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REINHOLD NIEBUHR:  
THE DEVELOPMENT OF A POLITICAL  
PHILOSOPHY

JOE BYRNS SILLS, JR.

Submitted in partial fulfillment for the requirements  
of the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Political Studies and Public Administration  
of the American University of Beirut

Beirut, Lebanon

1961

NIEBUHR'S POLITICAL THOUGHT

SILLS

## A B S T R A C T

This thesis is an analysis of the political thought of the noted American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr. It is based on a consideration of the concept of justice in his work.

The opening section deals with the theological bases of justice. The Christian, classical, and modern views of man are analyzed briefly. Second, Niebuhr's doctrine of sin is considered, with emphasis on his beliefs concerning original sin. Following this, love is discussed, with sacrificial love (agape) and mutual love compared and contrasted. Finally, the role of justice in Niebuhr's theology is considered, with emphasis on the relationship between justice and love.

The second section is an analysis of Niebuhr's work in the field of social justice. This section is written chronologically, tracing Niebuhr's development from his early years in Detroit, through his partial allegiance to, and subsequent break with Marxism, to the more mature and pragmatic outlook which has characterized his later years. Niebuhr's attacks on the Social Gospel and on John Dewey are discussed in this section; and a close analysis is given to his criticisms of liberalism and communism.

In speaking of communism, special emphasis is given to Niebuhr's view of communism as a religion, and to its relationship to liberalism. Niebuhr's view that both communism and

liberalism are variations of the same misguided utopian theme which has plagued our age is developed.

The third section of this essay is concerned with international justice. This is the field which has claimed most of Niebuhr's attention in recent years, as opposed to the domestic issues which were his chief concern in the thirties.

First, his attitudes toward pacifism are discussed, and his conclusion that pacifism represents a non-Christian approach to our problems is described. Second, Niebuhr's views on international organization are considered. The manner in which he deals with the illusion of world government, and the favorable light in which he views such limited steps toward international cooperation as that represented by the United Nations, are noted. The example of UNESCO is also mentioned, as an international organization which plays a valuable role. Niebuhr stresses the limited potential of the United Nations and of UNESCO, but views them as an important beginning.

Finally, the implications of power are discussed, with special emphasis given to the balance of power concept. A point of special emphasis is the relationship between justice and the balance of power: the only justice sinful man can create comes through a balance of power. The challenge of communism is reiterated and possible ways to meet this challenge are analyzed.

The fourth section of this essay is a personal commentary on Niebuhr's thought. This author notes the incomplete nature of

Niebuhr's theology, but stresses the accuracy of his doctrine of sin. His theories on social justice are considered especially sound and applicable. However, his analysis of the international scene is greeted with some reservations. This writer holds that Niebuhr does not offer very many solutions for the problems he raises, perhaps partially due to his lack of a clear-cut theology which would establish the framework for these solutions. In spite of this, Niebuhr is viewed as a keen and penetrating critic of the contemporary scene, and a valuable guide for our time.

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## I N T R O D U C T I O N

In proposing that Reinhold Niebuhr be invited to give the renowned Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh University, John Baillie said: "Intellectually, Niebuhr is head and shoulders, he is legs and ankles above any other American."

Since this evaluation, just prior to the Second World War, Reinhold Niebuhr has grown considerably in the eyes of the intellectual world. The Gifford Lectures themselves -- later published as The Nature and Destiny of Man -- stand as a hallmark in Niebuhr's thought.

Niebuhr has published eighteen books; his articles run into the hundreds. He is, one can readily see, a most prolific writer. Not only is his thought deep and demanding; he seems never to have mastered the short word and the simple sentence. His thought does not move forward in a steady and definable progression, but rather shifts and changes, altering both point of focus and method of attack. This makes of him an interesting and challenging subject for study.

There have been many doctoral theses, articles, and several books about Niebuhr. There are many possible avenues of approach to his work. Perhaps the first thing I should do in this introduction is to explain the approach I have taken.

The center of Niebuhr's thought is undoubtedly his theology. He is not a systematic theologian, with all that implies. But he



is a theologian. If one were to present a general view of his work, the focal point would have to be something connected with this theology. Perhaps it would be his doctrine of sin, perhaps that of man. Either of the two would form a valid approach.

However, this thesis is concerned primarily with Niebuhr's work as an interpreter of political life, his political philosophy, if I may call it that. Given this general approach, the more I examined his work, the more it became clear that one approach was preferable: a consideration of his views on justice.

Political philosophers have, of course, been talking about justice for a long time. It is a central concept in the work of most of the great political philosophers. It is most important in Niebuhr's work, for it serves not only as a convenient ordering point for his political writings, but also as a central concept in his theology. In this sense, it links his political thought to his theology.

I have divided this essay into four chapters. The first three center around the concept of justice. The fourth is a personal comment on Niebuhr's work.

The first chapter is concerned with Niebuhr's theology. This is the only possible starting point. Though I am not primarily concerned with this theology, I am writing about a theologian. And this theology must be presented, if only in bare form, in order to create a foundation for the rest of the essay. I have developed this section in such a way as to lead

in what I think is a logical progression to his theological view of justice. It may strike some readers that fifty-five pages is a bit long for a preliminary section. I do not think so. If anything, I apologize for the inadequate nature of this section. For it is not actually a preliminary section, but rather an integral part of the essay.

The second and third chapters represent more arbitrary divisions. They deal with social and international justice, terms which are, incidentally, Niebuhr's. The line between them wavers; there are definitely parts of the third chapter which could be discussed in the second chapter instead. Both pacifism and the balance of power concept are applicable on the domestic scene. I make no claims to have created three air-tight chambers. Indeed, I should be rather uneasy if I had, or thought that I had effected a perfect division. For no truly great writer can be neatly compartmentalized. There will be a constant crossing of lines; and it will be done intentionally.

In these first three sections, I have tried to let Niebuhr speak for himself. Quotations from his work are used with frequency. Naturally, I have had to summarize his work at points. In order to maintain the tone, I have avoided the first person in these three chapters. This is not to imply that there are no value judgments at all in these chapters. The very selection of material is the greatest value judgment of all. However, the greatest personal judgment comes in the fourth chapter. I

have used the first person freely in this chapter; the chapter is simply a short personal essay on Niebuhr's work as I see it.

This fourth chapter was very difficult to write. When one is considering the work of a great man, there is a temptation to be overawed. This is, I think unfortunate. We should certainly be impressed by greatness; I am certainly impressed by Reinhold Niebuhr. However, there is no reason to accept his every word as gospel. This last section will show that I have not done this. I hope that I have, in this final section, preserved both a critical eye and a sense of respect. That was my aim.

I also want to say a word concerning my sources. Basically, I have dealt with Niebuhr's books. Let me emphasize from the beginning that I have had no problem with a scarcity of sources. Indeed, my greatest problem was deciding what not to include. I have used most of these eighteen books. However, Moral Man and Immoral Society and the two volumes of The Nature and Destiny of Man were more valuable to me than the others. These are, I think, the most important books Niebuhr has written, and deserve emphasis.

Niebuhr's articles play, in comparison, a minor role. This does not imply that I consider his articles unimportant. It merely suggests that I consider the books more important; and that, in an essay of limited scope, where I cannot even consider much of the material in the books, a line must be drawn at some point. I have used some of the articles, mostly in the second and third

chapters of the essay. All of these articles, save two, were taken from a collection of Niebuhr's works, called Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics. This collection, rather than being an anthology, is something of a mosaic, with Niebuhr's work carefully cut and pasted together. As such, one should perhaps be a bit wary of it. However, the entire text was approved by Niebuhr before publication, and thus presumably does not distort his thought.

A second source I have used is a collection of essays on Niebuhr, published as Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought. This book of essays, largely written by Niebuhr's colleagues, has been valuable in placing Niebuhr's work in perspective. However, it was a difficult book to use, simply because I did not want to allow other ideas about Niebuhr to have an undue influence on my essay. I have thus used comments from these essays only to illustrate points which I have already made from Niebuhr's work.

There is one exception to this. In the section entitled "The Development of a Political Philosophy," in chapter II, I have used these essays a good bit, especially that of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. There were reasons for this departure from form. First of all, the very nature of this section made it impossible to illustrate it fully from Niebuhr's work. To have done so would have made one small section excessively long. Secondly, and also connected with the peculiar nature of the section, it seemed

particularly valuable to allow some of the men who have worked with Niebuhr to give us their personal opinions, opinions which were formed not by one or several books, but by a lifetime of association. This essay would have been much poorer without their meaningful personal insights.

The last chapter, as I have said, represents my own conclusions. Some of these are, of course, close to conclusions reached in these various essays about Niebuhr. This is inevitable.

Before I close this brief introduction, I want to express my gratitude to Dr. Malcolm Kerr, whose guidance and patience have been most helpful.

I do not pretend to have written an essay which deals with Niebuhr's thought in a comprehensive manner. I hope only to have pointed out some significant points in his political thought, to have placed them in a meaningful context, and to have added a few personal comments which are not too insensible.

In writing this essay, I have relearned the basic truth that there is no better path to knowledge than trying to put down on paper, in cogent form, something which you think you know. It has been a valuable experience.

Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but his inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.

Reinhold Niebuhr

## CHAPTER I

### THEOLOGICAL BASES OF JUSTICE

#### A. Three Views of Man

Reinhold Niebuhr states that "all modern views of human nature are adaptations, transformations and varying compounds of primarily two distinctive views of man: (a) The view of classical antiquity, that is of the Graeco-Roman world, and (b) the Biblical view."

Though these two traditions are distinct and partly incompatible, they were merged in the thought of mediaeval Catholicism, most perfectly in the Thomistic synthesis of Augustinian and Aristotelian thought. This temporary synthesis was soon destroyed; and its destruction marks the real beginning of modern culture. The Renaissance distilled the classical elements from the synthesis; the Reformation attempted to strip the Biblical elements from the classical. Today, we see in Liberal Protestantism an abortive effort to reunite the two elements. Actually, the two have little in common; their union was always forced. The little they shared was almost completely lost when modern, liberal thought reshaped the classical view in terms of a greater naturalism.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man (London: Nisbet & Co., Ltd., 1941), I, 5. Hereafter all references will be to writings of Niebuhr, unless otherwise cited.

In broad, sweeping strokes, this is the picture Niebuhr paints of the three views of man which will be considered: the classical, the Christian, and the modern. In a very real sense, the object of this essay can be expressed in terms of these three views: it is to show how one theologian, firmly grounded in the traditions of Christianity, and strongly influenced by classical views, attempts to refute the modern view of man. Such is Niebuhr's self-appointed task. And it is the self-appointed task of this essay to explain how he has or has not achieved his goal, with particular emphasis in the essay on the concept of justice as a focal point, perhaps even a framework, for the analysis to be presented.

The canvas is painted in broad strokes. The first, and continuing, task is to reduce this broad picture to more detail. It should be noted immediately that this will not be completely done; to reduce Niebuhr's thought in toto to the lowest possible denominator would be both impractical and confusing: impractical, because his ideas and works are too abundant; confusing, because oversimplification is perhaps more of a vice than a virtue.

Let us start by examining these three views of man.

1. The classical view. The prime components of the classical picture are Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic concepts of human nature. Their one common conviction is an insistence that man be understood primarily in terms of his unique rational facilities, his capacity for thought and reason. "In both Plato and



Aristotle 'mind' is sharply distinguished from body. It is the unifying and ordering principle, the organ of logos, which brings harmony into the life of the soul, as logos is the creative and forming principle of the world."

In addition to this common rationalism, there is in Platonic thought a strong element of dualism. The subsequent emphasis on these two elements -- rationalism and dualism -- has two consequences. The rational element tends to identify rational man, who is essential man, with the divine. This is inevitable since reason, viewed as the creative principle, is identical to God. Secondly, and in direct relationship, the element of dualism identifies the body with evil and assumes that the mind, or spirit, is essentially good.

This view is, at least when compared to the Christian view, optimistic: it does not locate man's great defect in the center of human personality. It also has a perfect confidence in the virtue of the rational man. But it most certainly does not share the view of the modern age that all men will be either virtuous or happy or both. There is an air of melancholy hanging over Greek life which is alien to the modern world, despite the rather pompous assertion of the latter that it has, in effect, restored the classical view of man.<sup>2</sup>

"There is nothing, methinks, more piteous than a man, of

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 6-7, 9-10.

all things that creep and breath upon the earth," declares Zeus in the Iliad. That note is a constant strain in Greek thought from Homer down to the Hellenistic age. Aristotle said: "Not to be born is the best thing and death is better than life." For him, melancholy and genius were inevitable bedfellows. Seneca prayed: "Forgive the world: they are all fools."<sup>3</sup>

Much of the force of the great Greek tragedy lies in its pessimism. And, unlike Christianity, it offers no solution, no escape from this Weltanschauung. It is significant to note that the tragedians, unlike the philosophers, viewed human passions as far more than mere impulses of the body. They saw the great tragedy of human history in the fact that human life can be creative only through being destructive. "Biological urges are enhanced and sublimated by daemonic spirit and ... this spirit cannot express itself without committing the sin of pride." The heroes of Greek tragedy are always urged to observe a proper restraint. They never do. And they are heroes precisely because they never do. Their actions are founded in the spirit as well as in the flesh. It would be ludicrous rather than tragic to imagine that majestic Oedipus fell simply because he could not control his body.

The final note to be sounded in this brief survey of the classical view lies in this concept of the tragedies. Niebuhr expresses it this way: "It is significant that the profound

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in the Nature and Destiny of Man, I, 9-10.  
No specific references are cited.

problem posed by Greek tragedy was never sensed by the moderns, who revived classicism and ostensibly built their view of man upon Greek thought. They may have understood or misunderstood Plato and Aristotle; but the message of Aeschylus and Sophocles was neither understood nor misunderstood. It was simply neglected..."<sup>4</sup>

2. The Christian View. If the basis of the classical view is in Greek metaphysical presuppositions, the basis of the Christian view is in the presuppositions of the Christian faith. This faith in God as the Creator transcends rationality. The first major point to recognize about the Christian view is that it insists upon a unity of body and soul. It has no room for the idealistic error of regarding the mind as basically good and the body as basically evil. Neither will it accept the romantic reversal which seeks the good in man-in-nature and the evil in man-in-spirit. Man is, in both body and spirit, a created and finite existence.<sup>5</sup>

If the modern view holds that "every extension and development of the human mind represents a clear gain," the Christian view asserts that, in Pascal's words, the "dignity of man and his misery" are interwoven in the same fabric.<sup>6</sup> Every action

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 11-12.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> "Christianity and Humanism," Messenger, XVII, (9 September, 1952), p. 7. Quoted in H.R. Davis and R.C. Good (ed.), Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), p. 71.

of man -- made possible by his freedom -- may bring either good or evil consequences. Evil lies not in nature but in man. The Christian view clearly echoes the famous words of Cassius to Brutus: "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves." This is the second major point.

The third important characteristic of the Christian view is that man "is understood primarily from the standpoint of God, rather than from the uniqueness of his rational faculties or his relation to nature. He is made in the 'image of God.'" The human spirit can, as it were, stand outside itself and survey the world. It is a spirit which is essentially homeless; "for the self which stands outside itself and the world cannot find the meaning of life in itself or the world." The soul must seek beyond both causality and rationality to find a God who, from the standpoint of human thought, can only be defined negatively.

In the Christian sense, faith in God depends on faith in the revelation. God's revelation culminating in Christ is "the basis of the Christian concept of personality and individuality. In terms of this faith man can understand himself as a unity of will which finds its end in the will of God." The only way for man to relate himself to God without pretending to be God is for him to "begin with a faith that he is understood from beyond himself, that he is known and loved of God and must find himself in terms of obedience to the divine will." Such a

view binds mind and body together, refuting the classical duality, by making of God, the revealed Creator of both mind and body, the unbreakable link between the two. This is a point which is vital for Christianity simply because it is vital for the faith and salvation of the individual Christian.

The above is the bright side of the picture. The dark side was hinted at in the second point. More concretely, it can be expressed in four short words: man is a sinner.

We will not, for the moment, discuss this aspect. It is so important that it must be dealt with in detail later. For now, suffice it to say that the Christian view of man asserts that man constantly claims for himself a higher stature than the already high stature he has been granted. This is his sin.<sup>7</sup>

For our purposes, the Christian view of man is more important than either the classical or the modern view. Indeed, it has already been stated that the essay is to concern a theologian whose work is "firmly grounded in the traditions of Christianity."<sup>8</sup> The balance of this opening section on "The Theological Bases of Justice" will attempt to lay the foundation for the central concern of the essay, as well as constituting a part of that concern. Before we discuss this Christian view in detail, let us briefly examine the third view of man.

3. The Modern View. This picture is made up partly of

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<sup>7</sup> The Nature and Destiny of Man, I, pp. 14-16 and 18.

<sup>8</sup> Supra, p. 1.

classical, partly Christian, and some peculiarly modern motifs. The classical rationalism is essentially retained, but it is flavored heavily with naturalism. Modern thought protests, in a rather idealistic way, against the Christian view of man as a creature who sins. Its more recent naturalistic tendencies protest against a vision of man as an "image of God." Modern man feels, through his rational mind, a tremendous sense of power over nature -- even though nature continually rises up and slaps him in the face. "But having destroyed the ultimate reference by which mediaeval man transcended nature spiritually, even while acknowledging his dependence practically, he ends by seeking asylum in nature's dependabilities and serenities."

Here, modern man finds himself in a sticky dilemma. He cannot decide whether he should understand himself in terms of the uniqueness of his reason or from the standpoint of his affinity with nature. This deep contradiction remains unresolved.

Modern man has repudiated the Renaissance view of individuality, a view which could only have grown on Christian and not classical soil. He is trapped in a technical civilization of his own creation "which creates more enslaving mechanical interdependencies and collectivities than anything known in an agrarian world." The individual is completely submerged in the universality of rational concepts.

Niebuhr summarizes in this fashion:

A genuine individuality can be maintained only in terms of religious presuppositions which can do justice to the immediate involvement of human individuality in all the organic forms and social tensions of history, while yet appreciating its ultimate transcendence over every social and historical situation in the highest reaches of its self-transcendence. The paradox of man as creature and man as child of God is a necessary presupposition of a concept of individuality, strong enough to maintain itself against the pressures of history, and realistic enough to do justice to the organic cohesions of social life.

Perhaps nothing tells more about this modern view than its attitude toward evil. Modern man has an easy conscience. The idea of man as a sinner at the very center of his personality -- in his will -- has been discarded. The net effect of this has been to make the Christian gospel irrelevant to him.

As a corollary, modern man views history in terms of inevitable progress. He has actually taken a Christian concept -- the Kingdom of God -- and transferred it from its Biblical status as an unrealizable goal lying beyond history, to an earthly goal which is quite realizable if man will just work and love hard enough during his appointed days.<sup>9</sup>

It is already apparent that Niebuhr's attacks on modern man will be severe, even savage. We will survey some of these attacks later. But let us first turn to a more detailed consideration of the Christian view of man. In the light of Christian doctrine, as seen by Niebuhr, there is only one logical place to

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<sup>9</sup> The Nature and Destiny of Man, I, pp. 19, 21-25.

begin: we must first of all consider sin.

B. The Doctrine of Sin

Reinhold Niebuhr is known to many as a man obsessed by sin. A close reading of his most important work -- The Nature and Destiny of Man -- affirms the importance of a doctrine of sin in Niebuhr's thought. However, "obsessed" is too strong a term. Even "preoccupied" would be inaccurate. Perhaps it would be accurate to say, with Emil Brunner, that the concept of sin is "one of the main pillars of his thought structure."<sup>10</sup>

Niebuhr observes that he has been criticized by both secular and Christian liberals for his "preoccupation with the Christian doctrine of sin, and alleged overemphasis on the corruption of human nature." He pleads guilty, in the sense that it was a long time before he paid as much attention to the cure as to the diagnosis, to "grace" as well as to sin.<sup>11</sup>

Emil Brunner recalls how conversations with Niebuhr and Henry van Dusen on the topic of sin -- a concept which "in those days (1928) had almost disappeared from the vocabulary of enlightened theologians" -- served to "stimulate Niebuhr and set fire to his imagination."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> "Some Remarks on Reinhold Niebuhr's Work as a Christian Thinker," Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought, ed. C.W. Kegley and R.W. Bretall (New York: Macmillan Co., 1956), p. 28.

<sup>11</sup> "Intellectual Biography," in Kegley and Bretall, Op.cit., p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Kegley and Bretall, Op.cit., p. 28.



Our task is to discover just what it was that set fire to the imagination of this young Professor some thirty years ago, and has contributed so strongly to his subsequent witness. This can be, at best, only a brief and fragmentary description of the doctrine of sin in Niebuhr's thought, tracing only the primary concepts.

1. Original sin. A statement by R.E. Hulme affords a good starting point. Hulme observes:

All thought since the Renaissance, in spite of its apparent variety, forms one coherent whole... It all rests on the same conception of the nature of man and all exhibits the same inability to recognize the dogma of original sin. In this period not only have its philosophy, its literature and its ethics been based upon this new conception of man as fundamentally good, as sufficient, as the measure of things; but a good case can be made out for regarding many of its characteristic economic features as springing from this central abstract conception.<sup>13</sup>

Fully agreeing with Hulme, Niebuhr's doctrine of sin begins with his doctrine of original sin. This doctrine is set forward in its most thorough and developed form in The Nature and Destiny of Man, especially in chapter IX of Vol. I, entitled "Original Sin and Man's Responsibility."

Niebuhr notes that both rationalists and moralists are offended by the Christian doctrine of original sin in its classical form, since it maintains a seemingly absurd position. It asserts that "man sins inevitably, and by a fateful necessity, but that he is nevertheless to be held responsible for actions

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<sup>13</sup> Speculations, p. 52. Quoted in The Nature and Destiny of Man, I, p. 99.

which are prompted by an ineluctable fate."<sup>14</sup>

Augustine compresses this essentially Pauline doctrine well:

Man's nature was indeed at first created faultless and without sin; but nature as man now has it, into which everyone is born from Adam, wants the Physician, being no longer in a healthy state. All good qualities which it still possesses... it has from the most High God, its Creator and Maker. But the flaw which darkens and weakens all these natural goods it has not contracted from its blameless Creator... but from that original sin which it created of its own free will.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, "sin is natural for man in the sense that it is universal but not in the sense that it is necessary."

In Calvin's words: "We say therefore that man is corrupted by natural pravity (sic) but which did not originate from nature. We deny that it proceeded from nature to signify that it is rather an adventitious quality or accident, than a substantial quality originally innate." Further: "We call it natural that no one may suppose it to be contracted by every individual from corrupt habit, whereas it prevails over all by hereditary right."<sup>16</sup>

Sin therefore proceeds from a defect in man's will, and is thus completely deliberate. But the will presupposes freedom. Sin cannot be blamed on a defect in man's nature.<sup>17</sup>

Despite these explanations, there remains a logical absurdity

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 256.

<sup>15</sup> Treatise on Nature and Grace, ch. 3. Anti-Pelagian Works, I, p. 238. Quoted in The Nature and Destiny of Man, I, pp. 256-7. Italics in original.

<sup>16</sup> Institutes, Book II, ch. 1, par. 11. Quoted in The Nature and Destiny of Man, I, p. 257.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 257.

from which the doctrine of original sin can never escape. Kierkegaard tacitly acknowledges this by saying that sin "comes as neither necessity nor accident."<sup>18</sup> Augustine affirms man's free will, but says that man is simply not free to do good. But he vigorously refuses to allow the concept of original sin to delete the idea of human responsibility.<sup>19</sup> Pascal accepts this absurdity as the mystery it most surely is: "Certainly nothing offends us more rudely than this doctrine, and yet without this mystery, the most incomprehensible of all, we are completely incomprehensible to ourselves."<sup>20</sup>

Luther, haunted by this paradox, was led to eliminate all substance from the free-will doctrine, leaving only an empty term: "Free-will lies prostrate ... for it must either be that the Kingdom of Satan in man is nothing at all, and thus Christ will be made to lie; or if the Kingdom be such as Christ describes, free-will must be nothing but a beast of burden, the captive of Satan, which cannot be liberated unless the devil be first cast out by the finger of God."<sup>21</sup> Niebuhr comments: "In this, as in other instances, Luther seems to heighten the Augustinian doctrine in the interest of a greater consistency but at

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<sup>18</sup> Begriff der Angst, p. 95. Quoted in The Nature and Destiny of Man, I, p. 258.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in The Nature and Destiny of Man, I, p. 258. No specific reference cited.

<sup>20</sup> Pensees, p. 434. Quoted in The Nature and Destiny of Man, I, p. 258, note 2.

<sup>21</sup> On the Bondage of the Will, p. 298. Quoted in The Nature and Destiny of Man, I, p. 259.

the price of imperiling one element in the paradox, the element of human responsibility."<sup>22</sup>

2. Psychological bases for sin. A statement that man sins inevitably, but is still responsible for that sin, poses great difficulties. Perhaps these difficulties can be reduced (they cannot be eliminated) by considering the psychological bases for this sin in man.

First of all, the human situation itself tempts man to sin. The freedom which makes his creativity possible is his temptation as well.

It is most important to recognize this element of temptation: for while it must be maintained consistently that sin is derived from man himself, it is derived from an all-too-human and sorely tempted man. This is, of course, the point of the myth of the Fall. Niebuhr holds that in this myth "the temptation arises from the serpent's analysis of the human situation." Man is tempted to transcend God-set limits; he is tempted from and by freedom to quest for total freedom.

Niebuhr makes heavy use of paradox to illustrate this crucial point. Man's temptation lies in the partially contradictory situation of his freedom and his finiteness. These are his "greatness and his weakness, his unlimited and his limited knowledge." This juxtaposition makes him "both strong and weak, both free and bound, both blind and far-seeing." His sin is

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 259.

"always partly an effort to obscure his blindness by overestimating the degree of his sight and to obscure his insecurity by stretching his power beyond its limits."<sup>23</sup>

Richard Kroner's analysis will be helpful here. He views man as a being with a free will, but with only a finite ability to resist temptation. Thus he fails, not because he lacks freedom of decision, but rather because he is not strong enough to withstand the lure of the devil. Man's nature is thus dual. As a spirit he is pulled toward God. As an animal he is pulled toward nature. "Stretched between the two poles of his existence, man lives in dread because he feels that his natural resources are not sufficient in all cases to subordinate the animal to the spirit within him. This anxiety is the soil from which sin easily sprouts."<sup>24</sup>

This closing sentence points to the next factor to be considered: anxiety. Anxiety is an important component in Niebuhr's doctrine of sin.

Kierkegaard declares that anxiety is "the dizziness of freedom." Being anxious, man "seeks to transmute his finiteness into infinity, his weakness into strength, his dependence into independence." Rather than submitting to the injunction of Christ: "He that loseth his life for my sake shall find it," man seeks

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 179-185.

<sup>24</sup> "The Historical Roots of Niebuhr's Thought," Kegley and Bretall, Op.cit., pp. 183-184.

infinity, in a Faustian quest not for God but to be God. He is blind to the ultimate truth that losing his life for (or in) Christ is not self-negation but self-realization of the highest order. This is true because "God is not merely the  $\alpha$  of the unconditioned or the undifferentiated eternal, but is a God revealed to the Christian as loving will. And his will is active in creation, judgment, and redemption. The highest self-realization for the self is therefore not the destruction of its particularity, but the subjection of its particular will to the universal will."<sup>25</sup>

We must not fall prey to the false conclusion that anxiety and sin are the same thing. Kierkegaard says: "Anxiety is the psychological condition which precedes sin. It is so near, so fearfully near to sin, and yet is not the explanation for sin."<sup>26</sup>

Insecurities -- at least immediate ones -- can be overcome by faith in the ultimate security afforded by the love of God.<sup>27</sup> Man's sin is much more serious: it is rebellion against God. "The Christian estimate of human evil is so serious precisely because it places evil at the very center of human personality: in the will." Man refuses to admit that he is merely a creature:

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<sup>25</sup> The Nature and Destiny of Man, I, p. 267.

<sup>26</sup> Begriff der Angst, p. 89. Quoted in The Nature and Destiny of Man, I, p. 195.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

he pretends to be more. Thus, his sin is the misuse, or wrong use, of his freedom.<sup>28</sup>

A further dimension which must be considered in this psychological analysis concerns impulses. The human world shares the natural survival impulse of the animal world. But man has a second impulse which distinguishes him from animals (or, if you wish, other animals), the impulse to "fulfill the potentialities of life." Niebuhr states that "man is the kind of animal who cannot merely live. If he lives at all, he is bound to seek the realization of his true nature."

Man seeks many things, some certain, others uncertain. But power is perhaps the basic object of his quest. And this quest for power means that he will inevitably infringe on the prestige and power of others. It places him more in conflict with his fellow man than modern liberalism can recognize, or is willing to admit.<sup>29</sup>

When power comes, pride accompanies it. This pride is sinful both when it motivates the quest for power, and when it governs the use of power in a self-centered way. Man remains a sinner.

The pride of power leads man to feel a sense of security which the Bible vigorously denies him. In the words of Isaiah: "Thy nakedness shall be uncovered; yea, thy shame shall be seen."

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 16-17.

<sup>29</sup> The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), pp. 18-22.

The Biblical instances of the ruin of the proud are too numerous to mention.

On the other hand (and again paradoxically), just as the will-to-power breeds pride and a false sense of security, it is closely related to insecurity. Thus, security and insecurity are linked. "The truth is that man is tempted by the basic insecurity of human existence to make himself doubly secure and by the insignificance of his place in the total scheme of life to prove his significance. The will-to-power is in short both a direct form and an indirect instrument of the pride which Christianity regards as sin in its quintessential form."<sup>30</sup> Niebuhr continues: "The sin of self-righteousness is not only the final sin in the subjective sense but also in the objective sense. It involves us in the greatest guilt. It is responsible for our most serious cruelties, injustices and defamations against our fellow men."

Thus, when the sin of moral pride conceives, it brings forth still another sin -- that of spiritual pride. When man takes the self-deification which is always implied in moral pride and makes it explicit, he commits the final sin. "This is done when our partial standards and relative attainments are explicitly related to the unconditioned good, and claim divine sanction.

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<sup>30</sup> The Nature and Destiny of Man, I, p. 205.



For this reason religion is not simply, as is generally supposed, an inherently virtuous human quest for God. It is merely a trial battleground between God and man's self-esteem."

