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THE SOCIAL ETHICS OF REINHOLD

NIEBUHR

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Philosophy
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Divinity

by

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TABLE I

Throughout this thesis Niebuhr's works will be referred to by the initials of their titles, as follows:

- BT -- Beyond Tragedy (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938).
- CE -- An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (New York: Harper and Bros.,
- CLCD -- The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944).
- GPP -- Christianity and Power Politics (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940).
- DCNR -- Does Civilization Need Religion? (New York: Macmillan Co., 1927).
- DST -- Discerning the Signs of the Times (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946).
- FH -- Faith and History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949).
- HD -- The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. II: Human Destiny (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943).
- HM -- The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. I: Human Nature (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941).
- LCWFC -- Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic (New York: Willett, Clark and Colby, 1929).
- MM -- Moral Man and Immoral Society (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932).
- REE -- Reflections on the End of an Era (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934).

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Reinhold Niebuhr has aptly been termed "Prophet from America."¹ He occupies a unique position in American theology. Combining the social passion of a fiery revolutionary with the theological insight of a profound religious thinker, he has made a deep impression on American Protestantism and has received considerable recognition from continental theologians. "Niebuhr is distinguished by the fact of an intense awareness of ultimate problems allied with an equally intense preoccupation with the immediate, concrete, practical next step."² It is no wonder then that he has gained the title of "U.S. Protestantism's foremost theologian."³

In order to accomplish the "practical next step" which characterizes his concern for the immediate problem, Niebuhr has developed a social ethic of considerable proportions and power. His ethic did not emerge full blown at an early age, but like that of many a social thinker developed over the years. Nevertheless there have been a number of controlling ideas present in Niebuhr's thought which make it possible to use his early works as well as the later ones, albeit with some dis-

¹Cf. the title to D. R. Davies' work on Niebuhr, Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet from America (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1948).

²Ibid., p. 1.

³"Irony for Americans," Time, LIX, 14 (April 7, 1952), 84.

cretion and discrimination.

Our concern in this thesis will be merely to present the line of thought which Niebuhr employs in relating the Christian agape to society. Since Niebuhr's social ethic has never been set down in any systematic form, it will be necessary to collect from his various writings those ideas which he uses in advocating his views. To be sure he has written extensively on ethics, but never has he developed the subject from the traditional points of view. As in philosophy ethics cannot be separated from theology. It is important for this study then to draw in much of the theology of Niebuhr. This complicates the task somewhat, for Niebuhr deepened, broadened, and in many instances, revised his theological approach through the years.

In addition to the evaluations of Niebuhr which have appeared in the various theological and religious publications of our country, there are also essays examining his thought in different volumes on contemporary American theology. Two of the most recent monographs on Niebuhr are D. R. Davies' Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet from America and Edward J. Carnell's The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr. Of the two, the book by Davies is to be preferred. Carnell is not completely equipped for evaluating the thought of Niebuhr.

The thesis will conclude with an estimate of Niebuhr' ethic from the Lutheran point of view. It is hoped that a correlation can be indicated between the thought of Niebuhr and that of Reformation ethics. Furthermore, the correctives which Niebuhr applies to Reformation ethics will be examined briefly for their validity.

CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

"Reason insists on a coherent world because it is its nature to relate all things to each other in one system of consistency and coherence."¹ Thus the interpretation of historical and religious phenomena must result in a coherent and consistent whole to be valid, according to Niebuhr. However, Niebuhr's point of departure in religion, ethics, and philosophy is always the concrete stuff of life itself. It is from human experience that he seeks to construct a coherent interpretation of life, but in the face of the incoherent he is willing to forego consistency to stay true to the facts. He stated in 1927:

What is important is that justice be done to the fact that creative purpose meets resistance in the world and that the ideal which is implicit in every reality is also in conflict with it. The reason why naive religions are "more inclusive of the facts" in portraying this struggle than highly elaborated theologies is that the latter are always prompted by the rational need of consistency to obscure some facts for the sake of developing an intellectual plausible unity.²

Since this is the case, Niebuhr concludes that the introduction of a new logic is necessary:

Loyalty to all the facts may require a provisional defiance of logic, lest complexity in the facts of experience be denied for the sake of a premature logical consistency. Hegel's "dialectic" is a logic invented for the purpose of doing justice to the fact of "becoming"

¹Reinhold Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (New York: Harper and Bros., 1935), p. 75. Hereafter referred to as CE.

²Reinhold Niebuhr, Does Civilization Need Religion? (New York: Macmillan Co., 1927), p. 200. Hereafter referred to as DCMR.

as a phenomenon which belongs into the category of neither "being" nor "nonbeing."³

Hegel's logic and philosophy supply much of the philosophical equipment with which Niebuhr attacks the several religious and social problems. It is from the employment of this logic that Niebuhr and those of similar bent were called "dialectical theologians."

With Hegel's logic, Niebuhr was enabled to state the complexities of human experience in a way which was at once true to the facts and philosophically valid. Instead of acknowledging only the one or the other alternative, he could now state both without being accused of contradiction. This he does frequently.

As logic must bend to the force of facts, so religion to be valid must interpret life as it actually is. Niebuhr seems to have held the view that religions and religious conviction grow out of life itself.

Religions grow out of real experience in which tragedy mingles with beauty and man learns that the moral values which dignify his life are embattled in his own soul and imperiled in the world.⁴

He states again, "Religion is...the courageous logic which makes the ethical struggle consistent with world facts."⁵ Later Niebuhr conceives of religion in different terms. Instead of deducing religion from empirical observation, he finds religious teaching originating from revelation:

It must be emphasized that this final revelation of the divine sovereignty over life and this final disclosure of the meaning of

³Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, I: Human Nature (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), p. 263. Hereafter HN.

⁴DCNR, p. 200.

⁵Ibid., p. 50.

life in terms of its dependence upon divine judgment and mercy is not simply some truth of history which is comprehended by reason to be added to the sum total of human knowledge.⁶

A few pages later Niebuhr modifies this viewpoint, indicating that the origin of religious truth in revelation is not preclusive of rational and empirical validation.

...A 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.⁷

Niebuhr emerges from a purely naturalistic view of the origin of religion to a revelatory one. In both views his concern to remain true to the facts manifests itself. Even in his final synthesis there is still the empirical sensitivity of his early days.⁸ Since religion must be true to the facts, its statements will reflect the complexities of those facts. Hence, religious affirmations also will take on the paradoxical and logically contradictory character of life itself.

Religion, however, does not remain earth-bound. It seeks the Absolute in philosophical terminology.⁹ It seeks to relate the antinomies of life to a transcendent source of meaning. To do so religion must employ the language of myth and symbol. For what religion attempts to express is the inexpressible; hence the need for the myth and the symbol.

⁶Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, II: Human Destiny (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), p. 57. Hereafter HD.

⁷Ibid., p. 63. Cf. HM, p. 101.

⁸Cf. Robert E. Fitch, "Reinhold Niebuhr as Prophet and as Philosopher of History," The Journal of Religion, XXII, 1, p. 31 ff. Fitch comments on Niebuhr's empiricism.

⁹Reinhold Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), p. 52. Hereafter MM.

The classical myth 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 defying the fact of incoherence. Its world is coherent because all the 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 immediate rational unity.¹⁰

The necessity for the myth arises from the dialectical relation between time and eternity, between the eternal and temporal. "The relation of time and eternity cannot be expressed in simple rational terms."¹¹ "What is true in the Christian religion can be expressed only in symbols which contain a certain degree of provisional and superficial deception."¹²

The latter consideration introduces a new element into Niebuhr's discussion of myth. Myths and symbols used by the Bible are not to be taken literally; hence the superficial deception.

If they are taken literally the Biblical conception of a dialectical relation between history and superhistory is imperiled; for in that case the fulfillment of history becomes merely another kind of time-history.¹³

Yet the myth must be taken seriously. "If the symbols are not taken seriously the Biblical dialectic is destroyed, because in that case concepts of an eternity are connoted in which history is destroyed and not fulfilled."¹⁴

¹⁰CE, p. 26.

¹¹Reinhold Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938), p. 4. Hereafter BT.

¹²Ibid., p. 3.

¹³HD, p. 50.

¹⁴Ibid.

A myth interprets the paradoxes of life even as it reveals the inexpressible. Yet when a myth is reduced to rational terms, it is falsified and distorted. Such is the case with the doctrine of Christ, a truth transcending all wisdom but made metaphysically obtainable in Greek thought.¹⁵ While a myth may not be reduced to rational propositions, it is perfectly legitimate to search the myth for meaning. When a myth is stated as a metaphysical truth, there is a danger that its power will not be grasped by faith but that it will merely be understood. This is the objection raised by Niebuhr against the "Hellenization" of Christian truth.¹⁶

Among the myths which Niebuhr discusses, according to his classification, are the Creation, the Fall, the Atonement, the Parousia, and the Last Judgment.¹⁷ He refers to these frequently as he attempts to relate their meaning to life and human history. These myths provide the larger framework of meaning and mystery which is absolutely necessary for the right understanding of the antinomies and mysteries of life.¹⁸ An example of Niebuhr's exploration of a myth for meaning is found in his discussion of Creation. "The myth of creation offers...the firm foundation for a world view which sees the Transcendent involved in, but not identified with, the process of history."¹⁹

¹⁵Ibid., p. 60.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁷Reinhold Niebuhr, Faith and History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), p. 33. Hereafter FH.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 101.

¹⁹CH, p. 22.

Ultimately, however, the myth for all its meaning and profound insight is still a myth. This is brought out in Niebuhr's comment on the Resurrection:

The church as a fellowship of believers was obviously founded upon the conviction of the fact of the resurrection. This "fact" contained an alteration in the story through faith's apprehension of the significance of the story.²⁰

In defense of this view of the nature of Christian affirmations, Niebuhr states in a sermon entitled "Childhood and Maturity:"

Religious literalism seeks to preserve childlike profundity in religion by giving simple and childlike answers to childlike questions. It thinks that the mythical answers to childlike questions are adequate scientific answers. It tries to insist that, because the idea of creation is true, it is also true that God created the world in six days; and that because the story of the Fall is true, therefore the account of the serpent and the apple in the garden is actual history. Thus it corrupts ultimate religious insights into a bad science. It tries to make mythical explanations of the ultimate "why" into scientific explanation of the immediate "how." This form of cultural primitivism is as baneful as the social primitivism of reactionary politics.²¹

The search for meaning within the mythological statements of Christianity necessarily involves one in philosophy. It is this fact that makes such a search ambiguous. For a myth expresses the relation of the finite to the infinite. As such it cannot be rationalized without destroying "the genius of true religion." Yet the myth must be rationalized, "lest religion be destroyed by undisciplined and fantastic imagery or primitive and inconsistent myth...."²² The distinction between theology and philosophy

²⁰PH, p. 147.

