

**THE THEOLOGICAL ETHICS OF H. RICHARD NIEBUHR**

**Malcolm Andrew Reid**

**Doctor of Philosophy  
University of Edinburgh  
December 30, 1973**



## SUMMARY

The purpose of this study is to give a critical exposition of the theological and ethical thought of H. Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962). After a brief introduction to "the man and his work" (Chapter I) the theoretical structure of his thought is set forth. A relational theory of value centering on the concept of "the center of value" (Chapter II) and a relational theory of action centering on the concept of "responsibility" (Chapter III) are distinguished and described. Two main criticisms of the relational theory of value are offered. First, it is argued that an unexceptionally relational theory of value is incompatible with Niebuhr's primary theological interest in maintaining the absolute priority and independence of the being and value of God to all contingent being and value. Second, it is argued that Niebuhr's radically monotheistic value theory need not entail (as he thinks it does) the complete relativity of all finite values and value systems. There is nothing in his relational theory as such that requires the prohibition of normative ethical principles so necessary for providing guidance for moral decision making. Furthermore, this prohibition seems to be contradicted by other statements made by Niebuhr, and it is also inconsistent with his advocacy of such principles for the construction of a viable Protestant ethic.

Niebuhr developed his relational theory of moral agency--the theory of "responsibility"--by way of comparative analysis of teleological and deontological ethics. His chief dissatisfaction with these two traditional ways of conceiving human moral agency lay at the point of the view of man which each

presupposes. Both theories accept a view of man that is too individualistic, non-historical and intellectualistic. The theory of responsibility accredits itself as a more adequate conceptual scheme insofar as it embodies a view of man that avoids these defects. Beyond this, according to Niebuhr, both teleological and deontological theorists understand the primary moral relation to be between the self-as-will and previously cognized moral principles, rules or demands. For the ethics of responsibility, on the other hand, the rightness or wrongness of specific moral actions is not determined by universal moral principles or norms, but by the self's "interpretation" of the objective moral character of that infinite Being upon which the self and all finite beings are absolutely dependent.

Both Niebuhr's relational theory of value and of action deny any place for general moral principles or rules in a theological ethic. The absence of such rules or principles is directly related to, and in part occasioned by, his understanding of the limitations imposed on all knowledge of God by his acceptance of 1) a modified version of Kant's distinction between theoretical and practical reason and of 2) the historically relative character of all knowledge (Chapter IV).

In the final chapter two theological principles are identified which structure Niebuhr's ethics. The principle of "radical monotheism" and the principle of "transformation" or "conversion" represent Niebuhr's positive answer to two questions that must be asked and answered by any ethic that makes a serious claim to be a theological ethic. First, "How is God known, and what may be known of him?" Second, "What are the consequences of this knowledge for understanding and ordering moral experience and action?" Both questions are explored further by means of a critical analysis of an important essay in which Niebuhr deals with each. The answer which he gives to the first

question raises two other critical issues. First, it is argued that Niebuhr fails to maintain the priority of the being and value of God to all human being and value--a failure which he himself argued was the major weakness of all post-Kantian liberal theologies--so long as he also maintains that a sufficient criterion for distinguishing experience of God from experience of any other being is the satisfaction of the constitutive human need to know that life is worth living. When Niebuhr stresses the relational and valuational aspects of his religious epistemology, his description of knowledge of God is anthropomorphic. On the other hand, when he addresses himself to the question of what it means to affirm that God reveals himself in historical events, he so stresses the objectivity and otherness of God that his description of knowledge of God is agnostic. If this is the case, then the legitimacy, or at least the adequacy of the "personal-encounter" model of revelation is called in question.

Finally, attention is given to Niebuhr's description of the transformation that all our natural religion and morality undergo as a result of receiving the gift of radical faith in the one God present in all events. Revelation is that event through which the self is given a new image of God as an absolute unity of power and goodness by means of which it is enabled progressively to reinterpret all the events of its individual and social existence, past, present and future, as related in a meaningful universe.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  | Page |
|--|------|
| ABBREVIATIONS . . . . .  | iv   |
| <b>Chapter</b>   |      |
| I. H. RICHARD NIEBUHR: THE MAN AND HIS WORK . . . . .                                | 1    |
| A Brief Sketch of His Life . . . . .   | 3    |
| H. Richard Niebuhr: Christian Thinker, Teacher and Writer.                           | 9    |
| II. THE RELATIONAL THEORY OF VALUE . . . . .   | 24   |
| Objective Relativism . . . . .   | 26   |
| Relative Centers of Value . . . . .  | 39   |
| "Value Theory and Theology" . . . . .  | 44   |
| The Absolute Center of Value . . . . .   | 50   |
| Objective Relativism and Radical Monotheism . . . . .                                | 56   |
| Toward a Constructive Ethic: An Inconsistency . . . . .                              | 61   |
| III. THE RELATIONAL THEORY OF SELF-EXISTENCE AND ACTION . . . . .                    | 72   |
| Introduction: Value and Selfhood . . . . .   | 72   |
| The Meaning of Responsibility . . . . .  | 77   |
| The Social Self . . . . .  | 95   |
| The Social Self and Conscience . . . . .   | 103  |
| The Social Self and History . . . . .  | 111  |
| The Dependent Self . . . . .   | 115  |
| Teleology, Deontology and Responsibility . . . . .                                   | 125  |
| IV. HISTORICAL RELATIVISM AND THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL<br>KNOWLEDGE . . . . .       | 135  |
| Historical Relativism . . . . .  | 140  |
| Theoretical and Practical Knowledge . . . . .  | 151  |
| V. FAITH IN GOD AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF NATURAL RELIGION<br>AND MORALITY . . . . . | 167  |
| Introduction . . . . .   | 167  |
| "Faith in Gods and in God" . . . . .   | 176  |

|  | Page |
|--|------|
| God and the Meaning of Human Existence . . . . .             | 201  |
| God and the Meaning of Revelation. . . . .                   | 211  |
| The Transformation of Natural Religion and Morality. . . . . | 242  |
| CONCLUSION . . . . .   | 262  |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .                                       | 274  |

## ABBREVIATIONS

|      |   |
|------|---|
| CC   | <u>Christ and Culture</u>   |
| CE   | <u>Christian Ethics: Sources of the Living Tradition</u>            |
| CV   | "The Center of Value"   |
| FE   | <u>Faith and Ethics</u>   |
| FGG  | "Faith in Gods and in God"  |
| KGA  | <u>The Kingdom of God in America</u>                                |
| MR   | <u>The Meaning of Revelation</u>                                    |
| PCM  | <u>The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry</u>                   |
| RMWC | <u>Radical Monotheism and Western Culture</u>                       |
| RS   | <u>The Responsible Self: an Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy</u> |
| SSD  | <u>The Social Sources of Denominationalism</u>                      |
| VTT  | "Value Theory and Theology"   |

## CHAPTER I

### H. RICHARD NIEBUHR: THE MAN AND HIS WORK

Helmut Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962) was in many ways simply one more unobtrusive and hardworking academic who went about his work as a teacher and writer in a manner little different from that of the best among his peers. Calm, meditative, even reticent by nature, he led no crusade, started no school of thought, but worked unostentatiously from 1931 until shortly before his death as a professor of Christian ethics at Yale University. But during this period the careful, subtle and searching character of his thought came increasingly to be recognized. Ethics, broadly defined as the relation between Christian faith and culture, was his chief theoretical interest. He was a self-conscious Protestant moralist and all his work was sustained by a deep personal faith in the sovereignty of God and was motivated by a corresponding concern for an immediate, radical and continuous reformation of the faith and action of the Christian church.<sup>1</sup>

It was in fact the comprehensiveness of his vision combined with an original, versatile yet disciplined approach to the task of Christian ethics that in large measure defines his importance for modern Christian thought. He was, for example, one of the first English-speaking Protestant moralists to

---

<sup>1</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," Christian Century, LXXVII (1960), 248-251. The essay is a description of Niebuhr's "theological pilgrimage" (p. 248), the fifth in a series of articles by leading theologians published under the general theme, "How My Mind Has Changed."

recognize the value of the new researches of the developing social sciences (into individual motivation and action, and into the dynamics and structures of society) for understanding the Church's situation as a human community and institution. Furthermore, this comprehensiveness and versatility may be seen in the fact that while he was not a trained sociologist his first work, The Social Sources of Denominationalism written in 1929, is still regarded by sociologists as a model piece of socio-historical analysis.<sup>1</sup> He was not a dogmatic theologian, yet one prominent theologian described The Kingdom of God in America (1937) as "still the most profound theological interpretation of Protestantism in America."<sup>2</sup> And Paul Tillich pronounced The Meaning of Revelation (1941) to be "the introduction to existential thinking in present American theology."<sup>3</sup> Nor, furthermore, was he a professional church historian, but in the opinion of Professor J. H. Nichols who is, "one might indeed do worse than to read the story of the best American thinking on church history in this generation in the passage from The Social Sources of Denominationalism (1929) through The Kingdom of God in America (1937) to Christ and Culture (1951)."<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Extracts from this work are to be found in the following sociological readers: Religion, Society, and the Individual, ed. John Milton Yinger (New York: Macmillan, 1957), pp. 453-58, 524-28; Religion, Culture and Society, ed. Louis Schneider (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1964), pp. 178-180, 203-219, 466-471.

<sup>2</sup> Claude Welch, "Theology," Religion, ed. Paul Ramsey (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1965), p. 264. This volume is one in a series entitled Humanistic Scholarship in America: The Princeton Studies, general editor, Richard Schlatter. These volumes cover roughly the years 1930-1960.

<sup>3</sup> In a review article "Existential Thinking in American Theology," Religion in Life X (1941), p. 455.

<sup>4</sup> "The History of Christianity," Religion, ed. Paul Ramsey (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1965), pp. 209-210.

### A Brief Sketch of His Life

H. Richard Niebuhr was born at Wright City, Missouri in 1894, the son of a minister in what was then known as the Evangelical and Reformed Church.<sup>1</sup> The elder Niebuhr, in a manner characteristic of the best in German Protestant piety, early introduced his children to theology and music. Reinhold Niebuhr, Richard's older brother, recalls that their father "combined a vital piety with complete freedom in his theological studies. He introduced his sons and daughter to the thought of Harnack without fully sharing the liberal convictions of that theologian."<sup>2</sup> There can be little doubt that the interest shared by both

---

<sup>1</sup>In 1957 the Evangelical and Reformed Church joined with the Congregational Christian Churches (itself the result of a previous union) to form the United Church of Christ. The Evangelical and Reformed Church also, as the name suggests, was the product of a prior union in 1934 of two bodies of Swiss and German background who shared a similar doctrinal, governmental and cultural understanding. Niebuhr's heritage is rooted in the younger of these two groups --the Evangelical Synod of North America. This group, too, had resulted from an amalgamation of a number of German speaking "evangelical synods" established by immigrant peoples in the frontier communities of the Mississippi Valley. The first of these, the Kirchenverein des Western, originated at Gravois Settlement near St. Louis in 1840. Cf. Frank A. Mead, Handbook of Denominations in the United States, Second Revised Edition (New York: Abingdon, 1961), pp. 215-223; C. E. Schneider, The German Church on the American Frontier (St. Louis: Eden Publishing House, 1939); "The Genius of the Reformed Church in the United States: A Genetic Appraisal of her Union With the Evangelical Synod of North America," The Journal of Religion XV (1935), 26-41. Schneider points out that the Evangelical Synod "was conceived in the spirit of the Evangelical Union of 1817 in Germany, which sought to bring the Reformed and Lutheran branches of German Protestantism together." Ibid., p. 26. It is interesting to note in this connection how elements of Reformed and Lutheran thinking in theology and ethics appear in the thought of both Niebuhrs with the Lutheran approach predominant in Reinhold Niebuhr's work and the Reformed in Richard Niebuhr's. While Reinhold put primary stress on the doctrine of man and sin and developed an essentially dualistic ethic, Richard emphasized grace and the sovereignty of God and developed a monistic ethic. On the other hand common to both is the Lutheran accent on justification by faith through grace alone and an interest in the subjective aspect of salvation.

<sup>2</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, "Intellectual Biography," in Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought, eds. Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956), p. 3.

brothers in the mutual interpretation of Christian faith and cultural life received its first vital impetus in a home that combined in an easy and wholly spontaneous manner "vital piety" and "complete freedom" in theological thinking.

He received his first higher education at the small college (Elmhurst College) and seminary (Eden Theological Seminary) of his denomination. Following the completion of his course at the latter he was ordained and for a short time (1916-1918) was minister to a congregation in St. Louis, Missouri. The denominational schools apparently had not fully satisfied him for he continued his formal studies at Washington University (St. Louis). Upon receiving the M.A. degree he accepted an invitation to join the faculty of Eden Theological Seminary. But this, too, proved to be only a short pause, for now as a mature student he travelled east to New Haven, Connecticut and entered the Divinity School of Yale University.

At Yale, Frank Chamberlain Porter, the Professor of New Testament, and Douglas Clyde Macintosh, Professor of Theology and Philosophy of Religion, exercised the greatest influence on his thought which was now rapidly forming its own distinctive mold.<sup>1</sup> Professor Macintosh together with Henry Nelson Wieman of Chicago were the leading "liberal" theologians in America at the time. The former gave close attention to the problem of religious knowledge and attempted to develop an empirical theology by applying the full rigor of strictly scientific procedures to theological inquiry.<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr, it appears,

---

<sup>1</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation (New York: Macmillan, 1941, Paper edition, 1960), pp. ix-x. Hereinafter cited as MR. The book is dedicated to these "two great theologians and teachers."

<sup>2</sup>Among Macintosh's many books, Theology as an Empirical Science (New York: Macmillan, 1919) is perhaps most typical. Cf. especially pp. 90ff.

was more convinced by the powerful and incisive arguments his teacher mounted against other views than the ultimate success of his own positive theological construction.<sup>1</sup>

In 1924 he submitted as his doctoral dissertation a detailed and closely reasoned exposition of "The Religious Philosophy of Ernst Troeltsch." The great German philosopher, church historian and influential theologian of the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule had died the year previously. One must concur wholeheartedly with the judgment of Niebuhr's Yale colleague, Sidney Ahlstrom, that

. . . though never published, this thesis is in one sense the most important thing he ever wrote, for it focused interests that must have been forming for a decade and set the general direction of his career as a theologian, historian and moral philosopher. His best known works all bear at least some of the marks of this influence.<sup>2</sup>

Though he was by now just thirty years old his church evidenced their high regard for him by inviting him to become the president of the college from which he had graduated as a youth. It did not last. Three years later he crossed over to join his old colleagues at the theological seminary. No useful purpose would be gained by inquiring into the reasons for this; but it is significant that even in later years when he enjoyed high esteem on all sides he resisted all offers to head prestigious institutions and elected to remain

---

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Niebuhr's essay, "Value Theory and Theology," in The Nature of Religious Experience: Essays in Honor of Douglas Clyde Macintosh, edited by Julius S. Bixler, Robert L. Calhoun, and H. Richard Niebuhr (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1937), pp. 93-116. Hereinafter cited as VTT.

<sup>2</sup>"H. Richard Niebuhr's Place in American Thought," Christianity and Crisis XXIII (1963), p. 214.

1  
a teacher.

During these years he was at work on his first book. It is altogether typical of Niebuhr as a man and as a teacher that his first published work should arise from the meeting of practical and theoretical concerns. On the theoretical side The Social Sources of Denominationalism follows directly from his dissertation in that here he utilized the best insights of Troeltsch in exposing the extent to which the denominational pattern of the institutional church in America was influenced by the nation's pluralistic cultural development. On the practical and existential side it was his "ninety-five theses" nailed to the door of a Protestantism that had become a complaisant partner to the pluralistic social forces in American culture. More immediately, it was simply the outcome of a young teacher's struggles to teach a course in "Symbolics":<sup>2</sup>

But Niebuhr was destined to serve the church outside the boundaries of the denomination he had until then served with such distinction. In 1932, he was called to be an associate of Professor Macintosh at Yale where he remained until his retirement in 1960. The previous year had been spent in Europe, and while Niebuhr has not made public any personal reflections on this experience, there is indirect evidence that he was deeply moved by what he witnessed. As is well known, Europe was experiencing tumultuous days. While it is true that the Great Crash of 1929 had shocked and sobered an America inebriated by the

---

<sup>1</sup>Liston Pope, "H. Richard Niebuhr: A Personal Appreciation," Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr, edited by Paul Ramsay (New York: Harper & Row, 1957, Paper edition, 1965), p. 7f. Hereinafter cited as FE.

<sup>2</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, The Social Sources of Denominationalism (New York: Henry Holt, 1929; Reprinted with new preface, Hamden, Connecticut: The Shoe String Press, 1954; New York: Meridian Books, 1957, Meridian paper edition, 1957), p. vii. Hereinafter cited as SSD.

wealth of its own new wine, it must have seemed almost mild compared with the political frenzy threatening the life of Europe. The mild socialism and hesitant internationalism of Roosevelt's New Deal and the fanatical nationalism of Hitler's Fascism that were to change the face of both nations down to the present, were just ahead.<sup>1</sup> But the "signs of the times" had not been lost on the young theologian. Evidence of his extraordinary sensitivity to the cultural and religious situation of his time is seen in the fact that as a result of this visit, Niebuhr did not immediately begin a new work of his own but introduced to the English speaking world a translation of what was in his opinion one of "the most important of many attempts which were made in modern Germany to achieve the orientation of thought and life in the new world of the twentieth century."<sup>2</sup> This was a time for listening and of repentant reflection by the church. Thus, when Niebuhr next spoke to and about the church in his own land the results of a "Turnerlebnis of justification by faith"<sup>3</sup> in his own life and thought are unmistakable.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>The significance of a comparison between the two leaders is heightened by the fact that the years of their power are exactly parallel--1933 to 1945.

<sup>2</sup>"Translator's Preface," to The Religious Situation by Paul Tillich, translated by H. Richard Niebuhr (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1932; New York: Meridian Books, paper edition, 1956), p. 9. While the ostensible purpose of this short essay was to prepare the English reader, by clarifying key ideas in Tillich's thought, it was at the same time a statement of Niebuhr's own reaction to Tillich's interpretation of contemporary culture and religion and throws considerable light on the process of rethinking Niebuhr was undergoing at the time.

<sup>3</sup>The phrase was used by Niebuhr about himself. Cf. Ahlstrom, Christianity and Crisis XXIII (1963), p. 215.

<sup>4</sup>I refer in particular to "The Question of the Church" and "Towards the Independence of the Church" in The Church Against the World by H. Richard Niebuhr, Wilhelm Pauck and T. P. Miller (Chicago, New York: Willet, Clark & Co., 1935), 1-13 and 123-156; The Kingdom of God in America (Chicago, New

In 1954 Richard Niebuhr accepted an invitation by the American Association of Theological Schools to direct a "Study of Theological Education in the United States and Canada." This was in many ways a fitting climax to his distinguished career for here he was provided with a unique opportunity to test across a wide front his methodological combination of sociological analysis and philosophical and theological reflection which was the distinctive mark of his approach to ethical understanding. Dialogue at the level of personal relations and dialectic at the level of thought were the means Niebuhr used to bring together these separate disciplines. He believed that in the process of reckoning with each other the truth and significance of the church's situation would be revealed. Niebuhr sought to generate such a dialogue at every level of the church's life. If he did not see self-criticism both in the individual and the church as synonymous with its reformation and renewal, he did regard it as a necessary pre-requisite. Thus, the three-volume study report does more than list statistics, reports and make recommendations for the bettering of education for the ministry.<sup>1</sup> For here Richard Niebuhr presented his mature reflections on the nature and purpose of the church and its ministry; reflections which had arisen out of his life-long participation in

---

York: Willet, Clark, 1937; Reprinted with a new preface, Hamden, Connecticut: The Shoe String Press, 1956; New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959). The 1959 paper edition will be quoted and hereinafter cited as KGA. The former is something of a "manifesto" presaging the new theological orientation of Niebuhr which was to result in his radically different approach to understanding the course of Christianity in America contained in the latter.

<sup>1</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr and Daniel Day Williams (eds.), The Ministry in Historical Perspective (New York: Harper, 1956). Also, H. Richard Niebuhr, Daniel Day Williams and James M. Gustafson (eds.), The Advancement of Theological Education (New York: Harper, 1957).

theological education.<sup>1</sup>

H. Richard Niebuhr: Christian Thinker, Teacher and Writer

A concern for the renewal and right ordering of the Church and its ministry was an important practical interest of Niebuhr's but it by no means defined the scope of his thought. His mind encompassed a variety of interests and all his writings evidenced the same wide knowledge and incisive grasp of the subject combined with a fine critical ability and sense of proportion. His doctoral dissertation clearly shows that by his thirtieth year he had a not un-critical mastery of the intricacies of much German philosophical and theological thought since Kant. This is particularly true of what Paul Tillich has called "the Kant-Ritschl-Harnack line of thought which led to Troeltsch."<sup>2</sup> He was, however, just as keenly aware of the philosophical and theological thinking of his own country. We might, to take a particular instance, point to Niebuhr's use of the term "objective relativism" in his theory of religious knowledge and value.<sup>3</sup> It was his aim to combine the objective interest of "new realism" and the subjective interest of "critical realism": positions which had developed in epistemological discussion in America during the first three decades of the

---

<sup>1</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, reflections on the aims of theological education, in collaboration with Daniel Day Williams and James M. Gustafson (New York: Harper, 1957). Hereinafter cited as PCM.

<sup>2</sup>Paul Tillich, Perspectives on Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Protestant Theology, edited by Carl E. Braaten (London: SCM Press, 1967), p. 215.

<sup>3</sup>MR, pp. 10, 18f, 22; VTT, pp. 113ff. "The Center of Value," in Moral Principles of Action, edited by R. N. Anshen (New York: Harper, 1952), pp. 162-175, revised and reprinted as a "Supplementary Essay," in Radical Monotheism and Western Culture (New York: Harper, 1960; London: Faber and Faber, 1961), pp. 100-113. Hereinafter cited as RMWC.

twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> "Objective relativism" and its theological surrogates, "theo-centric or theological relativism" became central concepts in his theology and ethics.

But if, quite naturally, he was influenced more directly by contemporary thought both inside and outside America, he did not neglect the past. Indeed, perhaps more than any other prominent American Protestant theologian of his time he moved confidently and critically within the greater part of Western theological and philosophical thought and combined in a quite unostentatious fashion a scholar's knowledge with a thinker's creativity. Furthermore, he was convinced that genuine cross-cultural and inter-disciplinary communication would do much to prevent the narrow provincial and one-sided development of theology and ethics that afflicted much academic thinking on these subjects in both Europe and America.<sup>2</sup> His sympathetic and clear-headed understanding of new departures being made in European theology, particularly the early work of Karl Barth and Paul Tillich, provided him with a perspective from which he could critically appraise the domestic theological scene of the 1930's. At this time Niebuhr believed that German "religious realism" was more "real" than American "religious realism," but he did not think the latter had nothing to say to the former.

---

<sup>1</sup>Cf. William Pepperell Montague, "The Story of American Realism" in Philosophy, XII (April, 1937), pp. 1-22; Herbert W. Schneider, A History of American Philosophy, second edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962) and Sources of Contemporary Philosophical Realism (Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1964). The latter volume contains the relevant sections of Schneider's larger History as well as a shortened version of Montague's essay.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. "Can German and American Christians Understand Each Other?," Christian Century, XLVII (1930), pp. 914-916; "Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century" in Religious Realism, edited by D. C. Macintosh (New York: Macmillan, 1931), pp. 413-428; Niebuhr's preface to his translation of Paul Tillich, The Religious Situation, 1931: Also, The Kingdom of God in America has been translated into German as Der Gedanke des Gottesreichs in Amerikanischen Christentum, (New York: Church World Service, 1948).

Ultimately the difference between German and American religious realism root in a divergent employment of criticism in the analysis of religious and moral experience. This divergence leads to a host of consequences which involve German theology in dualism, agnosticism, pessimism and dogmatism and American theology in optimism, monism, and rationalism. It is easy for the American to point out that German theology has pressed its critical principle to the point where it must choose between agnosticism and dogmatism and has, in fact, made a dogma out of the critical principle itself. On the other hand there is justice in the German criticism of the optimism and anthropocratic tendency in American religious thought.<sup>1</sup>

As one of his interpreters has noted, his own work was "a genuinely intercultural activity to a degree rarely achieved in present-day Protestant theology."<sup>2</sup> Here again we observe his concern for dialogue and communication which became on a theoretical plane a primary model for the explication of his ethical theory.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, something of Niebuhr's desire to attain a comprehensive understanding of a variety of theological and philosophical traditions is seen in the influence on his own thought of a quite diverse group of thinkers. Outside America thinkers as different as F. Schleiermacher, A. Ritschl, S. Kierkegaard, E. Cassirer, H. Bergson, A. E. Taylor, A. N. Whitehead and F. D. Maurice have contributed more or less directly to the style and direction of his thought. Even more important are Immanuel Kant, Martin Buber, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich and above all Ernst Troeltsch. A less impressive company, but certainly

---

<sup>1</sup>"Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century," *op. cit.*, pp. 427-428.

<sup>2</sup>Hans Frei, "Niebuhr's Theological Background," *Faith and Ethics*, edited by Paul Ramsey (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1957), p. 12.

<sup>3</sup>The Responsible Self: an Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy, with an introduction by James M. Gustafson (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), pp. 56-60, 149-160 *passim*. Hereinafter cited as RS. This posthumously published volume contains the Robertson Lectures for 1960 delivered at Glasgow University and in an appendix excerpts from the Earl Lectures at the Pacific School of Religion in 1962. It also includes a preface by his son, Professor Richard R. Niebuhr, and a long introduction by Professor James M. Gustafson, Niebuhr's successor to the Chair of Christian Ethics at Yale.

not less important in their influence on Niebuhr, were such American scholars as Walter Rauschenbusch, Frank C. Porter, Robert L. Calhoun, Josiah Royce, G. H. Mead, D. C. Macintosh and above all Jonathan Edwards. It is neither possible, nor desirable to indicate separately the precise nature of the impact of all of these scholars on the development of Niebuhr's thought. But I have tried to take account of those elements in the thought of the most important of them which, in my judgment, help to clarify aspects of Niebuhr's own views.

Colleagues and students alike have spoken of the way in which he had helped them to see old problems in a new light by employing new terms, drawn from various disciplines, as integral parts of a lucid, consistent and highly sophisticated structure of thought.<sup>1</sup> None of his lecture courses were required; yet the challenge and intellectual excitement generated by them drew large numbers of students. It is one thing to have combined incisive analysis with an impressive ability for existential communication in the relatively personal situation of the classroom, but a far more difficult task to accomplish this through the medium of the printed page. The extent to which Niebuhr achieved the latter is indeed remarkable and it raises the question whether an existential posture was the sole reason for this. We might point to the fact that most of his published works were first given as lectures, but there are other more basic factors at work which are closely related to his existentialist posture and may be understood as implications of it--although not in any necessary sense.

---

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Liston Pope, op. cit., Faith and Ethics, pp. 4-6; Hans Frei, "Niebuhr's Theological Background," ibid., p. 15f; D. D. Williams, "A Personal and Theological Memoir, Christianity and Crisis, XXIII (November 25, 1963), pp. 209-213; Joseph L. Allen, "A Decisive Influence on Protestant Ethics," ibid., p. 217; E. J. Beker, "The Sovereignty of God in the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr" in Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift, XV (1960), p. 108; Charles C. West in his review of H. R. Niebuhr; The Responsible Self (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) in Theology Today XXI (1964), pp. 519f.

The difficulty encountered in all attempts at employing the highly personal and "singular" categories of existentialism in theoretical work has often been commented on.<sup>1</sup> Language, by its very nature, is in one sense of the word essentialist because it uses universals. In an effort to avoid dissipating the "subjectivity" of truth by employing ordinary descriptive language, existentialist thinkers (both theological and otherwise), influenced by Kierkegaard, have resorted to the language of paradox. For Kierkegaard, however, in distinction from most of his followers including Niebuhr, the use of such language was demanded at the level of knowing in conformity to the actual Paradox (Incarnation) constitutive of Christianity at the level of being, and therefore was not, in the first place, a special instance of the difficulty inherent in thinking and speaking about the unique or unusual in human experience.<sup>2</sup> These are important matters, but I am not at this point concerned with his theological method or the type of language he employed in speaking about God, but with the structure of his thought generally. What then are those features of his thought which preserved his existentialism from being simply an interesting, but rather undisciplined collection of personal observations and reflections?

There are at least two prominent features of Niebuhr's work as an author which have disciplined, without extinguishing, the living quality of his thought

---

<sup>1</sup>For an admirable attempt to deal with "the logic of the singular" in a manner both philosophically rigorous and theologically adequate see J. V. L. Casserley, The Christian Philosophy (London: Faber and Faber, 1949), esp. Part II, 1 and 2.