To summarize these points, we can only repeat a prior statement: Christianity can never be a religion by which man, through searching for God, makes himself God. It is rather "a religion of revelation in which a holy and loving God is revealed to man as the source and end of all finite existence against whom the self-will of man is shattered and his pride abased... A religion of revelation is grounded in the faith that God speaks to man from beyond the highest pinnacle of the human spirit; and that the voice of God will discover man's highest not only to be short of the highest but involved in the dishonesty of claiming that it is the highest."<sup>31</sup>

3. Modern man and original sin. With this further background, we can return to the concept of original sin, and examine it from the vantage point of modern man. However, let us first pursue Niebuhr's view a bit further.

The literal (historical) view of original sin must be discarded if we are fully to appreciate the meaning of this teaching. Indeed, this can be done without doing excessive violence to Pauline doctrine. For Paul's doctrine of original sin leads one to believe that each man is related to Adam's sin in terms of

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 213-216.

"seminal identity" rather than historical inheritance. "Therefore," Paul says, "as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned."

We must again forge the link between this view and the doctrine of freedom. The seeming contradiction implied in characterizing sin as both inevitable for man and a responsibility for man, "is a dialectical truth which does justice to the fact that man's self-love and self-centeredness are inevitable, but not in such a way as to fit into the category of natural necessity. It is within and by his freedom that man sins. The final paradox is that the discovery of the inevitability of sin is man's highest assertion of freedom."<sup>32</sup>

Kierkegaard summarizes this point profoundly:

The concept of sin and guilt does not emerge in its profoundest sense in paganism. If it did paganism would be destroyed by the contradiction that man becomes guilty by fate.... Christianity is born in this very contradiction. The concept of sin and guilt presupposes the individual as individual. There is no concern for his relation to any cosmic or past totality. The only concern is that he is guilty; and yet he is supposed to become guilty through fate, the very fate about which there is no concern. And thereby he becomes something which resolves the concept of fate, and to become that through fate! If this contradiction is wrongly understood it leads to false concepts of original sin. Rightly understood it leads to a true concept, to the idea namely that every individual is itself and the race and that the later individual is not significantly differentiated from the first man. In the possibility

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 277, 279.

of anxiety freedom is lost, for it is overwhelmed by fate. Yet now it arises in reality but with the explanation that it has become guilty.<sup>33</sup>

We have previously noted that modern rationalists and moralists find this doctrine an absurdity. This has further consequences. Niebuhr maintains that man thus rejects the entire Christian drama of salvation because the myths of Creation, the Fall, and Atonement, etc., are incredible. "The sense of guilt expressed in them is to modern man a mere vestigial remnant of primitive fears of higher powers, from which he is happily emancipated. The sense of sin is, in the phrase of a particularly vapid modern social scientist, 'a psychopathic aspect of adolescent mentality.'"<sup>34</sup>

How did modern man reach such a view? Niebuhr holds that "the great achievement of modern culture, the understanding of nature, is also the cause of the greatest confusion of modern man: the misunderstanding of human nature."<sup>35</sup> Such a view finds evil not in man but in history, waiting to be forever purged by man. Sin cannot be defined as spiritual, for the spirit is essentially good.

When faced with catastrophe after catastrophe in history, modern man may take one (or both) of two avenues of escape.

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<sup>33</sup> Begriff der Angst, p. 105. Quoted in The Nature and Destiny of Man, I, pp. 279-280.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 100. Niebuhr does not identify the gentleman in question.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

He may claim that we must wait longer, that these catastrophes are not regressions (there can be no regressions) but merely adjustments which may be a bit messy at times. Such a view is, to Niebuhr, blind, illogical, and dishonest. Secondly, modern man may recreate the Platonic dualism, and maintain that what evil exists lies in the flesh, and that the spirit remains uncorrupted and uncorruptible. Niebuhr regards this view, as we have noted, as heresy. Man cannot, as both rational and mystic dualism would have him do, "dismiss his sins as residing in the part of himself which is involved in physical necessity. In Christianity it is not the eternal man who judges the finite man; but the eternal and holy God who judges sinful man."<sup>36</sup>

Luther struck at the heart of such a heresy when he regarded the final sin of man as his unwillingness to concede that he is a sinner.<sup>37</sup>

Niebuhr summarizes his objection to this dualistic approach in these words: "The fact that man can transcend himself in infinite regression and cannot find the end of life except in God is the mark of his creativity and uniqueness; closely related to this capacity is his inclination to transmute his partial and finite values into the infinite good. Therein lies his sin."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in The Nature and Destiny of Man, I, p. 130.  
No specific reference cited.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

The eminent Catholic philosopher, Étienne Gilson, observes:

Epicurus remarked, and not without reason, that with a little bread and water the wise man is the equal of Jupiter himself... The fact is that with a little bread and water man ought to be happy but precisely is not; and if he is not, it is not necessarily because he lacks wisdom, but simply because he is a man, and because all that is deepest in him perpetually gainsays the wisdom offered... The owner of a giant estate would still add field to field, the rich man would heap up more and more riches, the husband of a fair wife would have another still fairer, or possibly less fair would serve, provided she were fair in some other way... This incessant pursuit of an ever fugitive satisfaction springs from troubled depths in human nature... The very instability of human desire has a positive significance; it means this: that we are attracted by an infinite good.<sup>39</sup>

Man, in short, is selfish. Selfishness is self-love. And self-love is the basis of sin.

The roots of this view lie in the very roots of Christianity. A similar doctrine is the cornerstone of the Old Testament view of man.

Israel's sin, according to the Prophets, "lies in the temptation of the nation to identify itself too completely with the divine will of which it is only a historical instrument." Israel could never quite believe that God was serious when he said that he could raise up children to Abraham from the stones underfoot. There is only one God. And man is not that God.

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<sup>39</sup> The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy, pp. 27-72.  
Quoted in The Nature and Destiny of Man, I,  
pp. 130-131.

Paul continues this prophetic tradition by equating man's sin with his effort to make of himself God, or else to pull God down to his level. In Romans 2: 18-25 he says:

For the wrath of God is revealed from Heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; ...because that, when they knew God, they glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and of four-footed beasts, and of creeping things.

"Human self-consciousness is a high tower looking upon a large and inclusive world. It vainly imagines that it is the large world which it beholds and not a narrow tower insecurely erected amidst the shifting sands of the world."

Through such a view, man creates his own catastrophe. He dooms himself to meet God first as Judge, who will humble his pride and reduce his vain imagination to rubble. Thus Amos: "The day of the Lord will be darkness and not light."<sup>40</sup>

4. The "good news" of the gospel. This picture is certainly a black one. If it were the whole story, Christianity would be little more than a religion of sackcloth and ashes. One final and fatal question remains: in it, the ray of light which is hope lies. Can God -- or, more properly, will God -- cure as well as punish this fatal flaw in man? This question is answered in the

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp. 147, 150.

person of Christ; it is answered in the concept of a revealed Messiah, and of the mercy and grace He relayed to sinful man. But He is not to be considered as a means of perfecting man, or allowing man to perfect himself. This mistaken view of Christ is part and parcel of the liberal heresy.

Rather, "the good news of the gospel is that God takes the sinfulness of man into Himself, and overcomes in His own heart what cannot be overcome in human life... Without this divine initiative and this divine sacrifice there could be no reconciliation and no easing of man's uneasy conscience."<sup>41</sup> The bridging of this gap must be done by God and not by man. It is futile for man to aspire to bridge it, as Job's experience so vividly illustrates. Niebuhr, like Kierkegaard, feels that man must make a "leap of faith" in this respect. He cannot make the leap through actions for he is, after all, still man. It is beyond his pale to alter this fact. Jeremiah asks: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil." (13:23) Christ echoes: "Which of you taking thought can add one cubit to his stature?" (Matt. 6:27)

To summarize: there is a high stature to man. He is a unique spirit, cast in the "image of God." But this is not the only view. Paradoxically, the Christian view embraces a

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

low estimate of human virtue. Man was born, is, and will be, until he is finally redeemed by grace and love, a sinner.

C. The Doctrine of Love.

In the previous section we have mentioned -- and only mentioned, after a relatively extended discussion of the concept of sin -- the role of Christ, through Whom God with mercy and grace redeems sinful man.

Before discussing the doctrine of love, it is important to keep one vital link in mind. God's grace is a concrete manifestation of his love for sinful man. The doctrine of God's grace is thus dependent upon a recognition of the sinful nature of man. Niebuhr expresses it in this fashion: "The Christian doctrine of grace stands in juxtaposition to the Christian doctrine of original sin and has meaning only if the latter is an accurate description of the actual facts of human experience."<sup>42</sup>

With this in mind, we can turn to a consideration of love. This is the essential next step -- the third step -- in our consideration of Niebuhr's theology, a consideration which will establish the context for and finally consider the role of justice in this theology.

Love is, of course, the reason that God interceded on behalf of his sinful creation, man. The intercession is both motivated

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<sup>42</sup> The Nature and Destiny of Man (London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1943), II, p. 112.



by, and is a positive expression of, God's love. It is this love that now merits our attention.

1. Agape. The highest norm is the sacrificial love of God (agape), which is perfectly embodied in the Cross. Christ is the most significant revelation of God and His love. This love is a disinterested, as well as sacrificial, love. It stands as the highest possibility of agape, and thus as a model of the highest possibility of human nature. We thus have a "paradoxical relation of a divine agape which stoops to conquer, and the human agape, which rises above history in a sacrificial act."

Agape transcends all particular norms of justice in history. Rising above history, it quests for conformity to the Divine love, rather than harmony of conflicting interests on earth. Such harmony on earth -- forged by compromise and adjustment -- is a desirable, even necessary, goal. But it can never be a final norm. "A life which accepts these harmonies as final is bound to introduce sinful self-assertion into the ethical norm."

This relationship between agape and human history is most important, and should be discussed further.

The perfection of agape cannot be reduced to the limits of history, nor can it be discarded as irrelevant because it transcends history. "It is the final norm of a human nature which has no final norm in history because it is not completely contained in history." This has been understood by the wisdom of faith, and has eluded the wise. History is full of theologies

which flounder either on the Scylla of claiming the authority and relevance of the Cross for the relative norms of history, or the Charybdis of making the perfection of the Cross and sinless nature of Christ irrelevant to the human situation. "But meanwhile Christian faith has always understood, beyond all canons of common sense and all metaphysical speculations, that the perfection of the Cross represents the fulfilment -- and the end -- of historical ethics."<sup>43</sup>

John Bennett notes that "Niebuhr's ultimate reference in ethics is always to the perfect love revealed in the cross of Christ, the suffering love of one who sought nothing for himself, the love that is directed toward all neighbors. This is the pinnacle of ethics, the nature of the divine perfection in the light of which all of our moral achievements are judged."<sup>44</sup>

We thus see Christ as the norm of human nature. He points, by example, to man's ultimate, unattainable goal: the perfection of sacrificial love. Niebuhr states the paradox in this manner: "The same Cross which symbolizes the love of God and reveals the divine perfection to be not incompatible with a suffering involvement in historical tragedy, also indicates that the perfection of man is not attainable in history. Sacrificial love transcends history."

There are some corollaries of this doctrine which must be

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., pp. 77-78.

<sup>44</sup> "Reinhold Niebuhr's Social Ethics," Kegley and Bretall, Op.cit., p. 52.

considered.

First, in a very real sense sacrificial love violates natural standards of morals. It "represents a tangent towards 'eternity' in the field of historical ethics."<sup>45</sup> In the historical experience, the self seeks to preserve its life and to relate it, as far as possible, harmoniously to other lives. This is the basis for the complex social strategies of contemporary history. But these strategies must have a higher inspiration. "A strategy of brotherhood which has no other resource but historical experience degenerates from mutuality to a prudent regard for the interests of the self; and from the impulse towards community to an acceptance of the survival impulse as ethically normative."<sup>46</sup>

The only human life which can approximate the Divine love is one that ends tragically, refusing to take part in the claims and counterclaims of historical existence. Such a love, which "seeketh not its own," cannot last in history, since "even the most perfectly balanced system of justice in history is a balance of competing wills and interests, and must therefore worse anyone who does not participate in the balance."

This leads us to the second corollary. The Divine in history is characterized by a complete powerlessness, not in the sense that it lacks power, but rather in its complete refusal

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<sup>45</sup> The Nature and Destiny of Man, II, pp. 71-72.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

to intercede with its power in the rivalries of history. "For there is no self in history or society, no matter how impartial its perspective upon the competitions of life, which can rise to the position of a disinterested participation in those rivalries and competitions." Only by remaining aloof can the Divine symbolize disinterested love.<sup>47</sup>

For this reason, an attempt by man to be "disinterested," characterized by a policy of withdrawal or non-resistance -- a policy predicated on a strict adherence to the Sermon on the Mount -- is perfectly consistent with the Divine love expressed in the Cross. However, such an approach is to be reserved for saints and martyrs. To present it as a viable alternative which might, if practiced by enough people, be successful in history, is a grave error.

2. "Impossible possibility." One of the famous phrases Niebuhr has coined is "impossible possibility." This is simply what we have already described in our discussion of agape. Niebuhr states that "upon the basis of the Christian conviction that the agape of Christ is the disclosure of both the divine love which bears history and the human love which is history's 'impossible possibility,' one may define the main principles of human history."<sup>48</sup>

John Bennett clarifies this well. He notes that the perfect

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

love revealed in the cross of Christ is always the ultimate reference in Niebuhr's ethics. Christ's love is the pinnacle of ethics; in this divine perfection all of our moral achievements must be judged. We thus have a strong underlining of the perfectionist element in Christianity. This perfect love is the "impossible possibility." It means simply that "while love is never fully embodied in any human motive or human action, it remains relevant as a standard for both motive and action. It is relevant because we are judged by it: and because, if in humility before God we avoid the pretensions which must seriously distort our life, we are able to approximate such love."<sup>49</sup>

We thus define "impossible possibility" in both human and divine terms. Which is correct? As one might suspect, both are.

Paul Tillich speaks to this point. He says that, in terms of pure logic, the phrase "impossible possibility" is nonsense.

However:

In terms of theological insight it can express the real and only Christian paradox: namely, that the principle of the divine self-manifestation, the divine logos, has appeared without restriction in the life of an individual person. It can express the surprising, unexpected fact that the eternal unity between God and man has appeared under the conditions of man's radical estrangement from God. The term 'paradox' should never be used for a meaningless combination of words, but only for this fact and its implications. 'Impossible possibility' ceases to be irrational and becomes genuinely paradoxical.

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<sup>49</sup> Kegley and Bretall, Op.cit., pp. 52-53.

cal if the hidden adverb and adjective are added and if one reads 'humanly impossible divine possibility.'" 50

This is the meaning of Niebuhr's phrase.

3. Mutual love. We have seen agape defined as an unattainable but relevant ideal, a paradox described as the "impossible possibility." What then is attainable?

Niebuhr answers this question by reference to mutual love. From the standpoint of history, it is the highest good. "Only in mutual love, in which the concern of one person for the interests of another prompts and elicits a reciprocal affection, are the social demands of historical existence satisfied."<sup>51</sup>

Why is such the case? The answer is to be found in the nature of the self. The self wants to do good, but cannot. Its actions can never measure up to its contemplative aims and ideals. Created in freedom, it can realize itself fully only in loving relation to its fellow man, and not within itself. If the self were not human and sinful, this relation would be sacrificial. However, in actuality the self is continually betrayed by self-love. It views the world from a pre-Copernican vantage point, with itself as the center.

Thus, in history mutual love is the only viable alternative. For mutual love is both loving and selfish: by its very nature,

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50 "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Knowledge," Kegley and Bretall, Op.cit., p. 38.

51 The Nature and Destiny of Man, II, p. 71.

it elicits love for the self on the part of others. It is an arrangement made quite necessary by human nature. For love is the primary law of human nature, and brotherhood is the basic requirement of man's existence in society.<sup>52</sup>

Niebuhr summarizes in this fashion: "Mutual love is the harmony of life with life within terms of freedom; and sacrificial love is harmony of the soul with God beyond the limitations of sinful and finite history."<sup>53</sup>

4. The relation between agape and mutual love. This final statement by Niebuhr suggests a comparison between agape and mutual love. We have already suggested certain basic differences between the two. Yet, the former is an inspiration, a perfect example for the latter. Agape is most relevant for sinful man. How, then, do we positively relate these two types of love?

Niebuhr establishes this relationship in three ways.

First, agape completes and clarifies the incompleteness of mutual love. The latter is continually hindered by the fact that it always relates life to life from the standpoint of the self, and for the sake of the self. Serving as a goal, agape is "a resource for infinite developments towards a more perfect brotherhood in history."

Secondly, and closely connected, "the Cross represents a transcendent perfection which clarifies obscurities of history

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52 Ibid., p. 253.

53 Ibid., p. 81.

and defines the limits of what is possible in historic development." This is, however, negative as well as positive: we are constantly warned against making a simple possibility of the transcendent norm. There is no guarantee in the New Testament that the "strategy of the Cross" will succeed in history. Rather, the Cross clarifies the possibilities and limits of history, and refutes the pathetic illusions of those who are blind to these limits.

Thirdly, by symbolizing a perfection which contradicts all false pretensions of virtue in history, the Cross points up the great contrast between the sinful self-assertion of man and the divine agape. All history contains sin: on its highest levels, history does not attain the purity of the Cross. Niebuhr maintains that the virtually unique achievement of Christianity lies in the fact that it has not attempted to destroy, in some fashion, this "ultimate contradiction between the self-assertion of the human life and the divine agape," but rather that it has recognized the necessity of living with this indisputable fact.<sup>54</sup>

5. The rich young man. The best method to create a final picture of Niebuhr's doctrine of love is by use of an extended example: that of Christ's encounter with the rich young man.

First, we should examine Niebuhr's analysis of the two great commandments of God's law to Moses and Israel: "Thou shalt love

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 85-94.



the Lord <sup>thy</sup> ~~by~~ God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it. Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

In this statement, God commands man to create three harmonies: a harmony between the soul and God ("Thou shalt love the Lord thy God"); within the soul ("with all thy heart, and all thy soul, and all thy mind"); and between the self and its neighbor ("thy neighbor as thyself").

Now, if these were realized, there would be no need for further commandments. But there is no expectation of realization. This merely states "an ultimate condition of complete harmony between the soul and God, its neighbor and itself in a situation in which this harmony is not a reality. If it were a reality the 'thou shalt' would be meaningless. If there were not some possibility of sensing the ultimate perfection in a state of sin the 'thou shalt' would be irrelevant."<sup>55</sup>

We see in the story of the rich young man (Matt. 22: 37-9) a picture of one who had "kept all the commandments." But the commandments -- the "law" in the more restricted sense -- did not satisfy him, and he asked Jesus: "What lack I yet?"

This question is, to Niebuhr, indicative of the nature of the uneasy conscience of sinful man. It "suggests that what lies in the uneasy conscience of the sinner is not so much a

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<sup>55</sup>

The Nature and Destiny of Man, I, pp. 303-304.

knowledge that the ultimate law of life is the law of love, as the more negative realization that obedience to the ordinary rules of justice and equity is not enough."

Jesus' definition of the ultimate perfection is significant: "If thou wilt be perfect, go, and sell that thou hast and give to the poor." In other words, Jesus demands an action which will eliminate consideration of the self. The rich young man bows his head and departs, sorrowing.

Is Christ only saying, through his statement that "Verily I say unto you, that a rich man shall hardly enter into the Kingdom of Heaven," that the young man's riches were all that stood between him and obedience to the ultimate law? Not so. The disciples soon realize that there is more to this matter than riches, and ask: "Who then can be saved?" Jesus' reply to this question "admits that the ultimate possibility of human life is beyond the capacity of sinful man." He says: "With man this is impossible. But with God all things are possible."

We thus see a threefold statement of human nature in this story.

First, we see that man, even though he is a sinner, is not unaware of the ultimate requirements of his nature as a spirit both free and independent.

Secondly, we see that man does not fully understand these requirements.

Thirdly, we see that man is not willing or able to meet

these requirements once they are defined for him.

Only one thing can bridge the gap: the love of God.<sup>56</sup>

D. The Doctrine of Justice.

1. Justice and love. Following a consideration of the doctrine of love, the logical and proper next step is to consider the relationship between justice and love. One note of caution should be uttered here: justice will be defined and delimited almost entirely in relation to other concepts, such as sin, love, and equality. This is necessary because of the proximate nature of justice; it exists not as an absolute, but rather as a finite compromise. Also, in the consideration of a complex and prolific thinker such as Niebuhr, it is impossible to state a simple, Webster-like definition of any of his concepts - especially justice.

The emphasis upon love as the highest virtue is a purely religious one. This important point is made quite early in Niebuhr's work; it is explicit in Moral Man and Immoral Society, which was published in 1932.

The rational ethic aims at justice; the religious ethic aims at love. The rational ethic seeks to meet the needs of others with those of self; the religious ethic seeks to meet the needs of the neighbor without concern for the needs of self. Thus, love is ethically purer than justice. But since it is

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., pp. 304-305.

much more difficult to apply to complex and sinful society, it is not necessarily more relevant than justice.

Religion, even though recognizing this, must maintain a dual task. It is, of course, particularly concerned with the absolute in relation to the individual. But it is also concerned with conceiving a society in which the ideals of justice and love will be fully realized. There must be a millennial vision in every religion.<sup>57</sup>

As a corollary, Niebuhr develops the concept which is both foundation and subject of Moral Man and Immoral Society. He states that nations and smaller social groups find it difficult to achieve or even approximate the principles of justice. It is quite natural that they would find it even more difficult to realize the principle of love, a principle demanding far more than justice.

The function -- or one function -- of religion is to leaven the idea of justice with the idea of love. Religion prevents the idea of justice, which is a politico-ethical idea, from becoming one which is purely political, completely purged of the ethical element.<sup>58</sup>

This can be expressed in another fashion. For society, justice is the highest moral ideal; for the individual, it is

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<sup>57</sup> Moral Man and Immoral Society, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), pp. 57-60.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp. 74-80.

unselfishness. We have here an important gulf between the two. Because of this gulf, standards applicable to the individual may not be applicable to society, and vice versa. Thus, "society must strive for justice even if it is forced to use means, such as self-assertion, resistance, coercion, and perhaps resentment, which cannot gain the moral sanction of the most sensitive moral spirit." It is easy to see that much stress and strain will come from the necessary attempt to harmonize these two moral perspectives.<sup>59</sup>

The love commandment is thus an inspiration. "All decent human actions, even when under the tension and inspiration of the love commandment, are in fact determined by rational principles of equity and justice, by law rather than by love."<sup>60</sup> The law of love serves not, strictly speaking, as a law, but "as an indiscriminate principle of criticism over all attempts at social and international justice." Here, the important Christian element of contrition enters in. The law of love, in a contrite heart, is actually a "resource of justice, for it prevents the pride, self-righteousness and vindictiveness of men from corrupting their efforts at justice."<sup>61</sup> In short, "contrition is the socially relevant counterpart of love."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 257.

<sup>60</sup> An Interpretation of Christian Ethics (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1935), p. 145.

<sup>61</sup> Christianity and Power Politics (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), pp. 22-23, 25.

<sup>62</sup> "Christian Faith and Social Action," in Christian Faith and Social Action, ed. John Hutchinson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 236. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit.,

"... Beyond and above every human relation as ordered by a fixed structure of justice, by custom, tradition, and legal enactment, there remain indeterminate possibilities of love in the individual and personal encounters of those who are in the structure... The most adequate institution is still only a bare base upon which the higher experiences of love must be built."<sup>63</sup>

2. The role of equality. The concept of equality is an essential part of justice. Equal justice is viewed as the most rational possible good. Equality is assured by a proper balance of power in society. Society must have equality, not only to advance, but to survive. For justice to be justice, it must be qualified by the adjective, "equal."<sup>64</sup> Equality serves as a "regulative principle of justice." For this reason, there is an echo of the law of love in the ideal of equality: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."<sup>65</sup>

Niebuhr holds that a major failure of orthodox Christian teaching has been its inability "to relate the principle of equality to the law of love on the one hand, and to the problems of relative justice on the other." This tends to lead to "a complacent acceptance of historic forms of relative justice which ought to have been regarded, and by later

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<sup>63</sup> Christian Realism and Political Problems (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 167.

<sup>64</sup> Moral Man and Immoral Society, pp. 167, 171.

<sup>65</sup> An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, p. 107.

ages were regarded, as injustice. A perfectionist ethic thus had the tragic consequence of increasing complacency toward remediable imperfections in justice."<sup>66</sup>

We can recognize a familiar tone in Niebuhr's development of the idea of equality: like justice itself, it is something less than perfect. He states that "when dealing with the actual human situation realistically and pragmatically it is impossible to fix upon a single moral absolute. Equal justice remains the only possible, though hardly a precise, criterion of value... But so many contingent factors arise in any calculation of the best method of achieving equal justice that absolute standards are useless."

3. The Augustinian balance. The discussion thus far has attempted to connect love and justice, and to speak briefly of the principle of equality. The question now is: if these are relations of justice, how then is justice conceived, or characterized? The answer to this is basically the concept of balance. But before we go into the concept itself, it will be of value to look into Augustinian teachings along this line, teachings which provide the foundations for Niebuhr's thought.

Niebuhr views Augustine as the first great realist in western history. "He deserves this distinction because his picture of social reality in his Civitas Dei gives an adequate account of the social factions, tensions, and compensations

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., pp. 149-150, 196.

which we know to be well-nigh universal on every level of community; while the classical age conceived the order and justice of its polis to be a comparatively simple achievement, which would be accomplished when reason had brought all sub-rational forces under its dominion."

Augustine believed strongly in the transcendent freedom of the self. His conception of "the evil which threatens the human community on every level is a corollary of his doctrine of selfhood." This excessive love of self is sometimes defined as pride, or superbia. The civitas terrena is dominated by this self-love. "The 'city of this world' is dominated by self-love to the point of contempt of God; and is distinguished from the civitas dei which is actuated by the love of God to the point of contempt of self."

The civitas terrena exists only by virtue of uneasy armistice between warring factions. Augustine denies Cicero's conception of a commonwealth rooted in a "compact of justice." Rather, the various elements "are bound together by a common love or collective interest... and they could not maintain themselves without the imposition of power." Injustice will always be present, simply because some men must rule over others; and this is, by definition, unjust.

Augustine does not fall prey to the danger of letting his realism lead him into cynicism or relativism. He sees a



tension between the two cities. While man's egotism is "natural," in the sense that it is universal, "it does not conform to man's nature who transcends himself independently and can only have God rather than self for his end." There is only one path by which realism can become morally cynical or nihilistic: "when it assumes that the universal characteristic in human behavior must also be regarded as normative." This is not necessary, for in the Biblical view a behavior pattern can be universal without being normative.

The Augustinian concept of tension and balance is adopted almost completely by Niebuhr. He criticizes mediaeval theory (other than Augustine) for failing "to comprehend the political order as a vast realm of mutually dependent and conflicting powers and interests, and to appreciate the contingent and relative power of any 'justice' which might be achieved at a given moment by the power of government and by the specific equilibria of forces existing at that moment."<sup>67</sup>

This criticism expresses much of Niebuhr's view. Let us now examine that view in more detail.

4. "Tentative harmonies and provisional equities."

In all of man's relations with his fellow man, conflict is inevitable. What justice there is will be relative, and will be achieved only by setting interest against interest

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<sup>67</sup> Christian Realism and Political Problems, pp. 120-127.

in the hope that a certain degree of equality and stability may be achieved between these conflicting interests. Coercion is necessary to control inordinate egoism. The lesser, but more relevant, ideal of justice is thus substituted for the more pure but less relevant (but certainly not irrelevant) ideal of love.<sup>68</sup>

Ideal love negates self-interest. But in fact self-interest is omnipresent -- save in the perfect, disinterested love of the Cross. Since self-interest cannot, in fact, be overcome, "most of the harmonies of fully co-ordinated wills are but the tolerable harmonies of balanced interests and mutually recognized claims."<sup>69</sup>

The mechanism of justice is that of calculated and discriminate judgment between various conflicting claims. The claims of the self, as well as of others, must be entertained: for the goal is not martyrdom, but rather a tolerable harmony of life with life. But the claims of the self must be resisted as well as considered. "A simple Christian moralism counsels men to be unselfish. A profounder Christian faith must encourage men to create systems of justice which will save society and themselves from their own selfishness."<sup>70</sup>

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68 "Christian Politics and Communist Religion," in J. Lewis, Christianity and Social Revolution, p. 446. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., p. 161.

69 "The Spirit of Justice," Christianity and Society, XV (Summer, 1950), pp. 5-6. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., pp. 163-164.

70 "Justice and Love," Christianity and Society, XV (Autumn, 1950), pp. 6-7, Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., p. 164.

The closest we can come to love is to create a justice in which, in John Locke's words, impartial tribunals of society prevent men "from being judges in their own cases."<sup>71</sup>

Elsewhere, Niebuhr states it in this fashion: "We must establish tentative harmonies and provisional equities in a world from which sin cannot be eliminated, and yet hold these provisional and tentative moral achievements under the perspective of the Kingdom of God."<sup>72</sup> We must never assume that the love ethic means that if men would only stop being selfish and love one another, the world would be saved. The law in our members will always war against the law in our mind.<sup>73</sup>

Here, also, the doctrine of love enters in. As we have noted, sacrificial love is perfect love. It does not make careful calculations between the interests of the self and the other. But perfect justice is "discriminating and calculating, carefully measuring the limits of interests of the self and those of the other. The spirit of justice is particularly well served if reason finds the points of coincidence between the interests of the self and those of the other, or if not, if it makes careful and discriminate judgments between them."<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Christian Realism and Political Problems, p. 214.

<sup>72</sup> "Christian Faith and the Common Life," in N. Ehrenstrom, Christian Faith and the Common Life, p. 72. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., p. 153.

<sup>73</sup> Christianity and Power Politics, p. 214.

<sup>74</sup> "Christian Faith and Social Action," Op.cit., p. 228.

5. Justice and order, and the Lutheran example.

We thus see that what justice exists is but a balance of sorts. To maintain this balance requires a certain amount of order. However, there is a great danger implied in this view: for justice easily degenerates into order. Here again, love is an important factor. Niebuhr states: "Justice degenerates into mere order without justice if the pull of love is not upon it."<sup>75</sup>

This point can be well illustrated by reference to Luther's example. This is, incidentally, one point at which Niebuhr is most critical of Luther.

When faced with the bloody peasant rebellion, Luther rigorously distinguished between the "spiritual kingdom" and the "worldly" one, and accused the peasants of confusing the two. He felt that the social inequalities of serfdom were not his concern: there will always be masters and slaves on earth. He viewed the rulers as custodians of the public morality, and advised them to "hit, stab, kill" to suppress the peasants. Luther had a morbid fear of anarchy, and felt that the Obrigkeit should have all powers necessary to suppress it.

In short, Luther asked the state to maintain order with

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<sup>75</sup> Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), p. 185.

but little concern for justice. On the other hand, he asks the individual to suffer and to refrain from resistance. The individual is thus denied participation in the "claims and counterclaims which constitute the stuff of social justice."