²¹BT, pp. 147-8.

²²CE, p. 14.

is found in the different treatment of the myth. Theology seeks consistency and rationality in the myths of a given religious tradition. Philosophy seeks to carry the process one step farther and do away with the mythical basis entirely.²³

Other factors complicate the quest for truth. Not only is the theologian operating with a difficult type of religious expression in the myth, but he must also be mindful of the fact that he stands within a certain locus in history. He thus shares with his contemporaries all the relativities attached to his particular time. There is no philosophical solution for this problem.²⁴

Niebuhr is led from a consideration of this last fact to an application of the Reformation principle of justification by faith to the realm of truth. There is an incompleteness in our quest for truth even as there is an incompleteness in our religious life. To deny our finiteness and incompleteness in this area is a form of pride. Our knowledge of the truth is always tainted with our own ideology and corrupted by our premature assertion to finality. Thus we must never claim our truth as the truth. Instead we must hold the truth in Christ, confident that the God who overlooks and fulfills our insufficiencies will overlook and fulfill them here also.²⁵

Niebuhr applies the Reformation's discovery of the forgiveness of sins and the simul iustus et peccator character of man's religious life

²³Ibid., p. 13.

²⁴PH, p. 117.

²⁵HD, p. 214 ff.

to other areas of human experience. He sees the simul iustus et peccator character of man as an indication of the dialectic of all human life. He finds in it the reason why history can fulfill and negate the Kingdom of God at the same time. This is why he can say:

There is no realm of life where "grace" does not impinge. There are no complex relations of social justice to which the love of the Kingdom of God is not relevant. There are on the other hand no areas of experience where historical insecurity and anxiety are completely transcended, except in principle.²⁶

This application of love to social justice is the motif in Niebuhr's thought which we will explore further.

²⁶ibid., p. 204.

CHAPTER III

MAN

Before it is possible to demonstrate the relation of agape to the whole realm of culture, it is necessary to define in short compass Niebuhr's doctrine of man. For it is in human nature, asserts Niebuhr, that the social ethic will find its difficulties and its triumphs. Niebuhr's estimate of man underwent a development from his early days until it was fully expressed in the Gifford lectures of 1941 and 1943. In these lectures, Niebuhr elaborated the full implications of the Christian doctrine of man. He found that only the Christian interpretation of human nature did justice to the ambiguous and contradictory actions of human beings.

Basic for his entire interpretation of man is a clear view of man's dual nature.

The obvious fact is that man is a child of nature, subject to its vicissitudes, compelled by its necessities, driven by its impulses, and confined within the brevity of the years which nature permits its varied organic forms, allowing them some, but not too much, latitude. The other less obvious fact is that man is a spirit who stands outside of nature, life, himself, his reason and the world.¹

Man's dual nature will provide the key for the proper understanding of many of the contradictions of human life. The correctness of this view of man will be validated by a theological analysis. It is the misunderstanding of this basic fact about man which causes both the idealist and

¹HN, p. 3.

the naturalist to err, each emphasizing one aspect of human existence to the detriment of the other. The Christian holds both and thereby escapes the errors of both naturalism and idealism.²

It is from his ambiguous position in the world that man has difficulty understanding himself.

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....But the 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 the partial perspectives of a limited time and place.³

Man errs when he seeks to understand himself from his own finite perspective. But how can he transcend this limitation? Niebuhr answers with his doctrine of revelation. Man needs revelation because 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."⁴ This doctrine appears late in Niebuhr, receiving its first expression in Beyond Tragedy and being fully developed in the Gifford Lectures. The existential derivation of the doctrine comes out plainly in such a statement as: "Man does not know himself truly except as he knows himself confronted by God."⁵

Niebuhr justifies revelation on the basis of his interpretation of

²Ibid., p. 124.

³CE, p. 66.

⁴HN, p. 125.

⁵Ibid., p. 131.

Creation. As was pointed out above the myth of Creation expresses the involvement of the Transcendent in history. This insight is preserved in revelation. For:

The most important characteristic of a religion of revelation is this twofold emphasis upon the transcendence of God and upon His intimate relation to the world. In this divine transcendence the spirit of man finds a home in which it can understand its stature of freedom. But there it also finds the limits of its freedom, the judgment which is spoken against it, and, ultimately, the mercy which makes such a judgment sufferable.⁶

Revelation, then, provides the clue to the riddle of man. It not only provides the proper analysis of man's nature, but demonstrates the organic connection between the Transcendence of God and freedom of man. A religion of revelation is no arbitrary construct imposed upon nature, but an interpretation of nature which stems from certain points of reference which make sense out of the human drama.⁷ It is justified by the very nature of God. (See below.)

An analysis of the revelation of God indicates that there are two distinct types of revelation. The first is the personal, individual revelation which all men have by nature. This Niebuhr calls "general revelation." All men somehow are able to comprehend a reality beyond themselves, even though their understanding is limited. It is this capacity, this awareness, which makes it possible for the more specific type of revelations which Niebuhr finds to gain credence.⁸ The personal, general reve-

⁶Ibid., p. 126.

⁷M., p. 136-7; HD., p. 63.

⁸HN., p. 127.

lation provides the "Anknüpfungspunkt" for the socio-historical, special revelation of God. This latter revelation is highly necessary for:

It is not possible to arrive at an understanding of the meaning of life and history without such a revelation. No induction from empirical facts can yield such a conclusion about ultimate meaning because every process of induction presupposes some canon and criterion of meaning....(God) reveals himself not only in a general revelation; but in a special revelation. A general revelation can only point to the reality of God but not to His particular attributes. A theology which believes only in a general revelation must inevitably culminate in pantheism, because a God who is merely the object of human knowledge and not a subject who communicates with man by His own initiative is something less than God.⁹

Niebuhr finds that this general revelation, this sense of being confronted by a wholly other at the edge of human consciousness, contains three elements: 1. a sense of reverence for a majesty and dependence upon an ultimate source of being; 2. a sense of moral obligation and unworthiness; 3. a longing for forgiveness. The first of these categories gains the support of the general revelation of God as Creator. The latter two need the more specific delineation of special revelation.¹⁰

....The God whom we meet as 'The Other' at the final limit of our own consciousness, is not fully known to us except as specific revelations of His character augment this general experience of being confronted from beyond ourselves.¹¹

Special revelation fills in the knowledge that man has of God as Creator, interprets it, and finds God as Judge and Redeemer also.¹² Biblical religion takes a serious view of sin which necessarily leads to a view of God

⁹BT, pp. 14, 15.

¹⁰BT, pp. 131, 132.

¹¹Ibid., p. 130.

¹²BT, p. 56.

as Judge. The problem of God as Redeemer arises then by logical necessity. It is in the revelation of God's mercy that the concept of God as Judge is heightened and made more specific. The mercy of God is revealed in the suffering Christ.

From the standpoint of Christian faith the life and death of Christ becomes the revelation of God's character with particular reference to the unsolved problem of the relation of His judgment to His mercy.¹³

Thus revelation has the form of specific mighty acts of God culminating in the final act of the Cross, and the content of the life and death of Jesus himself.¹⁴

In terms of these presuppositions, man is able to see himself as he really is. God as Creator, God as "The Other," forces man to understand himself from God's point of view. Seen from the point of view of God, man is said to be made in the image of God in the sense that he possesses self-transcendence and self-consciousness. Man is enabled to see himself as self-transcendent since God has revealed himself as will and personality.¹⁵ Here it is possible once again to see the influence which the existentialists have had on Niebuhr. The image of God in man has been variously defined in Christian history. As Niebuhr himself states, however:

¹³HN, p. 142. Niebuhr's concept of the Atonement closely resembles the "declaratory theory" of various theologians.

¹⁴FH, pp. 141-4.

¹⁵HN, p. 14.

The ablest non-theological analysis of human nature in modern times, by Heidegger, defines this Christian emphasis succinctly 'as the idea of transcendence,' namely that man is something which reaches beyond itself--that man is more than a rational creature.¹⁶

Closely connected with man as self-transcending creature, is the idea of man's freedom. For self-transcendence means self-determination and this in turn means that man can set no limit on what he ought to be short of ultimate reality.¹⁷ It is important to keep this particular concept in mind when Niebuhr turns to his discussion of the guilt of man.

The second great fact concerning the nature of man derived from the revelation of God as Creator is the proper understanding of man as a finite creature. The Idealistic error in this sphere has limited the power of their proper appreciation of man as self-conscious, self-transcending spirit. Creation is good.

The whole Biblical interpretation of life and history rests upon the assumption that the created world, the world of finite, dependent and contingent existence, is not evil by reason of its finiteness....The Biblical view is that finiteness, dependence and the insufficiency of man's mortal life are facts which belong to God's plan of creation and must be accepted with reverence and humility.¹⁸

Again, it will be necessary to preserve this insight from any adulteration. Properly to focus the analysis of evil on where it really belongs necessitates on the one hand an understanding of man as a free creature with no limit except that which has been imposed by God and on the other

¹⁶HN, pp. 161-2.

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 162-3.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 167.

hand an understanding of man as a finite creature, good and sound in a universe which is good and sound. We have thus validated by a more detailed analysis the basic conception of man with which this chapter began, i.e., the duality of man's nature. It is now possible to discover the added factor in human nature which will hold the key to the problem of social ethics.

Man is free; man is good as he comes from God, but man is a sinner. Niebuhr finds the myth of the fall filled with profound insight into the cause and nature of the sin of man. From this myth it is possible to trace the root of sin to "the juncture of nature and spirit," as he likes to say. Spirit and nature provide the key to the riddle of man's sin in the paradoxical relation of freedom and necessity to each other.¹⁹ This was the basic insight into sin which Niebuhr held consistently through the years. However, his teaching on the precise relation of man's necessity, his finiteness, to the problem of sin shifted. At first he saw in finiteness merely the precondition for the sinful "yearning for the eternal in human life."²⁰ He seemed to hover on the brink of ascribing evil to finiteness. Nevertheless, he resists the inclination throughout his work. "Every distinction between an essentially good eternity and an essentially evil finiteness is foreign to the Christian faith," he declares in *Beyond Tragedy*.²¹ Consequently, he asserts that "Sin in

¹⁹CE, p. 76.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹BT, p. 132.

history is not finiteness and particularity,"²² in counterdistinction to the Platonic strains he finds in so much of the thought on the nature of man. To leave the cause of sin merely in man's impatience with his finiteness must have seemed somewhat unclear to Niebuhr. His existential reading helped him to analyze the relation between finiteness and sin more precisely. He then found that this yearning for the absolute which was occasioned by finiteness was not self-explanatory. There was an insecurity in the nature of the human situation which prompted this yearning for the infinite.²³ Consequently the dictum of the Rauschenbusch lectures of 1935 that "(the human spirit) is not capable because of its finiteness of incarnating all the higher values which it discerns"²⁴ was revised. (emphasis ours). Yet it was in the same lectureship that Niebuhr found "an element of perversity, a conscious choice of the lesser good, involved in practically every moral action."²⁵ His thinking on the subject finally reached its full clarity in the Gifford Lectures. He found why there was both a volitional and non-volitional factor in sin; he discerned clearly the role of finiteness in human sin, something which lay implicit in his thought previous to the Gifford Lectures. This phenomenon is observed more than once in Niebuhr.