<sup>2</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments. Translated from the Danish with introduction and notes by David F. Swenson (London: Oxford University Press, New York: American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1936), chapters III-V, and Concluding Unscientific Postscript translated from the Danish by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, London: Oxford University Press, 1941), pp. 505-519.

and which did in fact strengthen and sharpen the cutting edge of his existential mode of theological and ethical reasoning. The first is his wide, sympathetic, and in the main, incisive understanding of the past life and thought of the Church, and more particularly, the interwoven course of philosophy and theology in Europe since the Reformation and in America since the beginning.<sup>1</sup> As a young professor at Yale he turned back with many of his generation to what has been called the "Great Tradition" in theology. "Edwards, Pascal, Luther, Calvin, Thomas, and Augustine became important."<sup>2</sup> If Niebuhr qualified much of the content of their theologies, this is because he heard them in relation to his acceptance of theological and ethical questions formulated by more immediate theological and philosophical mentors, and not because he came behind in giving serious and sustained attention to their thought. In all his writings one is conscious that this critically loyal conversation with the past is going on. It may often have been assimilated to the more immediate concern of explicating his own views, but it is nevertheless present.

His most widely read books are essentially historical studies.<sup>3</sup> Much of their appeal and intrinsic value derives from the skill with which the author was able to etch with such economy the main lineaments of a quite astonishing range of men, movements and periods. Such mastery was not gained without the painstaking labor of becoming directly acquainted with the details of his "subject," but like all true art or science, depended upon this very knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Hans Frei, op. cit., pp. 10-40.

<sup>2</sup>"Reformation: Continuing Imperative," op. cit., p. 249.

<sup>3</sup>I refer to The Social Sources of Denominationalism (1929), The Kingdom of God in America (1937) and Christ and Culture (1951).

<sup>4</sup>Perhaps the best example of this is Niebuhr's beautiful evocation of the message and mission of the man to whom his own thought owed so much. See his essay on "Søren Kierkegaard" in Christianity and the Existentialists, ed. Carl D. Michalson (New York: Scribners, 1956), pp. 23-42.

Furthermore, like most historians whose works are read widely, his actual practice indicates that he did not subscribe wholeheartedly to the dogma that history should be studied for its own sake, or that the first law of historical writing (which after all is something quite different from historical research) is utter objectivity. Niebuhr has in fact stated very clearly the reason for his interest in the past.

All attempts to interpret the past are indirect attempts to understand the present and the future. Men try to remember the road they have traveled in order that they may gain some knowledge of the direction in which it is leading, for their stories are begun without preventient knowledge of the end. . . . What is true of historical interpretations in general is particularly true of attempts, such as the one we are undertaking, which set out frankly to find meaning in the past rather than describe the details of what happened.<sup>1</sup>

There are, of course, dangers in such an approach which Niebuhr did not wholly succeed in avoiding: but they do not outweigh the quality of the results he obtained. Here it is important to distinguish between the freedom of any thinker to adopt and adapt for his own use single concepts or even a whole philosophy (with due acknowledgment) from the literary legacy of the past; and the conscious fidelity demanded of an interpreter toward the thought of anyone whom he would seek to re-present. He exercised the former freedom in impressive fashion: ideas and thinkers as different as the concept of loyalty developed by Josiah Royce; or the idea of the social self propounded by George Herbert Mead; or Henri Bergson's epistemological notion of duration (*durée*) and his sociological distinction of "open" over against "closed" societies, were tailored to fit into a consistent pattern of thought. With respect to the latter, he sometimes tended to speak only of that which agreed with his own thought and perhaps did not take sufficiently into account those elements which were different

---

<sup>1</sup>KGA, p. 1 (*italics added*).

or even opposed. Particularly is this true of those to whom his own thought was most indebted. The long process of sympathetic hearing and intellectual and spiritual penetration seems to have become, within limits, so complete, that even the language which he employed to represent their thought and that which he used to set forth his own position became almost indistinguishable.<sup>1</sup>

Inseparable from this historical awareness, and ministering more directly to the existential quality of his work, was his vivid consciousness that a Christian moralist does not theorize in isolation, but within a specific theological community whose special vocation it is to serve as an "intellectual center of the Church's life."<sup>2</sup> This does not mean that the theological community serves only the Church, but that it does first recognize itself as Church, that it might under God lead the churches to understand their own faith and conduct. A particularly important part of the moral theologian's task is, therefore, to work at hauling the beam from the Church's own eye that it might see properly to pick the speck from the eye of other cultural movements and institutions.<sup>3</sup> This intellectual service rendered to the Church by the theologian and theological community is, according to Niebuhr, twofold. First, "it is that place or occasion where the Church exercises its intellectual love of God and neighbor" by putting aside,

---

<sup>1</sup>Cf. particularly Niebuhr's account of Jonathan Edwards in Christian Ethics: Sources of the Living Tradition, edited with introductions by Waldo Beach and H. Richard Niebuhr (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1955), Ch. 13, pp. 380-389, hereinafter abbreviated as CE; KGA, pp. 113-119. These two passages on Edwards contain most of the key ideas in the theological foundation of Niebuhr's own ethics as set forth in Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, pp. 11-48. The same is true to a less marked degree of his account of Luther and Calvin's teachings. Beach and Niebuhr, op. cit., esp. pp. 229-245, 269-274 respectively.

<sup>2</sup>PCM, p. 107. Cf. "Toward a Definition of the Church," ibid., pp. 19-27.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. H. Richard Niebuhr, "Theology--Not Queen But Servant," The Journal of Religion, XXX (1955), p. 5. Reprinted with minor revisions in RMWC as a supplementary essay entitled, "Theology in the University," pp. 93-99.

after the fashion of pure science, "all extraneous, private and personal interests while it concentrates on its objects for their own sake only."<sup>1</sup> Second, it is that community which brings "reflection and criticism to bear on worship, preaching, teaching and the care of souls," that is, on the whole of the Church's witness and service in the world.<sup>2</sup>

While the special vocation of a theological school is intellectual, it is never exclusively so. In the first place Niebuhr's anthropological doctrine of the "social self" not only denies that there can be any self-knowledge apart from the presence to the self of other selves,<sup>3</sup> but it also denies that the self can ever be considered as existing or acting at any moment as a purely cognitive, deliberative or emotive self.<sup>4</sup> But quite apart from the fact that men are more than their minds, the primary objects of study in the Church are not ideas (much less can the word "object" here be confused with a thing), but persons and the "fundamental indestructible relations between persons."<sup>5</sup> To be sure, theology in common with all other intellectual activity directed toward other objects in human experience, employs the mind in abstracting, conceptualizing, comparing and testing ideas about God and man, sovereignty and mercy, law and gospel, et cetera. This is its proper work.

---

<sup>1</sup>PCM, pp. 110 and 109. Cf. RMWC, p. 87f.

<sup>2</sup>PCM, p. 110. Cf. pp. 110-116.

<sup>3</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience," The Journal of Philosophy, XLII (1945), p. 353; Christ and Culture (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1951, Harper Torchbook edition, 1956), pp. 241-249. Hereinafter cited as CC.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 352f; RS, p. 109-111.

<sup>5</sup>MR, p. 143.

Because intellectual work requires such attention to the im-  
personal, therefore it is necessary that it be constantly corrected  
and made serviceable by activities of another sort, especially by  
the worship of God, the hearing of his Word, and direct service  
of the neighbor.<sup>1</sup>

Our primary relation to God is not by way of thought but by faith and worship.

Our primary relation to our neighbor is not mental but moral, a relationship  
of love and service.

Hence while a community which centers in worship is not a theo-  
logical school, a theological school in which worship is not a  
part of the daily and weekly rhythm of activity cannot remain a  
center of intellectual activity directed toward God. Preaching  
and hearing the proclamation is not theological study; but if  
students of theology, in all their degrees of immaturity and  
maturity, do not attend to the Word addressed to them as selves  
their study represents flight from God and self. A community  
of service to men is not as such a theological center; but a  
school that only studies man-before-God and men in relation  
to neighbor without the accompaniment of frequent, direct en-  
counters with human Thou's, serving and being served, has become  
too irresponsible to neighbors to be called a divinity school.<sup>2</sup>

I have quoted this passage from the conclusion of Niebuhr's personal reflection  
on "the idea of a theological school" because it illustrates so well how he  
sought to maintain a balance between theory and practice, reflection and action.

He was convinced that much needless debate and confusion ensued in theo-  
logical work (especially in America) due to inadequate theories of the relation  
between theory and practice. He rejected "the intellectualist theory" according  
to which "all human action begins with theory, with an understanding of ideas  
presented to the mind; the movement is from idea to action, from thought to  
voluntary deed."<sup>3</sup> This is one reason why he rejected both the teleological and  
deontological patterns of thinking in ethics--he regarded them both, especially  
the former, as intellectualistic.<sup>4</sup> But the directly opposite view of the

---

<sup>1</sup>PCM, p. 130.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 126.

<sup>4</sup>RS, p. 69f.

pragmatists, developed principally by American philosophers, he regarded as equally erroneous. Here theoretical activity is thought of as "an affair of rationalizations, essentially irrelevant to practice."<sup>1</sup> Practice tends to be regarded as in itself sufficient or at least "success" tends to be understood as the criterion for the determination of valid theory. Both are wrong in Niebuhr's view because they violate his basic understanding of what constitutes valid reasoning generally and moral reasoning in particular. And it is here that we catch sight of that mode of reasoning by means of which Niebuhr endeavored to reduplicate in the mind of his readers the inescapable alternation between reflection and action which is at every moment an essential characteristic of human existence. Niebuhr rejected these two theories precisely because the relation between thought and action was conceived as moving in one direction only, from thought to action (intellectualism) or from action to thought (pragmatism). A more adequate position according to Niebuhr must embrace both in a back and forth dialectic.

Reflection is never the first action, though in personal and communal life we can never go back to a moment in which action has been unmodified by reflection. . . . Reflection precedes, accompanies and follows action but this does not make it the source or end of action. Reflection as a necessary ingredient in all activity is neither prior nor subservient to other motions of the soul. . . . It serves them in its own way by abstracting and relating, by discerning pattern and idea, by criticism and comparison. It is served by a will that disciplines, a love that guides, by perception of incarnate being, by hope of fulfillment.<sup>2</sup>

If it is kept in mind that Niebuhr made these observations in the context of personal and rather tentative thoughts about the nature and purpose of theological education, then fuller justification for them will not be expected. Without doubt they stand in need of further explanation. But it is not without value

---

<sup>1</sup>PCM, p. 127.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 127f.

as an introductory statement of the type of reasoning he was to develop in greater detail later in dealing with moral experience, decision and action.<sup>1</sup>

The sum of his published work is not great--seven slim volumes, only two of which exceed 200 pages. There are in addition a moderate number of essays scattered about in various symposia and less than 50 articles.<sup>2</sup> Some of these shorter pieces embody original, profound and provocative thinking on more specialized topics.<sup>3</sup> Each of his books is quite different from the others, not merely in the obvious change of subject matter, but because he did not long remain satisfied with his previous results and wished to explore new ways of thinking about what were essentially the same theological and ethical problems. In this respect Niebuhr's thought bears comparison with that of Troeltsch to whom he owed so much. Troeltsch once remarked that, unlike most German theologians and philosophers, he had achieved no systematic presentation, but he supposed that the progression of thought traced by the chronological order of his book might be considered a sort of system.

---

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Chapter III below.

<sup>2</sup>For a complete bibliography of his published works see "A Bibliography of H. Richard Niebuhr's Writings," compiled by Raymond P. Morris, 1957, revised 1964, Faith and Ethics, pp. 291-306.

<sup>3</sup>Particularly important are the following: "Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century," Religious Realism, edited by D. C. Macintosh (New York: Macmillan, 1931), pp. 413-428; "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," The Heritage of the Reformation: Essays Commemorating the Centennial of Eden Theological Seminary, edited by E. J. F. Arndt (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1950), pp. 211-219; "The Center of Value," Moral Principles of Action: Man's Ethical Imperative, edited by R. N. Anshen (New York: Harper, 1952), pp. 162-175; "On the Nature of Faith," Religious Experience and Truth: A Symposium, edited by Sidney Hook (New York: New York University Press, 1961), pp. 93-102; "The Nature and Existence of God: A Protestant View," Motive IV (1943), pp. 13-15, 43-46; "The Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience," Journal of Philosophy, LII (1945), pp. 352-359; "The Idea of Covenant and American Democracy," Church History XXIII (1954), pp. 126-135; "The Protestant Movement and Democracy in the United States," Religion in American Life, Vol. I: The Shaping of American Religion, edited by James Ward Smith and A. Leland Jamison (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 20-71.

I have no original system, and in that I am different from most other German philosophers. To be sure, I have such in the background, but only that it may be corrected constantly as a result of the individual project. Consequently, I am not able to display the system in such an unfinished condition, but only explain it by the sequence of my books--which, in the case of<sup>1</sup> the systematically oriented person, is also a kind of system.

Niebuhr could very well have described the course of his own thinking in a similar manner. There is a system, but as Troeltsch remarked of himself, "it is in the background" and was "corrected constantly as a result of the individual project." For the same reason the wholeness of Niebuhr's thinking does not come to view in any one book. It would not be too much to say that the notion of dialogue or response which is such a prominent feature of his ethical theory is exemplified in the progress of his own thought. Each "individual project" is a response to what had gone before.

In the presentation of his thought, Niebuhr gave to all his work, even his more ephemeral occasional pieces, the same meticulous attention to structure and wording. In his review of the first volume of Paul Tillich's Systematic Theology he observed that the author "has not spared himself the final pain of seeking the exact formulation his thought requires."<sup>2</sup> This must surely be seen as a confession of the rigorous standard he had set for himself. He set forth his position in carefully balanced and elegantly tailored sentences which carried forward a well organized and tightly controlled argument. Reading his work is like looking at a well proportioned structure. One is never conscious of the framework. The prose is a delight to read for he was not afraid to use colorful non-technical language to convey what were often quite complex and

---

<sup>1</sup>Ernst Troeltsch, "Meine Bücher," Gesammelte Schriften (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1925), IV, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Theology, LVI (1953), p. 227.

difficult patterns of thought. And he knew how to relieve the pressure of sustained exposition or argument by coining arresting aphorisms, or by introducing a simple example, or by drawing an analogy from some well known historical or cultural source.

The literary merit of Niebuhr's writing is a delightful "work of supererogation" not always found in philosophers or Protestant theologians. The elegant, colorful and imaginative manner in which he presented his thought makes persuasive, perhaps too persuasive, arguments that involve highly sophisticated and subtly interwoven philosophical and theological ideas; arguments and ideas which must here be somewhat rudely unclothed and exposed to charitable, careful, yet critical scrutiny; a procedure which we may be sure Niebuhr himself would have been the first to encourage.

In his unpublished dissertation of 1924 Niebuhr had observed that "Troeltsch did not live to write a systematic exposition of his philosophy of religion, as he had purposed to do. His final large work, The Historical Standpoint and Its Problems (1922), of which he was able to finish only the first part, appears to be largely in the nature of a prolegomena."<sup>1</sup> It is a rather striking fact that the same general judgment mutatis mutandis should now be made of Niebuhr's own work. He, too, did not live to write a systematic exposition of his Christian ethics, as he had purposed.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, his final small essay

---

<sup>1</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup>James M. Gustafson points out in his "introduction" to The Responsible Self (pp. 6-41) that "the present book does not contain materials that would naturally have appeared in a second volume dealing with 'The Principles of Christian Action,' and a third, 'Christian Responsibility in Common Life,' dealing with the interpretation of marriage and family, politics and economics, war and international relations in the light of the idea of responsibility and the theological principles." Ibid., p. 9. Cf. also the "Preface" by his son, Professor Richard R. Niebuhr.

The Responsible Self (1963) is also, on his own accounting, largely in the nature of a prolegomena to Christian ethics.<sup>1</sup> "I shall attempt," he told his audience at Glasgow University,

to present to you in these lectures a summation and an ordering of some of the reflections on the moral life that have developed in my mind during a long period of teaching in the field of Christian ethics. In what I shall set before you in the way of an analysis of the responsibility of selfhood I shall be dealing not with the subject of Christian ethics proper but with an introduction to that subject.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, it must be acknowledged as his son, Professor Richard R. Niebuhr, among others has pointed out, that "while all of his books, from the time of The Social Sources of Denominationalism onward, bespeak themes and problems that were integral to his heart and mind, none of them directly incorporates the fundamental architectonic ideas of the discipline of systematic ethics into which he had poured the largest part of his energies."<sup>3</sup> If this is so then we must ask whether the purpose of this study--the attempt to give analytical exposition of Niebuhr's theological ethics--is really possible?<sup>4</sup> It is my contention that it is; and that while it must be regretted that we are denied Niebuhr's own mature statement of the systematic theological ethics which he had taught and reflected on over many years, that nevertheless, what he has written invites critical appraisal and provides sufficient material from which a relatively clear understanding may be gained of the basis, method and scope of his ethics, and of the principles and patterns of analysis which informed it.

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Gustafson's earlier judgment: "Until his theological ethics are systematically reduced by him to print and paper no one can adequately or accurately deal with Niebuhr's ethics and its implications." "Christian Ethics and Social Policy," Faith and Ethics, p. 120.

CHAPTER II  
THE RELATIONAL THEORY OF VALUE

Two different patterns of analysis and interpretation have been developed by H. Richard Niebuhr in the course of his critical reflections on the character of moral experience and action. In the first scheme he developed a relational theory of value around the concept of "the center of value." Here he was led to reflect 1) on the plurality and relativity of values; 2) on the many different centers of value in relation to which judgments about what counts as good or evil, right or wrong are made; 3) on the possibility, or better, the necessity of finding some ultimate regulative center of value that would unify without denying the relativity of all penultimate values. The second scheme is a relational theory of action centered on the concept of "responsibility." Here he attempted to develop a theory of human moral experience and action--based on a distinctive image of man as "a responsible self." He believed that this was an alternative to the images of man which are presupposed by teleological (goal oriented) or deontological (law oriented) theories. Niebuhr argued that this theory is not only more compatible with what he saw as a developing "anthropological consensus" among modern social scientists, but is also important hermeneutically for understanding the Biblical ethos generally and the place and function of Jesus Christ in Christian ethics in particular.<sup>1</sup> This chapter will seek to set forth the first of these

---

<sup>1</sup>RS, pp. 56f, 65ff, 161-178.

two schemes.

The relational value theory of H. Richard Niebuhr is contained principally in two essays, "Value Theory and Theology"<sup>1</sup> and "The Center of Value."<sup>2</sup> This is not to deny that in the broadest sense all of Niebuhr's writings-- which have as their object a constructive account of the relations between man and God and other men--are concerned with values. But it is chiefly in these two essays that Niebuhr has given a sustained and explicit description of, and justification for, the theory of value<sup>3</sup> which everywhere structures his theological ethics.<sup>4</sup> The procedure adopted here will be to take "The Center of Value" as the primary document and to use "Value Theory and Theology", and other sources, insofar as they corroborate or further elucidate the exposition given there. The latter essay has as its primary objective to expose the chief common weaknesses of most types of value theologies developed by theologians since Kant. Only in a brief section at the close of the essay does

---

<sup>1</sup>VTT, pp. 93-116.

<sup>2</sup>An essay in Moral Principles of Action, ed. R. N. Anshen (New York: Harper and Row, 1952), pp. 162-175. Revised and reprinted as a supplementary essay in Radical Monotheism and Western Culture (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), pp. 100-113. Revised version hereinafter cited as CV (1961); original cited as CV (1952).

<sup>3</sup>A "theory of value" is ordinarily understood to be an attempt to isolate that generic feature of value which is common to moral, aesthetic, religious or other types of value.

<sup>4</sup>The importance of Niebuhr's theory of value for understanding his thought was not missed by the most perceptive writers who contributed to the Festschrift, Faith and Ethics, ed. Paul Ramsey (New York: Harper, 1957). Cf. especially Hans W. Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," pp. 65-116; Paul Ramsey, "The Transformation of Ethics," pp. 140-172; George Schrader, "Value and Valuation," pp. 173-204. In his autobiographical essay, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," Christian Century, LXXVII (1960), p. 248, Niebuhr observes that he has ". . . 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."

Niebuhr suggest his alternative position which is given a much clearer and more detailed treatment in "The Center of Value."

Niebuhr's relational theory of value consists of three principal theses. First, value is a function of any relation between two or more "existent beings." Secondly, a value system exists wherever any being functions as a "center of value" for an indeterminate number of other beings. This being is properly described as a "center of value" because it exists as the final or ultimate value and only in relation to it is it possible to construct a consistent system of value judgments. Thirdly, there is only one adequate ultimate "center of value" and that is the God of "radical monotheism." Only this being, the One beyond all the many rather than one of the many, is the absolute center of value in relation to which all other finite beings have value and are constituted one realm of being.

Each of these theses will now be examined separately. The transition from the exposition of thesis two to thesis three will be effected by a discussion of Niebuhr's critique of the value theory characteristically employed in the liberal Protestant theological tradition. In two final sections a prohibition (disallowing discrimination between the relative value of finite value systems), which Niebuhr believed to be necessarily entailed by the acceptance of a monotheistic value theory, is discussed in the light of other statements or arguments of his which appear to be inconsistent with it.

### Objective Relativism

The first important objective of Niebuhr's value theory is to establish the claim that value is a quality of the relations which obtain between

existent beings. This means negatively that he does not seek to define value as a property of any entity either actual or ideal, nor does he define it as some relation said to exist between two entities. He does not think that value can be defined. Rather, he is concerned with the more cautious task of describing the conditions under which values appear. "Its [relational value theory] fundamental observation is this: that value is present whenever one existent being with capacities and potentialities confronts another existence that limits or completes or complements it."<sup>1</sup> Values are relational by virtue of the fact that they are coextensive with, and dependent on, the relational structure of existence.

In "The Center of Value" Niebuhr develops this theory in two ways. First, he analyzes various value theorists' views and attempts to show that whatever their position is theoretically as "objectivists" or "subjectivists," when they deal with substantive moral problems, they operate with a relational theory of value "which defines good by reference to a being for which other beings are good."<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr then goes on to argue that if this is the case then relational value thinking is really a third theory of value which needs to be made explicit, and argued as a theory in its own right "without reference to these [objectivist and subjectivist] complicating strains of thought."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>CV (1961), p. 103 (italics added). As Schrader has noted, Niebuhr's position is unexceptionally relational and the above statement should be qualified by some such phrase as "value is present only under these conditions." "Value and Valuation," FE, p. 176.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 100. Cf. pp. 100-103.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 103. Cf. pp. 103-109.

Among objectivists,<sup>1</sup> G. E. Moore, for example, has argued that "good" is the name of a simple, non-natural, unanalyzable property known intuitively "in abstraction from every relation."<sup>2</sup> The "objectivity" of "goodness" rests, for Moore, upon a direct private unmediated awareness of intrinsic value. But, says Niebuhr, when Moore turns to a discussion of the practical problem of identifying those things which possess intrinsic goodness and asserts that "the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects are by far the most valuable things which we can know or imagine,"<sup>3</sup> he has shifted his ground from a purely objective theory of intrinsic value to a relational theory, for "he has posited a being with consciousness and sociality as that for which these things are good, not as desired, but as desirable, as necessarily complementary to its existence."<sup>4</sup> There is, then, an inconsistency between Moore's meta-ethical theory of the meaning and justification of the term "good" and his normative theory of what is good for man.

A similar inconsistency shows up in the thinking of "subjectivist" theorists. According to Niebuhr, a transition from subjective relativism to objective relativism can be observed in the thinking of Moritz Schlick.<sup>5</sup> On

---

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre's remark that "Moore himself staked everything on the appeal to objectivity." A Short History of Ethics (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), p. 257.

<sup>2</sup>CV (1961), p. 100.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. Quoted but not cited by Niebuhr.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Problems of Ethics, translated by David Ripun from the original German edition, Fragen der Ethik, Vienna, 1930 (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1939; Paper edition, New York: Dover Publications, 1962). Schlick's study is perhaps the most sustained and perceptive work in ethics from a member of the school of logical positivists. His significance lies in the

the one hand he asserts that the idea of something being valuable or desirable for its own sake is meaningless. A theory of value must concern itself solely with the question of describing what is desired for its own sake. "Value is nothing but a name for the dormant pleasure possibilities of the valuable object."<sup>1</sup> But when Schlick, too, addresses himself to the question as to which things are good, he chooses "kindness" as that good which corresponds to man's capacity for happiness, not because it is desired by all men, but because it is "in conformity with human nature."<sup>2</sup> Though Schlick began by making value wholly relative to desire, he did not stop at simply recommending kindness as an object of desire but declared it to be valuable for all men.

The point of Niebuhr's interpretation of these representatives of "objective" and "subjective" theories of value seems to be that while, in their theories about the meaning and nature of value as such, each denies that value is a function of the relation of one existent to another, when they turn to the specifically ethical question of identifying what is good for man they inconsistently, but rightly, employ a relational theory. The objectivist is right insofar as he denies the subjectivist's identification of value with that which is desired by any being. The subjectivist is right insofar as he denies the objectivist's contention that value is some kind of self-subsistent entity.

---

fact that unlike his fellow logical positivists Reichenbach or Carnap, he did not view ethics as a non-scientific study. ". . . the book may be called scientific, for . . . true judgments may be systematized; they constitute a part of science . . . the scientific field to which they belong is psychology." Ibid., pp. xx-xxi.

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 102. Quoted but not cited by Niebuhr in CV (1961), p. 102.

<sup>2</sup>CV (1961), p. 102. Cf. Ibid., p. 105; Schlick, Problems of Ethics, pp. 202-209.

From the point of view of a relational value theory it is necessary to deny that value is relative to the desires, rather than the needs, or capacities, or potentialities of any being; but this kind of relational objectivity is not what the objectivists have in mind when they introduce the distinction between essence and existence, the mental and the material, and identify value with the former and deny it to the latter.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, according to the relational value theorist, it is just as important to deny that value is some ideal entity or essence and so not understood as grounded in the inter-relation of being with being; but this kind of relational objectivity is not what subjectivists mean when they declare value to be the function of non-rational desire and deny that it is present to other kinds of relations.<sup>2</sup>

These very different attempts of objectivists and subjectivists to analyze and justify their claims that value is a "property" of something should not obscure a fatal consequence which both theories share. They both end with an essentially non-rational definition of value: The first because value is made the object of an ineffable intuition, the second because it is made the object of irrational desire. Thus, both positions make communication about the meaning of any value, and the analysis and assessment of value-relations between existents impossible.<sup>3</sup> But a relational value theory, while it does not define values in the sense of making them identical with some psychological state or some "non-natural" property, does define the conditions under which anything may be said to have value.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

Niebuhr is, then, offering a general theory of value which is not limited solely to moral good or to human good, but embraces every situation in which value is being realized or denied.<sup>1</sup> The value term "good" is applicable to any situation in which the needs of a being are fulfilled. This would include, for example, the goodness of ideas for minds, the adjustment of living organisms to their environment, as well as the relations between a self and other selves. Furthermore, "truth," "beauty," "goodness" or "god" are neither real nor valuable simply as abstract ideas. "The question about value as a question of the valuing mind or of the needful organism is always a question about being having value."<sup>2</sup> A consistently relational theory of value insists on the inseparability of being and value and on the priority of being over value both in the way in which values are, and are known.

The following paragraph is the clearest statement of the first thesis of Niebuhr's theory, and will serve as a summary of what has been said thus far and prepare the way for further analysis.

Relational value theory understands that being and value are **inseparably connected but that value cannot be identified with a certain mode of being or any being considered in isolation, whether it be ideal or actual. Value is present wherever being confronts being, wherever there is becoming in the midst of plural interdependent, and interacting existences. It is not a function of being as such but of being in relation to being. It is therefore universal, co-extensive with the realm of being, and yet not identifiable with any being, even universal being. For if anything existed simply in itself and by itself, value would not be present. Value is the good-for-ness of being for being in their reciprocity, their animosity, and their mutual aid. Value cannot be defined or intuited in itself for it has no existence in itself; and nothing is valuable in itself, but everything has value, positive or negative, in its relations. Thus value is<sup>3</sup> not a relation but arises in the relations of being to being.**

---

<sup>1</sup>VTT, pp. 113-114.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>3</sup>CV (1961), p. 107.

This statement makes it plain that Niebuhr intends to develop a theory of value that is both relational and objective. His analysis of representative "objectivist" and "subjectivist" theories doubtless suggested to him the possibility of a third theory which would include what he judged to be the strengths, while avoiding the weaknesses, of each. Relational value thinking only comes to expression among these theorists in the determination of practical affairs but Niebuhr proposes it as a general theory in its own right. The theory which results he has called "objective relativism."<sup>1</sup> An adequate theory will insist that values are relational by virtue of the fact that they are in every case dependent upon the relational structure of existence. The value, positive or negative, of any being is not a function of that being's desire but of its relation to the needs, capacities and potentialities of another being. "Good is a term which not only can but which . . . must be applied to that which meets the needs, which fits the capacity, which corresponds to the potentialities of an existent being."<sup>2</sup> Value is relative to the being in question, but to its organic, or structural, or constitutive needs, rather than to its desires or consciousness of needs. For example, judgments about whether or not a particular food or poison is of positive value to an individual's survival cannot be accurately determined by knowledge of that being's desire

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113. Cf. "A more adequate value-theory would recognize, first of all, the relativity of values without prejudice to their objectivity. The interpretation of values as relative to structure and organic needs, rather than to desire and consciousness, provides for such an objective relativism." VTT, p. 113 *et passim* (italics added).