Niebuhr concludes: "The inevitable consequence of such an ethic is to encourage tyranny; for resistance to government is as important a principle of justice as maintenance of government."<sup>76</sup>

6. "The Kingdom of God and the struggle for justice."

Perhaps the most complete theological statement of Niebuhr's view of justice is to be found in chapter IX of The Nature and Destiny of Man, II, entitled "The Kingdom of God and the Struggle for Justice." John Bennett states that "since that was written (the preface is dated January, 1943), he has changed his opinions concerning the application of Christian ethics to particular problems, but I do not think that the style of his thought has changed fundamentally."<sup>77</sup> This is a fair statement. We will thus examine this chapter in detail. There will be some repetition; but by considering it as a unit, we will have a summary both of Niebuhr's doctrine of justice, and of all the theological points we have examined in the essay thus far. For this chapter is something of a

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<sup>76</sup> The Nature and Destiny of Man, II, pp. 202-203.

<sup>77</sup> Kegley and Bretall, Op.cit., p. 47.

pinnacle of Niebuhr's thought.

His initial consideration is the dynamic nature of the social process. Man, with his relative freedom over the limits of nature, is never static. Therefore, no fixed limits can be placed on "either the purity or the breadth of the brotherhood for which men strive in history."

There is one important qualification to such a view. While "dynamic" by definition implies change, it does not per se specify the direction of the change. We must therefore not view the social process as a continual movement forward. History tells a different story. "The facts of history may not support the conclusion that historical process has continually purified and perfected social relations; but they certainly prove that the breadth and extent of historical communities have been constantly increased."

Placing the Kingdom of God in history, and viewing it as an immanent force which will culminate in a universal society characterized by brotherhood and justice, is more than merely a mistake: it is rank heresy. The Christian view strongly challenges an identification of historical growth with moral progress.

What then is the relationship between justice and love in the Kingdom of God? It is a dialectical one, symbolized by the contrasting terms of nature and grace. Nature, here used in the restricted Christian sense of "sinful nature,"

is representative of the historical possibilities of justice. Grace corresponds to the ideal possibility of perfect love, "in which all inner contradictions within the self, and all conflicts and tensions between the self and the other, are overcome by the complete obedience of all wills to the will of God."

Further to explain this relationship, Niebuhr turns -- as is so often the case -- to paradox. He describes love as "both the fulfilment and the negation of all achievements of justice in history." He continues: "The achievements of justice in history may rise in indeterminate degrees to find their fulfilment in a more perfect love and brotherhood; but each new level of fulfilment also contains elements which stand in contradiction to perfect love. The only way we can approach justice in history is to understand that contradictions of, as well as approximations to, the ideal of love coexist in history."<sup>78</sup>

There are two dimensions to be considered in the relation of justice to love. First, rules and laws of justice must be considered. Second, the structures of justice, of social and political organizations, must be observed. The first tends to be absolute, and the second more concrete.

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<sup>78</sup> The Nature and Destiny of Man, II, pp. 253-255.

The rules and laws of justice stand in a positive relation to the law of love when they extend a sense of obligation. And though egotism may exert a heavy hand, it does not reign: as any democratic society proves, there is an element of rationality at work. Thus, when we relate government and systems of justice to the ideal of brotherhood -- the second step -- we have a relationship which is never purely negative. "The capacity of communities to synthesize divergent approaches to a common problem and to arrive at a tolerably just solution proves man's capacity to consider interests other than his own."<sup>79</sup> This positive relation between the rules of justice and the law of love is strongly emphasized by Niebuhr.

However, even though we may emphasize the positive relationship, we must not ignore the negative aspects. It must be remembered that all systems of human justice presuppose that various members of the community will tend to take advantage of one another, and to be more concerned with their own welfare than with that of their fellow man.

The harmony reached is therefore never better than an approximation of brotherhood. In a world where human egoism is present, such harmony is the best possible. It is certainly not the best of all possible solutions. But this is most

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 258.



emphatically not the best of all possible worlds, either.

There is a second, and more positive, obstacle to brotherhood in all plans of justice. This lies in "the contingent and finite character of rational estimates of rights and interests and ... the taint of passion and self-interest upon the rights of others." Thus, such rules of justice as we have come from a synthesis of opinion as well as a balance of interests.

Here, we return to the concept of equality. In Niebuhr's thought equality serves as a link between love and justice. He describes equality as the "pinnacle of the ideal of justice;" as such it "implicitly points toward love as the final norm of justice; for equal justice is the approximation of brotherhood under the conditions of sin. A higher justice always means a more equal justice."

There is one important characteristic common to both equality and justice: though both are valid principles, both are unrealizable.

If there is any one thought which emerges from these tentative explorations of the nature of justice, it is that justice is a rather complex matter. Niebuhr observes that "the complex character of all historic conceptions of justice thus refutes ... the relativists who see no possibility of finding valid principles, free of every taint of special interest and historical passion."<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., pp. 261-265.

How do we translate this into the "living community?" In his approach to this problem, Niebuhr combines the institutional and behavioral approaches so dear to political scientists. He states that we must "look beyond legal enactments to the whole structure and organization of historical communities." The basic factor in the human community is the balance -- perhaps stable for a moment, perhaps precarious -- of "human vital capacities" governed by power.

One of the factors in establishing and maintaining this balance is the "coercive and organizing power of government." The second is what Niebuhr calls "the balance of vitalities and forces in any given social situation." No amount of moral and social progress can reduce society's dependence upon these two principles.<sup>81</sup>

This means that what justice is achieved comes by manipulation and balance. Social forces group and regroup, and tend to balance. And government is continually refined.

But there is always danger of running against the laws of brotherhood. Power may degenerate into tyranny. A balance of power may actually create a situation in which no one has power, and thus create anarchy. Thus, social justice must ever strike a precarious balance between tyranny and anarchy, with both posing constant dangers. And it is impossible to

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 267.

so refine "social forces and political harmonies" that this potential contradiction to the spirit of brotherhood will be eliminated.

The concept of balance merits some further consideration. Niebuhr maintains that "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." From this, it necessarily follows that when there is a great disproportion of power there is likely to be injustice. In concrete terms, Niebuhr holds that in modern times the concentration of economic power has tended to create injustice, and the diffusion of political power has tended to create justice. "The history of modern democratic-capitalistic societies is on the whole determined by the tension between these two forms of power."<sup>82</sup>

There are two major perils -- both forms of corruption -- which endanger human brotherhood: when will seeks to dominate will, imperialism and slavery are introduced into history; and when interest conflicts with interest, relations of mutual dependence are destroyed.

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 272.

We can summarize in this fashion: an equilibrium of power may be a principle of justice when it prevents domination and enslavement. But when it creates tensions which, if unresolved, result in conflict, it is a principle of anarchy.<sup>83</sup>

Niebuhr views the principle of government as being on "a higher plane of moral sanction and social necessity than the principle of balance of power." It is likewise "a more conscious effort to arrive at justice than the latter."

But government is also morally ambiguous, containing an element which runs counter to the law of brotherhood. There are two ways in which the power of the ruler may be abused: one portion of the community may exercise dominion over the whole of the community; or government itself may exercise such dominion over the community.

We thus have a situation in which "the whole development of democratic justice in human society has depended upon some comprehension of the moral ambiguities which inhere in both government and the principle of the equilibrium of power." Justice thus stands constantly imperiled by one or both of the two instruments of justice: the organization of power and the balance of power.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., pp. 275-276.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., pp. 264-268.

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All of the elements discussed in the previous pages enter into Reinhold Niebuhr's theology. There is no way to distill, or simplify them. There is likewise no way to reach a simple conclusion and summary. Perhaps the best way to conclude this section, and to usher in the following section -- on social justice -- will be through an extended quotation from Niebuhr, a quotation which repeats many of the things already expressed, but does so in the clearest and most concise fashion that the author of this essay has been able to discover in any of Niebuhr's many writings.

Whatever may be the source of our insights into the problems of the political order, it is important both to recognize the higher possibilities of justice in every historic situation, and to know that the twin perils of tyranny and anarchy can never be completely overcome in any political achievement. These perils are expressions of the sinful elements of conflict and dominion, standing in contradiction to the ideal of brotherhood on every level of communal organization. There is no possibility of making history completely safe against either occasional conflicts of vital interests (war) or against the misuse of the power which is intended to prevent such conflict of interest (tyranny). To understand this is to labor for higher justice in terms of the experience of justification by faith. Justification by faith in the realm of justice means that we will not regard the pressures and counter pressures, the tensions, the overt and the covert conflicts by which justice is achieved and maintained, as normative in the absolute sense; but neither will we ease our conscience by seeking to escape from involvement in them. We will know that we cannot purge ourselves of the sin and guilt in which we are involved by the moral ambiguities of politics without also disavowing responsibility for the creative possibilities of justice.<sup>85</sup>

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85 Ibid., p. 294.

## CHAPTER II

### SOCIAL JUSTICE

#### A. The Setting

1. Detroit: the early years. In 1915, at the age of twenty-three, Reinhold Niebuhr, straight from the Yale Divinity School, was assigned his first parish by his church -- the Evangelical Reformed Church, a denomination different from most of Protestantism in that its doctrine was much closer to Luther than to Calvin. This parish was in a suburb of Detroit. There Niebuhr was to live, work, and grow for thirteen important years.

The parish was a small one. As a matter of fact, when Niebuhr came, it was only a handful of souls. An English friend of his described it as a "slum parish." This Niebuhr denied. When he left Detroit and the ministry for New York and the academic robes of Union Theological Seminary, the congregation numbered around eight hundred, including -- as he carefully notes -- two real millionaires.

Detroit in those days was a boom town. Henry Ford's "tin Lizzie" was whizzing across the roads and the imagination of America. And the demand for these new, noisy, and horseless carriages was growing steadily. To meet this demand the motor industry, particularly the Ford Motor Company, was undertaking

the rapid expansion which was to make Detroit the motor capital of the world.

America was industrializing. And Detroit was industrializing faster than most of America. It is a basic truth of history that rapid social change of any sort brings grave problems of human relations. These problems were great and troubling in Detroit. The labor movement was still struggling; but its power was growing steadily. It was this seething cauldron of industrial development and social change which had such a deep imprint on the young man from Yale.<sup>86</sup>

He lost no time leaping in medias res -- a characteristic of Niebuhr's which has endured to this day. He was named to the Mayor's Commission on Inter-racial Relations and the Detroit Council of Churches' Industrial Relations Commission. He joined the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order and the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

Almost immediately he began writing. Most of his early work was printed in World Tomorrow and Christian Century. He began work on his first book, Does Civilization Need Religion?, a work which was published in 1927.<sup>87</sup>

What were some of Niebuhr's reactions to this city and this way of life at this time? He gives some of them in

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<sup>86</sup> "Intellectual Auto-biography," Kegley and Bretall, Op.cit., pp. 4-5.

<sup>87</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Reinhold Niebuhr's Role in Political Thought," Kegley and Bretall, Op.cit., pp. 131-133.

retrospect, writing in 1956. He notes that the sordid social realities "forced me to reconsider the liberal and highly moralistic creed which I had accepted as tantamount to the Christian faith..." He continues: "My first interest was not so much to challenge the reigning laissez-faire philosophy of the community as to 'debunk' the moral pretensions of Henry Ford, whose five-dollar-a-day wage gave him a world-wide reputation for generosity."

His views are neatly summed up by reference to an occasion when the American Federation of Labor threatened to organize the automobile industry. This was met by an outcry which branded the A.F. of L. as communistic, and pressured the churches to cancel speaking invitations tended to various labor leaders. Niebuhr says: "The incident vividly portrayed the irrelevance of the mild moralistic idealism, which I had identified with the Christian faith, to the power realities of our modern technical society."<sup>88</sup>

As interesting as it is to see what Niebuhr has to say in retrospect about his days in Detroit, it is more interesting, and more important, to see what he thought at the time. Let us now turn in that direction.

2. The taming of a cynic. Niebuhr's most important early work -- prior to Moral Man and Immoral Society -- is the charming

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<sup>88</sup> "Intellectual Auto-biography," Op.cit., pp. 5-6.



and refreshing journal, Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic. This book stands in roughly the same relation to Niebuhr's subsequent work as does the prelude to a Wagnerian opera to the balance of the opera. The leitmotifs are all there, though in an incomplete and undeveloped form. This is especially true regarding his later work in the field of social justice.

There is no better way to discuss some of these early views than simply to state them, to let them speak for themselves.

On the automobile industry:

We went through one of the big automobile factories today. So artificial is life that these factories are like a strange world to me though I have lived close to them for many years.... The men ... simply work to make a living... And most of us run the cars without knowing what price is being paid for them... Beside the brutal facts of modern industrial life, how futile are all our homiletical spoutings! The church is undoubtedly cultivating graces and preserving spiritual amenities in the more protected areas of society. But it isn't changing the essential facts of modern industrial civilization by a hair's breadth. It isn't even thinking about them.<sup>89</sup>

On the industrial enterprise:

Look at the industrial enterprise anywhere and you find criminal indifference on the part of the strong to the fate of the weak. The lust for power and the greed for gain are the dominant note in business. An industrial overlord will not share his power

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<sup>89</sup> Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic  
(Chicago: Willett, Clark & Colby, 1929),  
pp. 78-79.

with his workers until he is forced to do so by tremendous pressure. The middle classes, with the exception of a small minority of intelligentsia, do not aid the worker in exerting this pressure. He must fight alone ... Men are clearly not very lovely in the mass. One can maintain confidence in them only by viewing them at close range.<sup>90</sup>

On courage and cigarettes:

Here is a preacher whom I have suspected of cowardice for years because he never deviated by a hair's breadth from the economic prejudices of his wealthy congregation... But I was mistaken. I have just heard that he recently included in his sermon a tirade against women who smoke cigarettes and lost almost a hundred of his fashionable parishioners. He is evidently not lacking courage in matters upon which he has deep convictions.... The church honestly regards it of greater value to prevent women from smoking cigarettes than to establish more Christian standards in industrial enterprise.<sup>91</sup>

On Thanksgiving and an industrial civilization:

I wonder if it is really possible to have an honest Thanksgiving celebration in an industrial civilization.... Thanksgiving becomes increasingly the business of congratulating the Almighty upon his most excellent co-workers, ourselves.... The union Thanksgiving service we attended this morning was full of the kind of self-righteous bunk which made it quite impossible for me to worship... The Lord who was worshiped was not the Lord of Hosts, but the spirit of Uncle Sam, given a cosmic eminence for the moment which the dear old gentleman does not deserve.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., pp. 94-95.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

On the new Ford car:

The new Ford car is out. The town is full of talk about it.... Mr. Ford has given out an interview saying that the car has cost him about a hundred million dollars and that after finishing it he still has about a quarter of a billion dollars in the bank.

I have been doing a little arithmetic and have come to the conclusion that the car cost Ford workers at least fifty million in lost wages during the past year. No one knows how many hundreds lost their homes in the period of unemployment, and how many children were taken out of school to help fill the depleted family exchequer, and how many more children lived on short rations during this period.

What a civilization this is! Naive gentlemen with a genius for mechanics suddenly become the arbiters over the lives and fortunes of hundreds of thousands. Their moral pretensions are credulously accepted at full value. No one bothers to ask whether an industry which can maintain a cash reserve of a quarter of a billion ought not to make some provision for its unemployed. It is enough that the new car is a good one. Here is a work of art in the only realm of art which we can understand. We will therefore refrain from making undue ethical demands upon the artist. Artists of all the ages have been notoriously unamenable to moral discipline. The cry of the hungry is drowned in the song, "Henry has made a lady out of Lizzy."<sup>93</sup>

3. The American scene. Niebuhr lived and worked for thirteen years in the city of Detroit. But the influences which shaped his thought went far beyond the borders of that city, though they may have been mirrored there in sharp detail. Indeed, they were influences which seized a country. These

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., pp. 154-155.

were the years of the Great War, which was to end all wars, and of the subsequent unjust peace in which New World idealism was vanquished by Old World realism, and even cynicism, and the will of the victor was imposed on the vanquished in a stern fashion. They were the post-war years, years of "normalcy," of a gay and carefree America on one level, and of an underprivileged and unsatisfied America on another. They were years in which an underendowed and thus ineffective League wavered and began to crumble, and in which the advance warnings of the clouds of a second and more terrible war began to rumble from Europe and the far-off Orient.

What did the American intellectual and ideological scene look like at this time? It was, of course, a broad and complex and often contradictory scene. We shall only look briefly upon it, using primarily the essay by Professor Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. -- an essay which admirably sets the scene for his consideration of Niebuhr, and which will serve a similar purpose for our more comprehensive consideration.

American liberalism, shaped in the tradition of Jefferson and Jackson, has retained a basic and constant purpose, even though its basic philosophical presuppositions have shifted from time to time. Schlesinger notes: "The generation which fought the American Revolution had, on the whole, a realistic image of human limitation. 'Every man by nature,' said a

petition from Pittsfield, Massachusetts, in 1776, 'has the seeds of Tyranny deeply implanted within.' This realism pervaded the sessions of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, dominated the Federalist Papers, ruled the thoughts of such Jeffersonians as James Madison, and was still to be found in such Jacksonians as Nathaniel Hawthorn."

However, "early in the nineteenth century a new and more cheerful estimate of human potentiality" began to emerge in liberal thought. Schlesinger notes:

The rising optimism about man derived from many sources: from the new mystique of democracy and the common man, welling up from the American and French Revolutions; from the beneficent and harmonizing role newly assigned to individual self-interest by the *laissez-faire* economics of Adam Smith; from the passionate new romantic faith in human innocence, in self-reliance, and in the perfectibility of man, a faith stimulated by English poetry, French political theory, and German philosophy; and, above all from the new circumstances of life and opportunity in nineteenth-century America.<sup>94</sup>

Andrew Carnegie said: "Man was not created with an instinct for his own degradation, but from the lower he had risen to the higher forms. Nor is there any conceivable end to his march to perfection. His face is turned to the light; he stands in the sun and looks upward."<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Schlesinger, *Op.cit.*, p. 127.

<sup>95</sup> Andrew Carnegie, *Autobiography*, ed. John C. Van Dyke (Boston: Houghton, 1920), p. 339. Quoted in Schlesinger, *Op.cit.*, p. 127.

Following the First World War, liberalism, and liberal optimism, was expressed in two converging streams of thought: the "Social Gospel," and the "social application of the instrumentalist version of American pragmatism, associated with John Dewey." Though these two areas of thought had different origins, both "combined to vindicate a common attitude toward man and society -- a radiant sense of optimism and of hope, a conviction of the manageability of human tensions and the plasticity of human nature."<sup>96</sup>

These two trends influenced Niebuhr strongly in his early years, and were the object of many of his attacks in his later years. They deserve to be examined in more detail.

4. The social gospel. By 1920, the Social Gospel had a long history. "Beginning in the eighties as the beleaguered conviction of a disreputable minority, it had sought to rescue nineteenth century Protestantism from its individualistic and reactionary interpretation of Christianity and to restore contact with the working classes." Walter Rauschenbusch was the most penetrating theologian of this movement. He viewed the Kingdom of God as "central in an approach both to religion and to society; the Kingdom represented not just the final end of man but man's historical hope." Rauchenbusch said: "Does not the Kingdom of God consist of this, that God's will shall

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<sup>96</sup> Schlesinger, Op.cit., p. 127.

be done on earth, even as it is now in heaven?"

The Kingdom meant "a growing perfection in the collective life of humanity, in our laws, in the customs of society, in the institutions of education, and for the administration of mercy." The Kingdom is "humanity organized according to the will of God"; it would be "brought to its fulfillment by the power of God in his own time." This required first faith, then knowledge, or "a scientific comprehension of social life"; to this must be added the revolutionary mission of a dedicated class: "If the banner of the Kingdom of God is to enter through the gates of the future, it will have to be carried by the tramping hosts of labor."<sup>97</sup>

As is so often the case, the master's affirmations were avidly embraced by his followers, and his reservations were quietly ignored. Schlesinger states: "Rauschenbusch had no naive expectations that social change would abolish the sinfulness of man; he never wholly lost his tragic sense." However, his followers went much further: they eagerly anticipated the creation of the Kingdom of God on earth, much, one imagines, as Christ's disciples eagerly awaited his rapid return and subsequent triumph.

Charles Sheldon's question -- "What would Jesus do?" -- was the key. The Federal Council's Committee on War and the

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., pp. 127-128.

Religious Outlook reported, in The Church and Industrial Reconstruction (1920):

Mankind in all its relations ... must be organized according to the will of God, as revealed in Christ. The entire social order must be Christianized. The world as a whole is the subject of redemption... By the Kingdom Jesus means a social order which is not merely of man's devising, but which it is God's purpose to establish in the world... Is such an ideal practicable? Beautiful though it be, can it ever be anything more than another Utopia? To this question the Christian answer is definite and unmistakable. The ideal can, indeed, be realized.<sup>98</sup>

Niebuhr at first adhered to, and was constantly strongly influenced by this school. Recalling his early allegiance, he writes (in 1956) that he followed "the fashion of the 'social gospel' school Christianity in criticizing the individualism and the optimism of the old liberalism, sometimes by appropriating the collectivism and the catastrophism of Marxism." He notes that the proponents of the Social Gospel did not believe in sin, and that "they had ... a faith which did not differ too grievously from the main outlines of the 'American dream.'"<sup>99</sup>

But Niebuhr never accepted these concepts without reservations. He stressed the extent which the Social Gospel made Christianity and a religion of social progress one and the same. In 1932, he wrote sharply of the movement, and criticized

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., pp. 128-129.

<sup>99</sup> "Intellectual Autobiography," Op.cit., pp. 8, 13.



Rauschenbusch in particular. He accepted his objectives, but did not feel that through education and moral persuasion they could be realized on this earth. Niebuhr said: "Rauschenbusch had a holy zeal for a social ideal which was essentially socialistic. But he had no conception of the class struggle." In 1954, after four decades of almost continuous strife, Niebuhr wrote: "The 'social gospel' was informed by the ideals and illusions of a 'liberal' age which could not cope with these dread realities and possibilities." It was a movement whose goals were sound, but whose path to those goals was unreal.<sup>100</sup>

5. Dewey and Pragmatism. If the Social Gospel supplied the religious sanction for this democratic idealism, John Dewey supplied it with "a humanistic and secular rationale."<sup>101</sup> He felt that through education and experiment man could achieve social progress. A brief look at some of Dewey's writings will clarify this belief.

Dewey stated that "it is incredible that men who have brought the technique of physical discovery, invention and use to such a pitch of perfection will abdicate in the face of the infinitely more important human problem. What stands in the way is a lot of outworn traditions, moth-eaten slogans and catch-words that do substitute duty for thought, as well as our

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<sup>100</sup> John C. Bennett, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Social Ethics,"  
Kegley and Bretall, Op.cit., pp. 63-64.

<sup>101</sup> Schlesinger, Op.cit., pp. 131-132.

entrenched predatory self-interest... Just as soon as we begin to use the knowledge and skills we have, to control social consequences in the interest of a shared, abundant and secured life, we shall cease to complain of the backwardness of our social knowledge." He concludes that this is the road to "the assured building up of social science just as men built up physical science when they actively used techniques and tools and numbers in physical experimentation."<sup>102</sup>

Schlesinger summarizes his view thus: "Social progress could be reliably attained, Dewey emphasized, by the planned and experimental techniques which had won such brilliant success in the natural sciences. In fine, the organized social intelligence could be counted on to work out definitive solutions to the great political and economic issues."<sup>103</sup>

Society was far from this ideal because of ignorance, which hid from man his potentialities, and because of prejudice, which held him back from the application of the scientific methods which would permit him to realize these potentialities. The remedy for ignorance was therefore education; for prejudice, science.

Thus, "the social philosophy of Dewey and the commandments of the Social Gospel fused happily in a common conviction that human and political tensions, however widespread or exasperating,

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<sup>102</sup> Moral Man and Immoral Society, p. xiii.

<sup>103</sup> Schlesinger, Op.cit., p. 130.

could be dissolved in the end by reason or by love."<sup>104</sup>

Just as Niebuhr was influenced by the Social Gospel, he likewise owed much to the pragmatic view. His nature was empirical, and he tended toward a strict realism. These elements combined to breed in his theology the strong use of paradox as a key device. Tending toward pragmatism and realism, he was unable to find a comfortable, rounded answer to life's problems. He found paradox the only reasonable and proper method of portraying the answer he found.<sup>105</sup> "The universe is simply not the beautiful Greek temple pictured in the philosophy of the absolutists and monists."<sup>106</sup>

If Niebuhr depended on pragmatism to a certain extent, just as he depended on and was influenced by the Social Gospel, he was just as critical of one as of the other. His criticism of Dewey came early and strong. In 1932 he wrote:

The most persistent error of modern educators and moralists is the assumption that our social difficulties are due to the failure of the social sciences to keep pace with the physical sciences which have created our technological civilization. The invariable implication of this assumption is that, with a little more time, a little more adequate moral and social pedagogy, and a generally higher development of human intelligence, our social problems will approach solution.<sup>107</sup>

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104 Ibid., pp. 129-130.

105 Ibid., pp. 131-132.

106 Ibid., p. 132.

107 Moral Man and Immoral Society, p. xiii.

Niebuhr observes that Dewey has noted, in passing, what is actually the prime reason for our difficulties: our "entrenched predatory self-interest." Dewey has ignored the great differences in the natural and social sciences, in his rather bland assumption that the methods of the former could be transferred to the latter. "The physical sciences gained their freedom when they overcame the traditionalism based on ignorance, but the traditionalism which the social sciences face is based upon the economic interest of the dominant social classes who are trying to maintain their special privileges in society." Also, "complete rationality in a social situation is impossible." In a social situation, reason serves interest. Conflict is thus inevitable.

Developing the proper experimental procedures is not such a plausible solution, either. "Contending factions in a social struggle require morale; and morale is created by the right dogmas, symbols and emotionally potent oversimplifications. These are at least as necessary as the scientific spirit of tentativity."

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We can see, through this brief analysis, some of the basic trends which existed in the American scene, and Niebuhr's reaction to them. Let us now turn to one particular approach --

liberalism -- and analyze in some detail his views concerning it.

B. Liberalism: the Soft Utopians.

1. The traditional view and modern trends. Niebuhr's attack on liberalism is a potent and an unending one, though it was more vehement in his youth than it is in his milder maturity. However, before analyzing this attack, it is important to clarify his definition of liberalism, particularly the distinction he draws between a sound, traditional liberalism, and misguided, modern liberalism.

Broadly and traditionally, liberalism is identified with a modern technical society based on capitalistic economic institutions, and making use of democratic political institutions. It was born in Britain, France, and the United States, in opposition to a European culture which was feudal and aristocratic. The traditional liberalism aims to make government dependent on the consent of the individual, and to free human initiative from all traditional restraints. In this broad sense, liberalism is synonymous with democracy.

However, such liberalism is only part of the picture. There are two distinct trends which are an outgrowth of this traditional base.

First, from the history of technical societies, liberalism became identified with "the peculiar and unique ethos of middle-class life." The middle classes, however, soon found

that the laboring classes stood to their left. Thus, liberalism was no longer the sole province of democracy. Modern democracies discovered that it was not enough to free initiative; there must be certain controls upon initiative, in order to maintain a minimum amount of security and justice.

Thus, liberalism acquired a dual and contradictory definition. On the one hand, it insisted that economic life be free of all restraints. It assumed this meaning for the middle classes who already possessed enough resources to be able to prefer the luxury of liberty to the necessity of security. On the other hand, liberalism has come to describe the attitude of those classes who prefer security to absolute liberty, and who seek to place economic enterprise under political control in order to assure desirable standards.

There is a second confusion: liberalism is viewed both as a political philosophy, associated with a technical society, and as a total view of life, a philosophy elaborated by the French Enlightenment. The latter view introduced into the picture a philosophy based on an unlimited confidence in historical progress, and in the ultimate perfectibility of man.<sup>108</sup>

It is this credo that Niebuhr defines as "soft utopianism." He says: "Soft utopianism is the creed of those who do not claim

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<sup>108</sup> "Liberalism: Illusions and Realities," New Republic, Vol. 133 (July 4, 1955), pp. 11-12. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., pp. 13-14.

to embody perfection, but expect perfection to emerge out of the ongoing process of history."<sup>109</sup>

Such is the variety of liberalism to which Niebuhr protests so violently -- even though it must be added that there are parts of traditional liberalism, such as the emphasis on capitalism, with which he is more than a bit uneasy. He characterizes this modern liberalism by his famous credo of liberalism, which he published in 1936. In this, he reduces the liberal view to six propositions:

- a. That injustice is caused by ignorance and will yield to education and greater intelligence.
- b. That civilization is becoming gradually more moral and that it is a sin to challenge either the inevitability or the efficacy of gradualness.
- c. That the character of individuals rather than social systems is the guarantee of justice in society.
- d. That appeals to love, justice, good-will and brotherhood are bound to be efficacious in the end. If they have not been so to date we must have more appeals to love, justice, good-will and brotherhood.
- e. That goodness makes for happiness and that the increasing knowledge of this fact will overcome human selfishness and greed.
- f. That wars are stupid and can therefore only be caused by people who are more stupid than those who recognize the stupidity of war.<sup>110</sup>

The liberal creed is thus a supreme faith in man. It

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<sup>109</sup> "Two Forms of Utopianism," Christianity and Society, Vol. 12 (Autumn, 1947), p. 6. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., p. 13.

<sup>110</sup> "The Blindness of Liberalism," Radical Religion, Autumn, 1936. Quoted in Schlesinger, Op.cit., pp. 130-131.

believes, in spite of history, that he is essentially good. It optimistically maintains that human history moves inevitably forward, powered by a force immanent within history.

To Niebuhr, this is a sort of blindness. "It is a blindness which does not see the perennial difference between human actions and aspirations, the perennial source of conflict between life and life, the inevitable tragedy of human existence, the irreducible irrationality of human behavior, and the tortuous character of human history."<sup>111</sup>

This blindness is based on two illusions. These must now be examined.

2. Two illusions. Almost all liberalism tends to believe that man is essentially harmless, even good. Thus, if you only leave him alone, things will work out. Niebuhr comments simply: "The only difficulty with this idea is that it is not true." There are no inherent balances of power in history. And "where power is disproportionate, power dominates weakness and injustice results." Man remains basically self-centered and sinful.<sup>112</sup>

Added to the theory of the harmlessness of man is a second and slightly more subtle theory: that while ignorant selfishness is harmful to society, a wise and prudent selfishness,

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<sup>111</sup> "Liberalism: Illusions and Realities," Op.cit., p. 12.

