For well over a quarter of this century H. Richard Niebuhr, along with his brother Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich (who fled Germany in the thirties), stood as one of the giants of American Protestant religious thought. Though less well known than his brother, Richard is perhaps more widely respected and has had greater influence within theological circles. In fact, because of his careful, penetrating, and creative scholarship, he has been referred to as the "theologian's theologian." Actually he was not a "systematic theologian" as that term is normally understood in seminaries and divinity schools; he was, as he claimed to be (and as his title at Yale indicated) a philosopher of the Christian moral life. But since for him theology and ethics were inseparable, a great deal of his reflections and writings were on the nature and actions of God, as well as reflections on man's appropriate response to God's nature and actions.

The Man and His Work

Helmut Richard Niebuhr was born in Wright City, Missouri, in 1894, the son of a distinguished pastor (who fled to the United States from Germany at the age of 17) in the German Evangelical Synod of North America. He followed his older brother to Elmhurst College (1908-1912) and later to Eden Theological Seminary (1912-1915). He pastored a church in St. Louis from 1916-1919, during which he received an M.A. in history from Washington University. In 1919 he returned to teach at Eden. Feeling the need for more intellectual development, he left Eden to continue his studies at Yale in 1922, while he pastored a church nearby. After receiving his B.D. and Ph.D. (writing a thesis on "Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion" under Professor D.C. Macintosh), he spurned an offer to stay on to teach at Yale and returned to be President of Elmhurst College in 1924. After a highly successful three years, he


yearned for the classroom and returned to the Eden faculty where he taught until 1931 when he took a Yale professorship to teach Christian ethics, a position he held until his death in 1962.

H. Richard Niebuhr was a dedicated and active churchman throughout his life. He was an early advocate of church union and ecumenical cooperation. His first major book, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929), in a highly critical tone, pointed to how economic, racial, regional, ethnic, nationalistic, and political forces had molded churches in their own image. In a 1935 book, *Church Against the World* (with Francis Miller and William Pauck) he pointed to the "captivity" of the churches by the culture and pleaded for the church's liberation and independence from capitalism, nationalism, and humanism. In his masterful study of 1937, *The Kingdom of God in America,* he seeks to provide a corrective to some of his early writings, arguing in effect that socio-historical factors cannot account for all religious belief and events. That is, to use social scientific language, religion (specifically in this case, the conception of the Kingdom of God) can be an independent variable.

In 1941 he published one of his finest theological works, *The Meaning of Revelation,* which Paul Tillich once referred to as "the introduction to existential thinking in present American theology." A 1951 book, *Christ and Culture* explores the normative patterns Christians have used to relate to the "world" or culture. Four years later he edited (with Waldo Beach) *Basic Christian Ethics.*

In 1954-55, with the assistance of James Gustafson and Daniel Day Williams, he directed a study of theological education in the United States and Canada for the American Association of Theological Schools. *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*

---

(1956)\textsuperscript{10} and The Advancement of Theological Education (1957)\textsuperscript{11} resulted from the study. A related book, The Ministry in Historical Perspective\textsuperscript{12} was edited by Niebuhr and Williams.

His last book before his death, Radical Monotheism and Western Culture (1960)\textsuperscript{13} develops his central concept of radical monotheism and distinguishes it from the polytheistic and henotheistic faiths in the history of Western science, religion, and politics. The Responsible Self (1963) was published posthumously, but it can only be regarded as prolegomenon to his projected opus on ethics which religious academics had long anticipated.

Niebuhr is difficult to classify using the usual categories or labels for schools of thought. In fact he eschewed such labels. Claude Welch’s characterization of his thought as "critical orthodoxy" will serve as well as any. Welch writes:

This critical orthodoxy, as I shall call it, is characterized by less animus toward liberalism than is present in some neo-Reformation types of thought (especially those of the European variety). Indeed, it includes what some interpreters would prefer to call a chastened evangelical liberalism. Yet the distinctive complex of liberal theology’s doctrinal emphases has not persisted. . . . And where liberalism was apologetic about the creeds and the biblical symbols, this theology is happy to rediscover their meaning and continuing relevance. It is impressed less by the newness of an epoch in which the past formulations must be radically revised and new principles of authority articulated than by the perduring validity of the central theological traditions. In this sense it may be called kerygmatic and orthodox. Yet this is plainly a critical orthodoxy, incorporating many of the concerns of liberalism, its historicritical approach to scripture, its interest in relevance to culture, etc., and there is an openness to new symbols that will not replace but will interpret the classic statements. Further, this critical orthodoxy is distinguished from its European counterpart by much less concern to identify a depositum fidei or body of revealed truth or unchanging doctrinal content.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{10} H. Richard Niebuhr, Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), hereafter PCM.
\textsuperscript{11} The Advancement of Theological Education (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), hereafter ATE.
\textsuperscript{12} The Ministry in Historical Perspective (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956).
\textsuperscript{13} Radical Monotheism and Western Culture (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), hereafter RMHC.
\textsuperscript{14} The Responsible Self (New York: Harper and Row, 1963) hereafter RS.
In a major article\textsuperscript{16} published just two years before his death in the \textit{Christian Century}'s "How My Mind Has Changed" series, he notes that a "purely objective critic" might say he had changed his mind not once but twice—that in the 1930's he had deserted early liberalism, which was an "ethics and religion centered way of thinking about God and man" and turned to what has been called Barthianism or theology of crisis. It is true that in 1937 he had penned perhaps his most quoted statement—a judgment on the religious liberalism of the 19th and early 20th century that had significant autobiographical dimensions: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."\textsuperscript{17}

This "purely objective critic," Niebuhr continues, might also point out that in the 1950's, Niebuhr had turned against Barthianism in its later forms and seemed to resume contact with earlier modes of theological thought. Niebuhr maintains that his convictions and concerns over the 1930-60 period were not only continuous but also consistent\textsuperscript{18} and that though the "external, rough facts" were true, the implied interpretation of this "purely objective critic" would be wrong. He admits his emphasis changed due to the varying contexts. He wrote:

\begin{quote}
I believe that the Barthian correction of the line of march begun in Schleiermacher's day was absolutely essential, but that it has become an overcorrection and that Protestant theology can minister to the church's life more effectively if it resumes the general line of march represented by the evangelical, empirical, and critical movement.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

He was particularly fearful that Barthianism had "gone back to orthodoxy as right teaching, right doctrine, and to faith as \textit{fides}, as assent." They tried to emphasize "right believing," exaltation of Christianity as the "true religion," and the "primacy of ideas over personal relations." Niebuhr concluded that by 1960 he felt a greater kinship with the "theologians of Christian experience than with theologians of Christian doctrine."\textsuperscript{19}

He noted that whereas in practical churchmanship his brother, Reinhold, focused on the reform of the culture (which was also the great concern of the Social Gospel), he felt the times (1930's)

\textsuperscript{16} "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," \textit{Christian Century} 77 - (March 2, 1960), \textbf{pp. 248-251}.
\textsuperscript{17} KGA, p. 193.
\textsuperscript{18} "Reformation," p. 248.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 249.
dictated that reformation of the church should be his special task. In the thirties, he called for a rejection of "cultural Protestantism" (see *Social Sources of Denominationalism* and *Church Against the World* cited above) and a "return of the church to the confession of its peculiar faith and ethics."²⁰ (This partly explains the attraction of the early Barth, with his focus on the primacy of faith, independence of the church and God's transcendence.) In the 1960's his primary concern was still reformation of the church. But now he was saying that the church's separation from the world had gone far enough. We need an entrance into it without conformity to it. He called for a "resymbolization of the message and life of faith in the one God."² The old phrases are worn out, they have become little more than cliches; they no longer are able to grasp or communicate the reality of existence before God.

It would be false to assume that Niebuhr's emphasis on the reformation of the church illustrated a lack of concern with society and its structures. The two concerns are interrelated. He ends his review of how his mind has changed with these words:

> I also believe, with both the prophets and, of all men, Karl Marx, that the reformation of religion is the fundamental reformation of society. And I believe that nothing very important for mankind will happen as a result of our "conquest" of space or as a result of the cessation of the Cold War unless the human spirit is revived within itself.

*Theology, Revelation and History*

Niebuhr was convinced of the radically historical character of human existence. He wrote, "I am certain that I can only see, understand, think and believe as a self that is in time."²³ Faith comes to man "in history." But all knowledge is conditioned by the standpoint or point of view of the knower. Niebuhr did not feel that acceptance of historical relativism (or historical relationalism) must lead to agnosticism or cynicism. "Relativism does not imply subjectivism and skepticism. It is not evident that the man who is forced to confess that his view of things is conditioned by the standpoint he occupies must doubt the reality of what he sees."²⁴ True

²⁰ Ibid.
²¹ Ibid., p. 251.
²² Ibid.
²³ Ibid., p. 249.
²⁴ MR, p. 18; see also p. vii.
we view the universal from a relative and particular point of view and we do not fully grasp or express it in our words but "it" still may exist. To some degree, knowledge of "reality" is subject to the test of experience (and validation or corroboration) on the part of our companions who look from the same standpoint in the same direction, using the paradigms, concepts, etc., that have developed over time in a common community.  

