

DRAFT
**Niebuhr's Immoral Society and Bellah's Good Society:
 A Conversation about Moral Man**

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I. Framing the Project

The title of my paper is an indication of where I began my thinking about this project. I was convinced from the start that Niebuhr's and Bellah's most significant disagreement would be how they viewed the role of collective life. Second, I assumed that they would have their most significant area of agreement on the moral capacity and responsibility of individuals. If you focus on Niebuhr's early work, especially in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* and Bellah's mature work today, these assumptions are generally true. Further, I still expected some broad lines of continuity in the work of these two committed "orthodox" Christians speaking from a "realist" perspective about their faith and their commitment to just societies. Again, the continuity is present, especially in their many parallel insights and in their commitment to a socially engaged Christianity, working in conversation with many of the same social thinkers, either personally or through their writings. Needless to say, this only begins to tell the story of two complex social thinkers, speaking from what they considered to be profound theological truths about the world. The full story of the continuity and discontinuity of Bellah and Niebuhr will have to unfold with more work on this project by many others. What I offer is a way to get started and to involve others in the project.

My task as I understood it for today's proceedings was to read Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* through the lens of Robert Bellah's work. Therefore, the themes I review in this paper are, though largely dictated by where I see Bellah's work extending Niebuhr, they are still at the heart of *Moral Man* and most of Niebuhr's work. In fact, for many years I have operated with the conviction that Bellah is a "Christian Realist" in the Niebuhrian tradition.¹ A discussion of Bellah and Niebuhr at the Niebuhr Society was an obvious good choice to me. I am not alone in this conviction. In *The Good Society*, Bellah's co-authored work with Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven M. Tipton, Reinhold Niebuhr is cited twelve times. Reinhold, and H. Richard Niebuhr, are key conversation partners for Bellah and his colleagues in their collaborative books, *Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society*. The last paragraph in *Good Society* establishes this importance. After acknowledging John Dewey and Walter Lippmann as figures, "typically American in their several ways, [who] transcended America," they conclude with:

Reinhold Niebuhr, H. Richard Niebuhr, and John Courtney Murray always asserted a primary allegiance that entirely transcended the nation, and held America under the judgment of God. All of them invoked a vigorous public life as essential to a good society. And all of them in their own way reminded us that the purpose of the public lies beyond its own boundaries, however inclusive they may become, in the service and the celebration of the greater city, that cosmopolis, that universal community, of which all of us, our regions, our nations, are citizens.²

Bellah and his co-authors, plant themselves in the broad river of social Christianity and as we will see with a new twist, in its "realist" tributary. There is no equivalency between

¹ See my article: "Civil Religion in the Interfaith Context of Northern California: Revisiting Robert Bellah's Broken Covenant Project," Pacific Coast Theological Society Presentation, November 6, 2004. Available on line at the Society's on-line peer reviewed journal.

² Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, Steven Tipton, *The Good Society*, New York: Vintage Books, 1992 [1991] p.306.

the human “good society” and the “universal community.” The nation is under the judgment of God. It is therefore no surprise that this year’s recipient of the Martin Marty award for “contributions to the public understanding of religion” at our meetings this week at The American Academy of Religion (AAR) is Robert Bellah.

The general assumption of this paper is that Bellah *sustains* many of the elements of Christian Realism that have been associated with Reinhold Niebuhr and others. The significance of Bellah, I will also argue, is that he has *extended and deepened* many of these elements. I will attempt to demonstrate this by focusing on two themes, the “individual and society” and the relationship of “idealism and realism.” For another paper I am adding the theme, “working for justice.” That is, how they put their ideas into practice in the modern societies. However, I will allude to this theme in this paper as it relates to the other two themes.

Celebration of Reinhold Niebuhr’s Moral Man and Immoral Society

In a profound sense, this paper is really about Niebuhr. It is an attempt to give Niebuhr proper credit for his essential contribution to those of us motivated by social Christianity. Celebration and gratitude are appropriate not just out of politeness or curiosity of the 75th anniversary of *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, but because so many stand on the shoulders of Niebuhr’s engagement with the world with his realist theological convictions. In addition to Bellah, so many have acknowledged their debt to him. My favorite is Martin Luther King Jr.’s tribute to Niebuhr in *Stride Toward*

Freedom:

During my last year in theological school, I began to read the works of Reinhold Niebuhr. The prophetic and realistic elements in Niebuhr’s passionate style and

profound thought were appealing to me, and I became so enamored of his social ethics that I almost fell into the trap of accepting uncritically everything he wrote.³

Many scholars and activists have been captivated by Niebuhr's thought, for the simple reason that his passion *is* captivating. One quote to "celebrate" from *Moral Man* is in order:

Furthermore there must always be a religious element in the hope of a just society. Without the ultra rational hopes and passions of religion no society will ever have the courage to conquer despair and attempt the impossible; for the vision of a just society is an impossible one, which can be approximated only by those who do not regard it as impossible. The truest visions of religion are illusions which may be partially realized by being resolutely believed. For what religion believes to be true is not wholly true but ought to be true; and may become true if its truth is not doubted.⁴

Whether or not you agree with his position or not, you may think you should because of the force of his passion. During Niebuhr's lifetime, when preaching from the pulpit, words like these were powerful.

The number of scholarly works devoted to Niebuhr is staggering. The number of doctoral dissertations treating his thought can never be totally accounted for. They all are witness to his impact and contribution to the role of religious conviction and its engagement with in public life. One doctoral dissertation, however, came to my attention recently. A doctor of ministry dissertation situated a case study of a "liberal" Protestant "mission education" organization in the river of social Christianity. The figures chosen to represent this river of thought and action were Charles Finney, Walter Rauschenbusch,

³ Martin Luther King Jr. *Stride Toward Freedom, The Montgomery Story*, New York, Perennial Library, Harper and Row, 1964 [1958] p. 79.

⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960 [1932] p. 81.

Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Bellah⁵. The usual subjects are represented. Though today it is not surprising to find King and Bellah in the cast of characters, at least from my perspective. For many he fills the void that many have felt with the absence of the public intellectuals, with stature, from the religious community with the death of the Niebuhrs. Also, there is no shortage of passion in Bellah, as he readily admits to sermon-like presentations.

However, beyond celebration of the passion of *Moral Man* and the anecdotal evidence of others' debt to Niebuhr, I want to suggest that *Moral Man* still represents much of the quintessential Niebuhr, in style, method and substance. You can find traces, if not full elements, of all of his later works in *Moral Man*. It was his building block if not a firm foundation for his later works. And therefore, the substance as well as the passion is what make this extraordinary book essential reading for an understanding of the challenge for Christian Realism today. My confidence on this point is based on where I detect Niebuhr pushing the limits and edges of his own positions and particularly his inherited Protestant worldview in the early 30's. (Perhaps he never fully escaped from it; but to his credit he kept trying). In addition, in *Moral Man* he has begun to expand his conversation partners to include more secular and non-Protestant thinkers. And most significant to me, and for the future of Christian Realism, is his constant "hope" for a positive role for collectives, even while he is most certain that it will not likely happen without some major negative consequences. These are what I will call some of the "openings" in *Moral Man*. His instinct was to continue to work at these edges. Now

⁵ Hugh Brinley Wire, *Uncovering a Theology of Social Ministry, A Case Study*, San Anselmo, Calif.: Doctor of Ministry Dissertation. 1987.

others such as Bellah, can help us continue to push the edges that he began to soften and on occasion broke through.

Approach, Assumptions and Tentative Thesis

I have undertaken a three-step process on each of the two themes that I will address in this paper. As mentioned above I will treat the themes of: 1) the individual and society and, 2) the relationship of idealism and realism. First, for each of the themes I will first suggest where Niebuhr “got it right” or was at least “on the mark” for his time. Or, at least, he offers us a penetrating perspective or insight that we still need to take seriously, for he is always grappling with and trying to illumine a constructive social role for Christianity. Also, as part of this first step analysis, I will suggest that he was trying to come to grips with the limitations of his own insight which prompted him to continually temper even his most defined positions. He does this by taking seriously the criticisms of his conversation partners. It is here that I use the work of two of his conversation partners, H. Richard Niebuhr and the Jesuit, John Courtney Murray. Second, I will focus on what I consider to be “openings” in his thought that were either there from the beginning or were the result of changes made in responding to his conversation partners. I will suggest that these openings are some of the most important points of connection with Bellah’s work. Third, I will attempt to show that these and other areas of Niebuhr’s thought, are being *sustained* by Bellah. Further, I will explore how Bellah’s “realism” *extends and deepens* Niebuhr’s focus on the creative side of human nature and its positive potential for the religious [and human] imagination. In these sections I want to at least suggest that Niebuhr’s normative side (i.e. coming from is

faith and theology) suggests more potential (if not a mandate) to be realized (at least in a partial sense) in the collective life of individuals. This is also accomplished by Bellah, with no less a concern about the evil potential of collective life and no less a sense of the need for a prophetic voice in the world. Bellah is even comfortable with part of his vocation as a modern day Jeremiah.⁶ Though as we will see below he is eventually critical of just the prophetic voice in creating the “good society.”

In order to make this paper manageable, I have largely restricted my analysis to several key texts. For Niebuhr, other than *Moral Man*, it seemed wise to focus on his last major work, *Man's Nature and His Communities*, published in 1965. These two texts seem to function as bookends for his other works. But more importantly, *Man's Nature* is Niebuhr's self-described book as containing “the systematic essays [that] are intended to ‘revise’ previously held opinions only in the sense that they seek to give a systematic account of the revisions which have taken place in the author's mind in a whole lifetime of study and writing books too frequently.”⁷ With one exception I have not systematically waded into the vast secondary material on Niebuhr. Robin Lovin's *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*⁸ proved to be helpful for my last section of this paper where I speculate on the legacy and future of Christian Realism. Lovin is important to me for he seemed to reinforce my view of the “hopeful Niebuhr.” But I have to admit that I went looking for this side of Niebuhr, even in *Moral Man*. Perhaps my projections on to Niebuhr, if in the end that is what they are, could have been corrected by others. I thought that looking at Niebuhr again through fresh eyes could be

⁶ Robert Bellah and Steven M. Tipton, eds., *The Robert Bellah Reader*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, p. 339.

⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Man's Nature and His Communities, Essays on the Dynamics and Enigma's of Man's Personal and Social Existence*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965. p15.

⁸ Robin Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

of benefit. I do have to admit that re-reading my doctoral comprehensive on Reinhold Niebuhr that was guided by John Bennett, does give me pause for my capacity for an “objective” understanding of Niebuhr.⁹ Perhaps more on this confession later. But I do apologize to many on this panel¹⁰ for not being more familiar with your work. I am certainly motivated to become more familiar now.

The Bellah’s texts I have used are more numerous. Yet I have tried to focus largely on *The Good Society* and connect his other works to this book, which I think most profoundly and systematically exhibits his version of Christian Realism. *Habits of the Heart* has been used to demonstrate how it anticipates *The Good Society*. *The Robert Bellah Reader* is an indispensable resource, especially for essays post *The Good Society*, to see his application of *Good Society* and his growing critique of Protestantism. I also have had access to some unpublished manuscripts of Bellah’s. They continue to explore the themes in *The Good Society* and increasingly connect to his forthcoming treatment of “religious evolution.”¹¹

I have also tried to manifest the sentiment that Bellah has suggested for looking critically and appreciatively at other individuals’ work. He quotes Charles Taylor, one of *his* conversation partners, when he is analyzing and evaluating the work of other authors and traditions. When referring to the problematic of Catholicism and modernity, Bellah

⁹ At the time in the early 70’s I was focused on the “early” Niebuhr to help bolster my commitment to my anti-capitalistic movements and various the “updated” Marxist critiques. This led me to found the journal, *Radical Religion*, named after Niebuhr’s 1930’s precursor to *Christianity and Society* and eventually *Christianity and Crisis*. I also helped to found the Bay Area chapter of Christians for Socialism, which I saw as inheriting the mantle of Niebuhr’s Fellowship of Socialist Christians, but without the “mistakes,” they made. We failed to learn the Niebuhr lesson of the sin of pride.