<sup>112</sup> "A Faith for History's Greatest Crisis," Fortune, Vol. 26, (July, 1942), pp. 122. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit.; p. 16.



which recognizes how to relate personal interests to those of the community, will serve the greatest good. Ergo, the intelligent man is virtuous.<sup>113</sup> Special privilege is held to be irrational. Thus, the growth of intelligence will end the desire for special privilege.<sup>114</sup>

Now, reason certainly has its value. And rationality must grow before morality can grow. But if we carry our faith in reason too far -- as the Enlightenment did -- we make of reason God. Such a rationalism ignores the fact that man is a finite creature.<sup>115</sup>

The second illusion under which liberalism labors is that history moves in a steady and certain march forward, and that it will ultimately redeem itself. Of course, liberalism has not always been able to define the goals toward which history was supposed to be moving. Some felt that increased personal comfort and well-being was the goal. Others felt that it was the development of a universal community of man. Still others -- such as H.G. Wells -- held that man's community would be made democratic as well as universal. The redemption of mankind was assured not only for the future, but by the future.<sup>116</sup>

This view was met by a deluge which began in 1914 and

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113 Ibid., p. 125.

114 Faith and History, p. 5.

115 Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), pp. 236-237.

116 Faith and History, pp. 3-7.

has not abated to this day. History, thus, speaks firmly against such a liberal view.

Niebuhr, of course, does not deny that there has been technical progress. He simply maintains that this is not synonymous with moral progress. "There are morally ambiguous elements in human history on every level of achievement."

History is not simple. And we have trusted it far too much. "History cannot be the answer to our problems, for history is itself our problem." History is a most inadequate god. Our own contemporary situation is particularly tragic. We find the age which was to end all strife and usher in a period of peace and justice faced with the stark possibility that it may not only fall short of those goals, but that it may well be unable to avoid a conflict so terrible that it will leave the very existence of man in question.<sup>117</sup>

The twin concepts of harmless man and redemptive history have exerted a paralyzing effect on modern Christianity. These concepts seemed to reinforce the idea that love would really conquer all. Modern religious liberalism believes that its task is to prove to man that the best path is to do good, and to love his neighbor. "It has not heard the cry of despair from the human heart about its impotence to do the good which

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117 "A Faith for History's Greatest Crisis," Op.cit., p. 128.

it knows." Liberalism offers salvation through "endless cascades of moral exhortation, moral admonition, and moral instruction." Men "are not fully conscious (though they may be darkly conscious) of the fact that they violate moral commandments by their own impulses of pride and lust for power, and that their anxieties about self make it impossible for them to consider the neighbor."

Liberalism thus is completely bankrupt when it faces our real problems and challenges. In a world torn with hatred, strife, and injustice, it blandly advises us to love one another if we would escape disaster. "There is in this preaching no understanding either of the complex problems of the justice which is required to preserve a tolerable peace among nations, races and groups which do not love each other, nor yet of the agony of rebirth required if the individual would turn from self-love to love."<sup>118</sup>

Niebuhr summarizes in this fashion:

So the tragic events of modern history have negated practically every presupposition upon which modern culture was built. History does not move forward without catastrophe, happiness is not guaranteed by the multiplication of physical comforts, social harmony is not easily created by more intelligence, and human nature is not as good or harmless as had been supposed. We are thus living in a period in which either the optimism of yesterday has given way to des-

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<sup>118</sup> "The Reunion of the Church through the Renewal of the Churches," Christian Century, Vol. 7 (November 24, 1947), p. 5. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., pp. 22-23.

pair, or in which some of the less sophisticated moderns try desperately to avoid the abyss of despair by holding to credos which all of the facts have disproved.<sup>119</sup>

3. Moral Man and Immoral Society. In considering Niebuhr's attack against liberalism in particular, and his social ethics in general, it is necessary to analyze in some detail his study, Moral Man and Immoral Society. Published in 1932, this early work is still considered by many to be Niebuhr's finest book. Though the subsequent development of his thought has altered and even rejected many of the views expressed, it remains Niebuhr's outstanding contribution in the field of social ethics.

The thesis of the book is that "a sharp distinction must be drawn between the moral and social behavior of individuals and of social groups, national, racial, and economic; and that this distinction justifies and necessitates political policies which a purely individualistic ethic must always find embarrassing."

There are basically two reasons for this. First, it is difficult to establish "a rational social force which is powerful enough to cope with the natural impulses by which society achieves its cohesion." Secondly, "the collective egoism is much stronger than an individual egoism."

Niebuhr sets for himself three tasks:

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<sup>119</sup> Christianity and Power Politics, p. 188.

1. To analyze the moral resources and limitations of human nature.
2. To trace their consequences and cumulative effect in the life of human groups.
3. To weight political strategies in the light of the ascertained facts.

These three statements lead to an ultimate task -- one which is most germane to this essay: "To find political methods which will offer the most promise of achieving an ethical social goal for society."

Two criteria must be kept in mind when analyzing such methods:

1. Do they do justice to the moral resources and possibilities in human nature and provide for the exploitation of every latent moral capacity in man?
2. Do they take account of the limitations of human nature, particularly those which manifest themselves in man's collective behavior?<sup>120</sup>

Despite man's long history, he has made little progress in his continuing problem of living amicably with his fellow man. No matter how much abundance each generation creates, man wants more. For he is characterized by an insatiable greed. The basic problem he faces, in society, is the arrangement of the distribution of life's riches. This is a continuing problem, for "human society will never escape the problem of the equitable distribution of the physical and cultural goods which provide for the preservation and fulfillment of human life."

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<sup>120</sup> Moral Man and Immoral Society, pp. xi, xii, xxiv-v.

The increased conquest of nature has accelerated rather than eased the problem of justice. For it vastly expanded the level of social cohesion, and so increased the uneven distribution of power, that justice has faded further and further from man's grasp.

There are, of course, certain resources available to man to deal with these problems. He has both his intelligence and his imagination. But all of these elements are severely limited by the finite and sinful nature of man, a nature which no amount of education can breed out of him.

Because man is both finite and sinful, and because his tendency is always toward self-love, it is necessary to have an element of coercion if there is to be any social cooperation on a large scale. If unity is created, it will ultimately be created by a dominant group strong enough to impose its will on others.<sup>121</sup>

History is, in a very real sense, a record of the continued creation of inequalities by society, inequalities which, in Niebuhr's view, cannot be justified. While there may be some justice in rewarding outstanding abilities and services, "it may be regarded as axiomatic that the rewards are always higher than the service warrants... (since) the men of power who control society grant these perquisites to

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., pp. 1-4.

themselves."<sup>122</sup>

Niebuhr declares that the rise of modern democracy has substituted popular consent for autocratic rule. The beliefs and practices of democracy are still linked to "the special interests of the commercial classes who conceived and developed them." Democracy has actually served to substitute economic power for political and military power as the most significant coercive force in modern society.<sup>123</sup> In short, democratic government does not afford society an inevitable route to justice.

Thus society is in a perpetual state of war. Lacking moral and rational resources to organize its life, without resort to coercion, except in the most immediate and intimate social groups, men remain the victims of the individuals, classes and nations by whose force a momentary coerced unity is achieved, and further conflicts are as certainly created. The fact that the coercive factor in society is both necessary and dangerous seriously complicates the whole task of securing both peace and justice.<sup>124</sup>

Society must, therefore, attempt to reduce the role of force by strengthening the role of the forces which lead to a "moral and rational adjustment of life to life."

Niebuhr early saw the threat as well as the promise of communism. He states: "There is, for instance, as yet no

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., pp. 14-15.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., pp. 19-20.

clear proof that the power of economic overlords can be destroyed by means less vigorous than communism has employed; but there is also no proof that communist oligarchs, once the idealistic passion of a revolutionary period is spent, will be very preferable to the capitalistic oligarchs, whom they are to displace."

Thus, communism, rather than meeting these perpetual problems, simply substitutes other, even graver problems for them. These problems will be discussed in detail later.

Man's concern must not be to create an ideal society characterized by perfect, uncoerced peace and justice. Rather, he must concentrate on establishing "a society in which there will be enough justice, and in which coercion will be sufficiently non-violent to prevent his common enterprise from issuing into complete disaster."<sup>125</sup>

If this is man's goal, what are his resources for achieving it?

4. Man's rational and religious resources. There are, in our age, basically two approaches to this enumeration of man's resources. Religious idealists maintain that injustice stems from selfishness rather than ignorance. Rationalists maintain the opposite, and insist that injustice will be overcome only by increasing man's intelligence. The latter view -- essentially the creed of the Enlightenment -- is more or less

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 22.



the creed of our time. It is expressed at its extreme by Condorcet, in his belief that universal education and the development of the printing press would usher in a utopia where the sun would shine "on an earth of none but freemen, with no masters save reason; for tyrants and slaves, priests and their hypocritical tools will have disappeared."<sup>126</sup>

While optimism is certainly of some value, it must be tempered by a strict awareness of limitations, limitations which this modern rational school tends to devalue or ignore completely.

Just as Niebuhr accepts a conditional optimism, he accepts a conditional rationality. In this respect, he goes much further: he ascribes to rationality a major place in society. He states: "An irrational society accepts injustice because it does not analyze the pretensions made by the powerful and privileged groups of society... A growing rationality in society destroys the uncritical acceptance of injustice." By bringing his rational powers to bear on social situations, man can, within his limits, develop more adequate instruments for the control of these situations.<sup>127</sup>

Laissez-faire economic theory -- a theory particularly repugnant to Niebuhr, especially in his early years -- illustrates this well. He sees the history of the 19th and 20th centuries

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

as a refutation of this theory. It survives, creating injustice, because those who suffer most from it are ignorant. When this disenfranchised group, made aware of the realities of the situation, brings power to bear on a vulnerable concept, its collapse is imminent.

Reason has strict limits which must be recognized. Within these limits, and especially when combined with the moral resources of man, it is a potent force.<sup>128</sup>

Among these moral resources, the conscience of man is, quite naturally, important. There is, among other human desires, a desire "to do right."<sup>129</sup> Secondly, "the religious emphasis on love as the highest virtue" is of prime importance. "A rational ethic aims at justice, and a religious ethic makes love the ideal."<sup>130</sup> The emphasis on love helps man to look above and beyond; it gives him courage. And "the courage is needed; for the task of building a just society seems always to be a hopeless one when only present realities and immediate possibilities are envisaged."<sup>131</sup>

However, just as is the case with man's rational resources, his religious resources are limited. It is easy for religious man to view himself as chosen and therefore better. Against such a view, Amos cried out to Israel: "Are ye not as the

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128 Ibid., p. 33.

129 Ibid., p. 37.

130 Ibid., p. 57.

131 Ibid., p. 61.

children of the Ethiopians to me, saith the Lord?" Such vanity and pride may easily lead to excesses which convert a resource into a liability. The long annals of history testify to carnage after carnage undertaken in the name of religion. Such pride, when dominant, leads to tyranny -- the antithesis of justice.<sup>132</sup>

Religion may also breed blindness. It may convince man that all justice lies beyond history, and that any quest for justice within history -- even if only for approximate justice -- is vain and even heretical. Luther's view, which has been cited, illustrates this.<sup>133</sup> The early church did not escape this danger: though slaves were accepted as equals within the confines of the church, there was no significant agitation for social reform which would improve their status beyond the church walls.<sup>134</sup>

Taken in a different light, this other-worldliness may breed a defeatism which, rather than seizing the bull by the horns, lies prostrate beneath its hoofs. Basically, Niebuhr sees nothing wrong with this -- though he would prefer humility to defeatism. Such a view is totally consistent with the Sermon on the Mount. But it must be recognized that there is no possibility that such action will bring any sort of justice, not even that tolerable amount of justice which man, by muster-

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132 Ibid., p. 66.

133 Supra., pp. 46-47.

134 Moral Man and Immoral Society, p. 77.

ing all of his resources, can hope to create. Such acts of love will not tame and eventually defeat the wicked. They will simply make the path of the wicked smooth.

Another danger in man's religious resources is that he may make of himself God. "Ye are Gods, you are crystalline, your races are radiant," cried Henry Ward Beecher to his congregation.<sup>135</sup> If religious man takes this approach -- an approach which rather than lying prostrate before injustice demands that injustice lie prostrate before him -- he will likewise fail to create justice.

This latter error is both the foundation and the aim of the liberal Protestantism of which Niebuhr is so critical. Modern man views the locus of the Kingdom of God not as heaven, beyond history, but rather in future earth. He combines pride and idealism, and soaks this combination heavily with sentimentality. In the thirties, the League of Nations was a stepping-stone to the Kingdom; and the Briand-Kellogg Pact was its covenant.

We thus see that religion faces perils both to the right and to the left in its task of becoming an effective instrument of social justice. Its proper role is to leaven the idea of justice with the ideal of love. The ideal of justice must be a politico-ethical ideal; without religion, it is in constant danger of becoming a purely political idea.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., pp. 79-80.

5. The role of the state. How do we apply these general concepts to the role of the state in seeking justice?

It has already been stated that group relations can never be as ethical as relations among individuals. And states -- in the absence of a fully functioning international community -- are the largest political groups.<sup>137</sup>

The answer is simply that states are never very moral or ethical. And there is no reason to expect that they either could or should be. "No state," declares Johannes Heller, "has ever entered a treaty for any reason than self interest." He adds: "A statesman who has any other motive would deserve to be hung."<sup>138</sup>

A state is inevitably characterized by hypocrisy. Such hypocrisy is undertaken in order that a nation might gain the approval of its own citizens, which it must have, and that it might gain the approval of other states, which it always wants.

The state uses a dual approach to press this claim to loyalty on its citizens: it claims his loyalty and devotion both because it is his special and unique group, and because it embodies universal values and ideals. This latter claim is as common as it is foolish. Niebuhr caustically observes that

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<sup>137</sup> It is possible to consider such organizations as the Roman Catholic Church as political, or partly political, groups which are larger than individual states. However, this essay refers solely to formal governmental groups only.

<sup>138</sup> Moral Man and Immoral Society, p. 84.

among most nations "the force of reason operates only to give the hysterias of war and the imbecilities of national politics more plausible excuses than an average man is capable of inventing."

This tendency can be illustrated in many cases, of which these two will suffice. The German philosopher Rudolph Eucken claimed that "we have a right to say that we form the soul of humanity and that the destruction of German nature would rob world history of its deepest meaning." On the other side of the fence, M. Paul Sabatier declared: "No doubt we are fighting for ourselves but we are fighting, too, for all peoples. The France of today is fighting religiously -- We all feel that our sorrows continue and fulfill those of the innocent victim of Calvary."<sup>139</sup>

If we turn from outside to inside, we see that the greatest obstacle to social justice within the nation is the ethical attitude -- or lack of ethical attitude -- on the part of the privileged classes. Let us now look at this attitude, as well as the attitude of the proletarian class.

6. Two ethical attitudes. In every society inequalities of social privilege develop; and these are soon transformed into classes. The chief division will quite naturally be between those who have property and those who do not.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., pp. 95-98.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

Niebuhr is critical, at this point, of most moral theologians. He asserts that they are blind to the basic fact which every communist sees clearly: namely, that "the social and ethical attitude of members of given classes is invariably colored, if not determined, by the unique economic circumstances which each class has as a common possession."<sup>141</sup>

Just what are the moral attitudes of the privileged classes? These attitudes are invariably characterized by "self-deception and hypocrisy."<sup>142</sup> Privileged groups claim that the precarious equilibrium which exists must not be upset, lest there be anarchy. "No society has ever achieved peace without incorporating injustice into its harmony. Those who would eliminate the injustice are therefore always placed at the moral disadvantage of imperilling the peace."<sup>143</sup>

The privileged classes are viewed by Niebuhr as fixed in their views, and must be moved by force, if they are to be moved at all. "It must be taken for granted therefore that the injustices in society, which arise from class privileges, will not be abolished purely by moral suasion. That is a conviction at which the proletarian class, which suffers most from social injustice, has finally arrived after centuries of disappointed hopes."<sup>144</sup>

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141 Ibid., p. 196.

142 Ibid., p. 117.

143 Ibid., p. 129.

144 Ibid., p. 148.

We have spoken of the ethical attitudes of the privileged classes. What, then, are the ethical attitudes of the proletarian class?

To begin with, old attitudes, based on pre-technological, personal relationships, have faded before the rise of a technological civilization. Ownership and power have been centralized, and the sense of responsibility on the part of the owners has been destroyed. The individual laborer has joined the masses, and the human factor has thus been obscured. The development of an industrial civilization has led to a proletarian attitude which, to Niebuhr in 1932, was accurately defined in Marxist political philosophy. He views this not as a departure or disease, but as a necessary fact. He holds that "Marxian socialism is a true enough interpretation of what the industrial worker feels about society and history, to have become the accepted social and political philosophy of all self-conscious and politically intelligent industrial workers." It would be (he felt, in 1932) only a matter of time until a full-blooded American Marxist proletariat arose.<sup>145</sup> Niebuhr feels strongly that the association of privilege with power is an inevitable one, and that the significant power in modern society is the ownership of the means of production. "The clear recognition of that fact is the greatest ethical contri-

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., pp. 143-144.



bution which Marxism has made to the problem of social life."<sup>146</sup>

It is most important to remember that society moves toward social justice by gradual and evolutionary processes. Pressure must be exerted at all times to accelerate, or even to make possible, this gradual process. When pressure is applied gradually, it may be accepted by all, even those who lose privileges. If this latter group fails to accept changes, and acquiesces only through the threat or use of political power, the next generation may well accept the changes as an established standard. This is well illustrated by the labor movement in the United States. Such rights as the strike and collective bargaining are now established and accepted parts of the system.<sup>147</sup>

To summarize: Niebuhr consistently maintains that "equal justice is the most rational objective for society." Thus, if a social conflict aims at greater equality, it has a certain moral justification which efforts aimed at perpetuating special privileges cannot claim. This leads to an insistence that "equality is a higher social goal than peace." Thus, "a social conflict which aims at the elimination of these injustices is in a different category from one which is carried on without reference to the problem of justice." This theme -- repeated so often in this essay simply because it is repeated

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 209.

so often and stressed so strongly in Niebuhr's work -- is the focal point of his social ethics in general, and his view toward liberalism in particular. The following closing statement expresses it clearly:

The very fact that rational men are inclined increasingly to condemn the futility of international wars and yet to justify the struggles of oppressed nationalities and classes, proves how inevitably reason must make a distinction between the ultimate ends of social politics and how it must regard the end of equal social justice as the most rational one.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., pp. 234-237.

C. The Hard Utopians: Communism

Just as liberalism is considered as a utopianism, so is communism. However, it is characterized by what Niebuhr terms a "hard" utopianism. He states that "hard utopianism might be defined as the creed of those who claim to embody the perfect community and who therefore feel themselves morally justified in using every instrument of guile or force against those who oppose their assumed perfection."<sup>149</sup>

It must be remembered that communism is viewed, in Niebuhr's thought, as "a variant of the same utopianism with which the whole liberal world is infected." The soft utopianism, as we have seen, looks toward the future for the realization of its ideal of perfect accord among men and nations.<sup>150</sup> On the other hand, "the hard utopian creates a fighting community which regards itself as the embodiment and champion of an ideal commonwealth of perfect justice or perfect love, for which it is ready to do battle against all enemies."<sup>151</sup>

Let us now examine this hard utopianism.

1. Marxism as a religion. Niebuhr insists that if one is to understand Marxism properly, it must be regarded as a religion. The working class is a messianic class. Its

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<sup>149</sup> "Two Forms of Utopianism," Op.cit., p. 7.

<sup>150</sup> "Two Forms of Tyranny," Christianity and Crisis, Vol. 8 (February 2, 1948, pp. 3-4).

Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., p. 26.

<sup>151</sup> Faith and History, p. 208.

triumph over its foes will not be merely a triumph over one particular set of foes, but a great and final triumph of good over evil in history. The communist party itself is the vanguard of this messianic class. Its purposes are identical with the purposes of history. Since this final sanction is afforded them, any weapon they may use is morally permissible.

It is interesting to note what such a view has done with the Hebrew myth of the Fall. It is reinterpreted so that the original state of innocence existed prior to the rise of the evil of private property. In such a blissful, original, state, man still had a sense of community. Thus, just as the rise of private property was the Fall, the socialization of all property will usher in the era of perfect love, in which each will give according to his ability, and take according to his need. The state, which is merely an instrument of class domination, will eventually wither away simply because, in this blissful condition, there will be no classes and hence no domination.

From this, it is easy to see why Niebuhr views the whole process as religious. If God is absent, a dialectical process is present. This process, which is to guarantee the victory of a cause which is unqualifiedly just, serves precisely the same function as God serves in other religions. "Everywhere the sense of the ultimate which characterizes religion

reveals itself."

Further, Niebuhr views communism as a religion "indirectly related to Biblical faith but perverted at two points."

First, there is no sense of conflict between man and God. There is only a conflict between the righteous and the unrighteous. Existentially interpreted, it is a conflict between the privileged and the poor. "Marxism is thus a secularized version of messianism without the knowledge of the prophets that the judgment of God falls with particular severity upon the chosen people."

Secondly, Marxism perverts Christianity in its expectation of a complete realization of the Kingdom within history. "This utopian hope, partly derived from sectarian Christianity and partly from the general utopian temper of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, completely obscures the fact that corruptions of the meaning of life are bound to appear on every level of history, so long as human freedom is real freedom and therefore contains the possibility of evil."

As a corollary of this view of communism as a religion, Niebuhr sees its real peril as lying in its self-righteous fury. Conventional objections to the "materialism" and "atheism" of Marxism are essentially irrelevant. Its materialism is a more or less justified reaction to piestic, socially bankrupt versions of Christianity "which do not understand the unity of individual and collective man in

the material and spiritual dimensions of his life." Its atheism is insignificant when set beside its idolatry. "It worships a god who is the unqualified ally of one group in human society against all others."<sup>152</sup>

Niebuhr connects this religious vision of communism with the classical religious dream in this fashion:

The modern communists' dream of a completely equalitarian society is a secularized, but still essentially religious, version of the classical religious dream. Its secularisation is partly a reaction to the unrealistic sentimentality into which the religious social hope degenerated in the middle-class religious community; partly it is the inevitable consequence of the mechanisation of modern life and the destruction of religious imagination.<sup>153</sup>

We have noted that Marxism is connected with liberalism in that both are utopian. Let us now explore this connection further.

2. Marxism and liberalism. First of all, it should be noted that, in Niebuhr's view, Marxism has served one great function: he states that "Marxism, in its pure form, has been the most potent critic of liberal illusions."<sup>154</sup>

This is an important point. Many of the early writings of Niebuhr were from the Marxist point of view, with certain

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., pp. 208-212.

<sup>153</sup> Moral Man and Immoral Society, pp. 61-62.

<sup>154</sup> Christianity and Power Politics, p. 91.

qualifications. Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932) is the best illustration of this. One cannot escape the conclusion that the greatest appeal Marxism held to Niebuhr was the effective vantage point it afforded him for an attack on liberalism, his mission in his early years, rather than the inherent truths in Marxism. However, this point cannot be taken too far. For Niebuhr recognizes the inherent truths in Marxism, and his dependence upon them. But he also recognizes the grave errors in Marxism.

Niebuhr states that "those of us who once used Marxist collectivism to counter the error of liberal individualism, Marxist catastrophism to counter false liberal optimism, and Marxist determinism to challenge the sentimentality of liberal moralism and idealism, must now admit that the 'truths' which we used to challenge 'error' turned out to be no more true (though no less true) than the liberal ones. But they were more dangerous."<sup>155</sup>

This passage points up an important fact. Niebuhr never gave himself to communism. From the beginning he had reservations. However, in 1932 communism seemed far closer to the truth to him than did liberalism. This view, however -- as noted above -- was soon discarded as he began to recognize

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<sup>155</sup> "Communism and the Clergy," Christian Century, Vol. 70 (August 19, 1953), p. 937. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., pp. 34-35.

the dangers of communism.

The liberal culture, for so long critical towards political power and uncritical toward economic power, invited criticism. When initial self-criticism was inadequate, Marxism was pressed to the fore. But it soon revealed itself as a counter-error of great proportion. "For a religious veneration of the institution of property led to a new religion which sought the redemption of man through the abolition of property."<sup>156</sup>

We must never permit the gross errors and excesses of Marxism to blind us to the errors of a liberal society which "gave plausibility and credibility to Marxist illusions." Likewise, we must never permit the evils of Marxism to obscure the basic fact that "Marxism is the perversion of a profound truth." Marxism understands, as a purely progressive view of history cannot, that civilizations and cultures do not merely grow, but that they must go through a painful process of death and rebirth if they are to attain a new life. Furthermore, the Marxian program of socialization of property may be a proximate answer to the immediate and pressing problem of achieving justice in a technical age. However, this proximate answer has been falsely made into an absolute answer to the immediate problem, and, in addition,

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<sup>156</sup> "Two Forms of Tyranny," Op.cit., p. 5.



into the ultimate answer to the ultimate problem of human existence itself.

Marxism has illumined the sordid nature of the struggle between the owners and workers in modern industrial society. Both orthodox Christianity and liberalism have tended to obscure this struggle. However, Marxism falsely made it into a final fact of history, and concluded that the possible redemption of history was to be found within that fact, or within its resolution through Marxism. Niebuhr views the "illussions of Marxism as thus the end-products of a Christian civilization which either failed to realize the highest possibilities of life in history or which claimed the realization of a perfection that can never be achieved in history."<sup>157</sup>

There is one further point which must be stressed. By no stretch of the imagination can liberalism be viewed as a viable alternative to communism.

Niebuhr refers to E. Stanley Jones' book, Christ's Alternative to Communism, as "the most perfect swan song of liberal politics." This books argues that, since the communists are establishing, by coercion and violence, an equalitarian society, we must counter it by creating a just society which is free of all political conflict. How is this to be done? By persuading all Christians to obey the law of the

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<sup>157</sup> Faith and History, p. 212.

Cross, by striving for, in Jones' phrase, a "Lord's year of Jubilee." In other words, men must rationally decide that the Cross is the only way home, and act accordingly. Jones holds that such is possible because "the mind of man is becoming more and more latently Christian, perhaps unconsciously so, because of the application of the method of trial and error."<sup>158</sup>

Such an approach, however sincere and moving and fine, is irrelevant to the political and economic problems of the hour. Niebuhr says this with regret, for he views Jones as "one of the genuine saints of the missionary movement." He comments: "Perhaps the actual facts of contemporary politics, the drift toward another world war, the rising tide of tyranny in the nations, driven to desperation by Dr. Jones' sentimental hopes, have been given unconscious recognition in the curious error of his assertion that 'the mind of man is becoming more and more latently Christian.'<sup>159</sup>

Why is good will unable to establish justice? Simply because any solution which claims to operate by ignoring the political and economic mechanisms of society is doomed to failure. Liberal Christianity, posing its answer at a time when the methods of production and distribution are

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<sup>158</sup> An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, p. 180.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

unable to maintain the peace and order of society, is thus inadequate and irrelevant.

There is certainly nothing wrong with seeking the "moral achievement of individual good will." Such a moralism is simply unable to create basic justice, though it may serve to perfect and purify it. "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."<sup>160</sup>

As Niebuhr has stressed, though Marxism may be more dangerous than liberalism, it is certainly no more incorrect.

3. Marxism and the proletarian attitude. We have previously touched on the attitude of the proletarian class.<sup>161</sup> This attitude will now be examined in some detail. Through it, we can see more clearly how Niebuhr's concept of Marxism relates to the question of social justice.

Great social upheavals, the great revolts, are fairly recent phenomena. There were, further back, revolts. And some of them were serious, even spectacular, such as the slave revolt against Roman authority. But they were merely "the rebellious vehemence of hungry men who lacked a social

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., pp. 181-182.

<sup>161</sup> Supra., p. 90.

philosophy to give dignity and sustained form to their efforts, and a political strategy adequate to the problem which they faced." It is only in modern times that the ideologically-tinged revolt has come to the scene. Niebuhr observes: "The moral cynicism, the equalitarian idealism, the rebellious heroism, the anti-nationalism and internationalism, and the exhaltation of their class as the community of significant loyalty, all these characteristic moral attitudes of the modern working classes are the products of the industrial era."<sup>162</sup>

How did these come about?

First, a technological civilization arose, which tended to centralize ownership and power, and to make of the individual laborer one cog in a giant machine. Human relations were made mechanical, thus revealing even more clearly the economic motive in human activity.

Second, as the working classes grew in size, the amount of social cohesion within the class tended to increase. Likewise, there tended to be an increased cohesion within the smaller but more powerful owning class. And as these classes increased their internal cohesion, a natural split and subsequent antagonism grew between them.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Moral Man and Immoral Society, p. 142.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

Third, as the democratic movement grew, the working classes tended to gain more and more political power, power which made possible attempts to redress the imbalance in economic power.

In 1932, Niebuhr viewed Marxian political philosophy as the "authoritative expression and definition" of the attitudes of the proletarian classes in the industrial era. The combination of "moral cynicism and unqualified equalitarian social idealism" -- a combination which occurs again and again in Marxism -- was the most striking characteristic of these classes. "The industrial worker has little confidence in the morality of men; but this does not deter him from projecting a rigorous ethical ideal for society."

This moral cynicism is apparent in the Marxian interpretation of history, an interpretation which is strongly materialistic and deterministic. From this interpretation, a cynicism evolves which views the relation of social classes solely in terms of a conflict of power with power. Cultural, moral and religious forces merely rationalize, and do not alter, the economic behavior of various classes. Thus, "it is assumed that the power which inheres in the ownership of the means of production and which makes for social injustice will not be abated, qualified or destroyed by any other

means but the use of force against it."<sup>164</sup>

There is a strong emphasis on catastrophe. Communism sees the new society arising from catastrophe, rather than from a general and inevitable revolutionary process. It views present trends in society with pessimism. "Evolutionary millennialism is always the hope of comfortable and privileged classes, who imagine themselves too rational to accept the idea of the sudden emergence of the absolute in history." For such people, who have not suffered very much from the brutalities of contemporary history, there is no need to embrace a catastrophic view of contemporary history. For the proletarian class, it is a different matter.<sup>165</sup>

Niebuhr returns continually to the concept that the Marxian creed is the valid means of expression for the disinherited worker. He states:

If it should be maintained that this social philosophy and prophecy is the creed of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky, rather than the faith and hope of the proletarian worker, it need only be pointed out that, wherever social injustice rests heaviest upon the worker, wherever he is most completely disinherited, wherever the slight benefits, which political pressure has forced from the owning classes, have failed to materialize for him, he expresses himself in the creed of the unadulterated and unrevised Marx.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., pp. 144-146.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., pp. 146-147.

