

“The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr”

[April 1953–June 1954]

[Boston, Mass.]

*Expressing views similar to those in his earlier essays on Niebuhr, King presented this essay to the Dialectical Society after first giving a handwritten draft of the essay to DeWolf for his comments. King agrees with Niebuhr's rejection of the perfectibility of human nature but asks, "Within such a view is there no hope for man?"*¹

1. For the handwritten essay, see King, "Draft, The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr," April 1953–June 1954, MLKP-MBU: Box 113. The transcription presented here is based on the most legible of the several extant copies of the typed essay. The title of the version is simply "Reinhold Niebuhr," but David W. Briddell, a member of the Dialectical Society, reported that during King's presentation he corrected it to "The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr" (David W. Briddell to King Center, 3 May 1982).

June 1954

We may best begin our study of Niebuhr's most important ideas by discussing his dialectically emphasis. Like other dialectical theologians he is forever insisting that there is a dialectical tension between time and eternity.² This theme runs the whole gamut of Niebuhr's writings. Eternity is always relevant to, and yet ever tensionally set against, earth at every moment of time. Eternity may never be identified with earth, but earth may never declare independence from eternity. Both ideal and achievement must be suspended in a dialectical relation: at every moment eternity must set the ideal of man, which judging the relativities of history as partial, yet inadequate. It is essentially at this point that Niebuhr differs from Barthianism. He accuses German dialectical theology of being nearer Greek Platonistic dualism than the Christian paradoxes when vindicating the absolute difference between eternity and time. History and nature became meaningless in Barthian theology, as Niebuhr sees it, and even the very fact of the Incarnation ceases to be a historical fact, i.e., the absolute never becomes incarnate in time. For Niebuhr, the only adequate religious expression of the human situation is a combination of this-worldly and other-worldly hopes.

It is interesting to notice how Niebuhr proceeds to state Christianity dialectically. The thesis of the Christian ethic is the absoluteness of the moral ideal and the endless possibilities for the fulfillment of brotherhood in history. "In the religion of Jesus, says Niebuhr, the perfection of God is consistently defined as an absolute love by comparison with which all altruistic achievements fall short."* This is the wisdom of the cross. This is the Renaissance side of the Christian ethic. The antithesis is the foolishness of the cross. Original sin makes the fulfillment of the rule of Agape love impossible, for pride encourages man to pretend pretend far more for himself than the facts will justify.⁴ This is the Reformation side of the Christian ethic. It contains a realistic pessimism which balances the initial Renaissance optimism. The synthesis

* DCR³

2. This sentence is also in an outline by King, "Reinhold Niebuhr," p. 140 in this volume.

3. The full citation should read Reinhold Niebuhr, *Does Civilization Need Religion? A Study in the Social Resources and Limitations of Religion in Modern Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), p. 54.

4. The word "pretend" appears as the last word on one page and the first word on the next.

June 1954

is the power of the cross. Through faith and justification resources of grace are made accessible to the individual who remains within the pincers of the dialectic.⁵

At this point, we may turn to Niebuhr's anthropology which is certainly the cornerstone of his thought.

One of the first problems to oppress Niebuhr was the terrible contrast between "moral man and immoral society," between the relatively decent, good behavior of man as an individual, and man as society. His analysis of this contrast led him to the roots of the contradiction of human nature. He cogently states, "Individual men may be moral in the sense that they are able to consider interests of others than their own in determining problems of conduct, and are capable, on occasion, of preferring the advantages of others to their own. . . . 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 to check impulse, less capacity for self transcendence, less ability to comprehend the need of others and therefore more unrestrained egoism than the individuals, who compare the groups, reveal in their personal relationships."*⁶

* MMIS

Again, Niebuhr was captured by the fact that the characteristics of the so-called Enlightenment of the 18th century, which had its roots in the Renaissance, had made a new appearance in the easy optimism of the first three decades of the twentieth century. Man was viewed as the measure of all things. History was to witness a quick and steady progress to Utopia. Man had only to be educated and put in agreeable environments in order that the kingdom of Heaven might be realized on earth. Modern liberal or "progressive" version of the Christian faith readily joined in to sing with the optimistic charms of modernity. The obvious refutations of this view of man, particularly in contemporary history, has brought about a definite swing away from this pattern of thought. Says Niebuhr, "Since 1914 one tragic experience has followed an-

5. Much of this paragraph is also in "Reinhold Niebuhr," p. 140 in this volume.

6. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Scribner, 1932), pp. xi, xii. This paragraph is similar to one in King, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Ethical Dualism," pp. 142-143 in this volume.