¹⁰ The panel for the Society includes: Gary Dorrien, Union Theological Seminary, Charles Mathewes, University of Virginia, Rebekah Miles, Southern Methodist University, Max Stackhouse, Princeton Theological Seminary, Ronald Stone, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and Josiah Young, Wesley Theological Seminary.

¹¹ I fit the category of “one of Bellah’s students,” and have remained so over the years through friendship. See D. Michael Lindsay’s review of the *The Robert Bellah Reader*

refers to what he calls “Charles Taylor’s admonition that we neither uncritically affirm or uncritically deny modernity.” As Bellah quotes Taylor:

The view I would like to defend...is that in modern, secularist culture there are mingled together both authentic developments of the gospel of an incarnational mode of life, and also a closing off to God that negates the gospel. *The notion is that modern culture, in breaking with the structures and beliefs of Christendom, also carries certain facts of Christian life further than they ever were taken, or could have been taken within Christendom.* In relation to the earlier forms of Christian culture, we have to face the humbling realization that the breakout was a necessary condition of the development.¹² [Italics Added]

In a similar fashion I have approached this project. The substance of Talyor’s remark is also intriguing. Perhaps one can detect a “realist” standpoint. Bellah’s participation on the panel to discuss Charles Taylor’s new book the week at AAR should be instructive.

However the approach to “humbly” and appreciatively read Niebuhr, has led me to be intrigued with what emerged for me as one of the key points of connection between Niebuhr and Bellah, their hopefulness. Yes, their hopefulness! And this is so in the midst of heavy doses of prophetic despair, which they also share. I think the *clues* are in *Moral Man*, certainly in the “celebration quote” above; and it is certainly in *The Good Society*. Robin Lovin uses the concept, “confidence,” for Niebuhr. Bellah uses the theological conviction of “hope.” Niebuhr’s and Bellah’s legacy for a viable Christian Realism is the fact that they have remained hopeful and motivated to work for justice in spite of their sense of evil in the world. As I will develop later, it is precisely because of their similar views of Christian of “grace.” Robin Lovin put it this way:

Niebuhr’s Christian Realism was both confident and critical. It was critical because he made no absolute claims for his own perspective. Faith can be distorted by self-interest, lulled into sentimental piety, or lured into fanatical excesses. Niebuhr could analyze those errors with clarity and urgency born of the conviction that they are never far removed from even our most sincere efforts to

¹² Bellah, *Bellah Reader*, p. 459

find moral and political truth. *Yet, after all the critical insights, Niebuhr remained confident that Christian Realism made more sense of the problematic historical situations than other interpretations.* Niebuhr's criticism required no retreat into a language of faith that was impervious to challenge. He was confident that when subjected to those same criticisms, 'the truth of faith is correlated with all truths which may be known by scientific and philosophical disciplines and proves itself a resource for coordinating them into a deeper and wider system of coherence.' [Italics Added]¹³

Therefore, for Lovin, "a reinterpretation of Niebuhr's Christian Realism must capture both the criticism and the confidence." This same insight was captured by John A. Sims in a very suggestive book entitled, *Missionaries to the Skeptics, Christian Apologists for the Twentieth Century*, C.S. Lewis, Edward John Carnell and Reinhold Niebuhr:

The three apologists did not have the same understanding of the character of biblical authority...but they were all secure enough in their convictions concerning its truth claims that they were willing to subject it to the demands of public verification. *The were convinced that Christians can enter into the problematics of philosophy, the social and natural sciences, and all other academic and social challenges with the full assurance that no real contradiction will ever exist between what true reason discovers and the truth that has been revealed through the Christian faith.*[Italics Added]¹⁴

It seems to me that this insight is at the core of social Christianity at its best, not a simple appropriation of the latest "empirical insight," but mutual criticism. Therefore, a tentative thesis for this paper must account for the critical *and* confident nature of Niebuhr and how Bellah continues to sustain, expand and deepen this perspective in his work. Neither Bellah nor Niebuhr considered themselves theologians, but it was their theological realism that gave them hope. Bellah often quips that he is not optimistic but

¹³ Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, pp. 30-31

¹⁴ John A. Sims, *Missionaries to the Skeptics, Christian Apologists for the Twentieth Century*, C.S. Lewis, Edward John Carnell and Reinhold Niebuhr, Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1995. A couple of side notes of interest. This was published the same year as Lovin's book. Bellah received the C.S. Lewis award for teaching of religion in 2000 and Carnell studied at Harvard Divinity School, wrote a major work on Reinhold Niebuhr and as professor and President of Fuller Theological Seminary helped to craft its special place in evangelical protestant training.

he is hopeful, and he continues, “hope is a theological conviction.” But this is more than a mere quip for Bellah. What are the ways in which Niebuhr and Bellah tried to express this similarity? And in what ways did they depart, if at all, on crucial insights?

Moral Man and Immoral Society is not Bellah’s favorite text of Niebuhr’s. In *The Good Society* it is referred to as Niebuhr’s “angry” book. For certain it is Niebuhr expressing his *outrage* about the intransigence of multiple forms of sentimentalism, idealism, self-delusion, hypocrisy and a lack of self-reflective social intelligence. But a more substantive criticism is also mentioned in *The Good Society*, one from H. Richard Niebuhr. He accused his brother of false logic and a false theology in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, particularly relative to his basic thesis about the role of the individual and collective life. At a minimum he felt that Reinhold was overstating the moral character of individuals. Bellah has also remarked in conversation that this was certainly Niebuhr’s most “individual” book. Though Niebuhr throughout his life sustained a criticism against American and Protestant individualism, and in *Moral Man* this is no exception, then in what sense is *Moral Man* too much about the individual? In what follows, I have tried to stay close to the actual words of Niebuhr and Bellah. This seemed important for several reasons. First, they were using words for a considered purpose. Second, though understanding their general approach is important, specific arguments and key passages needed to be lifted up to get the full weight of their convictions. Third, as I interpret key texts I am offering a fuller view of any potential misreading of the texts. This has created a much longer paper than I wanted; but at this phase of the project I seemed to have no choice.

II. The Individual and Society

Reinhold Niebuhr

Niebuhr's individual, "moral man,"¹⁵ that is, his generic individual, is communicated to us in at least four ways: 1) the American individual under the influence of American Protestantism; 2) the private human being, flawed but capable of virtuous acts if baser instincts are tempered by reason and religion; 3) historic examples of individuals acting out the drama of Niebuhr's two conceptions, this would include Niebuhr himself and; 4) the individual with other individuals acting together in collective life, including the family, social movements, society and nation states. We can best understand his individual, and his "realistic" understanding of it, as we focus on what happens when individuals act together in a collective. Beginning with *Moral Man*, according to Niebuhr, the individual's flaws get multiplied, which creates a collective life that can never match up to the best to which individuals are capable. But Niebuhr says it best in his own passionate words. After apologizing for stating the case too "unqualifiedly" in his title "Moral Man and Immoral Society" Niebuhr says:

Individual men may be moral in the sense that they are able to consider interests other than their own in determining problems of conduct, and are capable, on occasion of preferring the advantages of others to their own. They are endowed by nature with a measure of sympathy and consideration for their kind... Their rational faculty prompts them to a sense of justice which educational discipline may refine and purge of egoistic elements until they are able to view a social situation, in which their own interests are involved with a fair measure of objectivity. *But all these achievements are more difficult, if not impossible, for human societies and social groups.* In every human group there is less reason to guide and check impulse, less capacity for self-transcendence, less ability to comprehend the needs of others and therefore more unrestrained egoism than the

¹⁵ I have retained the concept "moral man" whenever referring to Niebuhr's formulation of the individual. I have tried to use inclusive language when analyzing the issue of the nature of human individuals.

individuals, who compose the group, reveal in their personal relations. [Italics Added]¹⁶

The inferior moral capacity of collective life, according to Niebuhr, is due to two factors. First, it relates to the need for social cohesion in societies as the primary goal. “Self regard” for cohesion is difficult to overcome with a countervailing rationality. Second, it is due to a “compound[ing] of the egoistic impulses of individuals, which achieve a more vivid expression and a more cumulative effect when they are united in a common impulse than when they express themselves separately and discreetly.”¹⁷ This is the formulation of the individual in relationship to the group that is most important for us to understand the extent to which Niebuhr sustained this view and how he began to nuance it. Certainly it is a formulation that he never *totally* changed. He in fact he made a special point to reaffirm it, though slightly softening it, with the 1960 reprinting of *Moral Man* and again with his final book, *Man’s Nature and His Communities* in 1965. I will present two criticisms of this formulation one by Niebuhr’s brother and the other by Catholic theologian John Courtney Murray. Murray’s criticism will lead us to eventually to Bellah’s approach to the relationship of individuals to their collective life. But first a brief exploration on Niebuhr’s concerns about American individualism and a brief appreciation of Niebuhr’s position on human nature and his early formulation of the dynamic of collectives.

In *Moral Man*, Niebuhr particularly ascribes what he calls “individualism of the nineteenth century political economy” to the privileged class which when tied to the “sanctification of prudential virtues in Puritan Protestantism” created a justification for

¹⁶ Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, pp. xii.

¹⁷ Niebuhr, *Moral Man* p. xi.

the hypocrisy of dominant groups to falsely justify their moral superiority. It was an illusion to justify special advantages, particularly the wealth and property of the middle class over against their self-serving view of the less industrious, and less thrifty working class. It was an individualistic creed that Niebuhr continued to suggest that promoted the illusion of “self-reliance that teaches us how to be prosperous.” In *Man’s Nature* he traces his own relationship to this Protestant individualism. The essays in his last monograph, “give an historical account of the tortuous path of the author’s mind in adjusting the original Protestant heritage of individualism and perfectionism” to a new age. One he characterized as “highly technical” with a “collective culture.” He even suggests that Jewish and Catholic faith, with a greater awareness of “the social substance of man’s existence” are more appropriate to this “collectivist age” than what he called “extravagant Protestantism.”

This movement in his thought is an illustration of an “opening” to soften his seemingly unbridgeable gulf of “moral man and immoral society.” However, in *Man’s Nature* he has held on to his basic dichotomy of *Moral Man* which he referred to in the Introduction as an “obvious” thesis, “that collective self-regard of class, race, and nation is more stubborn and persistent than the egoism of individuals.”¹⁸ He never fully lets go of this dichotomy. Why? I think it is partly due to his stance in the Protestant mindset that John Courtney Murray will address below. And it is partly due to the nature of his dialectical method that we will also explore below. We will return to these points below when using the lens of Bellah to get behind the difficulty of Niebuhr to fully move beyond his Protestantism and therefore this gulf between the individual and society. A journey to understand the limitations of Protestantism Bellah, admits to as still an

¹⁸ Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature*, p.22.

ongoing project for his work. Using this Bellah lens lead us to begin, however with H. Richard Niebuhr and Murray. But first an appreciation of Niebuhr's most stark formulation of the almost "impossible" morality of groups.