One cannot even speak of theology (i.e. man's formulations and critical thinking about the nature and acts of God and man's relation to God) or revelation (God's self disclosure) apart from history. Because we are historical beings we must see everything through the medium of history. "We are in history as the fish is in the water and what we mean by the revelation of God can be indicated only as we point through the medium in which we live."  

Niebuhr distinguishes between two types of history: external history, the realm of theoretical reason, and internal history, the realm of practical reason. The former refers to the "objective" or "cause-effect" history viewed by the "detached" or "outside observer" (i.e. detached as he can be). In internal history, the concern is for the "meaning" of events for one's life. One participates in internal history; he views things from the "inside" wearing the same "lenses" or using the same paradigms and concepts of his fellow community members with that common history. In external history (viewed from the outside) the value of an event is measured by valency or strength (i.e. the effect, not the nobility of the value); time is measured serially and society is viewed as an association of atomic individuals related to each other only by external bonds. But in internal or "lived" history, value is measured by its worth for selves; time is "in men," and society is a community of selves personally and internally related. The two kinds of history parallel the distinction developed by Martin Buber: written history involves I-it relationships; inner history, an I-Thou relationship. Man meets the eternal "Thou" in his inner history, he does not get information about God.

The revelation event takes place primarily in internal history. Niebuhr describes the meaning of revelation this way:

25 Ibid., p. 21.
26 Ibid., p. 48.
27 Ibid., pp. 59-73.
28 Ibid., pp. 146-7. See Martin Buber, I and Thou (Edinburg: T & T Clark, 1937).
Revelation means for us that part of our inner history which illuminates the rest of it and which is itself intelligible. Sometimes when we read a difficult book, seeking to follow a complicated argument, we come across a luminous sentence from which we can go forward and backward and so attain some understanding of the whole. Revelation is like that. In his Religion in the Making Professor Whitehead has written such illuminating sentences and one of them is this: "Rational religion appeals to the direct intuition of special occasions, and to the elucidatory power of its concepts for all occasions." The special occasion to which we appeal in the Christian church is called Jesus Christ, in whom we see the righteousness of God, his power and wisdom. But from that special occasion we also derive the concepts which make possible the elucidation of all the events in our history. Revelation means this intelligible event which makes all other events intelligible.

Revelation provides us with that "image" by means of which personal and common life become intelligible or take on meaning. Revelation is not irrational; on the contrary it brings rationality, coherence and wholeness. "Without revelation, reason is limited and guided into error; without reason, revelation only illuminates itself." The supreme occasion for revelation for the Christian is Jesus Christ's history which is not simply viewed externally but through faith as we participate in that history. He provides the paradigm to interpret, and give "meaning" to our existence.

Obviously Niebuhr's theology is "confessional" rather than apologetic. He speaks from a faith perspective, "inside" a particular history. He cautions against self defensiveness (those who claim their "view" of ultimate reality is "true" or superior) as a cardinal sin for Christians. There is no Christian God, only a Christian relation to God.

Another idea (sometimes referred to as the "protestant principle") that underlies Niebuhr's work is that "the great source of evil in life is the absolutizing of the relative, which takes the form of substituting religion, revelation, church or Christian morality for God." Every statement, action or institution of men in history is relative and finite.

2 Ibid., p. 93.
30 Ibid., p. 121.
31 Ibid., vii. See also RS, pp. 42-46.
32 RS, p. 45
33 MR, pp. viii-ix.
Radical Monotheism

The principal theological motif for Niebuhr was radical monotheism or God's sovereignty. In his review of his thought in 1960 he said:

The fundamental certainty given to me... was that of God's sovereignty. My fundamental break with the so-called liberal or empirical theology was not due to the fact that it emphasized human sovereignty; to interpret it in that way is to falsify it in unjustifiable fashion. It was rather due to the fact that it defined God primarily in value-terms, as the good, believing that good could be defined apart from God. And now I came to understand that unless being itself, the constitution of things, the One beyond all the many, the ground of my being and of all being, the ground of its "that-ness" and its "so-ness," was trustworthy—could be counted on by what had proceeded from it—I had no God at all. The change was not a change of definition of God but of personal relations to my world and the ground of the world, to the givenness of life, history, myself. Since I came to that conviction or since it came to me, I have worked considerably at the problem of the nature and meaning of "value" and at efforts to understand the basic relation of the self to that on which it is absolutely dependent. But the old theological phrase, "the sovereignty of God," indicates what is for me fundamental.33

For radical monotheism the value center is the principle of being itself; its reference is not to one reality among the many (as henotheism) but to the One (not three)35 beyond all the many from which all derive their being and value. As faith (which Niebuhr defines as both trust and loyalty) it is reliance on the source of all being for the significance and value of self and of all that exists. "Monotheism is less than radical if it makes a distinction between the principle of being and the principle of value." 37 This real God is personal (unlike Tillich's ground of being); he is an independent actor in history who confronts man as void, then enemy, then companion and friend.38

34 "Reformation," p. 248.
36 RMWC.
37 Ibid., p. 32.
38 See Fowler, To See the Kingdom, pp. 59-60, pp. 151-200. Niebuhr often quoted Alfred North Whitehead, Religion in the Making (Cleveland: Meridian
Radical monotheism is the conviction that nothing is absolute save the one God. *Negatively,* this idea protects against all the false absolutes and graceless gods that lead men up blind alleys. It negates ("slays") all these little gods, such as race, religion, class, nation, ideology, or sex, in which men have placed trust, sought meaning, and given their loyalty. *Positively* the radical monotheism idea is the affirmation that the principle of being, the one beyond the many, is trustworthy. The God whom Jesus Christ points to is both powerful and good. He ushers us into the inclusive, universal community and creates an obligation which extends to all creation. Radical monotheism dethrones all absolutes short of the principle of being itself; at the same time it "reverences every relative existence."

*Man's Sin and God's Grace*

In the same 1960 article referred to above, Niebuhr cites two other convictions (clearly interrelated and also relevant to radical monotheism) that he came to during the 1930s: a) recognition of man's lostness, sinfulness, and idolatrousness, and b) the understanding that trust in the ground of being is a miraculous gift."

The doctrine of human sinfulness is as central to any Christian strategy of life as the doctrine of class struggle in Marxian strategy. Though man's fundamental nature is "perfect," he is perverted or corrupted. In dealing with ourselves and our neighbors we confront twisted, warped, "diseased" beings. Niebuhr rejects various theories of evil that distinguish a moral elite from other individuals or classes in whom evil is supposedly concentrated. He also rejects the romantic belief that men are good, and evil resides in "bad" institutions. He rejects an evolutionary theory of evil that sees sin resulting from cultural lag or immaturity.

Sin for Niebuhr is primarily a religious category, not a moral one. Thus to say man is a sinner is not equivalent to saying he is morally bad. Moral principles of right and wrong are relative judgments-relative to the *standard* of morality presumed by them. He writes:

Ultimately morality is always driven back to the acceptance of a

---

Books, 1960), p. 16. "It (religion) is the transition from God the void to God the enemy to God the companion;"

39 *RMWC*, p. 32.

0 “Reformation,” pp. 16-23.
standard which is given to it, without which morality would be impossible, but which is itself prior to all morality. The source of that standard is always religion, not morality. It depends upon what man finds to be wholly worshipful, intrinsically valuable—in other words, upon the nature of his god or gods. The "chief good" of man is not the object but the presupposition of his moral choices, and his possession of a chief good is the presupposition of all moral judgments which he or another passes upon him.

Nor is sin to be confused with "creatureliness" or finitude per se or even selfishness or sensuality.

The religious concept of sin "always involves the idea of disloyalty, not of disloyalty in general, but of disloyalty to the true God, to the only trustworthy and wholly lovable reality." 42 God is not worshipped as God. But sin is more, for men must be loyal to something (e.g. themselves, their race, their nation, their machines). Thus sin is not merely absence of loyalty, it is "wrong direction," "false worship." Men are in "active rebellion" against the wholly loyal God. One consequence of this disloyalty and rebellion is conflict within the individual and within society and between societies. Sin also results in death—"death" of cultures, disintegration of the self, destruction of society by strife. There are also moral consequences (e.g. abuse of sex, greed, inhumanity of man to man).