<sup>2</sup> CV (1961), p. 103. Cf. VTT, pp. 106-107. "An act or a person is valued as good not because it or he possesses goodness as such but because loyalty to a standard and a system of preferences corresponding to actual needs are discovered." *Ibid.*, p. 114.

for one or the other. "What is fitting, useful, and complementary to an existent can be determined only if disinterestedness, or abstraction from desire is practised and the nature and tendency of the being in question are studied."<sup>1</sup>

The exposition of Niebuhr's relational value theory has to this point been concerned exclusively with value as a function of an external relation between two or more beings and their ability to fulfil or deny the objective needs constitutive to the existence of the other. But such existent beings, he recognizes, are also in a state of becoming such that there is a relation between being and becoming, or in Aristotelian terms, the actuality and the potentiality of any being. Having recognized these two kinds of relations--the external relation between one existent being and another and the internal relation between actual and potential states of the same being--it might be thought that Niebuhr would recognize that a being may have value for itself quite apart from any value or disvalue it may have for another. In this way Niebuhr would consistently maintain the relativity and objectivity of all values in the only senses in which he was concerned to defend these terms, while at the same time denying that value is any kind of ideal essence or property of any kind. He does not, in fact, say this. Rather, he insists that the values which arise for a being between present and future states of itself are themselves grounded exclusively in that being's value for another being. He everywhere insists that every being is always either good-for or bad-for other beings, and has value for itself solely by virtue of its relation to other

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., Cf. VTT, pp. 113-114. It was precisely this failure to practice the disinterested method of the modern sciences which has, according to Niebuhr, been the chief error common to much Protestant theology and ethics since Kant. Ibid., pp. 97-101.

beings. There is no value present in the relation between actual and potential states of any being which is independent of the value which that being has for some other being.

In this situation of being, in process of becoming itself (always as social self) and among others becoming themselves (also as social), value appears in many relations of which two may be particularly distinguished. On the one hand, that is good for a being which, separate from itself, assists it in its realization of its potentialities. On the other hand, the state of realization (the excellent or virtuous state) is good. This latter good is also a "good-for-ness," not primarily as a good for the becoming self but as a good for other beings in its whole community, and then secondarily, in the endless interactions of self and others, a good-for-the-self.<sup>1</sup>

The above passage contains the first four sentences of the most extensively revised paragraph in the republished version of "The Center of Value" (1961). Niebuhr acknowledges that the most important revisions were made in response to an incisive critique of the essay, as originally published, by a Yale colleague, Professor George Schrader. Schrader had interpreted Niebuhr as arguing that value does not depend "exclusively upon the relation between two or more beings, for a being may be self-related . . . a being may have value for itself or for another being."<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr had, however, intended to argue that all value is grounded in external relations and that any value realized in self-relatedness is derivative and everywhere dependent on that being's relations with other beings. In an important note to the paragraph being discussed, Niebuhr makes this clear.

In an excellent critique of this essay as originally published, Professor George Schrader seems to have missed the point I am trying to make here and so to have been misled elsewhere in

---

<sup>1</sup>CV (1961), p. 104.

<sup>2</sup>"Value and Valuation," FE, p. 178. Cf. especially pp. 179-191.

interpreting my thought. . . . Since others may encounter difficulties in understanding what I am trying to say I shall point out I do not wish to maintain that there is value in the self's relation to itself (or to its potential self) apart from its relation to others . . . the basis of this relational value theory is not the relation of existence to essence, it is that of self to other.<sup>1</sup>

He did, however, also make the judgment that his own statement was "inadequate."<sup>2</sup> It might be more accurate to say that while the over-all thrust of his essay does emphasize the primacy of external value relations there are a few explicit statements which provide credible support for the line of interpretation taken by Schrader. That this is so, may readily be shown by placing alongside of the passage quoted above the same passage from the earlier version (1952).

In this situation of being, in process of becoming itself (always as social self) and among others becoming themselves (also as social), value appears in many relations of which two may be particularly distinguished. On the one hand, that is good for a being which, separate from itself, assists it in its realization of its potentialities. On the other hand, the state of realization (the excellent or virtuous state) is good. This latter good is also a "good-for-ness," not primarily as a good for the becoming self but as a good for other beings in its whole community, and then secondarily, in the endless interactions of self and others, a good-for-the-self.<sup>3</sup>

In this situation of being, in process of becoming itself, among other beings similarly involved in becoming themselves, value appears in at least two dimensions. On the one hand, that is good for a being which, separate from itself, assists it in its realization of its potentialities. On the other hand, the state of realization, the essence which the being tends to realize in its existence, is its good.<sup>4</sup>

The italicized sentence is the one seized upon by Schrader in support of his

---

<sup>1</sup>CV (1961), p. 105, n. 1.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>4</sup>CV (1952), p. 166. (Italics added.)

interpretation. This sentence is omitted in the later version (1961) and the fourth sentence in this version did not appear at all in the earlier version (1952). Niebuhr does not assert that the "good-for-the-self" is a separate and distinct kind of good arising as a function of the relation between existence and essence, as Schrader was understandably encouraged to believe. Value is, Niebuhr insists, grounded solely in the relation between beings.<sup>1</sup> Schrader was not unaware of this emphasis--it could hardly be overlooked--but he sees it as an unfortunate contradiction into which Niebuhr had fallen.<sup>2</sup> His further contention that Niebuhr seeks to resolve this inconsistency by "allowing self-relatedness to count as an instance of the relation of being to being"<sup>3</sup> is, so far as I can determine, without any clear support.

Niebuhr is critical of what he calls the "Aristotelian form of relational value theory" precisely because there the realization of the self's potentiality (the virtuous state) is declared to be a greater value than the value which the self has for other selves. This cannot be the case Niebuhr argues, because the fulfillment of the self's potentiality is at every point dependent on its being good for others. His theory is opposed to all consciously self-realizationist ethics. We may say, to paraphrase a biblical passage which Niebuhr was fond of quoting, seek first to be good-for the being

---

<sup>1</sup>Niebuhr's effort at self-correction is well seen in the following illustration of this point:

CV (1952) p. 166. ". . . education is good for the child in its movement toward the realization of its capacities;"

CV (1961) p. 104. ". . . education is good for the child in its movement toward the realization of its capacities for activities beneficial to human society, other selves, and other beings in general;"

<sup>2</sup>Schrader, "Value and Valuation," FE, p. 186.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

who is other than yourself and the realization of the potentialities of your own being will be added to it. The realization of our own potentialities is important but they should never be pursued as ends in themselves. He does not deny that virtues like honesty, integrity or kindness, are goods for the self, i.e., virtues. The real issue concerns the ground of their goodness and this ground is not the self's relationship to some future state of itself but it is grounded in its relationship to others. In a note appended to the revision of this essay he states this position in categorical fashion.

The theory of value I am seeking to present is through and through social; I know of no self-relatedness apart from other-relatedness or self-alienation apart from alienation from the other. Potentiality in the whole realm of being is an important component in the situation in which there is value but the basis of this relational value theory is not the relation of existence to essence, it is that of self to other.<sup>1</sup>

In the original text, however, he had not expressed himself so categorically and therefore he allowed for, or even encouraged, the idea that he in fact sought to ground value in both the relations of a being to one or more beings and in self-relatedness.

Niebuhr's determination to ground value exclusively in external relations entails the rejection, or at least a serious modification of, the traditional distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value. In ordinary usage intrinsic value is that which belongs to the real, inherent, or essential nature of a thing independent of any external circumstance or relation.

---

<sup>1</sup>CV (1961), p. 105, n. 1. Here Niebuhr draws attention to the fact that his relational theory of value is consistent with his relational theory of selfhood. His theory of value is "through and through social" because his notion of selfhood is itself relational. Self-existence depends upon the mediation of other selves. How this is so and the implications of Niebuhr's concept of the self must be developed in more detail later. Cf. especially his essay, "Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience," Journal of Philosophy XLII, (1945), pp. 352-359.

Instrumental value on the other hand, is not intrinsic but extrinsic, or mediated, and derives its value insofar as it is a means to the attainment of some further instrumental or intrinsic value. What application does this have to the present question of the value which is present in the relation between present and future states of the same being? Any being that aids another in the realization of its own essential possibilities has instrumental value, while the state of realization is an intrinsic value. That the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental value is useful for analytical purposes, Niebuhr allows, but he declares that "these designations are misleading" when they are employed in the interest of "a conscious finalism for which some goods may be designated as intrinsic goods, others as instrumental."<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr cannot allow that there are some goods which are intrinsic and some goods merely instrumental, because he is not arguing that some, or most, but all value is present as a function of relations. In one sense the distinction is inapplicable, since there is no such thing as any being having only intrinsic value; nor is there any such thing as a being having merely instrumental value. In another sense "every good is an end and every good a means."<sup>2</sup> Every existent is in a state of becoming, but the value which is consequent upon the realization of any being's potentialities is not in the first instance a

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 105. It will be recalled that among philosophers John Dewey in Reconstruction in Philosophy (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1948) enlarged edition, had urged similar criticisms. "Dialectically, the distinction is interesting and seems harmless. But carried into practice it has an import that is tragic. Historically, it has been the source and justification of hard and fast differences between ideal goods on the one side and material goods on the other." Ibid., p. 170. Both Niebuhr and Dewey argue that all values are both means and ends and nothing ever has value solely as means or end.

good for that being but is first a good for all other existent beings and only by "indirection" or reflexively, is it a good for that being.<sup>1</sup> Self-realization is a sort of by-product of a being existing as good-for some being external to itself.

### Relative Centers of Value

The first thesis which Niebuhr advanced declares values to be a function of the relation between beings. All values are therefore "relative," dependent on the relational structure of existence. But they are relative in more than one sense of that slippery word. Niebuhr eschews the kind of psychological relativism for which nothing is either good or bad, but thinking (or desiring or willing, and so on) makes it so.<sup>2</sup> Values are objectively relativistic in the sense that value is present to, or may be predicated of, only those situations in which one or more beings are related, such that they either fulfil or deny, meet or do not meet, the needs, capacities and potentialities of the other. But values are relativistic in another sense. Value judgments about what is good or bad, right or wrong are always made from the standpoint of a self which consciously or unconsciously accepts some other being as a center of value. In this sense values are "dogmatically relativistic" in that "it is necessary to take one's standpoint with or in some being accepted as the center of value if one is to construct anything like a consistent system of value judgments and determinations of what is right."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>"Self-states are goods first of all for other selves, or other beings and only by indirection goods-for-self." CV (1961), p. 105.

<sup>2</sup>CV (1961), p. 111; VTT, p. 106.

<sup>3</sup>CV (1961), p. 109; Cf. VTT, pp. 105-106. The term "dogmatic" here does not refer to a conclusion asserted on the basis of little or no evidence. But it is used in its pristine sense of referring to a "given," a presupposition accepted as true, from which all reasoning proceeds.

All relational theories of value operate with some "center of value," some being or beings in relation to which all judgments about goodness and badness, rightness and wrongness are made. And Niebuhr claims that one of the main advantages of the relational theory of value over the "objectivist" and "subjectivist" positions, is that it makes possible an understanding of how claims about goodness and badness, rightness and wrongness, can be rationally ordered and criticized.<sup>1</sup>

The idea Niebuhr has in mind may be illustrated with an example he himself has presented. The value center of an evolutionary ethic will be life itself, and questions about what is good or evil, right or wrong will in the final analysis be questions about what is good-for-life. All value judgments are made relative to this center. Life is the value-center rather than the value: "living beings call forth reverence because they are functions of the will-to-live."<sup>2</sup> Every being which demonstrates the same will to live which man himself experiences is to be valued, but that which is not living is by definition excluded as not having value. If it is objected that vitalism thus arbitrarily excludes "reverence for beings, inorganic perhaps, perhaps ideal"<sup>3</sup> then this can only be remedied either by replacing "the will to live" as the value-center with some more inclusive principle--which will include the inorganic and the ideal as sharers in both the realm of the real and the realm of the valuable--or by recognizing some other value system besides the life-centered system, and thus deny that the will-to-live is "the absolute

---

<sup>1</sup>CV (1961), pp. 102f.

<sup>2</sup>RMWC, p. 36.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 37.

fundamental principle of the moral."<sup>1</sup> It is not possible therefore to raise the question of what life is good-for within such a value system because the question presupposes that some other center of value has been accepted other than, or in addition to, that of life.<sup>2</sup>

Two points should be noted here. First, it is possible to make critical evaluations that are true or false concerning the way in which some external reality actually aids or frustrates the central being and is thus judged to be either good or bad. This statement focuses on Niebuhr's concern for an ethic that is objective and rational. On the other hand, he seems to be arguing that it is not possible to establish rationally the priority or primacy of one being over against other beings as a center of value or starting point of any value system. Theoretically at least, Niebuhr claims, "there can be as many value systems as there are beings in existence,"<sup>3</sup> and it is not possible to rationally grade or rank these various value-systems as to their relative value in relation to each other.<sup>4</sup> Niebuhr is sure that no empirical or phenomenological inquiry can demonstrate that just this being should be regarded as the center of a universal system of value. Nor is it possible to demonstrate by purely rational means that values have some kind of ideal existence to which non-ideal existents must conform. Rather, Niebuhr asserts that every system of value necessarily begins "with an act of decision for some being as value-center."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Albert Schweitzer, Out of My Life and Thought, 1933, p. 188; cited by Niebuhr RMWC, p. 37, n. 9.

<sup>2</sup>CV (1961), p. 110. RMWC, pp. 36-37.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid. (Italics added.)

The idea of a plurality of value systems is the most conspicuous feature of Niebuhr's understanding of that complex phenomenon known as "culture."<sup>1</sup> Culture is a name given to that incredibly complex total process of human activity where man proposes ends designed largely to serve his own good. "In defining the ends that his activities are to realize in culture, man begins with himself as the chief value and the source of all other values. What is good is what is good for him."<sup>2</sup> Cultural anthropocentrism need not deny that men do seek the good of other beings besides themselves, and "often seek to serve causes transcending human existence;" nevertheless, in the end "the pragmatic tendency to do all these things for the sake of man seems unconquerable."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Niebuhr argues that there is no universal culture in the sense that the values which men seek to realize and conserve are not sought as good for all men everywhere and at all times. Rather, men are conscious of living in a particular culture, society, class or other group and consequently seek values which are relative to such societies. Thus, each of the groups regards itself as the center and source of all value but disguises the relative character of its starting point by convincing itself that the values it seeks are identical with what is good for all men.

The difficulties involved in seeking to elaborate a universal ethic that will unify and order the pluralism of cultural values by beginning with man as the source and center of all value is well illustrated, according to

---

<sup>1</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, Christ and Culture (New York: Harper & Row, 1951, paper edition, 1956), pp. 35ff. Hereinafter cited as CC.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 35, 36.

Niebuhr, by the "theories of English [sic] empiricism."<sup>1</sup> The first problem lies at the point of determining what the fundamental nature of man is. Is he fundamentally a pleasure-seeking being, and if so, is "pleasure" here understood to be that which is relative solely to bodily states, or something more or other? Is it possible to give a consistently empirical account of human nature and its needs that will provide the basis for answering the question of what is really good for man? But this question cannot be settled apart from facing an even more basic difficulty. When the question of "what is good for man?" is asked, is it asked from the point of view of what is good for man as an individual, or from the point of view of what is good for society? But the conflicts that inevitably arise between that which is good for the individual citizen and that which is good for the larger society of other citizens with whom the individual must live demonstrates the presence of two value centers--the individual and society. "Between these two objective but relativistic value systems English [sic] ethics sought to find some kind of reconciliation but never with complete success."<sup>2</sup> No reconciliation between them seems possible, because on the one hand, all value is defined as relative to the needs of individuals in their movement towards self-realization. On the other hand corporate needs and potentialities are recognized which transcend, and inevitably conflict with, and indeed often deny, the self-realization of individuals. J. S. Mill believed that justice was adequately served by his single principle of "the greatest happiness for the greatest number" but

---

<sup>1</sup>CV (1961), p. 109. Niebuhr has utilitarianism chiefly in mind which was not strictly confined to English thinkers. Perhaps Niebuhr has used the term "English" inaccurately as the equivalent of "British."

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 110.

insofar as justice involves the notion of an equality of treatment which takes account of the very different needs and abilities of individuals, it more nearly determines what is good for the society than what is good for the individual citizen. The only alternative which Niebuhr suggests is to ask if there might be some other center of value transcending any individual man or his societies that would be good for each and they good for it.<sup>1</sup> But to ask this question is, for Niebuhr, tantamount to challenging the basic dogma of a humanist ethic which assumes the privileged status of man as one finite reality among others.<sup>2</sup> It does not ask what man or society are good-for. The goodness of man for other beings is either ignored or it is silenced by the assumption that their good is identical with the good-for-man. The beginning and end of ethics is man. But to challenge this assumption also implies that the challenger issues his challenge from the point of view of a relational theory which recognizes some other being as the center of value.

### "Value Theory and Theology"

To this point Niebuhr has argued for his relational theory without any appeal to theological premises. However, we cannot forget that his primary intention is not only to develop a philosophically rigorous and consistent value theory but to ensure that in doing so the sovereignty and freedom of God and

---

<sup>1</sup>Niebuhr observes a similar duality of value-centers present in idealist ethics that define value as the good for man. For example, Nickolai Hartmann in his Ethics (1932) argues on the one hand for recognition of an objective realm of ideal essences as the center of value so that only in relation to them is anything else valuable. "On the other hand man is his center of value, in relation to whom even the ideas of value alone have actual worth." CV (1961), p. 111. Cf. CC, pp. 6f, 35 n. 38.

<sup>2</sup>CV (1961), p. 112.

the independence of theology is maintained. In order to understand the theological considerations which support his contention that only a relational value theory is adequate to the requirements of "monotheistic faith," we must examine his critique of the relationship of value theory and theology in the liberal Protestant theological tradition.

In "Value Theory and Theology" (1937) Niebuhr argues 1) that all religious experience is a species of value experience and therefore a theory of value is essential to (if not exhaustive of) any religious epistemology. But, 2) the many value theories developed or appropriated by Protestant theologians since Kant have been either inadequate to the objective and realist requirements of theology--that is they failed to assert the logical and ontological inseparability of the being and value of God and the primacy of the former over the latter--or, having once affirmed this they have proceeded to develop an epistemology which is inconsistent with this presupposition. They began by asserting the primacy of being over value but then introduced values known independently of the putatively religious object, God, as the very criteria by means of which experience of God is distinguished from experience of another sort. In short, taken together these value theorists have either a) made values equivalent to God or, b) argued that values require God as a postulate, or c) maintained that values are the criteria by which God is distinguished from other objects in experience.<sup>1</sup> An assessment of the accuracy of this analysis is not as important for understanding his own approach as the conclusion he draws from it. It is this third position which he sees as most pervasive. All previous value theologies have in common the assumption "that

---

<sup>1</sup>VTT, pp. 93-95, 112-113.

men have a knowledge of absolutely valid values which is not only independent of their knowledge of God but which is in some way determinative of God."<sup>1</sup>

The scientific theology of Professor Macintosh was a particularly distressing example of this tendency, according to Niebuhr, because in spite of the laudable intention motivating his search for a truly scientific theology centered on countering any naively subjective (unscientific) concern with feelings or values;<sup>2</sup> and notwithstanding his stress on the ontic priority of being over value, he nevertheless argued that divine reality is not self-revealing but is identified by ideals "worthy of our supreme and absolute reverence and devotion"<sup>3</sup> quite apart from any distinctively religious experience. Niebuhr was critical of this view on two main counts. First, that in theology, no less than in science, the objects "God" or "nature" must be valued for their own sake and not for the sake of any values considered absolute and "prescribed to them prior to their own valuation."<sup>4</sup>

A faith which finds in God the source and center of all value, which values personal existence only because it makes the enjoyment of God possible, and hopes for immortality only because it hopes for the vision of God, which founds its morality upon the sole value of God and the sacredness of his creatures because

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>2</sup>An adequate grasp of Macintosh's theology may be gained from the following works: Theology as an Empirical Science (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1919), esp. pp. 13-26; "Experimental Realism in Religion," in Religious Realism, ed. D. C. Macintosh (New York: Macmillan Company, 1931), pp. 307-409; The Problem of Religious Knowledge (New York: Harpers and Brothers, 1940), esp. Ch. XX. Here Macintosh insists that values known as absolute apart from our experience of God must serve as criteria "for criticism of all intuitions and doctrinal beliefs as to the character and activities which can be consistently ascribed to a transcendent divine reality," ibid., p. 358.

<sup>3</sup>D. C. Macintosh, The Problem of Religious Knowledge, p. 164.

<sup>4</sup>VTT, p. 102.

they are his creatures--such a faith must remain dissatisfied with an approach which however disguisedly, makes him a means to an end however noble the end in human esteem.<sup>1</sup>

This illicit inversion of theological priorities Niebuhr believes is in large part the result of accepting uncritically an absolute rather than a relational theory of value. But an absolute theory of value must not only be rejected on the theological grounds that it denies from the start any love for, or worship of God for his own sake, but also because of its philosophical inadequacy. Niebuhr is well aware that Macintosh and realist theologians generally recognize that values are qualities which an object or person may have in relation to other objects or persons, their purposes, desires, interests and so on. But he sees no justification for the further contention that some values relative to persons can be viewed as absolute "having positive worth, always everywhere and for all."<sup>2</sup> Once this step is taken the advertised empirical character of these value theories is denied and values which were at first recognized as relative to human experience are now assumed arbitrarily to be the supreme and final values of all reality. The final step has now been made possible. Just these values which at first were recognized as relative to human experience, and then were elevated as the supreme and final values of all reality whatever, now become the sufficient criteria for distinguishing what may or may not be identified as knowledge of God.

The serious consequences of this approach for theology and for theological ethics are plain. While Niebuhr's defense of the indispensable role of some theory of value in setting forth a religious epistemology indicates his

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>2</sup>D. C. Macintosh, "Experimental Realism in Religion," p. 310. Cited by Niebuhr in "Value Theory and Theology," p. 108.

unwillingness to make theology totally discontinuous with some general theory of value, he early recognized that this particular theory espoused by D. C. Macintosh resulted in the identification of theology with a specific theory of human value. This confusion of devotion to human values with devotion to God could only be sustained on the basis of assumptions which must be questioned. The first is the assumption that it is possible to identify universal values of the ethical which together constitute the irreducible essence of all particular historical religions. However, the majority of the great religions resist this kind of universalism and direct attention to a transcendent God who has revealed himself in particular contingent events. "Universal validity is claimed for these revelations not because of their correspondence to some system of valid values previously discovered by men, but because they are revelations of the universal power and reality to which man and his values are required to conform."<sup>1</sup> A second assumption is involved in this refusal to reckon with the truth-claims made by particular historic religions. Revelation --understood as the sovereign unveiling by God of his own goodness as Creator, Judge, and Redeemer--is an embarrassment to such value theologies which believe that reason is "the high road to the knowledge of God and salvation" and that revelation is "the religious name for that process which is essentially the growth of reason in history."<sup>2</sup> The belief that "reason" names a source from which wholly rational valuational principles may be drawn (for founding a universal religion to which the historic religions are approximate witnesses) involves a false estimate of the power of reason and a failure to recognize

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>2</sup>CC, pp. 110, 111.

that all ethical systems rest in the final analysis on dogmas that can only be described as religious. When Kant asserts that there is nothing good other than a good will, or the hedonist maintains that whatever is pleasurable in human experience and that alone is good, the final "center of value" has been identified in relation to which the value or disvalue of all else is to be judged. But the fact that various "centers of value" have been identified in Western moral philosophy makes it clear that no one of them can claim the self-evident deliverance of human rationality. Rather, what must be recognized, Niebuhr argues, is the fact that non-theistic and theistic but non-revelational ethics, no less than revelational ethics, begin with dogma. These dogmas are in each case religious "assertions of faith, confessions of trust in something which makes life worth living, commitments of the self to a god."<sup>1</sup> If knowledge of God must be authenticated in terms of a final value which is dogmatically posited yet trusted as intrinsically valuable, then all that results is the founding of one religion upon another, with the consequent obscuring of the relation between theology and ethics. Two-fold damage is done. Not only does theology become subordinated to or indistinguishable from value theory of a certain sort, but the religious character of the dogmas of any value theory whatever is disregarded.

Above all else the most serious weakness of liberal theology was its failure to reckon with the sovereignty of God.<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr had come to recognize that a theological ethic which restricted its conception of God to the role of a friendly guardian of human values could not do justice to the traditional

---

<sup>1</sup>VTT, p. 106.

<sup>2</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," Christian Century LXXVII (1960), p. 248.

Christian understanding of God, the Creator, Judge and Redeemer. Nor could it do justice to the situation of man whose values are often tragically denied and whose very existence is threatened by death.

It is not only possible but highly probable that human ideas of justice and goodness, as well as justice and goodness themselves as relative to isolated humanity, are out of line so to speak, with divine ideas of goodness and justice, or with the goodness and justice relative to the divine nature, so that conflict and tragedy rather than progressive integration are to be looked for.<sup>1</sup>

### The Absolute Center of Value

Earlier, mention was made of Niebuhr's suggestion that a relational theory of value could, theoretically at least, allow for as many relative systems of value (each ordered around this or that being as center of value) as there are beings in existence. In reality, however, such chaotic relativism gives way to one of more manageable proportions. In most moral philosophy man himself, or some extension of himself, is either the explicit or implicit center of value.<sup>2</sup> Man therefore presumes that he is the source and center of value and is himself the competent judge of good and evil for all other existent beings. But Niebuhr contends that this tendency of cultural life to make man the center of value does not make it any less a relative or limited starting point. Even the principle of reverence for life is for Niebuhr not radical

---

<sup>1</sup>VTT, p. 109-110. Frei seems to be mistaken in believing that Niebuhr came to this conclusion "since the writing of 'Value Theory and Theology'." "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," FE, p. 76. It is worth noting that The Kingdom of God in America (1937) was published in the same year as "Value Theory and Theology" and in that book the theme of the sovereignty of God is fundamental not only for the early Puritan theocracy (Chapter 2) but equally for his own convictions. Cf. pp. xvi-xvii; 17-27.

<sup>2</sup>CV (1961), p. 112. RS, p. 112.

enough, not totally inclusive of all beings because it excludes reverence for the dead or for inorganic being.<sup>1</sup> Neither humanism, nor vitalism, nor naturalism represents a sufficiently inclusive understanding of "the realm of being in its wholeness."<sup>2</sup> The only adequate center of value is not man or life or nature but being itself or "the principle of being." "Radical monotheism dethrones all absolutes short of the principle of being itself. At the same time it reverences every relative existent."<sup>3</sup> In a note Niebuhr explains his preference for the descriptive phrase "principle of being" (principle of value).

I use the terms 'principle of being' and 'principle of value' in distinction from the terms 'highest being,' and 'highest value,' or 'Being' and 'the Good,' because the principle of being is not immediately to be identified with being nor the principle of value with value. As many theologians have undertaken to say, God is beyond being; they ought also to say that he is beyond value. That by reference to which all things have their value is not itself a value in the primary sense.<sup>4</sup>

The "choice" of man or life or nature is an arbitrary selection of one sort of finite being from the rest of existence which "from any disinterested point of view have [has] no greater claim to centrality than any others."<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the absolutizing of any part of finite reality, Niebuhr contends, "is ruinous to the finite itself,"<sup>6</sup> presumably because it sets up an inevitable conflict between being which has value or disvalue and being which is left in the outer darkness of non-value. Thus, for Niebuhr, no finite reality may be accredited

---

<sup>1</sup>RMWC, p. 37.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 33, n. 7.

<sup>5</sup>CV (1961), p. 112.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 113.



as an adequate center of value, but only the One beyond the many, "the transcendent One for whom alone there is an ultimate good and for whom, as the source and end of all things, whatever is, is good."<sup>1</sup> In relation to this "One" all of reality is seen as worthy of existence. The center of value is not man, nor life, nor nature but "the principle of being, the source of all things and the power by which they exist. It is relied on to give and to conserve worth to all that issues from it."<sup>2</sup>

Earlier it was pointed out that for Niebuhr value exists only in those situations in which interdependent beings confront each other as good-for or bad-for each other. Every being has positive value only in its relations to other beings. Two kinds of worth are distinguished. The first is objective or external good. This results from the relation of one existent to other existent beings which are its complementary goods. The second is subjective or internal good. This results from the relation of an existent being to its own essential possibilities.<sup>3</sup> It is necessary and helpful theoretically to distinguish each but practically they are inseparable. This is not a complete description of all possible value relations, however, because each "existent being which is becoming what it is potentially and which meets such complementary goods in its environment, is itself good-for the other beings (if not bad for them) . . . "<sup>4</sup> And what is true for being  $x$  is true for all other existents. Beings  $x^1, x^2$  . . .  $x^n$ , each with very different natures and tendencies are all related

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>2</sup> RMWC, p. 38. Cf. KGA, pp. 114-115.

<sup>3</sup> CV (1961), pp. 105-106.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

multi-dimensionally in large "complexes of being," now human, now animal, now inorganic and so on. This scheme clearly involves reciprocity among beings in that each needs beings external to itself for the realization of its own essential possibilities. At the same time, each is the means towards meeting the needs or fulfilling the capacities and potentialities of other beings. Niebuhr does not limit value to the sphere of human existence and action. His relational theory seeks to describe the conditions under which value appears throughout all reality.