At an important level, I think Niebuhr's consistent formulation about the collective moral intransigence compared to individual moral intransigence "rings true." I think we all can give an example from our experience when fighting what we thought was an injustice, that we came up against an institutional response such as, "we just cannot do that because we have policies we have to follow." Or when a corporate body, whether a business, educational institution or a church body, feels attacked, they go behind closed doors and hunker down to do "damage control." No doubt we all have played this role in this drama of institutional life. We only have to look to the Catholic Church and its handling of the sex abuse scandal to see this dynamic at work. Behind closed doors, a self-protective "feeding frenzy" of "us against them" occurs. No doubt one of the justifications is that the challenging group is just as likely to be employing the same self-deception as the institutional power it is challenging. Our desire to maintain the *vital social cohesion* of the group could be used as a justification. We might say, "if order is lost, we will have anarchy, the prisoners will be running the jail." At our most "generous" moments we might even suggest, "if we could just sit down face to face as 'individuals of good will,' we could work things out." If I was honest with myself, I can think of times when I just used this as a strategy as a leader of the challenging group to just get a chance to argue my case rather than listen to the position of others. I think at a very basic level this is the insight about human nature about which Niebuhr is drawing our attention. And further, he feels that this insight is consistent with his Christian view

of human nature in its “sinful,” state. This is not the complete story about human capacity for Niebuhr, but is one he does not want us to forget our sinful and prideful human tendencies. And further, he does not want us to forget a similar self-deception that could be multiplied in our collective life.

The basic problem of Niebuhr, which many have pointed out, is that he only emphasizing one dynamic of institutional life and his “social substance” of human life is still underdeveloped in these early formulations in *Moral Man*. This is so, even though we can detect a strong interrelationship, albeit negative, between the individual and society in his critique of American individualism and the class-based hypocrisy of privilege. This is certainly a statement about the social location of knowledge. But before analyzing his movement to more fully appreciate, at least in his mind, the “social substance” of humans in his *Man’s Nature and His Communities Book*, I want to present two critiques that get at the heart of this problem and anticipate Niebuhr’s own “openings.”

H. Richard Niebuhr and John Courtney Murray S.J.

H. Richard Niebuhr, just after the publishing of *Moral Man* suggested a similar criticism of his brother in a private letter that remained in the family archive and now presumably is in the Library of Congress archive. In the letter he affirmed Reinhold’s critique of “idealist” positions that too easily place hope in reforming the nation by joining force with and perhaps giving up an independent critical voice over against, with new theories of human progress that will also create the new being. H. Richard Niebuhr:

“I have no defense of idealism to offer. I hate it with all my heart as an expression of our original sin.”¹⁹ But, as biographer Richard Fox recounts, H. Richard did associate with some of Reinhold’s critics on at least several accounts. Each of these seems to have at their base, a criticism of Reinhold’s insufficient faith in the message of his own Christian tradition. Fox lays out most of the contents of the letter, which were not made public at the time of *Moral Man*’s publication. The first criticism attacked Reinhold’s “defeatism.” Like him, his critics were “as cynical or almost as cynical and skeptical... but they have hope—not much but a little, and faith, not a great deal but some.”²⁰

They criticize you not for what you said but for what you could not say. They await a Messianic word of release which has not been given to our time. You are so much of a Christian that you can understand and appreciate them...²¹

According to Fox, what is behind this is H. Richard’s concern that Reinhold was not only not offering a messianic hope, but that it put the church in the same swim of his negative view of collective life. Fox suggests that H. Richard had an impact on Reinhold and next lectures and his “nature and destiny of man” project was an answer to his brother’s critic.

Embracing theology was Reinhold’s way of countering the charge of defeatism...he had to show that there was a place for faith, a reason to hope, a role for the church. He had to show that life did go “beyond tragedy,”—as Richard had argued in “The Grace of Doing Nothing”—and toward fulfillment.²²

Without putting too many “revisionist” connections in H. Richard’s critique, it seems valid to assume that Reinhold’s defeatism could be rescued by suggesting that the church, as a collective body, had a role to play in the drama of social engagement. H.

¹⁹ Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr, A Biography*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987 [1985] p. 144

²⁰ Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 144.

²¹ Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 144

²² Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr* pp. 146-147

Richard was at least offering, though lightly, a different role for institutions and their role in positive change, and certainly for hope. At a minimum the church could be a counter weight against injustice, just like was possible for individuals. In fact, H. Richard thought his brother was too “idealistic” about individuals:

Therefore, I must dissent from the whole argument that “individuals (as individuals) have a moral code...which makes the actions of collective man an outrage to their conscience.” They have a code which makes their own actions an outrage to their own conscience...²³

But H. Richard levels his most significant critique when he felt that his brother was too idealist about “religion.” He charges him with a view of only speaking about “humanistic religion.” Reinhold had not broken with “idealism” either in his view of the individual or religion, according to his brother:

You think of religion as a power—dangerous sometimes, helpful sometimes. That’s liberal. For religion itself is no power, but that to which religion is directed, God...I think the liberal religion is thoroughly bad. It is a first-aid to hypocrisy. It is the exaltation of goodwill, moral idealism. It worships the God whose qualities are ‘the human qualities raised to the nth degree,’ and I don’t expect as much help from this religion as you do. It is sentimental and romantic.²⁴

How else is an alternate worldview of the Christian faith sustained other than within the church? Individuals in fact needed formation in institutions. Certainly Christians need this in their community life in the church. Though he did not say it exactly this way, H. Richard was pointing to a logic that was less dichotomous in the relationship between the collective and the individual. Perhaps in the end, it was not that Reinhold did not have hope, according to H. Richard, it was that he had hope in the wrong and logically flawed view of the individual, the wrong view of religion and certainly an inadequate view of

²³ Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, pp. 144-145

²⁴ Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 145

collective life as a means of “formation.” As stated above, apparently Reinhold took these criticisms to heart. However, if H. Richard fully understood Reinhold’s motivation and full agenda, is not clear by these comments. Increasingly Reinhold was not just speaking to a Christian audience, he was speaking to modern man and society in general.

But it most likely that it also took Reinhold’s Catholic conversation partners to help expand his thinking on the individual’s social nature and institutional life as formation for individuals. John Courtney Murray, Niebuhr’s counterpart as a public intellectual, though from the Catholic community, called the morality of Protestantism an “intramural argument.” Biographer, Charles Brown indicated that Murray was “often engaged in dialogues with Niebuhr.” No doubt, without mentioning Niebuhr’s name in his book of 1960, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*, Murray was helping to deepen Niebuhr’s respect for the social substance of humans. Through the tradition of natural law, Murray was making a more profound statement about individuals and their collective life. A statement that we shall see is more in line with Bellah’s position. Where H. Richard was asking for a hopeful role of the church, Murray was analyzing why Niebuhr and Protestant thought in the United States was caught in a series of arguments that they were incapable of escaping. After exploring how the newer morality (presumably represented by Niebuhr) debunked the older morality (simplistic Protestant individualism), Murray concludes that the two moralities remained present to the extent that discussions were still within a framework that excluded many features of individual and collective life and therefore, had “many

similarities.” One similarity was “their common rejection of the whole style and structure of natural law morality, according to Murray.”²⁵

Murray, analyzing this intramural argument in the realm of “morality and public policy,” identified three problems with this loss of natural law thinking in American moral thought: 1) the gulf between the individual and collective morality which leads to a position that all politics is Realpolitik (I will say more about this later); 2) the corresponding position that nation states can only operate on self-interest and again must jump headlong in to the mess with “eyes wide open” and; 3) the problem of power that leads to the notion “that to use power is to be ‘irresponsible,’ and therefore [when you use it] to be more guilty yet.”²⁶ Without going into all facets of Murray’s argument, he makes a case for why he, a Catholic natural law thinker, needs to enter the moral debate. He admits he has difficulty in figuring out what “all the shouting is about” in this internal Protestant debate. There are three issues that seem to him to be “factitious,” and “pseudo-problems.” He takes each of the issues and reads them from a Catholic natural law tradition. We will take the first one to illustrate his critique:

The Protestant moralist is disturbed by the gulf between the morality of the individual and collective man. He is forever trying somehow to close the gap. Forever he fails, not only in doing this but even in seeing how it could possibly be done. Thus, he is driven back upon the simplest category of “ambiguity.” Or he sadly admits and unresolvable dichotomy between moral *man* and *immoral society*. [Italics Added]²⁷

It is hard not to see this as at least a partial reference to Niebuhr in this statement.

Murray sees this irresolvable dichotomy to be the consequence of a “defective theory.”

²⁵ John Courtney Murray, S.J., *We Hold These Truths, Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2005 [1960] p. 252

²⁶ Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, p. 255

²⁷ Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, p. 258

This is so, for this theory fails to see society as a “natural institution with [its] relatively autonomous ends or purposes, which are predesigned in broad outline in the social and political nature of man.”²⁸ He goes on to say, “morality proper to the life and action of society and the state is not univocally the morality of personal life, or even familial life.” It remains to be assessed whether this critique does justice to Niebuhr’s mature thought or it was truer of the Niebuhr of *Moral Man*. I am inclined to think that Niebuhr could never go this far with natural law thinking, particularly in regards to a full theory of institutional life as having its own unique moral contribution to make and not to be judged only in terms of individual morality.

H. Richard Niebuhr, suggested that his brother was too idealistic about the individual and his appeal to a “humanistic religion” and pointed him in the direction of a more hopeful stance based on his Christian faith and ecclesiology. Murray, appears to have suggested that Reinhold was still trying to operate with a private morality as his standard and only trying to be realistic about the limits of this private ethic as it manifested itself in collective life. And Niebuhr’s view of collective life was no more than a collection of individuals. In both cases, H. Richard and Murray are indicating that Reinhold’s view of collective life was colored by both an over emphasis on the individual and an incomplete appreciation of the moral possibilities in collective life. In the end, or at least early on, Niebuhr was not able to shake a latent view of the individual as only an “autonomous self.” If they were right, and I think they were to a large extent, this was, again, ironic given of his critique of a self-reliant American individualism. And perhaps even more ironic given his critique of the social location of privilege. Clearly there was a

²⁸ Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, p. 257

strong social dimension to his thought, it was still underdeveloped until late in his life. There were openings however.

Openings: Man's Nature and His Communities

If we can assume that *Man's Nature and His Communities* that was published in 1965 was, in a sense, a response to some of these criticisms, a shift does occur in Niebuhr's, social nature of man. The most clear statement of this is in his final chapter "Man's Selfhood in its Self-Seeking and Self-Giving." It is his focus on his concept of "common grace," that heightens his notion of the "social substance of individuals" which he announced in the book's Introduction. This was one of his "perspectives" that he changed. How big of a change was it? Niebuhr, drawing on "modern psychiatry," particularly the work of Erick Erickson, and the biblical insight of "He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it," to make his point. He interprets this insight as a paradox: "consistent self-seeking is bound to be self-defeating; on the other hand, self-giving is bound to contribute ultimately to self-realization." He sees the community of the family, the "most primordial of all human communities," where this paradoxical dynamic can best be nurtured, where the self, freed of undue self-concern, is able to relate itself to others."²⁹ He says it best in his own words:

Thus the *gift* of security given by parents to children is transmuted naturally into the ability of even those parents, who are otherwise self-seeking, to be "self-giving" in their relations to their family. Thus modern psychiatry has validated and given new emphasis to what was defined in orthodox religious thought as "*common grace*." [Italics Added]³⁰

²⁹ Niebuhr, *Man's Nature*, p. 107.

³⁰ Niebuhr, *Man's Nature*, p. 107.

Again we see how Niebuhr's Christian vision and theology for him is reinforced with what can be discovered to be validated in other disciplines and empirical study. But continuing on the social substance of individuals journey, Niebuhr makes clear that the family is not the only community through which the "self is made secure and in turn is offered the opportunity of self-fulfillment through self-giving."