Niebuhr addresses himself to the question of how men can rebel against God if he is not conscious of his disloyalty, i.e. he does not consciously will rebellion. Such a question misses the point, for Christianity is not primarily concerned with assessing blame or assigning guilt, but diagnosing the true character of the situation and the cure. Furthermore a dubious doctrine of freedom is implied by the question. "The starting point of the doctrine of sin is not man's freedom but man's dependence; freedom accounts for the fact that men can be disloyal, not for the fact that he ought to be loyal." 43 Don't assume man in "moral guilt" can exercise his "free will" and overcome his disloyalty and rebellion, thus putting aside his sin. Men are completely impotent to rescue themselves from false loyalties and their consequences. The will is always committed or it is no will at all. It is either committed to God or to one of the gods.

Sinful man is thus "entrapped" in his idolatrous systems of

---

42 Ibid., pp. 276-77.
43 Ibid., p. 277.
44 Ibid., p. 279.
meaning and value and cannot escape by "free will." As early as 1935 he had touched on the view that redemption from sin is possible only by a reconciliation to God, "which cannot be initiated by the disloyal creature." Writing twenty-five years later he says:

How it is possible to rely on God as inconquerably loving and redeeming, to have confidence in him as purposive person working towards the glorification of his creation and of himself in his works, to say to the great "It": "Our Father who art in heaven"—this remains the miraculous gift. It is the human impossibility which has been made possible, as has also the enlistment of these unlikely beings, these human animals, ourselves, in his cause, the cause of universal creation and universal redemption. So far as I could see and can now see that miracle has been wrought among us by and through Jesus Christ."

God’s self revelation, correlated with man's faith, begins the process of conversion, metanoia, the permanent revolution that continues into eternity.47

Christ and Culture

In Christ and Culture Niebuhr addresses the "enduring problem" of the relationship between Christ and culture (which includes the world of government and politics). He surveys the principal ways in which Christians have historically understood the normative relationship between Christ and culture. However, he recognizes that his types are partly artificial constructs that cannot do full justice to the rich complexity of history and do not conform completely to any person or group’s views or actions. Being the social existentialist he is, he makes two key preliminary points: 1) there has not developed among Christians one single Christian answer, and 2) a distinction must be made between Christ's answers to the problem of human culture and Christians' answers (including Niebuhr) which are relative to a particular, fallible standpoint in history and culture.48 Neither Christianity nor a particular church can be identified with Christ.

 Appropriately Niebuhr begins his investigation and analysis with careful definition. When he uses the term "culture" or world or civilization), Niebuhr has in mind the "total process of human

45 Ibid.
46 "Reformation," p. 249.
47 RS, pp. 143-44.
48 CC, p. 2.
activity and that total result of such activity. ... Adopting Bronislaw Malinowski's view of culture as the "artificial secondary environment" which man superimposes upon the natural, an environment composed of language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, artifacts, social organization (including government), technical processes, etc., he proceeds to specify, if not the "essence," some of the chief characteristics of culture. Culture is social and the result of human achievement. Further, the world of culture is a world of values, for these human achievements are designed for an end or ends, particularly what is "good for man." Its forms (of values) are manifested in the temporal and material. However, cultural activity is nearly always as much concerned with preservation as with realization of values. Finally, man's cultures are pluralistic, composed of many men in many groups and institutions with varied values, goals, and interests.

In defining Christ he begins by pointing out and defining the "virtues" of Jesus Christ. While making no claim for the superiority of a moral description, he further suggests the picture that emerges must be complemented by other interpretations. After examining the virtues of love, obedience, faith, and humility, he concludes that while any one of the virtues of Jesus (Niebuhr prefers to take them all together) may be taken as the key to the understanding of Christ's character and teaching, each is intelligible in its apparent radicalism only as a relation to God. Jesus points beyond himself to God, to the ground of being, the one beyond the many, to whom Jesus is uniquely devoted and trusts absolutely.

Belief in Jesus Christ by human beings in their various cultures means belief in God. Through the Son of God (a symbol for Niebuhr) we can know the Father (another symbol). Niebuhr writes:

To be related in devotion and obedience to Jesus Christ is to be related to the One to whom he undeviatingly points. As Son of God he points away from the many values of man's social life to the One who alone is good; to the One who alone is powerful; from the many times and seasons of history with their hopes and fears to the One who is Lord of all times and is alone to be feared and hoped for; he points away from all that is conditioned to the Unconditioned. He does not direct attention away from this world to another; but from all worlds, present and future, material and spiritual, to the One who creates all worlds, who is the Other of all worlds.

49 Ibid., pp. 32-39.
50 Ibid., p. 27.
Yet this is only half: the meaning of Christ, considered morally. The other half has been indicated above by what was said about his love of men in relation to his love of God. Because he is the moral Son of God in his love, hope, faith, obedience, and humility in the presence of God, therefore he is the moral mediator of the Father’s will toward men. Because he loves the Father with the perfection of human eph, therefore he loves men with the perfection of divine agape, since God is agape. Because he is obedient to the Father’s will, therefore he exercises authority over men, commanding obedience not to his own will but to God’s. Because he hopes in God, therefore he gives promises to men. Because he trusts perfectly in God who is faithful, therefore he is trustworthy in his own faithfulness toward men. Because he exalts God with perfect human humility, therefore he humbles men by giving them good gifts beyond all their deserts. Since the Father of Jesus Christ is what He is, sonship to Him involves the Son not in an ambiguous but in an ambivalent process. It involves the double movement—toward God, with God toward men; from the world to the Other, from the Other to the world; from work to Grace, from Grace to work; from time to the Eternal and from the Eternal to the temporal. In his moral sonship to God Jesus Christ is not a median figure, half God, half man; he is a single person wholly directed as man toward God and wholly directed in his unity with the Father toward men. He is mediatorial, not median.

Belief in Christ and loyalty to his cause involves men in a double movement from world to God and from God to world.

Niebuhr proceeds to delineate five principal ways in which Christians have historically understood the relationship of Christ and culture or "the world." At one end of the attitudinal spectrum (see figure 1) is "Christ against culture" (e.g. Tertullian, various monastic and sectarian movements, Tolstoy) which emphasizes the opposition of the two.62 The decision is posed as "either/or"; Christians, who as all men are basically good, must withdraw from the hopelessly corrupt and sinful world. The tension between the two poles is dissolved by abandoning the culture. At the other end of the spectrum, the "Christ of culture" of "cultural Christianity" type (e.g. Locke, Albrecht Ritschl, Abelard, early Christian Gnostics) recognizes a fundamental agreement between Christ and culture. Christ is the moral teacher, he confirms what is best and he is part of the social heritage to be conserved and transmitted. Thus there

51 Ibid., pp. 28-29.
52 Ibid., pp. 40-41 and chapter 2.
53 Ibid., p. 41 and chapter 3.
is no tension. This "both/and" position seeks accommodation with the world.

The other three mediating answers to the "enduring problem" agree with each other in seeking to maintain the important distinction between Christ and culture, yet undertake to affirm both of them in some respects. Obviously they differ from each other in how they try to combine the two authorities. They all three focus on the relationship between God and man, rather than Christ and culture per se. They all recognize the universality and radicalness of sin, even among the "best" or "supposedly holy" ghettoes. Finally they all three affirm the primacy of God’s grace and the significance of man’s activities of obedience in the sphere of culture:

The "Christ-above-culture" or synthetic type (e.g. Clement of Alexandria, Thomas Aquinas) perceive the relationship as hierarchical yet harmonious. Similar to Christ of Culture types, Christ is seen as the fulfillment of cultural aspirations and restorer of the institutions of the true society. However he is discontinuous as well as continuous with culture; he has something that does not arise out of culture. He "enters life from above with gifts which human aspirations have not envisioned and which human effort cannot attain unless he (Christ) relates men to a supernatural society and a new value center." Unfortunately, from Niebuhr’s perspective, there is a tendency in this type to absolutize what is relative, to reduce the infinite to the finite form and to "freeze" or materialize what is dynamic.

The fourth type, "Christ-and-culture-in-paradox" (e.g. Luther, St. Paul, Ernst Troeltsch), maintains a duality and opposition yet inescapable authority of each. Tension is perennial; devotees of

---

\( \text{Figure 1} \)

Christ and Culture Spectrum
(based on acceptance/rejection of culture)

---

\( \text{54 Ibid., p. 42; see also chapter 4.} \)

\( \text{55 Ibid., pp. 42-3; and chapter 5.} \)
this position refuse to accommodate Christ's claims to those of sinful, corrupted secular society. They are similar in many ways to the Christ-against-culture types, particularly in terms of perception of secular society, but they do not withdraw. States, for example, are seen as a mere restraining force against sin rather than agents of reform through which neighbors are helped toward a "better" life. Yet obedience to God demands obedience to the institutions of society. Man is a citizen of two worlds, subject to two moralities that are seemingly opposed. Some examples of this type (e.g. Luther) see more dynamic interaction between the two poles than others.

