inequality of guilt among men in the actualities of history. Guilt, states Niebuhr, is distinguished from sin in that it

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1. Ibid., pp.221-233. "Prophetic religion had its very inception in a conflict with national self-deification. Beginning with Amos all the great Hebrew prophets challenged the simple identification between God and the nation..." (p.227).

2. Ibid., p.233.

represents the objective and historical consequences of sin, for which the sinner must be held responsible. It is the objective consequence of sin, the actual corruption of the plan of creation and providence in the historical world.<sup>1</sup> In this way Niebuhr hopes to reconcile these two indispensable beliefs. Biblical religion, Niebuhr emphasizes, has stressed this inequality of guilt just as much as it has stressed the equality of sin. The strictures of the prophets against the mighty, accusing them of pride and of injustice, of sins of both religious and social dimensions, are consistently partial. And in Jesus' teachings this prophetic note of moral discrimination is maintained without reservation.<sup>2</sup> The simple religious insight which underlies these judgments, concludes Niebuhr, is that the men who are tempted by their eminence, and by the possession of undue power, become more guilty of pride and injustice than those who lack power and position.<sup>3</sup> And yet if one did not know that all men are guilty in the sight of God, it would not be easy to discern the particular measure of guilt of those who are able to obscure their weakness and insecurity so successfully by their power, and their

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1. Ibid., pp.235-236.

2. Ibid., pp.237-238.

3. Ibid., p.237.

sinfulness by their good works.<sup>1</sup>

Professor Robinson rightly challenges Niebuhr's definitions of the word 'guilt'. These definitions, says Professor Robinson, misrepresent what is ordinarily understood by the term 'guilt'. In any customary sense guilt neither represents nor is an objective and historical consequence. The notion of guilt, states Professor Robinson, is a transitive one, presupposing both a person who is, or is thought to be, guilty, and some objective circumstance of which the person in question is said to be guilty. Professor Robinson shows conclusively that Niebuhr consistently applies the word 'guilty' not to outward circumstances, but to people in relation to outward circumstances.<sup>2</sup>

William John Wolf also disagrees with Niebuhr's treatment of the relation between sin and guilt. Wolf asks if there may not be sins for which man feels or should feel guilty that have almost no determinable objective and historical consequences.<sup>3</sup> Fortunately we have Niebuhr's reply to Wolf's criticism. Niebuhr states that Wolf is right in criticising the idea of the equality

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1.

Ibid., p.242.

2.

N.H.G. Robinson, Faith and Duty, pp.75-76.

3.

William John Wolf, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Man" Reinhold Niebuhr ed. Kegley and Bretall, p.240.

of sin and the inequality of guilt:

I have been convinced for some time that this was an error. I sought to do justice to the fact that there is in fact a great distinction between forms of evil, that the saint and the criminal are not at all alike but that yet in the ultimate instance it is true that 'in God's eyes no man living is justified'. It is not, however, adequate to explain this situation in quantitative terms. I remain baffled in my search for an adequate description of the situation which will allow for discriminate judgements between good and evil on the one hand, and which will, on the other, preserve the Biblical affirmation that all men fall short before God's judgement.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr's reply, while offering no alternatives in the face of Professor Robinson's criticism, at least admits the justification of Professor Robinson's remarks. Professor Robinson wishes to maintain both that all men are equally sinners before God and that there are vital moral differences between the good and the evil among the human race. Niebuhr makes it plain that these are precisely the same two truths which he wishes to hold, though how he is to contain them in one statement escapes him.

Professor Robinson has a second criticism to make of Niebuhr's understanding of guilt. The extent of man's guilt, for Niebuhr, says Professor Robinson, seems to

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Niebuhr, "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism"  
Reinhold Niebuhr, ed. Kegley and Bretall, p.<sup>4</sup>37.

depend upon external circumstances, upon differences of opportunity. Niebuhr, continues Professor Robinson, fails to do justice to the moral distinctions drawn by ordinary men; and further evidence of this failure, he says, is to be found in Niebuhr's favourite characterization of these distinctions as relative.<sup>1</sup>

Professor Robinson's criticism stems from Niebuhr's formal definition of guilt as that which "represents the objective and historical consequences of sin, for which the sinner must be held responsible". If this were the only indication which Niebuhr gives of his understanding of guilt, then Professor Robinson's criticism would be fully justified. But as Professor Robinson himself points out, Niebuhr's use of the word 'guilty' is found to be much nearer the ordinary usage of the word than his formal definitions would lead one to expect.

"... nowhere, outside of his definition does he [Niebuhr] allow the word to denote objective and historical consequence."<sup>2</sup> Because this seems to be truer to Niebuhr's real understanding of the concept of guilt, it must follow that Niebuhr would not regard the extent of man's guilt as being dependent upon external circumstances. This contention is borne out by Niebuhr's statement that "wherever the fortunes of nature, the

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1. N.H.G. Robinson, Faith and Duty, p.78.

2. Ibid., p.76.

accidents of history, or even the virtues of the possessors of power, endow an individual or a group with power, social prestige, intellectual eminence, or moral approval above their fellows, there an ego is allowed to expand".<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr does not state that an ego inevitably expands. What he means is that the temptations to exploit such positions for self-aggrandisement and prestige, are more dangerously subtle and pressing in positions of eminence.

It is true, as Professor Robinson has stated, that men do make moral distinctions; but it is also true that men have difficulty in giving a specific content to such moral values and distinctions. The temptation to self-righteousness and complacency always lurks near when men elaborate upon moral distinctions. It is for this reason that Niebuhr's favourite characterization of these distinctions is to refer to them as relative. And it is true that a mere sentence or two serves Niebuhr in his description of the universalities of conscience. This does not mean that Niebuhr minimises the importance of the universalities of conscience; rather he maintains that all moral distinctions and values must stand under the judgement of the law of love. In order to avoid the danger of regarding moral distinctions as false absolutes,

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Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.I, p.240.

Niebuhr prefers to describe such distinctions as relative, and will, only very briefly and in most general terms, identify the universalities of the moral imperatives of conscience.

Sin as Sensuality.

Niebuhr further elucidates the nature of sin in human behaviour by examining sin as sensuality. Sensuality represents, says Niebuhr, an attempt to escape from the freedom and the infinite possibilities of spirit by becoming lost in the detailed processes, activities and interests of existence, an effort which results inevitably in unlimited devotion to limited values.<sup>1</sup> Because sensuality is a more apparent and discernible form of anarchy than selfishness, it has always been more sharply condemned than the more basic sin of self-love. The resulting essential identification of sin and sensuality with which Christian morality frequently complies, has given modern critics some justification in their accusation that Christianity encourages prurience in its judgment of sexual problems, and a cruel self-righteousness on the part of the self-possessed and respectable members of the community,

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1.

Ibid., p.197.

towards those who have fallen into obvious forms of sin.<sup>1</sup>

But Christian theology, states Niebuhr, regards sensuality as a derivative of the more primal sin of self-love. Sensuality is both a form of idolatry which makes the self god, and an idolatry in which the self, conscious of the inadequacy of its self-worship, seeks escape by finding some other god. Thus, the gratification of various sensual desires without limit is, on the one hand, a form of self-love. Sometimes its purpose is to display power and enhance prestige. But, on the other hand, it may be the search for another god; luxurious living may not be so much an advertisement of the ego's pride or even a simple and soft acquiescence with the various impulses of the physical life, as it is a frantic effort to escape from the self. The self throws itself into any pursuit which will allow itself to forget, for a moment, the inner tension of an uneasy conscience. The self, finding itself to be inadequate as the centre of its existence, seeks for another god amidst the various forces, processes and impulses of nature over which it ostensibly presides.<sup>2</sup>

Drunkenness, says Niebuhr, is a vivid form of the logic of sin which every heart reveals: anxiety tempts the self to sin; the sin increases the insecurity which

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1.

Ibid., p.243.

2.

Ibid., pp. 248-249.

it was intended to alleviate until some escape from the whole tension of life is sought. The same pattern, says Niebuhr, can be seen in man's sexual impulse. The force of this impulse reaches up into the highest pinnacles of human spirituality; and the insecurity of man in the heights of his freedom reaches down to the sex impulse as an instrument of compensation and as an avenue of escape. The climax of sexual union, states Niebuhr, is a climax of creativity and sinfulness. It is creative where it enables the self to discover itself through its giving of itself to another. But interlaced with its creativity are the corruptions of the ego in its domination of one life over the desires of another, and the flight of the ego into another in a spirit of self-abnegation, all combined in a baffling intermixture.<sup>1</sup>

The element of sin in the experience of sexual union is not due, says Niebuhr, to the fact that sex is, in any sense, sinful as such. But once sin is presupposed, once the original harmony of nature is disturbed by man's self-love, the instincts of sex are particularly effective tools for both the assertion of the self and the flight from the self; sex is the most obvious occasion for the expression of sensuality, and the most vivid expression of it. Thus man's sex life is both a vehicle of the

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Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.I., pp.249-251.

primal sin of self-deification and the expression of an uneasy conscience, seeking to escape from self by the deification of another. The deification of the other, states Niebuhr, is almost a literal description of many romantic sentiments in which attributes of perfection, beyond the capacities of any human being to bear, are assigned to the partner of love, with the result that disillusionment must inevitably follow.<sup>1</sup>

Because of the very power it develops in the spiritual confusion of human sin, sex, like drunkenness, states Niebuhr, may serve as an anodyne. The ego, having found both the worship of the self and of the other abortive, may use the passion of sex, without reference to the self and the other, as a form of escape from the tension of life. The most corrupt forms of sensuality, as, for instance, in commercialized vice, have exactly this characteristic that personal considerations are excluded from the satisfaction of the sexual impulse. It is a flight not to a false god, concludes Niebuhr, but to nothingness. In support of his contention Niebuhr refers to the flight of the self into the other and the escape into oblivion which are, he says, recurring themes in D.H. Lawrence's analysis of sex.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Ibid., pp.251-252.

2. Ibid., pp.252-253.

Niebuhr states that the proof that sex is a very crucial point in the spirituality of sinful man is to be seen in the fact that shame is so universally attached to the sexual function. The profundity of the account of the Fall in Genesis cannot be overestimated. For, though the account describes sin as primarily disobedience to God through the temptation of pride and not as sensual passion, it understands that guilt becomes involved in sensual passion after the Fall, for man becomes suddenly conscious of his sexuality. The view of Freudian psychology that this sense of guilt is abnormal and entirely due to the repressions of civilization is wrong, asserts Niebuhr, because this sense of shame antedates the conventions of a civilized society. In the same way the inordinate expression of sexual passion is the cause and not the consequence of the social disciplines and restraints which society has set around this area of life. A sophisticated effort to destroy modesty and the sense of shame by the simple device of making the function of sex more public is therefore, concludes Niebuhr, bound to aggravate rather than alleviate the difficulties of man's sex life.<sup>1</sup>

We can see that Niebuhr's understanding of man the

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1. Ibid., 253-254.

sinner is both firmly based upon the Biblical doctrine of man and his sin, and is at the same time, vindicated by an incisive assessment of human activity in the world. Niebuhr's grasp of the role of anxiety as a basic factor in human existence places him in dialogue with many of the most influential dramatists and writers of the twentieth century. At the same time his understanding of anxiety as the precondition of human sin enables him to illustrate the manner in which sin comes to man in his freedom. Here Niebuhr's thought resembles Brunner's, when the latter states that man's being made in the image of God is the presupposition of sin - only he who is created in the image of God can sin.<sup>1</sup> But Niebuhr cannot, as does Tillich, with his all-embracing ontological system, present a logical explanation for the universality of human sinfulness. Niebuhr can show us how and why sin occurs but he cannot explain why all men sin inevitably. There must always be an element of mystery, symbolized by the Biblical account of the Fall, in the prior existence of evil. That all men sin inevitably and yet are responsible for their sin must be, in the last resort, an affirmation of faith, even if we may support it by a knowledge of our own sinful selves. Niebuhr preserves this ineradicable element of mystery in mankind's universal sinfulness, in

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1.

Emil Brunner, Man in Revolt, pp.132-133.

his paradoxical statement that knowledge of the inevitability of sin does not extinguish the sense of responsibility. The inevitability of sin in any particular situation will not lead necessarily to sin in the life of a man unless sin has already lodged there.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr states that man recognises the fact of his responsibility for sin in the feelings of remorse, and in the qualms of an uneasy conscience. In this, Niebuhr's thought resembles some aspects of Brunner's work in Man in Revolt.<sup>2</sup> Brunner queries these similarities and asks why no mention had been made of the fact that Niebuhr has been preoccupied with certain ideas which Brunner himself had put forward four years earlier.<sup>3</sup> In his reply

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J.S. Whale sums up in these words: Sin is by hypothesis inexplicable since moral action presupposes freedom in the real sense of choice. If man is free no scientific formula can possibly cover the universality of sin, without taking away the element of responsibility which makes it what it is. Any alleged explanation of the fact that all men sin is only a new determinism. If sin, universal as it is, is to be treated as a moral fact and not as a natural fact it must remain inexplicable. Determine the causes of a universal moral fact and it ceases to be moral and becomes natural. J.S. Whale Christian Doctrine, pp. 49-50.

2.

"The sense of responsibility is the really primal human phenomenon which is not wholly absent from anyone..."  
Man in Revolt, p.178.

3.

Brunner, "Reinhold Niebuhr as a Christian Thinker,"  
Reinhold Niebuhr, ed. Kegley and Bretall, p.32.

Niebuhr states that he profited greatly from reading Brunner's work some time before giving the Gifford Lectures and that Brunner's whole theological position is one to which he is more indebted than he is to any other.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless it is clear from a reading of the two works that there are places where the two writers differ markedly.<sup>2</sup>

By making a distinction between man's essential nature and the virtues and perfection corresponding to that nature, Niebuhr is able to guard against two errors. Against the Catholic view that sin has destroyed man's original justice, Niebuhr has shown that he believes that man is capable of limited social and moral achievements in society. And against both the Catholic view which regarded man's essential structure as untouched by sin, and the Barthian view that man's essential structure was totally destroyed, Niebuhr believes that man's essential

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1.

Niebuhr, "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism," op. cit., p.431.

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On the universality of sin, Brunner states that when we speak of the central element in ourselves - our being created in God's image - we know that we might just as well be speaking of others as of ourselves. Man cannot be human without a relation to God, nor can he be a man without the human 'Thou.' This unique bond, this mutual responsibility means that man is not only a sinner as an individual, but is bound together in sin as a united body. (Man in Revolt, pp. 139-141). Here Brunner's treatment of the relationship between the universality of sin and man's responsibility for sin differs from Niebuhr's.

structure, though corrupted by sin, is not yet totally destroyed.

In his working out in theological categories of his understanding of man's essential nature, Niebuhr described this nature as including the elements of freedom, transcendence over nature, and self-transcendence. For this reason his treatment of man's essential nature cannot be described simply as an abstract concept. But Niebuhr, in his chapter in the Gifford Lectures, does not elaborate upon the content and significance of these three elements. It is true, of course, that a knowledge of Niebuhr's other writings enables us to understand the content of these three elements. It is clear that Niebuhr envisages man in his essential nature as being capable of experiencing moral imperatives and qualms of conscience. Man has natural impulses towards social justice and a certain inherent respect for others' needs.<sup>1</sup>

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Niebuhr describes conscience as one of the levels of the transcendence of the self over itself (The Self and the Dramas of History, p.24) and self-transcendence as part of man's essential nature. (The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.I, p.287) And in Moral Man and Immoral Society, p.2., Niebuhr states that "human nature is not wanting in certain endowments for the solution of the problem of human society. Man is endowed by nature with organic relations to his fellowmen; and natural impulse prompts him to consider the needs of others even when they compete with his own." In The Self and the Dramas of History, p.26 the universalities of the 'moral law' are said to be derived from intuitions of the self about the essential nature of its selfhood.

But it is questionable whether this treatment of man's essential nature, when taken as a theological statement, is entirely adequate. On the one hand, Niebuhr's treatment in Volume I of The Nature and Destiny of Man, while implying a greater content, is, as it stands, too brief a treatment to do adequate justice to man's essential nature. On the other hand, his elaboration of the content of man's essential nature in his other works, while admirably suited to the promotion of a dialogue with the secular world, runs the risk of portraying an essential nature which exists by its own right and by its own strength.

It is significant that in his subsequent thinking Niebuhr has drawn nearer to a 'relational' understanding of man's essential nature. Insofar as man has the freedom to transcend every given structure, every law of his essential nature, says Niebuhr, must be subject to indeterminate possibilities which finally exceed the limits of any specific definition of what he ought to do. Yet, says Niebuhr, they do not completely stand outside of law, if law is defined in terms of man's essential nature. For this indeterminate freedom is a part of his essential nature. Thus, says Niebuhr, the mystery of the deep personal relationship of love is a matter of law in the sense that the essential nature of man, with his

indeterminate freedom, requires that human relations should finally achieve such an intimacy. In other words, Niebuhr believes that man, who is created and sustained by the love of God, can relate meaningfully to his fellowman within the bonds of love, because the essence of his being has been created by love and is made for love.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr now sees the limited schemes of justice and the tentative moral codes of society as the achievements of man's essential nature, as the outworking of God's love through the medium of human lives, in a world in which sin corrupts, but does not destroy, all human achievement. This later development in Niebuhr's thought has a twofold advantage. It demonstrates more clearly, not only that man's essential nature is not destroyed, but also that its continued existence depends upon God's sustaining love. And secondly, it relates man's partial achievements in history to their true source. The provisional meanings in history, the provisional judgments upon evil in history, and the renewals of life in history, are all the manifestation of God's love revealing itself through human lives in a world in which sin exists but does not finally overcome.

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1.

Niebuhr, Christian Realism and Political Problems, pp. 140-164.

## CHAPTER V.

THE SALVATION OF MAN.

Though Niebuhr has often insisted that he is not a systematic theologian, and though one does not find in Niebuhr's work a careful working out of the doctrine of man's salvation, it is nevertheless true to say that God's redemption of man is the central concern of all Niebuhr's thinking. Niebuhr himself has stated that Christology has been, and is, the principal passion and purpose of his theological work. His theology is actually intended, he has said, to be nothing more than the analysis of the truth about 'Christus pro nobis' and 'Christus in nobis' in its significance for man.<sup>1</sup>

Yet it is easy to overlook this central Christological concern; for the importance which Niebuhr places upon the person and work of Christ is not to be found in closely reasoned doctrinal statements. Rather, it is to be found in the significance which Niebuhr sees in Christ for man's understanding of himself, his world, and his history. Hence we must search widely among Niebuhr's writings in order to do justice to his understanding of the person and

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Quoted by Paul Lehmann in "The Christology of Reinhold Niebuhr," Reinhold Niebuhr, ed. Kegley and Bretall, p.253.

work of Christ, and of the salvation of man. Such a search is well worthwhile, for it reveals, perhaps better than does a study of any other aspect of Niebuhr's work, the development and direction of his thought over the years.

Niebuhr's earliest thinking about Christology and the Atonement is expressed very much in the mould and thought forms of a liberal Christianity. It is of interest to note that this liberal understanding is seen also in Niebuhr's earlier understanding of man's essential nature. Just as we found two strands of thought in Niebuhr's understanding of man's essential nature - the one almost humanistic, and the other Biblical - so we find a tension between an optimistic liberal theology and the uncompromising perfectionism of a Biblical faith. And just as the tragic social problems of the 1930s drove Niebuhr to a profounder understanding of man's essential nature - an understanding which saw the relevance of the Christian doctrine of sin - the same social problems caused Niebuhr to see the pathetic inadequacy of the admonitions of a liberal theology, and the relevance of the Christian doctrine of justification by faith. We have seen how the two strands in Niebuhr's understanding of man's essential nature - the secular and the Biblical - gradually became merged into a more coherent whole. And we are able to see that in his treatment of man's salvation,

Niebuhr begins with a liberal's concern for the relevance of Christianity to society's problems; is driven to a much profounder understanding of the truths of the Christian faith; and then, some twenty years later, relates these profounder truths to man's world, and thereby achieves a more satisfactory doctrine of man's salvation.

Development from an Early Liberalism.

The liberal influence in Niebuhr's earliest work is easily discernible. The fact that man has created a kingdom of values in which truth, beauty, and goodness have been made real, is regarded as proof that man is more free and more moral than the modern cynic is willing to concede. Religion is seen as making its contribution to the task of binding man to spiritual values by giving man the assurance that the world of values really has a relevant place in the universe, and that values are permanent and will be conserved.<sup>1</sup> Man cannot have the faith which discovers potentialities in human nature, asserts Niebuhr, if he cannot interpret human nature in the light of a universe which is perfecting, and not

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1. Niebuhr, Does Civilization Need Religion?, (New York: Macmillan, 1929), p.49.

destroying, human values.<sup>1</sup> Life will continue to develop, continues Niebuhr, in the direction of the ideal implicit in it, and every organism is impelled to move towards the goal of its own completeness.<sup>2</sup>

In keeping with this liberal disposition, we find Niebuhr emphasizing the importance of the metaphysical problem of religion. "It is manifestly necessary to have some metaphysical basis for religious conviction, for there is no spiritual vigour in the conscious self-deception of purely subjective religions."<sup>3</sup> "In the long run religion must be able to impress the mind of modern man with the essential plausibility and scientific respectability of its fundamental affirmations."<sup>4</sup> And so Niebuhr hopefully asserts that "the religion of Jesus is free of theological absurdities. Its very simplicity saves it from undue entanglements with discredited cosmologies."<sup>5</sup>

But there is another strand of thinking which is just as evident in Niebuhr's early thought. There is a tension between this liberal Christianity and the 'otherworldliness' and the unrealizable ethical demand of a more Biblical

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1. Ibid., p.62.

2. Ibid., p.239.

3. Ibid., p.214.

4. Ibid., p.16.

5. Ibid., p.73.

faith. In a sense, admits Niebuhr, religion is always forced to choose between an adequate metaphysics and an adequate ethics. Where there is conflict between them, it is better to leave the metaphysical problem with some loose ends than to develop a religion which is inimical to moral values.<sup>1</sup> The scientific respectability of religious affirmations will not avail if the life which issues from them will not help to solve man's urgent social problems.<sup>2</sup>

It was this concern to discover an ethically effective faith which led Niebuhr to state at the beginning of his first book, that more men in the modern era were irreligious because religion had failed to make civilization ethical, than because it had failed to maintain its intellectual respectability.<sup>3</sup> The Church's vigorous pronouncement of ideals has a curious air of futility, states Niebuhr, for ideals are neither challenged nor applied if they are not finally embodied in concrete proposals for specific situations.<sup>4</sup>

It is clear that at this stage of his career, Niebuhr is chiefly concerned with the religion of Jesus, its

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1. Ibid., p.214.

2. Ibid., p.16.

3. Ibid., p.12.

4. Ibid., p.119.

content, and its actual and possible role in personal and social life. But it is also clear that his attention is absorbed by the problem which foreshadows the orientation of his later position. This problem is the relation between 'otherworldliness' and historical involvement.<sup>1</sup> Thus Niebuhr states that the modern Christian is inclined to destroy the force of the profound otherworldliness of the Sermon on the Mount, by reflecting that it represents an Oriental cast which is incidental and not essential to the Gospel of Jesus. But to regard them as incidental, he says, is to miss the whole meaning of the Gospel.

Niebuhr's recognition of the dimension of otherworldliness in the person and preaching of Christ led him to grapple again with the problem of Christ's nature. In the early Christian church, states Niebuhr, the naive dualism of Jesus was given dramatic and dynamic force through his deification, so that he became, in a sense, the God of the ideal, the symbol of the redemptive force in life which is in conflict with evil. No mechanical or magical explanations of the significance of the crucifixion, continues Niebuhr, have ever permanently obscured the helpful spiritual symbolism of the Cross in which the conflict between good and evil is portrayed,

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Paul Lehmann, op.cit., pp. 256 - 257.

and the possibility, as well as the difficulty, of the triumph of the good over evil is dramatised.<sup>1</sup>

If there is any lack of identity between the Jesus of history and the Christ of religious experience, the Jesus of history is nevertheless more capable of giving historical reality to the necessary Christ idea than any other character in history... The God of our devotion is veritably revealed most adequately in the most perfect personality we know, as he is potentially revealed in all personal values.... The idea of a potent but yet suffering divine ideal which is defeated by the world but gains its victory in the defeat must remain basic in any morally creative world view.<sup>2</sup>

"Of course this is liberalism", states Paul Lehmann, "and what with 'the most perfect personality we know', 'the Christ idea', and a 'suffering divine ideal', liberalism in a quite unblushing form."<sup>3</sup> Yet it is surely plain, argues Lehmann, that the central concern of the argument lies elsewhere. It is to be found in the meaningfulness and transforming power of Jesus Christ in the world in which the Cross occurred. This is the source of Niebuhr's dissatisfaction with the insufficiencies of both orthodox and liberal theology, and the source also of his steady wrestling with the tension between 'otherworldliness' and historical involvement.

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1. Niebuhr, Does Civilization Need Religion?, pp. 198-200.

2. Ibid., pp.236-237.

3. Lehmann, op.cit., p.260.

It is important to remember the influence of liberalism upon Niebuhr's earlier work, especially as Niebuhr has been described as having been deeply influenced by Karl Barth. Of course Barth's constant emphasis upon man's fallenness and upon the sheer omnipotence of God's grace in Christ must have had its influence upon Niebuhr. But we can see Niebuhr being driven towards a profounder faith, both by his awareness of the ills of his society, and by his recognition of the uncompromising demand of the true Gospel. Niebuhr's brooding sensitivity to the social and industrial ills of his first parish in Detroit, illustrates the forces which provoked him to search for a more morally and ethically efficacious faith. The claim that it was not simply Barthianism which led Niebuhr to a profounder faith is vindicated when we note Niebuhr's preoccupation with moral and ethical questions during these years of transition; when we remember that Niebuhr has always allowed a 'point of contact' for God's grace in man; and when we recognize the degree to which questions of social and political justice have always been, and still remain, of paramount importance for Niebuhr.

The development of Niebuhr's thought away from a concern with the metaphysical approach to the nature of faith and towards a more historical-dramatic understanding which uses myths and symbols to convey its truth, can be

seen in Niebuhr's next work.<sup>1</sup> The same dissatisfaction with the failure of both liberalism and orthodoxy to proclaim an ethically efficacious faith is bluntly stated: "It seems pathetic to me, that Liberalism has too little appreciation of the tragedy of life to understand the cross, and orthodoxy insists too much upon the absolute uniqueness of the sacrifice of Christ to make the preaching of the cross effective..."<sup>2</sup>

A continuation of the same development is to be found in Moral Man and Immoral Society, published in 1932. Here the Cross of Christ is described as "the symbol of love triumphant in its own integrity, but not triumphant in the world and society... . The man on the cross turned defeat into victory and prophecied the day when love would be triumphant in the world. But the triumph would have to come through the intervention of God ... . A sentimental generation has destroyed this apocalyptic note in the vision of Christ. It thinks the Kingdom of God is around the corner, while he regarded

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"But for the life of me I can no more reduce Jesus to the status of a mere Galilean dreamer and teacher than I can accept the orthodox Christologies. The person who can make no distinction between a necessary symbolism and mythology seems to me no better than the wooden-headed conservative who insists that every bit of religious symbolism and poetry must be accepted literally and metaphysically." Niebuhr, Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, p.120.

2.

Ibid., p.85.

it as impossible, except by God's grace."<sup>1</sup> Grace is defined as "an experience in which the religious life accepts the mercy and the forgiveness of God as consolation for its failure, and turns defeat into victory by enjoying an anticipatory attainment of what is regarded as unattainable."<sup>2</sup> With Niebuhr's introduction of the concepts of myth and symbol to portray the basic truths of the Christian faith, and with his recognition of the importance of the doctrine of justification by faith, we are in a position to discern the direction of Niebuhr's future thought.

The concepts of myth and symbol are used increasingly in Reflections on the End of an Era, published in 1934, in order to portray the growing significance for Niebuhr of Christ and his Cross. The dualism in the religion of Jesus - the tension between nature and spirit, between ethical striving and personal reassurance - explains for Niebuhr the human situation in the world. Religious faith needs specific symbols, states Niebuhr, and the Jesus of history is a perfect symbol of the absolute in history, because the perfect love to which pure spirit aspires is vividly realised in the drama of his life and Cross. Thus a man becomes the symbol of God, and the

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1. Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, p.82.

2. Ibid., pp. 70-71.

religious sense that the absolute invades the relative and the historical, is adequately expressed.<sup>1</sup>

For Niebuhr, the idea of grace, also, can be expressed adequately only in mythological terms. In the myth of Jesus the Holy God reveals His Holiness in terms of mercy and this mercy redeems the sinner. This redemption means that the sinner knows himself to be in the embrace of a divine love in spite of his sin. The holiness of God thus creates both the consciousness of sin and the consolation which makes bearable the consciousness of sin. Only in the concepts of a religious myth can an imperfect world mirror the purposes of a divine Creator, and can the mercy of God make the fact of sin and imperfection bearable without destroying moral responsibility for the evil of imperfection or obscuring its realities in actual history.<sup>2</sup>

Niebuhr here characterizes the human situation by the concept of "tension between spirit and nature". The truth and relevance of the Christian religion in this situation are analysed in terms of a theology of grace. Grace, says Niebuhr, is the apprehension of the absolute from the perspective of the relative. The tension between man's condition in the world and the imperative

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1. Niebuhr, Reflections on the End of an Era, (New York: Scribners; 1934), p.287.

2. Ibid., pp.290-292.

of the ethic of love is resolved in the experience of justification by faith. In every life, says Niebuhr, there must be times and seasons, at least, when the good is felt as a present possession and not as a far-off goal. The sinner must feel himself 'justified', that is, he must feel that his imperfections are understood and sympathetically appreciated as well as challenged. Since perfection is love, the apprehension of perfection is at once the means of seeing one's imperfection and the consoling assurance of grace which makes this realization bearable.<sup>1</sup>

It was from within the liberal fold that Niebuhr first attempted to recover for modern man the meaning and renewing power of the person and work of Christ. But a liberal theology could not satisfy Niebuhr's needs, and, as a consequence, we find in his work a deepening understanding of the significance of the Cross and its relationship to man's world. Nor could the dialectical theology of Barthianism satisfy Niebuhr; for its pessimistic and dualistic conclusions, he asserts, found

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Ibid., pp. 281-285.

no meaning in history or nature except as the one event in history - the incarnation - illuminated the scene.<sup>1</sup> In this deepening understanding of Niebuhr's we can perceive a movement in his thought away from a concern about the relevance of the Christian faith to human problems, to a concern with the truths of the Christian faith. In an attempt to convey the profundity of these truths, we find Niebuhr dropping his insistence upon metaphysical respectability and using the concepts of 'myth' and 'symbol' to express in a coherent form the logically irreconcilable and metaphysically unacceptable paradoxes, which are, nevertheless, indispensable to the Christian faith.

A much deeper and more adequate appreciation of the demands of the Christian faith is revealed in Niebuhr's work on Christian ethics. Here Niebuhr sees that the justification for these demands is put in purely religious terms, and not in socio-moral terms. Men are to forgive because God forgives; they are to love their enemies because God is impartial in His love. The points of reference are vertical and not horizontal.<sup>2</sup> There is an

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This one event in history really ceases to be an event in history and the symbol of the absolute never really becomes incarnate . . . . The absolute and the relative, the divine and the human, the spiritual and the natural are so completely separated that the ultimate faith of religion in the meaningfulness of life rests upon one event in history which is not truly historical.

Ibid., p.239.

2.

Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, p.56.

eschatological element in the ethics of Jesus, says Niebuhr, for these demands are incapable of fulfilment in the present existence of man and must await final fulfilment when God transmutes the perfect chaos of the world into its final unity.<sup>1</sup> But, Niebuhr insists, the element of sacrificial love in the ethics of Jesus is an "impossible possibility" and is relevant "to the moral experience of mankind on every conceivable level".<sup>2</sup>

Both liberalism and orthodoxy, Niebuhr believes, fail to do justice to this paradoxical truth so indispensable for man's salvation. Liberalism, says Niebuhr, resolves the paradox by reducing Christ to a figure of heroic love who reveals to us the full possibility of human nature. Christ is the ideal man, whom all men can emulate once the persuasive charm of his life has captivated their souls. The mistake of orthodoxy is to resolve the paradox of the ethic of Jesus by painting a picture of the Christ who has been stripped of all qualities which relate him to man and history.<sup>3</sup>

In either case, states Niebuhr, the total human situation which the mythos of the Christ and the Cross

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1. Ibid., p.67.

2. Ibid., pp.114-115.

3. Ibid., p.130.

illuminates, is obscured. The Jesus of history actually created the Christ of faith in the early church, and his historic life is related to the transcendent Christ as a final and ultimate symbol of a relationship which prophetic religion sees between all life and history, and the transcendent. "In genuine prophetic Christianity", says Niebuhr, "the moral qualities of the Christ are not only our hope, but our despair. Out of that despair arises a new hope centred in the revelation of God in Christ. In such faith Christ and the Cross reveal not only the possibilities but the limits of human finitude in order that a more ultimate hope may arise from a contrite recognition of those limits."<sup>1</sup>

It is now possible to see a considerable development in Niebuhr's understanding of the Christian doctrine of man's salvation. The shallow liberalism of his earlier works has largely disappeared.<sup>2</sup> The unlimited demand of Christ's ethic forced Niebuhr to grapple with the Biblical doctrines of justification by faith and of redemptive grace. Against liberalism the possibility of the 'impossible possibility' of Christ's ethic is insisted upon. And against orthodoxy the transcendent-metaphysical interpretation of the nature of Christ is

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1.

Ibid., p.131.

2.

But we still find such statements as "the revelation of Christ, the God-man, is a revelation of the paradoxical relation of the eternal to history." Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, p.130.

forsaken for an ethical and moral understanding of the paradoxes of his nature. The paradoxical nature of Christ is held together in the concepts of 'myth' and 'symbol'. Because this interpretation of Christ's nature is both ethical and expressive of forgiving love, the myth or symbol is relevant to the human situation both as the highest moral demand and as free redemptive love.

Concern for the Truths of the Christian Faith.

"The turning point in the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr", states Paul Lehmann, "is the point at which the concern for the relevance of Christianity is stated less and less with reference to the human situation to which the Christian faith is relevant and more and more with reference to the truth of the Christian faith by which the human situation is illumined and resolved."<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr's earlier preoccupation with the meaning and effectiveness of the Christian faith in personal life and culture, is now strengthened by, and grounded upon, a deepening understanding of the truths of the Christian faith centred in the Christ who transcends and sustains the human situation in meaning and in power.

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Paul Lehmann, "The Christology of Reinhold Niebuhr", in Reinhold Niebuhr, ed. Kegley and Bretall, p.265.

This search for a deeper understanding of the truths of the Christian faith led Niebuhr to see the Cross as revealing both the seriousness of human sin and the purpose and power of God to overcome it. The Cross, says Niebuhr, reveals man in his highest moral and spiritual achievements, violating the will of God; and reveals God absorbing this evil into Himself at the very moment of its most vivid expression.<sup>1</sup> The mythological character of Christian truth is illustrated when we affirm that God became man to redeem the world from sin. Though the idea of eternity entering time is intellectually absurd, as the theological dogmas with their rationalizing efforts amply demonstrate, the whole character of the Christian religion, states Niebuhr, is involved in this affirmation.<sup>2</sup>

The truth that Christ is both the perfect man, the Second Adam who restores what man was, and ought to be, and also the Son of God who transcends all possibilities of human life, is a further truth which can best be appreciated in mythological terms. Human life, says Niebuhr, stands in infinity. No moral standard proves to be a permanently valid standard short of perfection and infinite love. And in the same way, all evil in human life is derived from an effort to transmute finite values into infinities. On the one hand, there is no sharp line between the infinity in man and the infinity beyond man,

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<sup>1</sup>•Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy, (London: Nisbet, 1938), preface p.X.

<sup>2</sup>•Ibid., pp.13-14.

and yet, on the other hand, man always remains a creature. Thus Christ, who expresses both the infinite possibilities of love in human life and the infinite possibilities beyond human life, is a true revelation of the total situation in which human life stands.<sup>1</sup>

The truth of the atoning work of Christ, says Niebuhr, is, at its profoundest level, a revelation of what life actually is. It is tragic from the standpoint of human striving, for here human existence denies its own deepest and most essential nature.<sup>2</sup> Yet the crucifixion becomes the revelation of that in human history which transcends human striving. Without the Cross men are beguiled by what is good in human existence into a false optimism, and by what is tragic, into despair. God is defeated in history, but He is also victorious in that defeat. The message of the Son of God who dies upon the Cross, of a God who transcends history and is yet in history, who condemns and judges sin and yet suffers with and for the sinner; this message, asserts Niebuhr, is the truth about life.<sup>3</sup>

There is no theory of the Atonement, in Niebuhr's view, which is quite as satisfying as the simple statements

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1. Ibid., pp.14-15.
  2. Ibid., p.19.
  3. Ibid., p.20.

of the vicarious death of Christ in the Gospels.<sup>1</sup> Love is the law of life, but when it enters the world of relative justice and balanced egotism, it is destroyed in it. The suffering servant dies on the Cross. Godness armed with power is corrupted in the world, and pure love without power is destroyed. If they succeed occasionally, as they do, they give us vital and creative symbols of the fact that the Kingdom of God is a reality as well as a possibility.<sup>2</sup>

But Christ regarded himself, states Niebuhr, not only as the Suffering Servant, but also as the Son of Man. As the Suffering Servant, Christ is the symbol of the eternal in time. But the defeat of the Servant has within it the symbol of an ultimate victory. The Suffering Servant is also the Son of Man, the inaugurator of the final consummation. Thus God is revealed not only as the ground, but also as the goal of human existence; and man's rebellion against God is proved to be an abortive effort which cannot finally prevail.<sup>3</sup>

A deeper insight into the way in which sin corrupts every human endeavour, and a profounder understanding of

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1. Ibid., p.18.

2. Ibid., pp.182-185.

3. Ibid., pp.187-193. We must wait until Niebuhr makes a fuller examination of the concept of the Son of Man before we attempt a critical evaluation.

the supra-historical character of God's action in Jesus Christ, led Niebuhr to see the central importance for man's salvation, of the doctrine of justification by faith. This doctrine, states Niebuhr, declares that those who live by faith are declared righteous by the grace of God even though they are not righteous by their own achievements. This justification does not absolve man of his moral obligation; on the contrary the grace of forgiveness is vouchsafed only to those who have consciously made the will of God their law of life. In this sense the tension between law and grace is resolved in the life of the individual. The Cross, concludes Niebuhr, is the perfect revelation of the relationship of law and grace. In it the sin against man is revealed as the sin against God, as something more than casual imperfection. Yet in it, the merciful purpose of God to take human evil into Himself, is also declared.<sup>1</sup>

The mere development of what man is cannot save him, for development will heighten all the contradictions in which he stands. Nor will emancipation from the law of development and the march of time, through entrance into a timeless and motionless eternity, save him. Man's hope lies in a forgiveness which will overcome not his finiteness,

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1.

Ibid., pp.267-268.

but his sin, and in a divine omnipotence which will complete his life without destroying its essential nature.<sup>1</sup> To judge how far these thoughts not only reflect a development in Niebuhr's thinking, but also reveal the direction of this development, we need but recall the closing sentiments of Niebuhr's first work: "Life will continue to develop in the direction of the ideal implicit in it and every organism is impelled to move towards the goal of its own completeness."<sup>2</sup>

#### The Suffering Son of Man.

The fullest exposition of Niebuhr's understanding of the nature and means of man's salvation is found in The Nature and Destiny of Man, Volume II. Here Niebuhr returns again to the theme of the suffering Son of Man. The figure of the Son of Man, says Niebuhr, is that of a heavenly conqueror and judge through whom history is to be brought to culmination. The Suffering Servant, on the other hand, represents a profound effort to give the sufferings of Israel a higher meaning, by the suggestion that the nation's mission and triumph in the world would be achieved by its vicarious suffering for the sins of

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1. Ibid., p.306.

2 Niebuhr, Does Civilization need Religion?, p.239.

others. This synthesis of Jesus, according to which the Suffering Servant is not merely a character of history, but is the representative of the divine, transcends, states Niebuhr, both the simple optimism of liberal Christianity and the tragedy implied when vicarious love is seen to be defeated in history. For it is God who suffers for man's iniquity. The contradictions of history are not resolved in history; they are ultimately resolved only on the level of the eternal and the divine. Yet God's mercy must make itself known in history, so that man in history may become fully conscious of his guilt, and of his redemption. In combining the concepts of the Suffering Servant and the Son of Man, Jesus, in effect, attributed the qualities of the Suffering Servant to his first coming, and the qualities of the triumphant Son of Man to a second coming, either his own or that of another.<sup>1</sup>

This interpretation of the synthesis which Niebuhr believes was made by Christ raises the question as to whether Christ's Passion is adequately represented as victory over the forces of evil and as inaugurating the Kingdom of God. It is true that Niebuhr states that in Christ's own interpretation there was indeed in the first coming as a Suffering Servant a victory over Satan and the power of evil.<sup>2</sup> But, says Niebuhr, the love which enters

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1.

Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. II, pp. 46-49.

2.

Ibid., pp. 49-50.

history as the suffering love must remain suffering love in history. It may have its tentative triumphs even in history, since human history cannot stand in complete contradiction to itself. But in the interim between the disclosure of history's true meaning, an inner element of contradiction in history must be accepted as its perennial characteristic. Sin, says Niebuhr, is overcome in principle but not in fact.<sup>1</sup>

This interpretation of Niebuhr's has lead W.J. Wolf to describe Niebuhr's doctrine of grace as easily the most misunderstood area of Niebuhr's theology.<sup>2</sup> These misunderstandings, says Wolf, have a three-fold cause. In the first place, Niebuhr's early engrossment with the sin of man and its social effects, meant that Niebuhr devoted less attention to the nature and reality of man's salvation. Secondly, many critics have not understood Niebuhr's dialectical thought as it has evolved; for example, when Niebuhr analyses grace as forgiveness.

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1.

Ibid., pp.50-51.

2.

"One often hears such comments as these: 'He believes in justification, but not in sanctification. He is too pessimistic about man. He accepts forgiving love, but not redeeming love. He does not understand the sacraments'. Each of these statements is wrong, but there is just enough submerged or partial truth in them to require serious attention in this analysis." W.J. Wolf, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Man," in Reinhold Niebuhr, ed. Kegley and Bretall, p.243.

and then as power, he sees them not as alternatives but as dimensions of the one truth. And thirdly, there is, says Professor Wolf, a serious terminological mistake in Niebuhr's correlation of atonement with grace. When Niebuhr states that "sin is overcome in principle but not in fact", the word 'fact', says Wolf, is extremely misleading. Sin, of course, does exist in the world after the Cross, both in the redeemed and in the unredeemed, in such confusion as to require the symbols of the Second Coming of Christ and of a Last Judgement before history itself is finally redeemed. In this sense, says Wolf, sin has not been completely, that is, 'in fact', overcome. It is an obvious misunderstanding of Niebuhr, concludes Professor Wolf, to think that this means that the Cross does not now win in history any victories over sin, but a more dialectical statement of the problem is required than the misleading antithesis between 'in principle' and 'in fact'.<sup>1</sup>

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1.

Ibid., pp.243-245. Niebuhr "heartily accepts" Wolf's criticism. "My friend, Professor Kroner, long ago convinced me that this was an inadequate way of doing justice to the fact that there is sin in the life of the redeemed... . It is inadequate because it does not describe the real sanctification which takes place in conversion when the soul turns from itself to God." Niebuhr, "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism", op.cit., p.437.

It is very interesting that this interpretation of the relationship of sin and grace should have followed Niebuhr's interpretation of the Son of Man sayings in the Gospels. For Niebuhr, the suffering of the Son of Man was to be seen upon the Cross, while his triumph would be seen at the Second Coming. At the present time, the Son of Man concept appears to be one of the most controversial issues in New Testament scholarship. But at least it can be said that New Testament scholars no longer see the triumph of the Son of Man as referring only to his Second Coming. And their revised opinions have very important implications for the theologians' understanding of the concepts of grace and salvation.

X Oscar Cullman states that the Son of Man represents the highest conceivable declaration of exaltation in Judaism. But because Christ regarded his coming as the dawning of the end time, even the concepts which had an exclusively eschatological character in Judaism had to be transferred into the present when applied to Jesus. Thus the same Jesus, who appeared as a man among men, and, as such, assumed the "ebed Jahweh" role, is at the same time, the future Son of Man who is Judge of the world.<sup>1</sup>

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1.

Oscar Cullmann, The Christology of the New Testament, (London, S.C.M. Press, 1959), pp.158-159.

Neither A.J.B. Higgins nor H.E. Todt agree with Cullman's view that Jesus made the identification between the Son of Man and the Suffering Servant. Higgins believes that Jesus used the term Son of Man only in an eschatological sense, referring to the Son of Man as witness or advocate or judge, and that the early Church made the transition from thinking of Jesus as performing Son of Man functions in the future, to thinking of him, the exalted Lord, as actually the Son of Man.<sup>1</sup> In Todt's view, it was the Easter event which caused a new understanding of the work and the person of Jesus to appear among the disciples. From this understanding emerged the Christological statement which expounds the significance of the giver of salvation for the gift of salvation. Where there was faith in Jesus' identity with the fulfiller to come, there was also a deeper recognition of the authority of the one who had given the fellowship on earth - a recognition signified by the conferring on

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1.

Jesus' references to the Son of Man were to show "the vital soteriological connection between his humble life on earth ending in death and subsequent resurrection, and his future activity characterized by the dignity and authority, delegated by God, of the 'Son of Man'". A.J.B. Higgins, Jesus and the Son of Man, (London: Lutterworth, 1964), pp. 203, 208.

Jesus of the title Son of Man.<sup>1</sup>

Now whether the closely reasoned arguments of Higgins and Todt are correct or not does not affect the vital consideration that the "highest conceivable declaration of exaltation" has been bestowed on Jesus. If the conferment was made by the early Church, then it was made because of the experience of the exhilaration of victory over the forces of the world caused by a faith in the Risen Lord. It was victory and exaltation through suffering and death. The exaltation and the lifting up of the Son of Man upon the Cross are one and the same action. The triumph of the Son of Man is not only a hope of a final consummation; it is also a present reality and a present power in the world.

The importance of this interpretation of the Son of Man concept for theological thinking is obvious. It means that the present power and reality of God's salvation in Christ must not be minimized. Niebuhr has always been concerned to give due weight to the importance of the Biblical teachings. But it is not suggested that if Niebuhr had had access to these later interpretations his thought would have differed radically. It is clear that Niebuhr's reticence on the subject of achievement in the

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1.

H.E. Todt, The Son of Man in the Synoptic Tradition, (London: S.C.M. Press, 1965), pp.293-295.

Christian life has been caused by his appreciation of the over-weening self-confidence of his own society which worshipped its own achievements and ignored the fact of human sin which exists within every human achievement. Yet insofar as disillusionment and anxiety are also part of the modern climate of opinion, a more positive and clearer exposition of the reality of salvation in a sinful world is demanded.

#### The Atonement.

In an endeavour to understand more deeply the central truths of the Christian faith, Niebuhr devotes an increasing attention to God's work of Atonement in Christ. Niebuhr's first interest however, is still in relating the truths of the Christian faith to the social and cultural conditions of his time. This means that we do not find a carefully worked out doctrine of the Atonement in Niebuhr's work. But it is possible by diligent searching, to understand Niebuhr's general position in regard to the atoning work of Christ.

By His revelation in Christ, Niebuhr says, God reveals that He has a resource of mercy beyond His law and judgement, but He can make it effective only as He takes the consequences of His wrath and judgment upon

Himself. The classical Christian idea of Atonement, states Niebuhr, emphasizes that God is both propitiator and propitiated. There can be no simple abrogation of the wrath of God by the mercy of God.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr describes the wrath of God as the world in its essential structure reacting against the sinful corruption of that structure; it is the law of life as love which the egotism of man defies with the resultant destruction of life. Niebuhr's interpretation resembles C.H. Dodd's view that the wrath of God meant not a certain feeling or attitude of God towards men, but rather some process or effect in the realm of objective facts, an inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe.<sup>2</sup> But these interpretations of God's wrath such as "the world in its essential structure", or the inevitable result in a moral universe, have a too static - almost a Platonic - understanding of God's activity. God's wrath over against the sin of man is a much more positive and dynamic reality than merely the result of offending against the laws of the universe. In Brunner's words God takes the fact that He is God "seriously", He remains true to His own nature of Holiness and Righteousness. The Divine Wrath is the working out of the Divine

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1.

Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.II, p.58.

2.

C.H. Dodd, The Epistle of Paul to the Romans, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1932), pp.22-23.

Glory upon those who refuse to give God glory; it is the working out of the Holiness of God against him who irreverently and godlessly does not acknowledge Him. Because God takes Himself, His love, infinitely seriously, His Love must be experienced by those who spurn it, as wrath.<sup>1</sup>

The revelation of the Atonement is a 'final' word, says Niebuhr, because it discloses a transcendent, divine mercy which represents God's freedom over His own law. Yet that freedom is not capricious<sup>2</sup>; for the mercy of God represents the ultimate freedom of God above His own law, but not the freedom to abrogate the law. All the various theories of the Atonement, asserts Niebuhr, are efforts to state the paradox of the divine mercy in relation to the divine wrath. None of them completely effaces the central truth that, just as Father and Son are equally God, so the justice and the forgiveness of God are one; for the highest justice of God is the holiness of His love, and it is this love which man defies.<sup>3</sup> "Yet forgiveness and justice are not one, just as Father and Son are two. The fact that God cannot

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1.

Emil Brunner, The Christian Doctrine of God, vol. I, (London: Lutterworth, 1949), pp.161-162, 170.

2.

Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol. II, p.69.

3.

Ibid., p.58.

overcome evil without displaying in history His purpose to take the effects of evil upon and into Himself, means that the divine mercy cannot be effective until the seriousness of sin is fully known. The knowledge that sin causes suffering to God is an indication of the seriousness of sin."<sup>1</sup> It is this knowledge, says Niebuhr, which induces the despair which makes possible the contrition which can appropriate the divine mercy and forgiveness.

Earlier, Niebuhr had stated that there was no theory of the Atonement which was quite as satisfying as the simple statements of the vicarious death of Christ found in the Gospels.<sup>2</sup> It is clear that by now his understanding of the sacrificial nature of Christ's atoning death is more profound than the 'simple statements' of the Gospels. But Niebuhr's insight was correct, and the sacrificial understanding of the Atonement does appear to preserve the truths of the Atonement which Niebuhr now sees as indispensable. Vincent Taylor has stated that

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1.

Ibid., pp.58-59. cf. Brunner's incisive statement: In the Cross of the Son, the highest manifestation of the wrathful God, it is possible - and here alone - "for faith to 'break through wrath', and to see in that which is 'strange' the work of God, which is most peculiarly His own, reconciliation through Jesus Christ, in which the inmost being of God is disclosed as the abyss of Love." Brunner, op.cit., p.173.

2.

Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy, p.18.

the understanding of the Atonement must be both ethical and religious, and sufficiently inclusive to embrace the purpose and love of God, the distinctive work of Christ, and the appropriation by man, guided and directed by the Spirit of God, of all that God has accomplished in Christ on our behalf. And, in Taylor's view, the most inclusive category which meets most requirements, is the sacrificial category.<sup>1</sup>

It is in the underlying ideas of sacrifice that the true significance of the sacrificial element in the New Testament is to be found, states Taylor. The worshipper draws near to God in humility and contrition to make an offering with which he can solemnly identify himself in penitence and faith so that the action is not external to himself. In the offering of the life of the victim the worshipper surrenders his own life and yields it to God. And in the ritual meal following the sacrifice not only are God and man reconciled, but also man and man, so that all who eat of the meal become one. The social implications in the sacrificial theory of the Atonement are very strong, states Professor Taylor.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, although Niebuhr has no carefully elaborated doctrine of the Atonement, his thoughts point to the

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1. Vincent Taylor, The Atonement in New Testament Teaching, (London: Epworth Press, 1940), pp.270-271.

2. Ibid., pp.274, 303.

central significance of the sacrificial theory and in so doing maintain both the subjective and the objective truths of the Atonement. The essential truth which the satisfaction theory preserves is maintained in Niebuhr's insight into the importance of the relationship of God's mercy to His justice; that only by bearing the consequences of man's sinful rebellion Himself can God do justice to the ethical conditions of love in the work of reconciliation and remain true to His own nature of Holiness and Love. Niebuhr avoids the dangers of the satisfaction theory by insisting that the justice and forgiveness of God are one, just as Father and Son are equally God.<sup>1</sup> The truth preserved in all substitutionary theories is maintained in Niebuhr's belief that in Christ something is won for man which man could not achieve for himself. "God is both the propitiator and the propitiated". The idea of imputation, that a righteousness is attainable through a faith-relationship to Christ, is preserved by Niebuhr when he states that the Christ who is apprehended by faith, to whom the soul is obedient in principle, "imputes" his righteousness to that soul.<sup>2</sup> And finally the indispensable truth of all Moral theories of the Atonement - that the action and meaning of the Atonement is not an external

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1. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.II, p.58.

2. Ibid., p.107.

objective action - is maintained in Niebuhr's belief that it is the sight of God in Christ bearing the effects of the world's evil that makes men realize their guilt and causes them to lay hold of a power beyond themselves which both completes their incompleteness and purges them of their vain efforts at self-completion.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the one truth of the Atonement which the sacrificial interpretation does not stress sufficiently is the victory won in the Resurrection over the forces of evil in the world. And it is the significance of this victory for the present reality of man's salvation which, as we have seen, appears to be insufficiently stressed in Niebuhr's thought. For the power of God has triumphed over the greatest manifestation of human evil. Men may live by faith in this triumph and look forward with courage to its ultimate consummation. It is true that Niebuhr has stated that though God is Himself defeated in history, He is also victorious in

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<sup>1</sup>. Ibid., p.59.

that defeat.<sup>1</sup> But one could wish for a greater emphasis upon the decisiveness of this victory, and a greater emphasis upon the reality of the redeemed life. It would seem that Niebuhr's preoccupation with the practical affairs of human life where the prevalence of sin in all moral and ethical endeavour and in the lives of all the redeemed, is only too obvious, has led to the brevity of his treatment in this area.

#### The Nature of Christ.

When the early Church attempted to maintain the uniqueness of Christ's person, it attempted, Niebuhr

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1.

Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy, p.19. But one thinks, for example, of Cullman's telling illustration (Christ and Time, London: S.C.M. Press, 1951, pp. 85 and 141), of the relationship of the decisive battle to the final victory. The decisive battle in a war, says Cullman, may already have occurred in a relatively early stage in the war. Even though the war must be carried on until 'Victory Day', it means, nevertheless, that because of this battle, victory is assured. And though Victory Day will bring something new in contrast to this decisive battle already fought, this new thing which it brings is based entirely upon that decisive battle and would be impossible without it.

The conviction that the decisive battle is already fought enables a courage in face of the world's terrors which can be an integral part of true Christian salvation. One thinks of the moving remarks made by a young German woman condemned to death in Germany in 1943. "Last night I went to bed very early and read in the Gospel of St. John and read it to my cell mate. We were both overwhelmed by the tremendous power that radiates from those words." (Dying we Live, ed. H. Gollwitzer, K. Kuhn, and R. Schneider; London: Collins, 1958, p.65).

says, to retain this truth in metaphysical terms. It defied Greek thought which found the doctrines of the Atonement irrelevant, since it was finiteness for the Greeks and not sin which troubled man. For the Greeks it was sufficient for salvation that God should make himself known; salvation for them did not necessitate any atoning action by God. But though the early Church defied Greek thought, it did so within the limitations of Greek terms.<sup>1</sup>

This meant, states Niebuhr, that an ultimate truth transcending all human wisdom and apprehended by faith, was transmuted into a truth of human wisdom and incorporated into a metaphysical system.<sup>2</sup> Christ is said to be both God and man, yet his humanity, it is said, does not derogate from his divinity, nor his divinity from his humanity. But, says Niebuhr, to ascribe both finite and historically conditioned, and eternal and unconditioned, qualities to Christ's nature, must verge on logical nonsense. It is possible, asserts Niebuhr, for a character, event, or fact of history to point symbolically beyond history and to become a source of an

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1. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.II, p.62.

2. Ibid., p.63. By stating the doctrine of the divine and human natures of Christ in 'ontic' terms, a truth of faith which can be expressed only symbolically is transmuted into a truth of speculative reason.

eternal meaning, purpose, and power, which bears history. But it is not possible, he concludes, for any person to be historical and unconditioned at the same time.

The significance of the affirmation that God is revealed in Christ is that the love of God is conceived in terms which make the divine involvement in history a consequence of precisely the divine transcendence over the structures of history. This means, continues Niebuhr, that the love of Christ, his disinterested and sacrificial 'agape', stands, as the highest possibility of human existence, in paradoxical relation to the majesty of God. The paradox is the relation between a divine 'agape' which stoops to conquer, and the human 'agape' which rises above history in a sacrificial act. It is the relation between the final majesty and the ultimate freedom of the divine love which can have a counterpart in history only in a life which ends tragically, because it refuses to participate in the claims and counterclaims of historical existence. The significant contrast between the divine and the human in Christ is not, as Greek thought assumed the contrast between the "impassible and the passible". Rather, it is a contrast between the perfect coincidence of power and goodness in the divine. It is impossible to symbolize the divine goodness in history in any other way than by complete powerlessness -

the consistent refusal to use power in the rivalries of history.<sup>1</sup>

The perfection of "agape" as symbolized in the Cross, says Niebuhr, can neither be reduced simply to the limits of history, nor yet be dismissed as irrelevant because it transcends history. It is the final norm of a human nature which has no final norm in history because it is not completely contained in history.<sup>2</sup> As such, it can both justify the sacrifices of men with the promise of a fulfilment of life beyond the present conditions of history, and judge all human forms of justice and mutuality and all metaphysical concepts of the conquest of finitude, by its portrayal of sacrificial love in history.<sup>3</sup>

We find a similar criticism of the early Christological formulations in the work of P.T. Forsyth.<sup>4</sup> The person of Christ, says Forsyth, was the resultant of the two natures rather than the agent of their union; but there can be no unity of spirits like God and man except in a

1.

Ibid., pp.74-75.

2.

Ibid., p.78.

3.

Ibid., p.77.

4.

"... the old dogma thought in a far too natural and non-moral way. Its categories were too elemental and physical. It conceived it as an act of might, of immediate divine power, an act which united the two natures into a person rather than through that person."

P.T. Forsyth, The Person and Place of Jesus Christ, (London: Independent Press, 1961, 9th Impression), p.223.

moral way, by personal action which is moral in its method as well as in its aim. The Incarnation, continues Forsyth, being for a moral and not for a metaphysical purpose, must be moral in its nature. Its metaphysic should be, therefore, a metaphysic of ethics, and not of thought as pure being.<sup>1</sup> Man's need, says Forsyth, determined God's deed; "... the work of Christ, realized in the Church's experience through faith, becomes the avenue and the key to the person of Christ. Soteriology is the way of access to Christology."<sup>2</sup> If Christ's conquest of our moral weakness was not a miracle of his own moral strength, if the incarnation was not above all things a moral achievement by God, then the redemption cannot be a moral conquest of man.<sup>3</sup>

#### The Nature of Faith.

A truth of faith, says Niebuhr, is not something which stands perpetually in contradiction to experience; rather, it illuminates experience and is in turn validated by experience. Niebuhr illustrates the relation between a truth revealed by God and received by faith, and a truth

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1. Ibid., p.219.
  2. Ibid., p.220.
  3. Ibid., p.235.

about life which men deduce through a rational organization of their experience, by the use of the analogy of our knowledge of other persons. The other self, says Niebuhr, cannot be understood until he speaks to us. Only the 'word' of the other self coming out of the depth or height of his self-transcendence can finally disclose the other 'I' as subject, and not merely as object, of our knowledge. This 'word' partly clarifies obscurities in the other self's previously observed behaviour, and partly negates false conclusions which the self has made by trying to understand the other self in terms of its own characteristic prejudices and passions. This self-disclosure does not stand in complete contradiction to the knowledge gained by observation, but it completes incomplete knowledge. This, says Niebuhr, is exactly the relation of the self-disclosure of God as received by faith to such other knowledge as man has about the "hidden" God.<sup>1</sup>

Because there can be no total corruption of truth or virtue in man, there is always, claims Niebuhr, a residual desire for the true wisdom. It is this human capacity for the apprehension of the true wisdom which emerges as contrition.<sup>2</sup> Faith and contrition are closely

1. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.II, pp.67-68.

2. Ibid., p.66.

related, states Niebuhr, for if a man does not know the truth in faith about God who is more than an extension of himself, he cannot repent of the premature and self-centred completion of his own life. And yet, without repentance, without the shattering of the self-centred self, man is too much his own god to either feel the need of, or to have the capacity for, knowing the true God. The invasion of the self from beyond the self is therefore an invasion of both "wisdom" and "power", of both "truth" and "grace".<sup>1</sup>

#### The Doctrine of Grace.

It is necessary, says Niebuhr, to apply the Biblical doctrine of the relation of grace as power and grace as pardon to the facts of experience in order to establish its relevance. Grace is the power of God over man when, by His mercy and forgiveness, God completes what man cannot complete and overcomes the sinful element in all man's achievements. But grace is also the power of God in man because it represents an accession of resources which man does not have of himself, which enable him to become what he truly ought to be. It is synonymous with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Niebuhr demonstrates the relevance of this doctrine by an examination of the

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1.

Ibid., p.104.

Pauline text: "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I but Christ liveth in me".<sup>1</sup>

"I am crucified with Christ." The first assertion is that the old sinful self must be "crucified". It must be shattered and destroyed. It is in Christ, states Niebuhr, that the vague sense of the divine, which human life never loses, is crystallized into a revelation of a divine mercy and judgement wherein the fear of judgement and the hope of mercy are so mingled that despair induces repentance and repentance hope.<sup>2</sup>

"Nevertheless I live." The possibility of the reconstruction of the self is felt to be a consequence of a 'power' and a 'grace' from beyond the self because the true analysis of the plight of the self revealed this plight to be due to impotence rather than to lack of knowledge. The assertion, "Nevertheless I live", may be taken to refute two alternative schemes of salvation. In the one, the self is indeed invaded by 'spirit' as 'power' but it is not the Holy Spirit and therefore it destroys the self. Thus, religious nationalism in which either race or nation assumes the eminence of God, produces a spurious sense of transfiguration, and yet destroys the self which has a height of spiritual freedom beyond race

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1. Ibid., p.111.