Now the question arises in the present context as to whether Niebuhr means to maintain that this same reciprocal kind of relation is a satisfactory scheme to account for the value relations between created being and a God who is conceived of as "the principle of being," the source of all things and the power by which they exist, and as "the principle of value," that which gives and conserves the worth of all that is. It is not hard to understand how God, thought of in this way, is good-for other beings. Indeed, this would seem to be true analytically in view of the very definition of God as "the principle of value."<sup>1</sup> But it is not so easy to understand how this relation can be reciprocal, as demanded by the relational theory Niebuhr has proposed. How is Niebuhr to account for the value which created being has for God? He has recognized the difficulty and denies that the external relation between God and his creature is reciprocal: "it cannot be said that God has need of any being external to himself."<sup>2</sup> But how then can he maintain a consistently relational theory? He cannot at this point advance arguments in support of some notion

---

<sup>1</sup>The logical and epistemological difficulties which this definition of God may entail are not presently in question.

<sup>2</sup>CV (1961), p. 112.

of value as intrinsic to the existence of God apart from any relations, without contradicting his theory. Even if such a concession were granted in the case of the relations between infinite Being and finite beings, it would immediately raise the question as to why value could not be recognized as intrinsic to finite being. No exception is possible because Niebuhr has categorically asserted that "nothing is valuable in itself, but everything has value, positive or negative, in its relations."<sup>1</sup> He does not allow that any being has intrinsic value that may subsequently be modified, either positively or negatively, by external relations. To the contrary, the value of any being is established by such relations.<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr is therefore faced with an impasse: on the one hand he has argued that all value is grounded in the external relations between beings, on the other hand he has denied that the value of God in relation to the world is wholly constituted by external relations.

The modification he is forced to make in his theory is as disappointing as it was inevitable in view of his a priori rejection of the attribution of intrinsic value to any being.<sup>3</sup> A radically monotheistic faith must, on Niebuhr's view, "use a sort of psychological relativism" since it is "able only to say that whatever exists because it pleases God."<sup>4</sup> But this appeal to psychological considerations must be regarded as a piece of special pleading which is not justified on the basis of the relational theory which he

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 107 (italics added). For Niebuhr's acceptance of the Kantian ban on all knowledge of the thing-in-itself cf. "Faith in Gods and In God," a supplementary essay in RMWC, p. 116; hereinafter cited as FGG. MR, pp. viii, 2, 65, 86; PCM, p. 112; RS, p. 60.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Schrader, "Value and Valuation," FE, pp. 188-191 passim.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. FGG, pp. 114f. PCM, pp. 112f.

<sup>4</sup>CV (1961), p. 112.

has advanced. He can do so only in defiance of his theory. Furthermore, there seems to be no good reason why the criticisms which he had earlier raised against "subjectivist ethics" are not now applicable to his own theory. In the course of the exposition of his relational theory Niebuhr recognized that this "relativism raises great problems of its own"<sup>1</sup> but he nowhere suggests what these might be, nor does he anticipate possible lines of rebuttal from those theorists against whom he worked out his own position. Had he done so, he may have realized that to resort to psychological relativism as an explanation for the value which the world has for God was not a minor detail of little importance--as he seems to think--but a serious breach in the logical consistency of his theory of objective relativism. He does not attempt to resolve the issue of whether the value of "whatever is," is relative to some constitutive need in the nature of God or is relative to what pleases him. He simply passes over it. "Whether the relation is to need or to desire, in any case the starting point is that transcendent absolute for whom, or for which, whatever is, is good."<sup>2</sup> But this will not do. His philosophical theory demands that he support the former. But he refuses to do so, doubtless for the very good reason that this would impugn the infinity and sovereignty of God which is the very theological dogma he is most anxious to support. This seems to suggest that his relational theory of value is at this point incompatible with his theological interests.

It is worth remembering here that Niebuhr's primary theological conviction is the sovereignty of the being and value of God over all finite

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 112.

being and value.<sup>1</sup> He is therefore committed to metaphysical dualism and against any monistic theory of reality. But his relational theory of value is, I believe, much more compatible with a monistic theory. As Schrader has shrewdly observed: "it is an important question whether Niebuhr's relational theory of value in itself provides a sufficient safeguard against such a monistic theory. It is not his relational theory as such which provides this safeguard, but rather Niebuhr's specific interpretation and application of the theory."<sup>2</sup>

### Objective Relativism and Radical Monotheism

The final element in Niebuhr's theory of value may be described very briefly; the difficulties which it raises will require more extended discussion. Niebuhr has argued that radical monotheism makes relative every finite center of value but does so in such a way that all beings must now be recognized as valuable in relation to the one center of value, God.

The moral consequences of this faith is that it makes relative all those values which polytheism<sup>3</sup> makes absolute, and so puts an end to the strife of the gods. But it does not relativise them as self-love does. A new sacredness attaches to the relative goods . . . The moral consequences of faith in God is the universal love of all being in him. It is not an automatic consequence . . . But this is its requirement: that all beings, not only our friends but also our enemies, not only men but also animals and the inanimate be met with reverence . . .<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>KGA, pp. 17-25, 164, 192-198; MR, pp. ix, 40; "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 248f.

<sup>2</sup>"Value and Valuation," FE, p. 182.

<sup>3</sup>Polytheism is defined by Niebuhr as any faith in a plurality of valued objects. Even the various ethical theories of moral philosophers are referred to by Niebuhr as "polytheistic theologies of value" (CV (1961), p. 112) insofar as they operate with more than one center of value.

<sup>4</sup>FGG, p. 126.

At this juncture the crux of Niebuhr's relativism is exposed. His emphasis upon the historical and social relativity which deeply conditions all human knowing must be recognized as a pervasive and continuous feature of his thought.<sup>1</sup> But the relativity of all values in the last analysis is believed by Niebuhr to be a necessary corollary of that radical monotheistic faith that not only demands that no finite being be recognized as the absolute (thus idolatry is denied), but also that no finite value can be recognized as an absolute (thus universal moral rules are denied). Furthermore, no system of value can be graded as more or less adequate, more or less important than any other.

. . . The value theory of monotheistic theology is enabled to proceed to the construction of many relative value systems, each of them tentative, experimental, and objective, as it considers the interaction of beings on beings, now from the point of view of man, now from the point of view of society, now from the point of view of life. But it is restrained from erecting any one of these into an absolute, or even from ordering it above the others, as when the human-centered value system is regarded as superior to the life-centered system. A monotheistically centered value theory is not only compatible with such objective relativism in value analysis but requires it in view of its fundamental dogma that none is absolute save God and that the absolutizing of anything finite is ruinous to the finite itself.<sup>2</sup>

This passage is very significant for understanding Niebuhr's ethics; especially for understanding how he conceives of the relation between the value which all beings have for God and God for them, and the value which any finite being has for other finite beings. And its importance lies more in what is denied than in what is affirmed.

"The value theory of a monotheistic theology" first of all affirms

---

<sup>1</sup>MR, pp. viif., 6-22, 141, 164; CC, pp. xii, 234-241; RS, pp. 46, 71-73, 80f., 90-93, 95f. Cf. Chapter IV below.

<sup>2</sup>CV (1961), pp. 112-113. Cf. VTT, pp. 108-110.

that the value of all beings is a function of their relation to "the principle of being," God, who is the absolute center and source of all value. Clearly this denies to any one finite center of value such as "man" or "society" or "nature," etc. a position of unconditioned transcendence in relation to any other. To attempt to account for the value of all being in relation to one finite being among other equally finite beings is, from any disinterested point of view, arbitrary. From the point of view of radical monotheism it is idolatrous because it denies "the fundamental dogma that none is absolute save God." Such an inference is as analytically clear as it is deductively certain. But Niebuhr draws a further inference which would appear to be a non sequitur. He argues that radical monotheism must deny that absolute value can be predicated of any finite being and that no finite value system can be considered to have greater or lesser value than any other. Now this would follow from some but by no means all uses of the word "absolute." Here he uses the term "absolute" to mean the Absolute, the One beyond the many, a transcendent, unconditioned and unlimited being called God. It follows from this definition that the term "absolute" cannot qualify any finite being. But this is not the only possible meaning of the term. It has been argued, and it is still possible to argue, that there are values which transcend temporal, social or psychological immediacy and which are "absolute" in the sense that they are recognized as universally valid for all men everywhere and at any time, but which are quite independent of any such notion as "the Absolute."

Not only does Niebuhr rule out all mundane absolutes but he also disallows any "ordering" of these relative value systems such that it is possible to determine whether a human-centered value system is superior to a life-centered system or not. But, so far as I can see, he has said nothing about

radical monotheism which demands this sort of radical relativism. Taken seriously, this unnecessary stricture would yield a theistic ethic quite without normative significance for the difficult, yet inescapable task of analyzing, comparing, and judging between varying and often conflicting moral values and rules.

Niebuhr was not unaware of this problem. He has been a severe and clear-headed critic of all religious ethics which are content to elaborate an absolute principle without showing its normative relevance for guiding the believer's present moral experience and action.<sup>1</sup> This is articulated clearly in a brief early essay.

If ethics would develop its intention to the full, it must discover not only its eternal authority in a cosmic constitution, but also its responsibility to temporal problems and cultural values: it must seek not only the definition of the absolutely good and the absolutely bad, but it must remember its obligation to realize the better and to prevent the worse.<sup>2</sup>

The first of these two co-ordinate goals is very well provided for in Niebuhr's "monotheistically centered value theory" but the "obligation to realize the better and to prevent the worse" is not only not provided for, but the very possibility of determining the relative value of persons and things, ideologies and institutions is precluded.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>CC, pp. 69-76; 187-189.

<sup>2</sup>"Religion and Ethics," The World Tomorrow, XIII (1930), p. 445, (italics added). The influence of Ernst Troeltsch from whom Niebuhr had learned to respect both the complexity and urgency of this task is unmistakably in evidence in these words.

<sup>3</sup>In this same essay he rejects all religious ethics that confine "the definition of ethical truth to eternal principles from which no effective guidance for the moral life may be gained, so that individual and especially social institutions are left without ethical control." Ibid. (italics added.)

The problem with Niebuhr's theory is not his affirmation that everything that is, is good, by virtue of it being good for God, but his denial that these relative value systems can be ordered with respect to their relationship to one another. An example may help to clarify the difficulty. Consider a dispute between an anti-vivisectionist and a neurological physiologist over the morality of using animals for research. Niebuhr's theory allows him to make only two statements. He will remind each that neither human life nor animal life is an absolute but only a relative center of value in relation to the one absolute, God. And he would also remind the two disputants "that all being . . . not only men but also animals" are to be "met with reverence for all are friends in the friendship of the one to whom we are reconciled in faith."<sup>1</sup> But his theory makes it impossible for him to formulate any criteria or give any guidance on the question of whether human life or animal life is of more value each in relation to the other. He simply ignores the problem of how the inevitable conflicts of values among finite beings are to be settled.

The problem which we have been discussing goes to the very heart of Niebuhr's theological ethic. It will be helpful to define the difficulty further in the form of two questions. Did Niebuhr believe that any ethical theory must provide standards by means of which human agents are enabled not only to identify and distinguish that which is absolutely good (or evil) from that which is relatively good (or evil), but also to distinguish between relative rights and wrongs, goods and evils? Does his own theory provide such standards? The foregoing examination of his monotheistically based value theory suggests that it not only does not include such standards but categorically disallows

---

<sup>1</sup>FGG, p. 126.

them. The final section of this chapter will seek to show 1) that in his own ethical reflections Niebuhr consistently refused to elaborate any moral principles for the ranking of human valuations or for guiding human decision making; while 2) in his study of the history of Christian ethics he demanded that such principles be provided. The former contention will be illustrated by an analysis of Niebuhr's treatment of the practical ethical issue of whether Christians should or should not participate in war. The latter will be accomplished by following his discussion of the difficulty which Protestant thinkers have encountered in providing a constructive ethic for ordering the life of the believing community and for regulating its conduct within the wider culture. With respect to the two questions posed above we will see that when Niebuhr addressed himself to the general question of what is required in a Christian ethic he recognized the need for ethical standards. He answered the first question positively. But when his own ethic is examined, it is found that in his general theory of value and in his analysis of a practical ethical problem, he fails to provide the necessary ethical criteria. The second question must be answered negatively.

#### Toward a Constructive Ethic: An Inconsistency

The difficulty which we have just pointed out in Niebuhr's general theory of value is also evident when attention is given to his analysis of a practical ethical problem. In a number of occasional essays he attempted to provide an analysis of war from the point of view of radical monotheism.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>"The Grace of Doing Nothing," Christian Century, XLIX (1932), 378-380. The view expressed here that the only legitimate response of a Christian to war is one of repentance for the common sin of all men which occasions God's

Taken together, these essays are very clear about what a Christian's duty to God is in such crises, but little or nothing is said about how he is to determine what his duty is to his neighbor. That he has such a duty, that he must act, that even indecision is a kind of action, is not denied; but nowhere does he discuss, much less solve, the problem of how the Christian who fulfills his duty towards God is to determine what his duty is toward his neighbor, or how conflicts among human values and duties are to be settled. In the following attempt to justify and illustrate these claims primary attention will be given to the argument presented in his article "War as the Judgment of God," (1942). The other essays largely serve to corroborate or further develop the argument given there. They will therefore be called upon as supporting witnesses where appropriate.

The approach of a radical monotheist to the problem of participation or non-participation in war "is determined by the principle that man's action ought always to be response to divine action rather than any finite action."<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr acknowledges the fact that in most Christian thinking war is understood

---

judgment drew a rejoinder from his brother Reinhold Niebuhr entitled, "Must We Do Nothing," *ibid.*, pp. 415-417. H. Richard Niebuhr replied later in a letter to the editor entitled "A Communication: The Only Way Into the Kingdom of God," *ibid.*, p. 447. "The Christian Church and the World's Crisis," *Christianity and Society*, VI (1941), 11-17; "War as the Judgment of God," *Christian Century*, LIX (1942), 930-933; "Is God in the War?" *ibid.*, 953-955; "War as Crucifixion," *ibid.*, LX (1943), 513-515. War was the only practical ethical problem which Niebuhr analyzed in any detail in his published works. He was doubtless right in believing that the reality of war and suffering provided an acid test of his monotheistic principle. "To deny that God is in war is for the monotheist equivalent to the denial of God's universality and unity--to the denial that God is God. . . . The fight for the interpretation of war as divine judgment is to my mind, a fight for rationality in religion and for consistency in man's ethical response to his environment." "Is God in the War?," p. 954.

<sup>1</sup>"War as the Judgment of God," p. 630.

rightly in the first instance as the judgment of God on the common sinfulness of men. However, he also believed that too often it is also interpreted wrongly as involving judgments about the absolute or relative rightness or wrongness of our own actions or those of the enemy. Christian pacifists, for example, agree that war is the judgment of God on all the participants, but they also assert that Christians must distinguish between the bad actions of all men who make war and the good actions of those who refuse to participate in it because "men not God, make war."<sup>1</sup> Christian patriots also regard war as the judgment of God, but they also respond to it as involving the action of an enemy who has attacked their country. Thus, they too, are divided in their response; as Christians they respond in penitence before the divine judgment, as citizens they respond by defending their country. Yet a third group distinguishes between the absolute judgment of God to which they respond in repentance and the relative judgments of men to which they oppose their own contrary relative judgments. For example, they assert the relative rightness of the defense of democracy over against the relative wrongness of totalitarianism.

In every case there is a dualism: two actions must be responded to, the action of God and the action of the opponent. . . . But the dualism of double response is an intolerable one; it makes us . . . ditheists who have two gods, the Father of Jesus Christ and our own country, or Him and Democracy, or Him and Peace. Country, Democracy and Peace are surely values of a high order, if they<sup>2</sup> are under God, but as rivals of God they are betrayers of life.

This statement calls for two comments in view of his general theory of value. It exhibits the same uncompromising attitude toward all finite centers

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 631. Cf. "Is God in the War?," p. 954.

of value. To seek to understand war as a radical monotheist is to forsake all prior commitments to the absolute value of peace, or the absolute duty of defending one's own country, or even the relative rightness of democracy over against totalitarian forms of political order. On the other hand, however, he allows that "country," "democracy" and "peace" are "values of a high order." But to say this implies that Niebuhr himself has ranked these values above others, and this is a judgment which his theory does not allow. All that he can strictly say is that these are human values and that they are neither more nor less valuable than any others.

Now if war is to be interpreted wholly in terms of the judgment of God who is present in these, as in all historical events, then it is necessary to understand more clearly what this means. It must first be understood, Niebuhr asserts, that the notion "judgment" is not to be equated with vengeance or with the idea of restoring a moral balance in human affairs by making those who inflict suffering, suffer in kind. The God who is present as the judge of men's sin is the same God who is present as their redeemer. The judgment of God is redemptive, his justice is gracious and his grace just. Wars may be described as "crucifixions" because more often than not it is the innocent rather than the unjust who suffer most. But wars may not be described as "hell" because God is present in them and he is present not as vindictive judge but "as vicarious sufferer and redeemer, who is afflicted in all the afflictions of his people."<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr was not unaware of the fact that it is much easier to

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 633; "War as Crucifixion," pp. 514-515. To develop this point fully it would be necessary to discuss Niebuhr's speculative suggestions on the vicarious nature of the suffering of "the relatively innocent" participants in war.

understand war as judgment upon human self-righteousness and unrighteousness than it is to see any trace of divine grace in them. But he was convinced that if God is not present judging the actions of evil men and redeeming both the innocent and the guilty then radical monotheism must be given up. Furthermore, the development of an intelligible interpretation of war that compromises neither the unity nor universality of God, nor ignores the facts of our actual experience of war also becomes impossible.<sup>1</sup>

In the second place, if God is present in war judging all men then all the participants in the conflict are absolutely in the wrong before him and no relative judgments of the rightness or wrongness of any of their actions in any way mitigate or modify his judgment. It is true that God does not exercise his justice or grace except through human agency, but human actions can never be identified with the divine and therefore no party to any conflict can claim divine sanction for their cause.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, divine judgment and redemption cannot be confined to the sphere of man's spiritual or religious life. To do so is to deny that God is present in all events, in every sphere of human action. All men are therefore called upon to respond to God in repentance and faith in their social and political affairs no less than in their personal religious life.<sup>3</sup>

This interpretation of God's action in war has definite consequences for human action. The first is the abandonment by the Christian of all attempts to determine the rightness or wrongness of human action, our own or our enemies.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 631; "War as Crucifixion," p. 514; "Is God in the War?," p. 954.

<sup>2</sup> "War as the Judgment of God," p. 631.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 631-632; "The Christian Church in the World's Crisis," p. 11.

That the final or ultimate judgment of human affairs is the prerogative of God no Christian would deny, but this surely is not the immediate problem with which we are concerned in trying to determine the penultimate question of the rightness or wrongness of our participation in war. Niebuhr does not deny that we must "inquire what duty we have to perform in view of what we have done amiss and in view of what God is doing."<sup>1</sup> He is sure, furthermore, that this duty includes the offering of active "resistance to those who are abusing our neighbors"<sup>2</sup> but nowhere does he explain on what grounds such a decision was made. The decision to offer resistance to those who are abusing our neighbors logically presupposes 1) that a judgment has been made about the identity of the abusers and the abused and 2) that it is right to offer resistance to such abusers on behalf of the abused.

A second consequence of this interpretation of war, Niebuhr argues, is the forsaking of all self-defensiveness and self-assertiveness. Whether the Christian participates in war or not, his motive for doing so or not doing so can never be the defense of his own values.

To carry on the war under the judgment of God is to carry it on as those who repent of their self-centeredness and who now try to forget about themselves while they concentrate on the deliverance of their neighbors. . . . For those who refuse to participate in war either by physical or spiritual action such abstention can be reconciled to divine judgment only if it be part of a total action in which concern for others has been given pre-eminence over concern for self and its values.<sup>3</sup>

The Christian cannot claim that his own life has greater value in the sight of God than that of either the oppressed or the oppressor. Again, this is

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 632.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

consistent with Niebuhr's principle that God alone has absolute value and every other being has equal value in relation to him. But the above quote also makes it quite evident that he completely ignores the normative question of how any Christian is to decide whether or not he should participate in war. All that his principle of radical monotheism will allow him to say is that both those who participate in war and those who do not must be sure that in either case their response is wholly motivated by a concern for others. However, as we have seen above, he was not himself content to stop with this true but rather trivial exhortation. He did assert that the Christian should offer resistance to the oppressor on behalf of the oppressed. Yet neither in his general theory of value nor in the essays on war does he show how he arrived at such a decision on the basis of his principle of radical monotheism.<sup>1</sup>

The absence of any theory about how the Christian is to determine his duty toward his neighbor and about how he is to resolve conflicts among human values and valuations should not be attributed to ignorance or indifference on Niebuhr's part. Rather it is, I think, an almost inevitable consequence of his tendency to be exclusively preoccupied with the absoluteness of God as the ultimate center of value. His principle of radical monotheism effectively relativizes the value of all finite beings but having done so, it is, as a

---

<sup>1</sup>It should be noted that in these articles Niebuhr has utilized a conception of God that assumes many characteristics that go quite beyond the definition of God as "the principle of being" and "the principle of value." To speak of God as Judge or Redeemer would ordinarily be thought to presuppose the notion of God as a personal being rather than the principle of being who may or may not have personal attributes. It is by no means an easy task to arrive at a precise determination of Niebuhr's conception of God. He employs both the personal language which the biblical writers used to speak of God and the formal impersonal language common to many idealist philosophers. This issue will be discussed more fully in Chapter V.

purely critical principle, ill-fitted to deal with the normative question of ethics. In neither his relational theory of value nor in these essays on the problem of war does he come to grips with the problem of how the radical monotheist is to choose between relative and often conflicting human values and duties.

That Niebuhr was well aware of the need for normative principles in a Christian ethic is much in evidence in the first chapter of The Kingdom of God in America (1937) in which he discusses what he has called "the problem of constructive Protestantism."<sup>1</sup> This is a very clear and concise account of the difficulty which Protestant theologians have encountered in their efforts to provide a constructive ethic for ordering the common life of believers. To the degree that they have affirmed the all-pervasive presence and power of a God who is at every moment creating, sustaining and redeeming human life, to that same degree they have seemed to abrogate the need for an ethic that concerned itself with the ordering of human conduct. The greater the conviction that true goodness and justice is wholly the gift of a sovereign God the greater the conviction that all human judgments about good and evil, about right and wrong are in each case relative to the self-interest and pride of all men, especially of those who rule.

The Protestant Reformation was, first and foremost, according to Niebuhr, a reform movement that affirmed the primacy of the creating, judging and redeeming presence of God in every sphere of human and natural life.<sup>2</sup> It was not simply a negative protest against corrupt practices in the church or a movement

---

<sup>1</sup> KGA, pp. 17-44.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 17-27.

dedicated to the denigration of human freedom and rationality. Negative protests were made, but above all else it was a positive movement that called for renewed faith in the greatness and goodness of God. The Reformers emphasized anew the present powerful rule of God in the affairs of men. "The divine attribute which impressed their minds was not so much God's changeless perfection as his forceful reality or power. . . . the distinction between Catholic and Protestant views may be summarized in the contrast between visio dei and regnum dei."<sup>1</sup> The Protestant Christian is less concerned with the conception of God as an unchanging essence, the vision of whose perfection is his final goal, than with the view of God as a dynamic creating and redeeming power, to whom all men now respond either with trust or distrust. Catholic Christianity cannot be charged with having no understanding of regnum dei, however, it does understand the exercise of his rule differently. The Reformers' emphasis on the power rather than the changeless perfection of God produced a change in their conception of the way in which God exercises his rule among men. Catholicism tends to think of his rule as requiring the mediation of "an articulated and hierarchical structure while Protestantism represented it as immediate and direct."<sup>2</sup> For the Catholic Christian God had created all things according to a hierarchical structure which reason could discern at least in part. If the assistance of divine grace was needed to reveal the fulness of God's rule this was thought to be necessary in view of the finitude of man's mind, and the incommensurability of its powers to comprehend transcendent mysteries.<sup>3</sup> The

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 21-23. Cf. CC, pp. 145-148.

Protestant Reformers did not deny that the grace of God was needed to reveal truth impenetrable to finite minds but they believed that it was needed even more to correct the error and self-deception of man's incurably self-interested and therefore corrupt reason. Indeed, the Reformers believed that they saw clear evidence of the self-interestedness of human reason in the justification given by monks, priests and popes for their claims to mediate and administer the rule of God for their fellow believers. "In the place of the hierarchical structure in which the higher governed the lower, the Protestant set forth the idea of multiplicity in which many equals were all related directly, without mediation to the ultimate ruler."<sup>1</sup>

The Protestant assertion of the absolute primacy and direct presence of God to man was therefore a very effective critical principle for challenging the absolute claims of any human institution or agency. But when it faced-- as it must--the task of ordering its own life, of providing guidance for believers who had to make moral choices which reflected a rational assessment of the better or worse policy to pursue, its critical principle seemed ill-fitted by itself to provide any constructive guidance. "As a theory of divine construction the Protestant movement was hard put to it to provide principles for human construction."<sup>2</sup>

In Niebuhr's judgment Protestantism found itself faced with a peculiar dilemma. It is one thing to say that the Word of God alone must rule both church and state; that it must be the norm for ordering human life both inside and outside of the church, but is it really possible to counsel men to love

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 23-24.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

God and to hold to the "Word" alone without making clear to them how this Word is to be understood? If this is to be accomplished, does it not necessitate setting up the same sort of authorities (who identify and interpret the Word of God) which the principle of the primacy and immediacy of God's rule had denied to Catholicism? The problem is just as perplexing in the realm of morality. The sovereignty of God as a first principle in the Protestant ethic did effectively rebuke all moralism and legalism but "it offered no standard whereby men could make choices between relative goods and relative evils, it gave them no scale of values whereby their interests could be harmonized and the higher could be made to control the lower."<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 32 (italics added).

## CHAPTER III

### THE RELATIONAL THEORY OF SELF-EXISTENCE AND ACTION

#### Introduction: Value and Selfhood

H. Richard Niebuhr did not write a systematic Christian ethic to which we can go for an ordered and coherent account of his understanding of moral experience and action. However, it is possible to distinguish in what he has published two theories which attempt to provide an analysis of what is involved in the employment of value predicates and in the making of moral decisions. The previous chapter has critically explored his relational theory of value. The present chapter will provide an analysis of his relational theory of action. The existence of these two schemes raises questions about the relationship between them. This first section will attempt to clarify that relationship.

It is necessary first to consider each theory in relation to the development of Niebuhr's thought. The present analysis agrees with Hoedemaker in the identification of these two patterns of analysis but can find no support for his contention that "the 'center of value' scheme is gradually replaced by a greater concentration on existentialist ways of thinking and on the scheme of 'response and responsibility.'"<sup>1</sup> In the first place "the center of value"

---

<sup>1</sup>Libertus A. Hoedemaker, The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr (Philadelphia and Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1970), p. 76.

scheme was given systematic elaboration in his essay "The Center of Value" which was first published in 1952: and the theological position espoused in Radical Monotheism and Western Culture (1961) everywhere presupposes his relational value theory.<sup>1</sup> If it was replaced (which it was not) it certainly could not have been "gradually"! Furthermore, while "the scheme of response and responsibility" was given its most elaborate exposition in The Responsible Self (1963) it did not first appear there. It is clearly expounded in two earlier essays: "The Responsibility of the Church for Society" (1946),<sup>2</sup> and "The Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience" (1945). Even earlier in The Meaning of Revelation (1941), Niebuhr sounded themes which he was to develop in The Responsible Self (1963). "The participant in life simply cannot escape thinking in terms of persons and of values."<sup>3</sup> "Knowledge of other selves must be received and responded to. Where there is no response it is evident there is no knowledge, but our activity is the second not the first thing. . . . Selves are known in acts or not at all."<sup>4</sup> Granted there is "a greater concentration on existentialist ways of thinking" but here, too, caution is needed. The evidence at hand only supports a view of Niebuhr's debt to Kierkegaard and not to twentieth century successors such as Heidegger, Jaspers or Satre.<sup>5</sup> There was an important change in Niebuhr's thinking but it could not have been the

---

<sup>1</sup> Especially RMWC, Chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>2</sup> In The Gospel, The Church and the World, ed. K. S. Latourette (New York, London: Harper and Brothers, 1946), pp. 111-133.

<sup>3</sup> MR, p. 106 (italics added).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 145-146 (italics added).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. "Soren Kierkegaard" in Christianity and The Existentialists, ed. Carl Donald Michalson (New York: Scribner, 1956), pp. 23-42; CC, pp. 241-249.