The final type, "Christ-the-transformer of culture" (e.g., F.D. Maurice, Augustine, Calvin), claims (similar to the first and fourth type) that human nature is fallen and perverted and that this perversion is reflected in and transmitted by culture. Yet this antithesis does not lead to separation or mere endurance of culture in a state of perpetual agony. Rather a positive and hopeful attitude toward human institutions and customs is affirmed because: "Christ is seen as the converter of man in his culture and society, not apart from these, for there is no nature without culture and no turning off men from self and idols to God save in society." Redemption of mankind and therefore culture is partially actual even in the present time. Whereas the dualist lives "in between the times," conversionists live in the Divine Now, where God dramatically interacts with man; history becomes not the course of merely human events but is also the story of God's mighty deeds as Creator, Judge, and Redeemer and man's response to them.

Which is the appropriate type from Niebuhr's perspective? Obviously by the 1950's the last type was more congenial to Niebuhr but even then he remained less than explicit, preferring to point to the possibility of varying strategies. (Niebuhr had advocated strategic withdrawal in *The Church Against the World* in 1935, for he perceived a cultural captivity of the churches, a bondage to social forces.) Recognition of his historicity, finitude, and humanity prevented Niebuhr from saying that "thus and so" is the Christian answer." He writes:

Yet one is stopped at one point or another from making the attempt to give a final answer, not only by the evident paucity of one's historical knowledge, as compared with other historical men, and

56 Ibid., p. 45; see also chapter 6.
the evident weakness of one's ability in conceptual construction, as compared with other thinkers, but by the conviction, the knowledge, that the giving of such an answer by any finite mind, to which any measure of limited and little faith has been granted, would be an act of usurpation of the Lordship of Christ which at the same time would involve doing violence to the liberty of Christian men and to the unconcluded history of the church in culture. 51

A part of our discussion below on "the responsible self" will expand upon Niebuhr's "conversionist" position.

The Responsible Self

As a philosopher of the Christian moral life, Niebuhr was more analytical than prescriptive, more interested in preparation for action than application. Thus as an ethicist he was less practically oriented than his brother. He seeks to lay bare the roots and critically inquire into the fundamental perspectives underlying Christians' moral lives. Niebuhr focuses more on the "deciding" than the decision.

Niebuhr distinguishes two principal, symbols and concepts that men, including Christians, have used to apprehend the form of their practical life and give shape to it in action: man as "maker" and man as "citizen." To these he adds a third: man as answerer. These images are more than symbols for they are derived from our actual living. However a special experience for interpretation is used to interpret all of experience; a part represents the whole. Niebuhr openly admits further that his idea is a key not the key for understanding the Christian moral life, including Biblical ethics. 58 The three approaches are summarized in the following table.

The most common symbol or image has been that of man the maker, the fashioner who, acting for an end or good, gives shape to his acts and the world. Of course, people who have employed this image have not been unanimous in the choice of ideals or ends nor in their estimate of degrees or means of realization. The other major image is that of man-the-citizen, living under law. When we realize we are persons, communities, and history, we do not have control over the means and ends as suggested in the former symbol. Men come to self awareness in the midst of mores, commandments, rules,

57 ibid., p. 232.
58 RS, p. 65.
Table I
Three Approaches to Ethics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethical Approach</th>
<th>Image of Man</th>
<th>Primary Question</th>
<th>Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Teleological</td>
<td>Maker (acts toward some end)</td>
<td>What is my goal, ideal, or telos?</td>
<td>Seek the highest good.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(&quot;good&quot;)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Deontological</td>
<td>Citizen (acts in obedience to</td>
<td>What is the law and what is the first law of my life?</td>
<td>Obey the law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(&quot;right&quot;)</td>
<td>law)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Responsibility</td>
<td>Answerer (acts in response to</td>
<td>What is going on?</td>
<td>Perform the fitting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(&quot;fitting&quot;)</td>
<td>others)</td>
<td></td>
<td>action</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Niebuhr associates the first image with teleological ethics, the second with deontological ethics, and his own with the ethics of responsibility or cathekontic ethics. The table above represents the differences between the various ethical approaches. All answer the question "What ought I do?" differently. Purposive or teleological ethics seeks to answer the question by raising the prior question: "What is my goal, end, or telos?" Similarly deontology counters with "What is the law and what is the first law (or, ultimate law) of my life?" Responsibility proceeds in every moment of decision and choice to ask: "What is going on?" or "What is being done to me?" Niebuhr notes that if we use value terms the differences among the three approaches can be indicated by the terms: the good, the right and the fitting. He writes: . . . teleology is concerned always with the highest good to which it subordinates the right; consistent deontology is concerned with the right, no matter what may happen to our goods; but for the ethics of responsibility the fitting action, the one that fits into a total interaction as response and anticipation
of further response, is alone conducive to the good and alone is right.\(^{59}\)

In his theory of responsibility a person responds to action upon him in accordance with his \textit{interpretation} of the latter action and with his anticipation of response (answer) to his response (i.e. the agent is \textit{accountable}). Finally all of this takes place in a "continuing community" (\textit{social solidarity}) of other agents (or "selves").\(^{60}\) The self is always in relationship to others and is governed by these relations; he is always in dialogue with another.

The content of a Christian's actions would not necessarily differ from nonChristians, but Christians "interpret" the world and thus responsible actions differently. But one cannot move deductively from faith to decision. For Niebuhr, the "Christianized" version of the ethic of responsibility affirms "God is acting in all decisions upon you. So respond to all actions upon you as to respond to his action."\(^{61}\) Man relates to others in the context of God's presence and action. So the question "What is going on?" becomes "What is God doing?" and the agent asks, "What is the fitting response to God's actions in this situation?" The indicative has priority over the imperative; the principle of oughtness is rooted in "isness." Our "theology," of course, provides the lenses or perspective or paradigm through which we see, interpret, and respond to ourselves, others and the universal realm of being. Niebuhr for analytical purposes only (since these actions are not really separable) sees God active in all events-as Creator, Governor, and Redeemer."

God is creator of all and sovereign over all. "Whatever is, is good." since all is from God. Being and value are inseparable. Man's existence and value are from God: The "faith-knower" perceives that he and his companions in being (not just fellow Christians) are co-members of an inclusive commonwealth of being, and that this commonwealth is unified under God, who is absolutely trustworthy. To the Creator \textit{all} being is valued being and thus the object of redemptive care. In response man is to accept and affirm the creation, seek to understand it, to cultivate it, and to participate in his own limited way in creative use of it:

God also governs and sustains us; he is sovereign over history. This is not to say that intentions in finite actions or events are his

\(^{59}\) \textit{RS}, pp. 60-61.

\(^{60}\) \textit{RS}, pp. 61-65.

\(^{61}\) \textit{RS}, p. 126.

\(^{62}\) See James Gustafson's Introduction to \textit{RS}. 
or that all consequences that result share in his cause. Rather, as a whole, divine governance and judgment are working so as to redeem and incorporate man's action into the divine action of God. God limits us through other creatures as well as in our finitude. The fitting response is characterized by acceptance of God's divine judgment (and our limitations), repentance, self denial (not asceticism), and conscientious participation or "cooperation" with God in resistance of evil in society, in order that God's redemptive and creative will may be done.

Finally God acts redemptively to reconcile and restore. We can trust God for the preservation of our worth and can act in expectation of God's final victory, which is already assured. We have been reconciled. James Fowler's splendid book on Niebuhr's thought sums up the actions of God as redeemer this way:

From a human point of view we are being slain all day long. But our interpretation of our life of response in accordance with that viewpoint has been decisively interrupted by the teachings and actions, the death and vindication of Jesus-who appeared in our history as a man, and who is present in the community of interpretation formed around him. As exemplar and mediator of radical faith in the faithfulness of the power by which we are, he has embodied a New Covenant which lays bare the fiduciary structure of the relation between God and man and between man and man, and which invites a conscious joining of a universal community of faithfulness. From the ability to trust, which Jesus as the New Covenant inaugurates, flows a new master interpretative image for personal life and a new philosophy of history: We are being saved. Ultimate power in history and nature is one with ultimate goodness; both strain toward a restoration, fulfillment, and completion (perfection) of being. 

Man is called to respond to this divine action in forgiveness (acceptance of it in humility and to forgive others), freedom, and trust. Freed from legalism, insecurity, and fear of death, he can trust God and relate to others (and God) lovingly. (Note we are called upon to obey not love, but God.) We are "turned around" and our values are transformed and directed to the true center of value. We can participate in the process of reconciliation. Because of man's recognition of his "center of value" he is freed to deal creatively with personal and social situations as they are encountered and respond with inventiveness and ingenuity to the challenges in order to meet the need of his neighbor (any member of the universal community of being and value).