²²Reinhold Niebuhr, Christianity and Power Politics (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), p. 63. Hereafter GPP.

²³HN, p. 150.

²⁴GN, p. 66.

²⁵Ibid., p. 77.

Heretofore Niebuhr had been concentrating on the relation of finiteness to sin, although the factor of man's freedom and spirituality were clearly discerned. With the introduction of the "concept of dread" the various elements in human sin found their proper relation.

The temptation to sin lies...in the human situation itself. The situation is that man as spirit transcends the temporal and natural process in which he is involved and also transcends himself. Thus his freedom is the basis for his creativity but also his temptation: Since he is involved in the contingencies and necessities of the natural process—on the one hand, and since, on the other, he stands outside of them and foresees their caprices and perils, he is anxious. In his anxiety he seeks to transmute his finiteness into infinity, his weakness into strength, his dependence into independence. He seeks in other words to escape finiteness and weakness by quantitative rather than qualitative development of his life. The quantitative antithesis of finiteness is infinity. The qualitative possibility of human life is its obedient subjection to the will of God. This possibility is expressed in the words of Jesus: "He that loseth his life for my sake shall find it."²⁶

The "root of sin (excessive concern for the self) is found in the self's concern for its contingent existence."²⁷ This is anxiety in its true picture. Yet it must be emphasized that:

Anxiety is the internal precondition 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....²⁸

Although this analysis reveals the actual situation of man, it still fails to explain why it is that this creature, standing at the juncture of nature

²⁶HN, p. 251.

²⁷HN, p. 176.

²⁸HN, p. 182.

and spirit, finally in the end chooses to over-reach himself. Sin is a mystery.²⁹

Niebuhr moved from an emphasis on the psychological and philosophical analysis of sin to a more religious point of view. The two viewpoints are combined in one of his sermons when he says:

The life which seeks to transcend its creatureliness and make itself the centre of existence, offends not only against God, who is the centre and source of existence, but against other life which has a rightful place in the harmony of the whole.³⁰

Thus Niebuhr has explored the how and the why of the formula that man's sin is rebellion against God, relating it to his previous investigations on the nature of human freedom.

This sin of man is inevitable, which is the real meaning of the Christian doctrine of "original sin."³¹ Its actual appearance on the stage of human history takes two forms: pride and sensuality.³² For our purposes it is enough to concentrate exclusively on Niebuhr's analysis of sin as pride, for it is in this concept that the morality of groups will finally emerge.

There are various forms of pride, each related to the other. The pride of power, the pride of intellect, the pride of self-righteousness finally culminate in spiritual pride. In each of these forms the basic

²⁹HN, p. 122. Cf. also HN, pp. 179 ff (Kierkegaard's emphasis plainly adopted); Reinhold Niebuhr, Discerning the Signs of the Times (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), p. 163. Hereafter DST.

³⁰BT, p. 102.

³¹Cf. the discussion of this topic in HN, pp. 251 ff.; GE, p. 90.

³²HN, pp. 186-240.

elements of sin are found. Man forgets his dependence and exalts himself to the place of self-sufficiency enjoyed only by his Creator.³³

The pride of individuals stemming from the false attempt at hiding their contingency and a fear of their own insecurity leads over to the pride of groups. Collective egoism is a compound of the egoistic impulses of individuals. The cumulative effect of the egoism of individuals united in a common purpose within the structure of a particular group is far more powerful than would be the case in an unorganized mass of individuals. Human collectives experience great difficulty in establishing a rational social force which is powerful enough to overcome and transmute the forces which groups ordinarily employ to achieve cohesion. Consequently the morality of groups is far lower than individuals.³⁴ A distinction must be made. This distinction is even more necessary when it is noted that "group pride though having its source in individual attitudes, actually achieves a certain authority over the individual and results in unconditioned demands by the group upon the individual."³⁵ This last insight is a result of Niebuhr's analysis of the Nazi regime. There will be occasion below to examine how the rise of Hitler changed Niebuhr's teaching on the nature of human collectives and group morality.

The line of thought is now clear for a more detailed analysis of groups. Niebuhr has uncovered the sin of man, seen its root, its manifestations, its results, and has related this discovery to the mystery

³³Ibid.

³⁴HN, pp. xi and xii.

³⁵HN, p. 208.

of the obvious immorality of groups. It would have been impossible to understand Niebuhr's evaluation of social collectives without his understanding of man clearly developed.

CHAPTER IV

THE MORALITY OF GROUPS

Man's unvarying tendency to unite himself with his fellows into some sort of a group and the resulting social configurations have been analyzed by philosophers and political scientists. Niebuhr attempts an examination of human groups from a different perspective. True to his analysis in the preceding chapter, Niebuhr views man as a unity both of vitality and of reason, hence the presence of irrational factors in the cohesion of groups.¹ Man's problem in living together is made difficult by the presence of sin. With this man denies the demands of his real nature and the requirements of communal existence. Hence, measures to cope with the innate selfishness of humans must be adopted. The problem centers itself in finding those principles by which society may organize itself which are true to the needs of man's nature as well as realistic toward the problem of sin in society. In this chapter and the next the reasoning which led Niebuhr to his conclusions will be presented.

Social groups present peculiar temptations to human sin. On the one hand they provide the opportunity for self-sacrifice, and on the other hand they can be utilized as instruments for a sublimation and vicarious exercising of the will-to-power.²

¹HD, p. 244.

²MM, p. 47.

The frustrations of the average man, who can never realize the power and the glory which his imagination sets as the ideal, makes him the more willing tool and victim of the imperial ambitions of the group.³

Leaders and men of power realize that they are not merely in the position which they occupy by their own desire. Often dictators represent and incarnate the pretensions and ambitions of the group. Hence, the predatory and egoistic quality of the group can be discerned in its leader.⁴

Niebuhr in his early days entertained the notion that groups were formed more often on the basis of impulse than reason,⁵ that the responsibility of groups was less than that of individuals, and that groups could only be subjected to censure on a far smaller scale than individuals. Niebuhr held this view in the period of the economic depression of the thirties, when he was under strong Marxist influence. Later with the rise of Hitler, Niebuhr shifted his ground, asserted the responsibility of groups, and discerned a more conscious perversity in group cohesion than in his previous analysis. We shall have occasion to note this again.

Seeing the irrational development of groups, Niebuhr concluded that their law was the law of the jungle,⁶ that the sin and egoism of individuals reached its full height in collective relationships.⁷ This view had a very wide influence on his social ethic. He believed that society

³Ibid., p. 18.

⁴Id., p. 18.

⁵Reinhold Niebuhr, Reflection on the End of an Era (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), p. 43. Hereafter RNE.

⁶Ibid., p. 31.

⁷DC, p. 129.

was in a perpetual state of war. Consequently violence and coercion had to be the very law of its existence if it was to survive at all.⁸ At this time he was very warm toward unsentimental political theories like those of Luther and Hobbes. Later he came to be more optimistic and modified his approval of these two men. Nevertheless his social theory never lost sight of the egoism which pervades every group.

Even in his most pessimistic analyses of the group, Niebuhr consistently gave proper regard to the normative and legal forces in the community which constitutes a large segment of the cohesive factors of the group. It is true that these laws and legal factors are ambiguous, for an accurate analysis reveals that they are "merely explicit formulations of given equilibria of power."¹⁰ Yet laws represent an indispensable portion of the community's unity. A reverence for law and a reverence for the majesty of government are elements which every government must enjoy if it is to stay in power. Sheer force is never able to achieve a lasting cohesion.¹¹

⁸MM, p. 19.

⁹Cf. KEE, p. 209 ff; and MM passim. Niebuhr seldom explicitly affirms his affinity to Luther and Hobbes. His frequent corrections of Luther and the attention he gives the man betray an indebtedness to my mind which is difficult for Niebuhr to conceal. He frequently commends Christian orthodoxy for its clear perception of the true nature of society, but criticizes it severely for its quiescence and defeatism (cp. CE, 139 ff). Most of the time by Christian orthodoxy he means Lutheranism as his analysis of the German situation indicates, CPP, p. 50 ff. (The latter reference includes Niebuhr's view on the similarity between Hobbes and Luther.)

¹⁰HD, p. 257.

¹¹REE, p. 152.

Finally, however, it is power that decides the existence of any type of group organization. The importance of power in social organization is based upon two characteristics of human nature: 1) the unity of vitality and reason, of body and soul; 2) the force of human sin. The nature of man as free and as bound by physical necessity offers itself in a peculiar manner to the exploitation of nature and spirit by human sin. The unity of man guarantees that any type of egoism will find expression in all the vital resources which an individual or collective can command. The second characteristic indicates that moral or rational suasion does not suffice to prevent one individual or group from preying on the others.¹² The clear realization of the power-factor in human groups gave Niebuhr the reputation of a "religious realist." He was one of the few among the liberals to confront his readers and his audiences with the blunt fact of human sin and its consequences for human life.

While power is of the essence in social cohesion, there are various forms it may take. A group can be organized on the basis of a strong, central organizing force. In fact every group must have this in order to cohere at all. There must be an organizing principle. Yet as necessary as this central factor is, it is fraught with danger.

In the vital period of a social system the pretension and exactions of power do not appear to be irrational and unjust because they actually succeed in organizing society and they participate in the reverence which common men give to the organization of life about them.¹³

¹²ND, pp. 258-9.

¹³RSE, pp. 32-3.

The fact that society because of sin must be organized by power constitutes one of the sources of injustice which perennially appears within human groups. "The individual or the group which organizes any society, however social its intention or pretensions, arrogates an inordinate portion of social privilege to itself."¹⁴ Groups capitalize on the reverence which common men have for power. The inequalities of prestige which result from the disproportions of power are not warranted. Hence, from the evil of power flows the evil of hypocrisy.¹⁵ Most often Niebuhr means the state in his discussions on the organizing principle of society. The state is the main expression and embodiment of coherence by power. The state, however, is ambiguous. It is prey to the egotism of men and the pretensions of larger groups.