These other communities, not only include various civic communities from tribe to city-state, to empire and nation. They also include all communities of culture which engage creatively the reason and imagination of the self, thus leading to self-realization by the fulfillment of all its talents.³¹

These statements clearly move beyond a mere isolated individual with a moral will. This will is conditioned by grace, which flows from the nurturing community. This is also closer to the more embedded individual of Murray and has *hints* of a theory of institutions articulated by Bellah, which I will elaborate below. It is certainly more Christian in his ethic and is developing a stronger role for religious communities. He completes this thought by suggesting that Erick Erikson's concept of "basic trust" in his book, *Childhood and Society*, indicates that it is "the abundance of security as furnished by the love and devotion which others gives the self" as what completes the circle of the paradox: consistent self-seeking is self-defeating; but self-giving is impossible to the self without resources furnished by the family.³²

After demonstrating that "modern empirical studies support the paradox of Jesus," Niebuhr then elaborates on his concept of "common grace," and its use in the Christian tradition. This is where Niebuhr's critique of Protestantism is addressed, exhibiting a familiarity if not agreement with the resources of Catholic thought. It is also where he

³¹ Niebuhr, *Man's Nature*, p. 108.

³² Niebuhr, *Man's Nature*, p. 109.

addresses more fully the positive role of the “communities of faith.” Maybe this is not the full statement of an ecclesiology for Niebuhr, but it certainly helps to give H. Richard a sense that his brother continues to answer his challenge.

He begins by analyzing the confusions in orthodox doctrine, both Catholic and Reformation. He suggests that the distinction between saving grace and common grace only makes sense if saving grace as it exists within the conscience of the individual (and in its more complete *theoretical* formulation), frees that individual from devotion to a “contingent” community, such as family, race or nation, to “ultimate loyalty to God.” Because this has not been the history of the church in *practice*, it has lead to an “idolatrous” worship of the immediate community whether it is the family, church or nation. The well being of other communities become difficult, and the common welfare or common good is shortchanged.³³ Niebuhr, particularly traces this dynamic in the life of the historic church. From his perspective the church should be a humble community, for it is a community of “saved individuals, who know themselves to be “forgiven sinners.” The actual fact has most often been the opposite, though he acknowledges the Christian Church does not have a monopoly on a lack of humility. But his audience in this chapter is largely the church:

Historically speaking, religious piety is more apt to be found claiming the divine for an ally of its own partial view-points—It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us”—rather than showing a humble awareness of the relative aspects of all historical loyalties or as bringing for the fruits of repentance for shortcomings as judged by the transcendent God.³⁴

This tendency in Christian piety is redeemed by dissident individuals and the prophet, a role Niebuhr often played in foreign policy circles. He still has his high hopes for

³³ Niebuhr, *Man's Nature*, p. 110.

³⁴ Niebuhr, *Man's Nature*, p. 111.

individual morality, even though he now sees it to be more complicated than in *Moral Man*, which we will see below.

A second confusion in the paradox of self-giving and self-striving that Niebuhr saw in ascetic Catholicism, and Protestant moralism and perfectionist sects, was “self-righteousness” and “perfectionism.” The consequence of this led to seeing that “all forms of self-regard and self-realization” are sinful and thus obscuring the truth in Jesus’ original paradox of self-giving. (This is a departure in emphasis if not substance from his last chapter in *Moral Man*, where self-regard is his chief concern for morality.) According to Niebuhr an emphasis was put on “saving grace” as a way to rescue the self from undue destruction. This led to a striving for a “divine grace” at the expense of the “unconscious grace” of common experience that he saw in parental love. Further, this striving lead to a “saving grace” mediated by “the church and consciously sought by the believer.” Eventually this became too much of a focus on “salvation through right belief.”³⁵

This made the religious conception of grace even more confusing than the ascetic effort to rid the self of egoism through moral striving. Yet it must be recognized that there are certain elements of truth in the concept of saving grace. Those elements of truth are revealed in genuine evangelical experience in which he self apprehends a larger system of loyalty and meaning than he common loyalties and commitments which are the stuff of *common grace*. [Italics Added]³⁶

Niebuhr goes on to further explain his concept of *common grace*. It is in the social life of man that he experiences this. It is clear that he wants to distance himself from certain forms of collective life that do not produce common grace. The social life of man can

³⁵ Niebuhr, *Man's Nature*, p. 119.

³⁶ Niebuhr, *Man's Nature*, p. 119. There are shades of Max Weber's analysis of the unintended consequences of Protestant striving for “signs to prove their election” in these passages. Certainly Niebuhr was conversant with these theories.

“obviously be both the source of common grace and of demonic evil.” To illustrate this, which is a reformulation of his collective evil argument, he refers to the Nazism. But he then develops a complicated argument where he traces the difficulty to sustain the paradox of Jesus in the life of American Protestantism. Looking closely at this argument, which closes the book, helps to understand just how far Niebuhr’s thought evolved. He contends that the Great Awakening of Jonathan Edwards and the revivals in Ohio under Finney, were examples of where the creative impulse of religion were fruitful “not only for the individuals but for the community.” In the case of Finney, he sees the anti-slavery movement as a “common grace” impulse. “Impulse” is the operative word, for Niebuhr, it “did not affect seriously the institution of slavery.

The failure of Protestant Evangelicalism to challenge the institution of slavery ...may not be due to its specific weakness but to the general failure of any religious impulse to change radically a social climate of any culture...But there were specific weaknesses in Evangelicalism...among them were its individualism and its perfectionism. Both of them were the fruits of an undue distinction between “saving grace” and “common grace.” For this distinction exalts individual experience above social experience and thus obscures the social factors which redeem the individual from undue self-concern on the one hand, and those factors on the other hand which prevent him from regarding his own life critically.³⁷

“Social factors which redeem,” are really “institutions” that can have a positive and negative influence. This is certainly a shift in emphasis for Niebuhr. But for this analysis, however, he turns his criticism to the church. With its emphasis on a community that is too set apart by its focus on “saving grace,” it is unable to engage in the messy (ambiguous) world of life in terms other than individualism and perfectionism. This “isolation” (my word) has not allowed the church to fully appreciate its own imperfection and also contribute to a healthier “social situation.”

³⁷ Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature*, p. 123.

It may help, but not too much, to gather these saved individuals into a community of “forgiven sinners” and to insist on higher moral standards in this select community than in the whole society. But the evidence of the relation of Christian congregations to their general communities rather points to the fact that the religious community, whether evangelical or conventional, may have higher standards when there is an uncomplicated relation between the religious impulse and the fidelity of moral life, whether in marriage or in business enterprises.³⁸

After this argument about the weakness of Evangelical Protestantism and particularly its institutionalization in the church as he saw it, he ends with:

But all these complexities also reveal that the distinction between saving grace and common grace has been too much emphasized by the religious communities. This emphasis has obscured the true situation of the human self, has made for religious self-righteousness, for a meticulous rather than generous moral ethos, and has prevented any truth about love, grace and law from being generally understood or practiced.³⁹

Whether you accept his argument, at least as a partial description much of the Protestant culture, it is important to see key openings in his thought. First, social forces can be positive factors, but more important there is a sense that institutions have a voice in these arguments. It may not always be a healthy voice, but it is present. We are not just talking about a lone individual, yet his role for the individual is still important, and may be, in the end the most crucial. Second, religious sentiment or “impulse” is creative, yet still not sufficient in the messy play of social forces. Third, “common grace” for Niebuhr becomes the shorthand for Niebuhr to say that responsible action in the “web of pressures and counter pressures” of life is what is what makes him confident about his social Christianity. Common grace is an illustration that the self can be transformed in these “forms of social security or responsibility or pressure which prompt the self to bethink itself of its social essence and to realize itself by not trying too desperately for

³⁸ Niebuhr, *Man's Nature*, p. 124.

³⁹ Niebuhr, *Man's Nature*, p. 125.

self-realization” (saving grace)⁴⁰ Fourth, his criticism of the church is not to despair of the church but to call the church to its own self realization by working on common grace and the right theory of saving grace. Niebuhr has pushed the edges of his own thinking. Major breakthroughs from *Moral Man* have occurred. His view of a social nature of humans seems secure, even as he continues to maintain the important role for prophetic witness. His institutional analysis is less developed but his focus on the church has expanded. Whether he answered all the criticisms of H. Richard and John Courtney Murray is uncertain. Where has Bellah expanded our thinking on these subjects?

Robert Bellah: Habits of the Heart and The Good Society

Bellah’s view of the individual and his view of the role of institutions avoids the major error that Murray identified as the problem of Protestant moral thought, the unbridgeable gap between the individual and society. Drawing on a more Catholic view of the embedded individual, an understanding of the character forming nature of institutions and a critique of Protestant dialectical thinking with a more Catholic analogical thinking, Bellah forges a different approach to morality in the public sphere. This is an approach that maintains a strong Christian anthropology that is in line with much of Niebuhr’s prophetic individual but avoids the sense that collective life has to be more ethically problematic (ambiguous) than individual life. For Bellah they are both problematic and both ethically capable. Whether Bellah goes as far as Murray to ascribe the same type of “natural” moral parameters on institutions such as societies and nations is open to study. But Bellah’s institutional and collective sympathies are more with Murray and H. Richard Niebuhr. And they are certainly more in line with Reinhold’s

⁴⁰ Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature*, p. 125.

“common grace” and his categorical statement in *Man’s Nature*: “the self needs other selves in order to be itself.” Therefore, it is appropriate that the two Niebuhrs and Murray are to be seen as building blocks (conversation partners) for a continuous social Christianity that Bellah wants to energize in American social and religious thinking. I think Bellah would like to see his work as deepening their insights rather than illustrating⁴¹ his greater wisdom. In general Bellah is rather irenic in his treatment of Niebuhr. No doubt Bellah’s legacy and continuity with Christian Realism will be the willingness of others to work to deepen his thought as he has done with Niebuhr.

Individualism is under attack in every one of Bellah’s writings. His systematic treatment of the American problem is found in *Habits of the Heart* that anticipates his *Good Society* book, which extends the analysis in terms of the institutional arrangements, and mores that contribute to the “unrealistic Lockean individualism” of American society and market driven societies in general. This analysis continues to be unrelenting and penetrating in *The Robert Bellah Reader* and his many lectures and sermons. The source of this attack is both his normative Christian view of the world and his analysis of what has become a self-defeating and contradictory life style of modern societies and particularly in the United States. His normative view is expressed in his sermons but increasingly is intentionally present in his social science books. In *Habits of the Heart* when commenting on the “poverty of affluence” of our modern era where our “common life requires more than an exclusive concern for material accumulation,” he asks us to remember “we did not create ourselves.” One way to remember this is through “common

⁴¹ Robert Bellah, et.al. *Habits of the Heart, Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996 [1985] p. 295

worship” where in the face of “the mystery of being itself” we may be able to “remember what we, in our individualism and self sufficiency,” would like to forget:

...we owe what we are to the communities that formed us, and to what Paul Tillich called ‘the structure of grace in history’ that made communities possible. We will need to see the story of our life on earth not as an unbroken success but as a history of suffering as well as joy. We will need to remember the millions of suffering people in the world today and the millions whose suffering in the past made our present affluence possible.⁴²

We see in this statement elements of what Lovin and Sims referred to as a hope and confidence, in spite of a realistic assessment of the world. We also see Murray’s notion of the naturalness of collective life. We particularly see that Bellah’s individual is not the lone autonomous individual. For Bellah, the individual is only that which is formed in community. There is not abstract individual. He sees this from his Christian view of the world and from his analysis of human existence in modernity and throughout human history. Before we turn to his sociological analysis, one more statement about the resources for his “social understanding of human beings.”