2. Ibid., pp.112-113.

or nation.<sup>1</sup> The other scheme of salvation which is refuted, is the mystic doctrine of salvation in which the final goal is the destruction of the self. Though the self is a unity of finiteness and freedom, of involvement in natural process and of transcendence over process, the fulfilment of the self is not to be found in some undifferentiated divine unity. The unity of the self is so conceived in the Christian faith that it is not destroyed in the process of fulfilment.<sup>2</sup>

"Yet not I, but Christ liveth in me". The "yet not I" is a confession by the converted self that its new life is the fruit, not of its own power and volition, but of an accretion of power and an infusion of grace. It is also an affirmation, Niebuhr warns, that the new self is never an accomplished reality, that the new self is the Christ of intention rather than an actual achievement. It is the self only by grace, in the sense that the divine mercy 'imputes' the perfection of Christ and accepts the self's intentions for achievements. But if divine grace alone were responsible for the new life, we would be forced to accept a doctrine of divine

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However terrible the consequences of modern demonic possessions, they furnish the useful lesson of proving that human life is actually subject to power and not merely to mind. Human personality is so constructed that it must be possessed if it is to escape the prison of self-possession. Ibid., pp.114-115.

2.

Ibid., p.117.

determinism. But because man's freedom and self-transcendence allows a 'point of contact' for God's grace, there is something in man to which appeal can be made. Therefore, says Niebuhr, though only God in Christ can break and reconstruct the sinful self, the same self must 'open the door', an action of which this same self is capable. Both affirmations, concludes Niebuhr, are unqualifiedly true, but each on their own level.<sup>1</sup>

And yet, states Niebuhr, the miracle of grace is never a complete miracle. The sorry annals of Christian fanaticism, of unholy religious hatreds, of sinful ambitions hiding behind the cloak of religious sanctity, of political power impulses compounded with pretensions of devotion to God, offer the most irrefutable proof of the error in every Christian doctrine and every Christian experience which claims that grace can remove the final contradiction between man and God. Again and again, asserts Niebuhr, 'publicans and sinners' have had to rescue an important aspect of truth about life, and restore wholesomeness into human relations, against the fanaticism of Christian saints, who had forgotten that sainthood is corrupted whenever holiness is claimed as a simple possession.<sup>2</sup>

1. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol. II, pp. 118-122.

2. Ibid., pp. 126-127.

In these sentences we have summed up for us in a forceful way Niebuhr's reasons for refusing to elaborate upon the achievements possible in the life of the redeemed. In an absolute sense his judgements are, of course, fully justified, and we can but respect the motives behind them. But the question must still be asked if such a treatment must not be balanced by an appreciation of what faith in the crucified and Risen Lord can accomplish.

#### The Relation of Biblical Truths to Man's Experience.

We have examined the way in which Niebuhr's thought has developed from a concern with the human situation to which the Christian faith is relevant, to a deeper understanding of the truths of the Christian faith. There are, as we have seen, two motivating forces behind this development: Niebuhr's involvement with the moral and social problems of society and his need for a more adequate faith, and the unanswerable claims of the essential Gospel message. Having achieved a more profound understanding of the truths of the Christian faith, Niebuhr immediately sets out to show the way in which these truths illuminate and lend substance to the doctrine of man's salvation.

Man's insecurity stands out starkly when the tragedies and ambiguities of history are fully faced. Therefore,

any adequate doctrine of man's salvation must offer him some tenable interpretation of history. Niebuhr's understanding of the Atonement enables him to say that the suffering innocence of Christ, which reveals to the full the problem of the moral ambiguity of history, becomes, in the Christian faith, the answer to the problem at the point where it is seen as a revelation of a divine suffering which bears and overcomes the sins of the world.<sup>1</sup> This, says Niebuhr, is not a proposition which follows logically from the observable facts of history. Yet, he insists, there are no observable facts of history which cannot be interpreted in its light.<sup>2</sup> The meaning of history is not completed from within itself, but only from beyond itself as faith apprehends the divine forgiveness which overcomes man's recalcitrance.<sup>3</sup> And whatever may happen in subsequent ages, states Niebuhr, nothing can occur which will shake the faith of a true believer in God's sovereignty over all history.<sup>4</sup>

But if the full significance of the truths of the Christian faith are to be proclaimed for man's salvation, then, Niebuhr believes, three errors must be avoided. The

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1. Niebuhr, Faith and History, p.154.

2. Ibid., p.155.

3. Ibid., pp.162-163.

4. Ibid., p.159.

first error is to regard the truth of faith as capable of simple correlation with any system of rational coherence, and as validated by such a correlation.<sup>1</sup> The second error arises, says Niebuhr, "when the effort is made to guard the uniqueness of the truth of faith and to prevent its absorption into a general system of knowledge by insisting that Christian truth is miraculously validated and has no relation to any other truth otherwise known".<sup>2</sup> The third error, to which Catholic rationalism is particularly prone, is to validate the truth of faith but to explicate it rationally in such a way that mystery is too simply resolved into ostensible rational intelligibility.<sup>3</sup>

But the Christian faith, insists Niebuhr, cannot be related to the truths about life and history unless its truths are presented in trinitarian terms. God was revealed

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The ascription of divinity to Christ is embarrassing in rational systems of thought and so Christ is fitted into some general scheme of the history of culture and becomes the great teacher or exemplar of the moral ideal or either the anticipator or the culmination of the law of moral progress. Niebuhr, Faith and History, p.188.

2.

The consequences of this error is cultural obscurantism. The truth of faith, thus jealously guarded, can degenerate into a knowledge of a series of miraculous events, and, as such, may be perfectly compatible with a graceless legalism or with racial and religious hatreds of every kind. Ibid., pp.188-189.

3.

Ibid., p.190.

in Christ in actual history. Christ's sacrificial action, which reveals the force of redemption and the redemptive love in contrast to the wrath and justice of God, prevents the Christian doctrine of redemption from degenerating into either sheer sentimentality, or, on the other hand, a graceless legalism. And the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is important, says Niebuhr, if we would understand that all forms of holiness and all signs of redemption in actual history are not merely extensions of human wisdom or human virtue, but are the consequence of a radical breakthrough of the divine spirit through human self-sufficiency. Where theologians have difficulty in grasping the wholeness of the Christian truth, it is interesting, says Niebuhr, that Christian piety and art are usually closer to the truth in seeking to symbolize the true nature of Christ in both the historical dimension and in the revelation of a very unique 'glory' of the majesty of a suffering God.

Professor D.M. Mackinnon has described Niebuhr's work, Faith and History - in which Niebuhr's main concern is to relate the truth of the Christian faith to the truth of history - as a book of extraordinary insight and power. But the work fails in its Christological thinking, says Professor Mackinnon, because in spite of the profundity of Niebuhr's treatment of the Cross, his Christology

remains hopelessly inadequate. Fundamentally, his book only just escapes exhausting itself in the dialectic of ideas; it is only just a piece of Christian theology and not a masterly prophetic essay in the philosophy of history, with Christ as the name of the most searching and enduring solution to the problem.<sup>1</sup>

But it must be remembered that Niebuhr's intention in this work is not to write a Christology; rather, he intends to write a Christian interpretation of history. Thus there is no reason to suppose that Niebuhr would not accept Mackinnon's statement that Christ is the name of the most searching and enduring solution to the problem, as adequate in respect of his interpretation of history. Nonetheless, while Niebuhr's aim was not primarily to write a Christology as such, his work - despite Professor Mackinnon's criticism - does contain the basic elements of a sound Christology. Niebuhr maintains the 'event' character of God's revelation in Christ in actual history; that Christ reveals the divine love which both overcomes evil and vindicates God's essential nature, and yet, at the same time, offers man the possibility of achieving, in faith, his true humanity.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, Professor Mackinnon's remark that Christ is the 'name'

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1. Scottish Journal of Theology, vol.IV, 1951, pp.415-418.

2. See especially, Niebuhr, Faith in History, pp.160-161.

of the most searching and enduring solution of the problem appears unjustified. And it cannot be denied that Niebuhr's understanding of the place of the Christian faith in the understanding of history implies the highest possible Christology.

In this treatment of Niebuhr's later understanding of the relationship of the truths of the Christian faith to the wisdom of the world, we can appreciate the degree to which Niebuhr's thought has developed since his early works. Where Niebuhr could not decide whether the "values of religion" were "in perpetual conflict with all other values" or were "co-ordinated with them",<sup>1</sup> we now find him stating that the ultra-rational pinnacles of Christian truth, embodying paradox and contradiction and straining at the limits of rationality, are made plausible when understood as the keys which make the drama of human life and history comprehensible and without which it is either given a too simple meaning or falls into meaninglessness.<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr's more profound understanding of the truth of the Christian faith has enabled him to see that there is no hard and fast contradiction between the Christian faith and the truths of the world, but rather that the Christian faith holds the truths of

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1. Niebuhr, Does Civilization Need Religion?, p.185.

2. Niebuhr, Christian Realism and Political Problems, (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), p.174.

the world together in a meaningful whole.

'Myth' and 'Symbol'.

In his endeavour to relate the truths of the Christian faith to the mystery and meaning of life, Niebuhr makes increasing use of the concepts of myth and symbol. It is not always clear, as Paul Lehmann points out, whether the term myth expresses a precise or a loose relationship between 'idea' and 'occurrence', 'meaning' and 'fact', 'knowledge' and 'reality'.<sup>1</sup> But it appears that for Niebuhr the term myth provides a method of thinking which can both accept the reality of the occurrence of the life of Jesus and see in this life the manifestation of the divine, the majesty and power of God redeeming the world.

Niebuhr uses this method of thinking to explain the significance of the terms 'Son of God' and 'Second Adam'. Jesus is the Son of God in that in him God's power of mercy which exceeds His judgement is involved in the guilt and suffering of men. Jesus expresses both the final majesty of God and His relation to history. But because

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1. Lehmann, "The Christology of Reinhold Niebuhr", in Reinhold Niebuhr, ed. Kegley and Bretall, p.267.

the Son of God is crucified he reveals not only the paradox of majesty and mercy, but also the paradox of power and goodness. For, says Niebuhr, the final majesty, the ultimate freedom, and the ultimate disinterestedness of the divine love can have a counterpart in history only in a life which ends tragically, because it refuses to participate in the claims and counter-claims of historical existence.<sup>1</sup> Christ is the Second Adam in that he is the norm of human nature. Christ is the final perfection of man in history and reveals the full possibilities of human existence. To say that Christ re-establishes the virtue which Adam lost, means, says Niebuhr, that life can approach its original innocence only by aspiring to its unlimited end.<sup>2</sup> The term "Second Adam" both defines the possibilities and limits of history,<sup>3</sup> and preserves the historical character of the perfection of history against all forms of dualistic doctrines which seek escape from history and against the too simple fulfilments of naturalism and romanticism.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Niebuhr, Christian Realism and Political Problems, p.75.

2. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.II, p.81.

3. Sacrificial love completes the incompleteness of mutual love.... The Cross represents a transcendent perfection which clarifies obscurities of history and defines the limits of what is possible in historic development.

Ibid., pp.86-93.

4. Ibid., pp.95-96.

Niebuhr believes that this "mythical" understanding of the nature and work of Christ ensures that the essential kerygmatic message is preserved. He therefore disagrees with Rudolf Bultmann's demythologizing quest, believing that Bultmann ends by equating the kerygma with the message of existentialist philosophy. This means, says Niebuhr, that the kerygma is not left intact because existentialist philosophy, while understanding the unique freedom of man, is more intent to assert this freedom in defiance of death than to acknowledge that it is subject to corruption, and that therefore men must be saved from sin, rather than from death. In Niebuhr's view Bultmann has not made a sufficiently sharp distinction between pre-scientific myths which describe natural phenomena, and permanent myths. Permanent myths, states Niebuhr, are those which describe some meaning or reality, which is not subject to exact analysis but can nevertheless be verified in experience. Religious myths and symbols are verifiable on their own level - the level of religious experience.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr believes that it is better to use the word 'symbol' to avoid the sceptical connotation of the word 'myth'. (The Self and the Dramas of History, p.110). Since a religious myth cannot speak of the trans-historical without using symbols and events in history as its form of expression, it invariably falsifies the facts of history as seen by science, to state its truth. (Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, p.23). But the symbolic truth "that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself", is verifiable in the experience of everyone who experiences the mercy and new life which flows from true repentance in the encounter with God. It is also verifiable by the proofs that alternative methods of explaining or dissolving the mystery and the meaning which governs and surrounds us, lead to observable miscalculations in regard to the nature of man and of history." (Niebuhr, The Self and the Dramas of History, p.iii).

This difference of opinion between Niebuhr and Bultmann raises two very important issues. The first is concerned with the appropriateness of language which discusses 'acts of God'. And the second is concerned with the role of existentialism in the interpretation of the kerygma. Bultmann has defined mythology as "the use of imagery to express the other-worldly in terms of this world and the divine in terms of human life, the other side in terms of this side".<sup>1</sup> But Ronald Hepburn has pointed out that this definition is itself partly couched in mythological language and is sufficiently wide in its scope to include all pictorial, analogical, and symbolical speech whatever.<sup>2</sup> Such a definition is too sweeping and involves Bultmann in inconsistency, for he is forced to accept the fact that if we are to talk about 'acts of God' at all, then there are certain concepts which are fundamentally mythological with which we shall never be

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1.

Kerygma and Myth, ed. H.W. Bartsch, (London: S.P.C.K., 1953), p.10.

2.

Hepburn points out that "in another place Bultmann concedes that all utterance about God is analogical and therefore (if the first definition is to stand) irreducibly mythological. Bultmann cannot mean this. For if it were true, it would make demythologizing a logically impossible task..." Ronald Hepburn, "Demythologizing and the Problem of Validity", in New Essays in Philosophical Theology ed. Flew and MacIntyre, p.229.

able to dispense, for example, the idea of the transcendence of God. "If propositions about God are irreducibly oblique - that is, symbolical, analogical and so on, then to demythologize", points out Hepburn, "is not to remove all obliqueness, but only obliqueness of certain sorts".<sup>1</sup>

We can see therefore, states Professor Macquarrie, that demythologizing does not do the job it is supposed to do, namely, translate mythical statements into existential statements. Bultmann's intention was to translate all mythical statements into existential statements, but he has had to find a place for analogical statements also. Either, says Macquarrie, we must say that here there is a limit to demythologizing, or else we must redefine the aim of demythologizing and say that it intends to translate myth into existential statements plus analogical statements or consciously symbolic statements. In either case, he points out, we still come up against Hepburn's objection to oblique language about God. This problem would have been solved only if demythologizing, as purely existential interpretation, had been pursued without limit. This would have meant the abandonment of any attempt to talk about a transcendent

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1.

Ibid., p.237.

God and the representation of Christianity as nothing but a possible way of existence for man.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in answer to our second question, we can see that if we are to maintain the essential nature of the kerygma, we must place limits upon its existential interpretation. And, as Macquarrie points out, the various limits to a purely existentialist interpretation all go back in one way or another, to the limit constituted by "a transcendent God present and active in history", to quote Bultmann's own words.<sup>2</sup>

Professor Macquarrie believes that another very important conception which has influenced Bultmann's existentialist interpretation, is his understanding of modern man. Bultmann, says Macquarrie, is too uncritical of modernity and is inclined to ascribe to the outlook of modern man something of a normative character.<sup>3</sup> Karl Jaspers has some cogent criticisms to make of Bultmann's understanding of modern man. Jaspers sees Bultmann's

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1. John Macquarrie, The Scope of Demythologizing, (London: S.C.M. Press, 1960), p.215.

2. Ibid., p.227. (The reference to Bultmann is found in Kerygma and Myth, p.44).

3. Bultmann maintains that the essential message of the New Testament is independent of the world picture with which it is entangled. But is Bultmann trying not only to interpret the gospel in terms of the modern world picture, but also trying to present it in relation to the modern, secularized self-understanding? Ibid., pp. 229-232.

conception of modernity as confused: on the one hand, it is represented as the scientific view of the world; but, on the other hand, it is found to be no more than the average outlook of the man of today. And this outlook is decidedly not scientific, despite its claims; for, though modern men have a high regard for science - a regard which may include a superstitious and uncritical reverence for science - and constantly appeal to it, few are acquainted with its basic principles.<sup>1</sup> This attitude of modern man leads to a deeper belief; namely, modern secular man's understanding of himself as self-sufficient. All things are possible to him, he has taken the place of God.<sup>2</sup>

We have therefore, concludes Macquarrie, to distinguish

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Quoted from Jaspers by Macquarrie, op.cit., p.233. See above Chapter III, "Man and his Knowledge", pp.107-116. Macquarrie comments: Does not science-fiction have most of the important qualities of myth - it moves in the realm of fancy and daydream far removed from the sober realities of life. And yet this type of writing is a vehicle of self-expression; it gives a vivid and concrete embodiment to the popular belief in the omniscience of science. Ibid., p.234.

2.

Ibid., p.235. Here, Macquarrie finds in Niebuhr's thought a vindication of his view: The human ego "believes itself to be the author of its own existence, the judge of its own values, and the master of its own destiny". (Quoted from Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol.I, p.201.)

two quite different things. We can, and indeed we must, reinterpret the New Testament teaching in relation to our modern world-picture. But there is also, he insists, an average modern self-understanding which is not scientific and which differs completely from the self-understanding of the Bible. This modern self-understanding is a secular one, with man as the ultimate, whereas in the Biblical understanding man is a creature dependent on God. Here Macquarrie makes the vital point that,

a/ there can be no possibility of trying to reinterpret the New Testament message in a way which would accommodate this average modern self-understanding, for here we are dealing not with an attendant circumstance of the New Testament teaching, as the ancient world-picture is, but with the very heart of this teaching. It is here that the temptation arises to present Christianity in humanistic guise as just a possible way for man to exist, without any reference to a decisive activity of God, since such an activity does not come within the purview of secularized man. But such a presentation falls far short of Biblical teaching. Sin is not just alienation from oneself, it is alienation from God. Authentic existence is not just coming to oneself, it is coming to God.<sup>1</sup>

The dangers involved in making modern man's self-understanding the criterion by which we judge as to which truths of the essential Gospel message shall be preserved, are clearly revealed by Macquarrie's analysis.

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John Macquarrie, The Scope of Demythologizing, p.236.

The time which has been spent by Niebuhr analysing the lessons of history, is fully justified; for if a study of the history of the relation of the Christian faith to culture reveals anything at all, it reveals that the most difficult problem confronting the Christian faith has been the problem of communicating its essential truths in times when unsympathetic philosophies dominate. And the same study reveals that the Church's greatest temptation has been to accomodate these truths to particular ways of self-understanding which have emerged through the centuries. A knowledge of how frequently the Church has succumbed to this temptation would perhaps make a little more reticent those who today insist upon the demise of God.

#### The Inductive Approach to the Doctrine of Man's Salvation.

It is appropriate to return now to a question which was asked in the first chapter.<sup>1</sup> J.A.T. Robinson has stated that man's deep resistance to given truths necessitates an inductive approach to Christian doctrine. And the question was asked, whether "starting from the other end", from "Jesus as a compelling human man", could

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1. Chapter 1, pp.16-18.

reveal the true nature of God's salvation in Christ, and the true nature and possibilities of human life. We shall illustrate the possibilities - and the dangers - inherent in such an approach by an examination of the thought of three theologians whose work has attracted considerable attention: Fritz Buri, Schubert Ogden, and Paul van Buren.

Buri states that a kerygma is neither necessary nor possible; it is merely the last remnant of mythology. Salvation has nothing to do with a once-for-all event, and the value of the New Testament does not lie in the fact that it speaks of such an event, but in the fact that it gives expression, in mythical terms, to authentic existence.<sup>1</sup> Thus by "starting at the other end" with an existentialist philosophy as his sole criterion, Buri pursues his demythologizing to its logical conclusion and declares that "between our theology of existence and a philosophy which founds itself on the same concept of existence, there is in principle no difference".<sup>2</sup> Macquarrie answers the question of what happens when the limit which the kerygma sets to demythologizing is removed: "we find ourselves in what we must paradoxically call a kind of theistic humanism".<sup>3</sup>

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1. John Macquarrie, The Scope of Demythologizing, p.136.

2. Quoted by Macquarrie, op.cit., p.139.

3. Macquarrie, op.cit., p.151.

The dangers inherent in commencing the task of Christian apologetics with one's basic presuppositions determined by the modern philosophical outlook, are further illustrated in the work of Schubert Ogden. The demand for demythologization that arises of necessity from the situation of modern man, must be accepted, states Ogden, without condition.<sup>1</sup> The final test of a genuinely adequate post-liberal theology is whether the solution in question is also logically self-consistent.<sup>2</sup> "If the price for becoming a faithful follower of Jesus Christ is some form of self-destruction, whether of the mind or of the body ... then there is no alternative but that the price remain unpaid."<sup>3</sup> The only real alternative to Barth and Bultmann, states Ogden, is the general viewpoint of the "left" represented on the Continent by Buri and, to some extent in much that is significant in American and English theology.<sup>4</sup>

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"Christian faith is to be interpreted exhaustively and without remainder as man's original possibility of authentic existence as this is clarified and conceptualized by an appropriate philosophical analysis." Ogden, Christ Without Myth, (London: Collins; 1962), pp. 170 - 171.

2.

Ibid., p.19.

3.

Ibid., p.152.

4.

For example, says Ogden, Reinhold Niebuhr's important but seldom appreciated doctrine of the "hidden Christ" as well as the whole character of his unmistakably "empirical theology" reflects such a position. (Ogden,

(Contd. p.287.)

With an existentialist philosophy as his principle of interpretation, Ogden states that whenever theology

(Contd. from p.286.)

*op.cit.*, p.155) Now this "doctrine" is found in a footnote of Niebuhr's (The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol.II, p.113, Note 3) where he states that "while Christians rightly believe that all truth necessary for such a spiritual experience [conversion] is mediated only through the revelation in Christ, they must guard against the assumption that only those who know Christ 'after the flesh', that is, in the actual historical revelation, are capable of such a conversion. A 'hidden Christ' operates in history. And there is always the possibility that those who do not know the historical revelation may achieve a more genuine repentance and humility than those who do. If this is not kept in mind, the Christian faith easily becomes a new vehicle of pride."

By a 'hidden Christ' Niebuhr means a grace which, though unrecognized as from God, ameliorates human conditions. Thus "if we examine any individual life, or any social achievement in history, it becomes apparent that there are infinite possibilities of organizing life beyond the centre of the self, and these possibilities are always fruits of grace (though frequently it is the 'hidden Christ' and a grace which is not fully known which initiates the Miracle)". (Ibid., p.127) There is a 'common grace' in life, states Niebuhr, which can be seen in family and communal responsibilities, affections, disciplines and pressures. (Faith and History, p.198).

If people are to be judged by such revelation as has been granted them, then Niebuhr is right in suggesting that it is conceivable that some could achieve a greater righteousness even if it is mere obedience to the prompting of a hidden grace compared to others who are challenged by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Again and again he emphasises that all hidden graces are subject to the corruption of human egotism and that only the stark perfection of Christ's love can both judge all human endeavour and justify by faith all human failing. To suggest as Ogden does, that this insight of Niebuhr's regarding the 'hidden Christ' places Niebuhr in the same theological camp as Fritz Buri and the theological 'left' is completely unjustifiable.

speaks directly about God and His activity, its statements must be at least implicitly about man and his possibilities of self-understanding if they are not to be incredible and irrelevant. "In this sense, 'statements about God and his activity' are 'statements about human existence' and vice versa."<sup>1</sup> And the only final condition that the New Testament lays down, for sharing in authentic life, is a condition that can be formulated in complete abstraction from the event of Jesus of Nazareth and all that it specifically imports; it is that man must understand himself "in the concrete situations of his existence in the authentic way that is an original possibility of his life before God!"<sup>2</sup>

All existentialist thinkers are, of course, tempting targets for opponents versed in the arts of linguistic philosophy. In this case we find Paul van Buren criticizing Ogden's argument from a linguistic point of view. First, says Van Buren, Ogden's attempts to describe God in a non-objective way are meaningless.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, Ogden's

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1. Ibid., p.160.

2. Ibid.,

3. Paul van Buren, The Secular Meaning of the Gospel, (London: S.C.M. Press, 1963), pp.64 - 65. God's love is described, by Ogden, as "the ever-present ground and end of all created things." It is said to be experienced and yet it is also called non-objective. But, asks van Buren, "What would count for an experience being an experience of 'the ground and end of all things'?"

assertion that 'statements about God and his activities' are 'statements about human existence' and vice versa, is hopelessly confusing.<sup>1</sup> Thirdly, the kerygma of the New Testament contains statements which are empirical as well as some which are plainly existential.<sup>2</sup> Fourthly, Ogden's interpretation replaces the historical event of Jesus of Nazareth by the existential response of the believer.<sup>3</sup> And lastly, Ogden's view circumvents Easter in defining the relationship of faith to Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>4</sup> These criticisms of van Buren's are important because they reveal that the attempt from a purely existentialist position to portray, in a logically self-consistent way, an interpretation of the Christian faith which contains even a minimal objectivity, is bound to fail.

In contrast to Ogden's existentialist approach, van Buren begins his attempt at interpreting the Christian faith by "beginning at the other end", by accepting as his fundamental premise the unqualified empiricism of modern man. The clarification of the problems of the language

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1. Ibid., p.66. If Ogden means that God-statements are actually statements about man why does he add 'and vice versa'? "... can one say that one is the other and vice versa without hopelessly confusing the empirically minded... ."

2. Ibid., pp.68 - 70.

3. Ibid., pp.70 - 72.

4. Ibid., pp.72 - 74.

of faith has been accomplished, states van Buren, by a frankly empirical method which reflects the thinking of an industrialized, scientific age. It has taken certain empirical attitudes characteristic of modern thought seriously and accepted them without qualification.<sup>1</sup>

The empiricist in us, states van Buren, finds the heart of the difficulty not in what is said about God but in the very talking about God at all. Simple literal theism is wrong and qualified literal theism is meaningless.<sup>2</sup> "God-statements" have been translated into "man-statements". To confine ourselves to the language developed by men - and what other choice is available to us, asks van Buren - appears to confine our subject to the realm which is open, at least in principle, to human investigation.<sup>3</sup> Statements of faith do not communicate,

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Van Buren, The Secular Meaning of the Gospel, p.102.

2.

Ibid., p.100. "In making such statements, we reveal our own commitments to modern science, and we would only add that modern thought tends to grant the validity of the findings of the natural sciences." But few would wish to question the validity of the findings of the natural sciences; what we do wish to question is the right of a philosophy allegedly based upon scientific method to decide which questions are meaningful and may be asked. Van Buren's remarks reveal the confusions of the popular view of science which tries to build a philosophy around a discipline it does not understand.

3.

Ibid., p.103. "If a statement has a function, so that it may in principle be verified or falsified, the statement is meaningful, and unless or until a theological statement can be submitted in some way to verification, it cannot be said to have a meaning in our language-game." pp.104-105.

for van Buren, information about external reality; they are declarations of commitment to a way of life which is defined by relation to Jesus Christ. If we are to speak historically of Jesus, then we can do so only by using words with which we speak of other men. Jesus was an "exceptionally liberated individual" whose freedom for his neighbour, and his freedom from self-concern and his death which was the consequence of this freedom, was regarded as the measure of the freedom for which he set other men free. Faith is catching the freedom of Jesus to be for others. Easter or the Resurrection is defined as the moment when this freedom began to be contagious. The entire content of the kerygma can be translated into Christological and non-theistic terms, asserts van Buren, without losing any of its essential meaning. In opposition to the existentialist left, van Buren states, "We have not had to attempt to speak of God analogically or indeed in any other way..., we have spoken of situations of discernment ... and of a contagious freedom. By taking our models exclusively from the area of human experiences which do not require transempirical language, we are not faced with the difficulty of using circumlocutions for the word 'God' ... ."1 And because "Jesus of Nazareth is

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Ibid., pp.170-171.

central in, and integral to, our interpretation" and because "the key to the relationship between faith and Jesus is placed where the New Testament places it: in Easter", van Buren believes he has satisfied the concern for objectivity of the theological 'right'.<sup>1</sup>

These three works - those of Buri, Ogden, and van Buren - all reveal the dangers inherent in the attempt to elucidate the truth of the Christian faith by "starting from the other end", from the human situation. No one can ever achieve complete objectivity in any intellectual endeavour; and one is rarely able to judge the strength of one's own presuppositions. The strength of these often unrecognized convictions will ensure that no matter how honestly and logically we seek to progress from our human situation, the end we reach will not be the fullness of the Christian faith. This contention is amply borne out by the example of our three writers. All three writers are utterly convinced as to the universality and indispensability of their basic premises. Therefore it is all the more ironic that the interpretations of the Christian faith which they produce are diametrically opposed. The warning which Niebuhr extended in relation to the conflict between idealism and romanticism is applicable in this instance also; for it is possible that

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Ibid., p.171.

here too, the whole truth lies beneath and beyond the truths of both existentialism and empiricism.

Again we can see the relevance of Niebuhr's analysis of the lessons of history. Insofar as history is "the presentness of the past", an appreciation of the lessons of the past should lead to a wariness in accepting the dogmatism of the present, especially when they claim universal validity. And we should heed Macquarrie's warning that so long as modern man's attitude is inimical to religious faith he will never find its truths relevant.<sup>1</sup> So long as man's understanding of his own nature is either complacent towards, or opposed to, transcendent truths, then the quest to reach the wholeness of the Christian faith from a beginning in the human situation is bound to fail. The Christian faith is also, and more importantly, a revealed faith. Therefore it is impossible from the human situation, no matter what our interpretation of human nature, to attain, by logical progression, to a fullness of truth.

#### Faith and Meaning.

It will have become obvious that Niebuhr has never believed it possible for man to reach the fullness of the

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1.

Macquarrie, op.cit., p.236.

truth of the Christian faith by working from the human end. In J.A.T. Robinson's phrase, "our theology has to be done from both ends at once - and there is no guarantee that the lines will meet".<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr has worked "from both ends at once"; he has striven to show the significance of the truths of the Christian faith for man's situation in the world, and, at the same time, has utilized a deep understanding of that situation to reveal man's need of an answer which it is beyond his ability to supply. And it is true that for Niebuhr the lines do not meet to provide a logically coherent whole. The coherence which he does suggest is a coherence glimpsed momentarily through the eyes of faith; it is a coherence achieved by perceiving that the relationship between the truths of faith and the mystery of man's existence can provide a meaning which embraces the whole of life. Faith in God's revelation in Christ, states Niebuhr, illumines the mysteries of creation, of man's freedom, and of his sin.<sup>2</sup>

The revelation in Christ, says Niebuhr, gives a clue by faith to the mystery of creation - a mystery which all men experience. It substitutes for the unknown 'X' of the primordial god, the conception of a divine source and end of all historical meanings and purposes. Metaphysical

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1. J.A.T. Robinson, The New Reformation? p.82. See above, Chapter I, p.17, Note 3.

2. Niebuhr, The Godly and the Ungodly, pp.134-142.

speculation can never derive the reality of historical purpose and meaning from the concept of 'being'.<sup>1</sup> Only faith, and not reason, can see that the love of which the crucified Christ is the symbol, is related to, and identified with, the mystery of creation. Faith in the affirmation that Christ is the revelation of God, relates the mystery of creation to the meaning of history. It closes the structure of meaning on the basis of experience and insists that it is related to the structure of reality itself.<sup>2</sup>

The second mystery of man's existence which is illuminated by the revelation in Christ, is the mystery of man's freedom. Here, Niebuhr takes a universally recognized element in man's experience and shows how, in the eyes of faith, its true significance can be appreciated. Christ as the "Second Adam" and as the revelation of perfect self-giving love upon the Cross, is presented as the norm of human conduct. Despite the difficulties of relating the sacrificial love of Christ

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1.

In this context it is worth noting Heywood Thomas's criticism of Tillich's assertion that "Jesus is the Christ because he is the bearer of the New Being". If one tries to understand this statement from within Tillich's system, says Thomas, "one meets hopeless confusion in the use of the term 'being' to denote the essential existence of God (if not indeed to 'name' God) and also to denote reality." J. Heywood Thomas, Paul Tillich: An Appraisal, p.95.