Those workers who have revised Marxian creed in the direction of a greater optimism thus represent the more favored workers. When there is economic misery, there is revolutionary sentiment. The greater the misery, the more intense and extreme the revolutionary sentiment.

The moral cynicism of Marxism is also apparent in its view of the democratic state. "The true proletarian views the democratic state as the instrument of the bourgeoisie for the oppression of the workers."<sup>167</sup> In this completely cynical view, we see a striking contrast to, even an anti-thesis of, the sentimental over-estimates of the achievements of political democracy which pervade the middle-class world. Lenin stated the matter coldly and clearly:

In their sum, these restrictions (of middle-class democracy) exclude and thrust out the poor from politics and from active share in democracy. Marx splendidly grasped the essence of capitalistic democracy, when, in his analysis of the spirit of the commune, he said the oppressed are allowed, once every few years, to decide which particular representatives of the oppressing classes are to represent and repress them in politics."

To this could well be added Lenin's famous dictum: "Freedom in capitalist society will always remain more or less the same as it was in the ancient Greek republics, that is, freedom for the slave-owners."<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., pp. 147-148.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

Such statements must, of course, be qualified. For there are significant elements in the proletarian world which have sought and are seeking to use the instruments of democracy for a pacific transformation of capitalistic society. But this is not the orthodox Marxist view. Niebuhr maintains that the orthodox Marxist view is similar to Thomas Paine's conviction that "society is the product of our wants and government of our wickedness."<sup>169</sup>

Added to this cynical view of the democratic process is a similar estimate of both nationalism and patriotism. "The true proletarian is completely bereft of patriotic loyalty." However, this ideal is seldom realized. "So powerful is the sentiment of patriotism, that if the injustice, from which the worker suffers, is not quite unbearable and if some minimum portion of the national cultural inheritance is bequeathed to him, he will respond to the appeals of the nation, though more reluctantly than the middle classes." Once again, it is a matter of degree. "The modern worker sacrifices his patriotism in almost exact proportion to the amount of social injustice which he suffers."<sup>170</sup>

Loyalty to nation is, of course, to be replaced with loyalty to class. The class arrives at full and distinct

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., pp. 149-150.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., pp. 150-151.



self-consciousness when it finds itself in conflict with other classes. An old technique is used: the class is exalted as the community of most significant loyalty by claiming universal values for it. This is, of course, exactly what the privileged classes do.

Niebuhr sees something grand in Marxian exaltation not of the virtues but of the estate of the lowly. "It is not the meek but the weak who are given the promise of inheriting the earth. If the Christian poor hoped that spiritual forces would ultimately endow meekness with strength, these modern poor believe that historical, 'materialistic' forces will automatically rob the strong of their strength and give it to the weak."<sup>171</sup>

We can thus compare the Marxian view to the Christian view. The eschatology of true Christianity maintains that "virtue will ultimately triumph by the power of its own strength, or by the strength supplied by God's grace." Marxian eschatology, on the other hand, maintains that "justice will be established because weakness will be made strong through economic forces operating with inexorable logic in human history."

Niebuhr is strongly critical of this Marxian view.

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., pp. 153-154.

Though the Marxian claims to have a philosophy or even a science of history, he actually has only an apocalyptic vision. "There is something both sublime and ridiculous in expecting either the meek or the weak to inherit the earth, that is, in expecting the disinherited to conquer either by virtue of their moral qualities or by virtue of their very disinheritance."<sup>172</sup>

The Marxist exaltation of class leads to both egotism and vindictiveness. Psychologically, the egotism tends to be a compensation for the frustrated ego within the contemporary situation. Since this class has no meaning and no significance in the contemporary situation, it boldly declares itself the most significant class for the future. Though this may, on the surface, seem absurd, it is quite understandable: such a reaction to inferiority is fairly predictable, either in individuals or groups. It is not only understandable; it is also strategically significant. For the task of the proletariat is to rebuild society. And what class can better understand the true character of a civilization than the class which suffers most from its limitations? Who can better formulate ideals than those to whom present social realities are completely bankrupt?

The element of vengeance is certainly dangerous. But

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid., pp. 156-157.

it is also vital. It may lead to destructive social consequences. For it is impossible to make a clean sweep of the past -- something Marxism insists must be done -- without outraging both sensibilities and consciences, and interfering with the orderly establishment of the desired new society. Only so many foes can be liquidated. "No community, whether class or nation, can build a society by destroying everything outside itself. It must finally yield to the complexities of society and hope to win its foes to co-operation rather than to destroy them, or to trust that force will coerce a doubtful allegiance."<sup>173</sup>

Added to his other attitudes, the proletarian is a rigorous equalitarian. The purpose of the triumph of his class is to usher in a new and classless society. If Marxism states this equalitarianism in too rigorous terms, it may be traced to the essentially religious nature of Marxism. Religious movements always generate rigorous ethical idealism. "From each according to his ability, and to each according to his needs" is, in fact, an impossible ideal. This Marxian principle is quite comparable to the sublime Christian ideal: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., pp. 157-158.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

Though the Marxian may be cynical, this ethical overtone is never lost. Indeed, this uneasy, even contradictory liaison is a basic characteristic of Marxism. The ethical tone is perhaps the key weapon in the Marxian arsenal. Niebuhr maintains that the unbiased observer must agree with Laski's comment that "Communism has made its way by its idealism and not by its realism, by its spiritual promise, not by its materialistic prospects."<sup>175</sup>

It is, however, only natural that the Marxian frequently loses sight of this dream, or ideal, and becomes submerged in cynicism. When he does so, he is only being realistic, and is recognizing the basic fact that all social injustice stems from the disproportions of property in society. If the Marxian "makes mistakes in choosing the means of accomplishing his ends, he has made no mistake either in stating the rational goal toward which society must move, the goal of equal justice, or in understanding the economic foundations of justice. If his cynicism in the choice of means is at times the basis of his undoing, his realism in implementing ethical ideals with political and economic methods is the reason for his social significance."<sup>176</sup>

We thus see in clear focus the central question facing

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

society: how can it so reform itself, and eliminate social injustice, using methods which offer some reasonable expectation of destroying that which is most evil in society, without also destroying that which is worth preserving in it, and without substituting new abuses and injustices for those abolished? It is hardly necessary to stress that the task is herculean.

Communism poses an answer to this question, an answer which we have discussed briefly. We shall now proceed to discuss the reasons Niebuhr finds this answer invalid, indeed, why he finds the cure worse than the ailment. But throughout this, let us never forget the peculiar and tragic frustration which turns the disinherited proletarian toward communism. He is blind to many things. He does not see that there are elements in the present system which are worth preserving. He is blind to the dangers in the solution he embraces, to the perils it holds for the future. However, "in his mood he is not inclined to worry about the future. Like all desperate men he can afford to be romantic about it."<sup>177</sup>

4. Why is Communism so evil? This question is the title of an important essay on communism which Niebuhr published in 1953 as a part of Christian Realism and Political Problems.

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., pp. 167-168.

We shall first consider this essay, and then conclude this section by discussing, in summary form, the five chief sources of evil Niebuhr finds in communism.

While Niebuhr is certainly something of a relativist, he does not evade the terms "good" and "evil." And communism merits the latter. We must remember that he brands communism as evil from both the vantage point of theologian, and that of social critic and reformer. Why is communism so evil in his view?

There are basically two questions being asked today by non-communists. The bold and realistic ask: why is communism so evil, and what are the sources of its malignancy? The timid and deluded ask: is communism really so evil, or are we so prejudiced by our conflict with the nation that is associated with communism that our view is false and unfair? This latter view, Niebuhr asserts, is characterized by a former State Department official who held that communism was merely Russian imperialism with new trappings. Niebuhr firmly rejects this view. It is essential to remember this if his attitude toward communism, and particularly toward the answer it affords to the question of social justice, is to be understood.

Perhaps the most significant point to be considered is the monopoly of power which communism possesses. "Dispropor-

tions of power anywhere in the human community are fruitful of injustice, but a system which gives some men absolute power over other men results in evils which are worse than injustice."<sup>178</sup>

There is an important difference here between the theory of a monopoly of power, and the practical effects of such a monopoly. Socialist theory, for instance, may be comparable to communist theory in some important aspects. However, though pure socialist theory may not be compatible with democracy, in practice states such as Great Britain and Sweden combine a large dose of socialism with thoroughly democratic political procedures. In such cases, socialism functions within the democratic framework, and is ordered by the balances in that framework. As long as socialism works within such a framework, its actions and character are not comparable to those of the communist oligarchy or dictatorship. But socialists -- and all others -- must not regard present communist beliefs and practices "as merely the fortuitous corruption of the original Marxist ideal." While Marx did not plan the highly centralized power structure of communism as it exists today, he did plan for a "dictatorship of the proletariat." Niebuhr asserts that for two reasons the "progressive moral deterioration of such a dictatorship was

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<sup>178</sup> Christian Realism and Political Problems, pp. 33-34.

inevitable rather than fortuitous."

First, when there is a clear split in society between the powerful and the powerless, the gradual centralization of this monopoly of power becomes inevitable. Thus, the monopoly of a class becomes the monopoly of a party, through the claim of that party to be the vanguard of the whole class.

Second, the monopoly of the party soon becomes the monopoly of a small, select oligarchy, a group which is, at first, supposed to speak for this class to the other classes who have been robbed of their power. This, too, is subject to an inevitable degeneration. Their authority becomes merely a strict monopoly of power which is exercised over both their own party and class, and the entire community. This is possible because "no one in the whole community has the constitutional means to challenge and check the inevitable extension of power after which the most powerful grasp."

The next step is for the dictatorship of the oligarchy to degenerate into the dictatorship of a single, omnipotent tyrant. When Trotsky, a powerful member of the oligarchy, fell, he was as powerless as the most humble peasant against the tyrant who had defeated them.<sup>179</sup>

There is still another reason for the excessive concentration of power in Marxism. This is the belief that the sole locus of economic power lies in the ownership of pro-

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., pp. 34-36.



perty. There may be, and often is, enormous power in the management of property. Thus, the workers in a socialized concern who may be technically the owners of the property, are powerless against a managerial oligarchy which runs the property. "The inevitable result is the accumulation of injustices more grievous than those which originally inspired the Marxist revolt against a free society."<sup>180</sup>

From the basic error of communism -- the "relation of absolute power to complete defenselessness" -- there spring a whole series of pretensions "derived from the secular religion which creates the ethos of the communist society." The utopian illusions are one such pretension. According to these illusions, "every policy of Marxist propaganda and class conflict has the object of hastening the day of historical climax when an ideal, classless society will emerge." These illusions, in Niebuhr's view, serve to make communism more dangerous rather than more evil. They bend honest, if naive, intellectuals to the wind of communist ideology, and enable communists everywhere to pose as liberators of the very classes and nations they actually intend to enslave. Niebuhr rightly observes that Nazism could not have conquered Poland and China by internal conspiracy. Communism could and did.

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

It is therefore wrong to argue -- as some foes of communism do -- that the practice of communism negates the virtue which lies in the ideal. The fact is that there is as much or more evil in the ideal than in the practice. For utopianism is the basis of evil in communism, as well as the source of its greatest danger. It sets an impressive moral facade before the most unscrupulous policy, a facade comparable to the whited sepulchres of the Pharisees so vehemently condemned by Christ. Thus, legitimate claims for immediate justice can be ignored and trampled upon in the name of a greater justice in the future.

Niebuhr maintains that the "attractive power of communism for many so-called idealists is due to a general utopian element in our culture which fails to acknowledge the perennial moral contradictions on every level of historical advance." Whether the oligarchs or tyrants exhibit cynicism is not too important. What is important is the screen of ideal ends behind which the ruthless power operates.<sup>181</sup>

5. Five sources of evil in communism. In summary, we shall note what Niebuhr holds to be the five principle sources

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid., pp. 37-38. Niebuhr emphasizes strongly the evil inherent in the doctrine of communism. However, in his writings he tends to stress the evils which lie in the practice of communism. This indicates that he believes the greater danger to lie in communism "at work," and not that there is a contradiction in his thought in this matter. It is a question of emphasis; and his decision is made on pragmatic grounds.

of evil in communism.

First, it is based on the concept of affording one element a monopoly of power. As we have noted, disproportions of power breed injustice; and a system which gives some absolute power over others creates an end product far more evil than injustice. The Marxian theory that the "dictatorship of the proletariat" will wither away is simply not consistent with human nature. Coupled with this is the ignorance of the power that may inhere in management.

Second, he finds the utopian illusions of Marxism to be totally false. "According to these illusions, every policy of Marxist propaganda and class conflict has the object of hastening the day of historical climax when an ideal classless society will emerge."<sup>182</sup> By thus creating such a set of illusions, communism develops a wide appeal to intellectuals. And they are illusions which are most inconsistent with empirical facts.

Third, communism equates virtue with class. Thus, if one owns property, he is evil. If he does not, he is good. Such a view makes it quite easy to call black white and white black. Niebuhr comments: "There is of course nothing in the evidence of history to justify the belief that the historic class organization of society is alone responsible for the

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid., pp. 36-39.

tendency of man and societies to take advantage of each other. It would be truer to say that the class organization is a consequence of this tendency in the human heart."<sup>183</sup>

The fourth source of evil is concerned with determinism. Marxism "is rightly accused of being deterministic, that is, of underestimating the freedom of man and emphasizing the determined character of his culture and his convictions, which are said to be rooted in his economic interest."

Niebuhr views this as roughly half true. There is another side. Marxism is characterized by a "supplementary and contradictory dogma according to which history works toward a climax in which the proletarian class must by a 'revolutionary act' intervene in the course of history and thereby change not only history but also the whole human situation." Such an idea quite naturally breeds monstrous claims of omniscience and omnipotence, claims of such magnitude that they are valid only in the domain of a god. Molotov, for instance, declared that the communists cannot only penetrate to the inner and normally hidden meaning of contemporary events, but that they can lift the curtain and anticipate the future. "This tendency of playing God to human history is the cause of a great deal of communist malignancy."

Fifth, Marxist dogmatism, with its pretensions of

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<sup>183</sup> Christianity and Power Politics, pp. 145-146.

scientific rationality, is a source of evil. Such dogmas become even more dangerous under a tyrannical organization, for it does not permit re-examination of them, even when facts refute them. "The communists test every historical fact with ostensible precision and coolness, but their so-called science looks at the world through the spectacles of inflexible dogma which alters all the facts and creates a confused world picture."

We thus see in communism a terrifying combination of ideological inflexibility and a monolithic political structure. Dogmatism plus tyranny equals frightening irrationality. In communist trials, for instance, victims are made to confess to the most absurd and implausible charges, in order to fit into the prescribed framework. "Thus the evil of communism flows from a combination of political and 'spiritual' factors, which prove that the combination of power and pride is responsible for turning the illusory dreams of yesterday into the present nightmare, which disturbs the ease of millions of men in our generation."<sup>184</sup>

D. The Mature Years: "Flexible Pragmatism"

1. The development of a political philosophy.

Kenneth Thompson sees three stages in the odyssey of Niebuhr's political thought.

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<sup>184</sup> Christian Realism and Political Problems, pp. 39-42.

First, there was the period in which he embraced a rather conventional liberalism.

Second, in the thirties, he developed a growing criticism of Marxism and liberalism, a criticism "not wholly convincing for himself or for others, especially as a basis for concrete critical judgment."

The most recent stage is centered around the second World War. "Here we witness the triumph of a pragmatic conception of politics cast in the mold of the classic principles of Western statesmanship but seeking ultimately to transcend them."<sup>185</sup>

Using this as a framework, let us consider this development further. The first two stages have already been discussed; here, we will concentrate on the third.

The vital first step of this emergence into a mature pragmatism is Niebuhr's effort to expand and make further use of his doctrine of human nature. This doctrine was still embryonic in the thirties. However, by 1939, he was working on a further development of it, work which was to come to fruition with the publication, in 1941 and 1943, of the two volumes entitled The Nature and Destiny of Man. In 1939 Niebuhr wrote: "Is it possible to lead man out of social confusion into an ordered society if we do not know

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<sup>185</sup> Kenneth Thompson, "The Political Philosophy of Reinhold Niebuhr," Kegley and Bretall, Op.cit., p. 156.

man a little better than either Marxians or liberals know him?"<sup>186</sup>

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. sees 1935 as something of a turning point, or point of reappraisal. At that time Niebuhr viewed American middle-class politics as an absurd and virtually hopeless mess, "rushing us at incredible speed from the futilities of Rooseveltian 'liberalism' to the worse confusion of a political program concocted by a radio priest and a Louisiana 'kingfish.'" "He viewed the New Deal as an impotent program, a program characterized by incoherence and an aimless triviality."<sup>187</sup>

Why should this be so? Mainly because in his early years Niebuhr had, by definition, excluded the middle way. The young Turk had pronounced liberalism "spent," and he had no desire to exhume and examine the remains. The fact that Keynes, Stuart Chase, Sir Arthur Salter and others were beginning to speak out for a kind of democratic planning simply did not matter, for "the imperilled oligarchy of our day, though it may pay lip service to the sweet reasonableness of their counsels, drifts nevertheless toward fascism." And the drift was inevitable.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Radical Religion, Vol. IV, No. 2 (Spring, 1939), p. 8. Quoted in Thompson, Op.cit., p. 163.

<sup>187</sup> "Our Romantic Radicals," Christian Century, April 10, 1935. Quoted in Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Reinhold Niebuhr's Role in Political Thought," Kegley and Bretall, Op.cit., p. 141.

<sup>188</sup> Reflections on the End of an Era, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), pp. 45-46, 53.

What Niebuhr failed to see -- and Arthur Schlesinger, as one might expect, is quite critical of him in this regard -- was that "the imperilled oligarchy was being forced by effective democratic government to accept measures of regulation and reform which would avert fascism and lead to recovery." We thus have a sad picture of Niebuhr, blinded by doctrine, scornfully rejecting in practice the very brand of pragmatism which he called for in theory.<sup>189</sup>

In 1936, Niebuhr supported Norman Thomas for President. After the election, he announced that the nation "has chosen a messiah rather than a political leader committed to a specific program; and unfortunately the messiah is more renowned for his artistic juggling than for robust resolution."<sup>190</sup> He failed to see that in 1936 America was in dire need of a goodly amount of "artistic juggling."

By 1938, Niebuhr was ready grudgingly to admit that Roosevelt was "better than most of his reactionary critics." However, he still firmly maintained that "no final good can come of this whirligig reform..."<sup>191</sup> He wrote: "We have discovered a method which wards off dissolution without

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<sup>189</sup> Schlesinger, Op.cit., p. 141.

<sup>190</sup> "The National Election," Radical Religion, Winter, 1936. Quoted in Schlesinger, Op.cit., p. 142.

<sup>191</sup> "Roosevelt's Merry-go-Round," Radical Religion, Spring, 1938; "The Domestic Situation," Radical Religion, Summer, 1938. Quoted in Schlesinger, Op.cit., p. 142.



giving health to the patient."<sup>192</sup> Of Roosevelt, he said: "If that man could only make up his mind to cross the Rubicon!... A better metaphor is that he is like Lot's wife. Let him beware lest he turn into a pillar of salt."<sup>193</sup> Schlesinger dryly observes that Niebuhr fails to realize that Roosevelt's problem "was not to cross the Rubicon but to navigate up it."<sup>194</sup>

Niebuhr gradually began to recognize this. Bertrand Russell's Power, published in 1938, touched an exposed nerve in socialism. In 1939, when asked if the capitalistic system could not be made to work, Niebuhr surprisingly admitted: "It would be rather rash to give an unequivocal answer."<sup>195</sup> In 1940 he said that "if socialization of economic power is purchased at the price of creating irresponsible and tyrannical political power, our last estate may be worse than the first."<sup>196</sup>

In June of 1940 Niebuhr resigned from the Socialist Party. He wrote that "nothing is more obvious than that socialism must come to America through some other instrument than the socialist party."<sup>197</sup> On the 29th of June, he published

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<sup>192</sup> Christianity and Society, Spring, 1939. Quoted in John C. Bennett, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Social Ethics," Kegley and Bretall, Op.cit., p. 73.

<sup>193</sup> "New Deal Medicine," Radical Religion, Spring, 1939. Quoted in Schlesinger, Op.cit., p. 142.

<sup>194</sup> Schlesinger, Op.cit., p. 143.

<sup>195</sup> Review of Ezekiel's Jobs for All in Radical Religion, Spring, 1939. Quoted in Schlesinger, Op.cit., p. 143.

<sup>196</sup> "A New Name," Radical Religion, Winter, 1940. Quoted in Schlesinger, Op.cit., p. 143.

<sup>197</sup> "Christianity and Society," Summer, 1940. Quoted in Bennett, Op.cit., p. 73.

an article entitled "An End to Illusions." He capped this in November by casting his first vote for Roosevelt.

In fairness, it must be noted that foreign rather than domestic policy motivated this vote. The Socialist party, committed largely to isolationism, and the Protestant ministry, committed more or less to pacifism, were forming an alliance of which Niebuhr was most critical. This partnership revealed to him "in a dismal and devastating way the consequences of moralized politics."<sup>198</sup> This reaction to pacifism, along with his growing concern with international affairs, will be discussed in the final section of this essay in some detail.

The West Foundation lectures at Stanford in 1944, published as The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, represent a significant statement of Niebuhr's changing views. Still committed to the socialization of property, he held to the Marxist theory of the "social character of individual property." However, he felt that socialization was perhaps "too simple a solution." He stressed in these lectures the power inherent in managerial control, a power which has been discussed earlier in this essay.<sup>199</sup> He still felt that socialism would be more efficient. However, he admitted that it might be wise to sacrifice efficiency "for the sake of preserving a greater

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<sup>198</sup> Schlesinger, Op.cit., pp. 143-144.

<sup>199</sup> Supra, p. 114.

balance of forces and avoiding undue centralization of power."<sup>200</sup>

Niebuhr argued that there are two prerequisites for a free society: there must be an equilibrium among class forces; and that equilibrium must be dynamic, able to shift "the political institutions of the community to conform to changing economic needs and unchanging demands for a higher justice."<sup>201</sup>

Schlesinger notes: "This sounded a good deal more like the mixed economy and open society of the New Deal than like socialism."<sup>202</sup>

In 1947, Niebuhr became a key figure in Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), "a group of pragmatic liberals opposed to all dogmatisms, conservative, socialist, or communist, and dedicated to piecemeal and gradual reform."<sup>203</sup> In 1949 he described his attitude as "completely pragmatic." He stated, still with caution, that there was "a bare possibility that the kind of pragmatic political program which has been elaborated under the 'New Deal' and the 'Fair Deal' may prove to be a better answer to the problems of justice in a technical world than its critics of either right or left had assumed." The "unplanned improvisations of our early New Deal" by that time seemed to "grow into a purposeful pragmatism" which will

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<sup>200</sup> The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, p. 80.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>202</sup> Schlesinger, Op.cit., p. 146.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

make "a significant contribution to the cause of democracy." The Rubicon need not be crossed after all. And "whirligig reform" is looking better and better each day.<sup>204</sup>

2. The past reinterpreted. It would be wrong to assume that a mature Niebuhr cut loose completely from the beliefs of the past. On the contrary: one of the characteristics of the mature years is a steady reinterpretation and re-evaluation of past beliefs and disbeliefs. Let us now examine some of these reinterpretations.

First, we may say that the mature Niebuhr is a bit more reasonable and tolerant. The sting is still there, but is less potent, and is used with more caution and reluctance. Where the young man looked first for the evil, the mature man tends to look first for the good.

The Social Gospel affords an excellent example. Niebuhr can now mention this old foe without fire coming to his eyes and his pen. In an article written in 1952, he briefly reviewed the familiar defects of the Social Gospel, then dismissed them as "minor when its achievement is recognized: it delivered American Protestantism from meeting complex ethical problems of a technical civilization with an almost completely irrelevant pietism and moralism."<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> "Plutocracy and World Responsibilities," Christianity and Society, Autumn, 1949. Quoted in Schlesinger, Op.cit., pp. 146-147.

<sup>205</sup> "The Protestant Clergy and U.S. Politics," Reporter, February 19, 1952. Quoted in Schlesinger, Op.cit., p. 148.

However, the battle with pragmatism ended in no more than an uneasy truce. Niebuhr has never been able to cease his polemic against Dewey. He has always felt that the belief that a "scientific" analysis of society would produce impartial and uncontaminated conclusions was nonsense. Niebuhr could never forgive empiricism for the sin of mistaking a finite for an absolute perspective.<sup>206</sup> He did fervently maintain that the pragmatic method was supreme "in the world of contingent decision and action," as long as this method was recognized as finite.<sup>207</sup> Such a qualified view of pragmatism is the basis of his own pragmatic views.

His belief that original sin taints all human perception and action led him inevitably to relativism. By definition, the absolute was unattainable. Thus, "mortal man's apprehension of truth had to be fitful, shadowy, and imperfect; he saw through the glass darkly; nor could there be a worse expression of human self-righteousness and self-deception than the attempt to endow fragmentary and corrupt perceptions with objectivity and certitude."

Schlesinger's conclusion is a fair statement:

The penetrating critic of the Social Gospel and of pragmatism, he ended up, in a sense, the powerful reinterpreter and champion of both. It was the triumph of his own remarkable analysis that it took what was valuable in each, rescued each by defining for each

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<sup>206</sup> Schlesinger, *Op.cit.*, p. 148.  
<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

the limits of validity, and, in the end, gave the essential purposes of both new power and new vitality.<sup>208</sup>

What was the mature Niebuhr's debt to liberalism and Marxism?

Liberalism provided him with certain continuing moral objectives, or goals. These include a tolerance and a fairness without which life would be little more than a consistent inhumanity. Niebuhr retained many of liberalism's goals, as well as this basic philosophy. Few of its concrete methods are retained.

Two insights from Marxist thought -- if they are strictly and properly interpreted -- endure.

First, the Marxian emphasis on the social dimensions of man's life, and the collective fate of man's existence, endures. This implies a responsibility to seek continually for justice on the national and international levels.

Second, Niebuhr continues to embrace the postulate of the class struggle. However, he redefines (or expands) this to embrace all political struggles, struggles which should and will continue endlessly as the sole realistic means of righting the balances between the victims and the beneficiaries of injustice.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>209</sup> Kenneth Thompson, "The Political Philosophy of Reinhold Niebuhr," Kegley and Bretall, *Op.cit.*, p. 162.

3. Achievements of the later years. Thus far in this section, some characteristics of Niebuhr's later years have been touched on. Let us now go into a bit more detail with these achievements.

We have mentioned the importance of Niebuhr's doctrine of human nature.<sup>210</sup> One of the great achievements of the mature years was the application of this doctrine to the social situation. Specifically, Niebuhr applied it to the idea of combining political and economic power, and placing the combination in one set of hands. He became more and more aware of the problems of a cumbersome bureaucracy and a lack of incentive which plague socialism; and this awareness was made possible by a developed doctrine of human nature. He began to criticize the socialist approach on the grounds that it represented a doctrinaire approach to human nature. He accused the socialists of sharing the Marxist view that there are limits to "human needs, desires and ambitions."<sup>211</sup> In 1949 Niebuhr wrote: "Human beings are on the whole too thoughtless to justify a community in allowing them to set their own limit on demands which they may make of a public servant." This view was responsible for his statement that "'Christian Socialism' is no longer a viable compound."<sup>212</sup>

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210 Supra, p. 120.

211 Christianity and Society, Autumn, 1949. Quoted in Bennett, Op.cit., p. 74.

212 Christianity and Society, Summer, 1949. Quoted in Bennett, Op.cit., p. 74.

Second, and perhaps most obviously, the development of a pragmatic approach represents a great achievement. Just what is this brand of pragmatism?

John Bennett observes that it is not relativistic "except when it comes to concrete decisions, and these are more controlled by the particular situation than was the case when he was inclined to read the situation through a Marxist view of what the situation was supposed to be." Bennett adds: "I think that openness to the possible uniqueness of each historical situation is the new element in his thought which is most important." Through such a view, Niebuhr can call all available resources to play on a situation. Love remains the ultimate standard. And his view of human nature therefore assumes even greater importance.<sup>213</sup>

Niebuhr now sees the need for a more flexible social philosophy. He stresses not planning, but the proper distribution of economic power. He can even speak of Edmund Burke in reasonably favorable terms. Writing in tribute to Burke's conservatism, he says: "It is therefore intent upon developing politics as the art of the possible, being cautious not to fall into worse forms of injustice in the effort to eliminate old ones."<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Bennett, Op.cit., p. 75.

<sup>214</sup> Christian Realism and Political Problems, p. 72.



Third, we might mention that his mature years have brought a reinterpretation of the relationship between order and justice.<sup>215</sup> He has not, by any means, concluded that order comes before justice. He has rather concluded that order must be kept in mind, and that pragmatic rather than doctrinaire combinations of the two must be sought.

This was especially true immediately after the Second World War, when Niebuhr stressed the importance of establishing some kind of stable order throughout the world. He used Lincoln's experience as an example. He writes of Lincoln's decision to abolish slavery in order to preserve the union: "This is a nice symbol of the fact that order precedes justice in the strategy of government; but that only an order which implicates justice can achieve a stable peace. An unjust order quickly invites the resentment and rebellion which lead to its undoing."<sup>216</sup>

And, just as his view of the relationship between justice and order has matured, his view of the relationship between justice and power exhibits a far greater maturity, flexibility, and even sensibility. The power of all social groups, he asserts, needs to be checked by the power of those of whom some advantage may be taken. The struggle for justice consists largely of the continuing effort to increase the power

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<sup>215</sup> Supra, p. 46-47, for a discussion of his earlier views on this subject.

<sup>216</sup> The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, p. 181.

of the victims of injustice. And the reaction is reversible. There is no impartial agent above all of this. However, the mature Niebuhr would be more ready to admit what he avidly denied in the thirties: namely, that a national government may be broad enough to serve this function. Lately, he places less emphasis on the purely economic aspects of this problem; given the tendency of power to balance justice, he finds this conflict of power to be both modified and transcended in many ways. Without this tendency toward balance there can be little justice. Law and love are interrelated factors in controlling power.

All of these problems of justice become at least manageable if the various groups and parties do not falsely cover their struggles for power under the cloak of self-righteous illusions.<sup>217</sup>

Fourth, we can observe that an important achievement of the final years is a greater appreciation of the importance and validity of democracy as a political ideal.