In the *Good Society* Bellah once again indicates his agreement with the Catholic tradition and its formulation of the individual. In the same section, Bellah first quotes from Walter Lippman on the same point. “We are in truth members of one another, and a philosophy which seek to differentiate the community from the persons who belong to it, treating them as if they were distinct sovereignties having only diplomatic relations is contrary to fact and can lead only to moral bewilderment.”⁴³ If Niebuhr acknowledges in *Man’s Nature* in 1965 that he is beginning to take more seriously the Catholic social substance of humans, it is clear that this is at the core of Bellah’s theology, ethics and

⁴² Bellah, *Habits*, p.295

⁴³ Bellah, *Good Society*, p. 280

politics. Quoting from the American Catholic Bishop's Pastoral Letter on the US Economy, which he often does, he states:

As an example of fresh thinking about our situation, we call to mind the American Catholic bishops' 1986 letter on the U.S. economy, which argued eloquently that the dignity of the human person provides the moral cornerstone for social and economic life. *But for the bishops the human person is not an abstract individual but one whose dignity is realized only in community.* The commandments to love God with all one's heart and to love one's neighbor as oneself lay the foundations of human community. All persons have rights, but they arise from a mutual bond to care for one another as members of one creation and are rooted in "reverence for God as creator and fidelity to the covenant." [Italics Added]⁴⁴

Bellah adds, more from the voice of a social scientist, yet rooted in the above vision: "Justice begins with recognition of the need of all persons to take part in the life of a community in order *to be fully human*, by being united with one another in mutual activity and, finally, mutual love."⁴⁵

Bellah's ongoing struggle to find the key out of Weber's "iron cage" of the Protestant ethic that has turned back on itself, continues to rely on the Catholic tradition. It is here that he agrees with David Tracy's assessment in his book *Analogical Imagination*⁴⁶ that Christian theological tradition has included both analogy and dialectic. Suggesting that he is oversimplifying Tracy, he sees the analogical imagination as focusing on "similarities in the relationship between God, self, society, and world," and the dialectical imagination focuses on "dissimilarities." In a chapter in *The Robert Bellah Reader* entitled, "On Being Catholic in America," where Tracy sees the need for both, Bellah for the moment, is content to point out that the "imagination of Protestantism

⁴⁴ Bellah, et.al, *Good Society*, p.281.

⁴⁵ Bellah, et.al. *Good Society*, p 281

⁴⁶ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, New York: Crossroads, 1981)

has become dangerously one-sided.”⁴⁷ Lovin aptly states where Niebuhr’s method resides. He says that Niebuhr’s “method is dialectical, in the sense that concepts are clarified by stating what they exclude, and positions are explained by specifying what they reject.”⁴⁸ Again after acknowledging Tracy as seeing dialectics as a corrective on the analogical imagination, Bellah sees the consequences of the Protestant overemphasis on negative dialectics:

...Protestants have emphasized the element of critical judgment, the great negations of the prophetic tradition, at the expense of the affirmations of Being, the capacity to accept the world as God’s creation. The critical dialectical moment, which is certainly there at the heart of the tradition, has become unhinged from the other core elements of the tradition, and the result, for good and for ill is the drastic progress of modernity.⁴⁹

Elsewhere Bellah has bemoaned that the state of our intellectual life that has been overwhelmed by a post-modern focus on a hermeneutic of suspicion and deconstruction, particularly one that devalues tradition. In fact Lovin points out that Niebuhr helped introduce “into the discourse of American religious and social ethics what a later generation would call the “hermeneutics of suspicion.”⁵⁰ In *Good Society* Bellah asks for a “hermeneutic of recovery, through which we can understand what a living tradition is in the first place.” The other consequences of this unhinged Christian tradition are 1) a weak doctrine of the Trinity, with a low Christology, 2) emphasis on the Word of judgment at the expense of the Sacrament, and 3) a low ecclesiology with an emphasis on no mediation between and the individual and radically transcendent God.

It is clear that Bellah is affirming much of an “orthodox” Christianity. The tradition is meaningful to him. Again, one can see his own faith as a Christian present in

⁴⁷ Bellah, *Bellah Reader*, p 460

⁴⁸ Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 3

⁴⁹ Bellah, *Bellah Reader*, pp. 460-461.

⁵⁰ Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 7.

these words. But perhaps just important is his confidence in his social science that seeks for ways to understand our hope for a fuller humanity. A fruitful line of inquiry for understanding Bellah is to explore the relation of these insights to his long held view of “religious evolution.” In his current projected two-volume work on the subject, unpublished manuscripts reveal his confidence that “nothing is lost.” Bellah understands the axial breakthroughs that contribute to the “critical dimension” of modernity; he also uses the terms “theoretic” or “conceptual” to define our modern age. He maintains that previous periods of human history were no less religious. These periods were characterized by mimetic (ritual) and mythic (narrative) cultures. These cultures are still with us. Even the theoretic culture, which grows out of and significantly criticizes the past, never abandons, the early stages.⁵¹ This line of inquiry will be developed in a future work. But back to Bellah’s use of the Catholic tradition.

Bellah has certainly engaged in dialectics but he is also at home in the analogical imagination. At the close of his chapter “On being Catholic and American,” after he defends the important role his quintessential Catholic intellectuals, Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre could play in an academy less tied to disciplines, he states:

I suspect a closer look at the actual practices going on in the various fields, including the natural sciences, might yield more *analogies* than we might expect. A process of mutual self-interrogation might bring some greater understanding of the relationship of the parts to the whole. [Italics Added]⁵²

The similarity of this conviction to Niebuhr’s confidence in the validation of his Christian worldview with empirical science is noteworthy. In one of his most analogically imaginative essays in *the Bellah Reader*, “Flaws in the Protestant Code: Theological

⁵¹ Robert Bellah, “Tribal Religion: The Production of Meaning” in *Religious Evolution* (unpublished manuscript) p. 1.

⁵² Bellah, *Bellah Reader*, p. 472.

Roots of American Individualism,” Bellah uses an analogy from genetics. He begins with a passage from Clifford Geertz, “Culture patterns [are] sources of information that—like genes—provide a blueprint of template in terms of which processes external to themselves can be given a definite form.”⁵³ To make his case he cites the work of David Voegel⁵⁴ where he analyzes why certain cultures have a stronger environmental movement. He discovered that Protestant cultures seem to have stronger commitment to environmentalism. Vogel suggest one of the reasons for this connection: it is the sense of mastery over the environment. As Vogel states: “if one believes that control or mastery of the world is possible, one can just as readily choose to treat it well as dominate it. In any event, it is the people who are ultimately responsible for nature.”⁵⁵

The point of using Vogel’s argument is to suggest that even though Protestant cultures have been successful in many ways, we now see a watershed in this success, according to Bellah:

Now you will see the fiendish twist that I will give to the idea of a deep cultural code. Just as a genetic code can produce a highly successful species...perhaps at the moment of greatest success...the code can lead to rapid extinction... [and] can lead a civilization into abrupt decline if it disables it from solving central problems , perhaps problems created by its own success.⁵⁶

After, enumerating some of these “central problems” such as “porous institutions” and surface prosperity,” he reminds us that however deep, a culture code is not a genetic code, it can changed. In this essay he focuses on the depletions of our social capital and suggests the need for reinvigorated voluntary associations and a fuller ecclesiology that

⁵³ Bellah, *Bellah Reader*, p. 335.

⁵⁴ David Vogel, “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Environmentalism: Exploring he Cultural Roots of Contemporary Green Politics,” *Zeitschrift fur Umweltpolitik und Umweltpolitik und Umweltricht* 3 (2002) pp. 297-322.

⁵⁵ Bellah, *Bellah Reader*, p. 337.

⁵⁶ Bellah, *Bellah Reader*, pp 339-340.

includes a sacramental dimension as away to address these depletions. In this essay he is exhibiting much of his *Good Society* solution to address the flaws of individualism and a depletion of our institutional life. But one final comment about Bellah's assessment of the individual in this modern Protestant culture. He is clear that the reality of a depleted institutional life creates a depleted individual. Drawing often on his co-author, Ann Swidler's article, "Saving the Self, Endowment versus Depletion in American Institutions,"⁵⁷ he suggests that the individual is now depleted as well. In a recent lecture he states:

We live in a society obsessed with the self—above all most of us want to be rich, powerful, beautiful, and admired, or at least one of the above, and I certainly can't claim to be an exception. But instead of saying we are too obsessed with the self perhaps we should say we are not obsessed enough, we haven't looked deeply enough into what we want, which is the just self, capable of treating other justly in the context of a just society.⁵⁸

Perhaps we are getting close to what Niebuhr referred to as "common grace," and maybe the paradox of Jesus on loosing yourself to gain yourself. For Bellah, how does this "just self" get nurtured? Because "selves do not exist in isolation, it is hard to be a good self in a bad society, according to Bellah."⁵⁹ What is the solution for this situation for Bellah?

Again his social analysis and his theological hope come together in his view of institutions. If *Habits* pointed the way to a reform of institutional life, *The Good Society* is his deep exploration of what kind of institutional reform is needed to help our depleted self and our depleted social life. Simply put, if institutions help form individuals, we need a "good society." Bellah says, if we have a vicious society we will not have good

⁵⁷ See Richard Madsen, et.al., *Meaning and Modernity, Religion, Polity, and Self*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002, pp. 41-55.

⁵⁸ Robert Bellah, "Ethical Politics: Reality or Illusion, Henry Bugbee Lecture in Philosophy" University of Montana, Missoula, Montana: Unpublished manuscript, April 3, 2006 p.20.

⁵⁹ Bellah, "Ethical Politics" p. 21.

people. Working from a framework of Catholic social teachings about individuals *in* community and building on his grounding in Talcott Parsons' view of institutions, Bellah has developed a theory of institutions (and organizational life) that is missing in Niebuhr, but present in Murray and other social/cultural scientists such as Mary Douglas. But he goes beyond Parsons in what he and his co-authors call their normative and analytical approach. These are the theoretical underpinnings to *Good Society* that are outlined especially in the Introduction entitled, "We Live Through Institutions," written in 1991:

In *Habits of the Heart* we asked, "How ought we to live? How do we think about how to live?" and we focused on cultural and personal resources for thinking about our common life. In *Good Society* we are concerned with the same questions, but are now focusing on the patterned ways Americans have developed for living together, what sociologists call institutions.⁶⁰

After analyzing why Americans in our Protestant culture have difficulty with institutions because we see ourselves as "self-created atoms manipulating or being manipulated by objective institutions," Bellah states that: "we form institutions and institutions form us every time we engage in a conversation that matters, and certainly every time we act as parent child, student or teacher, citizen or official, in each case calling on models and metaphors for the rightness or wrongness of action." For Bellah, institutions are both constraining and enabling."⁶¹

They are the substantial forms through which we understand our own identity and the identity of others as we seek cooperatively to achieve a decent society. The idea that institutions are objective mechanisms that are essentially separate from the lives of individuals who inhabit them is an ideology that exacts a high moral and political price.⁶²

⁶⁰ Bellah, *Good Society*, p 4.

⁶¹ Bellah, *Good Society*, p. 12.

⁶² Bellah, *Good Society*, p. 12.