2.

Niebuhr, op.cit., p.135.

to the affairs of the community, this relation is indispensable, says Niebuhr, for the preservation of true human freedom and morality. It is the symbol both of the indeterminate possibilities of love in which human freedom stands, and of the transcendent or eschatological pinnacle of the ethical life of man. It provides that dimension of freedom which makes meaningful the insight which man at times has in his self-transcendence - that physical life can be bought at too high a price. And it frees man from the petty measurements and recriminations into which mutual love always runs the risk of deteriorating.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, the revelation in Christ illuminates the mystery of man's sinfulness, of the inevitable inclination of man to use his freedom for his own ends, and of the infection of this self-regard in even the highest reaches of moral endeavour. The revelation in Christ reveals the seriousness of sin but it reveals also that this universal characteristic of human behaviour is not a normative expression of the human self. It answers the problem of universal human egotism on the ultimate level by divine forgiveness.<sup>2</sup>

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1.

Ibid., pp. 139 - 142.

2.

Ibid., pp. 135 - 137.

In this latest attempt to relate the truths of the Christian faith to the world of experience, Niebuhr has portrayed the suffering divine love of Christ as the final coherence of life.<sup>1</sup> Here, in the key to the ultimate mystery of the universe, there is, as well, a centre for historical meaning. This historical meaning is broad enough to embrace the whole historical drama, high enough to contain the freedom of the individual, and realistic enough to discern the corruptions of freedom in human history.<sup>2</sup> The fragmentariness, the brevity, and yet the dignity of life, is a mystery which is made meaningful, states Niebuhr, by the promise of a fulfilment which is beyond the capacity of man. The multifarious patterns of history can be fitted into a framework of meaning only if the meaning has a penumbra of mystery which consists of a power and a love beyond our comprehension, and which overrules these various

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1.

Niebuhr, Christian Realism and Political Problems, p.173. By 'coherence' Niebuhr does not mean a rational coherence but a coherence which faith perceives between the meaning of man's existence and the mystery of God's revelation. If faith is true faith then it is impossible to supply the kind of objective criterion which Jerry H. Gill ("Reinhold Niebuhr and Apologetics", in Theology Today, vol.XVII, 1960-61, pp.200 - 212), and E.J. Carnell ("A Religious Naturalist Looks at Niebuhr", Reinhold Niebuhr, ed. Kegley and Bretall, p.336), demand of Niebuhr.

2.

Niebuhr, The Self and the Dramas of History, p.242.

historical dramas.<sup>1</sup>

We have been able to trace in Niebuhr's understanding of man's salvation a development from an early liberal point of view towards a profounder view which, while understanding more deeply the significance of God's redemptive acts, at the same time, preserves liberalism's concern for the practical matters of human life. In his endeavour to express more adequately the truths of these redemptive acts, Niebuhr has used the concept of myth to express the coincidence of goodness and power in the revelation in Christ. And the perfection of 'agape' in Christ which transcends all human endeavour and yet is still relevant in history, can be adequately expressed, he believes, only in mythological, and not in metaphysical, terms.

Professor J.M. Lochman has criticized Niebuhr's usage of symbolism.<sup>2</sup> We find in Niebuhr's understanding of Jesus Christ, he says, an illustration, a reflection of the general problem of anthropology and ethics, rather

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1.

Ibid., p.258.

2.

J.M. Lochman, "Realism in Niebuhr's Christology", Scottish Journal of Theology, Vol.XI, 1958, pp.253-264.

than a unique and concrete event in which the real God in the real man intervenes in our history.<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr's Christology, on the one hand, is introduced in the general anthropological situation where 'agape' is the source of all human life, and, on the other hand, is revealed in the same 'agape' which clarifies this situation by transcending the limits and possibilities of human life. The message about Jesus Christ thus belongs to the natural religion in the sense that any rigorous analysis of the moral life of man will partially disclose the tensions towards the eternal in all morality. And it belongs to the revealed religion because it is not possible without faith, to follow these implications through to their final logical conclusion. Lochman asserts that Niebuhr's Christology depends "on primary anthropological and other assumptions". Niebuhr's starting off point is not the absolute difference between the divine and the human natures but their dialectical continuity. This relation between Christ's divinity and his humanity, states Lochman, is formulated in terms which have been determined in advance by Niebuhr's view of the general world structure.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Ibid., p.257.

2. Ibid., p.262.

But we must ask from whence has come Niebuhr's understanding of the dialectical structure of all human life. That 'agape' is both part of human experience and a pinnacle which judges all human experience, is an understanding which could stem only from God's revelation in Christ. It is easy to forget, states Paul Lehmann, "that Niebuhr is thinking mythically and thus to conclude that his thought moves in principle from reason to faith, from history to gospel, from anthropology to Christology. But exactly the contrary is the case."<sup>1</sup> Discussing the Pauline paradox of the power of God and the wisdom of God, Niebuhr states that here we have a very exact and succinct definition of the relation of revelation to human culture. The truth which is revealed in the Cross is not a truth which could have been anticipated in human culture and it is not the culmination of human wisdom. The true Christ is not expected. And yet, says Niebuhr, the truth of faith is not something which stands perpetually in contradiction to experience. On the contrary, it illumines experience and is in turn validated by experience.<sup>2</sup>

Professor Lochman considers that the orthodox dogma,

1.

Paul Lehmann, "The Christology of Reinhold Niebuhr", Reinhold Niebuhr, ed. Kegley and Bretall, p.270.

2.

Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, vol.II, pp.62-63.

in spite of all the weak points of its conceptual apparatus, testifies more clearly to the primary uniqueness and concreteness of God's act in Christ, while Niebuhr's endeavour merely dims the concrete core of the Biblical message.<sup>1</sup> But it is difficult to see Professor Lochman's criticism as anything other than purely negative. The Biblical message is proclamation and does not attempt, as Christian doctrine must, to examine the meaning of the Christ-event.

Despite these criticisms, it does appear that Niebuhr's 'symbolic' interpretation of Christology, insisting as it does upon the divine as well as upon the human dimensions of Christ's nature, stands within the bounds of the Christian faith. Compared to the writings of Ogden and Buri, Niebuhr's work appears as old-fashioned orthodoxy. But it may well be asked if Ogden and Buri's thinking about the man Jesus can be construed as Christology at all. And it also seems clear that so long as we pursue further their line of thinking we shall move further away from an authentic Christology. Niebuhr's usage of the concepts of myth and symbol allows him to retain the essential truths of the traditional Christologies but to express them in moral and ethical categories which are relevant to the human situation. This means that on the one hand the metaphysical speculations about Christ's

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1. Lochman, op.cit., pp.263-264.

nature which appear to have little practical relevance for human lives, are avoided. And, on the other hand, the commendable social and ethical concern demonstrated in the work of Ogden and Buri is maintained, but maintained without the obvious dangers of their positions. It is for this reason that it seems fair to say that Niebuhr's thinking on this issue offers a more promising basis for future advances in Christological thinking than do either of the alternatives mentioned.

Niebuhr's interpretation of the doctrine of man's salvation stresses the relevance of the actions of God in Christ for man's existence in the world. But it does this without falling into the errors which all "approaches from the other end" cannot avoid. Writing in 1949, Niebuhr warned that modern theology did not recognize that the new objections to the Gospel were merely an old objection in new forms. Men are inclined in every age, he wrote, to resist a truth which discloses the contingent character of their existence and discredits the false answer they find to this problem. To make faith the requirement of the ultimate meaning of existence is to recognize the divine mystery as impenetrable by human reason.<sup>1</sup> Subsequent developments in theological thinking reveal that Niebuhr's warning has not been heeded and that

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1.

Niebuhr, Faith and History, p.165.

too great an accomodation has been made to modern thought, and too great a reliance has been placed upon the efficacy of logical reasoning. The form of interpreting the central revelation of the Christian faith is really, says Niebuhr, the best indication of the ethos of an age. If the two facets of the revelation in Christ are not appreciated, and the figure of Christ is interpreted merely as a symbol and example of human virtue, all that is expressed in Biblical faith from the prophets to the final revelation, is lost. Christianity, in that event, becomes merely another form of "idealism" in and through which men deceive themselves, believing that their actions and lives are as good as the ideals which they are able to entertain.<sup>1</sup> In the light of some of the most radical developments in contemporary theology, this does not appear to be too harsh a judgement.

Faith, says Niebuhr, is always imperilled on the one side by despair and on the other side by optimism. Of these two enemies of faith, optimism is the more dangerous. Few people live in permanent despair. They will construct some little cosmos in the seeming chaos

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1.

Niebuhr, The Self and the Dramas of History, pp.171-172.

of existence in order to give meaning to their life. Optimism is essentially the construction of such a little cosmos.<sup>1</sup>

When one reads the latest example of 'the new optimism', one feels inclined to agree whole-heartedly with Niebuhr. "Everybody knows or at least feels", writes Professor William Hamilton, "that the time of troubles for the neo-orthodox-ecumenical-kerygmatic theology is upon us." A new spirit of optimism, of which the death of God theology is both a cause and a consequence, has swept away the pessimism of the past. Hamilton examines three areas in which this change can be discerned: in the social sciences, where there is such unbounded confidence and optimism, that even the really intractable problems that have marked our civilized period can be overcome; in the arts, where the end of artistic creativity is not order or value, but purposeless play, a play that affirms life; and in the civil rights movement, where one can discern the optimism and hope, which is "beyond tragedy, beyond alienation, beyond existentialism".<sup>2</sup> Such examples of ill-founded optimism add further weight to Niebuhr's

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1. Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy, p.115.

2. William Hamilton, "The New Optimism", Theology Today Vol.XXII, No.4, January, 1966, pp.479-490.

constantly reiterated warnings against overconfidence in human achievements.

And yet despite the brashness of modern optimism, we must still question whether Niebuhr has bestowed sufficient importance upon such achievements as are possible in human life - albeit achievements possible by the grace of God and not by human strength alone. We must ask with Paul Lehmann whether the Cross which is apprehended and interpreted as the basis of a new wisdom and power, is adequately apprehended and interpreted as operative wisdom and power.<sup>1</sup> Lehmann believes that Niebuhr's Christological thinking does not stress sufficiently 'the mighty acts of God' as transforming events which, having actually occurred, serve as beacon lights in a sea of relativity whereby the channel to the fulfilment of human destiny is chartered. In consequence of the events that God has become man and that Jesus Christ has been crucified, other events happen which, though but signs, do demonstrate that history is not just on the move and the believer with it; but that history and the believer are going somewhere, and that believers are to take some stands en route. "In short faith in Christ not only apprehends but also obeys."<sup>2</sup>

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1.

Paul Lehmann, "The Christology of Reinhold Niebuhr", Reinhold Niebuhr, ed. Kegley and Bretall, p.277.

2.

Ibid., p.279.

That there is justice in Lehmann's criticism can be seen when we remember that not all societies and not all segments of society are influenced by a superficial optimism. In these areas of life the importance of creative achievements in moral, ethical, and spiritual spheres must not be minimised. In his discussion of optimism, Niebuhr himself admitted that the greater danger is lest the cosmos from which people derive their sense of meaning be too tentative and tenuous to support the idea of meaning in the great crises of existence.<sup>1</sup> For those societies which are affected by a cynical introversion and a self-concern which avoids all action and responsibility, the possibility of creative achievement implemented in practical measures by a power beyond man's, is as important as the constant warning against over-confidence in optimistic activist societies.

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1. Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, p.115.

## CHAPTER VI

MAN AND HISTORY

Professor F. Powicke has stated that "the craving for an interpretation of history is so deep-rooted that, unless we have a constructive outlook over the past, we are drawn either to mysticism or to cynicism".<sup>1</sup> Because man yearns for a sense of stability and security within his world he desires to understand, in some way, the meaning of the multitudinous activities of the human race. This meaning can only be conveyed to him through an understanding of the history of mankind. Friedrich Meinecke stated that "the search for causalities in history is impossible without reference to values ... behind the search for causalities there always lies, directly or indirectly, the search for values".<sup>2</sup> This is true, for man's search for an understanding of history is always designed to shed light on the significance and quality of his present existence. Thus we find men constructing interpretations of history which encourage them to believe in their own powers of ordering their world and their future, even when such interpretations conflict with the historical evidence. "The problem of the

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1.

Quoted by E.H. Carr in What is History?, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd.; 1964), p.109.

2.

Ibid, p.107.

meaning of history is always the problem of the meaning of life itself, since man is an historic creature involved, and yet not involved, in the flux of nature and time ...."<sup>1</sup>

This means that man may either negate the meaning of history, or, if he seeks to complete it from the standpoint of his own wisdom, complete it falsely.

In this search for a meaningful interpretation of history there are two radically differing approaches. The one sees history as the compilation of the maximum number of irrefutable and objective facts. It believes that there is a hard core of historical facts existing objectively and independently of the interpretation of the historian, and that these facts have merely to be elucidated, collected, and arranged and they will speak for themselves. The other approach appreciates the degree to which the historian's own presuppositions determine both his selection and his interpretation of historical evidence and goes so far as to deny any objectivity to history at all. This approach tends towards a total scepticism, for if an interpretation of history is seen as being dependent upon the presuppositions of the historian, then we must be prepared to be confronted with an infinity of meanings, none any more right than any other; and this is tantamount to admitting that history has no meaning.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr, Faith and History, p.158.

<sup>2</sup> E.H. Carr, op.cit., Chapter I, "The Historian and his Facts."

It is clear that an adequate interpretation of history must lie somewhere between these two extremes.<sup>1</sup> In the belief that Niebuhr's interpretation of history lies between these two extremes, we shall, in this chapter, examine his interpretation of history as a possible alternative. On the one hand, Niebuhr seeks to avoid the assertion of the objective factualness of historical interpretation, and, on the other hand, he sees the dangers in a subjective scepticism. We shall examine these opposing poles of interpretation and then examine the adequacy of Niebuhr's interpretation. But before doing so we must note the three differing approaches towards history which Niebuhr considers to be embodied in Western culture.

### Three Approaches to History.

Western culture, states Niebuhr, embodies three approaches towards the vexing problem of the nature of human history.

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1.

Discussing the more specific problem of the relationship of a Christian legalism and moral relativism, Niebuhr states that the truth must lie between the 'self-evident' truths in the sphere of morality claimed by the Christian legalists, and the scepticism of the moral relativists who see the vast variety of social and cultural configurations. "There must be some way of resolving this debate between legalists and relativists which will refute the legalists whenever they make too sweeping claims for fixed standards of conduct and which will, at the same time, avoid the abyss of nihilism on the edge of moral relativism." (Faith and History, pp. 196 - 198.) In the same way, in a wider sphere, Niebuhr attempts a more adequate interpretation of history, between these two extreme poles of interpretation.

First, there is the approach of Greek classicism which equated history with the world of nature and sought the emancipation of man's changeless reason from this world of change. Secondly, there is the Biblical - Christian approach which found man's historic existence both meaningful and mysterious, and which regarded the freedom of man, which distinguished history from nature, as the source of evil as well as of good. And thirdly, concludes Niebuhr, there is the modern approach which regards the historical development of man's power and freedom as the solution for every human perplexity, and as the way of emancipation from every human evil.<sup>1</sup>

These three views of history are all answers, for Niebuhr, to the problems and perplexities consequent upon the radical nature of human freedom by which man is able to create a new level of coherence and meaning which conforms neither to the world of natural change nor yet to the realm of pure Being in which Greek idealism sought refuge from the world of change. It is this creativity of man, says Niebuhr, which constitutes the realm of history.<sup>2</sup>

In classical culture, says Niebuhr, a rigorous effort is made to disassociate what is regarded as a timeless and divine element in human nature from the world of change and

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1. Niebuhr, Faith and History, pp. 15 - 16.

2. Ibid, p.16.

temporal flux. In both oriental and western - classical thought the temporal world is comprehended in terms of cycles of endless recurrences. History is a realm of ambiguity; it is for the classical mind, intelligible only as it participates in the cycles of birth and death which characterize nature. But, says Niebuhr, this view ignores the fact that freedom and necessity are involved in every human action and in every historical concretion and configuration. It is this mixture of freedom and necessity which gives the realm of history its particular character of meaning and obscurity, of partial, but not complete, intelligibility.<sup>1</sup>

The Biblical-Christian interpretation of history, states Niebuhr, sees the clue to the meaning of the drama of history in the revelatory events - the "mighty acts" of God - culminating in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. History is seen to be meaningful because it is believed that the purposes of God are being wrought out in history. Because of the relationship between God and man evil is not seen as the intrusion of the necessities of nature into the historical, but rather, it is seen as a force within the world which attempts to destroy this relationship.<sup>2</sup> The problem for the self is seen to be its sin - the claiming too much for its finiteness - rather than

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1.

Niebuhr, op.cit., pp. 17 - 19.

2.

Niebuhr, Faith and History, pp. 30 - 31.

finiteness itself. The discontinuity which the Biblical - Christian interpretation of history sees between the self and God, prevents the self from either usurping the place of the divine for itself or from imagining itself merged with the divine. It can both affirm the life of the self in history and challenge its achievements in any particular instance.<sup>1</sup>

The dynamism of western culture, in Niebuhr's view, was made possible "by the triumph of the Biblical-Christian sense of history as a realm of meaning over the historical culture of classicism".<sup>2</sup> But the currents of modern culture which arose in the Renaissance and culminated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, rejected the Christian faith because its simple symbols did not correspond to the realities of nature or of history as disclosed by the natural and historical sciences. But the profounder cause of its triumph over the Christian faith was, states Niebuhr, the introduction of a new and more plausible version of the classical idea of simple, rational

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1. Niebuhr, The Self and the Dramas of History, p.77.

2. Niebuhr, Faith and History, p.16.

cf. E.H. Carr's statement that "It was the Jews, and after them the Christians, who introduced an entirely new element by postulating a goal towards which the historical process is moving - the teleological view of history ... . The Renaissance restored the classical view of an anthropocentric world and of the primacy of reason, but for the pessimistic classical view of the future, substituted an optimistic view derived from the Jewish-Christian tradition." (What is History?, p.110.)

intelligibility as the key to historical meaning.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the third approach to history, the modern approach, sees history as the story of man's increasing power and freedom. History is seen as the movement towards the final triumph of rational order over the primitive chaos. History is no longer an enigma; it has become the assurance of man's redemption from his every ill. The tragic irony of the refutation by contemporary historical events of modern man's conception of history embodies, says Niebuhr, the spiritual crisis of our age.<sup>2</sup>

Modern man attempts to comfort himself by believing in a 'spiral' development in history.<sup>3</sup> But the failures and achievements of advanced civilizations inherent in such a theory, are incommensurable with those of simpler societies. And insofar as comparisons can be made, says Niebuhr, it is idle to regard the tyrannies and anarchies which result from the breakdown of an advanced and highly integrated civilization as preferable to the social confusion of more primitive societies. A more favoured explanation of present catastrophes, continues Niebuhr, is

1. Niebuhr, op.cit., p.33.

2. Niebuhr, Faith and History, pp. 2 - 9.

3. No recession in history ever reaches the depths of previous ones and each new 'peak' achieves a height beyond those of the past (Faith and History, p.10).

to hold the 'cultural lag' responsible for them.<sup>1</sup> The hope that lies behind the belief that everything recalcitrant in human behaviour may be brought under the subjection of the inclusive purposes of 'mind' by the same technics which gained man mastery over nature, is not merely an incidental illusion, prompted by the phenomenal achievements of the natural sciences; it is, states Niebuhr, the culminating error in modern man's misunderstanding of himself.<sup>2</sup>

In view of the prevalence of the belief in a progressive history it is worthwhile to examine in greater detail one such interpretation. E.H. Carr has won acclaim as a historian of Soviet Russia and his work What is History? is, on the whole, a mine of sound common sense. Carr writes that:

no sane person ever believed in a kind of progress which advanced in an unbroken straight line without reverses and deviations and breaks in continuity, so that even the sharpest reverse is not necessarily fatal to the belief . . . . Indeed, if I were addicted to formulating laws of history, one such law would be to the effect that the group - call it a class, a nation, a continent, a civilization, what you will - which

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1.

In this explanation a long view of history is taken, the millenia of prehistoric barbarism which preceded the known and comparatively brief period of life, is enlarged upon, and the hope is expressed that present misfortunes belong to the period of civilization's infancy which will be forgotten in the unimagined heights which will be achieved in the unimagined subsequent ages. (Faith and History, p.11).

2.

Ibid, pp. 11 - 14.

plays the leading role in the advance of civilization in one period is unlikely to play a similar role in the next period, and this for the good reason that it will be too deeply imbued with the traditions, interests, and ideologies of the earlier period to be able to adapt itself to the demands and conditions of the next period. Thus it may very well happen that what seems for one group a period of decline may seem to another the birth of a new advance. Progress does not and cannot mean equal and simultaneous progress for all. It is significant that almost all our latter-day prophets of decline, our sceptics who see no meaning in history and assume that progress is dead, belong to that sector of the world and to that class of society which have triumphantly played a leading and predominant part in the advance of civilization for several generations.<sup>1</sup>

Such shifts in leadership, initiative and centres of power, writes Carr, are always times of violent upheavals and struggles for power.

What I would suggest is that we are now passing through such a period. It appears to me simply untrue to say that our understanding of the problems of social organization or our goodwill to organize society in the light of that understanding have regressed: indeed, I should venture to say that they have greatly increased. It is not that our capacities have diminished, or our moral qualities declined. But the period of conflict and upheaval, ... through which we have been living, has enormously increased the strain on these capacities and qualities ... .<sup>2</sup>

But we must ask ourselves what has caused the present conflict and upheaval between continents, nations, and classes. These movements are not external to the life and

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1. E.H. Carr, What is History?, pp. 116 - 117.

2. Ibid, p.118.

actions of man; rather it is the latter which has caused them. It is true, as Carr suggests, that our understanding of the problems of social organization has increased, and it is probably equally true that our moral qualities have not declined. But the problem for modern humanity is that every new advance in technology, in mass communications, and in social organization offers greater opportunity for the exercise of human self-will and egotism. Whatever advances we make in the technological or social spheres demand commensurate advances in moral and ethical standards. So far there is insufficient evidence that this demand is being met. Belief in progress, says Carr, means belief not in any automatic or inevitable process, but in the progressive development of human potentialities.<sup>1</sup> But in every development of a potentiality towards a more just and ordered society, there exists within this same development the possibility for selfish exploitation, for injustice and disorder.

Carr believes that the extension to new spheres of the function and power of reason is part of the revolutionary change through which the twentieth century world is passing. Man's capacity to control his economic destiny and his capacity to control population are seen by Carr as examples of progress.<sup>2</sup> Modern methods of persuasion and indoctrination

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1.

Ibid, p.119.

2.

Ibid, pp. 140 - 143.

are seen as allowing educators to shape society in a particular mould, and to inculcate in the rising generation attitudes, loyalties, and opinions appropriate to that type of society. But we must also ask if modern methods of persuasion and indoctrination do not exploit the baser and more selfcentred instincts in men and encourage them to live in a dream-world of phantasy and irresponsibility.

The second aspect of this progressive revolution is seen by Carr to lie in the tendency of the world centre of gravity to shift from the English speaking world towards Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa.

.... the spread of modern technological and industrial processes, and of the beginnings of education and political consciousness, to millions of the population of Asia and Africa, is changing the face of those continents; and, while I cannot peer into the future, I do not know of any standard of judgment which would allow me to regard this as anything but a progressive development in the perspective of world history. 1

From this point of view one can only agree with Carr. But whether we shall be able to describe as progress what the Africans and Chinese do with these newly won freedoms is another matter. Recent events in Africa make one wary of any kind of prophesying.

#### The Complexities of History.

The real truth concerning history, states Niebuhr,

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1.

E.H. Carr, What is History?, p.148.

is that history is comprised of causalities and sequences, of coherences and structures, which are not easily comprehended as meaningful. They are too varied and unique to fit into any simple pattern of historical interpretation, whether classical or progressive. History is the fruit and the proof of man's freedom, for it is man's freedom over time which results in historical structures and configurations, in institutions and cultures which though subject to mortality, are longer-lived and infinitely more complex than the organisms of nature.<sup>1</sup>

This freedom of man's is demonstrated by the operation of memory. Memory, which Christian thought has defined as one aspect of the image of God in man, represents, says Niebuhr, man's capacity to rise above, even while he is within, the temporal flux. Present realities can be rightly interpreted only through the memory of past events. Memory is thus the fulcrum of freedom for man in history. That is why, says Niebuhr, the study of history can be an emancipating force in human life. The less the past is known and the human contrivance which entered into present realities is undisclosed, the more do present facts appear in the guise of irrevocable facts of nature.<sup>2</sup>

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1.

Niebuhr, Faith and History, pp. 62 - 63.

2.

Ibid, pp. 19 - 22. cf. also Carr's remark that "the past is intelligible to us only in the light of the present; and we can fully understand the present only in the light of the past. To enable man to understand the society of the past, and to increase his mastery over the society of the present, is the dual function of history." (Carr, What is History?, p.55).

It is man's freedom to both survey the events of the past and to rise above his present environment which leads to the diverse and novel modes of behaviour and action which make scientific generalizations based upon the observation of recurrence, much more dubious and hazardous than the generalizations which constitute the stuff of science. To the degree that men are not free, states Niebuhr, their actions, both individual and collective, may be predicted with something of the assurance with which the natural scientist charts the recurrences of nature. But insofar as men's actions are free, causal sequences in history reach a height and complexity in which the full understanding of the character of an event requires the knowledge of the secret motive of the agent of the action.<sup>1</sup>

Yet if human freedom were absolute, human actions, says Niebuhr, would create a realm of confusion. But, on the other hand, if the patterns and structures, whether natural or historical, were absolute, human freedom would be annulled. The truth, as E.H. Carr points out, is that the logical dilemma about freewill and determinism does not arise in real life. It is not that some human actions are free and others determined. The fact is that all human actions are both free and determined irrespective of the point of view from which one considers them.<sup>2</sup> But

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1.

Ibid, pp. 62 - 63.

2.

E.H. Carr, What is History?, p.95.

where then, asks Niebuhr, is the centre of meaning to be found for both individual life and for the total human enterprise? It is because the answer to this question is so difficult and extends the bounds of meaning from the confines of the simply intelligible to the realm of mystery, that alternative solutions have been sought in naturalism and in rationalism.<sup>1</sup>

But, says Niebuhr, interpretations which dismiss the unity of the real self in its combination of finiteness and freedom appear unreal when compared to the commonsense view, or the profound insights of the poet and of the artist. The commonsense of ordinary men is seldom under the illusion that the jealousies and envies which affect even the most intimate human relationships are merely the defects of an undisciplined mind. Commonsense or poetry, unless completely robbed of their art of observation, can see that the ideals of the human self are interlaced with anxieties and fears not known in the kingdom of pure reason, and its hopes and ambitions betray a guile of spirit not known in the realm of nature.<sup>2</sup>

Because of the difficulty of ascertaining any adequate centre of meaning in history, men are driven either to the dogmatic assertion of an interpretation which ignores the evidence of history, or to a scepticism which sees no meaning

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1. Niebuhr, op.cit., p.63.

2. Ibid, pp. 102 - 103.

in history. Because of the ambiguity of man's situation in history, as one who transcends and yet is involved in the historical process, man cannot construct systems of meaning for the facts of history, without making the temporal locus of his observation into a falsely absolute vantage point.<sup>1</sup> A high degree of imagination, insight, or detachment may heighten or enlarge the locus; but no human power can make it fully adequate. Historical sciences may help to reduce ideological taints, and philosophical disciplines may guard against claims to absolute knowledge; but none of them can obviate the necessity of using a scheme of meaning for the correlation of the observed data of history which is not the consequence but the presupposition of the empirical scrutiny of historical data.<sup>2</sup> It is for this reason that the problem of historical relativism remains one of the unsolved problems of modern culture. This problem, concludes Niebuhr, forces modern man, who claims to be increasingly the master of historical destiny, into periodic moods of scepticism, as he analyses his dubious position as observer of history.<sup>3</sup>

The awareness of the relativities of the claims to interpret history, and the awareness of the tragedies and

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1. Niebuhr, Faith and History, p.127.

2. Ibid, pp. 133 - 134.

3. Ibid, p.131.

sufferings into which dogmatic claims to interpret history have plunged mankind, have led to the appearance of a stream of cynical disillusionment alongside modern man's optimism. Goethe may have been right when he said that "when eras are on the decline, all tendencies are subjective, but on the other hand when matters are ripening for a new epoch, all tendencies are objective".<sup>1</sup> In any case whether we see subjectivism or objectivism as predominating, there can be no doubt that the complexities of history have resulted in men turning to either of these extreme interpretations. It is historical subjectivism and its associated scepticism on the one hand, and on the other hand, the attachment of meaning in history to certain indisputable facts, which constitute the basic division in contemporary historical interpretation. We must examine each of these schools of thought in turn and then examine Niebuhr's interpretation of history as a possible alternative.

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1.

Quoted by E.H. Carr, in What is History?, p.124.

Carr makes the comment that the relative decline in weight of the English speaking countries in world affairs is closely related to the scepticism, cynicism, and prophecies of disaster emanating from the intellectuals of countries whose former position is undermined. (What is History? p.146). But it is at least possible that this scepticism contains a truth which the objectivism of an optimistic, activist culture cannot see.

The Subjective School of Historical Interpretation.

One of the most influential historians of the subjective school has been R.G. Collingwood. In answer to the question: What is history for?, Collingwood answers that it is for human self-knowledge. "The value of history ... is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is."<sup>1</sup> And what is man? - man is essentially mind. But mind is not a substance, it is not something lying behind its activities. "Any study of mind is a study of its activities."<sup>2</sup> Collingwood thus conceives thought not as a mere act of thinking but as an act of man in his entire existence, as an act of decision.

For history, the object to be discovered is not, in Collingwood's view, the mere event in history, but the thought expressed in it. To discover that thought is already to understand it. The cause of an event for an historian means the thought in the mind of the person by whose agency the event came about; and this is not something other than the event, it is the inside of the event itself. All history is the history of thought. The only way in which the historian can discern the thoughts which he is trying

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1. R.G. Collingwood, The Idea of History, (London: Oxford; 1946), p.10.

2. Ibid, p.221.

to discover is by rethinking them in his own mind.<sup>1</sup> The knowledge of history is at the same time self-knowledge; it is the self-knowledge of the historian's own mind as the present revival and reliving of past experience.<sup>2</sup>

There can be historical knowledge, argues Collingwood, only of that which can be re-enacted in the historian's mind. Of that which is not experience but the mere object of experience there can be no history.<sup>3</sup> The object of historical knowledge must be of such a kind that it can revive itself, or "vibrate" in the historian's mind. This means that the historian must be the right man to study that object; his thought must be, as it were, pre-adapted to become its host.<sup>4</sup> Throughout his work the historian is selecting, constructing, and criticizing; so far from relying on an authority other than himself, to whose statements his thought must conform, the historian, insists Collingwood, is his own authority, to which his so-called authorities must conform, and by reference to which they are criticized.<sup>5</sup>

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1.

Ibid, pp. 214-215. Just as the autobiographer can disentangle his past thoughts and decide that he must have, at one time, thought in certain ways, the historian by using evidence of the same general kind, can recover the thoughts of others, coming to them now even if he never thought them before, and knowing this activity as the re-enactment of what those men once thought. (p.296).

2.

Ibid, p.175.

3.

Ibid, p.302.

4.

Ibid, pp. 304 - 305.

5.

Ibid, pp. 236 - 239.