Fowler, To See the Kingdom, p. 164.
We should be careful to note that the ethics of redemption is not an ethics of the redeemed but a response to the redeemer. There are no "saints" in history, even the "redeemed" remain sinners.

The concluding chapter of *Christ and Culture* contains an extremely lucid summary of the character of the Christian’s ethical decision making, whether responding to God as Creator, Judge, or Redeemer:

In faith, because we believe, we are made aware of our relativity and our relatedness; in faith our existential freedom is acknowledged as well as actually exercised in the context of our dependence. To decide in faith is to decide in awareness of this context. To understand that context as best he may is as much the duty of the believer as to do his duty in the context.

What is meant here may be made clearer by an examination of the character of the decisions we make in the freedom of faith. They are made, it appears, on the basis of relative insight and faith, but they are not relativistic. They are individual decisions, but not individualistic. They are made in freedom, but not in independence; they are made in the moment, but are not nonhistorical.

**Interpretation of Politics**

Man is inescapably social and thus inescapably political. We live in dialogue, developing into selves and responding to action upon our selves in society. Man’s sociality is primordial, not derivative. Politics, which Niebuhr uses interchangeably with "social construction," is part of the world of culture from which we cannot and, responsibly speaking, should not seek escape. Speaking out of his radical monotheistic framework described above, Niebuhr says:

The redeemer is the Father of all things who has created men not only in spiritual society but also in domestic political and economic society. Hence it is impossible so to separate response to the judgment of God from politically necessary action as to make religious life an affair of repentance while political action remains essentially unrepentant, self confident action in the defense of our values.

Empirically speaking, Niebuhr observes the often close correspondence and dialectical relationship among the general ideas

---

64 *CC*, p. 234.
'Western men hold about their own constitution, that of the societies and of the world in which they live.

Their efforts at self control (ethics), at social construction (politics), and their attitudes toward their ultimate environment (religion) are in consequence influenced by similar ideas.

Thus in the contemporary world there appears to be:

real similarity among: the conceptions of the ultimate environment as a field of forces; the idea of political society as a grouping of persons in tension, in conflict, in polar opposites, in alliances, in balance and again the picture of the person as a being in whom unconscious drives, aggressions and fears, moving powers of one kind and another, are held together in more or less stable unity.

In both descriptive and normative terms, Niebuhr rejects the amoral view of politics that sees it as a struggle for power among purely self-interested individuals or groups, with mortality being merely an instrument of power or rationalization. Speaking specifically of national self-interest (though clearly within the context of the essay he is referring to any group self-interest) he writes:

To a theologian a political science that works only with the idea of national self-interest seems very much like the sort of theology which constructs its understanding of man with the use of the idea of sin only without reference to that good nature which sin presupposes and of which it is the corrupted expression.

Such a political (or theological) view is regarded as inadequate and misleading by Niebuhr. It does not account for the relevant phenomena; the theory fails to describe accurately the practice. For example, the analyst of political power must recognize in a survey of religious movements that "there is something not wholly explicable in terms of self interested will to power."

True, man is self interested and he does try to extend his power. But that is only part of the picture for man is also concerned with values beyond the self and "desires not only power but also enjoyment of the good. . . ." (We shall develop this further with re-

68 Ibid., p. 128.
69 RMWC, p. 67.
garrison to Niebuhr’s theory of war.); There is a strange intermixture of justice and injustice on both sides of political conflicts and in most social movements. Political groups, especially nation-states, base their existence on the loyalty of their members, not only on the members’ fears and desires for benefits, but also by pledging their loyalty to important and usually “transcendent” causes. Thus the trust and loyalty to the group is extended to the group’s cause, as well as the group as a cause.  

Niebuhr also rejects an ethic primarily based on this “amoral-self interest-power” theory of politics. He describes the “defensive” ethics that usually correlates with such a theory:

Our actual ethics, personal and social, is to a large extent analyzable as defense ethics or as ethics of survival. It is the ethics of self-maintenance against threatening power that is not identifiable with any specific agency we meet but rather with a movement or a law in the interaction of all things, a law of our history. In our ethics of self-defense we act toward the realization of no ideal, unless continuing in existence is an ideal; we obey no law of reason, unless the law that reason itself must constantly defend itself and the body is a rational law. With our ethics of self-defense or survival we come to each particular occasion with the understanding that the world is full of enemies though it contains some friends. Hence we respond to all actions upon us with an evaluatory scheme: beings are either good or evil, they belong to the class of the things that ought to be or those that ought not to be. And ultimately the distinction between them has to be made by reference to the way they support or deny our life, whether this be our physical or spiritual or social existence.

Historically speaking, Niebuhr thinks the “structure of things” makes such an assertion-counter assertion cycle destructive for all involved and for many innocents in the long run. (See the interpretation of war as crucifixion below.) We must break the cycle or at least modify it.

But Niebuhr’s rejection of defensive ethics has a more fundamental basis for rejection. Behind such an ethical stance, “deep in our minds” is a myth or interpretative pattern of the metahistory, within which men understand their own particular histories and biographies. Niebuhr writes of this pervasive myth:

It has variant forms. It appears as the story of recurring cycles, of golden, silver, bronze, and iron ages, or of the round of personal

---

72 RIVI WC, p 67.
73 RS, pp. 98-99.
rebirth and death. It appears as the story of the infinite progress of a particular species, this human kind, moving outward into space with its conquests, forward in time with victories over nature, but leaving behind in its past forgotten, dead generations. And that is the great overarching myth. It is the almost unconquerable picture in the mind, of everlasting winter lying on the frozen wastes of existence before all its time and after all its time, or, otherwise, of all-destroying fire raging before and after the brief interval of its life upon our planet or in our galaxy. It is the image of myself as coming to that future when there is no more future. It is that understanding of the society, into whose action I fit my actions, as bound with all the tragic empires of history toward the eschaton, beyond which there is no healing of diseases, no resurrection. It has scores of forms, no doubt, this mythology of death. But all its forms lead to the same interpretations in the present; to the same way of evaluating the beings with whom we are compresent by dividing them into the good and evil. And all the forms lead to the ethos of defense, to the ethics of survival. 74

Christianity (as does some other religions) challenges this alternate myth and thereby attacks the ethos of defense. It redefines our conception of the "fitting" by questioning our picture of the context within which we act. The mythology of death is revised into a history of life, and with it a redefinition of what is a fitting response in a lifetime and a history "surrounded by eternal life, as well as by the universal society of being." 75

As indicated above, this is not a purely "spiritual" ethic or ethic of withdrawal, it is an ethic of life in the world-politics, economics, family, etc. Nothing is regarded as beyond the scope of redemption - not the political nor the economic nor the spiritual. But this is not an argument for a utilitarian or perfectionist morality, that is, the "effort to translate Christian faith and Christ into 'socially useful force' or new moral ideal." Though Christianity has social imperatives and social relevance, repentance practiced for the sake of such social fruits or efforts "is a bad kind of magic." The imperative of Christianity "does not ask whether the love of neighbor will bring forth a society in which all men will love their neighbors; it acts in hope, to be sure, but love and justice are its immediate commands and not its far off goals." 76

The society of love is an impossible human ideal. "It is not an

74 Ibid., pp. 106-7.
75 Ibid., p.107.
ideal toward which we can strive, but an 'emergent,' a potentiality in our situation which remains unrealized so long as we try to impose our pattern, our wishes upon the divining creative process." Man's role is not to build utopias, but to eliminate the weeds and till the soil so the kingdom of God can grow. His method is not one that focuses on a quest for perfection or acting perfectly (or on basis of an applied perfect ideal). Rather he tries to clear the road for repentance and forgiveness. Such an approach may break the ceaseless cycle of assertion and counter assertion by individuals and societies. We are to respond, as Jesus, to what we see God is doing in the world (including politics) in which sin and finitude are also present.

Because of man's sin, the restraint of evil, (partly the responsibility of the political order), particularly moral evil, is a necessary element in every plan for conduct of life. Social discipline as well as social freedom is a characteristic of communities. But Niebuhr, aware of man's tendency to see his rules as God's rules, offers three qualifications for restraint. First, Christian restraint too is "restraint of sinners by sinners not by the just." In restraint we acknowledge our equality with the restrained, equality in sinfulness, disloyalty, and relativity. No "moral" elite is to rule. We must dispel our illusions: "The double illusion we have about ourselves—about the goodness of our power and the power of our goodness; the double illusion also that we have about our enemy, the evil of his power and the power of his evil." Second, "any restraint imposed on the basis of human sinfulness must avoid the temptation of falling into moralism; it must be medicinal rather than vindictive, construction rather than destructive; if it uses force, which it will be loath to employ, it will use it only in this way; knowing that force cannot redeem but only prevent some external consequence of sin. Third, this "interum" strategy of restraint of evil, unlike later Puritanism, must be "wholly subordinated to the strategy of reconciliation."