"gradual replacement" of value thinking by existential thinking for the very good reason that the most important relations obtaining between persons are for Niebuhr precisely valuational. As was made clear in the last chapter the change in Niebuhr's thinking was a change from an absolute to a relational theory of value.<sup>1</sup> It was the theory of absolute value espoused by liberal theology which he forsook but this change must have been effected quite early in his thinking because it was well formed by the time he came to write "Value Theory and Theology" (1937). In this essay the absolute or idealist theory of value which American liberal theology had so largely adopted was challenged from the point of view of a radically relational theory.<sup>2</sup> But no appeal can be made to the genetic development of Niebuhr's thought to support the view that value theory itself is forsaken for some other approach to theology and ethics. Inquiry into the genesis and evolution of these two theories is not, in my judgment, as important as the attempt to understand the logical relations between them.

The exposition of Niebuhr's relational theory of value involved both a negative and a positive argument. First, he argued against all attempts to establish value as an independent essence or quality. To say that something is good is not to apply a particular value predicate to any object, rather it is to put into propositional form a particular relation which exists between two beings. This also rules out the possibility of arguing that value is

---

<sup>1</sup> The theological position espoused in The Social Sources of Denominationalism (1929) clearly presupposed a theory of absolute value. The cultural captivity of the church in America is diagnosed as resulting from its failure to rigorously apply the absolute "ideals of the Nazarene." SSD, p. 9; Cf. pp. 3-11, 21-25, 274-284.

<sup>2</sup> Supra, pp. 44-50.

grounded in the subjectivity of the subject who makes value judgments. Second, Niebuhr's positive argument grounds all value judgments in the actual concrete relations between one being and another. A crucial difference between the two patterns emerges at this point. The relational theory of value is just that; it centers on showing 1) that value predicates are relevant to the relations between all beings, animal and natural as well as human. This assertion of the inseparability of being and value ontologically is the philosophical basis for his denial, 2) that value predicates can ever be restricted to the relations between human beings, or that all non-human beings are valuable only insofar as they are related to human existence. From any disinterested point of view any being at all may be a center of value. A man-centered value system has no more claim to absoluteness than "the value system which fish or ants might construct if they could consciously make themselves, as individuals and as communities, the centers of value."<sup>1</sup> In the "center of value" scheme no clear distinction is made between value relative to "existent beings" which also qualify as "selves" and those that do not. There he is concerned more with value as a function of the relations between any kind of being than with valuation as the activity of "selves" which do not simply know or value themselves as one "existent being" among others, but know themselves to be valued by other selves as well as valuing others than the self. His relational theory of value does not develop the existential emphasis on the self as agent; the self which is not only one being among others in a complex relational structure, but is precisely that being which self-consciously chooses and commits itself on the basis of some interpretation of past, present and possible future actions of

---

<sup>1</sup>CV (1961), p. 110.

others upon it. It was concerned almost exclusively with presenting an ontological analysis of the relation of being and value. He did not address himself to the epistemological problems involved in human valuations.

In the "responsibility scheme" the emphasis is not upon value as a function of the relations between beings but upon valuation as a mode of cognition, or an element in all cognition from the standpoint of the knowing subject.<sup>1</sup> An understanding of Niebuhr's relational theory of action depends upon his understanding of what it means to be a "self," where value relations and the valuations of the self become part of the larger question of human selfhood.

The relational value theory stressed the notion of reciprocity among related beings as good-for or bad-for each other. The central notion of "responsibility" may be regarded as this reciprocity between beings described from the point of view of one of these beings which as a "self" cannot escape seeking some understanding of itself in relationship to other things and selves. Relational value theory is taken up into a more inclusive theory. In the "center of value" scheme Niebuhr made no clear distinction between values relative to "existent beings" which qualify as "selves" and those that do not. Only once in "Value Theory and Theology" does he mention "the relative standpoint of the observer."<sup>2</sup> Yet elsewhere in his writings Niebuhr has repeatedly drawn attention to a very different kind of relativity--the historical

---

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Schrader's comment: "Niebuhr wants to say that value is relevant not only to human existence but also to the life of animals and nature in general. But he cannot and does not deny that all valuation depends upon the interpretation of experience from the perspective of a valuing and also evaluated subject." "Value and Valuation," FE, p. 177.

<sup>2</sup>VTT, p. 106. Paul Ramsey and George Schrader have made similar observations. Cf. "The Transformation of Ethics," FE, p. 152 and "Value and Valuation," FE, p. 178, respectively.

relativity of the valuations made by any "self". In the section on "relative centers of value" discussed in the previous chapter<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr does assume that it is man qua man who affirms some other "existent being" as "center of value," but in neither of the essays in which he presented his relational value theory did he give explicit attention to the subjective conditions of value knowledge.

### The Meaning of Responsibility

In his posthumously published lectures, The Responsible Self (1961) H. Richard Niebuhr proposed a theory for understanding and ordering moral experience generally and moral agency in particular. He has called this "the theory of responsibility."<sup>2</sup> He developed his exposition of this new way of conceptualizing moral experience and action by means of a comparative analysis of the formal structure of the teleological and deontological ethical theories. He was, of course, well aware that these two theories have provided the conceptual structure for all the most important normative theories of ethics in the history of Western moral philosophy. Furthermore, he acknowledged that Christian theologians who have had an interest in formulating a systematic theory of Christian ethics have traditionally used one or other of these two approaches.

On the theoretic side, when Christians have undertaken to set forth the pattern present in the action of Christ they have found kinship between it and certain patterns of moral conduct set forth by the universalist philosophers, that is by thinkers who saw man first of all as a citizen of the universe, as endowed with a reason that seeks universal truth, as subject to laws that are universal. For the most part these affinities of the Christian ethos with

---

<sup>1</sup> Supra, pp. 39-44.

<sup>2</sup> RS, p. 61, passim.

other types of universal ethics have been stated in terms of idealism or of legalism, as when Platonic or Aristotelian ethics on the one hand, Kantian thought or universal utilitarianism on the other, have been associated with Christian ethics.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr's dissatisfaction with both did not arise because he believed their employment so seriously compromised the content of Christian ethics that they should be abandoned on theological grounds. Nor did it result from uncovering large areas of logical confusion which rendered each generally invalid. The criticisms which he does make are not directed toward alleged logical difficulties or terminological unclarity attending the normative and meta-ethical judgments contained in them such as is found in the works of moral philosophers like G. E. Moore, Stephen Toulmin or William Frankena. Indeed, Niebuhr is not interested in them as normative theories of ethics; nor is he concerned to question their adequacy as meta-ethical theories. Rather he centers his attention upon two particular images of man which, he argues, each presupposes. Both assume that their theories about what is good for man and what is required of him are consonant with the actual nature of man qua man. The teleologist, no matter how he defines the telos which is to be realized in action, carries on his debates with his fellow teleologists "against the background of a common understanding of the nature of our personal existence."<sup>2</sup> "Moral theories [teleological] and moral exhortations to a large extent presuppose the future oriented, purposive character of human action and differ for the most part only--though seriously enough--in the ends they recommend or accept as given with human nature itself."<sup>3</sup> The same is true mutatis mutandis

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 168. Cf. pp. 65f, 127-135; CE, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 51 (italics added).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

for deontological theorists.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr contends then that teleological and deontological theories of ethics, when they are analyzed according to their formal structure (rather than the varying material definitions of what is normatively good or right) presuppose and are largely determined by some "root-metaphor" or "symbolic-form." This approach involves an acknowledged borrowing from Ernst Cassirer's "philosophy of symbolic forms."<sup>2</sup>

I propose that we undertake to reflect on our life as moral selves in general, as Christians in particular, with the aid of contemporary ideas about the nature and role of symbolic forms. These ideas have been made familiar to us by many students of human life and action but have not been widely used in those inquiries we generally designate by the name ethics. . . . This is the line of thought persuasively presented and amply illustrated by that philosophy of symbolic forms which Ernst Cassirer developed.<sup>3</sup>

It is an attempt to show that man has always sought to understand himself and the moral quality of his actions by means of conceptual schemes (teleology and deontology) which are derived from particular archetypal preconceptual symbols or "root-metaphors."<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 51-53.

<sup>2</sup> *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, 3 Vols., translated by Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953-57). *An Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944) is essentially a more readily digestible synopsis of the above.

<sup>3</sup> *RS*, p. 151.

<sup>4</sup> The term is Professor Pepper's. Cf. Stephen C. Pepper, *World Hypotheses: A Study in Evidence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961); Perhaps the clearest short definition of the meaning and function of a root metaphor is the following: "I mean an area of empirical observation which is the point of origin for a world hypothesis. When anyone has a problem before him and is at a loss how to handle it, he looks about in his available experience for some analogy that might suggest a solution. This suggestive analogy gives rise to an hypothesis which he can apply towards the solution. . . . The originating analogy, I have called the root metaphor of a world

Our method has been derived largely from the philosophy of symbolic forms which sees man as symbolic animal. He is a being who grasps and shapes reality, including the actuality of his own existence, with the aid of great images, metaphors, and analogies. These are partly in his conscious mind but so largely in his unconscious mind and in the social language that he tends to take them for granted as forms of pure reason. They are, indeed, forms of reason, but of historic reason . . . his patterns are not copies of the reality to which he reacts but products of an art of knowing in which subject and object interact. His conceptual systems, accordingly, are largely abstractions from his symbolic forms.<sup>1</sup>

Given this view of man as an image-making and image-using creature Niebuhr explores two questions. First, what are the root-metaphors by which men have sought to clarify and order their moral life? Second, are these symbols and the conceptual schemes which have been developed from them wholly adequate?

#### The Symbols of Homo Faber and Homo Politicus

Historically and practically, the symbol of man-the-maker, man who constructs things and plans his actions according to some goal or envisaged end has been pervasive.<sup>2</sup> In the everyday affairs of our common life, whether

---

hypothesis. An analysis of the root metaphor generates the categories of the hypothesis. The adequacy of the hypothesis then depends on the capacity of the categories to render interpretations of the features of our world with precision and unrestricted scope. A world hypothesis differs from other hypotheses only in its unrestricted scope." Concept and Quality: A World Hypothesis. The Paul Carus Lectures for 1961 (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Co., 1967), p. 3. Pepper's work is cited by Niebuhr in support of his understanding of man as a symbol-using animal. In his role as metaphysician man has used such symbols or root-metaphors as generative substance, the republic, the organism, the machine, or the mathematical system, to describe the character of being itself. Cf. RS, p. 153.

<sup>1</sup>RS, p. 161.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 48-51, 69f, 88-91, 108, 131-136, 160.

in the sphere of science, education, legislation, industry or agriculture, we find ourselves engaged in purposeful activity directed toward securing some end or fulfilling some ideal. From Aristotle to his Christian disciple, Thomas Aquinas, to the more recent schools of idealists and utilitarians, hedonists and self-realizationists, the symbol of homo faber has been the dominant image in all teleological thinking about morals.

For the Greek philosopher and many who knowingly or unknowingly follow him, man is the being who makes himself-- though he does not do so by himself--for the sake of a desired end. Two things in particular we say about ourselves: we act toward an end or are purposive; and we act upon ourselves, we fashion ourselves, we give ourselves form.<sup>1</sup>

The teleologist approaches the double task of understanding the meaning of his existence and action as a man in terms of the myriad enterprises in which he seeks to attain some goal which he has set for himself or which has been set for him by another. Having observed this about himself it seems only natural to ask if there is not some final end, some goal transcending all the more immediate goals which is good in itself. Many questions have been and are continually debated by teleological theorists. What is the nature of the end to be realized? Is it to be defined from the point of view of the self alone, or the immediate society of family, race, class, or from the perspective of universal community? The answers given to these questions vary greatly, but all are agreed that the image of man as homo faber affords the most adequate analogy for understanding and shaping human life and conduct.

But for many other philosophers the image of man-the-citizen, obedient man under law living out his life in the midst of customs, commandments, and

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

rules has seemed to be a far more typical and pervasive characteristic of human experience than that of man-the-maker.<sup>1</sup> This political symbol, like the technical symbol of man-the-maker is synecdochic. A symbol drawn from one area of human experience is used to interpret all of it.<sup>2</sup> In science, government, industry and family life men find it morally necessary to legislate, administer, and be subject to laws and regulations. From the Stoics and Kant, to its criticism and refinement by others like the "Cambridge moralists" and eminent modern representatives among idealists and intuitionists, the symbol of homo politicus has been the dominant image in all deontological thinking about morals.

The image has applicability to all our existence in society. We come into being under rules of family, neighborhood, and nation, subject to the regulation of our action by others. Against these rules we can and do rebel, yet find it necessary--morally necessary, that is,--to consent to some laws and to give ourselves rules, or to administer our lives in accordance with some discipline.<sup>3</sup>

The teleologist does not understand himself as living apart from law; antinomianism is no necessary feature of his self-understanding. But rules are always means to an end and they are never good in themselves. He submits to rules or laws only insofar as they serve some end viewed as good in itself. For the deontologist, on the other hand, laws are good in themselves irrespective of consequences. He understands himself to be a law-giving (active) and law-consenting (passive) being whose good is defined by precisely these activities. The lawful life is the good life and the law is not a future ideal but

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 51-54, 70-71, 88, 92, 128-135, 160.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 52, 56, 159f.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

always a present demand.<sup>1</sup> Among deontologists, too, many discussions ensued over the scope of "the republic that is to be governed."<sup>2</sup> Is it the self-seeking unity in its many roles as a law-maker and law-abider (or law-breaker). Or is it the human community which legislates laws which may, but often do not, coincide with the rules proposed by less inclusive groups or by the individual self? Or is there some community more inclusive than that of the human community--nature or God--whose laws are either obeyed or disobeyed but not denied? The answers given to these and other questions vary, but all are agreed that the image of man as homo politicus is the most adequate symbol for interpreting moral as opposed to non-moral experience.

Niebuhr readily grants that these two symbols of man-the-maker and man-the-citizen have both yielded comprehensive interpretations of that reality we intend when we use the term morality. But symbols remain symbols and not reality. As synecdochic analogies they cannot avoid having the limitations inherent in their function. They are both broad and comprehensive symbols but they are not copies of reality.

. . . the fundamental images which we employ in understanding and directing ourselves remain images and hypotheses, not truthful copies of reality, and something of the real lies beyond the borders of the image: something more and something different needs to be thought and done in our quest for the truth about ourselves and in our quest for true existence.<sup>3</sup>

The above passage makes it clear that Niebuhr's rejection of these two symbols depends upon certain epistemological assumptions about the definition and

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 55-56, Cf. p. 161.

function of symbols. In The Responsible Self he gives brief hints at what is involved but no adequate account of the nature and function of symbolic forms is given.<sup>1</sup> It is impossible for any interpreter to understand with any precision Niebuhr's own understanding of the core idea of "symbolic forms," from the very cryptic interpretation he has given. He acknowledged the fact that his "method has been derived largely from the philosophy of symbolic forms . . ." <sup>2</sup> and that he had undertaken "to reflect on our life as moral selves . . . with the aid of contemporary ideas about the nature and the role of symbolic forms,"<sup>3</sup> but he apparently did not think it necessary to spell out what this "method" entailed. He does not provide the reader with any explanation of "the nature and role of symbolic forms." Given the ambitious task

---

<sup>1</sup>The Kantian concept of "form" was the starting point of Cassirer's "philosophy of symbolic forms." It was his chief aim to demonstrate that the synthesizing powers of mind so profoundly and precisely detailed by Kant in the "transcendental analytic" cannot and should not have been limited (as Kant did limit them) to knowledge in the realm of the natural sciences and mathematics but must be extended to include the totality of human culture. His magnum opus, The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, is a sustained attempt to effect a transition from Kant's "critique of reason" to a "critique of culture." (Vol. I, pp. 73-85). On this view the natural sciences are only one of several institutionalized activities such as art, language, myth and religion--which together define the meaning of "culture."

The specific details of the relation between Cassirer's notion of "symbolic forms" to that of Kant may be found in the following studies. Carl M. Hamburg, Symbol and Reality: Studies in the Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1956), pp. 34-43; Charles W. Hendel's "Introduction" to The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Vol. I, pp. 1-65; S. Körner, "Ernst Cassirer," The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Vol. 2, edited by Paul Edwards (New York and London: Collier-Macmillan, 1963), pp. 446-466; J. K. Stephen, "Cassirer's Doctrine of the a priori," and Robert S. Hartman, "Cassirer's Philosophy of Symbolic Forms," in The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer, edited by Paul S. Schilp (Evanston, Illinois: The Library of Living Philosophers, Inc., 1949), Vol. VI, pp. 151-157 and 289-333 respectively.

<sup>2</sup>RS, p. 161 (*italics added*).

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 151 (*italics added*).

which he set for himself the existence of this "hidden agenda" weakens the theoretical usefulness of his analyses of the teleological and deontological theories as well as his own constructive proposal.

The two older images of man-the-maker and man-the-citizen have yielded "fruitful" but "inadequate" conceptual schemes. All images yield only partial perspectives on the totality of moral reality. A new image will yield a different conceptual scheme. It, too, will be a partial perspective and therefore will not yield a conceptual scheme to replace the older images.

It represents an alternative or an additional way of conceiving and defining this existence of ours . . .<sup>1</sup> [It] brings into view aspects of our self-defining conduct that are obscured when the older images are exclusively employed.<sup>2</sup>

But at another point Niebuhr seems to have advanced a larger claim for the new image of responsibility.

On the whole, the difference between teleological and deontological practice and theory can be reduced--perhaps the two approaches may even be reconciled--if it is noted that both obedient man and man-the-maker are both responders and that there are yet other ways of responding to action upon us beside these two.<sup>3</sup>

It is difficult to tell exactly what kind of "reconciliation" Niebuhr has in mind here. Also, it is hard to see how the true but trivial fact that in both schemes the moral agent responds, could by itself provide any grounds for effecting a reconciliation. Niebuhr may have had something more and different in mind than this, but if he did, he chose not to pursue it.

Nevertheless, my present intention is not to argue that the method of response-analysis is a more inclusive and fruitful approach to . . . human life than the standard approaches but rather to try to understand our existence . . . with its aid,

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 57. The underlined words clearly illustrate his perspectival approach to knowledge.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 136.

putting aside the question of its greater applicability or the question whether it indeed offers opportunity for a more unified understanding of our ethos or only another, complementary way of dealing with ethical problems. . . .<sup>1</sup>

The fundamental characteristic of the theory of the responsible self is Niebuhr's constantly reiterated belief in the primordial social and temporal character of all human existence. Both the teleological and deontological schemes on his view share a common fault. They both have an individualistic and non-historical view of human selfhood.<sup>2</sup> The self exists only in relation to other selves. But in both teleology (where the first relation is to ideals, ideas or goals) and in deontology (where the first relation is to law or laws) this relation to other selves is derivative or secondary rather than primordial. Thus, when Niebuhr says that "there are yet many other ways of responding to actions upon us besides these two," he apparently means that both the object responded to (selves rather than ideals or laws) and the response itself are different. His arguments in support of these contentions will be explored further later.

Niebuhr is by no means the only thinker to have felt dissatisfied with the traditional distinction between teleological and deontological ethics.<sup>3</sup> He did not believe that further refinement of these schemes was any answer. In

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 136-137.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 69-71, 90-93.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the remark of R. B. Braithwaite: "The more I study ethics the more convinced I become that the traditional distinction between 'teleological ethics' . . . and 'deontological ethics' . . . is a false one. . . . In the context of Christian ethics, a Christian does not love his neighbor only to secure joy, peace, the visio dei, but neither does he do so only to obey a Kantian imperative: he does so in order to become a member of the Kingdom of Heaven; that is, he opts for one total universe rather than for another." Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy, edited by Ian T. Ramsey (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), p. 92.

each case they are derived from images of man's nature which are no longer adequate in view of a new image which he believed was emerging in the consciousness of modern man. "To these two great dominant symbols a third is being gradually added in our modern world, the symbol of responsibility . . . the symbol of homo dialogicus . . ." <sup>1</sup> It would make no sense to ask Niebuhr why he chose this particular symbol of responsibility, for it is a cardinal feature of this approach to morals that symbolic forms are not "chosen," either arbitrarily or as a result of rational deliberation. The symbol of responsibility is, he believed, simply there, present in the consciousness of modern men, in our common moral language and in the specialized inquiries of the several social sciences. <sup>2</sup>

#### The Symbol of Homo Dialogicus

We must begin by distinguishing the use of the word "responsibility" among most moral philosophers from its special function as a symbolic form. The concept of responsibility has had a prominent place in the thought of moral philosophers at least since Aristotle. <sup>3</sup> Most of them have agreed that some degree of freedom must be accorded the agent in the determination of moral actions. <sup>4</sup> Thus debate has centered on the meaning of the notion of "freedom"

---

<sup>1</sup>RS, p. 160.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 56-57, 162.

<sup>3</sup>Nicomachean Ethics, Bk. 3, Sec. 1-5.

<sup>4</sup>For example, Kant in a lecture on "Degrees of Responsibility" says: "The degree of responsibility depends on the degree of freedom. Freedom involves capacity to act, and in addition cognizance of the impulsive ground and objective character of the action. These are the subjective conditions of freedom, and in their absence responsibility cannot be imputed." Lectures in Ethics, translated by Louis Infield (New York: Harper & Row, Pub., 1963), p. 62.

or "free-will" apart from which the idea of responsibility was believed to have little clear meaning. The kind of freedom involved has most often been expressed by the two terms indeterminism (the view that some events, among them human volition or decisions, are uncaused) and determinism (the view that every event including human volition and decisions are caused by or happen as an effect of antecedent events) which is not the same as fatalism (the view that holds that all human decisions are wholly caused by some power or agency external to the human agent). Determinism, as it is understood in ethics, is a moral concept and is not to be confused with logical necessity on the one hand, or mechanical notions of force or compulsion on the other.<sup>1</sup> Generally speaking in the history of moral theory the teleological or utilitarian tradition has tended to stress the fact that determinism is morally compatible with the notion of responsibility while the deontological or Kantian tradition has generally denied this to be so.<sup>2</sup> With the demise of idealism generally, and of self realizationist<sup>3</sup> and intuitionist<sup>4</sup> ethics in particular, most recent

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. William K. Frankena, Ethics (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), pp. 57-62, and John Hospers, Human Conduct (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1963; New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1961), pp. 502-507.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. A. C. Ewing, Ethics (New York: Macmillan, 1953), Chapter 8. Professor Ewing is almost alone among recent English moral philosophers to champion indeterminism in the great tradition of Butler, Sidgwick, Rashdall, Martineau, Moore, Pritchard and Carritt. Sir David W. Ross is an exception among deontologists however.

<sup>3</sup> A. C. Bradley, Ethical Studies, 2nd edition (Oxford University Press, 1962), especially his essay "The Vulgar Notion of Responsibility in Connexion With the Theories of Free Will and Necessity," and T. H. Green, Prolegomena to Ethics (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1899), Bk II, Ch. I are representative.

<sup>4</sup> G. E. Moore, Principia Ethica (Cambridge, 1903). This is the most influential work by a twentieth century intuitionist.

English and American moral philosophers see determinism as not morally incompatible with responsibility, whatever may be the result of metaphysical arguments in favor of determinism or indeterminism.<sup>1</sup>

It is of first importance to understand that Niebuhr intends something very different in his employment of the idea of responsibility as a symbolic form. Responsibility is not simply a normative concept whose meaning is defined by the use to which it has been put in the older conceptual schemes of teleology and deontology which have so dominated our common moral discourse.

The use of this image in the field of ethics is not yet considerable. When the word, responsibility, is used of the self as agent, as doer, it is usually translated with the aid of the older images as meaning direction toward goals or as ability to be moved by respect for law.<sup>2</sup>

The symbol of responsibility comprehends a different understanding of human self-existence and agency than those symbols from which the conceptual schemes of teleology and deontology have been developed. It proposes a new approach to the ancient Socratic injunction, "Know thyself." What does it mean to live and act as a man qua man? With what great symbol or metaphor can we best understand ourselves and order our activity "as we decide, choose, commit ourselves, and otherwise bear the burden of our necessary human freedom"?<sup>3</sup> According to Niebuhr's typology, the teleologist answers this question by saying that man can best understand his existence and action by means of an analogy drawn from the work of the artist or craftsman who creates or constructs

---

<sup>1</sup>For a brilliant account of the metaphysical debate see Richard Taylor's essay, Metaphysics (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), Chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>2</sup>RS, p. 57.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 48.

things according to a vision, ideal, or plan. He understands himself in all his activity as homo faber, and therefore when he faces the practical question, "What shall I (we) do?" he answers first by asking the prior question, "What is the supreme goal or ideal for my life?". The deontologist believes that man can best understand himself as a moral agent by means of an analogy drawn from his role as a citizen, as a member of some social group governing as well as governed. He understands himself in all his activity as homo politicus, and therefore when he, too, faces the practical question, "What shall I (we) do?" he answers first by asking a prior question, "What is the supreme law of my life?" The ethic of responsibility is controlled by "the image of man-the-answerer, man engaged in dialogue, man acting in response to actions upon him."<sup>1</sup> Man understands himself in all his activity as homo dialogicus, and when faced with the practical question, "What shall I (we) do?" he answers first by asking a prior question, "What is going on?", "What is being done to me?" or more specifically, "To whom or what am I responsible and in what community of interaction am I myself?"<sup>2</sup>

It is necessary now to proceed beyond these preliminary questions and examine the formal structure of the theory of responsibility.

Niebuhr's ethic of responsibility is comprised of four basic "elements." They are the ideas of 1) response, 2) interpretation, 3) accountability, and 4) social solidarity. The first two of these ideas are not, to my mind, very clearly distinguished from each other. "Response" is a reflexive notion; it presupposes the idea of some previous action directed toward the subject who

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 63 and 68.

makes the response. Furthermore, according to Niebuhr, "we do not call it the action of a self or moral action unless it is response to interpreted action upon us."<sup>1</sup> Responses defined as "interpreted actions" are therefore to be distinguished from such bodily reactions as heart-beats or knee-jerks. But if it is the idea of interpretation (the second defining characteristic of the theory of responsibility) which differentiates responses from reactions, then in what sense is the notion "response" a separate "element" or defining characteristic of the theory? Perhaps he simply intended to draw attention at the outset to the reflexive linguistic character of the word responsibility, and thus bring to prominence the idea of the moral agent as not first of all the initiator of action but the recipient of some previous action. The actions of others are in fact the "raw material" from which the self will fashion its own distinctive response.

The third element of "accountability" is not to be construed as it is in deontological thinking, that is, as referring to obligation or duty. Responsible actions not only involve the interpretation of actions upon us but also include anticipation of the responses which our response will call forth.

An agent's action is like a statement in a dialogue. Such a statement not only seeks to meet, as it were, or fit into, the previous statement to which it is an answer, but is made in anticipation of reply. It looks forward as well as backward; it anticipates objections, confirmations, and connections.<sup>2</sup>

Accountability means that the self not only seeks to interpret past actions but also seeks to "take account of," possible future responses to its response before it makes that response. The basic point Niebuhr seems to be stressing

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

here is that the responsible self cannot rest content with interpreting past actions in determining its response but equally must anticipate possible future responses.

The fourth component is the idea of "social solidarity." Both words are important. The action of an agent is responsible in the fullest sense only when it is made in full consciousness of the continuity of its own existence within a continuing community of agents to whom response is being made. "Our action is responsible, when it is response to action upon us in a continuing discourse or interaction among beings forming a continuing society."<sup>1</sup> On balance it appears that these last two elements in the theory combine to stress the relational complexity of the situation in which any agent must carry on its inescapable task of understanding, relating and evaluating the actions of other agents upon it. The notion of "accountability" points specifically to the future dimension, to the anticipation of continuing interaction of response and counter-response. The notion of "social solidarity" increases the scope, and therefore the complexity of the relations to include the whole continuing community of agents. Niebuhr has summarized succinctly his initial sketch of the formal characteristics of his theory of responsibility.

The idea or pattern of responsibility, may, . . . be defined as the idea of an agent's action as response to an action upon him in accordance with his interpretation of the latter action and with his expectation of response to his response; and all of this in a continuing community of agents.<sup>2</sup>

The most important of the four elements in the theory of responsibility

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

is the notion "interpretation." If, as Niebuhr has affirmed, responsible action begins with the self's response to what is happening to it, then clearly it is absolutely essential that it be able intelligibly to identify, compare and relate events such that they are understood and have meaning. The notion "interpretation" is then, in the broadest sense, an epistemological notion which refers to this ability of the self to understand individual events as related to other events in a larger context of events. The responsible self is first the recipient of the action of other selves upon it, but it is not a passive recipient. It interprets these specific actions, and its responses to them will be determined by its interpretation of how these actions "fit" as parts of a larger whole. This aspect of the ethic of responsibility was "prefigured" in the ethics of Spinoza according to Niebuhr.<sup>1</sup> For Spinoza, ethics is concerned with that fundamental "correction of the understanding which will permit men to substitute for the unclear and self-centered, emotion-arousing interpretations of what happens to them, a clear and distinct interpretation of all events as intelligible, rational events in the determined whole."<sup>2</sup> As a neo-Kantian Niebuhr could not, of course, accept Spinoza's understanding of the relation between mind and its objects.<sup>3</sup> As a Christian theologian he believed that "revelation" rather than the exercise of rationality was the intelligible event which alone made this "correction" possible.<sup>4</sup> But these and other important

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 57f., 171.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>3</sup> MR, pp. 10, 15; Cf. pp. 91-109.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 93, 109-132. "By revelation . . . we mean that special occasion which provides us with an image by means of which all the occasions of personal and common life become intelligible." Ibid., p. 109.

differences aside, Niebuhr agreed with Spinoza that the basic ethical problem for man is how to achieve the correct interpretation of the nature of Being itself, or of God. Furthermore, Niebuhr agreed with Spinoza that the question of human freedom cannot be defined as self-determination, rather "freedom" describes that state of consciousness which is consequent upon being delivered from false or illusory interpretations of reality. The self is determined in its responses by its interpretation of the character of the universal context, that is, by its interpretation of Being itself as good or evil. "All my specific and relative evaluations expressed in my interpretations and responses are shaped, guided, and formed by the understanding of good and evil I have upon the whole."<sup>1</sup>

This "initial sketch" of the theory of responsibility must now be made more explicit. It is clear from what has been said already that this is not a normative theory of ethics if we mean by "normative" rule governed. Rather, it is in the first instance a theory of human selfhood. Niebuhr is attempting to elaborate a distinctive theory of what it means to be a self, and in doing so he is also arguing that the dominant schemes of teleology and deontology are inadequate or defective precisely as theories of human selfhood. In order to show that this is in fact the case Niebuhr proceeds to describe three dimensions of human self-existence which he believes are constitutive to the existence of selves qua selves. Every being exists, knows and acts as a self only insofar as it sustains these primordial relations. They are not the sort of

---

<sup>1</sup>RS, p. 124. Niebuhr rejected any mechanical or mathematical model as appropriate for describing divine determinism. Cf. "The Idea of Covenant and American Democracy," pp. 128, 131-135.

relationships which any self can choose to enter or refrain from entering into but they are given with the life of selves as such. They are the 1) social, 2) temporal, and 3) religious (value) relations.