June 1954

other, as if history has been designed to refute the vain delusions of modern man.”*

* FH⁷

The basal problem is how man shall think of himself. On the one hand, he is a child of nature, caught up in its conditions, on the other, he is a transcendent being standing outside of nature. Niebuhr contends that in the course of history, the tendency is to confuse or to disregard the synthesis, and to construct a view of human nature on the basis of one or the other aspect of his dual being. Platonism and Aristotelianism understood man primarily from the standpoint of his rational faculties. Over against this so-called classical view Democritus, Heraclitus, and Epicurus interpreted man as wholly part of nature. Such dichotomic views of man, says Niebuhr, can have no conception of meaning in history, and no solution of the element of tragedy in human affairs, because of the necessity of their own logic. The modern philosophic since the revival of classicism in the Renaissance fall into the same ancient errors. They are either idealistic or naturalistic. If the former, they tend to lose a sense of the finiteness of human nature, conceiving the self as identical with reason. If the latter modern man seeks to interpret himself wholly with reference to nature. This naturalism has in our times, taken concrete expression in Marxism and Fascism.

Over against these anthropologies which fail to do justice to the dimension of human nature, and which, in spite of the inner logic of their assumptions and of the refutations of history, persist in falsifying the human situation by false notions of progress and by false dogmas of human perfectibility, Niebuhr sets forth the biblical and Christian Anthropology. It takes issue with the utopian optimism of Modernism, but with equal emphasis it repudiates the cynical pessimism that lies at the heart of the age. It views man in terms of both nature and of spirit. He is both in the realm of necessity and in the realm of freedom. At one and the same time man is under the dominion of nature and also transcends nature. Man's self transcendence forbids him to identify meaning with causality in nature; his bodily and finite particularity equally forbids the loss of the self in a distinctionless absolute of

7. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History* (New York: Scribner, 1949), pp. 6-7.

June 1954

mind or rationality. God as will and personality is, therefore, the only ground of individuality. As creature, man is made in the image of God. But along with this high measure of the human stature stands also the concomitant fact that man is a sinner. And so this leads us to another important point of Niebuhr's thought.

Niebuhr never wearies of pointing out that man is a sinner. He points out that such modern thinkers as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud, in their explorations of the dark depths of the human heart, confirm afresh the biblical doctrine of the sinfulness of man. Niebuhr sees sin as what results when man tries to find security for himself outside the tension of the dialectical relation between time and eternity. "Sin is, in short, the consequence of man's inclination to usurp the prerogatives of God, to think more highly of himself than he ought to observing the limits to which a creaturely freedom is bound."⁸

* FH

This view does not look upon sin as the inevitable consequence of man's finiteness as the fruit of his involvement in the contingencies and necessities of nature. Rather it places evil at the very centre of human personality: in the will. "Sin is thus the unwillingness of man to acknowledge his creatureliness and dependence upon God and his effort to make his won life independent and secure."[†]

† NDM, I, 138.⁹

We readily see that for Niebuhr, pride is the basic sin and all other sins such as injustice and sensuality result from this pride. It is one of Niebuhr's great merits to show how the sin of pride develops into the pride of power, pride of intellect, moral pride and spiritual pride.

Niebuhr resorts to the formula of "original sin" to explain why evil in history belongs to man. "Man being both free and bound, both limited and limitless is anxious. Anxiety is the inevitable concomitant of the paradox of freedom and finiteness in which man is involved. Anxiety is the internal precondition of sin. It is the inevitable spiritual state of man, standing in

8. King omitted several words. The quotation should read: "Sin is, in short, the consequence of man's inclination to usurp the prerogatives of God, to think more highly of himself than he ought to think, thus making destructive use of his freedom by not observing the limits to which a creaturely freedom is bound" (Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, p. 121).

9. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner, 1941-1943).

June 1954

the paradoxical situation of freedom and finiteness.* Existentially, man sins inevitably, yet not by necessity. Since sin does not flow anxiety, man is responsible for his sin. If one answers that the doctrine is illogical, Niebuhr would retort that the doctrine may be logically absurd, but it is psychologically profound. Just as Hegel's "dialectic" is a logic invented for the purpose of doing justice to the fact of "becoming" as a phenomenon which belongs in the category of neither "being" nor "nonbeing," the doctrine of original sin, which is such a basic fact of experience, requires a provisional defiance of logic. He states, "the Christian doctrine of original sin with its seemingly contradictory assertions about the inevitability of sin and man's responsibility for sin is a dialectical truth which does justice to the fact that man's self love and self-centredness is inevitable, but not in such a way as to fit into the category of natural necessity."†

* NDM, I, 182.

† NDM, I, 263.

The universal reaction of all who have made spiritual contact with the law which defines ideal selfhood, is what Niebuhr calls "the fall." The fall is localized in th[at] moment in freedom where the free self, assenting to the law of Agape, peers down into the empirical self and discovers selfishness. For this reason "every man is Adam." The Fall is a mythological expression for what is psychologically true in each person. The fall, says Niebuhr, "is an inward conflict between the is and the ought of life, between the ideal possibilities to which freedom encourages man and the drive of egoism, which reason sharpens rather than assuages."‡¹⁰

‡ BT, pp. 137-138.

By now we see that for Niebuhr, original sin and the fall are not literal events in history; they are rather symbolic or mythological categories to explain the universality of sin. While passing we might say just a word about Niebuhr's conception of symbol and myth since they are such basic ideas in his thought. Ethical fruitfulness is measured by the ability of norms to maintain a tension between what is and what ought to be, between the historical and the transcendental. This means that eternity is the absolute and history the relative, and anything in history which is a pointer to the eternal can be no more than a symbol

10. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (London: Nisbet, 1947). The quotation should read "a particular conflict" rather than "an inward conflict."

June 1954

of the eternal. To identify anything in history with eternity is to break the dialectical relation between time and eternity. Symbols are rallying points for the religious myth. The myth is a story, the origin of which is generally forgotten, which serves to explain the basis of a religious practice or belief. The myth is an artistic attempt to give depth to history. Says Niebuhr, "Meaning can be attributed to history only by a mythology."* Orthodoxy has vitiated the usefulness of myth by trying to literalize it into a metaphysical truth, while liberalism has bypassed the symbols as prescientific nonsense.

* REE, 123.¹¹

We pass now to Niebuhr's philosophy of history. Niebuhr's most systematic treatments of this subject are found in the Second Volume of The Nature and Destiny of Man and Faith and History. The argument in the latter book turns, as the subtitle suggests, on the contrast between the Christian and th[e] modern view of history. The "modern view" is that history itself is the redeemer. This is Niebuhr's way of expressing the idea that man can help himself to progress, and unless he helps himself, he is helpless. The Christian view is that history is an inadequate Christ, that man's history is a history of guilt, and that meaning can be found only in repentance. Only after repentance, is man able to receive the Christian revelation.†

† FH, 140.

For Niebuhr the final problem of history becomes the fact that "before God no man living is justified."‡ Every individual "is a Moses who perishes outside the promised Land."§ The result of this view is that there can be no real moral progress in man's social, political, and religious life: for good can never triumph over evil in history, due to limitations of human nature—though there may be a parallel development of good and evil throughout history. Within such a view is there no hope for man? Is man consigned to remain suspended within this dialectical tension guilty when he performs and guilty when he fails to perform? It is at this point that the doctrine of Grace becomes all important in Niebuhr's theology. The moment a person assumes the posture of rependence before God and confesses helplessness in the inward man, that instant God injects power into his heart. These resources are at once recognized as vitalities which have

‡ NDM, II, 292.

§ NDM, II, 310.

11. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era* (New York: Scribner, 1934).