All thinking, states Collingwood, is critical thinking; the thought which re-enacts past thoughts, criticizes them in re-enacting them. The extreme subjectivity of Collingwood's view is further demonstrated when he says that this critical re-enactment is an achievement of the historian's "a priori imagination." The historian's picture of the past is in every detail an imaginary picture.

Historical thinking is that activity of the imagination by which we endeavour to provide this innate idea with detailed content. And this we do by using the present as evidence for its own past. . . . In principle the aim of any such act [the imaginative reconstruction of the past] is to use the entire perceptible here-and-now as evidence for the entire past through whose process it has come into being.<sup>1</sup>

The yardstick by which the historian assesses the credibility and correctness of his sources is that of whether the picture of the past, the product of his own a priori imagination, is a coherent and continuous picture, one which makes sense.<sup>2</sup> But because the evidence available for solving any given problem changes with every change of historical method and with every variation in the competence of historians, every new generation, says Collingwood, must rewrite history in its own way. Nevertheless, however fragmentary and faulty the results of the historian's work

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1. R.G. Collingwood, The Idea of History, p.247.

2. Ibid, p.245.

may be, the idea which governed its course is clear, rational, and universal. It is the idea of the historical imagination as a self-dependent, self-determining, and self-justifying form of thought.<sup>1</sup>

Collingwood believes that his interpretation of history overcomes the problem of the relationship of subjectivity and objectivity. Historical knowledge is the knowledge of what mind has done in the past, and at the same time it is the re-doing of this, the perpetuation of past acts in the present. Its object is therefore not a mere object, something outside the mind which knows it; it is an activity of thought which can be known only insofar as the knowing mind re-enacts it and knows itself as so doing. To the historian, the activities whose history he is studying are objective, or known to him, only because they are also subjective, or activities of his own.<sup>2</sup> Historical science is objective precisely in its subjectivity, because the subject and object of historical science do not exist independently of one another.

But this emphasis on the role of the historian in the making of history tends, as E.H. Carr rightly comments, to rule out, if pressed to its logical conclusion, any objective history at all: history is what the historian makes.

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1. Ibid, pp. 248 - 249.

2. Ibid, p.218.

Indeed, at one moment, Collingwood seems to have reached a conclusion which amounts, says Carr, to total scepticism.<sup>1</sup> In his reaction against "scissors and paste history", against the view of history as a mere compilation of facts, Collingwood, says Carr, comes perilously near to treating history as something spun out of the human brain. We are offered here the theory of an infinity of meanings, none more right than any other. But it does not follow, argues Carr, that, because interpretation plays a necessary part in establishing the facts of history, and because no existing interpretation is wholly objective, one interpretation is as good as another, and the facts of history are in principle not amenable to objective interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

But a still greater danger lurks in the Collingwood hypothesis, argues Carr. If the historian necessarily looks at his period of history through the eyes of his own time and studies the problems of the past as a key to those of the present, will he not fall, asks Carr, into a purely pragmatic view of the facts, and will he not maintain that

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1.

"St. Augustine looked at history from the point of view of the early Christian; Tillamont, from that of a seventeenth century Frenchman; Gibbon, from that of an eighteenth century Englishman; Mommsen, from that of a nineteenth century German. There is no point in asking which was the right point of view. Each was the only one possible for the man who adopted it." Quoted by T.M. Knox in Editor's Preface of the Idea of History, p.XII.

2.

E.H. Carr, What is History?, pp. 26 - 27.

the criterion of a right interpretation is its suitability to some present purpose? On this hypothesis, the facts of history are nothing, interpretation is everything.<sup>1</sup> When we have examined the influence of Collingwood's thought upon the work of Rudolf Bultmann we shall be able to appreciate the significance of Carr's warning.

Principal T.M. Knox has referred to the strain of scepticism in Collingwood's philosophical thinking and to the influence of this strain upon Collingwood's interpretation of history.<sup>2</sup> The logic of Collingwood's argument, states Principal Knox, would ultimately force him to hold that the work of any individual thinker is made what it is, in the last resort, by the particular set of absolute presuppositions

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1.

Ibid, p.27.

2.

"In The Idea of History there is a sharp rejection of Dilthey's idea that the philosophy a man adopts depends on his psychological make-up. Was the sharpness due to a still unconscious suspicion that a similar and no less sceptical view was implied in the historical relativism to which he became more and more attracted? As we have seen, he came to think that there is no sense in asking whether St. Augustine's view of Roman history is right or wrong, because he could not have thought otherwise than he did under the conditions of his own epoch. But if we ask exactly why he could not have thought otherwise, part at least of the answer must be 'because of his psychological make-up'...".  
R.G. Collingwood, The Idea of History, p.XIII.

which he himself has adopted.<sup>1</sup>

When we examine Collingwood's work we find that though the important rôle of presuppositions is fully recognized, the influence of presuppositions upon interpretation is accepted quite uncritically. Collingwood states that every time a historian asks a question he asks it because he thinks he can answer it; he has already in his mind a preliminary and tentative idea of the evidence he will be able to use.<sup>2</sup> The historian, continues Collingwood, proceeds in his activities according to a plan, he thinks on purpose, and thus arrives at results which can be judged according to criteria derived from the plan itself.<sup>3</sup> Now it is a vital question how a man comes to hold the presuppositions he does and how they come in course of time to be rejected in favour of others, states Principal Knox.<sup>4</sup> But such an uncritical acceptance of the historian's presuppositions as Collingwood's must mean an equally uncritical acceptance of the historian's interpretation. For once we have granted the historian his presuppositions, it is very difficult, with the evidence presented, to disagree with his findings.

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1. Ibid, p.XIV.

2. Ibid, p.281.

3. Ibid, p.312.

4. Ibid, p.XIV.

Niebuhr has made two main criticisms of Collingwood's interpretation of history. Firstly, the unconscious, or only partly conscious motives of the great actors of history, their resentments, ambitions, and jealousies, can hardly be dignified as "thoughts", and they are in any event, says Niebuhr, more inscrutable than Collingwood supposes. We cannot understand the pathetic period in which Hitler dominated Germany by reconstructing his thoughts or those of his lieutenants. Only a philosopher could have attributed such a motive, to the historian. The historian would know that Hitler was probably not wholly conscious of the strange mixture of resentment and ambition which animated him. Collingwood, says Niebuhr, made the mistake of defining as "thought" what is really the dramatic freedom which distinguishes history. And in the second place, argues Niebuhr, historical events are the product of a concatenation of social and historical forces, and therefore the thoughts even of the most eminent actors in the historical drama are unimportant in comparison with the interplay of these forces.<sup>1</sup> These reasons demonstrate that the subjective school of historical interpretation can be dangerously misleading when relied upon as a method of understanding history.

#### The Objective School of Historical Interpretation.

At the opposite pole from Collingwood's extreme

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1. Niebuhr, The Self and the Dramas of History, pp. 70 - 72.

subjectivism, we have interpretations of history which attempt a complete separation between subject and object. Historical facts impinge upon the observer from outside and are independent of his consciousness. The historian must first get his facts straight, and then he can embark upon interpretation. We can perceive the influence of a layman's understanding of scientific method upon the historians of the turn of the century who believed that the use of the methods of the scientist would eradicate bias and error and could lead to the advancement of true knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Describing the plan for the Cambridge Modern History, a work which he had undertaken to edit, Lord Acton wrote:

It is a unique opportunity for recording, in the way most useful to the greatest number, the fullness of the knowledge which the nineteenth century is about to bequeath . . . . By the judicious division of labour we should be able to do it, and to bring

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1.

"If men of science owe anything to us, we may learn much from them that is essential. For they can show how to test proof, how to secure fullness and soundness in induction, how to restrain and employ with safety hypothesis and analogy. It is they who hold the secret to the mysterious property of the mind by which error ministers to truth, and truth slowly, but irrevocably prevails. Theirs is the logic of discovery, the demonstration of the advance of knowledge and the development of ideas, which as the earthly wants and passions of men remain almost unchanged, are the charter of progress and the vital spark in history." Lord Acton, Lectures on Modern History, (London: Macmillan; 1906), p.21.

home to every man the last document, and the ripest conclusions of international research. Ultimate history we cannot have in this generation; but we can dispose of conventional history, and show the point we have reached on the road from one to the other, now that all information is within reach, and every problem has become capable of solution.<sup>1</sup>

In a letter to the contributors to the Cambridge Modern History, Acton wrote that "our scheme requires that nothing shall reveal the country, the religion, or the party to which the writers belong".<sup>2</sup> The editor of the New Cambridge Modern History commenting on his predecessors, wrote that the nineteenth century historians had "scored so many successes in disposing of lies or legends by the confrontation of crucial facts that they came to think of facts as the indestructible atoms by the adding of which together true history could be composed. With something of this sort in mind they looked forward to a future when it would be possible to write 'definitive history'".<sup>3</sup> This obsession with facts was seen as the

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1.

Quoted by E.H. Carr, in What is History?, p.7.

2.

Acton, op.cit., p.316. "... our Waterloo must be one that satisfies French and English, Germans and Dutch alike; that nobody can tell without examining the list of authors, where the Bishop of Oxford laid down the pen and whether Fairbairn or Gasquet, Liebermann or Harrison took it up." (p. 318).

3.

Sir George Clark, The New Cambridge History, Vol.I, (Cambridge University Press; 1957), p.XXIV.

means of eradicating the relativisms of country, religion, or party; an eradication which Acton regarded as necessary. But, as Sir George Clark points out: "Few of the historians were speculative enough to inquire what facts are. It appeared sufficient that they were not fancies, nor theories; the adjective most commonly applied to them was 'hard'. Whatever else might be open to question they seemed real."<sup>1</sup>

But lest it be thought that this obsession with facts is a long-outmoded view unworthy of resurrection, it is worthwhile examining Sir George Clark's own thoughts on his history. "This new issue of the Cambridge Modern History", he writes, "has been planned neither as a stepping-stone to definitive history; nor as an abstract or a scale-reduction of all our knowledge of the period but as a coherent body of judgments true to the facts."<sup>2</sup> And in an article published in *The Listener*, he is quoted as contrasting "the hard core of facts" in history with the "surrounding pulp of disputable interpretation".<sup>3</sup> But if Sir George accused his predecessors of being insufficiently speculative to inquire what facts are, we can, in turn, prefer the same charge against him. In E.H. Carr's words, "... if standing Sir George Clark on his head, I were to call history 'a hard

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1.

Ibid, p.XXV.

2.

Ibid, p.XXXIV.

3.

Quoted in The Listener, 19 June 1952, p.992.

core of interpretation surrounded by a pulp of disputable facts'; my statement would, no doubt, be one-sided and misleading, but no more so, I venture to think, than the original dictum".<sup>1</sup>

It is significant that the sociologists who are so often influenced by a faulty understanding of scientific method should see in this objective, factual understanding of history a tool for the building of their new society. Thus we find Karl Mannheim believing that it is possible to develop a "sociology of knowledge" which will refine historical knowledge by isolating and excluding the conditional perspectives of persons, classes, interests, and periods until the real truth is reached.

Mannheim believes that the basic task of research in the sociology of knowledge is to determine the various and changing viewpoints which gradually arise in history. These viewpoints, or perspectives, must be brought into relationship with the currents of thought of which they are part; and they in turn must be traced back to the social forces determining them. This reduction to explicit criteria, argues Mannheim, offers the maximum reliability in the reconstruction of intellectual development, because it frees it from the elements of propaganda and evaluation. It succeeds in singling out the anonymous, unarticulated

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1.

E.H. Carr, What is History?, pp. 23 - 24.

forces which are operative in the history of thought. "It does this, however, not merely in the bare form of surmises, nor in narrative terms (which is still the level of our political and cultural history), but rather in the form of the controllable determination of facts".<sup>1</sup>

It is against this uncritical acceptance of historical evidence that Collingwood has reacted so strongly. But his reaction has been too strong and in the place of the irrefutable fact we have been offered an unadulterated relativism. Neither position is acceptable. It is the value of Niebuhr's position that it lies between these two extremes.

Niebuhr has criticized the efforts of an American philosopher, Maurice Mandelbaum, to escape historical relativism by exalting "facts" and minimizing their valuations through which the historian betrays his own relative viewpoint.<sup>2</sup> The difficulty with this solution, says Niebuhr, is that every fact is both the fruit of a dozen or a hundred different historical pressures, forces, and tendencies, and the root of a dozen or a hundred historical

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1. Karl Mannheim, Ideology and Utopia. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner Ltd; 1936), pp. 266, 276 - 277.

2. Niebuhr, Faith and History, p.132.

consequences. The bare fact is little more than a date in history. Even battles incur conflicting interpretations, while in the vast complexities of political defeats and victories, interpretation of the events depends even more obviously upon the framework of meaning from which they are observed. The larger the area of historical events which is surveyed, the more obvious it is that events in it can be correlated within a framework of meaning, to which the viewpoint of an age, a class, or a nation contributes as much as the facts themselves. When the area of enquiry is sufficiently wide and complex, even the most scrupulous honesty on the part of the historian, states Niebuhr, cannot prevent his viewpoint from colouring the historical picture.<sup>1</sup>

Nothing can give any observer such detachment from the historical scene, continues Niebuhr, as would endow his views with the same kind of unchallenged and unchallengeable validity which the conclusions of the natural scientists

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1.

Ibid, pp. 132 - 133. cf. also E.H. Carr What is History? pp. 123 - 124. "The historian's interpretation of the past, his selection of the significant and the relevant, evolves with the progressive emergence of new goals .... so long as the main goal appeared to be the organization of constitutional liberties and political rights, the historian interpreted the past in constitutional and political terms. When economic and social ends began to replace constitutional and political ends, historians turned to economic and social interpretations of the past."

well may claim. It is not possible, he argues, to get a definitive interpretation of such events as the French Revolution or the American Civil War, for instance, which would refute all conflicting interpretations.<sup>1</sup> History and the interpretation of history are mutually dependent. Since all the structures of meaning which furnish the principle of coherence for historiography are contained in evaluations, to eliminate them, says Niebuhr, is a rather vigorous solution which would leave us with little else but the bare dates of critical events. Historical events are established in terms of coherence by precisely the 'evaluations' which are so embarrassing philosophically. They point to the impossibility of reducing historical drama to natural coherences. Interpretations are informed, concludes Niebuhr, by specific frames of meaning and these frames of meaning determine the interpretation of facts.<sup>2</sup>

Niebuhr's position is supported by E.H. Carr who states that there are certain basic facts which are the same for all historians and which form, so to speak, the backbone of history. But it is not with facts like these

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1.

See G. Rude, Interpretations of the French Revolution, (published for the Historical Association by Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961) for a similar view. T.J. Pressly, Americans Interpret Their Civil War, (Princeton University Press, 1954) makes the point that one can identify the period in which American Civil War historians wrote by the kind of history they produced.

2.

Niebuhr, The Self and the Dramas of History, pp. 65 - 69.

that the historian is primarily concerned. Such basic facts as the dates and places of battles belong to the category of the raw materials of the historian rather than of history itself. The necessity to establish these basic facts rests not on any quality in the facts themselves, but on an 'a priori' decision of the historian. It used to be said, says Carr, that facts speak for themselves. This, of course, he adds, is untrue. The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context.<sup>1</sup> Whether an incident of the past is given the status of a historical fact will turn upon a question of interpretation - whether historians see in it a happening of significance. This element of interpretation enters into every fact of history.<sup>2</sup>

In our examination of the relation of the historian to the facts of history, it is clear that a tenable point of view must lie between a theory of history as an objective compilation of facts, and an equally untenable theory of

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1.

"The facts are really not at all like fish on the fish-monger's slab. They are like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what the historian catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in, and what tackle he chooses to use - these two factors being, of course, determined by the kind of fish he wants to catch. By and large, the historian will get the kind of facts he wants." E.H. Carr, What is History?, p.23.

2.

Ibid, pp. 7 - 13.

history as the subjective product of the mind of the historian who establishes the facts of history and masters them through the process of interpretation. The predicament of the historian, states E.H. Carr, is a reflexion of the nature of man. "Man ... is not totally involved in his environment and unconditionally subject to it. On the other hand, he is never totally independent of it and its unconditional master. The relation of man to his environment is the relation of the historian to his theme. The historian is neither the humble slave nor the tyrannical master of his facts. The relation between the historian and his facts is one of equality, of give-and-take ... the historian is engaged on a continuous process of moulding his facts to his interpretation and his interpretation to his facts. It is impossible to assign primacy to one over the other."<sup>1</sup>

The historian, says Carr, starts with a provisional selection of facts, and a provisional interpretation in the light of which that selection has been made. "As he works, both the interpretation and the selection and ordering of facts undergo subtle and perhaps partly unconscious changes, through the reciprocal action of one or the other. And this reciprocal action also involves reciprocity between present and past, since the historian is part of the

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1.

E.H. Carr, What is History?, p.29.

present and the facts belong to the past. The historian and the facts of history," concludes Carr, "are necessary to one another. The historian without his facts is rootless and futile; the facts without their historian are dumb."<sup>1</sup>

A clue to the problem of the alleged dichotomy between fact and value is provided, believes Carr, by our ordinary use of the word 'truth' - a word which straddles the world of fact and the world of value, and is made up of elements of both. Every language, states Carr, appears to require this word for a truth which is not merely a statement of fact and not merely a value judgment, but embraces both elements. "Somewhere between these two poles - the north pole of valueless facts and the south pole of value judgments still struggling to transform themselves into facts - lies the realm of historical truth. The historian .. is balanced between fact and interpretation, between fact and value. He cannot separate them. ..."<sup>2</sup>

Carr's eminently sane treatment of the nature and method of historical study has been dealt with at length because it elaborates upon and makes clearer Niebuhr's own position. It demonstrates clearly Niebuhr's own point of view that historical study cannot seek comfort in the

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1.

Ibid, pp. 29 - 30.

2.

Ibid, pp. 131 - 132.

finality of a pure objectivism or of a pure subjectivism. Although its work can never be concluded historical study is here offered a viable alternative to these extremes of interpretation. And only by following this alternative, despite its inevitable frustrations, can the dogmatism of objectivism and subjectivism be avoided.

### History and Faith

Because the historian stands in intimate relation to the facts he must interpret, the events of history, says Niebuhr, will always appear infinitely complex. Even apart from the obvious bias of historians, the events of history are so complex and the historical dramas overlap one another in such bewildering confusion that history is not subject to the generalizations either of scientists or of philosophers who insist on trying to comprehend its multifarious themes in terms of either natural or ontological necessity. The real historians, says Niebuhr, have an instinct for the peculiar quality of history and know the hazards of predictions of the future. Even if a historian is able to establish causal sequences after an event in history, he cannot make any generalizations about the past, the basis of predictions of future actions and events. He cannot do so, states Niebuhr, not only because he has insufficient knowledge of the complex causes of the past; but also because he cannot predict which one of the many

tendencies and forces which determine actions may have a dominant place in the life of individuals and nations.<sup>1</sup>

In an endeavour to overcome the confusion of historical evidence some historians and philosophers, states Niebuhr, have attempted to make sense out of the larger patterns in history and to comprehend the whole drama of history as meaningful.<sup>2</sup> There is no more significant pointer, writes E.H. Carr, to the character of a society than the kind of history it writes or fails to write. In the nineteenth century, British historians with scarcely an exception, regarded the course of history as a demonstration of the principle of progress. "History was full of meaning for British historians, so long as it seemed to be going our way; now that it has taken a wrong turning, belief in the meaning of history has become a heresy."<sup>3</sup> Since Toynbee's failure to replace a linear view of history by a cyclical theory - the characteristic ideology of a society in decline - British historians, says Carr, have for the most part been content to throw in their hands and declare that there is no general pattern at all.<sup>4</sup>

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1.

Niebuhr, The Self and the Dramas of History, pp. 59 - 61.

2. Ibid, p.61.

3. E.H. Carr, What is History?, pp. 42 - 43.

4. Ibid, p.43. Both Niebuhr and Carr refer to H.A.L. Fisher's significant remark. "Men wiser and more learned than I have discerned in history a plot, a rhythm, a predetermined pattern. These harmonies are concealed from me. I see only one emergency following upon another, as wave follows on wave; only one great fact, with respect to which, since it is unique, there can be no generalizations, only one safe rule for the historian; that he should recognize in the development of human destinies the play of the contingent and unforeseen."

Therefore it must be clear that if any interpretation of history is to be attempted, it can be attempted only as an act of faith. The more the whole panorama of history is brought into view, writes Niebuhr, the more obvious it becomes that the meaning which is given to the whole is derived from an act of faith. History in its totality and unity is given a meaning by some kind of religious faith; in the sense that the concept of meaning is derived from ultimate presuppositions about the character of time and eternity, which are not the fruit of detailed analyses of historical events.<sup>1</sup> This faith is able to affirm the meaning of historical existence in its unity because it discerns by faith revelations of the centre of its meaning beyond coherences of nature and the rationally ambiguous coherences of history.

It is interesting to find a secular historian in the person of E.H. Carr who believes that the historian must solve his problems without recourse to some superhistorical source such as the Christian God or Hegel's World Spirit, and who professes no belief in the perfectibility of man nor in a future paradise on earth, and yet who believes that a faith in progress is indispensable to the survival

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Niebuhr, Faith and History, p.134.

of society.<sup>1</sup> The historian in his task of interpretation, says Carr, needs his standard of significance in order to distinguish between the significant and the accidental, and he can find it only in relevance to the end in view. This is necessarily an evolving end, since the evolving interpretation of the past is a necessary function of history. "The absolute in history is not something in the past from which we start; it is not something in the present, since all present thinking is necessarily relative. It is something still incomplete and in process of becoming - something in the future towards which we move, which begins to take shape only as we move towards it, and in the light of which, as we move forward, we gradually shape our interpretation of the past."<sup>2</sup> It is this sense of direction in history, says Carr, which alone enables us to order and interpret the events of the past, and to liberate and organize human energies in the present with a view to the future. The historian of the past can

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"... I shall be content with the possibility of unlimited progress - or progress subject to no limits that we can need or envisage - towards goals which can be defined only as we advance towards them, and the validity of which can be verified only in a process of attaining them. Nor do I know how, without some such conception of progress, society can survive." (Carr, What is History?, p.119).

2.

Ibid, p.121.

make an approach towards objectivity only as he approaches towards the understanding of the future.<sup>1</sup>

But such a belief in the concept of progress can only be described as an act of faith. As Carr himself says, "Nobody is obliged to believe either in the future of history or in the future of society."<sup>2</sup> If it is acceptable for Carr to place his faith in an understanding of history which the evidence of history does not necessarily yield, then it must be equally acceptable for the Christian historian to postulate a Christian interpretation of history - an interpretation which sees the goal and ultimate meaning of history as beyond history.

#### A Subjective Christian Interpretation of History.

So far in this chapter we have examined the nature of history, the varying approaches to its interpretation, and, in particular, we have examined the opposing poles of subjective and objective history and have seen that neither offers a satisfactory interpretation of history. We have seen that no understanding of history is absolute, but is

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Ibid, pp. 121 - 123. To avoid confusion it must be pointed out that Carr uses the term progress in two senses: firstly, progress in historical research, in the developing reciprocal relationship between fact and value; and secondly, progress in the course of history itself. "Historiography is a progressive science, in the sense that it seeks to provide constantly expanding and deepening insights into a course of events which is itself progressive." (p.124).

2.

Ibid, p.

rather a reciprocal and evolving understanding of the relationship between fact and interpretation, between the past and the present. And we have seen that the touchstone for any adequate interpretation must be an understanding of the future and of the potentialities of history and that therefore any adequate interpretation of history must be an act of faith. We have examined Niebuhr's understanding of the historian's work, and seen that it offers a worthwhile alternative to the extremes of subjectivism and objectivism; we must now turn to an examination of Niebuhr's Christian doctrine of history. And we must consider his Christian interpretation of history as a possible alternative to the extremes of subjectivism and objectivism.

Rudolf Bultmann's understanding of history is taken as an example of an extremely subjectivist Christian interpretation of history. Bultmann rightly states that every interpretation of history presupposes a hermeneutic method. Every interpretation is guided by a certain interest, by a "certain putting of the question". The questioning arises from a particular interest in the matter under discussion; therefore, a particular understanding of the matter is presupposed. Bultmann calls this a 'pre-understanding'. But the historian is not allowed to presuppose the results of his research; historical research includes the readiness

to hear the claim which meets one in the historical phenomena, and the historian, says Bultmann is obliged to reduce to silence his personal desires with regard to these results.<sup>1</sup>

But this does not mean, continues Bultmann, that the historian must annihilate his personal individuality, for genuine historical knowledge demands a very personal aliveness of the understanding subject. "Only the historian who is excited by his participation in history (and that means - who is open for the historical phenomena through his sense of responsibility for the future), only he will be able to understand history. In this sense the most subjective interpretation of history is at the same time the most objective. Only the historian who is excited by his own historical existence will be able to hear the claim of history."<sup>2</sup>

Bultmann's agreement with Collingwood is both clear and acknowledged. But Bultmann, while agreeing with Collingwood's statement that the justification for the study of history is the gaining of self-knowledge, wants to go further and say that self-knowledge is also consciousness of responsibility over against the future. The historicity of a human being is to be understood as

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1.

Rudolf Bultmann, History and Eschatology, (Edinburgh University Press; 1957), pp. 110 - 122.

2.

Ibid, p.122.

living in responsibility over against the future. Bultmann also wishes to modify Collingwood's definition of history as the history of human actions. "Human life goes its way," says Bultmann, "not only through actions, but also through events which encounter us through that which happens to one."<sup>1</sup>

For Bultmann the question of meaning in history has become meaningless.<sup>2</sup> It must, he says, be put in a different sense, namely as the question about the nature, the essence of history. And the real subject of history, says Bultmann - revealing the extent to which his pre-understanding has been influenced by existentialist philosophy - is man. Man is a creature who is never content with the present, for his intentions, his expectations, his hopes and his fears, are always stretched into the future. Man is always on the way, each present hour is questioned and challenged by its future. That means, says Bultmann, that the real essence of all that man does and undertakes in his

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1.

Ibid, pp. 136 - 137.

2.

By this Bultmann means that the question about meaning in history cannot be answered when we ask for the meaning of history as the entire historical process, as though it were like some human undertaking whose meaning we can recognize when we can survey it in its entirety. For meaning in history in this sense could only be recognized if we could stand at the end or goal of history, or if we could stand outside history. Bultmann, History and Eschatology, p.138.

present, becomes revealed only in the future as important or vain, as fulfilment or failure. The present is thus the moment of decision, by which the yield of the past is gathered in and the meaning of the future is chosen. Thus the unity of history does not consist of a causal connection of events, nor in a progress developing by logical necessity. It is rather, states Bultmann, in the responsibility over against the heritage of the past in the face of the future, that the unity of history is grounded.<sup>1</sup>

In Bultmann's view a self-understanding is more legitimate the more it expresses the historicity of the human being. And there can be no doubt, he asserts, that the radical understanding of the historicity of man has appeared in Christianity.<sup>2</sup> This understanding of man believes that man does not have the freedom which is presupposed for historical decisions. Radical freedom would be freedom from oneself; and the man who understands his historicity radically, who radically understands himself as someone future, who understands his genuine self as an ever future one, has to know that his genuine self can only be offered to him as a gift by the future. Man has to be free from himself or to become free from himself. But, says Bultmann, man cannot get such freedom by his own will and strength; he can only receive this freedom as gift. It is the

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1. Ibid, pp. 140 - 144.

2. Ibid, p.149.

Christian message which calls man and imparts to him the grace of God which makes him free from himself.<sup>1</sup>

According to the New Testament, states Bultmann, Jesus Christ is the eschatological event, the action of God by which God has set an end to the old world. In the preaching of the Christian church the eschatological event will ever again become present and does become present ever and again in faith. The believer, says Bultmann, lives from the future because his faith and his freedom can never be possession; as belonging to the eschatological event they can never become facts of past time but are reality over and over again as event. And the believer also lives from the future because he remains within history. In principle the future always offers to man the gift of freedom. Christian faith is the power to grasp this gift.<sup>2</sup>

Bultmann has emphasized some very important, and often over-looked, truths in his interpretation of history. The stressing of the importance of openness to the events of history; the recognition of man's 'unfreedom'; the emphasizing of the importance of present decision; and the conviction that man's faith and freedom can never be past fact, but must always be present event; these are all indispensable truths. But we must ask if Bultmann has utilized fully these truths in his own work as a Biblical

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1.

Ibid, pp. 150 - 151.

2.

Ibid, p.152.

critic. We must ask if Bultmann's existentialist pre-understanding has hindered the listening to historical events which he has urged.<sup>1</sup>

Thus we find Bultmann stating that the historical continuity between the Old and New Testaments is theologically irrelevant. For the Christian, the Old Testament is no longer revelation.<sup>2</sup> In an analysis of the fundamental concepts of Covenant, Kingdom of God, and People of God, Bultmann further elaborates upon this theme of a radical discontinuity between the Testaments. In its equation of the People of God with a nation, in its bringing of God and His activity in line with the

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"... it is precisely his 'individuality' that the exegete ought to eliminate by educating himself to the kind of hearing that is interested in nothing other than the subject matter of which the text speaks." Existence and Faith, ed. Schubert Ogden, (London: Hodder Stoughton; 1961), p.290.

2.

Israel's history is not our history, nor is it for us a history of revelation as it is for the Jew. The Old Testament is not in a true sense God's Word, yet the Church may use it since "if Jesus Christ alone, as God's eschatological deed of forgiveness is God's Word, then all words which help to make this Word understandable, by bringing man into the situation in which he can understand it and by unfolding its implicit understanding of existence are God's Word in an indirect way." R. Bultmann, "The Significance of the Old Testament for the Christian Faith." in The Old Testament and Christian Faith, ed. B.W. Anderson, (New York; Harper and Row, 1963), p.34.

empirical history of a people, the Old Testament, says Bultmann, can only be described as a miscarriage containing within it a promise. This promise that God will lead His people by some other way to that existence which is their proper end, does not overcome the radical discontinuity between miscarriage and eschatological existence.

But if Bultmann practises the "kind of hearing that is interested in nothing other than the matter of which the text speaks", "and if he is concerned with the "events which encounter us", then it is difficult to see how he can describe the Old Testament as no longer revelation. For if the Old Testament is concerned with anything at all, it is concerned, not with the nature of man, but with God's acts in history which reveal to man his true nature. Discussing the Biblical forms of "blessing" and "thanksgiving" J.M. Robinson points out that these forms "could hardly have arisen without some occurrence for which one wished to bless or thank God. They did not begin as blank formulae which were superimposed as nonhistorical constructions on history; rather, historical experience seeking for adequate expression in language produced the formulae, which hence reflect by their very form the nature of the historical experiences which created them."<sup>1</sup> Such forms of worship challenge us to grapple with the meaning of the historical experience which caused their creation.

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<sup>1</sup>J.M. Robinson, "The Historicality of Biblical Language" in The Old Testament and Christian Faith, ed. B.W. Anderson, p.136.

Walther Zimmerli challenges Bultmann's interpretation of Old Testament history as the history of failure. Is there not fulfilment in the New Testament, even in the midst of the shattering? Does the New Testament not say that Jesus Christ, who was born of the people Israel according to the promises, is the centre of the eschatological congregation? Can this king be understood at all apart from his people, 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel'? And if the New Testament speaks of the failure of the covenant grounded upon the law alone, precisely in so doing, does it not establish decisive elements of Jeremiah 31?<sup>1</sup>

Bultmann's judgment that in the New Testament history is swallowed up in eschatology is challenged by W. Pannenberg who states that "the anticipation of the eschatological decision in the decision with reference to the person of Jesus does not mean the elimination of the futurity of the end".<sup>2</sup> And in Claus Westermann's words, if Christ and his

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Walther Zimmerli, "Promise and Fulfilment" in Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics, ed. Claus Westermann, (Richmond Virginia: John Knox Press; 1963), pp. 118 - 119. John McIntyre points out that fulfilment has both a negative and a positive pole and thus both affirms and denies prophecy. By eliminating polarity from fulfilment Bultmann has a fulfilment which stands in no organic relation whatsoever to the prophecy it fulfils. John McIntyre, The Christian Doctrine of History, (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd; 1957), pp. 70 - 71.