While Niebuhr recognized how much sin and human problem (as well as human need) remained the same in the best of all possible worlds, he recognized some of the peculiar problems of the modern day. He writes:

78 The three discussed in this paragraph are from "Man as Sinner," p. 280.
The conditions of our times are such that human selfishness is given
an especial opportunity to assert itself. The fault does not lie only
within human nature,-it lies within the social structure to which
this human nature must make its adaptation."

There is thus a structural dimension of sin and Niebuhr calls for a
strategy of direct attack and redemption (by the church and indi-
viduals) upon the social units of society, including nations, races,
classes, and other groups. In language that anticipates the language
of the Kerner report by over 30 years, Niebuhr writes: ``. . . the
amount of honesty, purity and love which persons can exercise
while they participate in the dishonesties, impurities and hateful-
ness of capitalism, nationalism and racialism is very limited."

Men must be concerned with doom and salvation, sin and redemp-
tion, that is social as well as individual in character.

Niebuhr advocates three general propositions regarding the duty
of Christians as he faces political decisions. First, the issue at any
particular time and place is less an issue about the specific form or
content of actions (i.e. specific prescriptions) than of "the context
in which each specific action is carried out." 81 Actions and events,
like words, derive their significance from their context of meaning.
Thus one first directs his attention to the preceding (including
motivation) and (expected) succeeding acts. Two people or groups
may perform the same act (viewed from external history), but the
context and meaning for each may be quite different. For example,
the religious question is not celibacy or not, but whether regardless
of the alternative chosen, it is not an isolated act, but the action is
part of a life of continuous responsibility, made meaningful and
effective in life-long devotion.

Thus it is the "interpretation" of the context that is crucial for
Niebuhr-interpretation for him that is rooted in radical mono-
theism which sees God as governing, and redeeming. He would ask
first, "How is the one who affirms loyalty to the One beyond the
many to interpret the world in which people vote, power shifts to
the executive, and weapons become more destructive?" One's theol-
ogy should aim to help people see their immediate perplexities, joys,

80 "Christianity and the Social Problem," blagazin far Evangelische Theologie
and Kirche, 50, pp. 279.
82 The three propositions discussed in the following paragraphs are found in
"The Christian Church in the World’s Crisis," Christianity and Society, VI (Sum-
mer 1941), p. 11.
and sufferings in the light of ultimate meaning, to live as citizens in the inclusive society of being, and to relate their present choices to first and last decisions made about them in the totality of human history by sovereign power. Of particular significance for Niebuhr is the view that no matter how mysteriously and hidden, God is ruling, divine justice is being done, even divine mercy is taking place in the midst of suffering. Even in the case of Pilate, Jesus noted Pilate would have had no power over him except it had been given him from above by God. He writes:

Yet where the confidence in the actuality of the divine government is present, the ordering of life must go on as a serious yet somewhat tentative and temporal affair. New measures are called for to meet new opportunities or to exercise new repentance for sin. The impending judgment of God on the sin of slavery, of racial discrimination, of international conflict, or of Protestant disunity itself, must be anticipated rather than some moral law of nature enforced. At the same time, within a world under the government of God a considerable freedom prevails: not a freedom to decide the ultimate issues, but the freedom of those who are responsible in limited spheres of action and who can devise seriously meant yet temporal and tentative organizations or modes of action somewhat adequate to the occasion.

For him, faith illuminates the human condition; it colors how one "reads" the situation.

Niebuhr's *second general proposition* regarding the duty of Christians holds that the important political and institutional questions about ownership of property, human rights, war and peace, are religious questions for they are questions about the context (or alternative interpretations of the context) of political decisions. The great conflicts are not simply conflicts between "interests" and "ideologies"; they are conflicts between "faiths"-religions of egoism, nationalism, racialism, and universalism. Social injustice, war, and misery are rooted in "false faiths."

Niebuhr's *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* examines the contemporary henotheistic, polytheistic, and monotheistic faiths of modern man as they find expression in religion, politics, and science. As we have seen men are so created that they cannot and do not live without faith. They must trust in a "god" which gives meaning to their lives and to which they give trust and loyalty.

---

83 *PCM, p.3.*
84 "Protestant Movement," pp. 46-47.
Politics is filled with the language of loyalty. Part of the social solution, so to speak, is loyalty to the true God, a turning from false gods. Niebuhr notes that today the "chief rival" to monotheism is henotheism (one god beyond others) in its social form: "That social faith which makes a finite society, whether cultural or religious, the object of trust as well as of loyalty and which tends to subvert even officially monotheistic institutions, such as the churches." 85

The foundations of any civilization rest on deeper convictions than usually acknowledged. The democratic life, as well as art, literature, and science derive their ultimate orientation from religious faith.86 Niebuhr recognized that democracy too could become a social faith; he was thus concerned to avoid henotheism by renewal of the foundations of a democratic civilization so the structure would endure.

One thing that gives Western politics its character is the presence in it of a ferment of monotheist conviction and a constant struggle of universal with particularist faith. National faith is forever being qualified by monotheism. It will not do, to be sure, to say that the American nation is intensely God-fearing in a monotheistic sense of God; there is too much evidence to the contrary. Yet God-fearingness, as reverence for the principle of all being and for its domain, is present among us and is in almost daily conflict or tension with our large and small social faiths.87

He did not maintain religious faith (particularly Protestantism) produced democracy; he was content to point to several parallels in historical development and various beliefs. In my opinion democracy, particularly when expressed in a form that protected minority rights and kept the future open, had a special attraction to Niebuhr.88 His concepts of the "protestant principle," divine sovereignty, justification by faith, and universal order of being and value all seemed to have their best possible political expression in some forms of democracy (though he never identified or confused radical monotheism with democracy). Niebuhr consistently sought to understand, interpret, and evaluate particular democratic institutions and principles in light of the fundamental tenets of his religious faith.

85 RMWC, p. 11.
86 PCM, p. ix.
87 RMWC, p. 69.
The third general proposition for Niebuhr calls for Christians to organize and shape their political actions in such a way as to express confidence in and loyalty to the principle of being itself, the God of Jesus, as well as forgiveness of sin. "Our loyalty gives direction and form, though not immediate content, to our morality. As a result of radical monotheism all causes and communities are called to reach beyond their partiality toward universal community of being and universal responsibility.

Love of the neighbor is required in every morality formed by a faith; but in polytheistic faith the neighbor is defined as the one who is near me in my interest group, when he is near me in that passing association. In henotheistic social faith my neighbor is my fellow in the closed society. Hence in both instances the counterpart of the law of neighbor-love is the requirement to hate the enemy. But in radical monotheism my neighbor is my companion in being; though he is my enemy in some less than universal context the requirement is to love him. To give to everyone his due is required in every context; but what is due to him depends on the relation in which he is known to stands.

All moral norms and virtues receive a universal form, they are transformed in "context" of radically monotheistic faith.

Niebuhr should not be misunderstood. He does not accept uncritically the status quo. To affirm "Whatever is, is good," is not to say "Whatever is, is right." Niebuhr writes: "In their relations to each other and to their principle, these many beings in the realm of being are often wrong and grievously so. They are enemies to each other as often as friends, but even enemies are entitled to loyalty as fellow citizens of the realm of being." No faith can be radically monotheistic and not be concerned with the political conditions that enslave people, economic conditions which cripple them, and the social conditions which exploit them.

On questions such as coercion or nonresistance (discussed below), private ownership or public ownership of property, the real question is not force or how property is owned, it is the intention of the agent and the utilization (and consequences) in the context, interpreted by one's faith perspective. The questions relevant to universalism or self interested nationalism as reasons and beneficiaries come to the forefront. Responsible Christian social action has three

90RMWC, p.34.
91 Ibid., p. 38.
starting points: a) Christian revelation and faith; b) analysis of the self as agent; and c) understanding the social and political structures in which one acts. This means that right understanding of the context, information and explanations, drawn from political science, sociology, psychology, etc., become an indispensable element of responsible decision making. For Niebuhr as for many others "politics is the art of the possible.'"