June 1954

come from beyond man. Since the divine Grace comes from beyond man, it operates not in history, but outside, beyond, and at the "edge" of history. Justification supplies man with a "new nature." Sanctification releases a flow of grace to empower one to complete heights of Agape normally impossible on one's own strength. Justification is a feeling in the free self of a spiritual relief following upon the occasion of conversion and repentance. This release cannot be accounted for on the ground that one has merited release himself, for he remains a sinner; therefore, it must be the imputed righteousness of Christ. God accepts the intention to live according to the rule of Christ as the very act itself. The possession is always a righteousness by faith. Man is free from guilt "in principle" only never "in fact." Our sinful nature remains, although we feel that we are sinless. If man ever achieved Agape in fact, then the dialectic would be spoiled by history containing its own ideal.

In Niebuhr's philosophy of history such orthodox Christian doctrines as the second coming of Christ and the resurrection of the body become important. We must hasten to say, however, that his statement of these doctrines are not at all orthodox. The second coming of Christ is the symbolic way faith declares its assurance that Christ, who has already overcome the world, as Tetas, will assuredly achieve that triumph at the end of history. The first coming—Christ after the flesh, is the disclosure, and the second coming is the fulfillment. The resurrection of the body is a symbol implying on the one hand that eternity will fulfill the richness and variety which the temporal process has elaborated. On the other hand, it implies that the condition of finiteness and freedom is a problem for which there is no solution by human power. Only God can solve this problem.

For a clearer understanding of Niebuhr Philosophy of history it is necessary at this point to discuss his Christology, since, for him Christ is the heaven-sent clue to clarify the meaning of history.

In briefest compass, Niebuhr's general argument for the Christ concept is as follows: Because a free man stands outside of history, his full explanation requires a pattern or mind which likewise stands outside of history. History is one-dimensional; it suggests, therefore, more than it can explain. If history is to have meaning, such a meaning must not be identified with the process itself; for that which exempli-

June 1954

fies a pattern is numerically different from the pattern. If, e.g., an act has meaning, the act is one thing and the meaning which it exemplifies is another. There is numerical difference between the blueprints used in constructing a building and the finished building itself. Stated religiously, Christ is the mind or blueprint which gives moral finality to our ideals. Niebuhr states, "Christianity enters the world with the stupendous claim that in Christ . . . the expectations of the ages have been fulfilled."* In short, for Niebuhr, Christ is the eternal in time, a breaking through of the everlasting mind of God which gives both meaning and consummation to process.

* NDM, II, 35.

This Christ just discussed is not the Jesus of history that walked in Jerusalem rather he is a pure abstraction. Christ is only a symbol. Niebuhr laconically states, "Christ is the symbol both of what man ought to be and of what God is beyond man."† As to the person of the Jesus of history, Niebuhr fails to pass beyond his erstwhile liberalism.

† BT.¹²

At this point we may turn to Niebuhr's God concept. Unfortunately Niebuhr never gives a systematic statement of his doctrine of God, it is only here and there that one can find his view of God. First, he accepts the traditional theistic view that God is creator. "To believe that God created the world, states Niebuhr, is to feel that the world is a realm of meaning and coherence without insisting that the world is totally good or that the totality of things must be identified with the Sacred."‡ As creator, God is both transcendent and free. His existence must be postulated if one is to give a satisfactory account of the world itself. Natural causation can never explain why there is this causal series rather than another.

‡ ICE.¹³

Secondly, Niebuhr stresses that fact that God is Judge. General revelation which is "the testimony in the consciousness of every person that his life touches a reality beyond himself, a reality deeper and higher than the system of nature in which he stands, is powerful in its witness that man is morally related to God as Judge. "We have a deep and abiding awareness of being seen, commanded, judged, and known from beyond ourselves."§

§ NDM, I, 128.

12. Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, p. 23.

13. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Harper, 1935), p. 26.

June 1954

The final solution to the predicament of man, together with the completion of the dialectical relation between time and eternity, cannot be enjoyed until the knowledge of God as Judge passes to God as Redeemer. So Niebuhr is continually speaking of God as Redeemer. This redemptive work is accomplished through Christ, for in Christ God takes the sins of the world into himself, effecting a final forgiveness.