### The Social Self

One of the most prominent and constantly reiterated themes in Niebuhr's thought is his belief in the primordial social character of human existence. The self exists only in relation to other selves. The decisions made by a responsible self are his decisions but they are not individualistic, for we have no selfhood apart from our relations to other human selves. Niebuhr acknowledged his indebtedness to Kierkegaard for helping him to recognize the "existential nature of the irreducible self," but he was critical of his emphasis on the solitariness of the individual. In order to contrast his own view with that of Kierkegaard, Niebuhr coined the term "social existentialism."<sup>1</sup> Ethical decisions are existential because they cannot be reached by speculative inquiry of any kind. They are not arrived at by inferential reasoning. They are "made in freedom by a responsible subject acting in the present moment on the basis of what is true for him."<sup>2</sup> The decisions we must make as responsible moral agents are our decisions but we neither make them simply for ourselves nor by ourselves. Kierkegaardian existentialism abstracts the self from society and therefore in Niebuhr's view denies the irreducible social character of the existence of any self. This sort of individualistic existentialism relinquishes any interest in the self's responsibility for other selves. If, and when, we

---

<sup>1</sup>CC, pp. 241-249.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 241. Cf. pp. 243-246.

raise the ultimate existential question of the meaning of life, we cannot do so simply as solitary individuals but only in solidarity with every other meaning-seeking self. The most pressing existential questions are raised in their "most passionate form not in our solitariness but in our fellowship."<sup>1</sup>

It is this same charge of individualism which Niebuhr brings against teleological and deontological ethics. Here, however, the problem is not that of the self's solitary relation to God in abstraction from the society of other selves. The primary relation of the self is either to ideals or ideas (teleology) or to law or laws (deontology) and not to other selves. What is most important about the self for the teleologist is its rational ability to understand the general in the particular, and to abstract "the formal measurable, and comparable in all occasions."<sup>2</sup> The observation is true, but it becomes false when the self is identified with this one activity. "In this situation I acknowledge a relation to other rational beings but any connection with them is a function of my relation to the objects of reason. First I know the objects of reason and only secondarily do I acknowledge other knowers."<sup>3</sup> Here a choice has been made to regard the life of the mind as the essential characteristic of human selfhood. For the deontologist it is "conscience" rather than the power of understanding or knowing which is the most important element in selfhood. Conscience is the self-legislating center of the self. The knowledge present to conscience is a knowledge of law and every self defines itself first in relation to law.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 244.

<sup>2</sup>RS, p. 70.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 71.

Niebuhr has no wish to deny the importance of the existence of the self as a rational being in relation to ideas, or as a moral being in relation to laws and mores, but he rejects these relations as fundamental for understanding and defining ourselves as moral agents. The self cannot be defined in terms of any one of its subjective functions. No intrasubjective relation can be allowed to obscure the primacy of the relation of one self to another.

To be a self in the presence of other selves is not a derivative experience but primordial. To be able to say I am I is not an inference from the statement that I think thoughts nor from the statement that I have a law-acknowledging conscience. It is, rather, the acknowledgment of my existence as the counterpart of another self . . . the self is fundamentally social in this sense that it is a being which not only knows itself in relation to other selves but exists as a self only in that relation.

According to a long tradition the distinguishing characteristic of selfhood is its capacity for critical self-awareness or self-transcendence, that is, the self is that kind of being which can view itself as an object. But how is it possible to account for this reflexive capacity of any self to become an object to itself? Niebuhr's answer to this question was drawn for the most part from the thinking of the American social psychologist, George Herbert Mead, and the Jewish theologian, Martin Buber.<sup>2</sup> Mead taught, and Niebuhr accepted the view that selfhood is not a given quality of the organism

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> A comparative study and critique of the dialogic theory of the self in the writings of Mead and Buber has been provided by Paul E. Pfuete in his book, Self, Society, Existence: Human Nature and Dialogue in the Thought of George Herbert Mead and Martin Buber (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), originally published under the title, The Social Self (New York: Bookman Associates, 1954). In a foreword to this book Niebuhr observes, "few recent ideas have been so fruitful in so many areas of thought as the idea of the interpersonal nature of our human existence . . . with its aid light is being cast on many obscure places in our understanding of ourselves in our world." Ibid., p. vi.

at birth but develops through the individual organism's relation to other selves and through its relation to the social process as a whole ("The generalized other")<sup>1</sup>. The self's relationship to itself is not direct but mediated. The object-self is known only insofar as the subject-self takes "the attitudes of other individuals toward himself within a social environment or context of experience and behavior in which both he and they are involved."<sup>2</sup> A person may choose subsequently to live a relatively solitary existence, as Kierkegaard did; but he did not and could not have become a self outside of relations to other selves. It is possible, on this view, to conceive of a solitary body, but a solitary self is a contradiction in terms. Self-consciousness requires knowledge of some of one's own past states, as Kant had taught,<sup>3</sup> but according to Mead those "past states" could not have arisen as self states apart from the mediation of other selves. Thus Niebuhr following Mead, does not claim that the self is merely conditioned in some way by its relation to other selves but that it is wholly constituted as a self through its relations to others. It neither is nor knows apart from these relations. The self is "a being which not only knows itself in relation to other selves but exists as a self only in that relation."<sup>4</sup>

In an earlier essay in which he is also expounding the Meadian theory of social selfhood he seems to deny that self-existence is wholly mediated by

---

<sup>1</sup>George H. Mead, Mind, Self, and Society, edited and with an introduction by Charles W. Morris (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1934), p. 135ff.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>3</sup>Critique of Pure Reason, Kemp Smith trans., B 133.

<sup>4</sup>RS, p. 71.

other selves. There he again affirms that "we know ourselves only in the presence of another" but adds immediately that "we are not entitled to affirm on this ground that we exist only in the presence of another."<sup>1</sup> It is quite clear that in both instances he is saying that self-consciousness depends upon a relation to other selves who either value or disvalue them. But does he in the second instance, deny that self-existence is also mediated? Perhaps not, for strictly speaking he only denies that the proposition "we exist only in the presence of another" may be inferred from the proposition "we know ourselves only in the presence of another." The former proposition could be asserted on other grounds.

The self is a relational reality both genetically and actually. The distinctive mark of human selfhood is its reflexiveness. This reflexiveness is achieved through the mediation of other selves who criticize or compliment, accept or reject, praise or blame the self. Selfhood is attained through a process of internalizing the valuations and judgments of others. The self is always first of all a participant in some human community. "We do not only live among other selves but they live in us and we in them. Relations here are not external but internal so that we are our relations and cannot be selves save as we are members of each other."<sup>2</sup> This is a relational theory of selfhood of a most radical and comprehensive kind.

Niebuhr was impressed by the fact that G. H. Mead and Martin Buber,

---

<sup>1</sup>"The Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience," Journal of Philosophy, Vol. XLII (1945), p. 353.

<sup>2</sup>MR, p. 70. "Selves can only exist in definite relationship to other selves. No hard-and-fast line can be drawn between our own selves and the selves of others, since our own selves exist and enter as such into our experience only insofar as the selves of others exist and enter as such into an experience also." George H. Mead, Mind, Self and Society, p. 164.

though very different with respect to their general philosophical orientation, were agreed on the primordial social character of human existence. There is, he remarked, a "strange parallelism between the ego-alter dialectic of G. H. Mead's radically empirical philosophy and Martin Buber's religiously oriented reflections upon the I-Thou relation."<sup>1</sup> Mead's thought was naturalistic and pragmatic. He sought to understand the nature of human social existence within the context of evolutionary and behavioristic thinking. Buber's thought was theistic and existential. He sought to understand the nature of human social existence in the context of personalistic and transcendental (Kant) thinking.<sup>2</sup> But the very different general orientation should not obscure important similarities, similarities which Niebuhr himself shared. First, both Mead's pragmatism and Buber's existentialism agree on the primacy of action to thought; existence to essence. Second, they both reject the need for any metaphysical inquiry into the nature of things-in-themselves. Mead does so on the general phenomenalist thesis that such entities do not exist; Buber on the familiar Kantian grounds that they do exist but are not open to rational description. Thus, while both actually did have commitments to fundamentally irreconcilable metaphysical positions--Mead was a naturalist and Buber a theist--they were united in the belief that the doctrine of social selfhood could be formulated independently of fundamental metaphysical assumptions.

The specific point in Buber's thought that Niebuhr endorsed was his

---

<sup>1</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "Foreword," in Self, Society, Existence by Paul E. Pfuetze, p. vi.

<sup>2</sup> George H. Mead, Mind, Self and Society, and The Philosophy of the Present, edited by A. E. Murphy (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 1932); Martin Buber, I and Thou, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937), Between Man and Man, translated by R. G. Smith (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1947). Cf. Pfuetze, Self, Society, Existence, pp. 350-355.

contention that the I in the I-Thou dialectic is different from the I in the I-it relation.

Using Mead's language we might say that Buber points out how the I in the I-it relation is not a reflexive being. It does not know itself as known; it only knows; were it not for the accompanying I-Thou situation it would not know that it knows. It values but does not value itself or its valuations.<sup>1</sup>

Self-consciousness is not an essential quality of human nature as such but it is a state of being which is acquired by any individual within a society of individuals who have themselves already attained self-consciousness. Niebuhr was not interested, as was Mead, in pursuing the question of the genesis of self-consciousness in the evolutionary development of the human species. Rather, given the existence of a society of interrelated and interdependent selves, an individual achieves selfhood through a process of internalizing the judgments and evaluations of other selves upon it and upon each other. In this sociological explanation of human selfhood, self-awareness is wholly a function of other-awareness. The inward dialogue which the self may have with itself necessarily presupposes an external I-Thou dialogue. When Niebuhr asserts that "we are our relations" he would seem to be saying that the self or "I" is exhaustively defined in terms of these external relations. But Niebuhr's eagerness to combat any and all forms of individualism seems to me to have involved him in other difficulties of which he was not perhaps sufficiently aware.

It is clear, I think, that Niebuhr believed that any inquiry into the nature of man as he exists in and of himself committed the enquirer to an individualistic interpretation of human existence. We have already seen that he has lodged this charge against the views of human selfhood assumed by teleological

---

<sup>1</sup>RS, pp. 72-73.

and deontological moralists.<sup>1</sup> The following quote contains a clear statement of the basis upon which he mounted this charge. His own account of moral agency is, Niebuhr declared,

. . . an approach to man's self-conduct that begins with neither purposes nor laws but with responses; that begins with the question, not about the self as it is in itself, but as it is in its response-relations to what is given with it and to it.<sup>2</sup>

Any claim that the individual self exists and knows that it exists as one finite personal being independently of any relations to other selves or things is denied a priori in the interest of an exclusively relational theory. However, those who defend some theory of the substantiality of the self will doubtless counter by arguing that Niebuhr's relational theory loses the self in its relations, or more precisely, that Niebuhr cannot properly speak of a self at all but only of a plurality of relations which are without any identifiable termini.<sup>3</sup> They will argue that the assertion that "we are our relations" as it stands is meaningless. If "we are our relations" then these relations are not between anything at all. They are like lines "stretched in the air but without being anchored at either end."<sup>4</sup> If "we are our relations" then

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 69-71.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 60 (italics added).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Schrader, "Value and Valuation," FE, pp. 184-191, 200-204; Julian Hartt, "The Situation of the Believer," FE, pp. 225-233, 242-244; Helmut Kuhn, "Conscience and Society," Journal of Religion, XX I (1946), 203-214. Kuhn's paper is a critique of the interpretation of conscience which Niebuhr developed in "The Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience." With respect to the "ego-alter dialectic" he argues against Niebuhr 1) that self-consciousness is a necessary if not a sufficient condition of our knowledge of other selves (pp. 203-206) and 2) that while Niebuhr is right to maintain that self and society are correlated he is wrong in treating it as symmetrical. It is asymmetrical. (pp. 205, 208).

<sup>4</sup> Schrader, "Value and Valuation," FE, p. 190.

the self loses all self-identity and is reduced to a nexus of relations that are themselves without any rootage in existence. To have a relation is not to be a relation. The self performs activities but is not those activities; it has abilities or capacities but it is not those abilities; it sustains relations but is not those relations.

Finally, I would argue that Niebuhr cannot maintain that the existence, knowledge and value of selves are exhaustively determined by the relations they sustain without collapsing the distinction between relations and what they relate. On the other hand it is quite possible to allow that the nature or moral character of a person may be radically affected or changed by the relations he sustains, while at the same time insisting that a necessary condition for any relations between selves is the existence of those selves.

#### The Social Self and Conscience

Our discussion so far has provided a general orientation to Niebuhr's understanding of human selfhood. However, a closer reading of what is involved in his relational theory of human selfhood is needed. An attempt at re-examining the moral phenomenon known as "conscience" would, he believed, be a good practical test of the viability of his theory. In The Responsible Self he continues to sharpen his own position on this subject by way of critical interaction with representatives of the teleological and deontological theories. In an earlier essay, "The Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience" (1945), essentially the same protagonists are defined as representatives of the empiricist and rationalist tradition. It is of some interest to note that in those essays where he is most concerned with working out the philosophical basis of his ethics, he does so by setting up his own Neo-Kantian position over against selected

representatives of the empiricist and rationalist traditions. This was, of course, evident in his essay "The Center of Value."<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr begins his essay "The Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience" by asserting that most discussions on the meaning and function of conscience have been confused. This confusion has arisen from a failure to understand the complexity of the phenomena comprehended by this term. Bishop Butler, for example, was doubtless correct in saying that "this principle in man by which he approves or disapproves his heart, temper and actions, is conscience,"<sup>2</sup> but he regarded it as an a priori principle which needed no further analysis or justification. A beginning may be made in gaining clarity on this subject Niebuhr believed, when we attend to "the phenomenon of a duality in the self in which one is judged, counseled, commanded, approved, or condemned by an alter in the ego . . . which seems to be generally and perhaps universally experienced by men."<sup>3</sup> Various accounts of this basic duality in the self-consciousness of moral agents may be found in the history of moral philosophy: From Socrates' daimon, to Kant's perplexity about a self which doubles as both judge and accused to Adam Smith's distinction between the self as agent and as "impartial spectator" to G. H. Mead's description of the self which internalizes the judgments of a "generalized other."<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Supra, pp. 27-31.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Butler, Works, ed. W. E. Gladstone (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896), Vol. II, "Sermon I," paragraphs 7 and 8. Cited by Niebuhr, IRS p. 74, n. 3. I have cited only the last sentence of a longer quotation by Niebuhr. In checking the reference I note that it comes in its entirety from "Sermon I" paragraph 8 not paragraphs 7 and 8. It is of some interest to note in view of Niebuhr's own thesis that in the early editions of the "fifteen sermons," sermon I, entitled "Upon Human Nature" carried the sub-title "Upon the Social Nature of Man."

<sup>3</sup> "The Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience," p. 352.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., and IRS, pp. 75-79.

Kant's account of conscience is criticized by Niebuhr at two points. First, he charges that Kant has unnecessarily confused the inner dialectic between the self as agent (noumenal self) and the self that is observed and judged (the phenomenal self) with the conflict between reason and desires or inclination. Kant is right, according to Niebuhr, in affirming that the self is both subject and object but wrong in believing that the self that knows is a different self from the one which is known and for assigning reason (pure practical) to the former and confining desires and inclinations to the latter. There are not two selves, one noumenal and the other phenomenal, which must somehow be brought into unity. On the contrary the one existing individual self comes to know itself, becomes an object to itself, through the mediation of other selves. Thus the distinction is inter-personal not intra-personal and the intra-personal dialogue is not primordial but results from the internalization of the self-other dialogue.

What must be recognized Niebuhr claims, is that there are "two distinct movements in the moral life: (1) the conflict between the more and less socialized, integrated and rational organization of ideas, drives, and sentiments within a self; and (2) the dialectic in the self between an other and the self in which future or past acts of the self are subjected to scrutiny."<sup>1</sup> Both must be affirmed but it is the latter self-other dialectic which is more fundamental. Furthermore, reason and emotion qualify both movements.

The phenomenon of conscience cannot then be explained adequately on Niebuhr's view in terms of a dialectic between a "higher rational" and a "lower empirical" self. In his later account of a social theory of conscience in

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

The Responsible Self, Niebuhr refers directly to Kant's discussion of conscience in The Critique of Practical Reason. There Kant does affirm the self-other dialectic, but Niebuhr argues, he is restrained from giving it primacy because of his determination to secure the categorical character of the moral law promulgated by the rational self. The following is Kant's own account:

Every man has a conscience, and finds himself observed by an inward judge which threatens and keeps him in awe. . . . Now this original intellectual and moral capacity called conscience, has this peculiarity in it, that although its business is a business of man with himself, yet he finds himself compelled by his reason to transact it as if at the command of another person. For the transaction here is the conduct of a trial (causa) before a tribunal. But he who is accused by his conscience should be conceived as one and the same person with the judge which is an absurd conception of a judicial court. . . . Therefore in all duties the conscience of a man must regard another than himself as the judge of his actions, if it is to avoid self-contradiction. Now this other may be an actual or a merely ideal person which reason frames to itself.<sup>1</sup>

Quite apart from its intrinsic interest it has been necessary to quote this long passage in order to understand Niebuhr's second criticism of the Kantian account of conscience. The problem centers around that philosophical crux "as if." Kant cannot say that the experience of conscience arises because the self is judged by another self external to the self but only that a self experiences this judgment as if judged by another. He can only say that it is the rational self which judges the empirical self (or at least its inclinations, desires, affections, etc.) under the appearance of there being another present as judge. Kant had suggested that this alter in the ego "may be an actual or a merely ideal person which reason frames to itself." Niebuhr denies

---

<sup>1</sup> Kant's Critique of Practical Reason and Other Works on the Theory of Ethics, ed. and translated, T. K. Abbott (London: Longmans, Green and Co., Ltd., 6th ed., 1927), pp. 321f. Cited by Niebuhr, RS, p. 74; "as if" italicized by Niebuhr.

that this is the case. The "other" who judges the self is not a creation of an autonomous pure practical reason but rather it is present to the self as a consequence of the process of internalizing the approvals and disapprovals of the self's actions by other selves. A self does not possess an a priori moral capacity by which it judges its own actions "as if at the command of another person." Consistent with his ongoing critique of deontological ethics Niebuhr locates the source of this difficulty at the point of the conflict of the external self-other dialectic with the Kantian internal dialectic between the "higher self" who legislates and the "lower self" who either obeys or disobeys. In a relational theory of selfhood there is no need for the rational self to invoke a phantom other because conscience is a function of the self's existence as a social self. It is continually aware that its actions are judged by other selves. "The experience of conscience is not like being judged by another person; it is indeed being judged by another, though the other is not immediately or symbolically and physically present to sense-experiencing man."<sup>1</sup>

His social theory of conscience has been developed most significantly in the moral theory of the empiricist tradition. There have been moralists in this tradition too who have tended to confuse the self-other dialectic with the duality of reason and emotion,<sup>2</sup> but there is as little need for them to do so as there was for Kant.

In and of itself a social interpretation of conscience does not say anything about the rational or emotional character, nor

---

<sup>1</sup>RS, p. 75.

<sup>2</sup>Niebuhr mentions Westermarck as an example of this tendency. Cf. "The Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience," p. 352.

about the extent of the society to which man is able to reflect on his own deeds by viewing them with the eyes of others.<sup>1</sup>

But empirical theories of conscience such as those defended by Adam Smith and George Herbert Mead are less than satisfactory at a quite different point. If Kant was criticized for not understanding the social nature of the self, Adam Smith and G. H. Mead are criticized for their view of the nature of the other which is present to the self.<sup>2</sup> Adam Smith described this "other" as an "impartial spectator." The word "conscience" refers to that process in which a self examines its own conduct from the point of view of an impartial judge.<sup>3</sup> Niebuhr's conviction that the value judgments of every self are made in relation to a center of value which is considered ultimate leads him to question Adam Smith's assertion that the other which judges the self is an

. . . "impartial spectator" animated by "disinterested emotions."  
It is evident that the other on whose judgment the self depends in judging itself is not uninterested but endowed with profound attachments to certain beings, values or modes of conduct, though these attachments differ with the nature of the particular other whose judgment is sought or given.<sup>4</sup>

If the other is to judge the self disinterestedly it will do so not in relation to its "emotions" but in relation to some "value center" which both the self and the other recognize as absolute.

Mead gave the following definition of his notion of "the generalized other:"

---

<sup>1</sup>RS, pp. 75-76.

<sup>2</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience," pp. 354-355. RS, pp. 76-79.

<sup>3</sup>Adam Smith, The Theory of Moral Sentiments in British Moralists, Selections from Writers Principally of the Eighteenth Century, Vol. I, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge (London: Oxford University Press, 1897), pp. 297-298.

<sup>4</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience," p. 355.

The organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self may be called "the generalized other". . . . It is in the form of the generalized other that the social process influences the behavior of the individuals involved in it.

[It comes about when a self takes] the attitudes of others toward himself, and finally crystallize[s] all these particular attitudes into a single attitude or standpoint which may be called the "generalized other."<sup>2</sup>

Niebuhr believed this to be an important concept but one that was not without its difficulties. He argued that the Meadian account of the scope and homogeneity of the society which is generalized in self-consciousness was too monolithic. The self does not participate in a single homogenous society but in many and diverse social groups. But if "the self does not deal with one generalized other but with many," then neither are "all its others 'generalized'."<sup>3</sup> By the notion "generalized other" Mead intended a sort of consensus or composite picture of the moral attitudes and judgments of the individuals composing a society. Niebuhr proposed two modifications of this idea. He does not deny that the other which judges the self may be a more or less faithful image of some social group such as the family or nation. But for theological reasons he was concerned to adjust Mead's theory to the requirements of a theistic ethic. The ultimate confrontation is not between the self and an "other" (defined as a regulative ideal grounded in the authority of a society of whatever scope); it is between the self and the Other, or God (defined as the source and center of the universal community).<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Mead, Mind, Self and Society, pp. 154-155. Cf. Paul Pfeutze, Self, Society, Existence, pp. 83-87.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>3</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience," p. 354.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 354 and 357.

A second criticism of the idea of the "generalized other" is offered by Niebuhr. The response of a self does not depend so much upon its ability to frame this picture of a composite other, but upon its ability to discern a certain "constancy" in the actions of other selves. This "constancy" is really a pattern which has been learned as a result of repeated encounters in which present action is related to the past actions of the other upon the self. But, beyond the constancy in the action of the Thou toward this self there is also the constancy of the response relations of this Thou with other members of the community.<sup>1</sup> "The social self is never a mere I-Thou self but an I-you self,"<sup>2</sup> that is, the Thou to which response is made is not seen as a single Thou but as "a member of an interacting community." The self is able to interpret and respond "fittingly" to the action of this Thou in large part because it understands that this single action directed toward it is consistent with past actions of this Thou toward other selves. So, also, in that experience of conscience in which "I judge my action from the point of view of another, I do not abstract some vague general figure from all the particular individuals who together constitute my society, but I refer to constancies in the responses of individuals. . ."<sup>3</sup> In all its actions the responsible self is also always an accountable self, accountable not only to its immediate companions (socially and temporally) but to other communities, past, present and future.

---

<sup>1</sup>RS, pp. 77-78.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. Niebuhr recognized that to speak in this way of behavioral constancies is to re-introduce some notion of law, that is, some generalization about what may be expected in a given situation. But clearly this is not law in the form of a demand which the self itself (Kant) or some other authority proposes to the self. It is law in the descriptive rather than prescriptive mode.

The Social Self and History

A second important dimension of Niebuhr's theory of responsibility is his understanding of the temporality or historicity of all self-existence and knowledge. Social relations are not an incidental aspect of self-existence and neither is history. The term "history" here refers to the relations between individual selves and between communities temporally considered. Time or history is not therefore accidental to the self, but historical awareness is an elemental part of what it means to be a self. To be a social self is to have a history. Every theory of human selfhood must give an account of the temporality of human existence.

The teleological and deontological traditions were censured by Niebuhr for having a too individualistic conception of human agency. They are now criticized for minimizing the importance of its historicity. Teleologists are concerned with the future but primarily only as that shorter or longer time in which the actualization of the telos may be accomplished. But, Niebuhr charges, "of the critical present they seem hardly aware and the past seems to be of little moment in this way of thinking about our action."<sup>1</sup> For the deontologist--and Niebuhr again has Kant chiefly in mind--time is not a factor that in any way qualifies even formally the actions of the law consenting self. For Kant, time was important as a form of sense perception only and he categorically denied that the pure practical reason recognized time at all.<sup>2</sup> Kant did, it is true, recognize the importance of time for the practical reason when he postulated an

---

<sup>1</sup>RS, p. 91.

<sup>2</sup>Kant's Critique of Practical Reason, ed. Abbott, pp. 192 and 196.

immortal existence. Niebuhr is doubtless correct in judging this to be "mostly afterthought": A belated attempt to adjust "a rigorously logical system, based on self-legislation only, to the practical needs of a man who though essentially intelligible being, is a sense-being also."<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr's criticism of Kierkegaard on this point is consistent with his former one about individualism. The social and historical character of self-existence are inseparable.<sup>2</sup>

Kierkegaard, rigorous developer of the idea of Kant's second critique that he was, tended to concentrate all the meaning of personal existence into the moment. His followers, the extreme existentialists, define man in his freedom as one who newly creates, chooses, and defines himself in every present, though now he stands alone without even a universal law before him. With them the subtraction from existing man of his time-fulness, his past and future and his historicity, has gone as far as it seems possible to go.<sup>3</sup>

This is a very instructive passage. It shows clearly the heart of Niebuhr's dissatisfaction with any theory of human moral agency which denies the concrete historicity of all existence in community. The decisions of every self are made in what we call the "present." But the present is not a timeless moment between past and future. The responsible self understands the temporality of its existence and actions not primarily in terms of successive moments which can be measured as discrete events. Rather, it is aware of a "present" which is not a neutral moment between a no longer and a not yet, but a "present" in which the past is the still present (by means of memory) and the future the already present (by means of imagination).<sup>4</sup> Time for selves is not a dimension of the external

---

<sup>1</sup>RS, p. 92.

<sup>2</sup>CC, pp. 246-248.

<sup>3</sup>RS, p. 92.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 93. Cf. MR, pp. 69, 71, 110-120, 128.

world, a correlate of space. The time of objects in the external world may be defined in terms of their motion through space but for the self time is a dimension of its existence in community.

The self does not and cannot leave its past behind. Publicly, it shares habits of behavior, of language and thought as a participant in a specific society. Privately, it remembers joys and sorrow, love and guilt as belonging to itself alone. Both the categories of its historical reason which it shares with its social companions and its private remembrances of the affections and valuations that accompanied its past encounters with other things and selves, will largely determine what knowledge is possible to the self and how it will respond in the present to "those beings who are like the Thou's and It's of [its] remembrance."<sup>1</sup>

To be a "time-full" self means that the future too is in the present in the form of the self's expectations, anxieties and hopes. This does not mean that the self projects itself with its plans into the future, but rather that it understands every present encounter with other beings to be qualified by the hopes and anxieties, anticipations and expectations which it has of future encounters. For example, if a self does not expect to meet another self again it may ignore its actions, although that too is a response. If it does expect future encounters it will seek to fit its present actions into a pattern of responses that will evidence its trust or distrust, love for or indifference toward that self.