Building on Mary Douglas when she states, “responsibility is something we exercise as individuals but within and on behalf of institutions,”⁶³ the *Good Society* book is a call to action for a just society, a good society,

The key institutions treated in the book are the political economy, government, law and politics, education, and the public church. In each case the co-authors assess what kind of individual is being formed in the inherited institutions? What kind of patterns of meaning are they communicating to us? And how do we change the institutions to focus more on the well being of a fuller notion of who we are as social beings? Certainly *The Good Society* is a book about our responsibility in helping to create a “good society.” It is the “idealist” Bellah that emerges as the new “realist.” The emphasis is not just on the complication of transforming institutions or society that Niebuhr would stress, but it is an analysis on *how* to transform these institutions and a conviction that this can be done, for it needs to be done. What is at stake is a cultural catastrophe of our own making.

It is here that we see more clearly the shift from Niebuhr to Bellah. This is a shift that continues to carry the realist tradition into a new era, with the grounding in a theological hope and confidence.

III. Idealism and Realism

Reinhold Niebuhr: Moral Man and Immoral Society

Separately analyzing the themes of the “individual and society” and “idealism and realism” has been largely for analytical convenience to help draw attention to key

⁶³ Bellah, *Good Society*, p. 13.

distinctions for the sake of comparing the thought of others' with that of Niebuhr's. For Niebuhr, particularly in *Moral Man*, the key issue for him in challenging the idealists was their inability to understand that you could not move from individual morality and expect to see this translate into the how individuals perform when they are collected in groups. This led him to challenge the idealism of the social gospel movement that, for him, among other mistakes, made this shift too easily. It also led him to challenge the pacifists who failed to see that in the realm of politics, especially nation states, violence therefore, war could be used as a neutral moral instrument. Further in *Moral Man* he criticized liberals for failing to see that in politics you could not just educate and morally persuade people to give up their privilege. All of this was his early entry into creating a new current in the waters of social Christianity, where he remained.

Niebuhr, largely based this critique on several elements, which remained strong in all his thought. First, he used his Marxist critique of entrenched self-interest in the privileged class. Second, what he considered his Christian anthropology about the role of evil and its root in individuals, and especially groups. And the differential role that reason and religious imagination plays in each. In *Moral Man* this was how he understood the differential capacity of individuals and groups to use reason and their creative imaginative side to move beyond self-regard to a public good (not his word). This led him to be "realistic" about the ethic of each. Individuals could occasionally break through and exhibit love. However, social groups, especially politics could only hope for a break through for justice. His concept of justice was a limited one based on his realism. It took competing power to stabilize collective life. He held out for certain movements to "break through" with idealist thinking to create change. Again tied to his historical

context in *Moral Man*, he judged this breakthrough to be positive or negative. Looking at the international proletariat, he could see some potential for positive change, but it too would only institute an incomplete justice. Eventually he would be able to analyze communism as an idealistic messianic pseudo religion that would not produce positive change.

In *Moral Man* he was also tied to the inescapable reality of national identity. For him this was the most defining identity for human groups in the early 20th century. This judgment did not change much throughout his life. I will address this below when discussing the openings in his “realism.” In one of the most instructive and perhaps, most painful chapters to read in *Moral Man* is his chapter on the “morality of nations.” It is instructive for it makes a strong empirical case for the “reality” that national self-interest, in its most narrow sense has too many historical examples to be ignored. It is painful for this “reality” is still too close to home with our present world situation. As is the case throughout *Moral Man*, there are “exceptional” moments when a group, in this case a nation, might act less out of self-regard and for “justice.” Niebuhr defines moments when the British government achieves this status.

Just in case his readers are not confused as to what his “realism” is based on in *Moral Man*, Niebuhr concludes with a chapter entitled, “Individual and Social Morality.” He begins by reiterating that the highest ideal of society is justice and the highest ideal of the individual is unselfishness.

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. The individual must strive to realize his life by losing and finding himself in something greater than himself.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, p. 257

He then goes on to nuance this as to what he has just said. The “two perspectives are not mutually exclusive and the contradiction is not absolute.” He then summarizes his argument that he presented in his chapter on “Moral Values in Politics,” where he admits that this contradiction can be “harmonized,” but not very easily.

It was revealed that the highest moral insights and achievements of the individual conscience are both relevant and necessary to the life of society. The most perfect justice cannot be established if the moral imagination of the individual does not seek to comprehend the needs and interests of his fellows. Nor can any non-rational instrument of justice be used without great peril to society, if it is not brought under the control of moral goodwill. *Any justice which is only justice soon degenerates into something less than justice. It must be saved by something that is more than justice.* [Italics Added]⁶⁵

“Any justice which is only justice soon degenerates into something less than justice.”

This statement confounded me when I first read it in the 1970’s. My marginal notation was just a bunch of ??????. I think reading it from the lens of the 60’s and 70’s

“idealistic” radical movements that defined our age, I reconciled this statement with my sense that the old forms of liberal justice were not defining. We were in fact ushering in a new more perfect justice. In this sense we could count Niebuhr on our side. (In hindsight this was a misreading.) Niebuhr follows this up with:

The realistic wisdom of the statesman is reduced to foolishness if it is not under the foolishness of the moral seer. The latter’s idealism results in political futility and sometimes moral confusion, if not brought into commerce and communication with the realities of man’s collective life.⁶⁶

Then Niebuhr alludes to what I want to analyze more below that may connect with Bellah’s brand of “realism.” He refers to this “harmonizing” as a “necessity.” This sentiment also seems to be present in his comment that “justice (with, at least, the “aim to seek equality for all of life”) which is only justice soon degenerates in to something less

⁶⁵ Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, pp. 257-258.

⁶⁶ Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, p. 258.

than justice.” There is, in a sense, a *new* realism that we must attend to, even if latent and under emphasized in Niebuhr’s theory.

This *necessity* and possibility of fusing moral and political insights does not, however, completely eliminate certain irreconcilable elements in the two types of morality, internal and external, individual and social. These elements make for *constant confusion but they also add to the richness of life*. [Italics Added]⁶⁷

What to make of these comments? There are many places in *Moral Man* that Niebuhr is most insistent that his realism is based on the need to maintain the split between private and public morality; but then he is quick to add the possibility of the creative breakthrough in group existence. Yes it is still most often provided by the individual, who has the capacity not only justice but for love. Yes it is always more difficult in groups. But it never goes away and in fact it is even a “necessity.” So there appears to be another kind of “realism” in Niebuhr’s early work, though a nascent new realism. However, it is still an autonomous individual providing the most likelihood for manifesting its possibility in the life of groups. Collectives still have the capacity, but for Niebuhr, at this stage it is such a long shot. My sense, this is really Niebuhr’s sense of “confidence” breaking through. It is what sustains his own individual action in groups and motivates him to be hopeful in “generation we are therefore bound to feel harassed as well disillusioned.”⁶⁸

The last two paragraphs in *Moral Man* are certainly celebration quotes for the 75th anniversary of *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. Here is the very last one:

In the task of that redemption [of the total human enterprise] the most effective agents will be men who have substituted some new illusions for the abandoned ones. The most important of these illusions is that the collective life of mankind can achieve perfect justice. It is a very valuable illusion for the moment; for

⁶⁷ Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, p. 258.

⁶⁸ Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, p. 276.

justice cannot be approximated if the hope of its perfect realization does not generate sublime madness in the soul. Nothing but such madness will do battle with malignant power and “spiritual wickedness in high places.” The illusion is dangerous because it encourages terrible fanaticisms. It must therefore be brought under the control of reason. One can only hope that reason will not destroy it before its work is done.⁶⁹

H. Richard. Niebuhr and John Courtney Murray S.J.

The critiques of Reinhold’s brother and no doubt the Jesuit Murray, played a role in where Niebuhr ended up with his last book, *Man’s Nature and His Communities* as I suggested above. Most of this book is devoted to a systematic review of “Idealism and Realism.” H. Richard, as stated in the previous section on “the individual and society,” focuses on where Reinhold may have gotten his critique of idealism only partially right. Reinhold failed to see his own idealism in his view of the individual and his use of humanistic religion. There is no need to repeat his arguments here. Murray on the other hand, continued to hammer away at not only at the strange brand of Protestantism that focuses on autonomous individuals but also on autonomous collectives also acting like individuals (or more correct, not capable of acting like individuals). This false theory, for him, led to an ethics of “ambiguity” and “paradox” as the way out of the unbridgeable gulf between individuals and society. But Murray developed a more profound and complete theory of institutional life. If understood, it could have helped Niebuhr better understand how institutional life could contribute to the moral life of societies, in Bellah’s terms, a good society. From Murray’s point of view this would have helped Protestant moralists, such as Niebuhr, avoid an over emphasis on the realism of self-interested politics.

⁶⁹ Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, p. 277.

Murray analyses the bind that Protestant's often find themselves in moral and political thought to lead them to compress "the moral life of man into one dimension"⁷⁰ the moral dimension of "ambiguity." Murray states:

The ambiguiist, indicts the fundamentalist and the secular liberal for their one-dimensional views of man. But he does not recognize that the same indictment recoils on his head. He easily disposes of all the utopians, both "hard" and "soft," that result from one-dimensional the one dimensional fundamentalist and secular liberal views...He who relishes irony should relish this—that the whole complicated argument against simplistic theories should result in the creation of a theory that is itself simplistic; that the smashing attack on the bright and brittle illusion of utopianism should win its victory under the banner of an opposite illusion that is marshy and murky but no less an illusion.⁷¹

Murray, in this regard would put Niebuhr in the category of the ambiguiists. Without going into Murray's complete argument, we can appreciate it in its broad outlines. If the private morality of individuals is the standard for morality and this private morality can never be the realized standard for collective life, then what one is left with is a plunge into political life. This is a necessary plunge, in fact mandated by our faith. But this is a plunge with only the expectations of complexity and a war of competing self-interests. This is certainly an *ambiguous* effort. We will now turn to Niebuhr's book in 1965 to see if these criticisms had an influence on him. As we indicated above, some of this argument influenced his view of collective grace. Yet the themes of paradox and messy politics are very present.

Openings: Man's Nature and His Communities

This book illustrates how in his lifetime his experience with the recalibration of capitalism through what he refers to as "open societies," had adjusted his early Marxist

⁷⁰ Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, p. 257.

⁷¹ Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, p. 257

views of “bourgeois society” (he still uses this term in 1965). Still very much in the midst of the “cold war” of which he had an impact on helping to formulate American policy, and maybe to an extent because of this fact, *Man’s Nature* is consistent with his concern for collective egoism as mentioned above. But it is in *Man’s Nature* that we find the softest edges of his old realism. In fact at one point after tracing the various “realist” and “idealist” theories throughout Western thought he refers to his position as “moderate realism.” What is moderate realism for Niebuhr and how does it connect with the need for realism today.

Early in the book he states very boldly his assumption of about the basis of “Christian realism.” “In principle, the Christian faith holds that human nature contains both self-regarding and social impulses and that the former is stronger than the latter.”⁷² We now see a more prominent focus on the “social impulses as part of his formulation. But as usual he wants to remind us that the “virtue” in this “realistic analysis of the human condition does not guaranteed a Christian solution.” And this is so for the very same reasons as he has maintained all along, for “two vexing problems”:

The establishment of a tolerable *harmony* between self-regarding individuals within the civil community, and the relations of *integral* political communities with each other. The second problem is naturally more difficult than the first because of the strength of collective self-regard in comparison with the self-regard of individuals. [Italics Added]⁷³

Where are the soft edges in this statement? It is instructive to read how Niebuhr understands the history of Western social philosophy through the lens of the “horns of these two vexing dilemmas in *Man’s Nature*. A couple illustrations will help make this point and also illustrate his own self-reflection on his position, the soft edges. After

⁷² Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature*, p. 39.