The egotism of racial, national and socio-economic groups is most consistently expressed by the national state because the state gives the collective impulses of the nation such instruments of power and presents the imagination of the individuals with such obvious symbols of its discrete collective identity that the national state is most able to make absolute claims for itself, to enforce those claims by power and to give them plausibility and credibility by the majesty and panoply of its apparatus.¹⁶

A closer scrutiny of political configurations reveals that "ultimately, unity within an organized social group, or within a federation of such groups, is created by the ability of a dominant group to impose its will."¹⁷ Thus the danger of oligarchic rule hangs over every state.

¹⁴HN, pp. 6-7.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 8-9.

¹⁶HN, p. 209.

¹⁷HN, p. 4.

In the discussion of the democratic process, Niebuhr indicates his suspicions that this has indeed taken place.

Niebuhr's movement to the theological right can be traced in his attitude toward the root of evil in society. While noting the egotism of individuals very clearly, he could still say in 1932 that "coercive factors of social life are made inevitable by limitations of human intelligence and imagination."¹⁸ Later his position became more unequivocal and the locus of society's sickness was placed in the perversity of man's will.

While society must have an organizing central power to cohere, at the same time its existence depends on an equilibrium of power.

It is because men are sinners that justice can be achieved only by a certain degree of coercion on the one hand, and by resistance to coercion and tyranny on the other hand....Human egotism makes large-scale co-operation upon a purely voluntary basis impossible. Governments must coerce. Yet there is an element of evil in this coercion.¹⁹

This resistance to tyranny is basic for the healthy life of the group.

American democracy represents the principle of the balance of power.

There is an unresolved tension between political power diffused among the people and economic power concentrated in an economic oligarchy.

This has not achieved but a rough form of justice,²⁰ because a balance of power is something different from perfect justice. However it is a basic condition of justice, given the sinfulness of man.²¹ The difficul-

¹⁸Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁹GPP, p. 14.

²⁰AD, pp. 262-3.

²¹GPP, p. 26.

ties in organizing society lie precisely between the danger of tyranny from the central power on the one hand, and anarchy from the diffusion and blanching of power on the other. Nevertheless society must have both.²² History has demonstrated the ease with which one or the other is achieved. Representatives of a successful avoidance of the dangers to the law of brotherhood which is the good to which society must aspire are rare. Both dictatorship and anarchy present serious difficulties to the actualization of this law.

Despite its dangers, no group or group within a group can dispense with power and its manipulation. The cause of this situation has been indicated again and again. Under the pressure of various perfectionist bodies, the Christian Church has had a troubled conscience concerning the state's use of power. To this Niebuhr says:

It may not be frequently used in a stable and well-ordered community; but if either government, or a party to a dispute, explicitly disavowed any resource at its disposal, it would upset whatever equilibrium of social forces existed at that moment; it would thereby increase the possibility of successful recalcitrance or resistance on the part of the group or interest, prepared to use every available resource.²³

Hence, Niebuhr rejects pacifism as actually contributing to injustice if faithfully carried out. Furthermore, the use of violence is defended as a logical and unassailable extension of the principle of coercion. Any group existing in this world of sin is forced to resort to power to survive. The clear recognition of this fact contributed much to the reputation of Niebuhr and gained him the approbation among many who were seeking

²²ibid., p. 258.

²³Ibid., pp. 259-60.

some way out of the moral confusion of the liberal church. His line of reasoning is sharp and clear. Power and violence are never condoned as good, but simply accepted as necessary. Yet they never escape ethical scrutiny and restraint, as will be indicated in the next chapter.

The type of power wielded by the group or nation or individual are endless. Everything from the "soul force of Gandhi" to the iron fist of a dictator have been used by leaders and nations to effect their ends. Yet there seems to be a wider variety in the types of power wielded by collectives than by individuals. Within the group, social power rests upon differentiation of social function.²⁴ In modern society economic functions most often determine social power. Niebuhr absorbed much of the Marxist theory in his thinking on political, economic, and ethical questions. He showed a marked preference for Marxist views over any other analysis in his early writing. As the Russian experiment crystallized into the "ridiculous priest-kings" of present day Russia, his viewpoint on the economic basis for society's evil shifted also. He retains to the present a clear understanding of the economic factor in social problems. Economic power was always prominent in his writings:

In modern society the basic mechanisms of justice are becoming more and more economic rather than political, in the sense that economic power is the most basic power. Political power is derived from it to such a degree that a just political order is not possible without the reconstruction of the economic order.... Centralization of power and privilege and the impoverishment of the multitudes develop at such a pace, in spite of slight efforts at equalization through the pressure of political power upon the economic forces, that the whole system of distribution is imperiled.²⁵

²⁴HD, pp. 260-1.

²⁵CE, pp. 183-4.

The above passage contains typical Marxist strains. Niebuhr's view of the use which men put to economic power corroborates his thesis concerning the brutality and immorality of groups.

Our knowledge fails us because we are not dealing with a functional ill which might be corrected by a slight change in policy or program. The sickness from which modern civilization suffers is organic and constitutional. It is not due to an incidental defect in the mechanism of production or distribution but to the very character of the social system. The system provides for the private ownership of the productive processes upon which the health of the whole civilization depends. Private ownership means social power, and the unequal justice. By vesting the power of ownership in the hands of comparatively few individuals, the present social system insures the faulty distribution of wealth which modern machines create. Mass production requires mass consumption; and capitalism is unable to provide mass consumption. From this basic ill of modern society all other defects seem to spring.²⁶

Niebuhr's whole attempt in the thirties was to point up the basic evil which afflicted our society and note the root from which it sprang.

The analysis was necessary if an adequate solution to the various problems were to be found. It was his belief that economic power hides itself from overt expression and consequently the injustice flowing from it is difficult to trace.²⁷ The imminent fall of capitalism was predicted. Later explanations were offered why it did not fall or why it was so long in falling.²⁸ Finally in the Gifford Lectures Niebuhr stated:

The modern belief that economic power is the most basic form, and that all other forms are derived from it, is erroneous. The first landlords were soldiers and priests.²⁹

²⁶REE, pp. 23-4.

²⁷Ibid., p. 73.

²⁸GPP, p. 57.

²⁹HD, p. 261.

While maintaining some of his older views on economic power, the rise of Fascism caused Niebuhr to say:

Political power deserved to be placed in a special category, because it rests upon the ability to use and manipulate other forms of social power for the particular purpose of organizing and dominating the community.³⁰

Since Niebuhr's attention centered largely upon the economic dislocations of the world during the Great Depression, he neglected or failed to develop his theory of the state as a political entity. With the rise of Fascism, he came to realize the demonic pretensions and claims which a state qua state can make. In 1932 he laid down the dictum that "the nation is a corporate unity, held together much more by force and emotion, than by mind."³¹ With this view, the establishment of justice could only be effected with the use of counterpressure and power. However, both his conception of power and the methods of establishing justice changed by his own admission as we shall have opportunity to mention again. The fact that governments are forced to coerce opens society up to other dangers besides that of injustice from the economic system.

It is a question whether Niebuhr in revising his estimate of the most significant types of social power revised his estimate of the final employment of political power. He had stated in 1934:

The political power in any society is held by the group which commands the most significant type of non-political power, whether

³⁰Ibid., p. 263.

³¹NY, p. 88.

it be military power, priestly prestige, economic ownership or the ability to manipulate the technical processes of the community.³²

His statement in the Gifford lectures (note footnote 29) would seem to support the view that his position on the manipulation of political power remains unchanged.

The reason why such an extended analysis of power was necessary lies in the connection between the use of power and injustice, as has been intimated before.

All historic forms of justice and injustice are determined to a much larger degree than pure rationalists or idealists realize by the given equilibrium or disproportion within each type of power and by the balance of various types of power in a given community. It may be taken as axiomatic that great disproportions of power lead to injustice, whatever may be the efforts to mitigate it. Thus the concentration of economic power in modern technical society has made for injustice, while the diffusion of political power has made for justice.³³

In this Niebuhr comes close to endorsing the phrase of Lord Acton, "All power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." The control of significant sources of power is too much a temptation for sinful man. It must be held in restraint.

The ideal of equal justice sets the demands of pure spirit against the fact of nature. Nature does not endow men equally; and the impulses of nature create societies in which inequalities of endowment are accentuated because the shrewd and the strong are able to arrogate powers and privileges which enhance their strength and place the weak, the simple, and the unfortunate under additional disadvantages. Every social system tends to create differences in strength and weakness, in wealth and poverty much greater than anything which the world of nature knows. Every social system endows

³²REE, p. 151.

³³HD, p. 262.

the strong man, who is able to grasp the reins of power, with strength which is derived from society itself and is not of his own contriving.³⁴

Although it is not explicitly stated, Niebuhr probably holds to the view which he expressed earlier that these disproportions of power came about in the transition from a pastoral to agrarian economy, and from the agrarian economy to the industrial and trading civilization of the modern era. Thus the Marxist investigation would prove itself correct again. It is a tragedy that the same technology which man used to tame nature should create the great injustices which our civilization must endure. Power is so unevenly distributed that justice has become a more difficult achievement.³⁵

In viewing the rank injustice of modern states, Niebuhr was led to revise his estimate on the formation of these groups. Whereas he previously saw them as configurations resulting to a large extent from the vitalities of human nature, he later endowed them with a larger measure of conscious choice, a sort of group mind because of which the state could be held responsible. He had said:

Since there can be no ethical action without self-criticism, and no self-criticism without rational capacity for self transcendence, it is natural that national attitudes can hardly approximate the ethical.³⁶

From this view of society, Niebuhr expected the brutalities and ethical inertia of human collectives. But a closer investigation of the cohesion

³⁴REE, p. 270.

³⁵MM, p. 2.

³⁶Ibid., p. 88.

of groups revealed that:

Sinful pride and idolatrous pretension are thus an inevitable concomitant of the cohesion of large political groups. This is why it is impossible to regard the lower morality of groups, in comparison with individuals, as the consequence of the inertia of "nature" against the higher demands of individual reason.³⁷

There is then a point of contact, a possibility, and justification of the ethical criticism of groups. The pattern need not be sheer power against power although that in the final analysis will never be dispensed with. The later Niebuhr gives more place to criticism of society with hope of change than the earlier one.

The question arises where should the necessary criticism of society come from? Who is to advance it and what will be the principles by which it is made? Obviously the function of criticism presupposes a disinterested party. The classes which make up a given society are singularly unable to perform this function.

While some of the pretensions of privileged classes are consciously dishonest, most of them arise from the fact that the criteria of reason, religion, and culture to which the class appeals in defense of its position in society are themselves the product of, or at least colored by, the partial experience and perspective of the class.³⁸

While in later years Niebuhr did not base the inability for society to criticize itself so much on class prejudices, he still maintained his doctrine of the partial perspective of all human beings. Disinterestedness will then be a matter of degree. Yet it is desperately needed.