Writing in 1953, Niebuhr asserted that democracy is relatively better than other political schemes for three distinct reasons:

The first is that it assumes a source of authority from the standpoint of which the individual may defy the authorities of this world... The second is an appreciation of the unique worth of the

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<sup>217</sup> Bennett, Op.cit., pp. 61-62.

individual which makes it wrong to fit him into any political program as a mere instrument... The third insight is the biblical insistence that the same radical freedom which makes man creative also makes him potentially destructive and dangerous, that the dignity of man and the misery of man therefore have the same root.<sup>218</sup>

One condition remains the basis for Niebuhr's view of a successful democracy: it must avoid self-righteous illusions.<sup>219</sup>

These four achievements are not, of course, the only ones. But they are among the most important ones, and serve to indicate the trend of his later years.

4. "The Triumph of Experience over Dogma." This brief section on Niebuhr's mature years is by no means the end of the story. The third section of this essay, concerning International Justice, is largely an analysis of the work of these years, when the emphasis has shifted from the domestic scene to the international one. However, before we proceed to that discussion, let us look at one particularly important part of Niebuhr's work, his essay entitled "The Triumph of Experience over Dogma," an essay which was published in 1952 as chapter V of The Irony of American History.

As the title of this essay indicates, it deals with the subject matter from a more flexible and pragmatic approach, which is characteristic of Niebuhr's later years. He is

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<sup>218</sup> Christian Realism and Political Problems, p. 101.

<sup>219</sup> Bennett, Op.cit., p. 77.

actually writing of this "triumph" in American history. But it will not be unfair to suggest that as we look at Niebuhr's analysis of this development in American history, we keep a wary eye on the similar development in the odyssey of the commentator himself.

Niebuhr notes that America's "success in establishing justice and insuring domestic tranquility has exceeded the characteristic insights of a bourgeois culture." He views the pragmatic approach of America as one which "would do credit to Edmund Burke." Though the consistently bourgeois attitude of America is a handicap in dealing with the Asian (and now African) world, "we have established a degree of justice which has prevented the Marxist movement from arising in our society in either its milder or more virulent form."

Though America may side completely with the bourgeois credo in theory, "in practice it has achieved balances of power in the organization of social forces and a consequent justice which has robbed the Marxist challenge of its sting."<sup>220</sup>

Niebuhr views Burke's statement as a fair expression of the American view:

I should therefore suspend my congratulations on the new liberty of France until I am informed how it has been combined with government, with public force, with the disciplines and obedience of armies;

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<sup>220</sup> The Irony of American History, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), pp. 89-91.

with the collection of effective and well-distributed revenue; with morality and religion; with the solidity of property; with peace and order... Liberty, when men act in bodies, is power. Considerate people, before they declare themselves, will observe the use which is made of power.<sup>221</sup>

Niebuhr believes that America would merit Burke's congratulations, were he here to bestow them.

He sees a continual debate being waged between a Marxian and a liberal society. However, American social policy tends to consistently line up on one side in theory, but to "strike a creative synthesis" in practice. Thus, the unfettered economy is controlled to an extent by the development of mechanisms which do not have a place in pure theory. Had these modifications not been made, the liberal society would have been powerless before the onslaught of Marxism. These modifications may be viewed as a realist reevaluation of the liberal creed. The fact that they could be made reveals a flexibility which Marxism can never claim.<sup>222</sup>

The basis for such a flexibility goes back as far as the Constitution. James Madison wrote: "As long as any connection exists between man's reason and his self-love, his opinions and passions will have reciprocal influence upon each other."<sup>223</sup> Niebuhr notes that "the political philosophy which

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<sup>221</sup> Reflections on the French Revolution, Chapter I. Quoted in Ibid., p. 91. Italics in Burke's text.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., pp. 92-96.

<sup>223</sup> The Federalist, No. 10. Quoted in Ibid., p. 98.

underlies our Constitution is characterized by a shrewd awareness of the potential conflicts of power and passion in every community. It knows nothing of a simple harmony in society, analogous to the alleged reciprocity of the free market."<sup>224</sup>

The American labor movement was, for instance, pragmatic from the beginning. It was "born of the necessity of setting organized power against organized power in a technical society." Now, it has decided to challenge the reigning combination of political and economic power with a like combination of its own.

How did American society react to this? Initially, in terms of a bourgeois culture and creed. For instance, around 1900 the Supreme Court declared: "It is the constitutional right of the employer to dispense with the services of an employee because of his membership in a labor union."<sup>225</sup> Before long, however, the court decisions began to "follow the election returns," as they invariably do, sooner or later. The government began to break up great concentrations of power in industry, and to regulate utilities; such operations as social welfare and security, and public health, well outside the domain of the free market, were controlled by political policy. "All this has been accomplished on a purely pragmatic

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>225</sup> Quoted in, Ibid., p. 99, note 1. No court citation given.

basis, without the ideological baggage which European labor carried."<sup>226</sup>

Thus, America has thoroughly disproved the Marxist assertion that government is merely the instrument of the privileged classes. "We have, in short, achieved such justice as we possess in the only way justice can be achieved in a technical society: we have equilibrated power. We have attained a certain equilibrium in economic society itself by setting organized power against organized power. When that did not suffice we used the more broadly based political power to redress disproportions and disbalances in economic society."<sup>227</sup>

We may summarize this successful American approach as the triumph of the wisdom of common sense over ideology. In another sense, it is the triumph of common sense over "wise men." For wise men tend to follow one or another of the "lines." They either want to plan all, or to plan nothing. This is the "ideological taint" that the pragmatic approach may skillfully avoid.<sup>228</sup>

Niebuhr views this triumph of common sense as primarily the wisdom of democracy at work. In each of the two extreme views there is an element of truth. However, if it is carried through too consistently, it becomes falsehood. But it is

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<sup>226</sup> Ibid., pp. 99-100.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

required to do full justice to man's real situation in history. "For man transcends the social and historical process sufficiently to make it possible and necessary to contrive common ends of life, particularly the end of justice."

We thus have an irresolvable controversy "between those who would 'plan' justice and order, and those who trust in freedom to establish both... Every healthy society will live in the tension of that controversy until the end of history; and will prove its health by preventing either side from gaining complete victory."<sup>229</sup>

No statement could better close our discussion of the theories of social justice in Reinhold Niebuhr's political thought than this one.

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid., pp. 107-108.



## CHAPTER THREE

### INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE

#### A. Pacifism

In dealing with the Christian attitude toward pacifism, and in the balance of this section on international justice, we will consider Niebuhr's views in the light of one question: What does one do with power in order to achieve international justice?

The first consideration -- pacifism -- offers one possible answer, an answer which Niebuhr firmly rejects. It suggests that the Christian must have nothing to do with power, and that by applying his religion in a strict manner, and refusing to participate in "power politics," he is being most true to that religion. Let us examine Niebuhr's reactions to this view.

1. Pacifism and Christian doctrine. As a young man Niebuhr tended to identify himself with the pacifist movement. This was partially due to the revulsion he felt during and following the First World War. This pacifism did not in any way imply a neutralism: he felt strongly that the Allies were the side which deserved sympathy, if not active support. In 1918 he wrote: "If we must have war I'll certainly feel better on the side of Wilson than on the side of the Kaiser."<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, pp. 14-15.

However, a developing concept of just what Christianity was all about soon led Niebuhr away from the pacifist view. But he retained a horror of war and of violence. In 1932 he stated: "If violence can be justified at all, its terror must have the tempo of a surgeon's skill and healing must follow quickly upon the wounds."<sup>231</sup>

What were the bases for his revised view, and for his opposition to pacifism? The starting point must be Christian doctrine.

Niebuhr felt that the pacifist movement was a product of the liberal culture which had in so many other ways confused and confounded Christianity. The basic error was that the Gospel ideals of perfection which lie beyond history were transmuted into simple historical possibilities. Thus, the good man and the good nation were defined as the man and the nation which, by avoiding conflict at all costs, continually turned the other cheek. Such a brand of liberalism seeks perfection. Since it can find no perfection on earth -- especially among the governments created by man -- it is either unable or unwilling to distinguish between tyranny and freedom. By making the peace of the Kingdom of God a historical possibility, a premium is inevitably placed on surrender to evil, since the alternative is to risk conflict.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> Moral Man and Immoral Society, p. 220.

<sup>232</sup> "Christian Politics and Communist Religion," in John Lewis, et al., editors, Christianity and the Social Revolution (New York: Scribners, 1936), p. 458. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., p. 139.

Now, there is no quarrel with asserting unselfishness as the highest individual ideal. To do so is to affirm a perfectly scriptural view. But it is not an attainable ideal. Men are invariably selfish. But deep in their hearts they know that they should not be. That is why they venerate a Tolstoi, a St. Francis, or a crucified Christ.<sup>233</sup>

We must, however, realize that if we plan to follow the example of such as these -- the policy of non-resistance -- that we are accepting a policy which makes no claims to social efficacy. "It submits to any demands, however unjust, and yields to any claims, however inordinate, rather than assert self-interest against another." At its highest, such an attitude creates asceticism, such as that of St. Francis. At its lowest, it leads to the complete disavowal of any political responsibility, as in the case of the Menonites.

Certainly, such an attitude may have redemptive social consequences. Niebuhr comments: "Forgiveness may not always prompt the wrongdoer to repentance; but yet it may. Loving the enemy may not soften the enemy's heart; but there are possibilities that it will. Refusal to assert your own interests against another may not shame him into unselfishness; but on occasion it has done so."<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Moral Man and Immoral Society, p. 263.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., pp. 263-264.

The point is that all of this is applicable to individual action, to individual morality. At its best, it is disinterested and pure, as is the Divine love. But when it is transferred to group relations, it is doomed to failure. Hugh Cecil summed the matter up well: "It follows that all that department of morality which falls under the heading of unselfishness, is inappropriate to the action of a state. No one has a right to be unselfish with other people's interests."<sup>235</sup>

Let us look at some practical illustrations of this point.

When fascism came to power in Italy, the socialist movement there was in a grave situation. Realizing the impossibility of their situation, the socialist leaders adopted pacifist principles. The following advice was given to socialists by their leaders:

- (1) Create a void around fascism.
- (2) Do not provoke; suffer any provocation with serenity.
- (3) To win, be better than your adversary.
- (4) Do not use the weapons of your enemy. Do not follow in his footsteps.
- (5) Remember that in a struggle between brothers those are victors who conquer themselves.
- (6) Remember that the blood of guerilla warfare falls upon those who shed it.
- (7) Be convinced that it is better to suffer wrong than to commit it.
- (8) Don't be impatient. Impatience is extremely egotistical; it is instinct; it is yielding to one's urge.
- (9) Do not forget that socialism wins the more when it suffers, because it was born in pain and lives on its hopes.
- (10) Listen to the mind and to the heart which advises you that the working people should be nearer to sacrifice than to vengeance.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., pp. 268-269.

Niebuhr comments: "A nobler decalogue of virtues could hardly have been prescribed. But the Italian socialists were annihilated by the fascists, their organisations destroyed, and the rights of the workers subordinated to a state which is governed by their enemies."

A second example is the effort to apply the doctrines of Tolstoi to the Russian political situation. Tolstoi felt that the peasants should return good for evil, and practice non-resistance against the Czar. Such a program got absolutely nowhere. Niebuhr writes: "No effort was made to relate the religious ideal of love to the political necessity of coercion. Its total effect was therefore socially and politically deleterious. It helped to destroy a rising protest against political and economic opposition and to confirm the Russian in his pessimistic passivity."<sup>237</sup>

It is simply impossible to transfer this personal ideal into group relations. The Divine love can only be approached in history by a life which ends tragically, because it refuses to take part in the claims and counter-claims which constitute historical existence. Such a view portrays a life which "seeketh not its own." And a life which seeketh not its own cannot maintain itself in historical society.

There are two reasons for this. First, such a love will

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<sup>237</sup> Ibid., p. 269.

inevitably fall victim to excessive forms of self-assertion by others. Secondly, it denies its role in the only mechanism society affords for creating justice: the balance of competing wills and interests.<sup>238</sup>

This second reason has already been discussed in detail in this essay; and it will form the final section of this chapter. Suffice it to say here that just as the highest ideal for the individual is unselfishness, for society it is justice. The two are quite different. Niebuhr comments: "Society must strive for justice even if it is forced to use means, such as self-assertion, resistance, coercion and perhaps resentment, which cannot gain the sanction of the most sensitive moral spirit." The individual must realize his life in the fullest sense by losing it in something greater than himself -- a paradox which is central to Christian doctrine. Society, on the other hand, must seek justice. And justice can be realized only by asserting interest against interest. In the process, it may be forced to sanction conflict and violence as well.<sup>239</sup> "All justice that the world has ever known has been established through tension between various vitalities, forces, and interests in society."<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> The Nature and Destiny of Man, II, p. 242.

<sup>239</sup> Moral Man and Immoral Society, pp. 275-279.

<sup>240</sup> "If America Enters the War," Christian Century, Vol. 57 (December 18, 1940), p. 1579. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., pp. 139-140.

2. Non-resistance, non-violent resistance, and the example of Gandhi. We have seen that the ethics of non-resistance, as taught in the Sermon on the Mount, stand in perfectly consistent relation with the love which is symbolized in the Cross. We have seen further the error of modern, liberal Christianity in characterizing this ethic as one which, if practiced with enough fervor and by enough people, will become successful in history. Let us now examine a third step, one which reveals a further error common to modern liberal Christianity.

Many who claim to embrace pacifism actually hedge their beliefs at a crucial point. They commit the grave error of equating non-violent resistance with non-resistance. Thus, they assert that they will participate in the claims and counterclaims of historical social life; but they will do so in a non-violent manner. They assert that this is consistent with the gospel ethic of non-resistance.<sup>241</sup>

This is simply not the case. There are several reasons for this.

First of all, the social consequences of non-violent resistance are much the same as those of violent resistance. And both are totally different from the probable consequences of non-resistance. By its very nature, non-violent resistance is not disinterested. Indeed, such a stand is adopted simply

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<sup>241</sup> The Nature and Destiny of Man, II, p. 75, note 1.

because it represents the best possible way (to its advocates) of gaining a set goal.

Non-violent conflict and coercion may lead to destruction of property and life, just as violent conflict and coercion will certainly do so. The latter may do so intentionally, and the former as a by-product. But the destruction is the same.

Gandhi's quarrel, for instance, was with British imperialism, and not with the cotton spinners of Lancashire. But the latter group was impoverished through Gandhi's boycott of English cotton.<sup>242</sup>

What is the nature of non-violent resistance? It is essentially nothing more than non-cooperation. It expresses itself through a refusal to participate in the ordinary activities of society. More concretely, it may imply a refusal to pay taxes or obey edicts of the government (civil disobedience), to trade with a particular group on which pressure is being applied (boycott), or to render normal services (strike). Though it represents a form of resistance which is, by nature, passive and negative, its consequences may be quite positive. It places strong restraints on the freedom of action of the objects of its discipline. It destroys property values, and may indirectly lead to the loss of life. A boycott, for instance, may rob an entire community of its livelihood.

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<sup>242</sup> Moral Man and Immoral Society, pp. 240-241.



The points which non-violent resistance and violent resistance have in common are important. For an emphasis on them aids in pointing out sharply the differences between non-violent resistance and non-resistance. And it is essential to keep these differences in mind if we are to appreciate Niebuhr's objections to pacifism.

Niebuhr views Gandhi as a great contributor to the confusion between non-violent resistance and non-resistance. Gandhi liked to refer to his method as the use of "soul-force" or "truth-force." He regarded it as spiritual, in contrast to the physical character of violence.

Gandhi wrote: "Passive resistance is a misnomer... The idea is more completely expressed by the term 'soul-force.' Active resistance is better expressed by the term 'body-force.'"<sup>243</sup> This is, however, misleading. Niebuhr observes: "A negative form of resistance does not achieve spirituality simply because it is negative. As long as it enters the field of social and physical relations and places physical restraints upon the desires and activities of others, it is a form of physical coercion." Gandhi failed to recognize "the qualifying influences of his political responsibilities upon the purity of his original ethical and religious ideals of non-resistance. He started with the belief that social injustice could be successfully resisted

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<sup>243</sup> Speeches and Writings of M.K. Gandhi (Mardas Edition, 1919), p. 132. Quoted in Moral Man and Immoral Society, p. 242.

by employing the ethical, rational and emotional forces at man's disposal. However, he soon realized that some form of physical coercion upon those who stood squarely between his people and their freedom was required."<sup>244</sup> Gandhi himself recognized this when he said that "in my humble opinion, the ordinary methods of agitation by way of petitions, deputations, and the like is no longer a remedy for moving to repentance a government so hopelessly indifferent to the welfare of its charge as the Government of India has proved to be."<sup>245</sup>

Even though Gandhi continually used the various forms of negative physical resistance -- civil disobedience, boycotts and strikes -- he insisted on giving them a connotation which really belongs to pure non-resistance.<sup>246</sup> Gandhi wrote: "Jesus Christ, Daniel and Socrates represent the purest form of passive resistance or soul-force."<sup>247</sup> With this statement, he describes what is undeniably non-violent resistance as if it were non-resistance. He goes so far as to assert that even violence is justified if it proceeds from perfect good-will. However, he insists that non-violence is usually a better means of expressing such moral goodwill.

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<sup>244</sup> Moral Man and Immoral Society, p. 242.

<sup>245</sup> C.F. Andrews, Mahatma Gandhi's Ideas, p. 238.  
Quoted in Moral Man and Immoral Society, pp. 242-243.

<sup>246</sup> Moral Man and Immoral Society, p. 243.

<sup>247</sup> Andrews, Op.cit., p. 141. Quoted in Moral Man and Immoral Society, p. 243.

Niebuhr feels that "all this is a pardonable confusion in the soul of a man who is trying to harmonize the insights of a saint with the necessities of statecraft, a very difficult achievement. But it is nevertheless a confusion."<sup>248</sup>

There are, certainly, many things to commend non-violent coercion and resistance. It does not destroy the necessary moral and rational adjustment of interest to interest during the course of non-resistance. When self-assertion is resisted, it tends to become stronger and stubborn. All conflict gives rise to dangerous passions. However, when the conflict is non-violent, these passions tend to be lessened. "It preserves moral, rational and co-operative attitudes within an area of conflict and thus augments the moral forces without destroying them."<sup>249</sup>

However, we must be careful never to consider violence a morally impossible instrument of change, simply because non-violence is preferable. As an ideal, justice is always a greater good than order. And if injustice is too great, order must be sacrificed to remedy the situation. The method to be used must be determined by a pragmatic consideration of the prevailing circumstances. Gandhi readily admitted that non-violent methods are especially adapted to the needs and limitations of a group which has more power set against it than it

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<sup>248</sup> Moral Man and Immoral Society, p. 243.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., p. 251.

is able to command.<sup>250</sup> Non-violence is a particularly strategic instrument for a group which has no effective alternative. Had the power been there, Gandhi might quite possibly have justified its use "as the instrument of moral goodwill," to redress the injustice.

Gandhi was a realist of the first order, even though he may have confused his terms a bit, and was not above a certain amount of dubious oratory. However, another brand of pacifist -- symbolized by Tolstoi -- is not so realistic. This group is dedicated to the vain illusion that the evils which power introduces into society can be eliminated, and a sort of blissful anarchy created. Their convictions are illusions, simply because "there are definite limits of moral goodwill and social intelligence beyond which even the most vital religion and the most astute educational programme will not carry a social group, whatever is possible for individuals in an intimate society."<sup>251</sup>

The brand of pacifism which some modern liberal Christianity tends to embrace is actually different from both of these, though it is much closer to Gandhi than to Tolstoi. It might be termed a pragmatic pacifism. It does not claim the law of the Cross as its inspiration. Rather, it freely admits that we live in a world where force is set against force and interest against interest, and that in such a world the ideals of the

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid., p. 252.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., p.

Cross have been violated from the beginning. It maintains that this inherent struggle can best be mitigated by arbitration which avoids conflict. This type of pacifism is a valuable, even necessary force in society, since social violence is a great evil which should be avoided wherever possible. However, it embraces great dangers. For it is an easy step from maintaining that social violence is an evil which should be avoided wherever possible -- a view all sane men would hold -- to the contention that social violence is an evil which must be avoided at all cost.

3. Pacifism and power. We have already mentioned the fact that a pure pacifism will have nothing to do with power. Let us now expand this point a bit.

Most pacifists would agree that the state exists to preserve order. However, they are guilty of a very limited concept of just what "Christian citizenship" really is. They assert, by necessary implication, that a Christian is responsible to a state only up to a certain point. But when the state must act to preserve the order, "the state is abandoned on the ground that the Christian has a higher loyalty and code of conduct." Niebuhr views this as an abdication of responsibility. The Christian is at all times in the world but not of it, and not just at a particular point he may select.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> "God Wills Both Justice and Peace," (with Angus Dun), Christianity and Crisis, Vol. 15 (June 13, 1955), p. 76. Quoted in Davis and Good, pp. 142-143.

Niebuhr rightly insists that power is not evil, since it may serve good ends. However, when ends conflict, there will usually be violence, sooner or later. Since ends are certain to conflict where humans are concerned, the use of force cannot be disavowed wholly unless one accepts the view that it is better to suffer injustice than to resort to force. As we have noted, individuals may choose to accept such injustice. But statesmen cannot. Responsible for lives beyond their own, they simply do not have this option. "They must seek for justice by an accomodation of interests and they must protect precious values by force if necessary."<sup>253</sup>

The very essence of politics is "the achievement of justice through equilibria of power." Tension will continually underlie this balance. Where there is tension, there is potential conflict; and where there is conflict, there is potential violence. Thus, a disavowal of violence makes it impossible to achieve a responsible political order.<sup>254</sup>

By refusing to recognize that sin introduces this element of conflict into the world, the pacifists give "a morally perverse preference to tyranny over anarchy (war)."

Some pacifists maintain that if tyranny is not resisted,

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<sup>253</sup> "Speak Truth to Power: Comment," The Progressive, Vol. 19 (October, 1955), p. 14. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., p. 143.

<sup>254</sup> "Christ and Our Political Decisions," Christianity and Crisis, Vol. 1 (August 11, 1941) p. 1. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., p. 143.

it will destroy itself. Niebuhr completely rejects such a view. It is not consistent with human history and experience. Rather, if tyranny is not resisted it will continue to grow. "Tyranny is not war. It is peace, but it is a peace which has nothing to do with the peace of the Kingdom of God. It is a peace which results from one will establishing a complete domination over other wills and reducing them to acquiescence."<sup>255</sup> The triumph of an unjust cause will ultimately defeat both the future hope of justice and that of peace; for there can be no lasting peace without justice.<sup>256</sup> The Biblical concept is expressed by the Prophet, Isaiah (32:17): "And the effect of righteousness will be peace."

Niebuhr illustrates these points by quoting the following from a prominent pacifist during the Second World War: "Most of us would give our right arm to find some sanction for a position in the matter of war which would let us go along with our government unhaunted by the feeling that Christ has anything to say about our decisions."

Niebuhr rejoins: "Most of us would have given our right arm to be able to go along with William Randolph Hearst, Mr. Wheeler and Mr. Hoover in a policy which avoided American participation in war, ... unhaunted by the sense that millions

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<sup>255</sup> Christianity and Power Politics, pp. 15-16.

<sup>256</sup> "God Wills Both Justice and Peace," Op.cit., p. 75.

of Jews, Czechs, Poles, Danes, Norwegians, Serbs, Greeks and French, living in the misery of slavery, were accusing us of consigning them to living death by our irresponsibility." But there is one glaring inconsistency in this parallel: "We would not have 'given our right arm' to be able to make such a decision. We find it morally too intolerable to entertain."<sup>257</sup>

The pacifist error is the feeling that "they can dispense with all structures and rules of justice simply by fulfilling the law of love." Such a view fails to recognize that the law of love stands "on the edge of history, that it represents an ultimate and not an immediate possibility."<sup>258</sup>

4. Pacifism and the atomic age. The growing prominence of thermo-nuclear weapons poses a very grave problem of our time, and for the Christian living in this time. For not only are death and destruction the probable consequences of war. To these must now be added the possibility of annihilation.

Does this alter Niebuhr's view toward pacifism, and give it more validity in his mind? The answer is a firm no.

The atomic age has merely altered, and not eliminated, the problem. We have, in the atomic age, a drastically changed situation. One factor of this situation has been mentioned --

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<sup>257</sup> "Christ and Our Political Decisions," Op.cit., pp. 1-2.

<sup>258</sup> The Nature and Destiny of Man, I, p. 298.



the danger of annihilation. A second is that, with the bipolarization of the world, and the tendency to gravitate into power blocs, along with the tensions which exist between these blocs, it is probable that any limited and localized conflict will have world-wide consequences, if it does not break into a world-wide conflict. Thirdly, the danger of war by miscalculation grows greater and greater, as the time margin for attack and retaliation grows shorter and shorter.

In spite of these frightening considerations, we must not conclude that a just war is no longer possible.

The threat of atomic warfare, with all of its horrible potential consequences, "has heightened the criminal irresponsibility of aggression, the employment of war as an instrument of national or bloc policy." Correspondingly, we must underline the moral obligation to discourage such a crime, or, if it takes place, to oppose it and, if at all possible, deny it victory.

The crucial point is this: it is fearful to consider the consequences of a successful defense against such tyranny. But it is even more fearful to imagine the consequences of a successful aggression, with the tyrannical injustice this would imply.

Niebuhr makes an important distinction in this regard. He says that "resistance to aggression, designed to deny it victory and tyrannical control, is not to be equated with victory by those who resist the aggressor." Thus, he feels that a limited

war with limited objectives, of a defensive nature, would be justified. "Because the ultimate consequences of atomic warfare cannot be measured, only the most imperative demands of justice have a clear sanction." Therefore, the occasions in which a just war may take place are highly restricted.

He asserts that "a war to defend the victims of wanton aggression, where the demands of justice join the demands of order, is today the clearest case of a just war." However, when there is a clash between the claims of justice and order, as there would be in a war aimed at freeing the oppressed, the case is now far less clear. Thus, the atomic threat has placed at a premium the claims of order, as opposed to justice. "Although oppression was never more abhorrent to the Christian conscience or more dangerous to the longer-range prospects of peace than today, the concept of a just war does not provide moral justification for initiating a war of incalculable consequences to end such oppression."

We must continue to search for both order and justice. For there can be no lasting order, or peace, without justice.<sup>259</sup>

The pacifists have, of course, a simple remedy for these harsh and troubling problems of the nuclear age. Let us simply lay down our arms. If our enemies choose to do so with us, that will be fine. If not, we will go it alone. Niebuhr

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<sup>259</sup> "God Wills Both Justice and Peace," Op.cit., pp. 76-78.

observes: "This answer assumes that it is possible to summon the human will to defy historical development with a resounding 'No.'" The question is: where is the human will that can rise to such omnipotence? We certainly do not have access to the Russian will. Therefore, we must limit ourselves to the will of America and the west. Can we, as a nation and as a group, risk subjugation or annihilation in order to say "no" to this horrible new dimension of destruction? In short, can we risk letting the Russians have the bomb, and giving up our own? "The answer is that no responsible statesman will risk putting his nation in that position of defenselessness. Individuals may, but nations do not risk their very existence."

There is another belief the pacifists hold. They feel that if we act in a "Christian" way, it will soften the Russian heart. They believe that a soft answer will most certainly turn away wrath. However, such a view is inconsistent with history; and it is blind to the nature of communism. For communism, obsessed with the belief that it is bringing its brand of redemption to the world, is not likely to be impressed by a "moral" gesture from its decadent and reactionary foes. "Our will is neither powerful enough nor good enough to accomplish the miracle expected of us in the pacifist position."<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> "The Hydrogen Bomb," Christianity and Society, Vol. 15 (Spring, 1950), pp. 5-7. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., pp. 146-147.

Thus, we face a tragic situation, with no easy solutions. "There is nothing in the Christian faith which would enable Christians to evade a tragic dilemma which other men face. The development of atomic weapons has heightened the moral dilemmas which periodically generate the pacifist revolt against responsibilities which embody moral ambiguities. But it has not solved them."<sup>261</sup>

5. Religion or heresy? There is one final point which should be made in this consideration of pacifism. Pacifism may function both as a perfectionist expression of religion, and as a heresy as well. How is this possible?

First, we must bear in mind that to oppose pacifism is not to eliminate Christ from our convictions or decisions. It rather means that "we interpret life, man, history and even God in different terms than some of our brethren. We believe that the evil in man is more stubborn, that life and history are more tragic, and that the God who is revealed in Christ is more terrible in his judgments than is envisaged in sentimentalized versions of the Christian faith."<sup>262</sup>

Such a view as this is based on the belief that sin has introduced an element of conflict into the world which the pacifists do not see. They are thus unable to grasp the

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<sup>261</sup> "The Hydrogen Bomb and Moral Responsibility," Messenger, Vol. 19 (May 4, 1954), p. 5.  
Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., p. 147.

<sup>262</sup> "Christ and Our Political Decisions," Op.cit., p. 1.

complexity of the problem of justice. They simply assert that if only there were more love in the world, "all the complex, and sometimes horrible, realities of the political order could be dispensed with. They do not see that their 'if' begs the most basic problem of human history." Since men are sinners, "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."<sup>263</sup>

On the basis of this, Niebuhr asserts that certain forms of Christian pacifism are heretical. They fail to distinguish between the relative justice which man, at his best, can create, and the peril of tyranny. Certainly, any civilization which is fighting tyranny must be aware of the point at which its sins approach the barbarism of the foe it fights. However, it must also recognize the point at which it is the custodian of values and achievements which transcend its faults, or sins. Otherwise, an uneasy conscience may betray it by default into the hands of a tyranny which is void of scruples.<sup>265</sup>

We have already characterized pacifism as another version of the Christian perfectionism of which Niebuhr is so critical. It expresses a genuine impulse to take the law of Christ seriously

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<sup>263</sup> Christianity and Power Politics, p. 14.

<sup>264</sup> "An Open Letter to Richard Roberts," Christianity and Society, Vol. 5 (Summer, 1940), p. 32.

Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., p. 149.

when and only when it is presented as an individual standard, and not as a political alternative. This is valid on the individual level. "Individuals may run the risk of annihilation always involved in the practice of complete non-resistance; but it is questionable whether they can justify the same risks when they are dealing with the interests of a group."<sup>265</sup>

There is thus a place for non-resistance, for this quest for perfectionism. It warns us not to "accept the tragic sin in which the struggle for justice involves us as ultimately normative."<sup>266</sup> However, the Christian who holds this view must steer clear of the world of politics. Niebuhr states: "Let him, in other words, be a pure pacifist and remind the rest of us, who fool with politics, that we are playing a dangerous game."<sup>267</sup>

We therefore see that the pacifists, when they maintain that they are expressing only an individual ideal, are consistent with the Christian ideal. However, when they assert that this ideal represents a viable method for achieving political justice, they make of this ideal a heresy.

The pacifists correctly maintain that we stand under the

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<sup>265</sup> "Christian Politics and Communist Religion,"  
Op.cit., pp. 455-456.