⁷³ Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature*, p. 39.

tracing the idealist and realist positions in Paul, Augustine and Luther, Niebuhr is able to state that the Catholic “idealist version of human nature and of man’s community was closer to the truth.”⁷⁴ But then after showing the limits of Catholic thought, particularly in politics and an extension of the family, he takes on the realism of Hobbes and the idealism of Locke. His comment about Hobbes and Locke once more helps to illustrate his dichotomous lens and his dialectical method:

The differences between the thought of Hobbes and Locke illustrate the relation of theories of government to the estimate of human nature. Human freedom always produces disruptive as well as creative effects in the human community...it is important to emphasize again that both types of theory about human nature while they may be equally wide of the truth about human nature, do have these contradictory consequences in political theory.⁷⁵

Niebuhr indicates that the pessimistic theory encourages absolutism and thus sides with the idealist theory for it encourages the rise of free governments. Further, this optimistic estimate was a “necessary” source of creative energy to challenge authority. But he very quickly wants to remind us that there is a danger that Western democracy may lead to “mild illusions about human nature and the political order.”⁷⁶ Again a “necessity” yet a warning.

Next Niebuhr gives credit for the vindication of an open society through not only by its understanding of “interest” and “power,” but rational engagement and enlargement of a native sympathy, a sense of justice, a *residual* moral integrity and a sense of the *common good* in all classes of society.” [Italics Added]⁷⁷ Here the edges seem to have been more than softened, perhaps a complete break has occurred. Yet the “sense of the

⁷⁴ Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature*, p.47.

⁷⁵ Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature*, pp. 62-63.

⁷⁶ Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature*, p. 63.

⁷⁷ Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature*, p. 68.

common good” may only be a “sense,” just like moral integrity is only “residual.” But they seem essential to a fuller, maybe even more “realistic” view of the human condition, for Niebuhr. The question remains, where do these “senses” and “residual” elements reside and where are they nurtured? Could it be in institutions? Niebuhr appears to be on the verge of a bigger break through in his thinking, but at least in *Man’s Nature*, he does not seem to take the next step in this chapter. A final illustration in his most familiar world of international relations will help us see where he ends up, at least for this book in 1965.

When talking about nations, Niebuhr will often use the language of “autonomous nations.” And if not specifically using this language he assumes it. Needless to say this is where he is most vulnerable to Murray’s critique and as we will see again in more detail below, Bellah’s approach. Niebuhr concludes his chapter with a critique of Hans Morgenthau and a review of international relations during the cold war in 1965. He prefaces this section with a statement that the moral problem of collective self-regard “has reached its climax in our day.”⁷⁸

The consistent tendencies of nations to seek their own interests is so marked that the realistic interpretation of international relations would seem to be the only valid description of their behavior, and possibly the only true solution to the problem this behavior poses. Nevertheless it is important to raise once again the question whether a realistic interpretation may not err in obscuring the residual capacity for justice and *devotion to the larger good*, even when it is dealing with a dimension of collective behavior in which the realistic assumptions about human nature are most justified. [Italics Added]⁷⁹

Niebuhr in this statement is reframing his emphasis in a new direction. He then seeks to answer this question by analyzing Morgenthau’s *magnum opus*, *Politics Among the*

⁷⁸ Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature*, p. 71.

⁷⁹ Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature*, p. 71.

*Nations*⁸⁰. Niebuhr gives credit to Morgenthau for his fair treatment of the pretensions and hypocrisy of nations to aspire to supranational ideals, which only hide the parochial interests of nation. If anybody knows this world, it is Morgenthau. and according to Niebuhr, Morgenthau has a “unique reason for emphasizing the ‘national interest’ as a description of the most powerful collective motive and as the norm of conduct.”⁸¹

Niebuhr also gives Morgenthau credit as not a proponent of “arrogant nationalism.”

Morgenthau he says, is merely suggesting that it would be both honest and moral for nations to confess their real motives rather than pretend to have nobler ones.”⁸²

Morgenthau is against hypocrisy and pretensions. But Niebuhr then gives his critique of this limited morality:

In short, the hypocrisy of nations, as of individuals, may be an index to a residual creative capacity of their freedom, neither equal to nor effaced by their stronger impulse of self-regard. Hypocrisy which is the tribute paid by the less acceptable impulse to the more acceptable one, is certainly no virtue. On the other hand, its elimination by canceling out the higher loyalty offers no gain.⁸³

Niebuhr has a higher standard than Morgenthau. What exactly is it and does it go beyond his usual treatment of the need to focus on realpolitik in foreign relations? He wants to make sure that Morgenthau does not obscure the “important residual creative factor in human rationality.

The importance of establishing this residual creative freedom in the collective man lies not in the possibility of subordinating the lower to the higher or wider interest—but in the possibility that even a residual loyalty to values, transcending national existence, may change radically the nation’s conception of the breadth and quality of “national interest.”⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among the Nations*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958.

⁸¹ Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature*, p. 73.

⁸² Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature*, p. 74.

⁸³ Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature*, p. 75.

⁸⁴ Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature*, p. 77.

How far does he take this position? Later he will suggest that a “moderate realism” is important. It is one that suggests that national interest cannot be simply defined and the complexity of the situation will “refute both realistic and idealistic interpretations of national behavior.”⁸⁵ Essentially where this leaves Niebuhr is an affirmation of “prudence” as his highest value in foreign relations. He states it very clearly when he argues that “the morality of collective man in its highest reaches is governed by a wise apprehension of concurrent interests, rather than by a sacrifice of the lower to the higher.”

This *prudence* is a modest but important triumph of human reason and sympathy over the tribal parochialism in human nature, which is a symbol of the limits of freedom in the creature who is bound to nature even while he becomes a creator in history. [Italics Added]⁸⁶

This is all the farther he is willing to go in his “realism” in the affairs of what he calls “hegemonous nations.” It is all the farther he is willing to go for humans, though they be creators and agents in history, they are limited to the “limits of man as creature.” What appears to be the possibility of a bigger break through in his thought, he finds a way to pull back and maintain some of his classic dialectical thinking. This is still the gulf between individual morality and collective morality, based on his limited view human nature and the potential of institutions to “form individuals.” This in the end, is his realism: a prudential behavior that accounts for all factors, even idealistic capabilities. I would assume that he would also want to hold out for a correct saving grace and the existence of common grace.

Where does Bellah’s “realism” connect with Niebuhr’s, if at all?

⁸⁵ Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature*, p. 79

⁸⁶ Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature*, pp79-80.

Robert Bellah: The New Realism

Niebuhr could at least point to the “necessity” of not forgetting the creative, though residual force in both humans and their communities, regardless of how difficult it was to realize. He was also giving testimony to a different kind of realism that we had best not forget, in his own words: “the self needs other selves in order to be itself.” This reality of our interconnectedness is the reality that Bellah and his co-authors put forth both in its normative sense and in the analysis of the modern world. After the chapter which asserts that we “Live in Institutions,” Bellah (Again, I will use just his name as a shorthand for him and his co-authors, presuming two things, Bellah agrees and as stated in the preface to *Good Society*, Bellah had the larger role in drafting the framing and concluding chapters.) makes his case for the need in today’s world for us “to make sense of it,” in a chapter, entitled, “Making Sense of It.” Niebuhr suggested that we live in a confused time that has created a feeling of fatalism. Bellah analyzed this as a feeling that our future is determined by forces beyond our control, or so it seems.

It is this chapter where he develops his own view of realism, in conversation with Niebuhr’s, which he summarizes as follows:

Reinhold Niebuhr, for one, argued with great public effect that because of the tragic limitations of human nature, human beings could not help doing some evil in the course of doing good; yet, he continued, God commanded sinful men and women to bring justice to bear on human efforts, despite the ironic consequences that often meet such attempts.⁸⁷

Bellah goes on to recount the public debate over the best role for American politics in the world. Giving credit to those who framed the issue between idealists and realists for many years in the United States, he suggests that in “the past two decades [the 70’s and 80’s], however, as American preeminence in the world has receded and new forces have

⁸⁷ Bellah, *Good Society*, p. 36.

grown, idealism and realism have become strangely detached from the actual practice of foreign relations.”⁸⁸

Comparing Nixon, the self styled realist, with Carter, the Niebuhrian inspired but idealist as labeled by others, Bellah then reminds us of Reagan’s American messianism. How to “make sense” of these concepts today? According to Bellah, “all idealists have not been hopeless dreamers, nor all realists disillusioned cynics.”⁸⁹ He further reminds us that public figures like George Kennan and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., “tried to enact Niebuhr’s ‘moral realism,’ as a responsible moral practice of power politics in a complicated, ambiguous, tragically immoral world.”⁹⁰

What has changed to make such distinctions to “become strangely detached from actual practice of foreign relations?” The problem with any perceived failure in Carter’s foreign policy was not that it was too idealist but that the international political economy, according to Bellah was becoming too “complicated to permit effective use of the standard instruments of the geopolitical strategies beloved by the realists.” This meant, relying less on military power and more on the power of ideas and competing economically. This was the result of the fact that no one country could control either the flow of information or use economic weapons to punish other countries. In the case of Carter, Bellah cites Carter’s attempt to punish the former Soviet Union for invading Afghanistan. Other grain-supporting countries just filled the void. A similar case was made in regards to Reagan’s “realism” to “bankrupt the Soviet Union through the arms race. The consequence for the US was that it made us even more dependent on the goodwill of other nations as he created massive debts for the US economy, according to

⁸⁸ Bellah, *Good Society*, p. 37.

⁸⁹ Bellah, *Good Society*, p. 35.

⁹⁰ Bellah, *Good Society*, p. 35.

Bellah. Therefore, Bellah states that the deciding factor was not determined by the realist-idealist debate but by “seismic global shifts,” where “the complexities of international *interdependence* rendered obsolete our commonly accepted categories for understanding foreign policy challenges. [Italics Added]”⁹¹ One can only imagine what Bellah would have to say about President George W. Bush’s realism and idealism today and his attempt to craft a foreign policy of national self-interest in this interdependent world.

Where in the past a realist might say that the United States should do whatever it takes to “protect its self-interest,” it is clear to Bellah that today our economic life is dominated by a the “dynamics of a vast world market that cannot be controlled by any single nation-state.” There are no autonomous nation states. The problems of our world cut across all nations and threaten the security of all nations whether this is nuclear weapons, poverty or global warming. The solutions are not single state solutions. Bellah also suggests that both the idealist and the realist perspective of the past were tied to a concept that nations like individuals were isolated actors. For the realists they were in a Hobbesian “state of nature” of a ‘war of all against all.’ For the idealist, at least in the US, we were an independent actor as an example “uplifting” other nations. Certainly Niebuhr’s thought did not help move out of this general theory of nations as individual actors. But Bellah’s point is not so much that Niebuhr’s approach was wrong for its time, even though I think a case can be made that interdependence was always a fact, but that the global situation has made interdependence not a idealist theory of a sentimental, “we are all in this together.” It is a fact that “we are all in this together.”

⁹¹ Bellah, *Good Society*, p. 37.