2.

Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Redemptive Event and History" in Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics, p.322.

work are really the fulfilment of the Old Testament promises then "the fulfilment must be related clearly and unambiguously to the three realms with which the Old Testament promise ... has to do: the people of God, the individual, the world (= Creation). If the Christ event has reference mainly or only to the existence of the individual, then it is no longer the fulfilment of the promises of the old covenant ... Because God's final act of deliverance in Christ has to do not only with the individual but with the three realms of the Old Testament promise, the people of God of the new covenant also has a history. It is eschatological history insofar as it extends from the departure to the return of Christ; but it is real history stretching out to the End."<sup>1</sup>

Bultmann's insistence that man is the real subject of history means that the full significance of the events of history is not realized. It is true that the mighty acts of God call man into responsible existence and give him courage to remain open to the future. But the Christ - event does more than this; by faith man may believe that the ambiguities of history in which he lives shall finally be overcome. The future which beckons to man is not only

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Claus Westermann, "The Way of Promise through the Old Testament," in The Old Testament and Christian Faith, ed. B.W. Anderson, pp. 222 - 223.

one where grace may triumph over the enigma and insecurities of the world; it is a future which, by the victory of Christ's resurrection promises a final consummation of history. Bultmann's existentialist concern for the meaningfulness of the present has meant that neither the full significance for history of past events, nor the full significance for history of the hope of a future consummation, is realized.<sup>1</sup>

#### An Objective Christian Interpretation of History.

In many ways Oscar Cullmann's interpretation of history in Christ and Time illustrates the opposing pole to Bultmann's existentialist interpretation. On the one hand, Cullmann states that although individual basic facts of Biblical history are subject to historical investigation, yet as a whole, in its grouping, interpretation, and joining of events with the historical action of Jesus, it takes on meaning only when this historical action of Jesus of Nazareth is recognized as absolute

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"Does there not lurk in Bultmann, however hidden it may be behind every intent to cling to the New Testament message in its historicity, the desire to strip history away from the Christ-event-history, with its opaque and accidental events, which nevertheless in the Old Testament are illuminated again and again through the accompanying word and so are transformed into promise? Does Bultmann not do this in order to elevate the Christ-message purely out of history in existential interpretation, placing it over against the Old Testament in the same remoteness as the Greek tradition? Must this not end with a new Christ-myth?" Walther Zimmerli, op.cit., pp. 119 - 120.

divine revelation to men. Without this faith, states Cullmann, Biblical history must actually seem to be without meaning.<sup>1</sup>

And yet, on the other hand, Cullmann writes as if historical 'facts', even when their alleged nature must remove them from the world of normal human experience, are able to speak their own message to mankind. Thus he writes that all points of the redemptive line in history are related to the one historical fact at the mid-point, a fact which precisely in its unrepeatable character which marks all historical events, is decisive for salvation. This fact is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup> Again, the increased intensity of hope in Primitive Christianity is to be explained by the very fact that the centre of time is not in the object of hope, but rather in an already occurred historical fact.<sup>3</sup> And the stripping away of eschatology in Primitive Christianity coincides with the appearance of Christ and is conditioned by this positive fact rather than by delay of the Parousia.<sup>4</sup>

Of the resurrection Cullmann writes that it ceases to be only an object of hope; it is faith, and in particular, faith in a fact, the resurrection of Christ, which has already

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1. Oscar Cullmann, Christ and Time, pp. 22 - 23.

2. Ibid, pp. 32-33.

3. Ibid, p.86.

4. Ibid, p.139.

occurred at the mid-point of time. "Since this fact of the past stands in the centre of the redemptive process, it works out for the believer also in the present. With regard also to our resurrection a different present situation has come into being through the fact that there is now one body whose substance no longer is flesh but spirit."<sup>1</sup> By faith in the redemptive fact of the resurrection of Christ we may hope for the resurrection of the body.<sup>2</sup> In the New Testament, says Cullmann, all resurrection hope is founded upon faith in a fact of the past; it is the fact at the mid-point of the redemptive line to which the apostles bear witness: that Christ is risen.<sup>3</sup>

But we must ask what it could mean to have "faith in a fact" and "faith in this redemptive fact." We can meaningfully say that we have "faith in a fact" if we mean that we have faith in the results of our assessment of the evidence for the existence or authenticity of historical data. We could say that we have faith in the historicity of the man Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified under Pontius Pilate. And we could say that we have faith in the evidence which shows that the early church saw in Jesus, the Christ - the promised Messiah. But all that we have done is to

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1.

Ibid, p.235.

2.

Ibid, p.237.

3.

Ibid, pp. 241 - 242.

assert that we have had faith, not in something which is objectively real, irrespective of assessment, but in something which a critical evaluation would suggest, on balance, to be historically reliable. This becomes clearer when we consider Cullmann's reference to "faith in a redemptive fact". Not only does a 'redemptive fact' include a critical assessment but it also includes an act of faith if we are to describe it as redemptive. To urge us to have "faith in a redemptive fact" therefore would be to urge us to have faith in a faith which sees a particular event as redemptive.

The crucial difficulty with this type of thinking, points out Friedrich Gogarten, is that, on the one hand, it affirms this 'historical factualness', by which it means the same sort of historicity as historical science generally predicates of the occurrences it establishes, while on the other hand, it must, at the same time, assert that these events, since they are after all the 'redemptive acts of God', are entirely without analogy and cannot be grasped by human thought, but are accessible only to faith: How this objective reality is to be combined with the reality which cannot be established by historical means is a question which is not answered. On the one side, we are assured that faith, as faith, knows itself to be motivated, supported, and substantiated by facts, while, on the other side, it is maintained that the objective

factualness of these objective occurrences cannot as such be the basis of faith. Though these assertions are mutually exclusive neither can be avoided. The first is necessary, says Gogarten, because in accordance with the view of history by which this theory is governed, this is the only way of preserving the historical character of the faith and with it that 'objective reality' which is thought to be indispensable to it if it is to be faith in the New Testament sense. And the second assertion is necessary, concludes Gogarten, because without it faith would be merely a matter of considering the fact to be true.<sup>1</sup>

#### Niebuhr's Christian Interpretation of History.

The value of Niebuhr's Christian interpretation of history is that it steers a midway course between the subjectivism of Bultmann and the objectivism of Cullmann, and yet includes within it the valuable insights which both of these writers possess. This will become apparent as we make our examination of his interpretation of history.

The more profound historical religions, states Niebuhr, recognize that there is no point in history in which the finiteness of man is overcome so that he could complete his own life, or in which history as such does not retain the ambiguity of being rooted in nature-necessity on the one

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1.

Friedrich Gogarten, Demythologizing and History, (London: S.C.M. press; 1955), pp. 39 - 46.

hand, while pointing towards transcendent, eternal, and transhistorical ends on the other hand. Historical religions are therefore by their very nature prophetic-Messianic. They look forward, argues Niebuhr, to a point in history, and finally towards an eschaton which is also the end of history, where the meaning of life and history will be disclosed and fulfilled.<sup>1</sup>

This means, says Niebuhr, that a Christ is expected wherever history is regarded as potentially meaningful but as still awaiting the full disclosure and fulfilment of its meaning. "A Christ, is not expected wherever the meaning of life is explained from the standpoint of either nature or supernature in such a way that a transcendent revelation of history's meaning is not regarded as either possible or necessary."

A Christ is expected wherever history is thought of as a realm of fragmentary revelations of a purpose and power transcending history, pointing to a fuller disclosure of that purpose and power. He is expected because this disclosure is regarded as both possible and necessary. It is regarded as possible because history is known to be something more than the nature-necessity in which it has its roots. It is regarded as necessary because the potential meaningfulness is recognized as fragmentary and corrupted. It must be completed and clarified.<sup>2</sup>

And on the other hand, continues Niebuhr, no Christ could

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1. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.II, p.4.
  2. Ibid, p.5.

validate himself, as the disclosure of a hidden divine sovereignty over history, or as a vindication of the meaningfulness of history, if a Christ were not expected.<sup>1</sup>

It is this intimate relationship between hope and fulfilment which creates the unity of a Christian interpretation of history. It is a relationship built upon the revelatory acts of God in history which, to the eyes of faith, both vindicate God's love towards men and offer the hope of a final consummation. And it is precisely this relationship of promise and fulfilment between the Old and New Testament which Bultmann describes as naive and traditional.

But on the other hand Niebuhr makes it clear that such a hope and such an interpretation is an act of faith. It is not a statement about self-explanatory facts of history. "It is not possible," writes Niebuhr, "to interpret cultures according to their expectation or want of expectation of a Christ without drawing upon the faith that the Christ has been revealed; for there can be no interpretation of the meaning of life and history without implicitly or explicitly drawing into the interpretation the faith which claims to have found the end of these expectations. There can be no interpretation of history, states Niebuhr, without specific presuppositions."<sup>2</sup>

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1.

Ibid, p.16.

2.

Ibid, p.6.

The presuppositions upon which Niebuhr builds his interpretation of history are Christian presuppositions. They draw from Hebrew prophetism the insight that the eternal and divine can never be regarded as the extension and fulfilment of the highest human possibilities. For God's spoken word is against this favoured nation. The real problem of human history is seen to be the proud pretension of all human endeavours which seek to obscure their finite and partial character, and thereby involve history in evil and sin.<sup>1</sup> The worship of this God who is radically other, is the basis, says Niebuhr, for the first genuine conception of a universal history. The divine sovereignty which overarches all historical destiny is not the possession of any people or the extension of any particular historical power. And man's too simple identification of his purpose and power, with the divine power, is seen to turn the creativity of human freedom into destructiveness, thereby necessitating that the meaning and pattern of the historical drama must be worked out against human rebellion.

Niebuhr rightly sees that Old Testament history is primarily concerned with God's acts in history and that its understanding of man is formulated only in the light of these acts. If God has chosen His people Israel, then if He is to be true to His own nature, the promise to His

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1. Ibid, pp. 25 - 26.

people must continue. If being the chosen people encourages pride and sinfulness, then the prophets must look to the future for the working out of God's purposes. They must look beyond human evil and rebellion, beyond the judgments in history; they must look expectantly to the future to see how God will complete history by overcoming the perennial evil in every human good. Bultmann's preoccupation with the nature of man has caused him to miss the true significance of Old Testament history. For the promise remains despite the failures; it remains even though fulfilment, due to the manifestation of human evil, must be projected further into the future. This continuity between Old and New Testaments is vital for any adequate Christian interpretation of history.

Oscar Cullmann is much nearer the truth when he says that in the Christ-event the entire time-line is influenced in a decisive manner. In the central event of the Incarnate Christ, an event which constitutes the mid-point of the time-line, not only is all that goes before fulfilled, but also all that is future is decided. Faith allows the believer to share at the present time in the saving gifts of the entire time-line, even in those of the future.<sup>1</sup> It is this intimate relationship between the promises of the old dispensation, the fulfilment in the Christ-event, and the hope of a future consummation, which alone can

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1. Oscar Cullmann, Christ and Time, pp. 72, 76.

sustain an adequate Christian interpretation of history. But it must be emphasized that the revelatory power of the events of the Christian faith which shed light on the beginning, the present order, and the final end of history, can only be apprehended by faith. These events are not historic 'facts' whose message is self-evident. Only when they are apprehended by faith do they prove to be 'mighty acts of God' in which the meaning of the whole drama of human life is revealed.<sup>1</sup>

The unity of history, derived from faith in the Christ-event, is not established empirically, says Niebuhr, by tracing the interpretation of cultures and civilizations with each other. The revelation of Christ as the centre of, and the clue to, history's meaning, is both the negation and the fulfilment of all partial meanings in history, as they are embodied in national, imperial, and even world-wide cultures.<sup>2</sup> The scandal that the idea of universal history should be the fruit of a particular revelation of the divine, to a particular people, and finally in a particular drama and person, cease to be scandalous when it is recognized that the Divine Majesty, apprehended in these particular revelations, is less bound to the pride of civilizations and the hopes and ambitions of nations, than

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1. Niebuhr, Faith and History, p.119.

2. Ibid, pp. 120 - 121.

the supposedly more universal concepts of life and history by which cultures seek to extricate themselves from the historical contingencies and to establish universally valid 'values'.<sup>1</sup>

Every larger frame of meaning, writes Niebuhr, which serves the observer of historical events in correlating the events into some kind of pattern is a structure of faith rather than of science. But this does not render such frames of meaning less competent to deal with the complexities of the historical drama for,

The difference between structures of meaning is ... not between supposedly 'rational' and supposedly 'irrational' ones. Supposedly rational frames of meaning may be irrational in the sense that an implicit and unacknowledged centre and source of meaning may be inadequate to do justice to every dimension of human existence and every perplexity and antinomy in the stuff of history. A supposedly 'irrational' frame of meaning may be rational in the sense that it acknowledges a centre and source of meaning beyond the limits of rational intelligibility, partly because it 'rationally' senses the inadequacy or idolatrous character of centres and sources of meaning which are within the limits of rational intelligibility.<sup>2</sup>

One of the great perplexities of human existence with which a Christian interpretation of history must grapple is the existence of moral evil. The Christian faith, writes Niebuhr, does not regard moral evil as due to man's involvement in natural finiteness, but sees it rather as the

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1. Ibid, p.128.

2. Ibid, p.135.

consequence of man's abortive efforts to overcome his insecurity by his own power, to hide the finiteness of his intelligence by pretensions of omniscience and to seek for emancipation from his ambiguous situation by his own resources.<sup>1</sup> A Christian interpretation of history, states Niebuhr, must incorporate the provisional meaninglessness and obscurity which human defiance of God's laws introduces into the drama of the human story.

This perplexity of life can be overcome by faith in the self-disclosure of divine love which is both able to overcome the evil inclination to self-worship in the human heart, and to take the evil of history into and upon itself. These two facets of the divine love, writes Niebuhr, establish the two most important aspects of the Biblical interpretation of history.

On the one hand there is a possibility of the renewal of life and the destruction of evil, whenever men and nations see themselves as they truly are under a divine judgment, which is as merciful as it is terrible. On the other hand the life of each individual as well as the total human enterprise remains in contradiction to God; and the final resolution of this contradiction is by God's mercy. From the one standpoint human history is a series of new beginnings ... if under the divine judgment and mercy the old self or the old culture or civilization is shattered. ... From the other standpoint human life and human history remain a permanent enigma which only the divine mercy can overcome.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Ibid, p.137.

2. Niebuhr, Faith and History, p.142.

This enigma results in a tension between the meaning of life in the ultimate sense and the moral meaning of history. There is evidence of justice in human communities, writes Niebuhr,<sup>1</sup> but the processes of historical justice are not exact enough to warrant the simple confidence in the moral character of history which both secular and religious theories often ascribe to it. Every execution of moral judgment in history, asserts Niebuhr, is inexact because of its necessary relation to the fact of power which never corresponds exactly to the necessities of justice. The virtuous and innocent may, and frequently do, suffer more rather than less in the competitions of life and history, precisely because of their virtue.<sup>2</sup> Rewards and punishments are not exactly proportioned to relative guilt and innocency of men and nations.<sup>3</sup> There are tangents of moral meaning in history, concludes Niebuhr, but there are no clear exact patterns. The moral obscurities of history must either tempt men to the despairing conclusion that there is no meaning in history, or that it is under a sovereignty too mysterious to conform

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"The fact that historic communities of mankind have been able to devise systems of justice, capable of bringing at least extravagant forms of self-seeking and flagrant infringements upon the life and the interest of the neighbour to judgment, represents one aspect of the moral content of actual historical experience, in rough conformity with the moral meaning of life, religiously discerned." *Ibid*, p.146.

2.

*Ibid*, p.149.

3.

*Ibid*, p.151.

fully to the patterns of meaning which human beings are able to construct.<sup>1</sup>

Professor H.J. Butterfield's attempt to show in the development of piety and charity, a meaningful development in the world, appears of doubtful value. He advises us to turn from politico-ecclesiastical history to the intimate life of the church throughout the ages, and to the spiritual work done by humble men, and we would find it the most moving spectacle history presents, and we would see that the spread of piety does mean a growth in charity.<sup>2</sup> Even if these men made wrong decisions about such things as toleration - whose victory Butterfield concedes was due to secular interests and considerations - or democracy and social justice; even if the conflicts which succeeded the Reformation were rendered more bitter and uncompromising because of the addition of the religious issue; even so, we are told that it is impossible to measure the vast difference that ordinary Christian piety has made to the last two thousand years of European history.<sup>3</sup> "Here is a fact which blots out and supersedes everything that can be said against the churches in

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1.

Ibid, p.150.

2.

H.J. Butterfield, Christianity and History, (London: G. Bell and Sons; 1949), p.136.

3.

Ibid, pp. 132 - 137.

European history."<sup>1</sup>

According to Christian belief, states Niebuhr, history remains morally ambiguous to the end; the perfect love which Christ's life and death exemplify, is defeated rather than triumphant, in the actual course of history. This perfect love of Christ is both the ultimate possibility of all historic virtues and a contradiction to them. The enigma of life is resolved by the confidence that this love is a revelation of a divine mercy which overcomes the contradictions of human life. Suffering innocence, which reveals the problem of moral ambiguity in history, becomes, in the Christian faith, the answer to the problem at the point when it is seen as the revelation of a divine suffering which bears and overcomes the sins of the world.<sup>2</sup> For to make suffering love, rather than power, the final expression of sovereignty in history, is to embody the perplexity of history into the solution.<sup>3</sup> But the confidence that the enigma of history can be resolved, is a confidence not built upon a naively hopeful reading of history; nor is it a confidence built upon the message of allegedly self-explanatory 'facts' of salvation. Rather it is a confidence built upon a faith in the redeeming love of Christ. And this means that it will not be an easy confidence but one which contains both risk

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1. Ibid, p.132.

2. Niebuhr, Faith and History, pp. 153 - 154.

3. Ibid, p.161.

and doubt, which must strive to maintain itself against the ambiguities which will exist until the end.

The points of reference for the structure of the meaning of history in the Christian faith, writes Niebuhr, are obviously not found by the empirical analyses of the observable structures and coherences of history. Rather they are 'revelations' apprehended by faith, of the character and purposes of God. The sense of meaning is derived from the conviction that no human rebellion can rise so high as to challenge the divine sovereignty essentially. While this confidence in the final source and end of human life is not a fruit of empirical observation, it is worth noting, says Niebuhr, that the philosophies which are the fruit of empirical observation, either drive men to despair by charting the growing antinomies of life, or they prompt complacency by obscuring the obvious tragic aspects of life and history. The experience of faith, by which "anchors for a structure of meaning" are apprehended, is an experience at the ultimate limits of human knowledge. The character of these points of reference make it quite clear, says Niebuhr, that it is not possible to speak simply of a Christian philosophy of history - for a philosophy will reduce the antinomies and obscurities to a too simple form of intelligibility. Yet, says Niebuhr, a Christian theology

of history is not an arbitrary construct; it makes sense out of life and history. "That the final clue to the mystery of the divine power is found in the suffering love of a man on the Cross, is not a proposition which follows logically from the observable facts of history. But there are no observable facts of history which cannot be interpreted in its light."<sup>1</sup>

The love of Christ, concludes Niebuhr, always stands in a double relation to the strivings and achievements, the virtues and wisdoms of history. "In so far as they represent developments of the goodness of creation, it is their fulfilment. In so far as they represent false completions which embody the pride and the power of individuals and nations, of civilizations and cultures, it is their contradiction." "Positively the Gospel is validated when the truth of faith is correlated with all truths which may be known by scientific and philosophical disciplines and proves itself a resource for co-ordinating them into a deeper and wider system of coherence."<sup>2</sup>

We can see how Niebuhr has incorporated into his interpretation the truths of both the subjective and objective interpretations of history, while avoiding the most serious of their errors. The truth of the subjective interpretation - that only a self-committal of faith to

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1. Ibid, pp. 155 - 156.

2. Ibid, pp. 171 - 172.

the events of the past will make these events meaningful and relevant - is maintained. But Niebuhr avoids the dangers of a too subjective approach. When the subjective approach becomes too engrossed with present meaningfulness it overlooks the full significance of past events. For when men apprehend by faith the revelatory character of past events, they see not only meaning in the present but tangents of meaning and a certain unity in history. But if past events are seen to reveal no other message but that of the nature of man's present situation, then no tangents of meaning and no unity can be seen in history. This means that man's understanding of the present learns nothing from the evolving drama of history.

Bultmann believes that man's 'historicalness' is revealed to him by the Christ-event and that man's freedom for the future is thereby deeded to him. But though Bultmann knows that man, by his own will and strength, cannot achieve this freedom, a knowledge of past history would reveal the true extent of man's unfreedom. For man's historicalness is more subtle and devious, more compounded of prejudices and predilections, and less morally neutral and less unbiased than the existentialists often imagine. The danger of judging the significance of the Christian faith solely by its relevance to our present situation is that we may take what is palatable to us from the

Christian faith and ignore what is unpalatable to our intellects. A deeper understanding of the lessons of history would reveal the degree to which Christian apologists have fallen into this error. And it would reveal to us the subtleties of the human heart which convinces itself that it is open to all truth while all the time it is closed to the things which affront it.

On the other hand, Niebuhr maintains the objective historian's concern for the historicity of past events and he portrays the kind of listening to historical events which Bultmann himself has advised. But it is the listening with an attitude of faith which Niebuhr demonstrates. It is not the arbitrary writing of history from the testimony of self-explanatory facts Niebuhr's interpretation does not remove all objective reality. It combines a true objectivity with an indispensable apprehension by faith. Friedrich Gogarten sums up this kind of interpretation in the words: "In and with this history of Jesus there takes place the event by which God, in and with this history, signifies something to me, namely the fact and the manner of Christ's being the salvation of man and of the world." "If this means that we must say of history in general that an event 'un-conceals' itself in it and that this event which unconceals itself is to be perceived only by means of a corresponding

'self-unconcealment' on the part of him for whom or to whom it happens, then it follows that the same is no less true of the history which we call the revelational history of God because in it God unconceals Himself for us."<sup>1</sup>

#### History's Tangents of Meaning.

When history is viewed through the eye of faith it reveals tangents of meaning. These tangents of meaning are, for Niebuhr, safeguards against the easy complacency of a purely objective history which discerns its lessons too easily. And, at the same time, they offer encouragement and hope to the relativists who fear to act because they see no meaning in history.

There are tangents of meaning to be seen, argues Niebuhr, in the emergence of permanent values during the rise and fall of cultures and civilizations. These are values which contribute to the fulfilment of man's true nature. For example, despite the obvious dangers of the greater freedom and individuality which emerged when a bourgeois civilization replaced a feudal society, they do constitute, Niebuhr believes, facets of meaning in history.<sup>2</sup> Similarly the freedom to work for the implementation of human rights and for the establishment of tentative schemes of justice are all tangents of meaning in history.

On the other hand, Niebuhr believes that the disasters

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1. Friedrich Gogarten, Demythologizing and History, pp.79-80.

2. Niebuhr, Faith and History, pp. 262 - 264.

of history are also able to reveal tangents of meaning. For example, he believes that both the Catholic and the Calvinist efforts to overcome the moral ambiguities of human history by bringing political power under religious control, must honestly be designated as dismal failures. The meaning revealed is that when men attempt to implement an ideal, no matter how laudable, by means of unlimited rigour, the result must always be disaster. It reveals that if sin is the corruption of man's freedom then the ultimate form of sin is a corruption of man's quest for redemption.<sup>1</sup>

If it is true that there are tangents of meaning to be discerned in history then it is fair to expect that an understanding both of the lessons which history teaches and of the profundities of human nature should make it possible to point to the meaning of present events. Niebuhr's career illustrates that this is possible. As early as 1927<sup>2</sup> and again in 1932<sup>3</sup> Niebuhr warned against Marxism's dangerous utopianism and unscrupulous search for power. And in 1944, even before the war-time alliance broke-up, he pointed to the likelihood of a 'cold-war' in the post-war era.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Ibid, pp. 233 - 234.

2. Niebuhr, Does Civilization Need Religion?, p.192.

3. Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, Chapter 6. *passim*.

4. Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, Chapter 5. *passim*.

Again, Niebuhr, because he understood the causes of the emergence of Fascism, was able to write in 1934 that war between Germany and France or Poland was both imminent and inevitable.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr's insights into the meaning of present events is all the more significant when the vulnerability of existentialism is remembered. Because it denies the possibility of tangents of meaning in history, or indeed the possibility of any interpretation of history whatsoever, existentialism lacks any profound critical judgment, any adequate perspective from which to view life, and any strong defence against a new and virile dogma. In this context Martin Heidegger's support of the Nazi Party when it came to power, should not be forgotten.

But if there are tangents of meaning discernible in history, says Niebuhr, a full understanding of history's meaning lies beyond human comprehension. There are provisional meanings in history, capable of being recognized and fulfilled by individuals and by cultures; but mankind will continue 'to see through a glass darkly' and the final meaning of history can be anticipated only by faith in the Christian message of salvation. There are provisional judgements upon evil in history, continues

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<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr, Reflections on the End of an Era, Chapter 6.

Niebuhr. But all of them are imperfect, since the executors of judgment are tainted in both their discernments and their actions by the evil which they seek to overcome. History therefore awaits an ultimate judgment. There are renewals of life in history, individually and collectively, concludes Niebuhr. But no rebirth lifts life above the contradictions of man's historic existence. The Christian must await a 'general resurrection' as well as a 'last judgment'.<sup>1</sup>

#### The Consummation of History.

Niebuhr's faith in a consummation of history again illustrates his position between the extremes of subjectivism and objectivism. It enables him to avoid the dangers of cultural and moral obscurantism of a purely futuristic eschatology which ignores the tangents of meaning in history and sees history's meaning as being revealed solely in its end. On the other hand, it enables Niebuhr to avoid the morass of relativity which forces the searcher for meaning in history to the conclusion that there is no meaning. For Niebuhr's faith in the consummation of history is the climax and fulfilment of the meaning faith discerns in history. It is significant that Bultmann, who claims to 'listen' to the message of the events of the Kerygma does not find any promise of a final consummation of history in

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1.

Niebuhr, Faith and History, p.243.

this message. We must ask whether Bultmann's presuppositions, which owe so much to Heidegger's philosophy, have prevented him from listening adequately. Because the present is meaningless without the act of faith which sees in the Christ God's act of salvation, the intellectual affront of such an act of faith is overcome. But because the existential moment is more concerned with the present reality than with a final consummation, the promise of the fulfilment of history, inherent in God's action in Christ, is ignored.

If faith in Christ illumines the darkness of history's self-contradictions, then such a faith must point to an end where the divine both completes human incompleteness and purges guilt and sin by judgment and mercy. Thus history as we know it, says Niebuhr, must be regarded as an interim between the disclosure and the fulfilment of its meaning.<sup>1</sup> The Biblical symbols which point towards the end are not to be taken literally, warns Niebuhr, but they must be taken seriously, for theologies which do not take

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1.

Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. II, p. 298. Here Niebuhr's view agrees with Cullman's statement that for the believing Christian, the mid-point, since Easter, no longer lies in the future. The centre has been reached but the end is still to come. In the central event of Christ, the Incarnate One, not only is all that goes before fulfilled but also all that is future is decided. (Cullmann, Christ and Time), pp. 84, 76.

these symbols seriously do not take history seriously either.<sup>1</sup> In the New Testament symbols of the return of Christ, the last judgment, and the resurrection Niebuhr discerns the truths which promise the final consummation of history.

To believe that Christ will return at the end of history as a triumphant judge and redeemer, says Niebuhr, is to express the faith that existence cannot ultimately defy its own norm. It is an expression of faith in the sufficiency of God's sovereignty over the world and history and in the final supremacy of love over all the forces of self-love. Against utopianism, the Christian faith insists that the final consummation of history lies beyond the conditions of the temporal process. Against an otherworldliness which ignores the struggle for justice and morality in history, it asserts that the consummation fulfils, rather than negates, the historical process.<sup>2</sup>

The second New Testament symbol which Niebuhr considers, is the symbol of the last judgment. Here, he says, there are three important facets of the Christian conception of life and history. The first is expressed in the idea that it is Christ who will be the judge of history. This means, says Niebuhr, that when the historical confronts the eternal it is judged by its own ideal possibility. The judgment is upon sin and not upon finiteness. The second

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1.

Ibid, p.299.

2.

Ibid, pp. 300 - 301.

facet is the symbol's emphasis upon the distinction between good and evil in history. Though all historical realities are morally ambiguous, the very rigour with which all judgments in history culminate in a final judgment, is an expression of the meaningfulness of all historic conflicts between good and evil. The third facet in the symbol of a last judgment, says Niebuhr, is to be found in its locus at the 'end' of history. It expresses Christianity's refutation of all conceptions of history, according to which history is its own redeemer and is able by its process of growth to emancipate man from the guilt and sin of his existence, and to free him from judgment.<sup>1</sup>

In the third symbol of the resurrection of the body, the 'body' states Niebuhr, is indicative of the contribution which nature makes to human individuality and to all historical realizations. It implies that eternal significance belongs to the whole unity of a historical realization insofar as it has brought all particularities into the harmony of the whole.<sup>2</sup> Consummation is thus

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1. Ibid, pp. 301 - 304.

2. J.A.T. Robinson points out that for St. Paul and the Hebrews the body was the whole psycho-physical unity made up of soul and flesh; it was the whole man constituted as he was by the network of physical and mental relationships in which he was bound up with the continuum of other persons and things. J.A.T. Robinson, In the End, God, (London: James Clarke, 1950), p.85.

conceived not as absorption into the divine but as loving fellowship with God. Everlasting life does not mean the annulling of all historical reality for which 'the body' is the symbol. The consummation means, says Niebuhr, in Paul's succinct phrase, not to be "unclothed, but clothed upon". Here the Biblical hope of a consummation which will sublimate rather than annul the whole historical process, is perfectly expressed.<sup>1</sup>

The symbol of the resurrection of the body is, in Niebuhr's view, both more individual and more social in its connotations than the alternative idea of the immortality of the soul. It is more individual because it asserts eternal significance for the self as it exists in the body.<sup>2</sup> It is more social in that the historic constructions of human existence, the cultures and civilizations, the empires and nations, and finally the whole historical process, are, just as individual life, the product of a tension between natural conditions and the freedom which transcends nature. The idea of resurrection implies that the historical elaborations of the richness of creation,

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1.

Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.II, pp.304-309.

2.

cf. John Robinson's remark that "in Christian thought/the resurrection of the body was asserted to insist that individuation is a good and divine thing - the frontiers between person and person reach up to heaven." J.A.T. Robinson, op.cit., p.86.

in all their variety, will participate in the consummation of history. It gives the struggles in which men are engaged to preserve civilizations, and to fulfil goodness in history, abiding significance and does not relegate them to a meaningless flux, of which there will be no echo in eternity.<sup>1</sup> It is on this note of hope that Niebuhr concludes his interpretation of history.

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1.

Niebuhr, op.cit., pp. 322 - 323. cf. J.A.T. Robinson's remark that the Christian Gospel professes the faith that the whole of God's workmanship is of value to Himself and cannot ultimately be lost to His purpose. (In The End, God, p.90); also, H.H. Farmer, The World and God, (London: Nisbet, 1935), pp. 302 - 306.