<sup>266</sup> "If America Enters the War," Op.cit., p. 1580.

<sup>267</sup> "The Will of God and the Van Zeeland Report,"  
Christian Century, Vol. 55 (December 14, 1938),  
p. 1550. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit.,  
p. 150.

judgment of God. Let us never forget that. But they are in error when they maintain that we have neither the right nor the duty to defend an admittedly imperfect civilization against worse alternatives. They are right in recognizing love as the ultimate law of life. But they are wrong when they ignore the sinfulness of man, and the degree to which this sinfulness makes even imperfect justice a tentative compromise between competing interests and conflicting wills. "They seek erroneously to build a political platform upon individual perfection."<sup>268</sup>

B. World Government: Illusion and Reality

1. Two views of world politics. An analysis of Niebuhr's views on international organization must proceed from a general approach to the problems of international politics. He distinguishes between two such approaches. First, there is the historical and realistic school of politics. Secondly, there is the approach which tends toward rationalism in method and idealism in temper.

The latter school rightly insists that the present economic interdependence of the world demands some new form of international political organization. They believe that this form of organization must be a world government, "which will make our economic interdependence sufferable and which will organize the potential world community and make it actual."

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<sup>268</sup> "The Christian Faith and the World Crisis,"  
Op.cit., p. 4.

The realist and historical school by no means denies the validity and promise of these new necessities and possibilities. However, it views the task of attaining them in the cruel light of the stubborn inertia which characterizes the pages of human history. "It wants to know how nations are to be beguiled into a limitation of their sovereign right, considering that national pride and parochial self-sufficiency are something more than the mere fruit of ignorance but recurring forces in all efforts at social cohesion." This approach demands that the task of world organization be approached from the standpoint of historical realism.

Niebuhr feels, however, that the truth does not lie totally on the side of the realists. He notes: "Without an admixture of the temper and the insights of the other school, there could be no genuine advance in social organization at all."

There is a danger of cynicism in the realist view. Recognizing that politics is essentially the problem of a manipulation of power, the realists easily forget that economic and military power form only one aspect of political power. "They do not fully appreciate that a proper regard for moral aspirations is a source of political prestige; and that this prestige is in itself an indispensable source of power."<sup>269</sup>

Further, through its emphasis on the balance-of-power

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<sup>269</sup> "Plans for World Reorganization," Christianity and Crisis, Vol. 2 (October 18, 1942), pp. 3-4. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., pp. 245-246.



approach, the realist school offers little alternative to continual anarchy.

We thus have two extremes. Pure idealists are blind to the appeal of parochial loyalties, which operate as a counter-force against a potential world community. They naively imagine that every new situation automatically generates the resources to solve the problems it creates. The realists, on the other hand, are so impressed by the force of parochial appeals that they are blind to the new and unique elements in the revolutionary world situation of our time. And they discount the destructive power of this revolutionary situation. For though a period of catastrophe in history may not bring forward the resources to solve all of its problems, it will tend to destroy some false solutions, and to overcome some of the inertial obstacles to advance.<sup>270</sup>

For Niebuhr, the Christian solution is always a combination of idealism and realism. Always preserving humility, the Christian must deal with both the realities and the higher possibilities of human nature.<sup>271</sup> The Christian should realize that "the creation of some form of world community, compatible with the necessities of a technical age, is the most compelling command

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<sup>270</sup> The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, pp. 173-176.

<sup>271</sup> "World Community and World Government," Christianity and Crisis, Vol. 6 (March 4, 1946), p. 5. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., pp. 245-246.

of our day."<sup>272</sup> He concludes: "Our job is therefore to establish a tolerable community within the limits set by man's recalcitrance."<sup>273</sup>

2. The illusion: World Government. The situation of modern man, obsessed as he is by insecurity, is essentially tragic. Technical achievements, rather than solving our ills, have compounded our insecurities. These technical achievements have established a rudimentary world community; but it is not integrated organically, morally or politically. It is a community of heightened self-dependence, but with little mutual trust and respect. And it is characterized by a fierce ideological conflict which divides the world into hostile camps.

In such a situation, it is imperative that men of good will should attempt to strengthen every moral and political force which would help in further integrating the world community. However, in their zeal to do so, some well-meaning men have felt that "the gap between a technically integrated and politically divided community could be closed by the simple expedient of establishing a world government through the fiat of the human will and creating world community by the fiat of world government."

Such a view adds pathos to an already tragic situation. It gives rise to two regrettable consequences. First, it

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<sup>272</sup> "Plans for World Organization," Op.cit., p. 6.  
<sup>273</sup> "World Community and World Government,"  
Op.cit., p. 5.

"beguiles some men from urgent moral and political responsibilities." Second, it leads some to criticize excessively and irresponsibly the limited constitutional beginnings which have been made by the United Nations. For Niebuhr, such criticism is valid only if better and more mature constitutional structures are within the realm of possibilities. He clearly feels that, for the present, they are not.<sup>274</sup>

Proponents of world government tend to rest their argument on one flimsy prop: that the desirability of world order proves that world government is attainable. This is simply not the case.<sup>275</sup>

There are three simple propositions which state well the fallacy of world government.

First, governments are not created by fiat. Advocates of world government want to convene a great world constitutional convention at which the nations will abrogate or abridge their sovereignty in favor of a newly-created international sovereignty. This has never been done in world history; nor is it likely to be done. Governmental authority develops historically, and over long periods of time.

Niebuhr views the notion that world government is a fairly simple possibility as "the final and most absurd form of the 'social contract' conception of government which has confused

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<sup>274</sup> Christian Realism and Political Problems, pp. 15-16.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., pp. 16-17.

modern political thought since Hobbes."<sup>276</sup>

How do the proponents of world government react to a stand such as that of the Soviet Union, a nation which has served notice, by word and deed, that it will not submit its sovereignty to an international constitutional order? The answer is twofold. First, they say that a genuinely constitutional world order has never been offered to the Russians; if such is done, and the constitution is not weighted against her, there are real possibilities that she will accept such a scheme. This answer embodies in a nutshell the key rationalist assumption: it holds that the mutual trust upon which community relations must rest can be created and insured by constitutions.

Actually, if there is to be any workable and democratic constitution, it must embrace some form of majority rule. The majority and the minority must have enough common ground to keep the relationship viable.

The second answer is to propose that a "world" government be created without Russia. This answer, in fact, confirms the ambiguities which exist in the present historical situation. They would destroy what bridges exist -- such as the Security Council of the United Nations -- in favor of a more ordered constitutional system. They feel that one of two things would happen. First, in complete blindness to the dynamism of commun-

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid., pp. 17-18.

ism, they feel that Russia may capitulate and join. Second, and only if the first fails, they feel that such a move will avoid war by leading to a preponderance of power in the west. Here, they run afoul of their own doctrine. For they have advocated all along the replacement of "power politics" with a "world of law."

Niebuhr finds it difficult to speak of this view without bitterness. He remarks:

The world federalists who accept the inevitability of war walk bravely up the hill of pure idealism and down again into the realm of power politics. In this journey they rid themselves of the much despised quasi-constitutional system of the United Nations. Their brethren who are in a less exalted frame of mind will continue to put up with the Charter for the sake of preserving a bridge, however slight, between Russia and the West, making the best arrangements they can to restrain Russia, while trying at the same time to strengthen the existing world security agencies.<sup>277</sup>

The second fallacy of world government -- and one more serious than the first -- lies in the relation of government to community. Niebuhr observes: "Governments cannot create communities simply because the authority of government is not primarily the authority of law nor the authority of force, but the authority of the community itself."<sup>278</sup> "If the community does not exist in fact, at least in inchoate form, constitu-

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid., pp. 19-21.  
<sup>278</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

tutional instruments cannot create it."<sup>279</sup>

Where in history communities have come together, it has been through force, rather than through constitutional agreement. The analogy in the present world situation would not be the creation of a world government by fiat, but rather the conquest of the world by either Russia or the United States, and the subsequent creation of a world empire.<sup>280</sup>

These facts are tragic; and one may well wish that they were not true. But they are. The world community is most certainly lacking in the potent cohesive force which national communities possess.

This points to a third fallacy. While the international community does not totally lack integrative forces, they are minimal. Let us look at these integrative forces.

First and extremely important is the factor of economic interdependence. However, this must be conditioned by the vast disparity in the economic strength of the various states.

A second and important factor in the world community is the shared fear of annihilation. However, we must remember that the fear of a particular foe is usually more potent than the fear of destruction. Niebuhr notes: "There is no record in history of peoples establishing a common community because they

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<sup>279</sup> "The Myth of World Government," Nation, Vol. 162 (March 16, 1946), p. 312. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., p. 249.

<sup>280</sup> Christian Realism and Political Problems, pp. 23-24.

fear each other, though there are many instances when the fear of a common foe acted as the cement of cohesion."

A final and most important factor of cohesion is the moral one. Enlightened men everywhere have a sense of obligation which transcends national boundaries. Such men tend to unite in a desire for a community of mankind. This common moral sense is important; however, it does not have as much political relevance as is often supposed. There may or may not be a "natural law" which is "self-evident" to all men. If there is, it is couched in generalities, and does not go beyond minimal rules. And it has not been able to reach a decision on the criteria to be used to measure the due of each man.

We must remember that the primary cleavage in the world today does not arise between traditional East and traditional West. It rather stems from a violent civil war in the heart of Western civilization, a civil war which pits a liberal creed against a fanatical equalitarian creed. The fact that both sides lay claim to the word "democracy" is a striking semantic symbol of the very nature of this civil war.

Thus, we have a picture of very limited forces seeking to integrate the world community. Their task is neither vain nor ignoble; indeed, it is most noble, and "must and will engage the conscience of mankind for ages to come." However, Niebuhr adds warily: "But the edifice of government which we build will

be sound and useful if its height is proportionate to the strength of the materials from which it is constructed."<sup>281</sup>

Blind to this admittedly unsettling situation, proponents of world government march on behind the slogan "one world or none." This slogan has some limited value, in that it calls our attention to our precarious situation. But it is, in sum, very foolish. It is foolish because a sober analysis will convince any honest person that world government is, for the present, impossible. We do not have one world; nor do we have any hope of achieving one world in the proximate future. If we follow this slogan, logic tells us that we have no world at all. We thus risk letting logic drive us to despair.<sup>282</sup>

Niebuhr concludes:

We are living in a world which is neither one in organization nor yet consistently divided in two. Let us not be more consistent than history is. Our hope lies in protecting ourselves at the points where the world is divided, but also in preserving the tenuous threads which still unite it.<sup>283</sup>

3. The fact: The United Nations, and the example of UNESCO.  
The United Nations is most certainly not the "Parliament of

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281 Ibid., pp. 26-29.

282 "One World or None," Christianity and Crisis, Vol. 8 (February 16, 1948), p. 9. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., p. 253.

283 "The Federation of Western Europe," Christianity and Crisis, Vol. 8 (March 1, 1948), p. 18. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., p. 253



Mankind and Federation of the World" which the nineteenth century fondly believed to be the "one far-off divine event, to which the whole creation moves." It stands, rather, as a symbol of that part of those nineteenth century illusions that was true. However, two unanticipated contemporary facts have pointed out vividly the errors in this view. The first of these is the unremitting attempt of communism to shape the world in the form of its own utopian illusions. The second is the development of thermo-nuclear weapons. The first has divided the world into two antagonistic camps. The second has established the terrible possibility of mutual annihilation as the possible consequence of this enmity between the two. Niebuhr sees both as stark reminders of the fact that human history embodies possibilities of both good and evil. It remains ambiguous.

We thus face the task of integrating the human community in the light of serious and unanticipated hazards. We are faced with the need for diligence and honesty in gathering and evaluating facts. We must also further examine the presuppositions which provide the standpoint for the gathering and interpretation of facts. In short, we must develop a wider perspective of the total situation.

Perhaps the greatest presupposition of all -- the belief that if we amass enough insight and skill and resources, we can shape history -- must be called into question. For this pre-

supposition leads us to approach problems as if we were the potential managers and masters of our destiny. "It has seemingly not dawned upon us that we have only limited competence in deflecting historical destinies in the drama of history in which we meet competitive creators who have contrasting ideas of our common destiny."

We thus have one group proposing to solve our problems by world government, or wisdom, and another by technical advance, or power. "Both tend to disregard the possibility of unpredictable emergencies in the drama of history."

There is one thing which can easily be overlooked, and which is most important. The tension that exists between Russia and the United States tends, as a necessary measure, to increase the cohesion within each side. Niebuhr views this fact as extremely important in forming a "community." Thus, such things as the ad hoc defensive arrangements, which are formed under the aegis of the United Nations, are an important step.

We must therefore never view the United Nations itself as a security against war between the great powers. It was organized on the basis of unanimity; and there is no unanimity. This idea betrays the illusion that the free world could establish community with communism. The very establishment of the veto is an affirmation of the fact that the world community has not yet reached a stage in which minorities trust majorities. "Yet

this is a basic requirement of the constitutional instruments of which we are so fond."<sup>284</sup>

This leads us to what Niebuhr views as the most important role of the United Nations. Frustrated by events in serving its intended task of preserving the peace, it plays the necessary role of integrating the world as far as the world situation permits. Niebuhr comments: "On the one hand, it is a minimal bridge across the chasm between Russia and the West. On the other hand, it furnishes the meeting ground for the free nations, the aegis for its various ad hoc arrangements for defensive communities, and an assembly of peoples in which world opinion serves to check the policies of the most powerful nations in the alliance." Needless to say, these unintended services are vital. Niebuhr asserts that "it is one of the interesting revelations of the charm of historical surprises that all these factors of cohesion would probably not have had a chance to become established if the framers of the initial United Nations Charter had not been beguiled from their justified fears by an unjustified hope."

There is a second factor which is serving to integrate the free world. This is the integration brought about through a differentiation of authority, chiefly motivated by considerations of power. The central factor in this phenomenon is the rise in

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The Self and the Dramas of History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), pp. 202-206.

power and position of leadership of the United States.<sup>285</sup> One of the chief purposes the United Nations serves is to "relate American power to a weakened world and American prosperity to an impoverished world." However, this has hazards. For a preponderance of power in the hands of any one nation is dangerous to justice. It is difficult for power and weakness to march together in the same harness.<sup>286</sup> Power tempts those who hold it to pride, and those who lack it to envy and resentment.<sup>287</sup> "Our loyalty to the United Nations in a sense ought to be a symbol of our loyalty to the principles of international cooperation and our responsibility to the international community."<sup>288</sup>

This power and this loyalty give rise to yet another clear and present danger. We must beware lest we falsely label what should be the legitimate exercise of power as imperialism. For instance, we tend to view the United Nations as "the true organ of the universal community to which all nations must be subject." This view is questionable. Some brief comments on the 1956 Suez affair will illustrate this.

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<sup>285</sup> Ibid., pp. 206-207.

<sup>286</sup> With the phrase, "in the same harness," Niebuhr refers to both the United Nations as a whole, and to the Western Alliance within the United Nations. This latter view will be developed later in this essay.

<sup>287</sup> "The Moral Implications of Loyalty to the United Nations," Hazen Pamphlet No. 29, New Haven, 1952, pp. 9-10. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., p. 257.

<sup>288</sup> "The Churches and the United Nations," Christianity and Society, Vol. 18 (Winter, 1952-53), p. 3. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., p. 257.

Speaking after the episode was past, General Eisenhower praised Britain and France for heeding the United Nations and quitting Egypt. This was, he said, "an immense contribution to world order." However, he failed to note that they left because the combined power of the Soviet Union and the United States ordered them out. The then-President's view was essentially pacifist, when he said: "If the United Nations once admits that international disputes can be settled by force then we will have destroyed the very foundation of the organization and our best hope of establishing a real world order. That would be a disaster for us all."<sup>289</sup>

These eloquent words obscure the whole point of the organization. It is not so much a super-government as a forum organ for diplomacy among nations. If we emphasize the former mistaken view, we will obscure the hegemonic responsibility of our own nation.

It is hardly necessary to remind the reader that tragic events were taking place in Hungary at almost the same time as the Suez affair. The Hungarian incident showed clearly that Russia was strong enough to defy the United Nations. General Eisenhower deplored this, and noted that two wrongs do not make a right.

In short, he placed emphasis on the moral and political

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<sup>289</sup> The Structure of Nations and Empires. A Study of the Recurring Patterns and Problems of the Political Order in Relation to the Unique Problems of the Nuclear Age. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), pp. 15-16.

prestige of the United Nations, and conveniently ignored the power factors which operate in an organization which has no power of its own, save that given it by the consent of the powerful nations. In Hungary this consent, which the theory of the United Nations presupposes, was lacking.<sup>290</sup>

Such a view of the United Nations, is traceable to the same rather abstract universalism which dominated Woodrow Wilson, and which survives even today. "We still regard the United Nations as the source of policy, when its very constitution prevents its from becoming more than a clearing house for the policies of the nations."<sup>291</sup>

Niebuhr maintains strongly that the United States must acknowledge the dimensions of its great power, and act accordingly. The great disparities of power which exist within the United Nations make it futile and even dangerous to rely on that Organization as the initiator of strategy. Strong nations, indeed all nations, will rightly develop their own policies within the framework of the United Nations Charter.<sup>292</sup>

The integration of at least part of the world is thus taking place largely apart from the conscious control of our dogmas. And yet this integration is, for the present, more successful than more obvious artifacts. We must pursue this integration,

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290 Ibid., pp. 16-17.

291 Ibid., p. 21.

292 Ibid., p. 259.

confident that the greatest weapon for escaping tyranny will be unity of the free. It is improbable that communism will ever lose its power as a potent secular religion. But it may be so challenged and defeated that it will be shorn of its power to threaten the world.<sup>293</sup>

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Niebuhr views the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization as an Organization which is "in the paradoxical position of performing most useful and necessary functions in the nascent world community but giving very implausible reasons for the performance of its functions."

Many serious supporters of UNESCO claim that it can resolve the conflict between Russia and the West.<sup>294</sup> It is asserted that if the unresolved conflicts can be taken from the hands of the politicians and given to men of culture, they can be resolved. Niebuhr sees at least two faults in such a view.

First, it assumes that men of culture can be found in Russia who do not reflect the views of the ruling oligarchy.

Second, and far more important, it assumes that nations disagree simply because their statesmen are intellectually

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<sup>293</sup> The Self and the Dramas of History, pp. 207-208.

<sup>294</sup> "The Theory and Practice of UNESCO," International Organization, Vol. 4 (February, 1950), pp. 3-5.

inferior to their cultural leaders, rather than because of their responsible pursuit of the interests of their various nations. This misses the whole point. Statesmen are to be distinguished from cultural leaders not by their greater stupidity, but rather by their greater responsibility to their various communities.<sup>295</sup>

Granted, ignorance among men, with the subsequent suspicion and mistrust that may follow it, has contributed to war. However, just because ignorance may aggravate fear, it is not logical to say that more knowledge will necessarily allay suspicion, mistrust, and fear. Throughout history, Germany and France have known one another quite well. Niebuhr observes that "actually the most tragic conflicts are between disputants who know very well what the other party intends, but are forced by either principle or interest to oppose it." To resolve such disputes, there must be far more than understanding. There must be a community, possessing both moral authority and police force.

UNESCO's role thus lies in its services to the emergent world community, rather than to its much-heralded but usually illusory contributions to "peace."

Such long-term contributions as literacy programs are

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<sup>295</sup> "Peace through Cultural Cooperation," Christianity and Crisis, Vol. 9 (October 17, 1949), p. 132. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., p. 258.



thus most important. However, they are not necessarily guarantees of peace. Modern wars are fought between literate rather than illiterate nations, as a rule. Literacy may teach a person to better understand his fellow man. It may just as well teach him to read plans for weapons, and the writings of Marx.

The assertion, found in UNESCO's constitution, that "Peace must be founded, if it is not to fail, upon the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind" is a questionable proposition at best. The task at hand -- both immediate and long-term -- is to "achieve minimal common convictions on standards of justice and to establish degrees of tolerance between disparate cultures which do not now exist." This task is UNESCO's justification.<sup>296</sup>

In sum, UNESCO has fallen prey to a too-easy universalism. "Its idealists burke the tragic realities of life: the conflicts of interest which cannot be easily composed; the perils of war which cannot be simply overcome; the power of collective egoism which is not easily subordinated."

Throughout all this, though, we must beware lest our idealism fail to survive at all. Niebuhr observes that "the spiritual problem of UNESCO is exactly the spiritual problem of modern man, who must find a way of engaging in impossible tasks and

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<sup>296</sup> "The Theory and Practice of UNESCO," Op.cit., pp. 6-10.

not be discouraged when he fails to complete any of them." UNESCO, like the whole modern generation, "needs a faith which recognizes the completion of life within and above its fragmentariness, the final solution beyond all our solutions." In short, it must be able to apprehend the grace which enables man to say: "We are perplexed but not to despair."<sup>297</sup>

C. The Implications of Power

1. Elements of power. Niebuhr's analysis of the composition and role of power is based on one central point: "All social cooperation on a larger scale than the most intimate social group requires a measure of coercion."<sup>298</sup> Man's mind and imagination are limited; he is unable to transcend his own interests sufficiently to appreciate the interests of his fellow man as he does his own. In addition, even if he were able to appreciate fully the views of his fellow man, his selfish and sinful nature would still cause him to place his own interests first. Thus, force is necessary.<sup>299</sup>

We must remember, however, that order within a community is not maintained by power alone. There must also be certain

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<sup>297</sup> "Peace through Cultural Cooperation," Op.cit., pp. 132-133.

<sup>298</sup> Moral Man and Immoral Society, p. 3.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

organic cohesions, as well as a decent organization of the various vitalities of national life which both complement and conflict with each other.

In the international scene, the partial, and sometimes total, anarchy of nations requires that, if there is to be peace, power must be balanced against power in time of peace.<sup>300</sup>

Niebuhr maintains, then, that all communities "are more or less stable or precarious harmonies of human vital capacities." Power governs these harmonies. It is not only the "coercive and organizing power of government." It is also "the balance of vitalities and forces in any given social situation." Thus two elements -- "the central organizing power, and the equilibrium of power" -- are both necessary.<sup>301</sup>

There is, of course, a dilemma inherent in power and the community which simply will not go away. Tyranny is avoided by establishing a tolerable equilibrium. However, if such an equilibrium is not organized and directed, it will probably lead to anarchy. Thus some individual, class, government, nation, or group of nations must have more authority than others. The distinction between rulers and ruled can never be abolished, though the ruled may be given power to check the rulers. The continuing task is to prevent rulers from becoming tyrants.<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> Christianity and Power Politics, pp. 123-124.

<sup>301</sup> The Nature and Destiny of Man, II, pp. 257-258.

<sup>302</sup> "The Long and Short Range of History," Christianity and Society, Vol. 7 (Winter, 1941), p. 8. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., p. 106.

This danger inherent in power cannot be eliminated: it will always threaten man. "There is no possibility of making history completely safe against either occasional conflicts of vital interests (war) or against the misuse of the power which is intended to prevent such conflict of interests (tyranny)."<sup>303</sup>

The only safeguard which exists is the balancing of power. This fact extends through both the domestic and the international scene. It is rooted deep in Niebuhr's theology, and traces back to Augustine, to whom so much of his theology owes a debt.<sup>304</sup> His view is summarized well in this statement: "All political community and justice are achieved by coercing the anarchy of collective self-interest into some kind of decent order by the most attainable balance of power. Such a balance, once achieved, can be stabilized, embellished, and even, on occasion, perfected by more purely moral considerations. But there has never been a scheme of justice in history which did not have a balance of power at its foundation."<sup>305</sup> This balance seeks to avoid the domination of one life by another through establishing "an equilibrium of powers and vitalities, so that weakness does not invite enslavement by the strong." Unless

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<sup>303</sup> The Nature and Destiny of Man, II, p. 284.

<sup>304</sup> Supra, pp. 41-49.

<sup>305</sup> Christianity and Power Politics, p. 104.

this balance exists, moral and social restraints will never succeed completely in guarding against injustice and perhaps even enslavement. Man is simply not that good.

One might say: an equilibrium of power is not brotherhood. It certainly is not. Rather than create brotherhood, such an equilibrium creates tension.<sup>306</sup> In Christian terms, this is where the doctrine of love enters in. For without love, the frictions created by this tension would be intolerable.

These tensions may become overt; and overt tensions easily degenerate into conflict.<sup>307</sup> "The principle of the equilibrium of power is thus a principle of justice insofar as it prevents domination and enslavement; but it is a principle of anarchy and conflict insofar as its tensions, if unresolved, result in overt conflict."<sup>308</sup>

2. Power, government, and democracy. Niebuhr views the functions of government as standing "upon a higher plane of moral sanction and social necessity than the principle of the balance of power." Moreover, the principle of government is "a more conscious effort to arrive at justice than the principle of the balance of power." While the principle of

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<sup>306</sup> The Nature and Destiny of Man, II, p. 265.

<sup>307</sup> Christianity and Power Politics, pp. 26-27.

<sup>308</sup> The Nature and Destiny of Man, p. 266.

balance of power belongs to the natural, the principle of government belongs to the historical.<sup>309</sup>

All structures of justice, in Niebuhr's view, presuppose the sinfulness of man. "But they are also mechanisms by which men fulfill their obligations to their fellow men, beyond the possibilities offered in direct voluntary and personal relationships."<sup>310</sup>

Thus, government has a dual function. It must "guide, direct, deflect and rechannel conflicting and competing forces in a community in the interest of a higher order." It must also "provide instruments for the expression of the individual's sense of obligation to the community, as well as weapons against the individual's anti-social lusts and ambitions."<sup>311</sup> Thus, "a healthy society forces practically all people to be just beyond their natural inclinations by establishing standards of justice which gain the moral assent of the majority of the population but yet operate against the immediate inclinations even of some of the good people who helped to establish the standards."<sup>312</sup>

We can therefore conclude that "to establish justice in

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309 Ibid., p. 266.

310 Ibid., pp. 198, 192.

311 The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, p. 44.

312 "The Idolatry of America," Christianity and Society, Vol. 15 (Spring, 1950), p. 4. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., p. 110.

a sinful world is the whole sad duty of the political order." Justice must be based on law; and law is merely the "stabilization of certain social equilibria, brought about by pressures and counterpressures in society, and expressed in the structures of government."<sup>313</sup>

A true democracy recognizes the moral ambiguities which are inherent in both government and the principle of the balance of power. The highest achievement of democracy is that resistance to government is embodied within government. A "loyal opposition" is a concrete realization of the genius of democracy in this regard. Thus, a citizen, or group of citizens, can use assured "constitutional" powers to resist unjust demands which his government may make upon him. This can be done, in a democracy, without creating anarchy because government is so conceived that criticism is an instrument of better government rather than a threat to government itself.

In a democratic society, power is related to justice in two instrumental ways: through the organization of power, and through the power balance. Much of the painful history of democracy is due to a failure to comprehend the perils contained in these two instruments. "Usually the school of thought which comprehended the moral ambiguities of government did not understand

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<sup>313</sup> "The National Preaching Mission," Radical Religion, Vol. 2 (Spring, 1937), p. 3.  
Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., p. 180.

the perils of anarchy inhering in uncontrolled social life; while those who feared this anarchy were uncritical of the claims and pretensions of government."<sup>314</sup>

Ideally, freedom and order will support one another in a democratic society. Such a society does justice to two complementary dimensions of human nature: man's spiritual stature, and his character as a being in society. "An ideal democratic order seeks unity within the conditions of freedom; and maintains freedom within the framework of order."<sup>315</sup>

The balance of power in a democracy is a recognition of a basic fact: that various groups will never have a perfect, rational conformity of interests; indeed, political arguments are never entirely rational arguments. There is always an implied threat of force.<sup>316</sup> Democracy holds all viewpoints under criticism and, at its best, creates "an uncoerced harmony among the various social and cultural vitalities."<sup>317</sup> It also checks pretensions which would upset this harmony. It withholds total power from any dogma, and instead creates, not an automatic but a contrived balance of power. "In this way it distills a modicum of truth from a conflict of error."<sup>318</sup>

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314 The Nature and Destiny of Man, II, p. 268.

315 The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, pp. 1-3.

316 Christianity and Power Politics, p. 86.

317 "The Contribution of Religion to Cultural Unity," Hazen pamphlet No. 13 (1945), p. 6.  
Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., p. 183.

318 Christian Realism and Political Problems, pp. 14, 51.



The democratic consensus, which is necessary for the survival of the community, will thus always be tentative and precarious. Various alliances will make up the majority from time to time. However, there is one important point which Niebuhr stresses, and which he insists history has established: the justice created in this fashion, with this freedom, is much greater than that attained by allowing the "truth" about justice to be defined by any one group, and then to remain unchallenged.

Why is this the case? Because "the mind by which we define justice is bound, not only by ultimate commitments, but by immediate interests." A free society allows both ultimate commitments and immediate interests to be taken into account.<sup>319</sup>

This is why elections are "the pride of democracy." They serve to "keep all political power under the scrutiny of the citizens and give the men who organize political life only a short lease of power, which must be periodically renewed.... 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."<sup>320</sup> Democracy, thus, holds "all sources of authority under criticism."<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> "The Commitment of the Self and the Freedom of the Mind," in Religion and Freedom of Thought, by Perry Miller, Robert L. Calhoun, Nathan M. Pusey, and Reinhold Niebuhr (New York: Doubleday, 1954), pp. 58-59. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., p. 184.

<sup>320</sup> The Nature and Destiny of Man, II, p. 263.

<sup>321</sup> "The Contribution of Religion to Cultural Unity," Op.cit., p. 4.

Niebuhr notes: "The reason this final democratic freedom is right is that there is no historical reality, whether it be church or government, whether it be the reason of wise men or specialists, which is not involved in the flux and relativity of human existence; which is not subject to error and sin, and which is not tempted to exaggerate its errors and sins when they are made immune to criticism."<sup>322</sup>

We thus see that the prime mechanism for preserving justice in the community is not the judgment of the community, but rather "the effect of free criticism in moderating the pretensions of every group and ... the weight of competing power in balancing power which might become inordinate and oppressive." This is important; for it makes it possible to conclude that democracy is not effective only when men are virtuous. It is rather a method "which prevents interested men from following their interests to the detriment of the community -- though there must of course be a minimal inclination of justice to furnish a base of community."<sup>323</sup>

In sum, we can see that the basic principles of democracy are essentially extensions and elaborations of the concept and strategies of the balance of power.

3. The international scene. As we have noted, both

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<sup>322</sup> The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, pp. 70-71.

<sup>323</sup> The Self and the Dramas of History, p. 198.

idealists and realists are fond of presenting the world with a two-horned dilemma: we either have world government or world war. We have discussed the errors of this view earlier, in regard to world government. One new factor should be mentioned here.