Past, present and future are dimensions of the active self's time-fullness . . . Whatever else the much commented on continuity of the self in time may mean, this much must be included: the self

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 96. Cf. pp. 93, 95-97; MR, pp. 13-16, 69. The importance of the historicity of the self for Niebuhr's general theory of knowledge will be treated in more detail in Chapter IV.

existing always in a now is one that knows itself as having been and as going into existence and into encounter.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear from what has been said so far that the social and temporal self always exists as an "encountered self." "To be in the present is to be in compresence with what is not myself."<sup>2</sup> Most of our "now's" are routine repetitions of encounters with familiar others, the character of whose actions are well known. But a self is most aware of its existence in the present when it understands itself to be compresent with another whose actions are neither remembered nor anticipated, yet are present to the self in threatening or promising form, calling for a response.<sup>3</sup>

The primordial social and historical dimensions of human selfhood combine to support a theory of moral action that seeks to understand the fittingness or unfittingness of the responses of a self in a continuing process of interaction. It is not therefore concerned in the first instance to determine the rightness or wrongness of specific actions in relation to universal norms--teleological or deontological--but it seeks to understand how each response which the self makes to the actions of others upon it fit into a total context. Whether they are fitting or not will depend upon this social and time-full self's interpretation of the objective moral character of that transcendent being or power which is immanent in every society and in all historical events, and is that upon which every self is absolutely dependent for its being and value.

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 94.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 94-95.

The Dependent Self

There is a third and final relation which defines responsible selfhood. This relation is ultimately determinative of our moral conduct as selves because it is a relation to that upon which every self is absolutely dependent for its existence and value as a self.<sup>1</sup> We remind ourselves that Niebuhr never attempted to define the self as a thing-in-itself. He was committed to a relational view of human self-existence. It is not possible on his view to define the self in terms of its biological structure or of any of its functions such as thinking, feeling or willing, or to identify it with all of these together. But Niebuhr does not simply posit that the self is, that its primordial awareness is an awareness of the radical contingency of its existence, rather he asserts that the primordial awareness of every self is one of absolute dependence upon a radical power or being that is other than any finite being. Beyond all the finite beings to which the self must respond in all its social and temporal relations is this radical power to which it also must respond.<sup>2</sup>

Niebuhr does not deny that there is an intricate and inseparable relation between the self and its body or mind or emotions. He does deny that it can be identified with any one of them or all of them together. Furthermore none of the responses which I make to my interpretation of those actions or forces which have brought this body into being, or which have supplied this mind with just these thoughts or ideas, are responses to that radical action by which I am. The self is not absolutely dependent on any of the finite agencies which brought just this physiological, and psychological complex into being. "I am, and I am I. That 'I am,' and 'I am I' here, now, bring to my awareness a radical

---

<sup>1</sup>RS, pp. 108-26; MR, p. 91.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 109-115.

deed which I cannot identify with any of the specific actions that have constituted the elements of my body [mind or emotions] . . ." <sup>1</sup> Awareness that I am is at once awareness of that power which elected me into existence and maintains me in existence. Awareness that I am I is awareness of myself as just this unique and irreducible individual that experiences this radical dependence. I come to understand that "it was not in my own power, nor in my parents' power to elect my self into existence." <sup>2</sup> I understand too that I can destroy the life of my body but it is not clear that by this action that I am able to destroy myself.

In the preceding discussion of Niebuhr's phenomenological description of the self as a social and temporal being exclusive attention was given to trying to clarify those dimensions of human selfhood strictly in terms of the self's interpretation and response to the actions upon it of other finite things and selves. This was done in the interest of trying to isolate and examine single aspects of a more complex relational structure. It now needs to be emphasized that Niebuhr further argued that awareness of this radical power may also be discerned as present in all the self's responses as a social and temporal self. <sup>3</sup>

Our interpretation of the immediate depends upon our sense of the ultimate community of interaction. So also the timefulness of our agency and of our historical interpretation are conditioned by our understanding of what lies at the limits of our time. In both cases something that we may call the religious element in our responses has come into view, meaning by the word, religion, in this connection man's relation to what is ultimate for him--his ultimate society, his ultimate history. <sup>4</sup>

In his analysis of the social dimension of human selfhood Niebuhr argued that the structure of our life in response to persons and things is not diadic

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 114. Cf. CC, p. 250.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 79-89 and 98-107 respectively.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 109.

but always triadic.<sup>1</sup> The responses we make are never a single response to persons or things; they are always accompanied by and inseparable from a further response to a third reality which transcends both self and other. It is this conception of the triadic structure of responsible selfhood which provided the basis for his critique of the notion of "the generalized other" as it was employed in rationalist and empiricist descriptions of the moral phenomenon called "conscience."<sup>2</sup> The triadic structure present in all human knowledge of other things (theoretical knowledge) and persons (practical knowledge) is a central Niebuhrian theme. In the moral triad every relation between two selves (I and Thou) also involves their relation to a third reality. Faith defined as trust or confidence and as loyalty or fidelity, is the term used by Niebuhr to describe the fundamental moral quality of the relations involved.<sup>3</sup> Trust is the passive element. It is passive because it refers to the self's reliance upon some other being for a sense of worth or value. Loyalty is the active element. It is active because it refers to that commitment made by the self to another self or to a cause. In all social life these two modes of faith are present in either positive or negative form qualifying every human intention and action.

The importance of these notions for Niebuhr's understanding of the structure and character of moral experience is particularly apparent in writings published after 1950.<sup>4</sup> He began to recognize that "faith" was a more complex

---

<sup>1</sup> RS, pp. 79-84; H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Triad of Faith," Andover Newton Bulletin XLVII (1954), pp. 3-12.

<sup>2</sup> RS, pp. 74-79.

<sup>3</sup> RMWC, pp. 16-23, esp. p. 18; "The Triad of Faith," pp. 6-12; CC, pp. 252-254; RS, pp. 118-123.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. CC (1951), pp. 252-254; "The Triad of Faith" (1953); "The Idea of Covenant and American Democracy," Church History XXIII (1954), pp. 126-135; "On the Nature of Faith," in Religious Experience and Truth: A Symposium (New York: New York University Press, 1961), pp. 93-102; RMWC (1961), pp. 16-23; RS (1963), pp. 118-123.

phenomenon in the life of selves than he had previously realized. It is also clear that he was directly influenced by the moral philosophy of Josiah Royce,<sup>1</sup> particularly Royce's understanding of the covenantal or promisory character of communities in which selves understand themselves to be bound by loyalty to one another and to a cause which transcends them.<sup>2</sup> Royce defined loyalty as "the willing and practical and thoroughgoing devotion of a person to a cause."<sup>3</sup> Niebuhr also acknowledged that Royce's description of the moral life as primarily an affair of loyalty was a theory "closely related to [his] notion of responsibility."<sup>4</sup> Royce too, he believed, sought to define the moral life less in terms of the teleological image of man the realizer of ideals or the deontological symbol of man obedient to laws and more in terms of the image of man as a covenant-maker (or breaker).<sup>5</sup> A person attains mature selfhood as a moral being by being loyal to other selves and to a cause that transcends them all and that is loyal to them.<sup>6</sup>

The most explicit treatment of the triadic structure of the moral life is contained in Niebuhr's lecture, "The Triad of Faith" (1954). He begins by arguing that while it is true that the concept faith refers to a reality which

---

<sup>1</sup>CC, p. 251; RMWC, pp. 18, 21-22, 132; RS, pp. 83-89; "The Triad of Faith," p. 7; "The Idea of Covenant and American Democracy," p. 133.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. The Philosophy of Loyalty (New York: Macmillan, 1908) and The Problem of Christianity, 2 Vols (New York: Macmillan, 1913).

<sup>3</sup>The Philosophy of Loyalty, p. 51.

<sup>4</sup>RS, p. 83.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.; "The Idea of Covenant and American Democracy," p. 133.

<sup>6</sup>"The Triad of Faith," pp. 7-9. "[Man] is a personal covenanting being," ibid., p. 11. ". . . the moral requirement and ability of promise-keeping is central to human existence." "The Idea of Covenant and American Democracy," p. 133.

is a relation rather than an entity, it does not refer to a single uncompounded relation but to a structure. Faith is present in the dynamic complex inter-relations of human communal existence.

What's faith? Faith as I know it in my common human life seems first of all to be a kind of double relation between the I and the Thou in which I trust in thy loyalty to speak the truth to me as thou seest the truth and in which I trust in thy faithfulness, not only to me but to something else. For a third dimension comes into view, a third part of this structure of faith. There is not only the reciprocity of I-trusting-you, you-being-faithful-to-me; there could not be real faith if there were only the I-Thou relationship.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr finds the traditional medieval distinction between fides (belief), fiducia (trust) and fidelitas (loyalty) helpful. They belong together; "where there is no fiducia, no trust, there can be no believing, and there can be no believing where there is no loyalty or faithfulness."<sup>2</sup> When, for example, I believe that a statement made to me by another person is true, my belief depends upon a trust in that person's loyalty to me as one who seeks or expects the truth; and as one who is loyal to truthfulness as a cause to which we both are committed.

The case may be illustrated more fully by an example Niebuhr has given.<sup>3</sup> Consider the situation of two soldiers in combat. They are loyal to each other and trust in each other's loyalty. Each trusts the loyal other and is loyal to the trustworthy other. The two strands of faith mutually qualify their actions toward each other. But their situation is more complex. As soldiers they fight for a cause which transcends them both. It may be identified as their country, or some political ideal, or something else, but whatever it is, it is a common

---

<sup>1</sup>"The Triad of Faith," p. 6.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 7-8. Cf. RS, p. 83f.

cause which requires their trust and loyalty. The fact that they are together as soldiers testifies to the presence of this cause whose existence and worth they are called upon to defend. Finally, they must believe that the common cause will not be disloyal to them, that it will not deceive them or let them down. It is, of course, often the case that soldiers are very doubtful about this last relationship. They may think that their loyalty to each other is a much more tangible reality than loyalty to the cause but they cannot deny its presence or its claim on them. Even if they distrust the goodness or rightness of their cause and even if they become disloyal to it or to each other, faith is still present, albeit in the negative forms of distrust and disloyalty. Distrust is perverted trust, not the absence of trust. Disloyalty is loyalty denied, not the absence of loyalty.<sup>1</sup>

The following summary statements may be made of Niebuhr's description of the fiduciary and promisory character of the triadic structure of the moral life of selves. 1) All moral relations between selves are, at their profoundest level, relationships of trust and loyalty. 2) Morality is ultimately a matter of loyalty to a cause which transcends the self and its companions, and is the ground of the unity of any community of selves. 3) Both trust and loyalty have a dual aspect. There is the penultimate trust and loyalty between selves and an ultimate loyalty of both selves to a cause which transcends them. The loyalty to the cause is ultimate because it is the cause, or more exactly the loyalty of the cause to both self and other, which is the objective ground of every self's trust in and loyalty to another self.

This triadic structure of the moral life is central to Niebuhr's whole understanding of moral conduct in terms of the notion of responsibility as he

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

has defined it. It is present in the social existence of every self.<sup>1</sup> For example, the self in its role as a patriot is related to his fellow citizens and to his country as the cause. He cannot avoid making responses to the moral approval or disapproval of his peers, but he never does so apart from his response to the cause (his country) or its representatives (such as heroes or founding fathers) to whom he looks for ultimate praise or blame. "In reaction to the present action of his companions, he anticipates the action upon him of that third and does his fitting act, that is, makes a response that fits into this continuing triadic interaction."<sup>2</sup> In all his social roles and relations this dual response is made.

Niebuhr now advances a final observation which may well be one of the more controversial aspects of his whole theory. It is this. He argues that not only the self exists as a self always in relation to other selves, or that self-transcendence is achieved only through its existence in a society, but he also argues that the societies in which the self exists and makes its responses are not more self-contained than are the individuals that exist in them.

The societies that judge or in which we judge ourselves are self-transcending societies. And the process of self-transcendence or of reference to the third beyond each third does not come to rest until the total community of being has been involved.<sup>3</sup>

In all our response relations in any community there is always a continuous double dialogue taking place. For example, a patriot within a nation does respond to his companions and he is also responsive to a "transcendent reference group" which represent the nation. For the democratic patriot who is a citizen of the United States, Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Lincoln, etc., will perform this function. They will be "the ideal observers" or "impartial spectators" to

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 84-86.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 87.

whom the patriot will appeal for ultimate approval or disapproval of his conduct and of his response to his co-patriots. It is this relation which guarantees to him a relative independence of individual moral judgment and action from the judgments and actions of his immediate companions. Now these "founding fathers" encountered in memory also refer beyond themselves for they represent both the community and what the community stands for--its cause. But this appeal to a "transcendent reference group" cannot stop here with the "closed society" of all loyal democrats.

Ultimately we arrive in the case of democracy at a community which refers beyond itself to humanity and which in doing so seems to envisage not only representatives of the human community as such but a universal society and a universal generalized other, Nature and Nature's God.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr was well aware that in our concern with responses to immediate companions we do not always raise this final question about universal community and the final cause to which loyalty is owed. But he was convinced that in those "critical moments" when we do ask this question we will recognize that our life in response to action upon us takes place in a universal community "whose boundaries cannot be drawn in space, or in time, or in extent of interaction short of a whole in which we live and move and have our being."<sup>2</sup>

This movement toward the universal may also be seen when attention is

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 88. Niebuhr suggests that this movement toward the universal is not only present in the moral life but also in theoretical knowledge of nature. "Though science does not undertake to know the universal, it seeks to interpret each particular occasion by reference to more general patterns so that the movement is toward the universal. It operates with universal intent." Ibid. Elsewhere he argues that the fiduciary and promisory structure of the moral life is present in the scientific community as it is in all other identifiable human communities. This must be so because scientists do not cease to be moral beings because they are scientists. Cf. RMWC, pp. 85-89; 131-136.

given to the temporal dimension of human existence.<sup>1</sup> The self must respond in the present to the actions of others upon it and it does so as a self conscious of a personal and social past and of an anticipated future, that is, it responds as an historical being, as a time-full self. This means that all interpretations of present events are made with an awareness of and are modified by a larger historical context. But if this is so then the question of the extent of the historical context within which the self makes its present responses must be faced. The self as a time-full being cannot avoid the ultimate question posed by the movement of its life from a past to a future--the question of the limits of its life. Niebuhr believes that for most men all of the time, and for almost all men much of the time, this ultimate historical context is interpreted as death in one of its many forms.

Deep in our minds is the myth, the interpretative pattern of the metahistory, within which all our histories and biographies are enacted. . . . 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. . . . It is the image of myself as coming to that future when there is no more future. . . . It has scores of forms . . . this mythology of death. . . . And all the forms lead to the ethos of defense, to the ethics of survival.<sup>2</sup>

When the self interprets this law of death to be the law of its temporal existence, it responds to all actions upon it by seeking to defend itself as worthy of existence, by declaring those beings "good" which support its physical, spiritual or social existence and calling "evil" those that threaten its existence.<sup>3</sup> A great anxiety grips the self in the face of this threat of loss of itself.

---

<sup>1</sup>RS, pp. 98-107.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 106-107.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 99.

It is important to understand that Niebuhr has not argued that his phenomenological analysis of the self in its social and timeful existence, by itself, establishes the fact that it exists at every moment as an absolutely dependent self. He does maintain that his attempt to interpret the moral life of man with the aid of the idea of responsibility involves a similar movement toward the universal to that present in teleology and deontology. The universal element in responsibility ethics is not, of course, to be identified with a universal idea or ideal to be realized, or with the universal form of a maxim which must be obeyed. The universal element in the ethics of responsibility enters at the point of recognizing that all responses to the finite actions of other things and selves are qualified by the self's interpretation of its actions as taking place in a universal community, and in ultimate history.<sup>1</sup> But the primordial religious dimension of human existence is much more clearly seen when attention is given to the self's existence in absolute dependence. In the final analysis, Niebuhr argues, human selfhood cannot be understood solely in terms of its finite relations. Each self's awareness of itself as just this radically contingent individual is the one point at which a simultaneous awareness of its absolute dependence enters.

The religious or faith dimension comes clearly into view the moment the self asks itself how it is to interpret the character of the radical power that "flings it into existence and holds it there."<sup>2</sup> The self raises the question to itself as to whether this being upon which it is absolutely dependent for its existence is good for it or bad for it, whether it sustains it in its existence or whether it is heedless of the self's existence. If the inscrutable power by

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 87-89, 97-99.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

which the self is, is good, it deserves trust, but if it is hostile or heedless, then profound distrust will be the inevitable response. In order to do justice to these issues it is necessary to pass over into a consideration of Niebuhr's theology. If it is asked why it is that one or the other of these responses is given, or, how it is that the issue of the objective moral character of being itself as either good for or bad for the dependent self are to be settled, then it is necessary to go beyond this formal description of the ethic of responsibility and inquire into strictly theological matters that "are not the task of Christian ethics as ethics to set forth."<sup>1</sup>

#### Teleology, Deontology and Responsibility

In the essay The Responsible Self (1963) Niebuhr set forth his "theory of responsibility" as an alternative way of conceptualizing the formal structure of moral experience and action to the traditional teleological and deontological theories. Earlier it was observed that he was not interested in examining the structure of these theories as normative theories of ethics if one means by normative, theories which seek to articulate general principles of obligation or value in relation to which all particular actions or persons may be justified as morally right or wrong, good or bad. Rather, he centers his attention upon two different images of man which these theories presuppose. Each theory assumes that its general principles of moral obligation and value are consonant with the actual nature of man qua man. It was precisely the view of man or of the self which each presupposed that Niebuhr rejected. Both are criticized for having a too individualistic and non-historical understanding of human self-existence.

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 143.

The purpose of this concluding section is to argue that Niebuhr's search for an alternative way of conceptualizing the formal structure of human moral experience and action was occasioned by a more fundamental disagreement. All teleological and deontological theories are agreed that the performance of any moral action presupposes the fulfillment of three antecedent conditions. Niebuhr rejects each of them. In the first instance both approaches maintain that moral decision-making depends upon the moral agent being in possession of two distinct kinds of knowledge: First, it is necessary to have knowledge of general moral rules or principles. Second, it is necessary to know whether a contemplated act falls under a given moral rule or principle or not. The moral agent is in a position to act only when he is in possession of both kinds of knowledge. But such knowledge is not a sufficient condition for the performance of a moral act. Both of these approaches also agree that knowledge of moral principles and knowledge of the moral rightness or wrongness of a contemplated moral act, as determined by the principle, does not by itself guarantee that the moral agent will choose to act in conformity with what he knows the moral principle requires. To will to act in conformity with the principle or not is the third pre-requisite for making moral decisions. Constitutive of moral self-hood is a distinct power called "the will" which determines moral choices. Both theories assume "freedom of will" in the sense of the self-determination of the agent to affirm or deny, obey or disobey, what it has understood antecedently to be required by the moral rule.

Both deontological and teleological theories agree then, 1) that there are moral norms or rules in relation to which all moral decisions are made, and 2) that all moral decisions to act according to these rules further presuppose the freedom of the agent to act contrary to such rules. The differences between them do not preclude this fundamental agreement. The chief difference between

them has to do with the identification of the basis of moral authority in each case.

Over against this view Niebuhr attempted to set forth a very different account of what is involved in human moral agency. Responsibility ethics accredits itself as a distinct form of the moral life not simply by denying what teleology and deontology assert, but by setting forth an alternative understanding of moral agency. While it is true that in The Responsible Self Niebuhr did not explicitly draw out the comparison which is presently being offered, it is clearly implicit in what he wrote there. It is suggested, at least, when he observed that it is the task of the moral theologian, "to bring greater clarity to the self in its agency, not by supplying a theory upon which practice may follow but by illuminating the theory that is actually though unacknowledgedly present in practice."<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr seems to be implying that his theory of responsibility is that "theory that is actually though unacknowledgedly present in practice" while teleology and deontology set forth theories "upon which practice may follow."

Both teleology and deontology center attention on the conformity of a self-determining moral agent's actions to antecedently understood moral imperatives. This means that the primary moral relation is not between a self and that being on which it is absolutely dependent but between the self-as-will and previously cognized moral imperatives. From the point of view of responsibility, morality is not fundamentally a matter of obedience to rules.<sup>2</sup> Thus it can have no interest in putting forward a theory about what rules we ought to obey or what end we ought to realize. Moral conduct is ultimately determined by every

---

<sup>1</sup>RS, p. 135. (italics added).

<sup>2</sup>"The consistent ethics of radical faith is not constituted by the attachment of certain ethical rules to religious beliefs . . ." RMWC, p. 48.

self's trust or distrust, loyalty or disloyalty to God.

The conduct of life issues out of the central faith. . . . Men are so created that they cannot and do not live without faith. . . . Hence the great ethical question is always the question of faith, "In what does man trust?" Moral reasoning always builds on the explicit or implicit answer given to this prior question. A mode of life which is not founded on faith in God is necessarily founded on some other faith, there is no faithless ethics.<sup>1</sup>

In the theory of responsibility there are no rules, no imperatives and no notion of will as a morally neutral power determining moral choices. For Niebuhr moral understanding and moral choice are one and the same action which he terms "interpretation."<sup>2</sup> The "patterns of interpretation we employ seem to determine--though in no mechanical way--our responses to action upon us."<sup>3</sup> The moral quality of our actions is not determined by conformity, or lack of it, to a moral imperative, but by the self's interpretation at every moment of what is happening, that is, by its interpretation of the character of that being upon which it is absolutely dependent as either good or evil, as either life-giving or death-dealing, as God the friend or God the enemy.<sup>4</sup> For the theory of responsibility it is impossible for any moral agent not to be determined by its interpretation of the trustworthiness or untrustworthiness of that being upon which it is absolutely dependent. If this being is interpreted as untrustworthy then the self is negatively determined by it; if it is interpreted as trustworthy then the self is positively determined by it. But there can be no situation in which the self interprets being as trustworthy yet responds with distrust and disloyalty, or one where the self interprets it as untrustworthy, yet responds

---

<sup>1</sup>"Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," pp. 222-223.

<sup>2</sup>RS, pp. 63, 101-107, 117-125, 137, 141-144.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 61-62.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 140-143. Cf. pp. 239-242.

with trust and loyalty.<sup>1</sup>

The ethics of responsibility does not deny the freedom of man.<sup>2</sup> It does deny the notion of "absolute human freedom, the ethics of man the conqueror of the conditions in which he lives, the ethics of human mastery" on the one hand, and the notion of divine determinism in the sense of fatalism on the other.<sup>3</sup>

The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the loving dynamic One, who does new things, whose relation to the world is more like that of father to his children than like that of maker to his manufactures; it is more like that of ruler to his realm than like that of designer to his machines. The symbols fatalism uses to interpret what is happening do not fit the situation. The [images] of the kingdom and of the family are to be sure, symbols also, but they do greater justice to our actual experience of life. They fit this dialogue in which our free acts take place in response to actions over which we have no power, in which our free acts are not truly ours, and free, unless they are the consequences of interpretation.<sup>4</sup>

Thus for Niebuhr the moral deed is not prepared for by determining which moral principle justifies it: nor is it then actualized by a morally neutral contra-causally free will. This is so objectively because the will of God is understood more as what God does and is doing than what he requires. It is so subjectively because our knowledge of the nature and will of God is not mediated by principles or propositions about God or his will but it is an immediate relation of trust or distrust of that being upon whom we are absolutely dependent.

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 115-125.

<sup>2</sup>Niebuhr did not address himself to the question of human freedom in any systematic way but it is clear from scattered references in various places in his writings that he rejected any notion of a morally free will. The account given here of his view of freedom is drawn from the following sources: "Man the Sinner," The Journal of Religion, XV (1935), pp. 273f, 279. Cf. KGA, pp. 112-114, 118; CE, pp. 239-241, 387; CC, pp. 249-252; RS, pp. 100-106, 173.

<sup>3</sup>RS, p. 173.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid. (Second italics added.)

There is a second and related reason why Niebuhr rejected teleology and deontology as fit "instruments" for setting forth a theory of moral agency in a theological ethic. Both agree, as we have stated earlier, that in any normative ethic it is necessary to have knowledge of general moral rules of obligation (eg. "we ought to keep our agreements") or of value (eg. "benevolence is a virtue"). Both agree also that the cognition of these principles is logically prior to any moral choice. Niebuhr's ethic of responsibility however is in agreement with those existentialist thinkers who deny that the fundamental moral relation is one between the self and moral principles. This is not, for Niebuhr, because God is dead but because theoretical knowledge of God as he is in himself is dead. All "knowledge" of God is faith-knowledge, that is, a non-theoretical valuation-al knowledge. "The standpoint of faith, of a self directed toward gods or God, and the standpoint of practical reason, of a self with values and with a destiny are not incompatible, they are probably identical."<sup>1</sup> Thus knowledge of God or his will cannot be identified with knowledge of Scripture, or doctrine, or metaphysical theories about God. Religious knowledge is unique and "this uniqueness has been shown to be due to the fact that it is a type of value knowledge or valuation."<sup>2</sup> If knowledge of God can only properly be attained within the limits of practical reason and if all theological principles or propositions which assert this or that about God, or command this or that as his will, are instances of theoretical knowledge, then they are either not faith-knowledge of God or they are statements about God which may or may not be true of him. In either case the self would not be in that relation which is decisive for the determining of moral conduct.

---

<sup>1</sup>MR, p. 80. Cf. VTT, pp. 110-116.

<sup>2</sup>VTT, p. 112.

The argument was advanced in Chapter II that Niebuhr's relational theory of value not only failed to provide any normative ethical principles for ordering relative value systems but positively disallowed them. It was also argued that there was nothing in his relational theory which necessitated this restriction. At best, such a prohibition must be regarded as quite unnecessary; at worst, it would make it quite impossible for a theologically grounded ethical theory to provide guidance for the difficult yet inescapable task of making moral discriminations between the various competing and often conflicting claims of relative finite centers of value. Finally, in the previous chapter this problem was not pursued beyond the point of showing that the prohibition seemed to be contradicted by other explicit statements made by Niebuhr. It is also not consistent with his diagnosis of the need for such principles in the construction of a viable Protestant ethic.

If the just concluded comparison between teleology and deontology and the ethics of responsibility is correct, then the ambiguity in Niebuhr's thought with respect to the place of general moral principles in ethical theory seems to be resolved in favor of their elimination. His theory of responsibility has at its heart the same theological principle of the absolute primacy and direct presence of God to man which he had identified as the central theological principle of "the Protestant movement."<sup>1</sup> In the following concise summary statement of the theory of responsibility Niebuhr makes this point very clear. "Responsibility affirms: God is acting in all actions upon you. So respond to all actions upon you as to respond to his action."<sup>2</sup> In this formula he brought his theory

---

<sup>1</sup> KGA, pp. 17-44.

<sup>2</sup> RS, p. 126.

of moral action centered on the image of man-the-answerer, man acting in response to actions upon him, into inseparable relation with his central theological principle of radical monotheism.

In setting forth Niebuhr's relational theory of moral action in this chapter, little specific attention has been given to his understanding of the nature of the God who is active in all events. In order to do justice to his doctrine of God it will be necessary to deal separately with his understanding of the self-revelation of God in and through Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> The decision to delay entering upon the strictly theological side of Niebuhr's ethics is not a wholly arbitrary one dictated by the expositor's need to treat major themes sequentially. This approach has been taken because Niebuhr himself put forward his relational theory of moral action as a philosophical theory which could be accepted as an adequate conceptual scheme for understanding and ordering human moral agency quite apart from the acceptance of any specific theistic beliefs.<sup>2</sup> This view of what it means to be a responsible self is not derived directly from Christian doctrines. He does not deny, of course, that he is himself committed to a theistic point of view, but he does deny that the usefulness of his theory of responsibility is limited to those who share a theistic commitment.<sup>3</sup>

The object of the inquiry is not, as in the case of Christian ethics, simply the Christian life but rather human moral life in general. . . . I regard this as an effort in Christian moral philosophy . . . because I am concerned in it . . . with the development of an instrument of analysis which applies to any form of human life including the Christian. All life has the character of responsiveness, I maintain. We interpret the actions to which we respond differently, to be sure, but we do respond, whether we interpret them as actions of God or of the devil or of a blindly running atom.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Chapter V below.

<sup>2</sup>RS, pp. 45f, 57f, 67, 150-154.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 44-46.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 45f.

Both the relational theory of value and the relational theory of moral action are presented as philosophical theories. He also contended that as relational theories each is better suited to the requirements of Christian theology, as he understood it, than other alternatives.

In the chapters which follow no attempt has been made to give a comprehensive exposition and critique of the whole scope of Niebuhr's theology. Both the relational theory of value and the relational theory of action were developed by Niebuhr because he believed that other philosophical theories of value and action available to the theologian for constructing a theological ethic were not adequate to the requirements of his radically monotheistic interpretation of the Christian faith. Given this fact, it is clearly necessary now to inquire more fully into what radically monotheistic theology entails. This will be accomplished by exploring the answers Niebuhr gave to two questions. (Chapter V) First, how is God known, and what is the nature of that being whom Christians believe has been revealed in Jesus Christ? Second, what are the consequences of knowing or trusting in God for human conduct?