There are many points in his writings in which Niebuhr speaks of God's existence and nature as inexplicable and incomprehensible to man. Man is so limited as never to be able to transcend his limitations and understand the ways of God.*

* NDM, I, 163.

CRITICAL EVALUATION: The merit of Niebuhr is that, seeing the problem of our age in its proper relations and dimensions, and laying firm hold on ultimate principles, he sets forth with rigour and consistency in analysis and criticism the fundamental weaknesses and contradictions and the inevitable sterility of the humanistic emphasis.¹⁴ Moreover, I think that Niebuhr's anthropology is the necessary corrective of a kind of liberalism that too easily capitulated to modern culture. Man who has come so far in wisdom and decency may be expected to go much further as his methods of attaining and applying knowledge are improved. Although such ethical religion is humane and its vision a lofty one, it has obvious shortcomings. This particular sort of optimism has been discredited by the brutal logic of events. Instead of assured progress in wisdom and decency, man faces the ever present possibility of swift relapse not merely to animalism but into such calculated cruelty as no other animal can practice. Niebuhr reminds us of this on every hand.¹⁵

Yet we may ask if Niebuhr's views are as orthodox and Biblical as he assumes them to be.¹⁶ His conception of original sin, the fall of man, and original righteousness, is overhauled in terms of historical and lib-

14. This sentence repeats the first sentence of the concluding paragraph in "Reinhold Niebuhr," p. 141 in this volume.

15. These four sentences are part of King's draft report on *Crozer Quarterly*, p. 141 in this volume.

16. This sentence, a paraphrase from an article by Walter G. Muelder, appears in King's conclusion to "Reinhold Niebuhr," p. 141 in this volume. See Muelder, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Conception of Man," *The Personalist* 26 (July 1945): 284.

June 1954

eral criticism. His Christology is so novel that he can make essentially symbolic the reality of Chris[t], the sinlessness of Jesus, and the resurrection. Indeed, his use of myth and symbolization to explain Christian doctrine is so thoroughgoing that hardly any denotative meaning is possible.¹⁷

In setting forth the Biblical view of man, Niebuhr attacks and seemingly rejects Greek and modern idealism. Yet Niebuhr fails to see that in his argument he uses concepts and categories of the very idealism he rejects. What more can we say for such ideas as: self, consciousness, transcendence, self-transcendence, freedom, will, and personality? Niebuhr does not recognize the presuppositions of the idealistic categories, but begs the metaphysical question by putting them at the disposal of so-called Biblical presuppositions.¹⁸

Again, it may be pointed out that Niebuhr's extreme agnosticism as to the God concept is far from Biblical religion. In asserting that God's nature and existence are inexplicable and incomprehensible to man, Niebuhr is asserting what is essential to Thomas Henry Huxley's definition of agnosticism, that reason cannot demonstrate the existence and nature of God. Niebuhr is quite dependent on the Epistle to the Romans for many of his views, but there is one passage in the Epistle that he almost completely overlooks. "For the invisible things of hom from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.*"

* Rom. 1:20.

TADS. PACC.

17. Muelder, "Niebuhr's Conception of Man," p. 284: "In commenting on Niebuhr's claims it may be said at the outset that his views are probably less orthodox and certainly less Biblical than he assumes them to be. . . . He overhauls in terms of historical and liberal criticism such ideas as original sin, the fall of man, original righteousness, and guilt. He introduces into the old wine-skins of Christology novel assumptions of fact and doctrine. Thus he makes essentially symbolical the reality of the Christ, the sinlessness of Jesus, and the resurrection. Indeed, the use of myth and symbolization with respect to Christian doctrine is so thoroughgoing that hardly any direct denotative meaning can be recognized."

18. Muelder, "Niebuhr's Conception of Man," p. 285: "In stressing the uniqueness of the Biblical view of man, Niebuhr attacks and seemingly rejects Greek and modern idealism. Yet, it is idealistic concepts and categories which carry the weight of his argument. Such ideas are: self, consciousness, transcendence, self-consciousness, self-transcendence, freedom, reason, will, universality, and personality. . . . Unfortunately, Niebuhr does not recognize or face squarely the presuppositions of the idealistic categories, but begs the metaphysical question by putting them at the disposal of so-called Biblical presuppositions."