Realists deny that world government is possible. Therefore, we will have war. And, if we must have war, why not fight it on the best terms available? The logical next step is the advocacy of preventive war.

Now, if the dilemma actually exists, such reasoning is valid. Niebuhr, however, maintains that there is no such dilemma. Dilemmas may, like horned cattle, have two horns. However, there is no reason to believe that history is always impaled on one of those two horns. The function of statesmanship is to explore the area which exists between the two horns.

Even when the situation is as tragic as the contemporary scene, "when a careful estimate of historic possibilities is bound to lead to more pessimistic than optimistic conclusions, we have no right to speak of 'inevitabilities' in history. Men are always agents, and not merely the stuff, in the historical process." Niebuhr is critical of modern culture for overestimating the power of the human will. However, this does not imply that we should claim no responsibility at all for the human will.

The task of the free world, Niebuhr feels, is not to worry too much about converting the Russian oligarchy to a democratic view. This would certainly be a nice achievement; however, the mind of "these fanatic priest-kings of a secular religion" will not be easily altered. Rather, the task of the free world is to convince that part of the world not now communistic that history refutes the logic of communism, and that justice and security are attainable in a free society, and need not be exchanged for the relative security of slavery. If this is done, "we will preserve a sufficient preponderance of power to prevent Russian aggression." And while "the Russian dogmatism will not necessarily be consciously changed by such a moral defeat ... it will gradually be robbed of its virulence."<sup>324</sup>

Niebuhr views the Anglo-American alliance as the central and most important feature of western strength. He asserts that "the world is being held together by American power, frequently deflected, though not always guided, by the wider experience and greater political maturity of British statecraft."<sup>325</sup> However, despite our many affinities, the relationship is not always an easy one. Sometimes it is easier for strangers to be cordial than relatives. Our predominantly economic power does not always sit well with Britain's predominantly political power, which

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<sup>324</sup> "A Protest against a Dilemma's Two Horns," World Politics, Vol. 2 (April, 1950), pp. 338-344.

<sup>325</sup> "British Experience and American Power," Christianity and Crisis, Vol. 16 (May 14, 1956), p. 57. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., p. 303.

until recently rested on the vast British Empire.<sup>326</sup>

Niebuhr views this friction as a sort of recreation on an international scale "of the old tension between the landed aristocrats and the rising bourgeoisie." He comments: "The British own more castles than we; we, increasingly, own the mortgages to these castles. We do not quite know whether we ought to resent the fact that we do not live in the castle or rejoice that we have the mortgage. In this moral predicament we have tended to resolve our difficulty by calling attention to the fact that the owner of the castle has not completely liquidated serfdom on his estate, but we do not mention that the owner is in danger of becoming our serf."<sup>327</sup>

On a wider scale, America is "linked in a bond of common destiny with Europe." This bond figures prominently in one of Niebuhr's central ideas: if there is to be peace, it will be "maintained for years to come by the preponderance of power in the Western world." This power must be moral as well as political. It is like "the total strength of the body plus the psychic vitality of the soul which is in the body. The preponderance of power in the Western world is constituted primarily of the moral unity and economic health of that

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326 "Understanding England," Nation, Vol. 157 (August 14, 1943), pp. 175, 177. Quoted in

Davis and Good, Op.cit., pp. 303-304.  
327 "American Liberals and British Labor," Nation, Vol. 162 (June 8, 1946), p. 684. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., p. 304.

world."<sup>328</sup>

The West is devoted to what the World Council of Churches likes to call a "free and responsible society." With this, there is no quarrel. The problem is to translate this fine phrase into practical terms.

Many Europeans suspect us "of defining democracy in too strictly libertarian terms." They feel that "we have too great confidence in the possibility of achieving justice as a by-product of freedom." We tend to accuse our European allies of being too ready to sacrifice liberty for the sake of wider security or a more equal justice. The lesson here is that we must guard against a dogmatic formula in judging one another.

Niebuhr feels that "our Western civilization could do with fewer 'ideals,' particularly those which contradict each other and set nations and classes at variance with each other. It would also profit from a higher sense of responsibility: each man for his neighbor. For it is that sense of responsibility which makes freedom both sufferable and possible. When freedom is exercised irresponsibly it creates conditions which lead to its annulment."

One great danger of the Western alliance is the envy which our allies feel of our power, coupled with the resentment many

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<sup>328</sup> "Streaks of Dawn in the Night," Christianity and Crisis, Vol. 9 (December 12, 1949), p. 163. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., p. 305.

old and mellow cultures feel of our brash and young and technical society. While recognizing the reasoning behind such a view, Niebuhr finds it difficult to be very sympathetic with it. He is especially critical of France in this regard. He comments: "One is tempted to reply resentfully that the French culture is indeed ripe to the point of overripeness, that the French intellectuals oscillate between an absurd devotion to communist illusions and a sophistication which is bereft of every illusion and ends in the conviction that human existence itself is absurd."<sup>329</sup>

We must, however, not fall prey to resentment. The stakes are too high for petty quarrels. We must remember that "liberty and equality are just as much in contradiction as they are complementary to each other. A society can destroy liberty in its search for equality; it can annul the spirit of equal justice by a too consistent devotion to liberty." In a healthy democracy, the problem of liberty and equality will never be fully solved. New historical factors will continually enter into the situation, factors which will upset satisfactory balances or aggravate existing disbalances.<sup>330</sup>

4. Survival in the nuclear age. We have, thus far, dis-

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<sup>329</sup> "Transatlantic Tension," The Reporter, Vol. 5 (September 18, 1951), p. 14. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., pp. 307-308.

<sup>330</sup> "Hazards and Resources," Virginia Quarterly Review, Vol. 25 (Spring, 1949), pp. 197-202. Quoted in Davis and Good, Op.cit., pp. 305-307.

cussed the nature of communism. We have, centering around the concept of power, dealt with possible answers to this challenge. Pacifism has been rejected as wrong; world government has been rejected as ephemeral. How then, given the character of the nuclear age, do we face up to this challenge and conquer it? Or, should mere survival, or order, be our goal rather than conquest, or justice? And if survival is to be our goal, must it be bought at the price of submission? In short, must we all join the chorus of unilateralists and assert that "We'd rather be red than dead," simply because there is no alternative?

These are demanding and troubling questions. Niebuhr is no oracle in this regard. He, nor anyone else, has all the answers, or even very many of them. But within the framework of his political philosophy, as it has been elaborated in this essay, he suggests the following.

We must "come to terms with the possibilities of co-existence" with the Russian regime. This is a more realistic, though less dramatic, proposal than that to abolish nuclear weapons, for "it does not demand that the impulse for survival of each collective system be challenged directly. It is only required that each side allow historical developments to modify the animosities and to change the power realities within each system."

What are the preconditions of such survival?



Both sides must "come to a full recognition of their involvement in a common fate." This common fate includes a fear of mutual annihilation. However, there is also a "common inclination to attribute malice to the other side, particularly the evil design of initiating the ultimate conflict."

This recognition must lead to "a less rigid and self-righteous attitude toward the power realities of the world..." In short, we must learn to share the world with communism.

We must also develop "a more hopeful attitude toward the possibilities of internal developments in the Russian despotism." We must "hope for, and abet, those aspects of the communist system which offer some promise of gradual change in the despotic rigidity of the communist totalitarianism." Niebuhr admits that "it would be foolish to expect an inflexible system either quickly or even gradually to develop into an open society." However, history insists that very little which man creates is permanent. And there are some possibilities within the Russian system which point toward evolution.<sup>331</sup>

First, there have been tendencies, since Stalin, toward an oligarchical arrangement, though these have not yet led to a true oligarchy. Even in his present-day position of power, Mr. Khrushchev cannot openly flaunt his views in defiance of all others as did Stalin. Beria was executed; and terrorism seems

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<sup>331</sup> Nations and Empires, pp. 281-282.

on the wane.

Second, the educational system offers opportunity for change. This is not a short-term possibility, however. A technical education does not necessarily bring any knowledge of humanistic values. However, Niebuhr feels that, in the long run, "a technically competent culture cannot avoid a rational ferment which yet may prove politically subversive."

However, there are severe obstacles to even these faint hopes. First, we are dealing with "the first system of government which identifies without reservation the ideal and the real, claiming for its system of power if not the immediate then the ultimate realization of an ideal justice." Niebuhr notes that the only despotic system which remotely compares with this was Islam. "Perhaps this identification in Russia is related to the consistent subordination of the individual to the social whole, thus giving the individual conscience no leavening influence in the community."

The second obstacle is that "none of the oligarchies -- rivalry between which must be one of the conditions of increasing freedom -- have independent sources of power, not related to the state bureaucracy."

In western history, property and conscience were the "twin forces of freedom." Communism has no room for either.

We cannot hope that communism will cease to regard itself

so well. We can only hope that "the fury of its fanaticism and the rigor of its despotism" will wane. "Such a development might make accomodation between the democratic and the communist alliance easier, but it would not eliminate the peril of war. That peril may be avoided in the future, as in the present, by the fear of mutual annihilation and the processes of diplomacy." Niebuhr also feels that the peril will be lessened by increased trade and cultural exchanges, which will follow upon the abatement of the "revolutionary animus... in the second and third generations of post-revolutionary leaders."<sup>332</sup>

We can thus see that either a successful battle with communism or a successful truce with communism will be a difficult and trying task. We can but repeat that a clear view of the future will make a pessimist of the best of us. But there is an answer of sorts. For Niebuhr, as a Christian, that answer is to continue the search for justice, within the Christian framework, knowing that our best will not be good enough, but confident that our best is all that a loving God expects of us, his sinful creation.

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332 Ibid., pp. 283-286.

## CHAPTER IV

### Reinhold Niebuhr's Concept of Justice

When we consider Niebuhr's view of justice, we must always remember that it is a view imbedded firmly in the Christian tradition. This tradition insists that a faith in God must transcend rationality, and that there is a unity of body and soul. Man is a creation of God, and is created in the image of God. He is, however, an imperfect creation, and is characterized by his unremitting sin. Man's selfishness, his constant quest for power, and his tendency toward pride make for the creation of injustice.

Though man is sinful, he is still God's creation. God does not doom him to his sin, but rather, through Divine and sacrificial love, offers him a means of redemption from that sin. This love is an ideal, and cannot be attained by man, even though it stands as a constant measure for him. Man must rather seek for justice, which is the highest goal of the rational ethic, just as love is the highest goal of the religious ethic. Justice is thus, for Niebuhr, more relevant to human society than love.

Niebuhr early links his theological views on justice to practical applications. In Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932) he makes the point that groups find it more difficult to approximate justice than do individuals. Thus, in community relations, even the lesser ideal of justice (lesser when compared to love)

is difficult to attain. The individual may seek unselfishness as an ideal. Society must seek justice, a more imperfect ideal.

Society must seek for justice by seeking equality. The adjective "equal" must be affixed to justice, if it is to be true justice. Niebuhr's key concept here is that equality is achieved only by a proper balance of power in society.

We have, in society, many elements seeking advantages. Because man is man, this will continue to be the case. Thus, society can achieve justice at a given moment only by creating an equilibria among the forces that exist at that moment. "Tentative harmonies and provisional equities" must be created. What justice we do have will be relative. Furthermore, coercion must be used to achieve this balance, for man will not voluntarily accede to the claims of his fellow man. We thus have a constant danger, since the power of coercion must be placed in the hands of some individual or some group. If this power is misused, the attempt to create justice will actually create injustice. Thus, the profound Christian moralism encourages "men to create systems of justice which will save society and themselves from their own unselfishness."<sup>333</sup>

There is always a danger of substituting order for justice. Frequently, the only way for injustice to be eliminated is through violent change. Thus, the elements which are entrenched in a favorable position assert that order must be maintained at all

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<sup>333</sup> Supra., p. 44.

costs, and that anarchy is a greater evil than injustice.

We can see, then, that achieving justice will never be an easy task. We must presuppose that man will tend to take advantage of his fellow man, and that he will be more concerned with his own welfare than with anything else.

Love stands above and beyond justice. Equality is the link between love and justice. It is the ideal for justice, and is a signpost on the road toward love. "A higher justice always means a more equal justice."<sup>334</sup>

To achieve justice in society, we must constantly manipulate the elements in society, and seek to balance them. We must be aware of the danger of too much power degenerating into tyranny, and of too little degenerating into anarchy. The equilibrium of power is thus the means of achieving justice.

There are some distinct difficulties involved in Niebuhr's views on justice. It is apparent that he tells us how justice is achieved -- through the balance of power -- but he never tells us exactly what justice is. It is not equality; for equality stands between justice and love. Equality is only a part of justice.

I do not think that this is an oversight on Niebuhr's part. It is rather an inevitable consequence of the undeveloped and uncertain nature of his theology.

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<sup>334</sup> Supra, p. 51.

Niebuhr is not a systematic theologian, and he makes no claims to be one. His greatest theological work, The Nature and Destiny of Man, establishes the framework for a systematic theology. However, this framework is never filled in. Following the publication of this study, Niebuhr turned to writings concerned more with contemporary problems, both domestic and international, rather than continuing to deal with the realm of theology.

This explains, in part, one of the greatest failings in Niebuhr's work: the absence of a clearly defined exposition of the Christian framework from which he writes. In short, we never know exactly what Niebuhr believes about this Christianity which is so important to him.

This is most troublesome in his use of myths and symbols. A myth is not the same thing as a symbol; and it is difficult enough when the two are confused. However, when there is a confusion among myth, symbol, and fact, it is relatively certain that questions will follow. I submit that Niebuhr constantly confuses these things, through his lack of clear definitions. He frequently gives the impression that he is evading the issue at hand when he discusses basic tenets of Christian doctrine.

Let me give some examples.

Not many Christians will disagree, or be offended, when Niebuhr refers to the myth of the Fall. However, when he speaks of the divinity of Christ as if it were symbolic, this is quite

likely to raise some significant objections. The actuality of the divinity of Christ is essential to Christian doctrine. Niebuhr never lets the reader know whether he does or does not believe in this divinity. Indeed, he ridicules those who seek to pin him down on the matter. In 1925, during the years of his ministry in Detroit, he wrote the following:

The old gentleman was there who wanted to know whether I believed in the deity of Jesus. He is in every town. He seemed to be a nice sort, but he wanted to know how I could speak for an hour on the Christian church without once mentioning the atonement. Nothing, said he, but the blood of Jesus would save America from its perils. He made quite an impassioned speech. At first I was going to answer him but it seemed too useless. I finally told him I believed in blood atonement too, but since I hadn't shed any of the blood of sacrifice which it demanded I felt unworthy to enlarge upon the idea.<sup>335</sup>

Now, Niebuhr makes clear his views about the ability of the blood of Christ to save America, or any nation. This is the point of his discussion of love, equality, and justice. His rather inflated answer to this question is thus understandable, if not in the best of taste. However, what about the question of Christ's divinity? If that old gentleman is in every town, I guess that I am the Beirut version. I do not ask Niebuhr, or anyone else, to prove the matter empirically. I simply want to know how far his faith really goes.

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<sup>335</sup> Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic, p. 77.



This desire for further information is not purely for self-gratification. It bears directly on Niebuhr's theory of justice. It is my contention that his lack of a developed and defined theology has adversely affected his work as a whole in two ways.

First, he is unable to define justice in concrete terms. He is limited to telling us how  $\chi$  (justice) is achieved, and to noting some of its characteristics.

Secondly, and as a result of this first inadequacy, he is unable to give us very many positive suggestions for achieving greater justice.

This second criticism is one which is applicable to all of Niebuhr's work. He is honest, forthright, and searching when it comes to criticisms of false beliefs and shallow pretensions on the part of others. However, he is often unable to go much beyond this. I feel that a major reason for this is his lack of framework. What framework he has tends to be negative. He is much better at telling us what is wrong, than he is at telling us what is right.

At times, of course, the ability to point a critical finger at what is wrong is an invaluable asset. In Niebuhr's theology, this ability plays a major role in the development of his most important and most accurate theological point: his attitude toward sin.

Nothing in Niebuhr's theology is on sounder ground -- religiously, rationally, and psychologically -- than his approach

to sin. He rightly recognizes that without an emphasis on sin, the Christian religion is void of meaning.

Niebuhr's doctrine of sin is an essential part of his doctrine of justice. Indeed, it is the starting point for this doctrine of justice. If we consider man as basically sinful in nature, then it is obvious that man will seek to further his own cause at all times. For a basic element of man's sin is his selfishness. Thus, what justice there is can be created only by setting claim against claim, and reaching an approximate balance. Niebuhr's doctrine of sin is thus more than the starting point for his views on justice; it is the foundation of these views. Without the doctrine of sin, his views on justice would be meaningless. For if it were possible to have man love his fellow man as himself, why should we seek tentative balances? We could rather seek the ultimate -- pure love.

In his emphasis on sin, Niebuhr played a great service to contemporary theology. This theology was galloping steadily away from the Christian view; sin was something mentioned only in a whisper, or in a lecture on church history. Niebuhr's great contribution was the restoration of sin to modern Christianity. Had this been his only contribution, he would still have been a major figure.

One can only wish that Niebuhr had taken his tremendous powers of perception, and used them to explore such concepts as

love, justice, and equality as thoroughly as he explored sin. Had he given as much attention to the cure -- grace -- as to the disease -- sin -- his work would have been even more meaningful.

I have emphasized Niebuhr's strength in criticism, and his weakness in suggesting positive improvements. Let us now turn to another area where this is apparent -- his consideration of social justice.

Social justice was Niebuhr's earliest serious concern. Coming of age in Detroit, he saw at first hand the grave human consequences of social injustice. Throughout his work in Detroit -- as chronicled in Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic -- there is a growing disgust at the way man was treating his fellow man. Niebuhr was not a member of the working class by birth; but his heart was with them from the beginning.

Niebuhr was not the only one on the American scene to recognize the presence of social injustice. However, others who perceived the evils well failed in proposing alternatives to these evils. Such weak solutions as those offered by the Social Gospel, and by Dewey's pragmatism, were denounced by Niebuhr as shallow and irrelevant. They afforded excellent solutions for man's problems, if only man were not what he is.

The resentment bred against injustice burst forth in 1932 with the publication of Moral Man and Immoral Society. This

book is brash and forceful, daring and embittered. It is the work of a young Turk who challenges the world about him. However, if it is characterized by an immoderacy and an occasional lack of judgment, it is also characterized by a fervent and moving honesty which makes all of its faults seem minor.

Perhaps more than anything else, Moral Man and Immoral Society stands as a brilliant criticism of the shallow liberalism which was engulfing the American intellectual scene in 1932. He identifies liberalism with a modern industrial society, based on capitalistic economic institutions and democratic political institutions. He sharply points up the contradiction inherent in liberal thought: traditionally, it sought the greatest personal freedom for the individual; recently, it has sought the greatest security for the individual.

Liberalism has led to a false hope for justice, for it expects justice to emerge inevitably from history. It equates injustice with ignorance, and concludes that all we must do to stamp out injustice is to educate man further. It totally ignores the basic selfishness of man, a sinful trait which the most excellent education cannot eliminate. Liberalism holds that man is essentially good, and that history will redeem itself. Thus, good man marches steadily forward, within history, toward justice. Justice will inevitably come, sooner or later.

Niebuhr's attack on this view is strong and clear. He says

that it is simply not true. Man is not essentially good, and history will not inevitably redeem itself. Rather, history is ambiguous. Man may progress morally; and he may regress as well.

In his attack on liberalism, Niebuhr again fails to provide a really workable alternative. In Moral Man and Immoral Society, he delivers a forceful attack on the industrial age, an age in which traditional human values have been subjugated by the necessities of machine production. Indeed, in this criticism Niebuhr fits smoothly into a steady stream of American intellectual opposition to this industrial age. In literature, for instance, the works of Hawthorne and Melville paved the way for such modern critics as Faulkner, Warren, Tate and Ransom, all of whom have criticized the injustice of modern industrial society.

But what is the alternative? Niebuhr is certainly no romantic, advocating a return to an agrarian society. Paying better wages might help, but that will not solve all the problems. In short, Niebuhr defines and criticizes the injustice well. But he tells us very little about the positive measures of justice which will eliminate this injustice.

There is one point in his discussion of liberalism which I would call to question. Niebuhr mentions, quite rightly, that a nation holds the loyalty of its citizens both by being his special and unique group, and by claiming universal sanction for its actions. He also stresses that when there is a war, both sides

will invariably claim that God is in their trenches. This is certainly true. However, I wonder if such an emphasis does not run the risk of arguing that there is no right or wrong where international relations are concerned? Niebuhr does not mean to say this, as his analysis of pacifism points out. In criticizing pacifism, he notes that it is just to defend an imperfect system from one that is far worse. Niebuhr does not evade the words "good" and "evil": this is commendable. He should always be clear that, though both sides may claim to be just, one may be relatively more just than the other. Certainly we can find more than self-interest to justify our battle against the tyranny of communism. We can surely claim at least some measure of rightness for our cause.

Moral Man and Immoral Society also marks the beginning of Niebuhr's serious concern with communism. In this book, as I have noted, his primary purpose is to attack liberalism. To do so, he employs a framework which often includes Marxian philosophy. There is no doubt that Niebuhr felt, in 1932, that Marxism offered some of the answers to the problem of social injustice. However, Niebuhr was never fully won over by Marxian philosophy. And as years passed, he began to oppose it more and more. In his later work, we see some of the most vigorous and convincing criticism of communism ever written on the American scene. In this criticism, he firmly asserts that communism is

not a valid means for achieving social justice, but rather represents a "cure" far worse than the disease.

The basis of Niebuhr's view of communism is the fact that he considers it as a religion. It has its creeds and dogmas, its saints and messiahs. And it promises to bring the world complete social justice -- its version of the "Kingdom of God" on earth.

Niebuhr has done a nice job of placing Marxism in perspective. He sees its faults, and attacks them with vigor. However, he does not let a blind dogmatism cloak the positive values of Marxism. He retains certain beliefs which are a part of Marxism, reserving always the right to revise them to fit the situation as he sees it. For instance, he basically accepts the Marxian premise of the class struggle. However, he views mankind in constant struggle, with each man seeking to further his own interests. He further asserts that class tends to struggle against class, as the victims of injustice seek to improve their position. Furthermore, he credits Marxism with being a valuable instrument for criticizing liberal illusions, even though he rejects the Marxian alternative to these liberal illusions as being an even worse set of illusions.

Perhaps the most searching criticism Niebuhr directs against communism is directly connected with his views on justice. For there to be justice, as I have noted, interest must be set against

interest, and a tentative harmony worked out. This harmony must be subject to constant challenge and revision.

Communism, on the other hand, gives all the power to one group. Rather than attempt to set interest against interest, it blandly asserts that this one group represents all interests, and is thus justified in claiming a monopoly of power. This monopoly, as well as the specific actions stemming from the monopoly of power, remain unchallenged. Within Niebuhr's definition of how justice is attained, such a system could never approximate justice. The very fact that communism does not, in reality, approach justice lends credence to Niebuhr's framework.

The ability to appreciate the elements in liberalism -- in the social gospel and in pragmatism -- which were valuable; a more thorough criticism of Marxism, a criticism in which common sense gained a firm triumph over dogma; the tendency to be not quite so rash and immoderate, and to make wiser and less sweeping judgments: these characteristics describe the more mature work of Niebuhr.

Still searching for justice, he began to see that there was some virtue in the middle road after all. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in his changing attitude toward Roosevelt. He began to feel the need for a more flexible policy, one based less on dogma than on practicality. At long last, he is able to practice the same brand of flexibility which he has so long advo-



cated. However, this flexibility does not degenerate into opportunism, or expediency. In the field of social ethics, it is the great triumph of Niebuhr's religious framework that he has always called his views to answer ultimately to Christian doctrine.

After the Second World War, Niebuhr began to turn his search for justice from the domestic scene to the international scene. The two, however, were always linked closely in his thought. This is true for several reasons.

First of all, the same means for achieving justice which Niebuhr felt was valid on the domestic scene -- the balance of power -- was also applicable on the international scene.

Second, the same philosophy - communism -- which had occupied much of Niebuhr's concern in his early years now posed the great threat to world peace.

Third, the same misguided liberals who had posited utopian solutions for the domestic evils of the thirties were now posing new utopian solutions -- pacifism and world government -- for the post-war world. Thus, the setting had changed. But the cast of characters bore a striking resemblance to that of an earlier day. And the goal was the same: the achievement of justice.

In dealing with Niebuhr's views on international justice, we see much the same pattern as that which characterized his commentary on the domestic scene: his criticisms of the shallow

and the false are searching; his solutions are less profound.

Niebuhr emphatically rejects pacifism as a path to international justice. He contends that pacifism is actually a sure path to injustice; for by refusing to stand up to tyranny, it will make certain the triumph of tyranny. By refusing to participate in the claims and counterclaims of man's historical existence, pacifism renders the achievement of justice impossible. By attributing to man a greater capacity for perfection than he in fact possesses, pacifism falsely advocates a trust in man as the best policy.

There is, certainly, a great emotional appeal behind the pacifist view, especially in the atomic age. For we are faced with the prospect of a war so terrible that at times it seems that no price would be too great to avoid it. However, Niebuhr does not feel that this is accurate. Even though the governments we have are imperfect, and the justice they afford far from complete, we must feel a responsibility to defend them against a tyranny which would be far worse.

Niebuhr is critical of the confusion on the part of those who interchange the gospel ethic of non-resistance with non-violent resistance. His comments on Gandhi are especially revealing in this regard. There is, however, one failing in Niebuhr's consideration of pacifism. While he dwells at length upon the difference between non-resistance and non-violent resistance, he

does not pay so much attention to the difference between non-violent resistance and violent resistance. He feels that the two will have essentially the same results in the long run; but he is never quite clear on the relationship between the two.

Niebuhr does feel that the peculiar threats of the atomic age place a particular premium on caution. He is prone to favor more order and less justice, wherever the injustice is not an immediate threat. This represents something of a compromise in his basic Christian principles; but it is certainly a realistic approach to the world situation.

Niebuhr asserts that we must not equate resistance to an aggressor with triumph over that aggressor. Further, he feels that "only the most imperative demands of justice" have a clear sanction in the nuclear age. Thus, the atomic threat forces us to place a premium on order as opposed to justice. He therefore concludes that there is only a limited area in which a war may be called "just" in our time. The clearest case within this limited area is "a war to defend the victims of wanton aggression."<sup>336</sup>

This poses some distinct problems, the greatest of which is the difficulty of defining aggression. For instance: would western intervention in Hungary in 1956 have represented a defense against aggression, or an attempt to relieve oppression? When Niebuhr draws a tenuous line such as this, and proclaims one thing just,

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<sup>336</sup> Supra, pp. 155-156.

and another unjust, he is treading on dangerous soil. Whenever we admit that any injustice must continue in the interest of order, we are putting aside our principles. This expediency may be necessary. But let us be wary of it, and not conceal by words just what is being done.

Given these qualifications, Niebuhr feels that international justice must be built upon the same balance of power and interest which is the basis for domestic justice. He stresses, however, the need for continued western unity and strength. For he is aware of the fact that the communist bloc will continue to increase its strength. In the absence of any better solution, this balance is the best we can hope for.

What would be some possible alternatives, some better means of achieving international justice? Perhaps the most appealing of all is world government. However, Niebuhr views this as an illusion. Man cannot create a community by constitutional fiat; and there is certainly no integrated world community today. World government may be desirable: Niebuhr thinks that it is. But that does not make it attainable. The same reasoning which asserted that more love would solve our domestic problems asserts that a greater world community would solve our international problems. The tragic fact is that man is capable of neither.

If there is to be any workable world order, it must be based on some form of majority rule. In the present world situation,

this is an impossibility, since the minorities will not voluntarily accept the will of the majority.

Opposed to this illusion of world government, Niebuhr views such definite achievements as the United Nations as necessary, if limited, beginnings. The United Nations serves as a bridge between the two power blocs, and also assists in integrating the world community as far as is feasible at this time.

UNESCO is viewed as another important organization, not because by placing affairs in the hands of men of culture rather than men of state, it can bring peace, but due to its positive, though measured, contributions in such fields as literacy programs.

In his search for international justice, Niebuhr finally returns to an elaboration of the balance of power concept. He goes so far as to state that "there has never been a scheme of justice in history which did not have a balance of power at its foundation."<sup>337</sup> He rejects the idea that we must have "one world or none," and insists that there is a middle ground which it is the function of statesmanship to explore. While not overestimating man's resources for creating international justice, we must never assume that man is the mere object of history, tossed about with no control over his fate.

Of course, in dealing with the international scene, there is

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<sup>337</sup> Christian Realism and Political Problems, p. 104.

one crucial question which any writer must ask and attempt to answer: is it possible for democracy and communism to share the same world?

One would believe from Niebuhr's statements on communism, which we have discussed earlier,<sup>338</sup> that it would not be possible for democracy and communism to coexist very long. I think that he still feels this, even in his later years, although he does not proclaim it as loudly. He insists, certainly, that we must seek out and explore possible areas of agreement with the Russian regime. This is not a startling statement; almost anyone would hold the same view today. We must recognize, along with the Russians, the dangers of annihilation which face us. We must also encourage change within the Russian regime, in the hope that time will mellow their youthful fanaticism, and make them more agreeable.

These suggestions are certainly limited. In examining the possibilities for international justice, Niebuhr has actually stated what he believes are the possible paths for international order. This seems to be the only way out. I am not proud to say it, but I suspect that Niebuhr, like myself, and like millions of others, would be perfectly willing to turn a deaf ear to the conditions of those enslaved by communism, if only communism would agree to leave the rest of us alone.

We have, thus, come a far distance from the Christian ethic,

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<sup>338</sup> Supra., p. 93 ff.

and from the search for justice. Niebuhr's Christian framework, so integrated and so valuable in his consideration of social justice, seems to have little meaning for the international scene in the nuclear age.

One thing stands out in this essay, and in this summary: the complex nature of justice, and the difficult road man must travel if he is to attain it. Niebuhr has done a brilliant job in illuminating this tortured and twisted road. He has also contributed valuable insights toward man's journey down this road. There are, certainly, shortcomings and failings in his witness. He would be the first to admit this. After all, Niebuhr is, by his own definition, a quite finite and sinful man, like the rest of us. However, in sum, these failings are insignificant beside his great accomplishments. Emil Brunner's statement is a fitting conclusion: "And yet -- what does all this amount to compared with the debt of thanks which not only American theology, and not only Christendom, but the world at large owes to Reinhold Niebuhr?"<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> "Some Remarks on Reinhold Niebuhr's Work as a Christian Thinker," Kegley and Bretall, Op.cit., p. 33.

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