Bellah concludes with what he sees as the challenge to “strengthen and expand the international institutions essential to the common good.” We are already part of what he calls a global great society with many, though fragile, treaties and agreements that need to be strengthened. He offers a special challenge for the US by again stressing the outdated distinction of realists and idealists:

Under these circumstances, the self-interest of our nation, which the *realists* stress, cannot always be clearly distinguished from the self-interest of other societies, let alone be conceived in opposition to it. The *idealist* approach, for its part, assumes that the United States has ideals that are uniquely its own and that we have it in our power to spread them around the world. If that is still true, and in some ways it surely is, we do not understand very well what it is that others seek to learn from us or how to provide them an example that will neither stifle or oppress them. It would appear then that both our *ideals* and our *interests* require reformulation from a new more global perspective. And it is clear that that global perspective is an institutional approach. [Italics Added]⁹²

The new realism of interdependence for Bellah is one of the key elements in helping us to “make sense of our world.” He and his colleagues in other chapters in *Good Society*, repeat this thesis of interdependence over and over. They make the case that what is needed is an institutional life that helps us understand this reality. They see the difficulty of understanding this reality and therefore the need to create institutions to help reinforce this reality. Part of the reason for this difficulty is due to our profound disconnect from the actual world of interdependence and the American ideology of what he calls Lockean individualism. In *Habits of the Heart* they referred to this as “radical individualism, as they distinguished from “expressive individualism.” But both deeply ingrained individualisms worked against facing up to the fact of interdependence and Bellah’s value norm of the common good. With our focus on the individual to such an

⁹² Bellah, *Good Society*, p. 37.

extent as autonomous and self-sufficient, we are totally cut off from our ability to make sense of our world. This becomes what they call the “central argument” of *Good Society*:

The Lockean ideal of the autonomous individual was, in the eighteenth century, embedded in a complex moral ecology that include family and church on the one hand and on the other a vigorous public sphere in which economic initiative it was hoped, grew together with public spirit...Both the economy and the government were sufficiently small-scale as to be understandable to the ordinary citizen....It was not inconsistent with autonomous individualism, when it was supplanted by religious and republican understandings of the common good, and large-scale institutions did not dominate individual decision.⁹³

This of course is not the large-scale, complex and interdependent world of today. But with an psychology and ideology that hides this reality, particularly in our complex cities, and without sustaining institutions that make independence morally significant,” Bellah feels that “individual attention becomes fragmented and delimited in scope” (as pointed out in the previous section). This leads to a running away to private lives and a further focus on the pursuits that guarantee our private happiness. With this escape from responsibility and a desire and capacity to understand what is happening to us, according to Bellah, “interdependence is both complex and fragile.”⁹⁴ More and more the virtues of mutual trust and good will which were once seen as *idealist* become *essential* for the viability of a coherent individual and a coherent society. As Bellah states it: “viable interdependence, as we have argued repeatedly, requires that participants integrate a cognitive understanding of their interdependence with the practical enactment of goodwill demanded in each institutional context. Moving beyond just a *latent necessity* for a regard for others becomes the most urgent, and in Bellah’s terms, the most “realistic” challenge for modern societies today.

⁹³ Bellah, *Good Society*, p. 265.

⁹⁴ Bellah, *Good Society*, p. 277.

At this point the Bellah the social scientist meets Bellah the Christian. It is here that he draws on Niebuhr, not Reinhold, but H. Richard. Quoting from Reinhold's brother's book, *The Responsible Self*, he "argued that all our action is a *response* to action upon us, for we are caught in an inescapable web of relationships with other human beings, with the natural world, and with the ultimate reality that includes and transcends all things---what Jews and Christians call God."⁹⁵ Bellah suggests that H. Richard's focus at this point is just he being a good sociologist. Once he moves to the idea of trust and what Christians are called to do in the world, Bellah feels Niebuhr is being both "sociologically realistic and religiously perceptive."⁹⁶ Building on H. Richard's insights about trust, Bellah ends the Conclusion of *Good Society* with what he feels will give society a chance to trust. A Christian message of grace.

Yet, if we are fortunate enough to have the gift of faith through which we see ourselves as members of the universal community of all being, then we bear a special responsibility to bring whatever insights we have to the common discussion of new problems, not because we have any superior wisdom but because we can be, as Vaclav Havel defines his role, ambassadors of trust in a fearful world.⁹⁷

It is here that Bellah and both Niebuhr's meet with vision for the universal community. Reinhold's comments about saving and common grace and his vision of the universal community, no doubt are partially informed by his most trusted conversation partner, his brother, brings us back to our tentative thesis about the real connection and continuity between Robert Bellah and Reinhold Niebuhr: their deep hope and confidence that the what is true in their faith will be born out in their analysis of the world, not in simple

⁹⁵ Bellah, *Good Society*, p. 283.

⁹⁶ Bellah, *Good Society*, p. 284.

⁹⁷ Bellah, *Good Society*, p. 286.

terms but through being tested with all the factors available. This is a calling as good social theorists and a calling as responsible selves.

What is the future of Christian Realist thought for today, particularly if we situate Bellah's new realism in the broad tradition of social Christianity?

IV Conclusion: Christian Realism Continuity

Taking a lead from Robin Lovin in his concluding chapter in *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, I have focused on eight areas of what Lovin calls the "classic formulations" of Christian realism.⁹⁸ They are presented in Lovin's language below as indicated by Italics. Using the lens of Bellah's work, in each case I will speculate briefly on whether or not these formulations have been sustained or expanded by Bellah. Much more can be said; but my intent is to illustrate this with just a few examples.

1. *The Christian Realist has a commitment to take all factors into account with no a priori commitment to the particular set of social, political, and economic forces that Reinhold analyzed.*⁹⁹ Bellah's commitment to "grand theory" and the "classic tradition" in sociology has never limited the scope of his disciplinary focus. This has insured that his focus has never relied on just one set of forces that were contributing our understanding of the human condition. Certainly he was not constrained by Niebuhr's categories, yet he certainly matched Niebuhr's scope as a social thinker with a commitment to the positive role of religion in social development especially from the

⁹⁸ Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 239.

⁹⁹ Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 239.

standpoint of one's faith commitment. Bellah's greater constructive use of Catholic thought is certainly an expansion of Niebuhr.

2. *The Christian Realist will not defend a narrow conception of human nature.*¹⁰⁰ Here Lovin is most concerned with feminist and other extensions of human nature to be seen as offsetting the often one-dimensional focus on human pride. Bellah certainly sustains the Niebuhr agenda on pride. However, his understanding of expressive individualism as both leading to other failings and creative outpourings sustains an expanded view of human nature that Lovin suggests. But Bellah's greatest contribution, along with others such as John Courtney Murray, is to see the self as an embedded self and not an atomistic self, abstracted from its nature as a social being.

3. *The Christian Realist's patterns of argument focus on prescriptions for action that are based on attention to the complexity of forces at work in a situation, especially the trends that go unnoticed because they are pervasive, and the interests that go undetected because they are concealed by appeals to more general values. Understanding how a social system ought to function rests on understanding how to meet the needs of human nature and how to avoid the distortions to which it is susceptible. To see what Christian Realism is, we need to attend not only to the works of those who chose the label for themselves.*¹⁰¹ Though Bellah would be comfortable with much of the label of Christian Realism, he has not sought to specifically use this self-identification. He, however, has helped to make a contribution to this "classic formulation." He has deepened our

¹⁰⁰ Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 239.

¹⁰¹ Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 240.

understanding of a radical individualism that has become an ideology in our interdependent world. Knowing that democracy entails citizens being committed to and capable of “making sense” of their world, Bellah has insured that his books and ideas are widely accessible to concerned individuals.

4. *For Christian Realists today it is not about what whether or not we can apply Niebuhr’s principles directly to new problems. The question is about more general convictions of those who sought a “realistic theology.” They believed that the truth about God must in the end prove consistent with every other kind of truth we can know, and they believed that by attending to reality, without insisting in advance that it conforms to faith’s expectations, we would in the end find “whatever ground of courage, hope, and faith is actually there...” that attentiveness to what Christians have thought about human life is likely to prove more accurate as a guide to present possibilities than any of the alternative understandings of the human condition.¹⁰² There can be no claims to moral and religious truth that stand in simple contradiction to the rest of what we know.¹⁰³ This is the formulation that points to the “confidence” of Niebuhr and the hope of Bellah. This is where the sociologist Bellah meets the person of faith. Bellah sustains this element of Christian realism, even in his study of diverse cultures and “religious evolution.” I am not sure he would say that Christianity would prove to be the most accurate guide for all, but he would say it would be the most accurate guide for him.*

¹⁰² Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 241

¹⁰³ Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 242

5. *The Christian Realist ventures into apologetic theology not simply to answer questions, but also to challenge the terms that the questions are put. The apologist is always the skeptic and the critic. One of the clearest insights of Christian Realism is that those who hold to the Christian faith do not live only in Barth's "strange new world of the Bible," but also in the modern world whose assumptions are strange to us.*¹⁰⁴ As a person of faith in the "secular university," Bellah has been no stranger to this role as a skeptic and a critic in the strange world of reductionistic epistemologies. In fact, he has the vocation that Sims applied to Lewis, Carnell and Niebuhr: he has been a missionary to the skeptics all his life.

6. *The Christian Realist proceeds with humility and with confidence. The Christian Realist does not escape the distortion of insight by interest. No one does. The confidence comes from the awareness that sooner or later, those who see matters differently will have to make their own case in realistic terms. It is important for Christian Realism that there is rarely a straight line from individual aspiration to social reality.*¹⁰⁵ Bellah like the Niebuhr's, always saw his theories as partial and contingent. He saw his Ultimate Reality, however, as a transcendent reality and his contingent reality under the judgment of God. I have already addressed one form of confidence. This second form flows from the first. Alternate views or even views expanding the realist agenda, like Bellah's, must make their case in realist terms. Bellah's new twist is that the new global reality makes the so-called idealist perspective of institutions manifesting morality of the past, the realism of today. Niebuhr began to see the solution to a collectivist world as a closer

¹⁰⁴ Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, pp. 243-244.

¹⁰⁵ Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, pp. 244-245.

harmony between the creative individual and a creative collective. He also began to see “common grace” as needing this nurturing in our social institutions. Bellah has extended this thinking with his theory of institutions.

*7. The Christian Realist is not to talk about realistic limits, but to expand political imagination. When no one dares to be utopian, however, the role of the Realist may be to recall that the human reality also includes the capacity for such dreams.*¹⁰⁶ Niebuhr began to more fully emphasize this in his later work. Bellah has become the consummate motivator for a common good. This is his value norm that he feels should be the focus for individuals and reinforced society as the most realistic way out of our current individualism. It is an individualism that neither serves the individual, as a responsible moral being, or society, as a good society to reinforce these values in the individual. A prophetic voice needs both an audience *and* a way to institutionalize the vision.

*8. As a positive view of politics in a new century (not Niebuhr’s century) Christian Realism must teach us to think again about politics, so that we will not expect too little of it. There is no way to achieve any of what we hope, no way, indeed, even to know what it is that we hope, that does not pass through politics.*¹⁰⁷ Bellah, wrote *Habits Heart* and *The Good Society* with the motivation to reinvigorate our public life. He too analyzed the difficulty of Americans to have a positive view of politics. He offers an analysis to give us a warning of what will happen if we ignore our political life, nothing less than a viable

¹⁰⁶ Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, p. 246.

¹⁰⁷ Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, pp. 247-248.

interdependence is at stake. It will take “paying attention” to the transformation of our institutional life. As Bellah stated in *Good Society*:

We shall argue in this book that, in spite of the complexities and the difficulties, large-scale institutions can and indeed must be better understood, and they are amenable to citizen action and the influence of global public opinion. To imagine them as autonomous systems operating according to their own mysterious logic, to be fine-tuned by experts, is to opt for some kind of modern Gnosticism that sees the world as controlled by the powers of darkness and encourages us to look only to our private survival...But responsible social participation...does not come about just from exhortation...It is certainly not enough to implore our fellow citizens “to get involved.” We must create institutions that will enable such participation to occur, encourage it, and make it fulfilling as well as demanding.¹⁰⁸

This is the realist’s challenge today.

¹⁰⁸ Bellah, *Good Society*, p. 15.