## CHAPTER VII.

Niebuhr's Social and Political Thought.

In this chapter we shall be concerned with an examination of the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr's doctrine of man upon his social and political thinking. We have seen the way in which Niebuhr's doctrine of man developed over the years. Because this development has been related to Niebuhr's social and political observations, we should expect to find a similar development in his social and political thinking. A clear development is observable, but within this development we find again that Niebuhr's main concern is the same. It is to present an alternative, on the one hand, to a relativism, this time found in the field of ethical and political thinking. And, on the other hand, it is to present an alternative either to an abstract system of moral ideals, which, because of its abstract nature, loses its relevance for ordinary men, or to a political philosophy which, because of its authoritarian nature, becomes an idolatry.

Experience had quickly taught Niebuhr that unless moral ideals are able to be implemented in concrete situations they quickly acquire an air of futility. On the other hand, the relativism which sees man as having

no essential nature, either behind or before him, and which believes that man must define his own nature, is at the mercy of every ideological wind, and all too often produces social and political thinking which degenerates into nihilism.

Niebuhr believes that the aggravation of the problem of social and political stability in the modern world dates back to the industrialization of society. A mechanical civilization, he writes, has weakened the organic relations of family, social group, and community. Modern man is a unit in a vast, mechanical enterprise, and is dependent upon the crowd. He feels at home only in the mass. He seeks out crowds with almost morbid eagerness, and becomes a pawn in the hands of the political agitators and demagogues. If he desires escape from the workaday world, he must find it in standardized and commercialized amusements.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr admits that industrialization did contribute towards some important social and political values. Universal suffrage, for example, and certain other rights were granted to each individual because bourgeois man was a more completely independent and discrete individuality than any previous personality. The extension of rational justice, and the encouragement of a tolerant attitude

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1.

Niebuhr, Reflections on the End of an Era, pp.99-104.

towards other life is the very essence of the modern liberal spirit. But, wrote Niebuhr in 1934, liberalism's fruits of tolerance, goodwill, and rational sympathy, are discounted in an era like ours because its claims have been too extravagant and its fruits have been too meagre for the task of building a new social order.<sup>1</sup>

Although these thoughts of Niebuhr's were expressed over thirty years ago and were expressed against the disillusionments and fears of the 1930s, they still touch upon some of the basic factors in modern life. They help to explain the alternating moods of scepticism and idolatry which plague our modern world.

The second vital factor which must influence, in Niebuhr's view, all social and political thinking, is the sharp distinction which must be drawn between the moral and the social behaviour of individuals and of social groups, whether they be national, social, or economic groupings. There is less reason to guide and to check impulse, less capacity for self-transcendence, less ability to comprehend the needs of others, and therefore more unrestrained egoism in any human group than the individuals who comprise the group, reveal in their personal relations.<sup>2</sup> Since there can be no ethical

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1. Ibid., pp.251-258.

2. Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, pp.XI-XII.

action without self-criticism, and no self-criticism without the rational capacity of self-transcendence, it is natural, says Niebuhr, that national attitudes can hardly approximate the ethical.<sup>1</sup> It is for this reason, concludes Niebuhr, that social justice cannot be resolved by moral and rational suasion alone; conflict is inevitable and in this conflict power must be challenged by power.<sup>2</sup>

These two factors - the impersonalness of modern society, and the differences between individual and group morality - have influenced all of Niebuhr's social and political thinking. They will lie behind many of the considerations which emerge when we seek to relate Niebuhr's doctrine of man to this aspect of his thought.

#### Religion and Morality.

Niebuhr's early thinking about the relationship between religion and morality reveals the same amalgam of liberal remnants and biblical insights which we have already discovered in his early treatment of both the essential nature and the salvation of man.

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1. Ibid., p.88.

2. Ibid., p.XV.

Thus we find him writing that "morality is as much the root as the fruit of religion; for religious sentiment develops out of moral experience and religious convictions are the logic by which moral life justifies itself".<sup>1</sup> In an unethical civilization religion is doubly affected; the immoralities which bring the reproach of impotence upon it are also the reason for the impotence, for unethical relationships atrophy man's religious sense. Presumably by a 'religious sense' Niebuhr meant the "courageous logic" by which man assured himself that the world of values had a relevant and permanent place in the universe.<sup>2</sup>

But alongside this early liberalism there existed the doubt that these same values were as easily implemented in society as an optimistic culture often assumed. Religion was easily tempted to make devotion to the ideal a substitute for its realization, and to become oblivious to the inevitable compromise between its ideal and the brute facts of life.<sup>3</sup> And furthermore these ideals of men were but relative when compared to the "absolute ethic" of Jesus. Men must not only subject all partial moral achievements to comparison with the absolute

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1. Niebuhr, Does Civilization Need Religion?, p.14.

2. Ibid., pp.49-50.

3. Ibid., pp.63-64.

standards of truth, beauty, and goodness of their religious faith; they must also be willing to see and to concede the relativities in the absolute values of their devotion.<sup>1</sup>

In keeping with his general theme in his work Moral Man and Immoral Society, we find Niebuhr emphasizing that "ethical attitudes are more dependent upon personal, intimate and organic contacts than social technicians are inclined to assume".<sup>2</sup> The future direction of Niebuhr's thought is indicated however, when he says that the religious conscience is sensitive not only because its imperfections are judged in the light of the absolute, but also because its obligations are felt to be obligations towards a person. Moral attitudes develop more sensitively in person-to-person relationships.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, says Niebuhr, religion absolutizes the sentiment of benevolence, gives transcendence and absolute worth to the life of the neighbour, and condemns egoistic impulses, and aids in the development of the concept of the equal worth of all personalities.<sup>4</sup>

But the liberal influence upon Niebuhr's thought is

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1. Ibid., p.224.

2. Niebuhr, op.cit., p.28.

3. Ibid., p.53.

4. Ibid., pp.57-59.

still apparent at this time. "Religion", says Niebuhr, "with its sense of dependence upon a Supreme Being, with its emotional commitment to the will of that person, with its belief in the benevolent aid of that person for the achievement of our highest aims, is able to create a white heat of sublime emotion which devours all lesser passions and interests, leaving the soul purged of its distracting and confusing occupations and redirected towards the highest goal that it is able to conceive."<sup>1</sup> There is, as yet, little sign of a tension between "the white heat of sublime emotion" and the achievable goals in history, for Christ is "the symbol of the best that life can be", a symbol which stands, in general, "only for the good life..."<sup>2</sup>

The same claim that religion and morality are related to each other in terms of mutual support, is made again in Reflections on the End of an Era.<sup>3</sup> But we find that Niebuhr is now more aware of the difficulty of preserving a decent balance between the ethical urge to realize perfection in history, and the religious need

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1. Niebuhr, The Contribution of Religion to Social Work, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), p.39.

2. Ibid., p.35.

3. Niebuhr, Reflections on the End of an Era, pp.280-281.

of reconciliation with imperfection. Sanity and wholesomeness are possible, says Niebuhr, only when these two partially incompatible and partially supplementary attitudes towards life are both embraced and espoused.<sup>1</sup>

It is when we come to his An Interpretation of Christian Ethics that we find Niebuhr appreciating fully the tension between religion - which now becomes the ethic of Jesus - and the moral problems of life. This development in Niebuhr's understanding of the relationship of the Christian faith and morality coincided with the drawing together of the two streams in Niebuhr's understanding of man's essential nature. Furthermore, it occurred at the time when Niebuhr became more concerned with the actions of God in Christ for man's salvation, than with the human situation to which the Christian faith is relevant. These developments reflect a deepening understanding of the nature of human sin in the world, and a more profound grasp of the significance of God's acts of redemption.

The Ethic of Jesus, writes Niebuhr, does not deal at all with the immediate moral problems of every human life; it has nothing to say about the relativities of politics or economics, nor about the necessary balances of power which exist in even the most intimate social relationships.

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1.

Ibid., p.296.

Every form of self-assertion and pride is condemned, and the justification for Jesus' demands are put in purely religious and not socio-moral terms. We are to forgive, says Niebuhr, because God forgives; we are to love our enemies because God is impartial in his love. The points of reference are vertical and not horizontal.<sup>1</sup>

This means, says Niebuhr, that Christian ethics are faced with the problem of compromise, the problem of creating and maintaining tentative harmonies of life in the world in terms of the possibilities of the human situation, while yet at the same time preserving the indictment upon all human life of the impossible possibility, the law of love.<sup>2</sup> Love, which is in the transcendent realm, must stand in paradoxical relationship to moral actions in the historical world. To command love is a paradox, says Niebuhr, for by its nature love cannot be commanded or demanded. To love God with all our hearts and with all our souls and with all our minds means that every cleavage in human existence is overcome. But the fact that such an attitude is commanded, proves that the cleavage is not overcome; the commandment, concludes Niebuhr, comes from one side of reality to the other, from essence to existence.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, pp.49-56.

2. Ibid., p.69.

3. Ibid., p.220.

In the paradoxical relationship between love and historical structures in the world, even the minimal standards of justice, says Niebuhr, are organically related to the transcendent love. Every moral value and standard is both grounded in, and points towards, an ultimate perfection of unity and harmony not realized in any historical situation. The law of love which is involved in all approximations of justice and is the ground of moral conduct, is also the ultimate fulfilment of these norms of justice and morality. It is the ultimate perspective by which their limitations are discovered.<sup>1</sup>

The statement that justice "points towards" and finds "fulfilment" in love, suggests, Paul Ramsay writes, that justice itself may properly be grounded in structural reason and nature, independent of love which transcends these things. The question, he continues, is whether man's sense of justice is grounded in his sense of the love requirement upon his freedom, or whether it is grounded in itself, by virtue of what man knows concerning the natural requirements of his determinate nature and the fixed structures of human relationships. Niebuhr, says Ramsay, sets up a scale comprised of several items: love, freedom, equality, equal justice, justice, and

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1.

Ibid., pp.116, 117, 150.

schemes of justice. Read in the way set down, love is the ground, source, and basis of these proximate principles; and this is the way in which Niebuhr usually reads them. But read in the reverse direction, these proximate principles point towards love as their end and fulfilment. When Niebuhr reverses the direction in order to point out how rational consistency 'points towards' love as its fulfilment, Ramsay claims that this is to adopt a rationalistic position. For when Niebuhr writes that "reason tries to establish a system of coherence and consistency in conduct", Ramsay points out that it is perfectly possible for reason, unless under the sway of love, to imagine a much more coherent world according to a hierarchical arrangement or caste system which has usually been the system of coherence in actual existence at most times and places.<sup>1</sup>

Ramsay's criticism is a valid one, and it is one which Niebuhr himself accepts.<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to find this strain of thought still persisting in a book such as An Interpretation of Christian Ethics. In Niebuhr's own words, he was still "only dimly feeling his way in this book towards a realistic and valid

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1.

Paul Ramsay, "Love and Law", in Reinhold Niebuhr, ed. Kegley and Bretall, pp.93-97.

2.

Niebuhr, "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism", Ibid., p.434.

Christian ethic".<sup>1</sup> It reveals that the insights Niebuhr had gleaned from the observations of human potentialities in the world, had not yet been fully integrated with the revelation of the love of God apprehended by faith.

As Niebuhr's thought develops and as all moral systems and standards of justice are seen as an expression of the law of love within the limits of law, Niebuhr finds that he must postulate a workable alternative to the extremes of a rigid natural law on the one hand, and a disillusioned moral relativism on the other. Natural law theories which derive absolutely valid principles of morals and politics from reason, says Niebuhr, invariably introduce contingent practical applications into the definition of the principle. They fail to appreciate the perennial corruptions of interest and passion which are introduced into any historical definition of even the most ideal and abstract moral principles.<sup>2</sup> Natural law principles are not so much fixed standards of reason as they are rational efforts to apply the moral obligation, implied in the love commandment, to the complexities of life and the fact of sin. Any definition of moral rules beyond those which

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1.

Ibid.

2.

Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, pp.52-54.

mark the minimal obligation of the self to the neighbour, are discovered, upon close analysis, to be rational formulations of various implications of the love commandment, rather than fixed and precise principles of justice.<sup>1</sup> But a Christian morality, inspired by the spirit of the New Testament, must be ready, states Niebuhr, to challenge relativism as well as legalism. Against the relativists it must insist that no man or nation, no age or culture, can arbitrarily define its own law. Against the scepticism which sees through the false claims to eternal validity in the structures and norms of ethics, it must assert the law of love which is more than law.<sup>2</sup>

The question of how love is related to law must be considered, argues Niebuhr, in terms of both the subjective and the material dimensions of both love and law. Subjectively, the question is how the experience of love, in which the 'ought' is transcended, nevertheless contains a 'thou shalt'. Materially, the question is how the indeterminate possibilities of love are related to the determinate and specified obligations defined by law. These points of indeterminacy in the law of love, correspond, says Niebuhr, to the indeterminate

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1. Niebuhr, Faith and History, pp.214-215.

2. Ibid., p.220.

character of human freedom. Insofar as man has the freedom to transcend every structure and every particular social situation, every law is subject to indeterminate possibilities which finally exceed the limits of any specific definition of what he 'ought' to do.<sup>1</sup>

In his most careful working out of the relationship of love and law, Niebuhr draws attention to four points at which the transcendence of love over law is clearest. The first of these points is to be found in the fact that the freedom of man over every historical situation means that his obligation to others cannot be limited to partial communities of nature and history, to family, tribe, or nation. The second pinnacle of love, says Niebuhr, is sacrificial love which represents both the completion and the annulment of law as love. It is the complement of the law of love because perfect love has no logical limit short of the readiness to sacrifice the self for the other. Yet it is a point which stands beyond all law, because the necessity of sacrificing one's life for another cannot be formulated as an obligation, nor can it be achieved under the whip of the sense of obligation. Law, in the determinative sense, says Niebuhr, must stop with distributive justice and

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1.

Niebuhr, Christian Realism and Political Problems, (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), pp.140-147.

mutual love.<sup>1</sup>

The third point at which the transcendence of love over law is most clearly revealed, is to be found, says Niebuhr, in the concept of forgiveness. Forgiveness has the same relation to punitive justice as sacrificial love has to distributive justice. Forgiveness is both a completion and an annulment of punitive justice. It is its completion, in the sense that imaginative justice which understands all the factors involved in a wrong act, moves in the direction of forgiveness. Yet forgiveness is finally a contradiction to punitive justice. God's judgement is a revelation of his mercy, therefore we must forgive our brethren because God has forgiven us. But though forgiving love transcends all schemes of justice, it also enters partially into the category of love as law. The fact that forgiveness is laid upon us as an obligation, states Niebuhr, proves that even on this pinnacle of grace, law is not completely transcended.<sup>2</sup>

The final pinnacle of love in its transcendence over law, is to be found, says Niebuhr, in the relation between persons in which one individual penetrates imaginatively and sympathetically into the life of another. This kind of love is a matter of law, in the sense that the essential nature of man, with his

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1.

Ibid., pp.146-154.

2.

Ibid., pp.154-157.

indeterminate freedom, requires that human relations should finally achieve such an intimacy. But it is also, in Niebuhr's view, a matter of grace, because no sense of obligation can provide the imagination and forbearance by which this is accomplished.<sup>1</sup>

Law, says Niebuhr, seeks for a tolerable harmony of life with life, sin presupposed. It is, therefore, an approximation of the law of love on the one hand, and on the other, the instrument of love.<sup>2</sup> When we remember Niebuhr's original assertion that "morality is as much the root as the fruit of religion", we can appreciate the degree to which his thoughts evolved over the years. 'Religion' from being the 'courageous logic' which persuades men to rely on universal values, has become faith in the sacrificial forgiving love of Christ, who mediates a grace which both judges and upholds the structures of morality and justice in the world. From the statement that religion and morality stand in a relationship of mutual support, Niebuhr has moved to a position where he sees Christian love and the laws of society as standing in a relationship of dialectical tension. Love must implement itself in a sinful world

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1.

Ibid., pp.157-161.

2.

Ibid., p.162.

in the form of law; but it must also judge and transcend every implementation of law.

It is this dialectical relationship of love and law which Niebuhr sees, on the one hand, as the alternative to a static system of morals and ethics which loses its relevance for ordinary men in a complex world. And, on the other hand, he sees it as an alternative to the relativism which becomes so immersed in the complexities and contradictions of life, that it doubts the reality of any moral or ethical norms whatsoever. All law, writes Niebuhr, whether historical, positive, scriptural, or rational is more tentative and less independent in its authority than orthodox Christianity, whether Catholic or Protestant, supposes. And yet it is much more necessary than liberal Protestantism assumes. The final dyke against relativism is to be found not in the alleged fixities of law itself, but in the law of love. This, concludes Niebuhr, is the only final law, and every other law is an expression of the law of love in minimal or proximate terms, or in terms appropriate to given historical occasions.<sup>1</sup>

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1.

Niebuhr, Christian Realism and Political Problems, pp. 163-164.

Christian Faith and Social Justice.

From the beginning of his career Niebuhr has been concerned to elucidate the relationship between the Christian faith and the standards of social and political justice in communities. Despite the liberal influence upon his life Niebuhr still saw that religious ideals were neither challenged nor applied if they were not finally embodied in concrete proposals for specific situations.<sup>1</sup> And the complexities of a technological society forced him to see that the dream of perfect justice and the brotherhood of man was possible only of approximation in actual history. It was for this reason that Niebuhr quickly saw that the struggle for social and political justice must always be an area where conscience and power meet, where the ethical and coercive factors of human life interpenetrate and work out their uneasy compromises.<sup>2</sup>

We have already considered Paul Ramsay's criticism that in Niebuhr's earlier thinking there is the suggestion that justice may be grounded in structural reason and nature, independent of love which transcends these things.

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1. Niebuhr, Does Civilization Need Religion?, p.119.

2. Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, pp.XI - XXV.

But as his thought developed Niebuhr outgrew his liberal heritage, and justice came to mean the implementation of the law of love in the structures of society, insofar as this was possible in a sinful world.

Because this implementation must always be relative and must always depend upon the human situation and the demands of love in this situation, Niebuhr is not prepared to offer a neat definition of justice. His reticence has drawn criticism from Emil Brunner. "... Reinhold Niebuhr has never worked out a clear concept of justice whereby the difference between the demands of justice and those of the supreme ethical norm of love might be understood. If one uses the term 'justice' intending it to be distinguished from the 'agape' of the New Testament..., then one is duty-bound to say exactly what this 'justice' is as distinguished from love."<sup>1</sup> But justice, for Niebuhr, is not a definable entity in itself; in Niebuhr's mature thought it is the relative embodiment of 'agape' in the structures of society.

Brunner believes that the Christian conception of justice is determined by the conception of God's order of creation.<sup>2</sup> But the difficulty for Niebuhr with this

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1.

Brunner, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Work as a Christian Thinker", Reinhold Niebuhr, ed. Kegley and Bretall, p.30.

2.

Emil Brunner, Justice and the Social Order, (New York: Harper; 1945), p.89.

concept is that human freedom alters and transmutes the 'given' facts of creation so much that no human institutions can be judged purely by the criterion of fixed principles of creation. For Brunner, the law of justice is that "by which earthly systems are framed", and the law of love is "for our relations with our fellowmen". "Justice belongs to the world of systems, not to the world of persons." Love can operate in systems only "between the lines", through the "meshes of the systems". Love begins where justice ends. "The real gift of love only begins where justice has already been done, for it is that which is beyond justice." Therefore, concludes Brunner, the "obligations of justice can be fulfilled because they are distinct, but love is never fulfilled".<sup>1</sup>

For Niebuhr, the demands of justice are never fixed; nor can they be satisfied for they are in the end, the demands of love. Niebuhr's understanding of justice revolves around the dialectical relation of 'agape' to the relative achievements of man in history. Mutual love is the highest possibility of social life, rising above the power-balances of its rough justice. But, says Niebuhr, if mutual love is not constantly

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Ibid., pp.116-130.

replenished by impulses of grace in which there are no calculations of mutual advantage, mutual relations degenerate first to the cool calculation of such advantage, and finally to resentment over the inevitable lack of complete reciprocity in all actual relations.<sup>1</sup>

Christian love and social justice then, can be neither identified nor separated. They cannot be identified simply, for 'agape' is transcendent, heedless, and sacrificial. Justice is historical, discriminating, and concerned with balancing interests and claims. But, on the other hand, they cannot be separated as Brunner separates them. For justice is the relative social embodiment of love, and, as such, is an approximation of love. The relationship between love and justice is, for Niebuhr, dialectical; love is both the fulfilment and the negation of justice.

In Niebuhr's view, love demands, negates, and fulfils justice. Love demands justice, for to be unconcerned for the achievement of more equal justice is to deny the claims of love. "A religion which holds

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1.

Niebuhr, Faith and History, p.210. cf. A.D. Lindsay's statement that "War is the negative aspect of the morality of my station and its duties if this closed morality is unredeemed by the universal spirit of the Gospel". A.D. Lindsay, The Two Moralities, (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1940), p.20.

love to be the final law of life stultifies itself if it does not support equal justice as a political and economic approximation of the ideal of love".<sup>1</sup> Love negates justice because justice must always be discriminating; it must always calculate and weigh conflicting interests. Love is not only the "source of the norms of justice"; it is also the "ultimate perspective by which their limitations are discovered".<sup>2</sup> Finally, love fulfils justice because 'agape' is redemptive; love alone can meet the other person in his uniqueness and freedom. "The other", says Niebuhr, "has special needs and requirements which cannot be satisfied by general rules of equity."<sup>3</sup>

It is because love demands, negates, and fulfils justice, that Niebuhr insists that neither can exist apart from the other. And it is for this reason that he makes no reply to Brunner's insistence that one is duty-bound to say what justice is as distinguished from love. Because, for Niebuhr, justice always exists in a dynamic relation between 'agape', on the one hand, and the uniqueness of concrete, historical situations on the other, it is not possible for him to say "exactly"

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1. Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, p.141.

2. Ibid., p.150.

3. Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.I, p.313.

what justice is, apart from either 'agape' or the historical situation. Brunner, in deriving his concept of justice from the 'order of creation', has, in Niebuhr's view, separated it too radically from the one ultimate norm of 'agape', with the result that the concept of justice is given a fixity which it does not possess, and the full relevance of 'agape' to our ideas of justice and to the social and political task, is obscured. By defining justice as the norm for social structures, and love as the norm for personal relations, and by insisting that "it is supremely necessary to emphasize the truth that what is decisive always takes place in the realm of personal relations and not in the 'political' sphere ...", Brunner demonstrates that he views the political task as a "matter of secondary importance".<sup>1</sup> This leads Niebuhr to describe Brunner as being in great error when the latter "interprets an act of personal kindness as more 'Christian' than a statesmanlike scheme in the interests of justice".<sup>2</sup>

Niebuhr's understanding of the effect of human freedom upon all given structures and orders of creation, makes it clear that justice cannot be determined by any

1.

Emil Brunner, The Divine Imperative, p.233.

2.

Niebuhr, Christian Realism and Political Problems, p.158.

static order, nor can it be regarded as an independent norm. But if Niebuhr has succeeded in showing men that there is no objective system of justice against which every achievement of society may be evaluated instantly, then he is obliged to supply some guidance towards the implementation of justice, lest men be lost in a sea of relativity.

A guiding, but not an absolute, standard of justice is to be seen, Niebuhr believes, in the principle of equality. This principle stands in a medial position between love and justice. If the obligation to love the neighbour as the self is to be reduced to rational calculation, the only guarantee of the fulfilment of the obligation is a grant to the neighbour which equals what the self claims for itself. Thus equality, says Niebuhr, is love in terms of logic; it is no longer love in the ecstatic dimension. Therefore, equal justice is, on the one hand, the law of love in rational form, and on the other hand, something less than the law of love.<sup>1</sup>

Equality, Niebuhr emphasises, is a guiding, but not an absolute, standard of justice. From the beginning of his career Niebuhr saw that to make equality into an absolute standard was to fail to appreciate the necessity of inequality of function, without which no society could live.<sup>2</sup> Over against the principle of equality there

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1.

Niebuhr, Faith and History, pp. 215 - 220.

2. Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, p.128.

must always stand the principle of freedom. Freedom, says Niebuhr, is a high value which ought not to be too readily or too completely sacrificed for other values. To what degree freedom ought to be subordinated to the requirements of social cohesion, and vice versa, is one of those problems, says Niebuhr, for which there is no final answer.<sup>1</sup> Every definition of the restraints which must be placed upon human vitalities and freedom must be tentative, argues Niebuhr, because all such definitions, which are themselves the product of specific historical insights, may arrest or suppress prematurely a legitimate vitality, if they are made absolute and fixed.<sup>2</sup>

Over against those who wish to postulate an objective system of justice, Niebuhr insists that justice can be approached only in specific situations when freedom and community, liberty and equality achieve, under the judgement of love, the most creative compromise. To those who exalt freedom, says Niebuhr, we must declare that freedom without community is not love, but leads to man's making himself his own end. And to those who exalt community, adds Niebuhr, we must declare that no historic

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1.

Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, p.206.

2.

Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, p.38.

community deserves the final devotion of man, since his stature and structure are such that only God can be the end of his life.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, says Niebuhr, there is a continuous dialectical tension between liberty and equality. No community can exist without either; but neither liberty nor equality can be unconditional. Liberty, concludes Niebuhr, is just as unrealizable in the absolute sense and just as relevant to the health of society as the principle of equality.<sup>2</sup>

Given the sinfulness of man, Niebuhr believes that a balance of power between conflicting social and political forces, must be a basic condition of justice in society. But this does not mean that all that Niebuhr has to offer in the quest for justice are the tensions and disputes of a balance of power. For a balance of power, argues Niebuhr, does not exclude love. Without love the frictions and tensions of a balance of power would become intolerable. And without the balance of power even the most loving relations may degenerate into unjust relations, and love may become the screen which hides the injustice.<sup>3</sup> Against those who believe in static objective systems of justice, Niebuhr insists that

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1. Niebuhr, Christian Realism and Political Problems, p.110.

2. Niebuhr, The Godly and the Ungodly, pp.66-67.

3. Niebuhr, Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist, (London: S.C.M. Press, 1940), pp.38-39.

justice must be recognized as dependent upon a balance of power between the conflicting forces in society. And against those who become defeatist and cynical over the relativity of all achievements of justice, Niebuhr insists that the dimension of love must judge every use of power and the sin of self-love which exploits every employment of power.

... to know both the law of love as the final standard and the law of self-love as a persistent force is to enable Christians to have a foundation for a pragmatic ethic in which power and self-interest are used, beguiled, harnessed and deflected for the ultimate end of establishing the highest and most inclusive possible community of justice and order. This is the very heart of the problem of Christian politics: the readiness to use power and interest in the service of an end dictated by love and yet an absence of complacency about the evil inherent in them.<sup>1</sup>

Just prior to Niebuhr's Gifford Lectures, Principal John Baillie is reported to have described Niebuhr as being theologically indebted to Karl Barth, and politically and socially indebted to Karl Marx.<sup>2</sup> We must consider carefully the justification of this remark. There is

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1. Niebuhr, "Christian Faith and Social Action," in Christian Faith and Social Action, ed. John Hutchison, (New York: Scribners, 1953), p.241.

2. N.H.G. Robinson, Christ and Conscience, p.109.

evidence, of course, of Barth's influence upon Niebuhr,<sup>1</sup> and there can be no doubt that Barth's emphasis upon the holiness of God, the sinfulness of man, and God's sheer act of grace which redeems man, helped to mould Niebuhr's thought. But on one very important issue Barth and Niebuhr have differed radically. The issue is concerned with the relationship of God's kingdom to the kingdoms of the world, with the relationship of love to the relative decisions and proximate solutions of justice in day-to-day life. Again and again Niebuhr has accused Barth of viewing life from such an exclusively 'transcendent' or 'eschatological' perspective that the 'nicely calculated less or more' of political and social justice received altogether too little concern and attention. Barthian theology, Niebuhr has always argued, fails to provide discriminating guidance for the making of political and social decisions.<sup>2</sup>

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Reviewing a work of Barth's in 1928, Niebuhr wrote that "insofar as Barth reintroduces the note of tragedy in religion (as it condemns all achievements of history by bringing them into juxtaposition to the 'holiness of God') it is a wholesome antidote to the superficial optimism of most current theology". (Quoted by June Bingham, Courage to Change, p.337.)

"I awakened from my Socialist slumber", Niebuhr recalls, partly as a result of reading Barth, together with Augustine and Pascal, and partly as a result of national and international affairs. Ibid., pp.339.

2.

See Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, p.68; Reflections on the End of an Era, pp.286-289, Beyond Tragedy, p.282; An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, p.238; The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.II, p.263; Christian Realism and Political Problems, p.184; Faith and History, p.220, Note 1.

The point at issue between Barth and Niebuhr is illumined in their dispute over the question of the Christian's attitude to the state. In a letter to Hromadka after the Munich debacle, Barth had said, "Every Czech soldier who will then fight and suffer, will fight and suffer for all of us, and ... also for the Church of Jesus Christ, which in the midst of such Hitlers and Mussolinis will either decline into ridicule or be wiped out". Niebuhr agreed with Barth in his understanding of and resistance to Nazism, but added, "We agree neither with Barth's previous separation of the Gospel from fateful political and historical decisions which we as men must make, nor yet with his present identification of the Czech soldier with the liberty of the Church of Christ". In Niebuhr's view Barth does not see the relationship between the Gospel and the world, between love and justice, in sufficiently dialectical fashion. "Here again Barth, the exponent of dialectical theology, has proved himself to be not sufficiently dialectical. In all the years before the crises his 'no' to the problem of culture and civilization was too unreserved, and in the hour of crisis his 'yes' is too unreserved."<sup>1</sup>

Though it may appear that the dispute between Barth

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Niebuhr, "Karl Barth and Democracy", Radical Religion, Vol.IV, No.1 (Winter, 1938), pp. 4 - 5.

and Niebuhr is limited to the field of social and political justice, in reality the dispute stems from their basic theological thinking, from their differing interpretations of human nature. Niebuhr has always believed that man has had both the responsibility for, and the ability to work for, proximate schemes of justice in a sinful world. For him, Barth's belief that the moral life of man would possess no valid principles of guidance if the Ten Commandments had not introduced such principles by revelation, is as absurd as it is unscriptural.<sup>1</sup> For Niebuhr has always believed that though man's nature is corrupted by sin, it is not totally destroyed by sin. There are moral insights among men, and there is the possibility of a provisional justice in society, and thus, for Niebuhr, there is indeed, a point of contact in man for God's grace. Because there is this basic disagreement between Niebuhr and Barth, John Baillie's remark must be accepted with considerable reservation.

It is clear that all through his examination of the relationship of the Christian faith to social and political justice, Niebuhr is concerned to avoid two extreme views. On the one hand, he is concerned to avoid the dangers of a disillusioning relativism which sees nothing more than sectional interest and prejudice without

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Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.II, p.263.

permanent values, in all schemes of human justice. On the other hand, he is equally anxious to avoid the claims to universality of such abstract natural law absolutes as liberty, equality, or freedom; or indeed, of a message of salvation which calls men to personal faith and ignores the problems of human society. His solution, the dialectical relation of love to justice, is able to meet the demands for guidance in treading the paths to a more just society, while, at the same time, remaining true to the transcendent source of sacrificial love.

#### Niebuhr and Marxism.

The second point made by John Baillie in regard to Niebuhr, was that he was politically and socially indebted to Karl Marx. It is true that Niebuhr accepted a great deal of the Marxist social and economic analysis of society, and there is ample evidence that he was influenced by its conviction of the imminence of catastrophe.<sup>1</sup> But Niebuhr always expressed considerable doubts regarding the methods and ultimate goal of Marxism. These doubts sprang from his understanding of human nature. It is of interest, therefore, to examine

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See especially Niebuhr, Reflections on the End of an Era.