War and International Conflict

Although Niebuhr's theological interpretations of history remained remarkably consistent from the early thirties on, his specific applications of his theory of responsibility varied somewhat. The Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931-32 occasioned one of the most heated exchanges between him and Reinhold Niebuhr. In this article on The Grace of Doing Nothing" (1932) he observes that it is when individuals and societies "stand aside" from a conflict (such as the Japanese aggression), before they know what their relations to it really are, when they seem to be condemned to doing nothing; that their moral problems become greatest. He asks: "How shall we do nothing?" Even inactivity affects history. He rejects three kinds of inactivity: 1) that of the pessimist who sees the world going to pieces and grimly responds to it with his inactivity; 2) that of the opportunist who sees only the clash of self interested nations and waits hoping later to exploit the situation for his benefit; and 3) that of the frustrated yet morally indignant (some so-called pacifists) who temporarily sit on the sidelines and hurl violent inductive judgments on the aggressor-a situation that may well result in explosive forcible entry or in apoplexy.94

Interestingly Niebuhr explicitly suggests for Christian inactivity a strategy that selectively borrows from the Communist model-a faith stance that informs a way of doing nothing, that offers more hope, a longer vision and a realistic program for noninterfering action. Communists see nothing constructive that they can do in the present situation, but that, "rightly understood this situation is after all preliminary to a `radical' change which will eliminate the

93 RS, p. 52.
conditions of which the conflict is a product." Though there is no hope for good or justice in the present order, there is a steadfast faith in the future. Misery of war often precipitates revolution. The present crisis is theoretically perceived by them as:

an opportunity, not for direct entrance into the conflict, nor for watchful waiting of those who seek self interest, but for the laborious process of building up within the fighting groups those cells of communism which will be ready to inherit the new world and be able to build a classless international commonwealth on the ruins of capitalism and nationalism.  

Niebuhr's way of doing nothing rests on the faith in a real God who acts in history. Simply because men can do nothing constructive does not mean nothing constructive is being done, even though seemingly "impersonal" forces inevitably usher in a new kind of world with lasting peace. The history of the world is not only judgment, it is also redemption. The seeds of self interest, in individuals and collectives, must bear their bitter fruit, but God’s mercy lies beyond this judgment.

Niebuhr delineates some important differences between inactivity of Communists and radical Christians. The Christian recognizes that his inability to act constructively is due in part to his own faults and failings, which are similar to the "offender." Thus such intervention by the Christian would be "less than disinterested." American Christians should see the need for a great deal of rigorous self analysis and renunciation of both self interest and any sense of superior righteousness.

Reinhold Niebuhr responds in such way as to indicate that he and his brother must have been having a prolonged discussion (argument!) over pacifism as a categorical. Reinhold attacked some things not in Richard's article yet omitted reference to many key points. Reinhold saw the article as a plea for pacifism and ethical purity built upon the radical application of the ethic of love. (Incidentally love is not mentioned in Richard's article.) Reinhold asserts that it is unrealistic to think that a kingdom of pure love will emerge out of the conflicts, revolutions, and other catastrophes of history; rather "judicious use of force in the pursuit of the love ideal is the only responsible goal for Christians."

In a final rejoinder, Richard pinpoints the key difference.

96 Ibid., p. 379.
96 "Must We Do Nothing," Christian Century 49 (March 30,'1932); pp. 415-17.
Whereas Reinhold’s God is outside history, Richard sees God as "always in history"—as structure in things, as the source of all meaning, as a creating will and as ultimately redeemer. Against Reinhold’s view that the history of mankind is a perennial tragedy which can derive meaning only from a goal that lies beyond history, Richard’s "eschatological faith" asserts that history, destruction, and tragedy, the ultimate outcome of self assertion, is only the prelude to fulfillment (love) in history. Richard repudiates the charge of a faith in progress (for evil grows as well as good) and implies the society of love is impossible of human attainment.

Though Reinhold Niebuhr may have missed the theological subtleties of Richard’s argument, he did not misperceive the radical pacifist position that personally resulted from Richard’s stance toward war in the early 1930’s. In an important unpublished 1933 paper in which he adopts a position he attributes to Jesus, Richard writes:

The strategy of Jesus, the Jewish revolutionary, centers in the principle of repentance, faith, forgiveness, innocence, suffering judgment. It is impossible for man to take the kingdom by violence, by self assertion; he has no means adequate to this purpose. But it is possible for him, in repentance, to anticipate the judgment, to give up the attempt to preserve or extend the dying system and so to hasten its destruction.

Niebuhr thus advocates total nonresistance and forgiveness.

On the occasion of a split that developed in the Fellowship of Reconciliation in 1934, when his brother and a minority left the organization because they felt it necessary to recognize the possible necessity of use of force in restraining aggression or violence, Richard attacked the reasoning of the majority (while expressing sympathy for their stand). The majority was primarily utilitarian in their advocacy of nonviolent coercion as more effective and thus more pragmatic in securing ideal goals: It was not the pacifism of nonresistance but the pacifism of nonviolent aggression which characterized the whole movement. The authentic pacifism, modeled after Jesus, is not designed purely to convert the opposition to one’s own point of view. Niebuhr adopts his stance of nonresistance, not because it is likely to be more "successful," but in the

name of reconciliation of all men to God, exemplified by the cross event.

Never again does Niebuhr argue for such a clear cut stance. By the early forties he has adopted a position which allows for the possibility of coercion based on the nature and interpretation of the "context" in which the action takes place. In 1941, as he reflects upon America's entry into the war, he does not support either coercion or nonresistance. Rather he offers a third position: "The real issue of our time is between internationalism and nationalism." 100 The decisive focus is now on the reasons or motivation for refraining or entering the war and which action is expected to serve the universal or international interests. This position is not merely theoretical, for only one year later he writes: "If that duty involves, as I believe it does, resistance to those who are abusing our neighbor..." 101 The absolute nonresistance stance is gone, and he seems to have adopted a modified utilitarian (within a given context) approach—though his position is still rooted in radical monotheism which affirms and values a universal community of being.

The events of the Second World War pressured Niebuhr to carry the logic of his radical monotheism to its final conclusion. Three Christian Century articles, published within a year of each other, distill and develop his interpretation of the meaning of that war. As expected, his radical monotheism asserts that God is acting in war. Niebuhr begins by asking, "What is God doing?" and then turns to man's response to that divine action.

Three themes, all sounded in less developed and less coherent form, in prior writings, emerge. First, war is the judgment of God on the self-centeredness of all nations, all churches, and all mankind—a judgment that includes all of life, not just the "spiritual" side. Before God there can be no contention about the relative rightness or wrongness of the various participants. To say God judges through Assyria, a Pilate or Hitler is not to say they are thereby justified, relatively or absolutely, for they do not intend what God intends. He often acts through them in spite of them. God acting through them does not mean they take God's place 102 Niebuhr explicitly rejects the views that God in judging is execut-

---

100 "Christian Churches in the World Crisis," p. 16.
102 Ibid., pp. 630-31. See also "Is God in the War?" Christian Century, 59 (August 5, 1942), pp. 953-55.
ing punitive vengeance, or (as we shall see below) that he is vindicating righteousness through the war in history (i.e. the good guys finish first, and the bad guys finish last).

Second, wars are like the crucifixion. In offering an interpretation of war as crucifixion, Niebuhr is rejecting two main theories of the nature of war—the amoral and the moral theory. The former (which includes certain pacifists, "balance of power" and priority of national interest advocates) interprets war as a conflict of powers in which victory with its fruits belongs to the stronger and in which moral words or phrases are nothing but instruments of power by means of which emotions are aroused and men are unified. Might makes right. On the other hand the moral view of war "interprets it as an event in a universe in which the laws of retribution hold sway." Certain "just" wars are justified to punish the "law breaker" and insure order and peace. Both are "inadequate," "unreasonable" and "misleading" and are inevitably abandoned at some point in practice. "Since man is a self interested being and always desires to extend his power the amoral theory is partly true. But since man is always interested in values beyond the self and desires not only power but also the enjoyment of the good, the amoral theory is wholly inadequate." In war man and nations fight not only for interests but also sacrifice for "distant values" such as democracy or the new order. However, in history, the burdens of suffering fall not exclusively on the guilty or most unjust, but on the innocent little people who had little to do with the aggressive intentions of their leaders or nations least responsible for the present conflict.