³⁷HN, p. 210; cf. FN, pp. 218-9. Niebuhr here frankly admits his change of mind on this point.

³⁸HN, p. 140. Niebuhr often acknowledges his indebtedness to Marxism for this insight.

The brutal character of modern society and national states result in great privations to many multitudes. Hence:

The importance of the political and economic problem increases in every decade of modern existence because a technical civilization has so accentuated the intensity and extent of social cohesion that human happiness depends increasingly upon a just organization and adjustment of the political and economic mechanism by which the common life of man is ordered.³⁹

Society has a difficult task ahead of it. It must eliminate the social injustices which afflict it, but to do so it must find methods which will abolish that which is bad and preserve the good. The further danger of substituting new abuses for old ones must be avoided.⁴⁰ Specific remedies must be drawn up and the leaven of reform sown. The life and eath importance of the matter is obvious.

Having seen the possibility of registering criticism, the need for disinterestedness, and the privation which call for reform, Niebuhr finds the necessity for prophetic criticism as obvious. This prophetic criticism should come in part from the church. The transcendent view of life which religion enjoys should enable it to perform this function:

...The possibility of future usefulness of religion demands the largest possible detachment from the unethical characteristics of modern society. If religion cannot transform society, it must find its social functioning in criticising present realities from some ideal perspective and in presenting the ideal without corruption, so that it may sharpen the conscience and strengthen the faith of each generation.⁴¹

For quite some time, Niebuhr often discussed religion as if it were

³⁹CE, p. 139.

⁴⁰HM, p. 167.

⁴¹DCNR, pp. 163-4.

divorced from any historical group. Finally he did recognize that religion has its locus in the Church and transferred to the church the advice he so often gave to "religion." Niebuhr recognized that religion had other functions to perform, that there were other enemies to cope with other than the social need of the times.⁴² Nevertheless he believed for a long time that the senescence of religion was due to its social impotence.⁴³ The suggestion which Niebuhr makes for the function of religion is seconded by many prominent churchmen today. Religion faces two dangers: the one is a retreat into another world (orthodoxy); the other the danger of compromise (liberalism). Niebuhr never tires of warning against these two evils and indicating their derivation and results. If it is to succeed, religion must be alive.

Religion can be healthy and vital only if a certain tension is maintained between it and the civilization in which it functions. In time this tension is inevitably resolved into some kind of compromise. The tendency of religion to become a conservative social force is partly derived from its ambition to defend the resultant compromise in the name of its original ideal.⁴⁴

The compromise which religion makes with its environment often originates paradoxically from its profound insight into the nature of man and the human problem. Hence, it is tempted to quiescence.

That is why any social religion, which is intent upon the achievement of relative goals of social righteousness in history, must come in conflict with those forms of classical religion in which supramoral and ultramundane optimism has been stressed to such a degree as to rob the historical struggle for the realization of the ideal of its significance.⁴⁵

⁴²CE, pp. 139-40.

⁴³DCNR, pp. 15-16.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 69.

⁴⁵REE, p. 205.

Religion can play a vital role in the achievement of justice. Both inwardly, in the heart of the individual, and outwardly in the thinking of society it can work to alleviate the brutality of society.

Religious individualism recognizes the roots of society's evils in the self, but it also knows that the impulse toward the ideal is a vital factor in life. Being certain of the spirit it is not afraid to look upon the face of nature. Confident of the reality of the principle of love, and certain in its faith in God it is able contritely to recognize the reality of malignant power in the self and in the world.⁴⁶

This is the function religion can play in the struggle for justice. In the next chapter we will indicate the result of a theological quest for principles of discrimination in seeking society's good.

There is another disinterested force in society which makes its contribution to ethical thinking. Reinhold Niebuhr no longer emphasizes this particular aspect of Marxist thought, but it nevertheless played a large part in his social comment during the thirties.

The determinists have made an important contribution to the modern social problem by revealing the brutal nature of much of man's social life. Even if the human conscience could be sensitized to a much greater degree than now seems probable, it will not be possible to eliminate conflict between various social and economic groups. Good men do not easily realize how selfish they are if someone does not resist their selfishness; and they are not inclined to abridge their power if someone does not challenge their right to hold it.⁴⁷

The challenge of course comes from the disinherited. That is why the industrial worker's chief philosophy is Marxism.

The particular virtue of this philosophy is that it brings the Tower of Babel character of all civilization into the open and makes men conscious of it. It clearly discerns the economic base of all

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 115.

⁴⁷DCNR, p. 60.

culture and points a finger of scorn at the claims of impartiality made by the cultural enterprises of the ages.⁴⁸

It has already been said that Niebuhr modified his estimation of Marxist theory and strategy later. He did retain some of the insights which Marxism gave him, however. During the thirties he found the disinterestedness of the workers a necessary and useful tool for the criticism of the unjust economic order. "Who is better able to state the social ideal in unqualified terms than those who have experienced the bankruptcy of the old social realities in their own lives?" he asks.⁴⁹ Later on Niebuhr, while retaining the insight which Marxism gave him into the ideological taint in all justice, nevertheless abandoned the view that the workers only or ideally could criticize the social order. His appreciation of Marxism became more mature and critical, less activist and more philosophical.⁵⁰

From whichever perspective one chooses, Marxism or Christianity, the goal is clearly delineated. Justice must be achieved. The need of society demands it. The brutality of society guarantees its difficulty. "Moral idealism which fails to gauge the measure of resistance which its ideals must meet in the confused realities of life or to fashion adequate

⁴⁸ST, p. 36.

⁴⁹NI, p. 157.

⁵⁰Whatever the defects of Marxism as a philosophy and as a religion, and even as a political strategy, its analyses of the technical aspects of the problem of justice have not been successfully challenged, and every event in contemporary history seems to multiply the proofs of its validity." OE, p. 184. Niebuhr recognizes the ideological taint, even in the "impartial" perspective of the worker. NI, p. 190.

weapons for its conflict degenerates into mere sentimentality.⁵¹ In the quest for an adequate set of principles with which to achieve justice in society, Niebuhr attempts to remain true to the "measure of resistance" he has uncovered in society.

⁵¹DCNR, p. 161.

CHAPTER V

THE IDEAL OF LOVE

The formation of ethical principles is a difficult task. The ethical question, "What ought I to do?" is the beginning of the search for moral reasons. When it is asked "What ought I to do?" the question is being asked "What am I and what shall I become?" Niebuhr derives his ethical principles partly from revelation and partly from the nature of man. Not only does the nature of man demand its fulfillment in a certain way of living, but it is endowed with the capacity for discerning the revelatory act of God which will complete man's meaning. Thus there is an organic relation between man, revelation, and moral living. Once the law of man's life is clearly discerned, the application of that law to society can be accomplished. We have already traced the state of society from the sinfulness of man. We must now center our attention on another aspect of the complex nature of man to discover the law of human nature from which consistently true ethical principles can be derived.

Orthodox Christianity confesses that Christ is true God and true Man. Most often it emphasizes the deity of Christ to such an extent that the significance of the manhood is lost. Niebuhr sees in the revelation of Christ as man a revelation of man as he should be. "This Saviour is a revelation of the goodness of God and the essential goodness of man, i.e., the second Adam."¹ The revelation which Christ bears

¹BT, p. 168.

as true man is not a revelation of a number of virtues in the Greek sense of the word. It is the perfection of sacrificial love.² The fact of sin which informs all of human history, the necessity for power and coercion, the difficulties faced when justice is attempted—all these prove that the actualities of history are something less than the perfect sacrificial love which Christ has revealed as the norm of human nature. Yet even in the compromise which human history is forced to make with the principle which Christ has revealed, even this is approximated in some degree by the mutual love which is society's own law. Here the effect of the revelation of Christ can be seen. There is a continuity between nature and grace. Sacrificial love indicates that society's type of love, its mutuality, is at the same time true and false.³ At the same time, however, Humankind will view sacrificial love as a violation of its natural standards, as a "going too far."⁴ Nevertheless the law of man's being has been defined—sacrificial love. Sacrificial love as law revealed from without finds an echo within the heart of man. The Gifford lectures were an attempt to demonstrate just how this actually takes place. In the first series of lectures Niebuhr had explained that man, this creature of finiteness and freedom, was possessed of a dual essential nature. Corresponding to the two aspects of human nature, there are two elements in the original perfection of man. Man's essential nature consists in:

²Ibid., p. 68.

³Ibid., p. 81.

⁴Ibid., p. 68.

1. all natural endowments, physical and social impulses, sexual and racial differentiations, etc.; and 2. freedom of the spirit, transcendence over natural process, and self-transcendence. The virtue corresponding to the first part of his nature can be subsumed under the term "natural law." "It is the law which defines the proper performance of his functions, the normal harmony of his impulses and the normal social relation between himself and his fellows within the limitations of the natural order."⁵ It should be observed in what terms Niebuhr casts his locus for and conception of natural law. He will later show an equivocation on this matter which will make difficult any precise interpretation. Natural law then is that norm which defines man's behavior as a creature "imbedded in the natural order."

There is a second element in man, his freedom and transcendence, which also has its law. This law can be summarized in the "theological virtues" of Catholic thought.⁶ Just why Niebuhr chose to use these virtues as the spirit's law can be seen from his existential evaluation of human nature. Man needs faith, hope, and love to complete his life because:

(1) Without freedom from anxiety man is so enmeshed in the vicious circle of egocentricity, so concerned about himself, that he cannot release himself for the adventure of love. (2) Without relation to God, the world of freedom in which spirit must meet spirit is so obscured that human beings constantly sink to the level of things in human imagination.⁷

⁵HN, p. 270.

⁶Ibid., p. 271.

⁷HN, p. 272.

It is not a question of choice whether man wants to add these perfections to his nature. As sinner he lacks them, yet they must be added to fulfill the true meaning of human life. "They are basic and not supplementary requirements of his freedom."⁸ The self truly finds itself in the life which actualizes the law of human existence.

Man viewed from this perspective has a new obligation to morality, in the Christian sense of the term. He has been created for it; it is an organic part of his nature; he remains incomplete without it.

Sin neither destroys the structure by virtue of which man is man nor yet eliminates the sense of obligation toward the essential nature of man, which is the remnant of his perfection.⁹

The reason why the revelation of Christ as second Adam can find such a response lies in the very structure of man. Christ's perfection represents to man his incompleteness, but original and natural perfection. The fact that he has lost this perfection does not alter the fact that it still is a part of nature as man to have it. Therefore there can be nothing like "Total Depravity," understood as a complete separation from God. Karl Barth is wrong when he asserts that the difference between man and a cat is simply that man is man and not a cat. The bad in man is a perversion of the good. The blind eye presupposes the good eye. To destroy the structure of man, empty now because of sin, would mean to destroy the humanity of man.¹⁰

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰GE. p. 90.

If this analysis be correct it follows that if Protestantism was right in rejecting the Catholic doctrine that the Fall had not altered man's essential nature because it had only destroyed a domm supernaturale, it was wrong in asserting that man's essential nature had been destroyed.¹¹

Niebuhr wishes to avoid regarding sin as a necessity of man's nature or sheer caprice of his will. He finds the will defective. Hence, sin is not completely deliberate but man is still responsible. Without viewing sin in this fashion, man's freedom would be meaningless. Sin is inevitable, yet the structure of man's freedom has been preserved.¹² To use the language of the old dogmatists, Niebuhr retains the formal freedom of man and acknowledges the absence of material freedom.¹³ One of the reasons why the doctrine of sin has been largely misinterpreted according to Niebuhr lies in the emphasis which orthodoxy has placed on the chronological interpretation of the myth of the fall. Hence, instead of defining sin as a contradiction in man, it is possible to speak of total depravity, as the Formula of Concord. The paradox that sin is a corruption, but not destruction of man's true nature is obscured in Catholic and Protestant thought.¹⁴ The historical estimate of the "Fall" has prevented theologians from seeing its psychological validity.

The revelation of Christ as second Adam joins itself with "original

¹¹HN, pp. 275-6. It should be observed that Niebuhr here accuses orthodoxy, and especially Lutheranism, with a heresy Lutheranism rejected in the Flacian controversy. His point is valid, however.

¹²HN, p. 242.

¹³Cf. Emil Brunner's discussion of this subject in Man in Revolt (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1947), p. 256 ff.

¹⁴HN, p. 268.

righteousness" to corroborate and clarify the law of man's existence.

Niebuhr clarifies his conception of "original righteousness:"

The "I" which from the perspective of self-transcendence, regards the sinful self not as self but as "Sin," is the same "I" which from the perspective of sinful action regards the transcendent possibilities of the self as not the self but as "law." It is the same self but these changing perspectives are obviously significant.¹⁵

In order to define more precisely the content of this "law" which stands over human life, it is necessary to emphasize that no hard and fast distinction can be made between the law which is applicable to man as a finite creature and the law which is his as free, self-transcending spirit.¹⁶ Previous to this Niebuhr had defined natural law as something distinct from and separate from the law of the spirit. Here he modifies his position, an indication of his difficulty with the subject. He justifies the existence of natural law and quickly reverses his estimate of its validity:

The law of love is the final law for man because of his condition of finiteness and freedom. It is not the only law of his existence because man is, despite his freedom, a creature of nature who is subject to certain natural structures. But these natural structures have a negative rather than positive force. The freedom of man contains the capacity of transcending nature so that the self in the unity of its freedom and finiteness contains a bewildering degree of mixtures of spiritual freedom and natural necessity....In consequence there are not as many "things to do and not to do" which follow "in a necessary manner from the simple fact that man is man" as it (sic) assumed by Christian legalists. It is at any rate apparent that Christian legalism is constantly tempted to embody historically contingent mixtures of freedom and necessity into the body of law, which is supposed to follow in a necessary manner" from the primordial structure of human nature." On the other hand modern thought is always in danger, either of obscuring what is permanent

¹⁵ HN, p. 278.

¹⁶ ibid., p. 280.

in the structure of human nature or of denying its essential freedom by its preoccupation with the "natural" as conceived as the primordial.¹⁷

If the function of natural law is "negative" rather than positive, how can it be possible for apologists to accuse modern thought of relativism, seeing that natural law cannot be defined? Niebuhr is always afraid of any kind of definite statement in regard to natural law since he is afraid that reason, submerged as it is in its own times, will only give the peculiar prejudices of the moment in place of the so-called "eternal" truths of natural law.¹⁸ In trying to steer a straight course between relativism and legalism, Niebuhr at times seems to give approval to the Lutheran doctrine of Schoepfungsordnung because it limits natural law to natural facts such as bisexuality.¹⁹ However, he never develops the idea or makes use of it. Many times he has occasion to criticize it and point out the misuse which was made of the doctrine as we shall see later. Two pairs of quotations illustrate the ambivalence which Niebuhr entertains on natural law:

There are of course certain permanent norms, such as monogamy, which, contrary to the relativism of such Protestant sceptics as Karl Barth, are maintained not purely by Scriptural authority but by the cumulative experience of the race. About these universalities, amidst the relativities of standards, a word must be spoken presently.²⁰

¹⁷HN, p. 174.

¹⁸HN, p. 281.

¹⁹Ibid.; GE, p. 152.

²⁰HN, pp. 282-3.

In the field of sex-relations for instance, bi-sexuality and those vocations of mother and father which are unalterably related to biological differentiation are the only factors which may rightfully be placed in the "order of creation." Monogamy can certainly not be placed there....²¹

The whole difficulty in this matter lies in the nature of human freedom which is able to alter the structure of man's natural existence.²² After all the difficulty which Niebuhr has in defining the content of natural law, and after he points out the impossibility of any precise delineations of that law, he still says:

The Catholic theory is infinitely superior to the Lutheran relativism and moral scepticism which finally leaves the Christian without any standards by which he might judge the relative justice of his nation's cause.²³

While disavowing any "legalism" Niebuhr condemns the relativists who would undermine morality from another direction. The relativists err in denying the validity of general norms.²⁴ They do not see that "there is indeed a permanent structure of human personality" which demands these norms, something which Niebuhr had previously disavowed.²⁵ For if there is "a permanent structure of human personality" how could he say "there is not much that is absolutely immutable in the structure of human nature?"²⁶ It is no wonder then that he concludes by saying:

²¹HD, p. 197.

²²HN, p. 179.

²³HN, p. 283.

²⁴Ibid., p. 284.

²⁵HN, p. 180.

²⁶Ibid., p. 183.

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 which will, at the same time, avoid the abyss of nihilism on the edge of moral relativism. Could the "word of the Cross" be the resolution of that debate?²⁷

Concerning the law of the spirit, Niebuhr says that Christ has revealed the law of man's life—sacrificial love. This law finds reception in a human nature which is designed and constructed for it. Niebuhr indicates the specific way in which this law applies:

The law of love is the final law for man in his condition of finiteness and freedom because man in his freedom is unable to make himself in his finiteness his own end. The self is too great to be contained within itself in its smallness.²⁸

Specifically defined this higher law, which is more than law, which transcends all law, contains three terms: 1. love to God; 2. harmony within the self; 3. love to man.²⁹

Love is thus the end term of any system of morals. It is the moral requirement in which all schemes of justice 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. It does not carefully arbitrate between the needs of the self and of the other, since it meets the needs of the other without concern for the self.³⁰

Just by way of a footnote it must be mentioned that Niebuhr does not regard human nature without grace capable of such love. For our purposes, however, it is not necessary to discuss the divine origin of love. We

²⁷Ibid., p. 173.

²⁸HN, p. 174.

²⁹HN, pp. 288-9.

³⁰Ibid., p. 295.

are interested merely in the derivation of principles from the ideal of love.

Because love is both fulfillment and negation of systems of justice it has a permanent validity.³¹ Man still has a remnant of the original righteousness which will enable him to respond to some extent to the demands of love. Yet he will always find the actualization of love an impossibility for internal and external reasons. Hence there will be a need for a "dualistic ethic."³² The fact of sin has made it impossible to apply the law of love with simple ease to human relations.

The ideal of love, on the other hand, transcends all law. It knows nothing of the recalcitrance of nature in historical existence. It is the fulfillment of the law. It is impossible to construct a social ethic out of the ideal of love in its pure form, because the ideal presupposes the resolution of the conflict of life with life, which it is the concern of law to mitigate and restrain. For this reason Christianity really had no social ethic until it appropriated the Stoic ethic.³³

Troeltsch had already indicated that religious idealism never arrives at rational political ideals without the aid of some rational thought.³⁴ Religious and theological thinking is crippled in this activity even as it was crippled in the activism necessary for the achievement of social justice. The cause is the same in both.

Prophetic Christianity faced the difficulty that its penetration into the total and ultimate human situation complicates the problem of dealing with the immediate moral and social situations which all men

³¹PH, pp. 178-9; HD, p. 246.

³²HN, pp. 296 ff.

³³GR, pp. 149-50.

³⁴PH, p. 59.

must face. The common currency of the moral life is constituted in the "nicely calculated less and more" of the relatively good and the relatively evil. Human happiness in ordinary intercourse is determined by the difference between a little more and a little less justice, a little more and a little less freedom, between varying degrees of imaginative insight with which the self enters the life and understands the interests of the neighbor.³⁵

A rational religion (rational thought based on principles and insights developed from religion) can make a positive contribution to ethical thinking. Since certain presuppositions are always necessary, it may as well be Christian presuppositions which are utilized since they agree both with the needs of human nature and the facts of history.³⁶ Thus rational insight and religion need to work hand in hand in solving the moral confusion of our time. Religion suffers when it refuses reason its role in the establishment of justice; for, as stated above, religion's ideal of love needs the concrete embodiment supplied by reason to be effective in society.³⁷ Love is confounded when confronting ethical problems by its almost too profound view of the nature of man and society. Furthermore, the complicated group relations which have emerged in our technical civilization are in sharp contrast to the simple face to face relations which love see as the ideal community. These face to face relations of primitive groups have been erased, and thus love finds itself baffled as it asks the question, "What ought I to do?"³⁸ A further justification for the application of reason to the problem is found in an

³⁵OE, p. 103.

³⁶HD, p. 6; FH, p. 20.

³⁷OE, p. 165; cf. DCNR, pp. 139-40.

³⁸DCNR, p. 152.

examination of the ethical situation itself.

An immediately felt obligation toward obvious need may be prompted by the emotion of pity. But a continued sense of obligation rests upon and expresses itself in rational calculations of the needs of others as compared with our own interests. A relation between the self and one other may be partly ecstatic; and in any case the calculation of relative interests may be reduced to a minimum. But as soon as a third person is introduced into the relation even the most perfect love requires a rational estimate of conflicting needs and interests.³⁹

The first rational application of love to society is based on the continuity between "nature" and "grace."

A positive approach reveals that what is known as "natural law" and what is known as "original righteousness" are intimately related to each other...by reason of the fact that human freedom places the requirements of "original justice" as ultimate possibilities over the requirements of the natural law.⁴⁰

Thus Niebuhr can say:

It is not an ideal magically superimposed upon life by revelation which has no relation to total human experience. The whole conception of life revealed in the Cross of the Christian faith is not a pure negative of, or irrelevance toward, the moral ideals of "natural man." While the final heights of the love ideal condemn as well as fulfill the moral canons of common sense, the ideal is involved in every moral aspiration and achievement.⁴¹

Therefore, the revelation of Christ will complete, clarify, and negate the achievement of mutual love.⁴² A rationale has thus been established for the Christian by which he is justified in encouraging all lesser harmonies in human life short of the ideal of perfect love and brotherhood.