Niebuhr's relationship with, and attitude to, Marxism, because it illustrates the influence of his doctrine of man upon his social and political thinking.

In 1932 Niebuhr wrote that Marxism's clear recognition that special privilege was inevitably associated with power, and that ownership of the means of production was the significant power in society, had been the greatest contribution Marxist thought had made to the problem of social life.<sup>1</sup> Marxism rightly recognized, in Niebuhr's view, that the brutalities of the conflict of power were basic to the collective history of mankind. Its realism in attempting to implement ethical ideals with political and economic methods were the reason, he believed, for Marxism's social significance.<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr believed that the Marxist maxim "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs", was an ideal impossible of consistent application, but was, nevertheless, an ideal towards which a rational society must move.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand Niebuhr saw that Marxism's expectation of changing human nature by the destruction of economic privilege to such a degree that no one would desire to make selfish use of power, must be placed in

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1. Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, p.163.

2. Ibid., p.165.

3. Ibid., pp. 159 - 160.

the category of a romantic illusion. He recognized that Marxism's feeling of social inferiority was responsible for its egotism and its spirit of vindictiveness. He saw clearly that its amoralism and its desire for vengeance could lead to the most destructive consequences. For no community, whether class or nation, wrote Niebuhr, can build a society by destroying everything outside of itself.<sup>1</sup> Looking to the future, Niebuhr wrote that the growing political power of industrial workers had forced the dominant classes to yield concessions sufficient to cast grave doubts upon the Marxist theory of revolution through the increasing misery of the workers.<sup>2</sup> There was a much greater probability, remarked Niebuhr, very significantly, that Communism would gain its victories in the agrarian Orient rather than in the industrial Occident.<sup>3</sup>

What then were the reasons which led Niebuhr first to reject Marxism's ultimate aims, and eventually to reject its methods? The key is to be found in a question which Niebuhr asked frequently during the nineteen-thirties. "Is it possible to lead man out of social confusion into an ordered society if we do not know man a little better

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1. Ibid., pp. 154 - 164.

2. Ibid., p.181.

3. Ibid., p.191.

than either Marxians or liberals know him?"<sup>1</sup> It was Niebuhr's doctrine of man, deepened now by the interaction of his Christian faith with his understanding of contemporary events, which enabled him to see the fallacies in Marxist philosophy.<sup>2</sup> His understanding of the nature of human sin enabled him to see that the combining of political and economic power in the same hands inevitably must provide a fertile field for the uncontrolled growth of human egotism and pride. And his understanding of man's situation in history convinced him that any claims that the contradictions and conflicts of history would be resolved in the Marxist utopia, were idolatrous and therefore doomed to failure. Niebuhr's criticism has touched upon some of the basic fallacies in Marxism; thus, John Baillie's remark must be accepted again with considerable reservation.

In the criticisms which Niebuhr has made of Marxism in more recent years, the influence of his doctrine of man is again apparent. The Marxist goal of an ideal classless society, writes Niebuhr, creates a more dangerous situation than the purely cynical defiance of moral ends.

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1. Niebuhr, Radical Religion, Vol.IV, No.2, (Spring, 1939), p.8.

2. "It is difficult to know whether the criticism of both liberal and Marxist views of human nature and history was prompted by a profounder understanding of the Biblical faith; or whether this understanding was prompted by the refutation of the liberal and Marxist faith by the tragic facts of contemporary history ..." Niebuhr, "Intellectual Biography", Reinhold Niebuhr, ed. Kegley and Bretall, p.9.

It corresponds more nearly to the weakness of the human heart, for men are less inclined to pure cynicism than they are to the delusion that they serve some noble purpose when engaged in projects which serve their own ends. Thus the communist, by equating egotism solely with the economic motive, can be utterly self-righteous in his lust for power because he is not a property-owner or a profit-maker.<sup>1</sup>

Further, the Marxist belief that after the revolution man will be purely the creator of history, involves, says Niebuhr, monstrous claims of both omnipotence and omniscience, ignoring history's enigmatic character, and contributing to Marxism's illusion of power. Because the Marxist looks at the world through the spectacles of an inflexible dogma, his 'historical understanding' predetermines the facts he discovers, and prevents him from really knowing the kind of world in which he lives.<sup>2</sup> The danger in Marxism, concludes Niebuhr, is that its expectation of the complete realization of the kingdom of perfect righteousness in history, is but a self-righteous, secularized version of Messianism, without the knowledge of the prophets that the judgement of God falls with particular severity upon the chosen people.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Niebuhr, Christian Realism and Political Problems, pp. 39 - 43.

2. Ibid., pp. 45 - 46.

3. Niebuhr, Faith and History, p. 240.

Niebuhr and Socialism

Niebuhr's relationship with Socialist doctrine and practice reveals a pattern similar to that of his relationship with Marxism. In 1935 Niebuhr wrote, "We believe that the social ownership of the means production is the only basis of health and justice for a technical age".<sup>1</sup> There was some evidence, said Niebuhr, looking towards Europe, that Socialism could be achieved progressively by parliamentary action;<sup>2</sup> for example, the ballot box had actually served the purpose of equalizing some of the inequalities of economic society by rigorous taxation policies.<sup>3</sup> But, said Niebuhr, the counsels of the doctors of a moribund social system - the J.M. Keynes, and the Sir Arthur Salters, and a whole host of liberal economists - could not prevent the inevitable drift towards fascism. It was always more natural to hide wasted strength by a desparate venture of power, than to arrest its decay by a prudent restraint upon its use.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Niebuhr, "Is Religion Counter-Revolutionary?", Radical Religion, (Autumn, 1935), No.1, pp. 14 - 20.

2. Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, p.206.

3. Niebuhr, Reflections on the End of an Era, p.54.

4. Ibid., p.53.

Having rejected the policies of a liberal Christianity as confusing and irrelevant, Niebuhr substituted for them the policy of achieving justice by a balancing of power between the classes of society. But when we examine the ways in which Niebuhr proposed to implement this policy, we find what Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., has described as a profound split in Niebuhr's thought. Niebuhr, says Schlesinger, "rendered two answers to this question - one on the level of strategy, the other on the level of tactics - and assumed that the two answers were identical".<sup>1</sup> His first answer derived from his conviction that power conflicts were the basic elements of history. And yet for all his rejection of closed abstract systems, Niebuhr's second answer, argues Schlesinger, shows that he saw the contemporary American problem in closed and abstract terms. Niebuhr, the passionate champion of experiments, "flatly condemned the most massive and most brilliant period of political and economic experimentation in American history".<sup>2</sup> Too engrossed with a shocked fascination with the inevitability of catastrophe, Niebuhr, "blinkerred by doctrine, scornfully rejected in practice the very pragmatism he called for in theory".<sup>3</sup>

But gradually, we can perceive a change in Niebuhr's

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1. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Reinhold Niebuhr's Role in Political Thought", Reinhold Niebuhr, ed. Kegley and Bretall, p.136.

2. Ibid., p.140.

3. Ibid., pp. 141 - 142.

attitude to Socialism. By 1946 he had broken definitely with Socialism as a system. The success of the New Deal improvisation and the disastrous results of the Communist experiment, caused Niebuhr to confess that, "if socialization of economic power is purchased at the price of creating irresponsible and tyrannical political power, our last estate may be worse than the first".<sup>1</sup> How could a community socialize property, asked Niebuhr, "without creating pools of excessive social power in the hands of those who manage both its economic and political processes"?<sup>2</sup> Even if social ownership were more efficient, it might be wise to sacrifice efficiency "for the sake of preserving a greater balance of forces and avoiding undue centralization of power".<sup>3</sup> Though the logic of history seemed to Niebuhr to be behind proposals for socialization, the logic was not unambiguous. It was clear that the two prerequisites for a free society were that there should be equilibrium between class forces, and that the equilibrium should be dynamic, gradually shifting "the political institutions of the community to conform to changing economic needs and unchanging demands for a higher justice".<sup>4</sup>

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1. Quoted by Schlesinger, Ibid., p.143.

2. Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, p.80.

3. Ibid., p.81.

4. Ibid., p.102.

In Niebuhr's eventual acceptance of the pragmatic political programme of the New Deal and the Fair Deal as a more adequate answer to the problem of justice in a technical age, the two halves of Niebuhr's thought were re-united.<sup>1</sup> "Christian radicalism had given way, so to speak, to Christian realism; his old demand for a social balance of power had finally found its objective correlative in public policy."<sup>2</sup>

One of the key factors in this change in Niebuhr's thinking about Socialism, says J.C. Bennett, was the more explicit application of Niebuhr's doctrine of man to the problems which arise when political and economic power are combined in the same hands. Niebuhr's visit to England in 1949, says Bennett, caused him to become vividly aware of the problems of incentive and bureaucracy under Socialism. He believed that the British Socialists shared the Marxist illusion that there were limits to human needs, desires, and ambitions. Of the British health

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"We have, in short, achieved such justice as we possess in the only way justice can be achieved in a technical society. We have attained a certain equilibrium in economic society itself by setting organized power against organized power. When that did not suffice we used the more broadly based political power to redress disproportions and disbalances in economic society." Niebuhr, The Irony of American History, (New York: Scribners, 1952), p.101.

2.

Schlesinger, op.cit., p.147.

programme, for example, Niebuhr remarked, "Human beings are, on the whole, too thoughtless to justify a community in allowing them to set their own limit on demands which they may make of a public servant...".<sup>1</sup> It is not surprising, says Bennett, to find Niebuhr saying at this time that "'Christian Socialism' is no longer a viable compound".<sup>2</sup>

The abandonment of Socialism was, in the first instance, the result of particular disillusionments. But, says Professor Bennett, there was something deeper at work. Niebuhr's doctrine of man was never really consistent with democratic socialism; for the latter had too optimistic an attitude towards the problem of incentive and towards the problem of self-aggrandisement which inevitably arises with the uniting of political and economic power. Niebuhr's rejection of fixed socialist goals for society at last brought consistency to his position which had much earlier rejected the fixed social laws of Catholic natural law.<sup>3</sup> There is a certain irony in this long-delayed return to consistency. For Niebuhr, on the one hand, had strived strenuously to find a relevant social and political philosophy which avoided the dogmatism and irrelevancies of abstract theories. And,

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1. Quoted by John C. Bennett, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Social Ethics", Reinhold Niebuhr, ed. Kegley and Bretall, p.74.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p.75.

on the other hand, he had striven equally strenuously to avoid the relativism which sinks into defeatism and disillusionment. And yet for all his striving, Niebuhr had fallen into the error of which he had so frequently accused others. Immersed in a struggle which demanded a dynamic zeal, he embraced a doctrinaire Socialist idealism which prevented him from aiding, by pragmatic action, the implementation of the goal of social justice which he so much desired.

#### Niebuhr and Pacifism.

Niebuhr's attitude to pacifism is important for our examination of his social and political thinking, because it again illustrates the extent to which Niebuhr's understanding of human nature has influenced other areas of his thought. Niebuhr, convinced of the futility of international war, shared in the general revulsion that followed the First World War. But even in this revulsion, there is evidence that Niebuhr was not a completely convinced pacifist.<sup>1</sup> When the break with pacifism did come, it came in the context of political coercion in the class struggle, rather than in the context of international war.

Once we admit, writes Niebuhr, that the factor of

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Niebuhr, Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, p.47.

coercion is ethically justifiable in the struggle for social justice, we cannot draw any absolute line of demarcation between violent and non-violent coercion.<sup>1</sup> If a season of violence, he says, can establish a just social system and create the possibility of its preservation, then there is no purely ethical ground upon which violence and revolution can be ruled out.<sup>2</sup> A social conflict, in Niebuhr's view, which aims at a greater equality has a moral justification which must be denied to efforts which aim at the perpetuation of privilege.<sup>3</sup>

Niebuhr's dispute with Christian liberals who insisted upon pacifism in the social struggle was centred upon what Niebuhr considered to be the error of combining pragmatic scruples against violence with an absolutist religious objection to violence. Liberal Protestantism believed in the possibility of living by the 'law of Christ' while remaining related to all the relative and compromising forces of ordinary society. In Niebuhr's eyes,

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1. Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, p.172.

2. Ibid., p.179. See also, Niebuhr, Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist, p.35: "Justice is never free from vindictiveness [but] capitulation to the foe might well subject us to a worse vindictiveness."

3. Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, p.235.

it believed it was possible to be involved in all the moral relativities incident upon the defense of limited human groups, and yet, at the same time, remain true to an absolute ethic by the simple expedient of disowning violence.<sup>1</sup>

If Christians are to live by 'the way of the Cross', then, says Niebuhr, they must be prepared to practise not non-violent resistance but non-resistance as such, for they will find nothing in the Gospels which justifies non-violent resistance as an instrument of love perfectionism. They must recognize that a Christian's concern over his violation of the ethic of Jesus ought to begin long before the question of violence is reached. It ought to begin by recognizing that he has violated the law "The shalt love thy neighbour as thyself". For it is out of the violation of this commandment, says Niebuhr, that the conflict of life with life, and nation with nation, arises.<sup>2</sup>

Niebuhr has always made it clear that he both accepts and respects the religious idealist in society. Men may indeed emulate the powerless goodness of Christ; and some of his followers ought to do so. But, warns Niebuhr, they ought to know what they are doing. They are not

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1. Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, pp.195-197.

2. Ibid., p.196.

able, by this strategy, to guarantee victory for any historical cause, however comparatively virtuous. They can only set a sign and a symbol of the Kingdom of God, of a kingdom of perfect righteousness and peace which transcends all the struggles of history.<sup>1</sup>

But a pragmatic pacifism, states Niebuhr, must not be confused with a purely religious pacifism. A pragmatic pacifism must accept a world in which interest is set against interest, and force against force, and it ought to know that in such a world, the ideal of the Cross has been violated from the beginning. The very essence of politics, says Niebuhr, lies in the achievement of justice through the balancing of power in society. A balance of power, he says, is not conflict, but a tension between opposing forces underlies it. Where there is tension there is potential conflict, and where there is conflict there is potential violence. A responsible relationship to the political order, concludes Niebuhr, makes an unqualified disavowal of violence impossible.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, while respecting a pacifist perfectionism, Niebuhr denounced a pacifism which saw the Cross as a social strategy, where the 'way of Jesus' was projected

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1. Niebuhr, Discerning the Signs of the Times, (London: S.C.M. Press, 1946), pp. 124 - 125.

2. Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, pp. 199 - 200.

as a success story, and the Sermon on the Mount became a counsel of prudence. It was through this kind of distortion of the New Testament ethic of non-resistance that pacifism was able to present itself as, at one and the same time, a political method and a religious absolute, and thereby compounded political naivety with heresy at every crucial point. The final absurdity to which pacifist illusions led, was to be seen, said Niebuhr, in its self-righteous religious perfectionism which shunned the realities of politics at one moment, while, in the next, it embraced the sorry and selfish relativities of a political isolationism.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr's rejection of pacifism, especially in its political form, is based primarily, says J.C. Bennett, upon his doctrine of man. Niebuhr, says Bennett, believed that the pacifists failed to do justice to the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith, substituting for it a sectarian perfectionism which believed that divine grace actually lifted man out of the sinful contradictions of history and established him above the sins of the world.<sup>2</sup> In Niebuhr's view, the pacifist who tries to live in history without sinning and who fails to strive for a relative decency and justice in an unjust society, is

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1.

Niebuhr, "Pacifism and America First", Christianity and Crisis, (June 16, 1941), No. 1, pp. 2 - 5.

2.

John C. Bennett, op.cit., pp. 68 - 69.

himself involved in sin. Professor Bennett's opinion is substantiated when we consider Niebuhr's statement that pacifism, presumably inspired by the Christian Gospel, has really absorbed the Renaissance faith in the goodness of man, has rejected the Christian doctrine of original sin as an outmoded bit of pessimism, and has reinterpreted the Cross so that it is made to stand for the absurd idea that perfect love is guaranteed a simple victory over the world.<sup>1</sup>

What was at issue in the pacifist debate, states Gordon Harland, was a whole understanding of the Christian Gospel and the nature of historical and political reality. War had been abstracted from the rest of reality to where it could be named as the evil, there to be denounced and disavowed. "It was a problem to be mastered by men of reason and an evil to be conquered by men of goodwill." "Such a viewpoint", says Harland, "involved an entire philosophy of life, an integrated view of the nature of man, evil, and history. ... To oppose such a position was not merely to have a different viewpoint on a social question, it was to attack an entire life philosophy ... . ... if this is seen we can apprehend the passion, bitterness, and real seriousness of the debate. ... This

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1.

Niebuhr, Christianity and Power Politics, (New York: Scribners, 1940), p.5.

is why the pacifist struggle was of such signal importance in the development and clarification of Niebuhr's thought."<sup>1</sup>

Since the Second World War the development of atomic weapons has heightened the moral dilemma of mankind. For Niebuhr, it has made the pacifist issue more difficult; for men must now find a way between nuclear warfare, on the one hand, and capitulation to tyranny, on the other. A nation may well reach a point where it can purchase its life too dearly, says Niebuhr, for a life purchased by the use of nuclear weapons might not be worth living. And yet, no statesman would risk placing his nation in a position of complete defenselessness. In Niebuhr's view, individuals may do so, but nations do not thus risk their very existence. Nor is there any guarantee that such a 'moral' gesture as nuclear disarmament from what is regarded as the decadent West would impress our opponents.<sup>2</sup> Man cannot win freedom by renouncing his freedom to destroy; he can win freedom only by mastering that freedom.<sup>3</sup>

#### Niebuhr and Democracy.

Niebuhr has wisely refrained from entering the debate

1. Gordon Harland, The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 220 - 221.

2. Niebuhr "The Hydrogen Bomb", Christianity and Society, Vol.15, (Spring, 1950), pp. 5 - 7.

3. G. Harland, The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr, p.231.

between Christian and secular protagonists on the question as to whether democracy is the product of the Christian faith or of a secular culture. In a fair assessment, he says that democracy is the fortunate product of the confluence of both Christian and secular forces. This is so, says Niebuhr, because democracy requires, on the one hand, a view of man which forbids using him merely as an instrument of a political programme or a social process; this view, he says, the Christian and Jewish faiths have supplied. On the other hand, a free society requires that human ends and ambitions, social forces and political powers, be judged soberly and critically, in order that the false sanctities and idolatries of both traditional societies and modern tyrannies, may be avoided. This sober and critical view, says Niebuhr, is the fruit both of some types of Christianity, and of the secular temper with its interests in efficient causes and in immediate, rather than in ultimate, ends.<sup>1</sup>

Modern secular thought, says Niebuhr, prides itself upon the idea that its optimistic view of human nature, depending upon an erroneous identification of the virtue and dignity of man, laid the foundation of modern democracy.<sup>2</sup> But democracy, insists Niebuhr, has a more

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1.

Niebuhr, Christian Realism and Political Problems, p.95.

2.

Ibid., p.97.

compelling justification and requires a more realistic vindication than is given it by this interpretation of its origin. This excessively optimistic attitude, says Niebuhr, can imperil democracy, for when contemporary experience refutes this optimism, it may seem to refute the democratic ideal as well. Thus, democracy may be jeopardized when sentimentality gives way to despair, and a too consistent optimism gives way to a too consistent pessimism.<sup>1</sup>

It is thus imperative, in Niebuhr's view, that we understand that democracy has a greater significance than its association with the ideals and prejudices of a bourgeois culture would suggest. Modern democracy, says Niebuhr, requires a more realistic philosophical and religious basis, not only in order to anticipate and understand the perils to which it is exposed, but also to give it a more persuasive justification. Both the possibility of, and the necessity for, democracy, says Niebuhr, are rooted in the nature of man. It is man's capacity for justice which makes democracy possible; but it is man's inclination to injustice which makes democracy necessary. The possession of power aggravates man's inclination to deal unjustly with his fellows; that

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Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, p.V.

is why irresponsible and uncontrolled power is the greatest source of injustice.<sup>1</sup>

The facts about human nature which make this monopoly of power so dangerous and make a balance of power so desirable, are best understood, argues Niebuhr, from the standpoint of the Christian faith. It is for this reason that Niebuhr believes that a Christian view of human nature is more adequate for the development of a democratic society, than either an easy optimism or a moral cynicism. Christianity, believes Niebuhr, is able to offer three insights into the human situation which are indispensable to democracy. The first is that it assumes a source of authority from the standpoint of which the individual may defy the authorities of this world. The second insight is an appreciation of the unique worth of the individual which makes it wrong to fit him into any political programme as a mere instrument. The third insight which Christianity offers, says Niebuhr, is the biblical insistence that the same radical freedom which makes man creative, also makes him potentially destructive and dangerous, that the dignity of man and the misery of man have the same root.<sup>2</sup>

Christianity, Niebuhr believes, contributes to the

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1.

Ibid., p.VI.

2.

Niebuhr, Christian Realism and Political Problems, p.99

humility and tolerance necessary for the stability of democracy's balances of power. But it also enables men to see the limits of a democratic system. Every absolute devotion to relative political ends - and all political ends, says Niebuhr, are relative - is a threat to communal peace.<sup>1</sup> Christian humility should help us to see the sin of identifying a particular brand of democracy with the ultimate values of life. An uncritically religious devotion to democracy, concludes Niebuhr, tempts us to identify the final meaning of life with a virtue we possess.<sup>2</sup>

Thus in the realm of political philosophy, Niebuhr postulates an alternative, on the one hand, to all totalitarian political philosophies which circumvent human freedom. And, on the other hand, he avoids the dangers of a political relativism which, in its concern to preserve human freedom, may allow freedom to degenerate into anarchy. Democracy, says Niebuhr, embodies the principle of resistance within the principle of government itself.<sup>3</sup> This means that when democracy is nourished by both tolerance and humility - the fruits of both Christianity and of a secular culture - then freedom and

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1.

Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, p.104.

2.

Niebuhr, "Democracy as Religion", Christianity and Crisis, Vol.7, (August 4, 1947), pp. 1 - 2.

3.

Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol.II, p.278.

order in a democratic society are made to support, and not to contradict, each other. Democracy, says Niebuhr, does justice to two dimensions of human experience; to man's spiritual character and to his social character; to the uniqueness and variety of life, as well as to the common necessities of all men.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout our examination of Niebuhr's social and political thinking, it has become clear that Niebuhr's major concern has been to provide a normative social and political ethic which is, at the same time, relevant to man's situation in the world. In the field of morals Niebuhr has avoided both the rigidities of natural law, on the one hand, and a completely relative morality, on the other. Similarly, in his understanding of the struggle to create a just society, Niebuhr has avoided both a too static concept of justice - which could easily become injustice as the structures of human society change under the impact of human freedom - and a system of social justice which is completely relative. For Niebuhr an adequate social justice can be achieved only by the implementing, insofar as a sinful society allows, of the law of love. In his

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1. Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, pp. 9 - 11.

political thinking Niebuhr has seen the dangers in accepting doctrinaire ideologies or religious ideals, which claim a too easy implementation in human society. Nevertheless, he makes it clear that he believes that there are values and standards which a genuine political philosophy must preserve.

Of course, Niebuhr's position can never have the neatness and apparent consistency which objective systems of thought can claim.<sup>1</sup> Behind all of Niebuhr's social and political thinking lies his doctrine of man. Because man in his freedom transcends and modifies every given structure and edifice in society, a genuine social and political philosophy must always take this into account. This will mean that its system can never be static, but must be continually evolving. But, on the other hand, because man has been redeemed by the grace and love of

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Kenneth Thompson has criticized Niebuhr's application of the concepts of realism and idealism as being "so inconsistent, polemical, and vague as to drain them of much of their content, meaning, and usefulness". "... for Niebuhr political realism refers to conduct on a continuum ranging from cynicism to sheer utopianism." Kenneth Thompson, "The Political Philosophy of Reinhold Niebuhr", Reinhold Niebuhr, ed. Kegley and Bretall, p.173.

It is true, as we have already seen, that Niebuhr has made mistakes in political judgment. But a great deal of this alleged inconsistency is the result of the application of the law of love to situations which differ vastly in their moral, social, and political implications. Apparently similar situations appear to receive contradictory diagnoses and verdicts. But behind this apparent inconsistency lies the consistent application of the law of love to the infinitely complex problems of social and political life.

God, then, for Niebuhr, man's social and political thinking can never be purely relative. It must always be a living embodiment of God's love manifesting itself in the world. It must be normative, but not static; dynamic, but not relative. It must be the working out in social and political terms of God's love for men.

CONCLUSION.

It is clear that Niebuhr's main concern throughout his writings, has been to relate the truths of the Christian faith to the world of human experience. Perhaps the most important insight into Niebuhr's character can be gained from a reading of his Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic. Here the clear-sightedness and honesty with which Niebuhr views the human situation is obvious. This has meant that for Niebuhr it has never been sufficient to proclaim the truths of the Christian faith without facing the problem of the communication of this faith both in an understandable language and in a manner which reveals its relevance to the problems of ordinary life.

Niebuhr's early involvement in pastoral work and his part in the battle for the establishment of social justice in America bred in him a healthy respect for the vast complexity of human life, for its multifarious activities, and for its inextricable intermixture of high achievement and tragic failure. But, on the other hand, Niebuhr has sensed the immutability of the truths of the Christian faith and the unchangingness of certain elements of man's nature. Niebuhr's life-long endeavour has been to relate these two sources of truth into a meaningful whole. He has seen clearly that the stressing of the immutability of truth

can lead either to an intransigent dogmatism or to an ineffectual obscurantism. But he has seen equally clearly that the stressing of the multifarious activities of the human race without recognition of any ultimate truth may lead to a sheer relativism and, in the end, to scepticism. Niebuhr's endeavour has always been to mould these two sources of truth into one stream of unified truth which can do justice to their respective insights. Though he does not always succeed in his endeavour, Niebuhr's attempt is one which must always be made if the work of Christian apologetics is to proceed, and it is an attempt which must be made anew in every age.

Evidence of Niebuhr's over-riding concern is to be found in his analysis of the lessons to be learned from history. This is especially clear, for example, in his examination of the relationship of the Renaissance to the Reformation; for men are faced with the problem of relating the truths of the Reformation - that man as a sinner standing in need of God's grace cannot complete his life himself - with the truth of the Renaissance - that we can actually see from the lives of men that history is filled with indeterminate possibilities.

In his early thought, it is clear that Niebuhr did not always succeed in integrating these two sources of truth.

We have been able to perceive two sources of man's moral sense, two interpretations of man's conscience, and two understandings of the nature of justice. In each case these alternative sources reflect Niebuhr's inability to integrate fully the truths discernible in human life with the truths discernible by faith in a God who has created all life. Because man's moral sense, his conscience, and his sense of justice form such a vital element in his nature they cannot have alternative sources. And if Niebuhr wished to indicate that these sources were in fact related then it was necessary for them to be more closely integrated than was achieved in his early thought.

A similar dichotomy is to be found in Niebuhr's earlier understanding of man's salvation. Religion was seen more as an aid in the implementation and preservation of values, than as a revealed faith. Religion was seen to be as much the fruit as the root of morality. And in his political thinking so much was Niebuhr immersed in the struggle for social justice, that he became, for a period, an uncritical advocate of a doctrinaire Socialism. And yet, during all this period, there is still in Niebuhr's thought the recognition of the unlimited ethical demand and 'otherworldliness' of the true Christian faith. Despite his strenuous endeavours to relate the truths ascertainable

by faith to the truths discernible in human life, it is plain that Niebuhr, in his early work, did not succeed in his task.

In the development of Niebuhr's thought from these early formulations it is clear that the cause of this development is to be found in the fruitful interplay of Niebuhr's observations in the world of human activity with his understanding of the Christian faith. The bursting bubble of optimism in the economic disasters after the First World War, the rise of Fascism, and the idolatrous claims of Communism demanded a more profound theological diagnosis than a liberal Christianity could provide. Only a truly Biblical doctrine of man's sin and of God's salvation could meet such a challenge.

In his first working out in theological categories of man's nature as a sinner, Niebuhr's distinction between man's essential nature and the virtues corresponding to that nature allowed him to draw attention to the fact that man's essential nature, though corrupted by sin, was yet not destroyed. This essential nature, Niebuhr pointed out, contained the elements of man's freedom, his transcendence over nature, and man's self-transcendence. Now while a knowledge of what is implied by these three freedoms of man allows us to understand the content Niebuhr permits man's essential nature, as a theological statement of man's essential nature it is

too brief. On the other hand, when we do consider all that Niebuhr implies in these three freedoms, we find that his understanding of man's essential nature is still not fully adequate. Niebuhr's understanding owes too much to one of his sources; his work and observations in the world caused him to portray an essential nature which appeared to exist by its own right and in its own strength. And yet, as we have seen, man's essential nature exists, and continues to exist, only by virtue of its relationship with God.

In the subsequent development of his thought it is clear that there has been a merging of these two sources of Niebuhr's insights into a more integrated whole. Morality has become the fruit of the unending ethical demand of a dynamic faith. Justice has become the implementation of the law of love insofar as a sinful society allows; and every political philosophy is seen as standing under the ultimate judgment of God. In his understanding of man's salvation, Niebuhr makes use of the terms 'myth' and 'symbol' to convey meaningfully the truths of God's salvation. He has seen clearly that only in such symbols can the truth of God and the truths discernible in human life be linked together. To attempt to reach the truth of God from a beginning in the world of men must fail. In his understanding of history Niebuhr does justice to the insights of the opposing poles of subjective and objective historical

interpretation without falling into the errors of either. Niebuhr's viewpoint is important because it offers an alternative approach to the problem of the relationship of the Jesus of history to the Christ of faith. Because the Jesus of history is himself the object of historical research and all that that involves, he is not so objectively factual as is often supposed; for this reason the problem of the relationship of the Jesus of history to the Christ of faith is based upon a false understanding of history.<sup>1</sup>

In his later thinking Niebuhr has stressed that man is capable of relative achievements in history and is capable of partial implementations of the law of love in society. In this later endeavour to portray man's nature in history, Niebuhr retained the truths he had conserved by the distinction he had made earlier in man's nature. By stressing that man can partially implement the law of love, the law appropriate for man's essential nature as a free creature, Niebuhr preserves the truth which he had originally stressed - that man's essential nature though corrupted by sin was not destroyed. And by emphasizing that man is capable of implementing tentative schemes of justice in history Niebuhr has preserved the second of his original truths - that though the proper function of man's essential nature was destroyed

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Alan Richardson, History Sacred and Profane, (London: S.C.M. Press, 1964), especially Chapter 4, "Disengagement from History".

this did not mean that man was incapable of any achievement or any virtue in history.

This later interpretation of Niebuhr's has a twofold advantage. In the first place it portrays more clearly the content and potentialities of man's essential nature by stressing the law of love as the law appropriate for man's essential nature. In addition it relates the achievements and virtues corresponding to man's essential nature more closely to this nature and thus avoids the criticism which Niebuhr's use of the word 'distinction' had allowed: that there was a hard and fast line drawn between man's essential nature and its corresponding virtue. And in the second place, Niebuhr's insistence that the essential nature of man with its indeterminate freedom requires the dimension of 'agapeistic' love for its complete fulfilment, draws nearer to the indispensable truth that man's essential nature exists only because of its relation with God.

But though Niebuhr's later thinking has been closer to this indispensable truth he has not elaborated upon this aspect of his work. Thus despite the more successful integration of his thought, and despite his ability to provide the opportunity for a creative dialogue with secular thinkers, it is still necessary for the task of Christian apologetics to profess as an act of faith that man's essential nature exists only through the grace of God.

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