Niebuhr’s alternative theory of war as crucifixion (with parallels in Jesus’s crucifixion) accounts for the admixture of altruism and self interest, justice and injustice in both sides of the conflict. The cross symbol neither yields to analysis purely in terms of retributive justice nor in terms of brute power. War is not only a great slaughter but a great sacrifice. Through vicarious suffering, others come to see the righteousness of God (which is distinct from the righteousness of the law) who stands behind and beyond yet acts redemptively in all the events of history. While the cross confronts us with the tragic consequences of man’s moral failure (when we see sacrifice and punishment of the innocent), it is also the occasion for demonstrating the "sublime character of real goodness." Suffering of the

103 "War as Crucifixion," pp. 513-14, 515.
innocent can result in remaking the guilty. Finally this theory of interpretation of war, according to Niebuhr, not only accounts for all the relevant phenomena but is a more adequate guide for man's response. Third, in the present (not after the war is over) man should forego his elaborate efforts of self justification (in relation to our "enemies") and respond to God with repentance, self-denial, hope, and trust in the continual grace of God. Such action can be "constructive" in the building of a new community in the midst of tragedy, when pursued with self denial and without self righteousness. Niebuhr is adamant that the cross does not encourage moral indifference. Rather it "requires men to take their moral decisions with greater rather than less seriousness." We see more clearly the evil as well as good possibilities of our existence. But, as is characteristic of his later thought, Niebuhr notes that "No single answer can be given (as to the appropriate action) since the cross does not impose a new law on man." 104

Thus it is not Niebuhr's pattern to prescribe with much specificity. General "norms" or meaningful operational principles of actions are hard to come by. His ethics of responsibility prevent that. Rather he seeks to aid us in understanding the roots and situation for the moral act. His concluding words in his article on "War as the Judgment of God" succinctly state his general approach:

These are but general reflections which do not presume to say to anyone what his particular duty in response to God's judgment must be. They seek however to describe in what spirit and context Christians in varying vocations and with conflicting political convictions may meet the divine judgment and maintain fellowship with each other. 105

Some Critical Questions and Dilemmas

The thrust of this essay has been primarily descriptive and analytic, and I do not wish now to enter a full scaled detailed critique

104 Ibid., p. 515.

105 Ibid. Note however in "War as the Judgment of God" he provides one interesting piece of concrete guidance for doing our duty. He implies God favors (and thus also Christians should) the victims of injustice or aggression, regardless of their morality or attitude toward Him. Niebuhr writes: "If that duty involves, as I believe it does, resistance to those who are abusing our neighbors, we shall not inquire whether our neighbors are not better people than those who are abusing them," (p. 632). This is a theme that appears in many of the more recent "liberation" theologians.
Niebuhr's work. However there are some areas that do need highlighting as genuine problems in his work.

We have noted the confessional character of his theology rooted in his historical relativism. But if one accepts his position that what is seen from a relative perspective is not therefore true only from that perspective, isn't this purely confessional character of theology challenged? Furthermore, did he arrive at his belief that confessionalism is the only legitimate expression of faith in terms of nonconfessional principles? Did his study of history and sociology produce this "fact" about belief? Is this consistent with a thorough-going historical relativism?

He has made a distinction between internal and external history in order to understand and convey the idea of revelation. But does something happen "out there" in revelation? That is, can all potentially "know it?" Or do we have a "Yes, Virginia there is a Santa Claus if . . ." approach? Does my thinking it is so mean it is so? To use another analogy, is there a tree in the forest that really fell so one can hear it? Niebuhr tells us a great deal about the perceived and subjective apprehension of truth, but what of the "objective pole" of God and God's actions? Did God really "act" in Jesus?

I personally have enormous problems with his strange mixture of God's predetermination and man's freedom in history. If God controls history, what is the significance of man's ethical response? I'm uncomfortable with any position that could ever see Hitler as a "tool of God" or that sees the suffering and death of millions of innocent Jews in World War II as a crucifixion through which the rest of us guilty ones are brought to repentance and renewal. This might well have bothered Niebuhr. One study of his thought notes of the World War II years: "Reports of friends and students from those years attribute to this struggle with the war the acute depression which all but immobilized Niebuhr and hospitalized him for a time in the early forties." 166

Niebuhr seems to try to "personalize" Tillich's view of God as ground of being and thereby seems to mix metaphors, confusing rather than illuminating the God-man relationship. It is not clear how literal Niebuhr takes his idea of God as a Person or Thou who discloses himself in history.

The most important questions must be directed to the usefulness

106 Fowler, To See the Kingdom, p. 255.
of his theory of ethical responsibility. His development of his theory seems to lack breadth and specificity. Though his analysis of the understanding of the self as an agent is helpful, he does not carry his analysis into other areas such as family, economics, or politics. Though they were on the syllabus of his course, he, like most professors I suppose, never reached those topics in lecture. Niebuhr vacillates in his view of the role of concrete moral principles. Though he affirms their necessity, he quickly retreats to the abstract language of redemption and universal responsibility. In fact my own survey of the development of his thought suggests that he became even less concrete as his thought developed.

Specifically how am I to know "what God is doing?" so I can respond with any degree of specificity? How am I to make relative judgments about which of my actions are being more faithful to the Creator of value? Are not some actions more desirable than others within a given context? Niebuhr provides very little guidance for us. to make comparative judgments as to what is in fact most "fitting." One critic refers to the ethics as "functionally useless." \(^{10}\) For example, Niebuhr has no well developed concept of justice to allow one to make discriminatory judgments. In fact his theological concepts are so general as to allow one to justify almost any action.

Perhaps we are inspired and motivated by his ethic, moved even to the depths of our being, but then the decision rather than thinking about the decision is upon us. What will we do? If we look to Niebuhr, we look in vain.

*The End of Political Philosophy?*

There is a sense in which the effect of Niebuhr's political philosophy is to invalidate the whole enterprise of political philosophy as it is ordinarily conceived, that is, to state clearly the nature of the good society. Douglas Sturm, writing in the mid-sixties, charges:

> contemporary American Protestant social and political thought in its prevailing tendencies is failing to fulfill its proper role-which role is to remind men of ends, purposes and goals . . . (it has) eschewed the difficult, but most essential, task of engaging in the definition of the nature of the good society.

H. Richard Niebuhr is one he mentions in his attack.


Sturm is somewhat ambiguous about what he means by "ends, purposes and goals." If he means statement of man's ultimate ends such as love, reconciliation, peace, etc., then he is obviously wrong. The sense of the article taken as a whole leads me to believe he is calling for greater specificity about the structures and processes of the good society (i.e., its characteristics) and an explanation of how those structures and processes secure "social salvation." He states:

It seems reasonable to assert that if the Christian's primary concern is soteriological and redemptive, then certainly all considerations of the proper nature of the social and political order should be expressive of that concern. . . .

If the central point of the article is his charge that Niebuhr has not given specificity to the "proper nature of the social and political order" or "the definition of the nature of the good society," to this, we respond "guilty as charged." And gladly so. Niebuhr has clearly rejected what Sturm calls "finalistic social and political philosophy," as either possible or desirable. Sturm posits certain major questions which a theorist is required to address (and presumably "solve") before his social and political philosophy can be regarded as "adequate." However a closer reading of his article reveals they are drawn from or at least parallel Aristotle's four questions in the Fourth Book of the Politics:

1. What is the best constitution or social structure absolutely;
2. what are the best means to generate or to form constitutions or social structures and the best means to preserve them for the longest time against possible destruction;
3. what is the constitution or social structure best suited to people in general or to the majority of people; and
4. what is the best constitution or social structure relative to given circumstances and conditions?

He labels respectively the social and political philosophies (or each aspect of an "adequate" philosophy) as (1) finalistic, (2) pragmatic, (3) the formalistic, and (4) the factualistic or situational. Sturm contends contemporary protestant political thought has been predominantly of the pragmatic type as represented by Reinhold Niebuhr and subordinately of the situationalist type as seen in Richard Niebuhr and Joseph Sittler.

Because Richard Niebuhr (and others) does not answer all four questions or have all four aspects in his philosophy Sturm feels this

109 Ibid., p. 912.
110 Ibid., p. 901. Sturm's source is Aristotle's Politics, IV.
philosophy is deficient. Obviously the legitimacy of that conclusion depends upon the justification for using the major questions posited by Sturm. Merely because Aristotle set out these four questions it does not follow they are the questions a theorist must address himself to. Nor does it follow that because Aristotle set these out as the major questions they are answerable by man. No doubt they were in Aristotle's eyes, given his paradigm, but the same assumption need not follow for us. Even to indicate that most political philosophers posed similar questions or answers to those questions does not mean they are the questions and most certainly does not prove they have "answers." In the interests of completeness of man's knowledge or certainty for guidance in politics, perhaps it would be desirable to have such major questions answered. But to desire something, or to demonstrate its advantage "if" it existed, does not prove its existence.

To make an "answer" (any answer?) a prerequisite for a political theory to be judged "adequate" is illegitimate if the questions are unanswerable in any real sense. Niebuhr's theology paradigm suggests that the "finalistic" answers are not forthcoming. Answers may be given but they are illegitimate if they are offered as complete, final, and absolute answers, for they fail to take proper account of man's limitations and existential nature, either as citizen of the good society or as the architect of the good society. Sturm does not realize the degree to which he and his major questions with presumed answers are imprisoned within the Greek political theorists' paradigm. The Greek paradigm is "nonexistential," perceiving politics (and thus the "answers" to the major questions) as conforming to a preestablished order or harmony. Niebuhr seems to hold for a more flexible definition of the social good, relying not only on transcendent principles and reason, but also on historical experience, context, relevant data from the secular disciplines, the continuing response to God's action in history, etc. As architect of the good society, man participates in the vexing problems of human existence. There are no preestablished answers to the major questions somehow built into the ontology of being and what guidance is available is limited by the answerer's finitude, relativity, and sin, which makes his solutions incomplete, partial, and distorted.

L. EARL SHAW

University of Minnesota