³⁹id., p. 248.

⁴⁰id., p. 285.

⁴¹id., pp. 104-5.

⁴²id., p. 82 ff.

In practical applications, this is of tremendous importance. For it means that legislation, civic enterprises, and other social activities have a thread of positive good in them which the Christian can support in the interests of a larger goal. Christianity recognizes the resources within human nature, both rational and impulsive, which aid in the establishment of justice.⁴³ It encourages and supports rational morality.

A religious ethic which holds such achievements in contempt discredits itself; particularly in a generation in which the problems of man's aggregate existence have become so difficult and the evils of social misunderstandings so great that their slightest alleviation must be regarded as a boon to mankind.⁴⁴

With the assertion of the continuity between nature and grace, Niebuhr rejects the doctrine of the "Two Realms" as he interprets it. Here again as in the doctrine of total depravity it seems that he misunderstands the doctrine, but what he protests against is plain. No area of life is excluded from the application of the law of love in its pure or rational form. There is no system of justice separate and apart from love.

The positive relation between rules of justice and the law of love must be reemphasized in opposition to sentimental versions of the love commandment, according to which only the most personal individual and direct expressions of social obligation are manifestations of Christian agape. Both sectarian and Lutheran analyses of the relation of love to justice easily fall into the error of excluding rules of justice from the domain of love.⁴⁵

While holding on to the relation of love to justice (we shall see how and why the two are related presently), Niebuhr sees clearly that a dualism

⁴³Cf. discussion in NM, p. 25 ff; REE, pp. 4-10.

⁴⁴GE, p. 93.

⁴⁵HD, p. 251.

in ethics is necessary, that the ideals of justice may run athwart the ideal of love.

Whenever religious idealism brings forth its purest fruits and places the strongest check upon selfish desires it results in policies which, from the political perspective, are quite impossible. There is, in other words, no possibility of harmonising the two strategies designed to bring the strongest inner and the most effective social restraint upon egoistic impulse. It would therefore seem better to accept a frank dualism in morals than to attempt a harmony between the two methods which threaten the effectiveness of both. Such a dualism would have two aspects. It would make a distinction between the moral judgments applied to the self and others; and it would distinguish between what we expect of individuals and of groups.⁴⁶

The Christian acting in office cannot function as an individual. He must reduce the rigors of the moral imperative.⁴⁷ Not only does the moral ideal face difficulty in its use of force and in its function as a rule for a person acting in office, but there is the further difficulty that "all men cannot be expected to become spiritual any more than they can be expected to become rational."⁴⁸ Yet despite all these difficulties love must be related to society and society's laws.

The highest moral ideal for human life, the ideal of love, can neither be renounced nor completely realized. Its imperatives and convincing reality proves that human life has its source and its goal above and beyond the frustrations and hindrances of the world of nature in which man lives. In this world, the inordinate egoism of individuals and groups constantly threatens life with self-destruction through anarchy. Since obedience to the absolute demands of love is impossible to natural man he must be restrained by an ideal less rigorous but nevertheless effective in preventing the strong from devouring the weak and from living in the anarchy of constant conflict. The law of justice is such an ideal. It is moral ideal in a more negative form than the ideal of love. It demands that the interests of the neighbor be affirmed but that the interests of the self be restricted so that they will not infringe

⁴⁶MM, pp. 270-1.

⁴⁷HD, p. 88.

⁴⁸ibid., p. 73.

upon those of the neighbor. Furthermore it sanctions the coercive force of governments to restrain those who will not voluntarily abide by the rule of rational justice.⁴⁹

This interpretation of justice will lend itself to fruitful applications in the realm of human relations. Niebuhr sees a hierarchy of standards each affirming the law of love more explicitly. It is to be observed that his analysis of human nature and his doctrine of a continuity between nature and grace enable him to develop a clear conception of the content and meaning of justice. Prohibition gives way to affirmation, and affirmation soon becomes embodied in the principle of equality, a natural growth of the attempt for justice, the very meaning itself of justice.⁵⁰

Equality is always a regulative principle of justice; and in the ideal of equality there is an echo of the law of love. "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as THYSELF...." Equality, being a rational, political version of the law of love, shares with it the quality of transcendence....It remains, nevertheless, a principle of criticism under which every scheme of justice stands and a symbol of the principle of love involved in all moral judgments.⁵¹

Thus clear rational thinking on the basis of religious principles, has found its way from the nature of man as sinner, to the situation in society, to the law of man's nature as a creature of God, to the principle of equality. Niebuhr has developed and substantiated a principle with which the achievements of society can be judged. For example, he says, "We may never realize equality, but we cannot accept the inequalities of capitalism

⁴⁹REE, pp. 216-17.

⁵⁰GE, pp. 107-8.

⁵¹Ibid., pp. 108-9.

or any other unjust social system complacently.⁵²

But this principle of equality is ambiguous. On the one hand it contains and approximates the law of love in rational form. On the other hand, it is something which is contrary to love, since it allows the self to insist upon "mine" and "thine." Therefore it stands in a medial position between the actualisation of justice and the ideal of love, pointing in both directions.⁵³

As we move from the ideal of love to the ideal of equality and from thence to more specific directives, it must be observed that judgments become more hazardous.⁵⁴ It is ever thus in ethical decisions. Consequently, caution must be exercised when advancing specific programs for social action. It may be that the prejudices and presuppositions of the times have insinuated themselves so deeply into the perspective of the agent that they no longer reflect the dispassionate and disinterested concern necessary for proper social work. Nevertheless, guided by proper principles, there is at least the possibility of accomplishing and effecting more positive goals than would be the case if there were no social theory whatsoever.

The final function which love can and must exercise in its relation to societal norms is the criticism of all positive justice. The ideal of love is a principle of criticism upon all approximations of justice, thus

⁵²Ibid., p. 148.

⁵³ibid., p. 189.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 190.

encouraging and inciting society on to ever higher establishments of justice.⁵⁵ Positive justice varies in its approximation of the ideal of love. The principle of love can exercise a discrimination between the various forms of justice, choosing that which is best, that which affirms and extends the law of human existence as far as possible.⁵⁶

When moving from the realm of theory into the world of actual fact, Christian ethics is confronted with the problem of compromise which is

"...the problem of creating and maintaining the 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."⁵⁷

That is why a clear estimate of the social situation is necessary.

The nature of human society guarantees the necessity for power and counter-power.

The selfishness of human communities must be regarded as an inevitability. Where it is inordinate it can be checked only by competing assertion of interest; and these can be effective only if coercive methods are added to moral and rational persuasion.⁵⁸

This situation then will determine the tactics which must be employed in the establishment of justice. Any other viewpoint or hope is mere sentimentality. Our analysis of the structure of society revealed that injustice springs for accumulations of power.⁵⁹ Correspondingly, justice can be better guaranteed by the leveling of irresponsible power.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷GE, p. 59.

⁵⁸MM, p. 272.

⁵⁹GE, p. 164. MM, passim.

In dealing with the political task which confronts every society and particularly a society, such as the contemporary one, in which social injustice has reached proportions which threaten social stability, the problem is to prevent or destroy the accumulation of social power and to bring the irreducible minimum under the strongest possible social check. In modern society this means that economic power must be dealt with rigorously because it is the most significant power.⁶⁰

The one element in modern society which saw this tactic clearly were the Marxists. Consequently Niebuhr at one time believed that "an adequate radical political policy must be Marxian in the essentials of political strategy."⁶¹ Thus Marxism was one of the factors which led Niebuhr to adopt this principle which he has consistently espoused in the social struggle. History had seen many attempts at justice based on rational suasion and moral imperatives with little or no effect. Karl Marx revealed the ideological mask which hid the true nature of these feeble efforts and taught the tactics necessary for the actual situation. Niebuhr "baptizes" this method and utilizes this insight.

If only the sensitive spirit could learn how to use the forces of nature to defeat nature, how to use force in order to establish justice. Knowing the peril of corruption in this strategy, the religious spirit recoils. If that fear can be overcome, religious ideals may yet achieve social and political significance.⁶²

Here then is a rationale for social action, grounded squarely in the facts of communal life and human nature, and capable of employment to a successful issue. As Niebuhr himself admits, the use of power is not without its danger. Yet the analysis of man and society compel one to its adoption.

⁶⁰ REE, p. 235; cf. also pp. 230-1.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 177.

⁶² NI, p. 81.

The employment of the power principle is always guided by the social theory of equality and the rational evaluation of the effectiveness which power will have in any given situation. There is a definite goal to which society should tend in its establishment of equal justice.

The domination of one life by another is avoided most successfully by an equilibrium of powers and vitalities, so that weakness does not invite enslavement by the strong. Without a tolerable equilibrium no moral or social restraints ever succeeded completely in preventing injustice and enslavement.⁶³

In achieving equal justice, power must be employed to build up equilibria of power within the community. More specifically:

Basic justice in any society depends upon the right organization of men's common labor, the equalization of their social power, regulation of their common interests, and adequate restraint upon the inevitable conflict of competing interests.⁶⁴

Step by step, then, we are led to realize that justice will never be established unless social mechanisms for the embodiment of justice are actualized. The leveling of power will never take place by moral suasion. "No moral idealism can overcome a basic mechanical defect in the social structure."⁶⁵ Society must be organized within a framework that makes for the most justice in terms of the sinfulness of man. Instead of viewing the social mechanism simply negatively, Niebuhr finds it fulfilling a definite positive function for those who live under it. The social mechanism is more important for justice than liberal Christianity was led to believe

⁶³ibid., p. 265.

⁶⁴ibid., pp. 181-2.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 182.

and much more positive than orthodox Christianity thought.⁶⁶ Within the equilibria of power which keep society from tyranny, one central organizing group should be able to arbitrate conflicts, manage and manipulate the processes of mutual support, coerce submission to the social process by superior power, and redress the disproportions of power whatever they make for injustice.⁶⁷ In Chapter IV it was pointed out that political power is regarded by Niebuhr as the most important and most basic since it organizes the rest. Hence it will fall to the province of political power to accomplish this function which the organizing principle should perform.

It is obvious that the principle of government, or the organization of the whole realm of social vitalities, stands upon a higher plane of moral sanction and social necessity than the principle of the balance of power.⁶⁸

In organizing society, there has been an advance from the anarchic balance of power necessary for the prevention of tyranny. But government is morally ambiguous. It may represent a successful solution to the tyranny anarchy dilemma, but there is always the possibility that it will become tyrannical. (Cf. Hasis). Its function is necessary, and can be made to represent a positive moral gain, if a way can be found to avoid tyranny. Here is where Niebuhr finds his justification for democracy. Democracy combines the necessity for an organizing element within society without permitting that element to exist unchecked and unbridled.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷ibid. p. 266.

⁶⁸Ibid.

Modern democracies tend towards a more equal justice partly because they have divorced political power from special social functions. They endowed all men with a measure of it by giving them the right to review the policies of their leaders. This democratic principle does not obviate the formation of oligarchies in society; but it places a check upon their formation, and upon the exercise of their power.⁶⁹

Previous to democracy, political power depended upon social function as for example warriors and priests in societies of the past. Power then came to reside in a powerful and practically untouchable vested interest, out of reach of any control and criticism. Democracy has evaded the difficulties inherent in such an arrangement. "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."⁷⁰ This dictum neatly summarizes Niebuhr's whole attitude on democracy which he develops at length in The Children of Light and Children of Darkness.

The democratic techniques of a free society place checks upon the power of the ruler and administrator and thus prevent it from becoming vexations. The perils of uncontrolled power are perennial reminders of the virtues of a democratic society; particularly if society should become inclined to impatience with the dangers of freedom and should be tempted to choose the advantages of coerced unity at the price of freedom.⁷¹

This line of thought on democracy grew out of Niebuhr's observations on the Nazi regime. He had consistently espoused a more positive view of government than was current within "Christian orthodoxy," and the rise of Fascism stimulated him to validate this thesis more solidly. In his

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 263.

⁷⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), p. xi. Hereafter CLGD.

⁷¹Ibid., p. xii.

earlier days he had been extremely pessimistic in regard to democracy's ability to establish justice, largely because his observation was directed toward the economic structure of society.

At any rate political contests between such parties do not involve the question of the right of a particular class to rule society. In England the actual political power has remained in the hands of the landed gentry and industrial wealth, while in America a combination of industrialists and farmers has created a democracy, slightly more bourgeois and less aristocratic than the English variety.⁷²

Since the reigns of government were in the hands of the one economic class which dominated all of society, the hope for justice from this group was slight, unless power was wrested from it by power. There could be no gradual transition from class domination to more equal justice. Speaking of the economic situation during the Great Depression, he wrote:

The conviction that these conservative tendencies must ultimately issue in fascism is based upon the assumption that all western social systems must face a crisis in which the issue between capitalism and socialism is definitely joined, each system sharpening its own position in the process of standing in unqualified juxtaposition to the other. Such an assumption rules out the possibility of a gradual transition from capitalism through state capitalism to socialism. The reason such a gradual transition is ruled out is that no ruling oligarchy reveals any inclination to transfer any more power than is absolutely necessary to maintain the functions of its social system; and all of them incline to regret and to disavow the actual transfers they have made when the moment comes in which they are threatened with complete loss of power. For this reason the reservations which have been placed upon the power of the economic overlords by the Roosevelt administration can no more be regarded as permanent gains in the direction of a socialized state than the analogous gains of the semi-socialistic governments of Europe in the last decade.⁷³

The assumption that democracy could not achieve justice is based on the judgment that economic power is the all controlling factor in society.

⁷²ibid., p. 155.

⁷³ibid., p. 81.

With the increased centralization of economic power in the period of modern industrialism, this development merely means that society as such does not control economic power as much as social well being requires; and the economic, rather than the political and military power has become the significant coercive force in modern society.⁷⁴

Niebuhr was thus led to approve of Lenin's condemnation of democracy:

"Freedom in capitalist society always remains more or less the same as it was in the ancient Greek republics, that is, freedom for the slave-owners."⁷⁵

With this analysis of the source of modern ills in society, the proper thing to do to establish justice was to effect the overthrow of the economic stranglehold which the oligarchy had on the nation. Even violence was defended in this enterprise.⁷⁶ The rule of the proletariat was regarded as inevitable.⁷⁷

With the increasingly apparent tyranny in Russia and its concomitant imperialism plus the threat of Nazi domination from without, Niebuhr revised his estimate of democracy and the source of evil in society.

Russia has proved, on the one hand, that the ownership of property is not the only form of irresponsible power which creates injustices. All ownership might be abolished; but if the right to control property remains in the hands of an essentially irresponsible oligarchy the net result is merely to merge the political and economic power in the hands of one oligarchy.⁷⁸

Once Niebuhr had come to the conclusion that the ills of society did not reside exclusively in the ownership of property and the economic order,

⁷⁴MM, pp. 14-5.

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 149.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 169 ff.

⁷⁷REE, p. 148.

⁷⁸GPP, pp. 132-3.

he became increasingly more optimistic concerning the possibility of justice by less violent means.

But there is fortunately another possibility in history. The powers and majesties, the institutions and structures of human contrivance do not always meet the challenge of competitive forces by increased rigidity and idolatry....Yet there is a possibility that old forms and structures of life may be renewed, rather than destroyed by the vicissitudes of history.⁷⁹

With his increased optimism came an increase in Niebuhr's condemnation of the "pessimists" who viewed history and society negatively. Government can be positive. Niebuhr thus emerges midway between the sentimental optimism of the bourgeois idealism of the nineteenth century and the traditional pessimism of Lutheran orthodoxy. He defends this position as the only right one by which to validate and protect democracy.

The consistent optimism of our liberal culture has prevented modern democratic societies both from gauging the perils of freedom accurately and from appreciating democracy fully as the only alternative to injustice and oppression. When this optimism is not qualified to accord with the real and complex facts of human nature and history, there is always a danger that sentimentality will give way to despair and that a too consistent optimism will alternate with a too consistent pessimism.⁸⁰

Niebuhr in many places criticizes a too unqualified acceptance of government in preference to anarchy. Luther, according to Niebuhr, is particularly guilty on this point.⁸¹ Government conceived only negatively and in addition regarded with an undue amount of piety and reverence opens the way to tyranny.⁸² The proper evaluation and understanding of democracy

⁷⁹HH, p. 226.

⁸⁰GLON, p. xi.

⁸¹HD, p. 195.

⁸²GLON, pp. 44-5.

prevents such a development. Thus the economic question has been transmuted into a political one, and the political one in attempting to establish equal justice finds itself approving of democracy. While accepting the fact that democratic control of the political process plus political supervision of the economic process has tended toward the realization of justice, Niebuhr also sees the necessity for private morality to fill the framework of the social structure.

But it must be clearly understood that voluntary acts of kindness which exceed the requirements of coercive justice are never substitutes for, but additions to, the coercive system of social relationships through which alone a basic justice can be guaranteed.⁸³

Yet these voluntary acts of kindness play a tremendously important role in the rough and tumble of the social order. Hence religion, whose concern it is to promote such action has perennial justification.

The realists who have recognized the limits of politics in the establishment of justice will be encouraged to supplement pure politics with resources of reason and imagination in the hope of perfecting the rough justice of the political order with the refinements of rational justice and imaginative altruism.⁸⁴

⁸³CE, p. 183.

⁸⁴REE, p. 248.

CONCLUSION

This paper has been an attempt to examine Niebuhr's thought on social ethics. We have found that Niebuhr develops and employs the principle of equality as the basis for his social action. This principle he finds as a derivation of the Law of Love which he asserts is congruent to the nature of man and substantiated by religious revelation.

From our conclusion it is possible to make several observations. These observations are not offered as further conclusions to this study but merely as lines which future investigation might follow.

1) Niebuhr's understanding of the continuity of nature and grace enables him to construct his powerful social ethic. Perhaps Lutheranism could here incorporate into its ethical thinking a most valuable insight. Instead of juxtaposing the morality of natural man with that of regenerated man from the religious perspective, Lutheranism could recognize the positive in natural morality more clearly. This would not connote merit, for such a recognition would take place in a realm other than that of the religious. In short, what Niebuhr does so powerfully with his nature/grace continuum, Lutheranism could do on the basis of its doctrine of the iustitia civilis and its conception of anthropology (the imago dei, refutation of Flacius, etc.). Lutheranism's ethic would then be both realistic and religiously valid.

2) The clear conception of the nature of power and the necessity for coercion which Niebuhr displays in his thought on the social structure indicates his affinity to Luther. Luther recognized the Weltliche Regiment

and the coercive measures it is forced to employ. Thus Niebuhr seems implicitly to endorse the "Two Realms" but explicitly denies the doctrine. He does this because of his misunderstanding of Luther's position, a misunderstanding he took over from Ernst Troeltsch and never lost. Niebuhr is right when he asserts that Lutheranism has been socially quiescent. Even Lutheran apologues concede this fact, at least in respect to German Lutheranism. Niebuhr is wrong, it seems, when he presents what he considers to be the reasons for his quiescence. Holl and others have indicated that Troeltsch's analysis, which Niebuhr uses, is incorrect. Yet Lutheranism can learn from Niebuhr. It can learn that it does have a social responsibility, and it can be driven to search its own heritage for the theological and ethical concepts which will enable it to participate in the arena most effectively. That it does have the necessary material in its heritage can be seen from the fact that Niebuhr's most powerful and successful principles are, or could be, those of Lutheranism. For example, Niebuhr asserts that a positive relation must exist between the state and the establishment of justice, that the state is not merely negative. Here Lutheranism could well affirm such a position on the basis of its doctrine of the calling and the justitia civilis, and accomplish much within the area of social justice.

3) Niebuhr comes very close to adopting the Lutheran Dreistand-
lehre. This line of thought is undeveloped in Niebuhr, but he sees that the person acting in office is forced by his more complex relationship to adopt a different ethical standard than his private morality would dictate. Luther saw this clearly and gave many instructions on it.

Niebuhr reluctantly admits the dualism in morals (which really is not a dualism when understood as Luther understood it). Yet Niebuhr is correct when he fights against a cynical type of morality which uses the necessary difference between public and private morality for the employment of immoral means. Work could be done in this area to clarify and strengthen Lutheran thinking by an investigation of the problem which Niebuhr raises.

4) Niebuhr's main weapon of social justice is the principle of equality. Emil Brunner and many other philosophers have subjected this principle to telling criticism. Nevertheless, although ill-defined and not consistently thought through, the principle of equality becomes for Niebuhr an axe which he can lay to the root of the tree. Niebuhr is a prophet, and as such is often guilty of intellectual and philosophical leaps which lesser mortals would not dare. In order to accomplish his goal of a better and more just social order, Niebuhr has seized upon the principle of equality without being too much concerned with the philosophical and ethical problems it raises. It may be safely said that his motive is correct, his goal is correct, and within a certain latitude, his reasoning on the principle of equality stands up under criticism. Yet there is needed a more precise explication of this principle if it is to serve as a well-knit political and social theory.

After all is said and done, Reinhold Niebuhr enunciates a message which is sorely needed by a weak and frightened Church: *The Relevance of the Ideal of Love*. For this alone the value of his work is assured.

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