For Niebuhr, all knowledge of God depends objectively upon the "self-revelation" of God to man. Subjectively, all knowledge of God is "faith-knowledge." The precise meaning which he attached to these key notions "revelation" and "faith" can clearly be understood only within the context of his general theory of knowledge. Niebuhr has argued that a positive personal and rational relation between man and God is possible, but that its actuality is qualified from the side of the subject by two universal limitations inherent in all human knowledge. First, he argued that the Kantian distinction between the theoretical and practical modes of human cognition must, with some qualifications, be accepted and that all knowledge of God is a kind of practical

knowledge. Second, he believed that all human experience and knowledge, including experience and knowledge of God, is wholly relative to the historical standpoint of the individual within a specific culture or society. The following chapter isolates and analyzes Niebuhr's understanding of these two epistemological doctrines.

## CHAPTER IV

### HISTORICAL RELATIVISM AND THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE

The notion "relativity" is the most pervasive and at the same time the most troublesome theme in Niebuhr's epistemology. All men considered either as individuals or as groups are wholly encompassed by an inclusive relativity which defines their being in a world. We are and have value only insofar as we sustain particular relations with other things and selves within the realm of being. Sufficient attention has already been given to 1) Niebuhr's rejection of all definitions of value as an independently subsisting quality or property and 2) to his vigorous promotion of the view that value is a function of the relation of being to being. But we have not yet given sufficient attention to 3) his account of the epistemological status of value judgments. Two basic pre-suppositions largely determine his understanding of all value judgments. The first follows from what has already been said about value relativity, the second is an application of his understanding of "historical relativism" to all rational activity including the judgments of the practical reason. On the one hand value judgments express in propositional form the specific value which one being may have for another. If a person says that "x is a good person" this does not mean that "goodness" is a quality predicated of x, but rather it gives expression to the quality of a particular relation of x to that person or to some other person(s). Nor does it mean that this value judgment expresses subjective emotions; the projection of a feeling that this person has for x. What it does

mean is that the person uttering the judgment understands that x has met some constitutive need or needs or, otherwise furthered the realization of the capacities or potentialities of himself or of some other person. Value judgments are grounded in the external relations between selves. On the other hand all value judgments depend upon the interpretation of experience from a particular perspective of the valuing self. Value judgments are not only relative to the situation in which beings are objectively either good-for or bad-for each other but they are also relative to the subjective factors involved in the interpretation of experience from the standpoint of the valuing self. Niebuhr was convinced that all knowledge claims are limited not simply because the knower's experience of what is there is limited, but more because the mind itself employs categories or concepts in its interpretation of what is there which are not universal (that is, not the same for every mind) but pervasively conditioned by the specific beliefs of a particular society. The "objective relativism" described earlier must now meet the challenge of an "historical relativism" which prima facie threatens to deny the objectivity of all knowledge claims, including judgments of value. Two different notions of relativity must therefore be distinguished (though they cannot be separated) in Niebuhr's thought.<sup>1</sup>

First, relativity means relatedness. The primordial structure or pattern of all existence is socio-theological in character. To be is to be-in-relation; a being-in-relation to things, other selves and ultimately to God. This relational structure or pattern of being informs Niebuhr's understanding of all the crucial doctrines of his theological ethic. The self and value and the fundamental theological doctrines of faith and revelation all presuppose this relational pattern of existence. He is everywhere concerned with being-in-relation

---

<sup>1</sup>MR, pp. 6-22. Cf. Schrader, "Value and Valuation," pp. 176-178, 191-192.

rather than being-in-itself; with selves in relation to other selves who are in turn related to God and He to them. The primary inquiry in ethics is never first of all, or at all, into the being and character of man-in-himself, conscience-in-itself, or values-in-themselves any more than the object of theological inquiry is the existence and nature of God-in-himself.<sup>1</sup> This radical social character of all existence demands " . . . an approach to man's self conduct that begins with neither purposes [teleology] or laws [deontology] but with responses: that begins with the question, not about the self as it is in itself, but in its response-relation to what is given with it and to it."<sup>2</sup> This is no less true for theology.

The God who makes himself known and whom the Church seeks to know is no isolated God. If the attribute of aseity, i.e., being by and for itself, is applicable to him at all it is not applicable to him as known by the Church. What is known and knowable in theology is God in relation to self and to neighbor, and self and neighbor in relation to God. This complex of related beings is the object of theology.<sup>3</sup>

This passage well illustrates another important feature of the notion of relativity as relatedness. The pattern of interaction between beings is always triadic, never merely diadic. Implicit in the relational theory of value already discussed is the triad of the self (or "existent being")-other and "center of value." A clear illustration of what is involved in a triadic relation is provided by Niebuhr in setting forth his approach to the knowledge of natural events.<sup>4</sup> Further specification of Niebuhr's epistemology will concern

---

<sup>1</sup>"Faith in Gods and in God," supplementary essay in RMWC, pp. 114-116.

<sup>2</sup>RS, p. 60.

<sup>3</sup>PCM, pp. 112-113. Cf. CE, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup>RS, pp. 79-82. The triadic structure of all knowing and valuing is made much more explicit in Niebuhr's thinking since the writing of Christ and Culture (1952) than it was prior to that time. It is consonant with 1) the

us presently but the important point here is his contention that all knowledge of natural phenomena depends upon three distinct yet inseparable relations. There is first, the direct relation of the self to natural phenomena; second, the direct relation of other selves to these same phenomena, and third, the response relation of these selves to each other seeking to communicate and corroborate their interpretations of the same natural events. The self engages

. . . in a continuous dialogue in which there are at least these three partners--the self, the social companion and natural events. As it is true that I encounter and interpret no natural event except as one who has been and will be in encounter with social companions--also related to such events--so it is true that I do not usually encounter and interpret the speech of companions except as one who lives in relation to nature and interprets their words as issuing out of a like relation.<sup>1</sup>

The structure of knowledge is triadic because knowledge claims depend in part upon the self's direct experience of nature, and in part upon interpretative schemes learned from social companions. The self is not wholly dependent upon

---

increasing emphasis on existentialist modes of thinking, and 2) an increasing affinity for the concept of "the community of interpretation" which was the central philosophical idea in the thought of Josiah Royce. (Cf. The Problem of Christianity, Vol. II, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1913). I can find no references to Royce or to the notion of the triadic structure of social existence prior to Christ and Culture. Since that time direct references to Royce appear at important junctures in his writing on the nature of human community, especially the notion of a "cause" as that third reality which unites self and other together and to which they commit themselves in loyalty. Cf. CC, pp. 249ff; RMWC, pp. 18, 21f, 132; RS, pp. 83-89; "The Idea of Covenant and American Democracy," Church History, XXIII (1954), p. 133f; and esp. "The Triad of Faith," Andover Newton Bulletin, XLVII (1954), pp. 3-12. Niebuhr's interest in Royce coincided with a general revival of interest in his philosophy. Niebuhr directed the unpublished Yale dissertation of Professor Paul Ramsey entitled "The Nature of Man in the Philosophy of Josiah Royce and Bernard Bosanquet" (1943) and in 1950 Niebuhr's Yale colleague Professor John E. Smith, published his important study of Royce's later philosophy (comprising his theory of interpretation, loyalty and community) entitled, Royce's Social Infinite (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1950).

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 80.

other selves for this knowledge for it does sustain direct relations with natural events and may champion an interpretation of this experience in defiance of the dominant pattern of interpretation mediated to it by social companions, both past and present. The self's knowledge of nature is therefore conditioned by, but is never wholly determined by, conventional interpretations such that "it must ignore for the sake of its [societies] dogma all that is personal and all that is novel in scientific theory. . ." <sup>1</sup> On the other hand the self is never so independent of its social culture that it apprehends natural events without "some of the words, categories, and relations supplied by his society." <sup>2</sup> Knowledge of nature is never pristine.

Relativity also means limitation. Relativity as relatedness focuses attention on the external relations of a self with others. These relations are irreducibly triadic in character. Relativity as limitation focuses more upon the internal structure of consciousness. The self in its role as theoretical or practical knower is limited in all its knowing to a particular, rather than universal point of view because of its finitude and because the concepts and categories employed in all reasoning are not a priori and universal but a priori and relative to the history of the society in which the self exists. <sup>3</sup> In philosophical discourse the term "relativism" is used more often to refer to this sort of subjective limitation than it is to refer to relativity as "relatedness" previously described. Niebuhr's discussion of the concept of "historical relativism" provides us with the most radical expression of the idea of relativity as limitation.

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 81. Cf. CC, p. 39.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>MR, pp. 7-13; CC, pp. 34-49; RS, pp 80f, 96f.

### Historical Relativism

In the prefaces of three of his most important works Niebuhr makes special mention of the important place that historical relativism occupies in his thinking.<sup>1</sup> A sensitive awareness of the problems posed for theology and ethics by the acceptance of the historically relative character of all knowledge claims was, of course, aroused by his early study of Ernst Troeltsch.<sup>2</sup>

Troeltsch has taught me to respect the multiformity and individuality of men and movements in Christian history, to be loath to force this rich variety into prefashioned, conceptual molds, and yet to seek logos in mythos, reason in history, essence in existence. He has helped me to accept and to profit by the acceptance of the relativity not only of historical objects but, more, of the historical subject, the observer and interpreter.<sup>3</sup>

On Troeltsch's own accounting the enduring problematic at the heart of all his thought was the conflict between the merely approximate truth yielded by all inquiry into history and "the impulse in men towards a definite practical standpoint--the eagerness of the trusting soul to receive the divine revelation and to obey the divine commands."<sup>4</sup>

His successive writings probe deeply into the problem of historical knowledge and its implications for the universal claims of Christianity and a universal ethic. The historical method which Troeltsch employed and the

---

<sup>1</sup>MR, p. vii; CC, p. 14; RS, p. 46.

<sup>2</sup>Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion, Yale University doctoral dissertation, 1924.

<sup>3</sup>CC, p. xii. Cf. Introduction to The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches by Ernst Troeltsch (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), pp. 7-12.

<sup>4</sup>Christian Thought: Its History and Application, edited with introduction by Baron Von Hügel (New York: Meridian Books, 1957), p. 37.

conclusions which he drew from his study of history were decisive for Niebuhr's own approach to all historical inquiry.<sup>1</sup> They also provided the starting point for his historicist approach to theology and ethics.<sup>2</sup> Two major studies published in the last decade of Troeltsch's life were particularly important in Niebuhr's judgment. His inquiry into the relationship of Christian faith and Western culture, Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen (1912), led him to affirm that not only the organization and polity, but also the theological and moral affirmations of Christianity, were inextricably intertwined with the development of Western intellectual, social, political and economic ideas and ideals.<sup>3</sup> This led him to modify his earlier view that Christianity

---

<sup>1</sup>"I am most conscious of my debt to that theologian and historian who was occupied throughout his life by the problem of church and culture--Ernst Troeltsch. The present book [Christ and Culture] in one sense undertakes to do no more than to supplement and in part to correct his work on The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches," (Ibid., pp. xi-xii). Niebuhr does not explain in any detail the nature of this "correction," other than to indicate that his own study of the history of Christianity had led him to conclude that "all this relative history of finite men and movements is under the governance of the absolute God." (Ibid., p. xii). Some indication of the nature of this correction may be gained by noting that Niebuhr placed Troeltsch among "the dualist" while plainly himself favoring "the conversionist" answer to the nature of the dialectic between Christ and culture. (Ibid., p. 181-183). Of the three "median answers" identified by Niebuhr "the dualist" seeks to combine the two authorities of Christ and culture by asserting paradoxically that while the moralities of each are discontinuous with each other, both must be obeyed. Any synthesis between them is impossible within history; it awaits an eschatological reconciliation beyond history. (Ibid., pp. 42-43). "The conversionist" agrees that the two moralities are irreconcilable but believes that it is precisely within man's historical existence that Christ is transforming culture and society. (Ibid.) Nowhere in Christ and Culture does Niebuhr explicitly acknowledge his preference for this position. But it is the only position he does not criticize adversely. In The Meaning of Revelation however, he does give explicit endorsement of this position as his own. "The problem of natural and revealed religion, has been dealt with as involving neither mutually exclusive principles nor yet distinct stages in a continuous development but rather transformation or conversion, in which the later stage is less the product than the transformer of the previous stage." (Ibid., p. viii).

<sup>2</sup>MR, p. x.

<sup>3</sup>Christian Thought, pp. 51f. Cf. CC, pp. 30f; and SSD, pp. 17f.

alone among world religions could justify its claims to "absolute validity."<sup>1</sup> Christian belief and practice, far from being universally normative, was now not even normative for all Christians at all times but only for each individual Christian in his own time and place.<sup>2</sup> The character and purpose of God have not been revealed in any definite or final way in any historical religion.<sup>3</sup> This particular expression of a nominalist temper is given even more consistent expression and broader application in Der Historismus und seine Probleme (1922). Here the historical relativity of all human knowledge is emphasized. No political, social, ethical, aesthetic and scientific ideas so transcend the historical circumstances in which they developed such that universal validity could be claimed for them. "Indeed, even the validity of science and logic seemed to exhibit . . . strong individual differences present even in their deepest and innermost rudiments."<sup>4</sup>

Niebuhr did not share the view of other critics that Troeltsch's emphasis on the relativity of historical knowledge was excessive.<sup>5</sup> On the contrary, he was confident that the problems posed by historical relativism for the unity of culture and the normativeness of Christian theology and ethics had increased rather than decreased since Troeltsch's time. Furthermore, he believed

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 53-57.

<sup>2</sup>"It [Christianity] is final and binding for us, because we have nothing else, and because in what we have we can recognize the accents of the divine voice." Ibid., p. 55. It is interesting to note here also that Troeltsch has now forsaken his earlier quest for a general religious a priori and is much closer to the existentialists' stress on subjective truth.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 60-63.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Baron F. Von Hügel's "Introduction" to Christian Thought, pp. 20-26; H. R. Macintosh, Types of Modern Theology (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1937), pp. 175-208, esp. pp. 195-198 and 204-208.

that the historically conditioned character of all knowledge had been "demonstrated by history and sociology."<sup>1</sup> It is a new factor in the self-understanding of modern men which the theologian and moralist ignore at their peril. "In every field of philosophical inquiry the historical approach has established itself."<sup>2</sup> What is true for philosophy is no less true for theology.

There does not seem to be any apparent possibility of escape from the dilemma of historical relativism for any type of theology. The historical point of view of the observer must be taken into consideration in every case since no observer can get out of history into a realm beyond time-space; if reason is to operate at all it must be content to work as an historical reason.<sup>3</sup>

His agreement with Troeltschean historicism was complete.

It is necessary now to specify more precisely the concept of historical relativism as Niebuhr himself understood it. Briefly stated, historical relativism means that there is no knowledge of things or events in themselves; all knowledge is conditioned by the standpoint of the knower.<sup>4</sup> Whatever we know or value, conceive or judge, is seen from the point of view of a self that exists in a particular society at a particular time. Its very rationality is qualified by the language and categories of interpretation of this society.

Critical idealists and realists knew themselves to be human selves with a specific psychological and logical equipment; their successors know themselves to be social human beings whose reason is not a common reason, alike in all human selves, but one which is qualified by inheritance from a particular society. They know that they are historical selves whose metaphysics, logic, ethics and theology are limited, moving and changing in time . . . though we regard the universal, the image of the universal in our mind is not a universal image.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>MR, pp. 7-8.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 9-10. Cf. CC, pp. 69f; 236-238.

. . . Historical relativism affirms the historicity of the subject even more than that of the object: man it points out, is not only in time but time is in man. Moreover and more significantly, the time that is in man is not abstract but particular and concrete; it is not a general category of time but rather the time of a definite society with distinct language, economic and political relations, religious faith and social organization.<sup>1</sup>

The self is never in possession of Plato's timeless transcendent universals nor Kant's transcendental a priori categories. It is in possession of categories or patterns of interpretation but they are not inherent in the structure of the mind, as Kant taught, but inherited from the subject's personal and social past. As a critical disciple of Kant, Niebuhr dispensed with the a priori categories of the understanding as structuring present experience. But he remained enough of a critical disciple to hold to a view of mind as actively structuring all understanding of present experience (of things and other persons) by means of "remembered images." These

remembered images are the product . . . of a society which has taught it [the self] a language with names and explicit or implicit metaphors and with an implicit logic. With the aid of that language the self has learned to divide up the continuum of its experiences into separate entities, to distinguish things and persons, processes in nature and movements in society.<sup>2</sup>

Only through the mediation of a specific language with its contingent concepts and categories does the mind attempt to interpret direct confrontation with natural and historical events.

Niebuhr was fully aware that the acceptance of historical relativism raised the spectre of a "new agnosticism."<sup>3</sup> The phrase "new agnosticism" is significant because Niebuhr saw a definite parallel between the agnostic challenge to reason posed by historical relativism and the similar challenge posed

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>2</sup>RS, p. 96.

<sup>3</sup>MR, p. vii.

by the early empiricists Locke and Hume, namely, that reason must work within the limits of sensory experience.<sup>1</sup> But just as reason survived the subjectivist challenge of Hume and emerged chastened, disciplined and self-confident from the pen of Kant, so today Niebuhr is confident that the threat of skepticism need not be the inevitable result of accepting historical relativism. The challenge can be met by developing a "new type of critical idealism."<sup>2</sup>

Critical philosophy and critical theology accepted the limitations imposed on the rational subject by a new self knowledge. . . . So in our time the recognition of reason's historical limitations can be for theology in particular, as for the social sciences in general, the prelude to faithful critical work in history and historically apprehended experience.<sup>3</sup>

This can be accomplished by consistently tempering the emphasis of the "new" critical idealists on the historically conditioned character of the mind's categories with the critical realist's emphasis on the independent reality of the object.

Niebuhr supported two central theses of a critical realist epistemology. First, he maintained the irreducibility of the subject-object relation. This is well illustrated by Niebuhr's questioning of the validity of Paul Tillich's view that the existence of the subject and the object is grounded in some more primal strata of being. He questioned whether the polarity of being and non-being employed by Tillich was a true polarity.<sup>4</sup> If not, it was simply dialectical

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 2, 9, 13, 16f.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. vii, 8, 65.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 16-17.

<sup>4</sup>Review of Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology I in Theology LVI (1953), p. 227. It is interesting to note that one other question which Niebuhr puts to Tillich is addressed to his conception of reason. (Ibid., p. 228) His question clearly implies that he thinks that Tillich's method of correlation employs a conception of reason which is autonomous with respect to revelation and history. It was precisely Tillich's emphasis upon historical relativism that had attracted Niebuhr to his earlier work. Cf. Niebuhr's preface to The Religious Situation, pp. 9-27.

camouflage for an idealist metaphysical monism. For Niebuhr the subject-object, self-other dialectic is irreducible and untranscendable whether between God and man, man and man, or man and objects in the external world. Objects both finite and infinite, persons or things, exist in their own right independently of any knowing mind.

Niebuhr also accepted a second realist thesis; knowing conforms to being and not being to knowing. It is true that the mind is not able to gain privileged access to any object such that it gains knowledge of the discrete characteristics of objects as they exist independently of the knower. It is also true that the content of all knowledge claims are qualified by the contingent historically conditioned character of the images and categories employed by the knowing self. But despite these limitations, if what we know is true, it is so because it conforms to what is there and not because the knowing mind cannot err in the employment of its ordering images. Errors in our knowing result from the employment of images which obscure or distort the requirement of the object.<sup>1</sup>

No major theme in Niebuhr's theological ethic has called forth as much critical comment as his commitment to historical relativism.<sup>2</sup> There are, I believe, at least two major reasons for this. The first is that Niebuhr failed to provide a sufficiently careful, discriminating and self-critical definition of the precise meaning he attached to the term. Nor did he give an adequate

---

<sup>1</sup>MR, pp. 97, 99, 102-108.

<sup>2</sup>John Cobb, Living Options in Protestant Theology: A Survey of Methods (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), pp. 296-300; Hans Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," FE, pp. 87-94; Paul Ramsey, "The Transformation of Ethics," FE, pp. 151-158, 163-164, 170-171; John D. Godsey, The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970), pp. 96-107; Van A. Harvey, The Historian and the Believer (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1969), pp. 234-242.

account of the way in which human reasoning is qualified by historical relativism.<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps too easy to point out the logically self-contradictory character of statements which imply that historical relativism is a universal truth! But to say unqualifiedly, as Niebuhr does, that "we are in history as the fish is in water"<sup>2</sup> is to use an unhelpful and misleading analogy. If all our being and knowing is wholly encompassed and determined by our particular social history as the fish is wholly bounded by water, then how did Niebuhr come by the knowledge of this universal truth? To know that this is true of all human reasoning is only possible for a mind that has transcended its partial perspective and attained knowledge of a universal truth. The principle of historical relativism can never become universally true of all human reasoning without itself becoming an absolute truth and thus falling into self-contradiction. But there is direct evidence in both his early and late writings that he recognized as well as anyone else that to deny the existence of universal truth is to deny the possibility of a theological ethic. In his autobiographical essay

---

<sup>1</sup>Both Professor Van A. Harvey, in The Historian and the Believer (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1969), esp. in the last chapter entitled, "Faith, Images, and the Christian Perspective," pp. 246-291--and Professor Gordon D. Kaufman, in Relativism, Knowledge and Faith (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), seek in their own ways to remedy these defects in their teacher's work while remaining loyal to the historicist perspective. "Historical relativism may be deplored," says Kaufman, but "what is needed is an analysis of our thought processes which will enable us to understand why it is that our thought is relative and inadequate and subject to radical doubt with a careful assessment of the metaphysical and theological significance of this fact." Ibid., p. ix.

<sup>2</sup>MR, p. 48. Commenting on the same passage Paul Ramsey says wryly, "No fish ever discoursed at length on the bondage of its reason to liquidity, or on the relativity of its point of viewing from the depths. 'The Critique of Piscatory Reason' has not yet produced the thesis that fish are not only in water but water also in fish, wholly determining the categories of fish understanding. Indeed we can set it down in advance that, were such a literary event to occur, the author would thereby have refuted himself by evidencing incontrovertibly that his own reason is not, to the whole extent of its being, bounded by liquidity." "The Transformation of Ethics," FE, p. 157.

written in 1961 he expressed regret at having used the term "historical relativism;" "historical relationism is probably a better term, since it does not involve subjectivism."<sup>1</sup> The comment is in one sense a curious one because it implies that substituting the word "relationism" for the word "relativism" would by itself preserve the theory to which the terms refer from subjectivism. But this aside, it does show that he was sensitive to the problem and wished to give full weight to his "conviction of the radically historical character of human existence"<sup>2</sup> without embracing the kind of historical relativism that would rule out all universal truth in theology. Again, in a very early essay on the implication of moral relativism for Christian ethics he expressly denied that relativism ruled out the possibility of absolute truth.<sup>3</sup>

To say that there are relative elements in the Christian ethic, even in the New Testament formulation, is not to say that the Christian ethic is relative. The absolute within the relative comes to appearance at two points--in the absolute obligation of an individual or a society to follow its highest insight, and in the element of revelation of ultimate reality.<sup>4</sup>

But when every allowance has been made for good intentions it is also true that the exact nature of the claims which Niebuhr made in the name of historical relativism are ambiguous.

Paul Ramsey, among the several previous commentators on Niebuhr's

---

<sup>1</sup>"Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 249.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>"Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic;" An address given at a Conference of Theological Seminaries meeting at Drew Theological Seminary, Madison, New Jersey, November 29-December 1, 1929 on "Theological Education and the World Mission of Christianity." Published in New York by the International Missionary Council, pp. 3 and 7-11.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 9. This essay, above all others, shows the strong influence of Ernst Troeltsch.

thought, has given the most sustained attention to the important role which the idea of relativism plays in Niebuhr's ethics.<sup>1</sup> The critical thrust of his essay centers on getting clear about this issue. He has questioned the accuracy of Niebuhr's use of the word "relativism." He suggests "the words 'relational' and 'relatedness' better represent Niebuhr's position than the words 'relative' or 'relativism.'"<sup>2</sup> While he recognized that Niebuhr's choice of this word is 1) "in part only a terminological matter of no great importance," he also believed it to be an indication of the influence of 2) the "excessive contextualism of much modern social philosophy, idealistic and pragmatic," and 3) "the continued influence of Troeltsch's cultural and historical relativism."<sup>3</sup> These three observations are correct, but I am not sure that the terminological innovations Ramsey advanced really succeed in removing the ambiguity in question. Later in his essay he suggests that the term "objective relativism" be replaced "with some such expression as 'relational objectivism' (when the relativity of the object is at issue) or 'perspectival objectivism' (when the relativity of the subject is in view)."<sup>4</sup> I would argue, however, that the term "objective relativism" should be allowed to stand precisely because Niebuhr employs it to hold together both the ontological notion of the "triadic" structure of being (God-self-other) and the epistemological notion that all knowledge is relative to the specific culturally conditioned categories of the knower's mind. This is not a serious criticism of Ramsey's understanding of Niebuhr's ethics because he is well aware of the fact that this terminological problem is occasioned by a more basic epistemological problem.

---

<sup>1</sup>"The Transformation of Ethics," FE, pp. 140-172.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., cf. pp. 151ff.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 156.

Niebuhr tended to interpret certain epistemological concepts as "facts" which must simply be accepted rather than as theoretical notions which need some sort of rational justification. As Ramsey has observed, "the reader [of The Meaning of Revelation] is asked to presuppose that a volume entitled 'The Critique of Historical Reason' has already been written, and has clearly established itself in a consensus of 'critical philosophers.'"<sup>1</sup> But Niebuhr nowhere advances a philosophical argument to justify the truth of historical relativism as indispensable to any adequate epistemology. Rather he simply asserts that certain nameless social theorists and historians have demonstrated that this is the case. "Theology," he declares, "is concerned with the principle of relativity as this has been demonstrated by history and sociology rather than by physics, and if it is developing into a relativistic theology this is the result . . . of an attempt to adjust itself to a new self-knowledge."<sup>2</sup> The point of my criticism is not that Niebuhr should not entertain such a view but that he does so uncritically.

Finally, it seems to me that the crux of the problem is Niebuhr's failure to mark an important distinction between descriptive and normative relativism. Does he in particular contexts claim that judgments of fact or value in society  $S_1$  differ from those in society  $S_2$  (descriptive relativism) or does he claim that what is really good, right or true in society  $S_1$  is not good, right or true for society  $S_2$  (normative relativism). One may hold the first of these positions without accepting the second. A commitment to descriptive relativism does not logically entail normative relativism. An awareness of the great

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>2</sup>MR, pp. 7-8. Niebuhr doubtless had Troeltsch primarily in mind as having "demonstrated" the truth of historical relativism.

variety of beliefs which various people hold to be true and the variability of the values which they cherish at different times and places is a strong antidote to the ready acceptance of parochial beliefs masquerading as universal principles. It was the prevalence of this tendency, especially in the Christian church, that Niebuhr rightly criticized with tireless zeal. But the erection of false norms does not provide grounds for denying the possibility or actuality of universal principles of moral obligation or moral value.

### Theoretical and Practical Knowledge

One cardinal feature of Niebuhr's theory of knowledge is his serious commitment to the historically conditioned character of all human reasoning. A second important element in his epistemology is his acceptance of something like Kant's distinction between theoretical and practical reason.<sup>1</sup> Theoretical reasoning is that rational activity which a subject carries on in knowing objects in the external world. Practical reasoning is that rational activity which a self carries on in knowing other selves. Now these two kinds of reasoning yield two kinds of knowledge which are wholly dissimilar. This is so because both the knower and what is known and the character of the relationship between them is different. "Our knowledge of other persons differs from our knowledge of objects externally regarded not only by being directed toward different aspects of reality but by being a relation between different terms."<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>MR, pp. viii, 65, 73, 74; RMWC, pp. 12-16, 78, 116f, 127-130; RS, pp. 82f. Recalling his break with liberal theology over the nature of the relation between God and man, Niebuhr observes that this did not mean that he abandoned "religious empiricism any more than [he] abandoned historicism or neo-Kantian epistemology." "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 249.

<sup>2</sup>MR, p. 144. Cf. ibid., pp. 144, 147; RS, pp. 72-73.

The specific interpretation which Niebuhr gives to the Kantian distinction owes much to the familiar dialogical theory of Martin Buber. According to Niebuhr, Buber argued that the "I" that knows and acts in the "I-Thou" dialectic must be distinguished from the "I" in the "I-it" relation.<sup>1</sup> The "I" in the "I-it" relation is not a self-conscious being. It knows, but it does not know that it knows. It values, but it is not able to value itself nor evaluate its valuation of other objects. The "I" in the "I-it" relation is not conscious of itself as a subject, as the counterpart of a Thou.<sup>2</sup> In seeking to interpret impersonal processes and ideas the subject is not in this relation, strictly speaking, a self.<sup>3</sup> ". . . The mind that contemplates ideas is not the self in its whole concrete character with its anxieties and hopes, its highly personal guilt and need of deliverance from evil but rather a common mind, an abstracted self."<sup>4</sup> The "I" alone in this relation is active; the object is passive. The self as observer is not concerned with questions about personal freedom or with making judgments about the value or disvalue of the entities or processes it seeks to understand. It recognizes no qualitative distinctions in the behavior of the external world.<sup>5</sup> It is solely concerned with tracing the efficient, material, formal or antecedent causal relations between one object and another.<sup>6</sup> This "I" is not conscious of itself as just this particular individual existing here and now with a definite moral character

---

<sup>1</sup>MR, p. 65; PCM, p. 130; RS, p. 72. Cf. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 2nd edition, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 62f.

<sup>2</sup>RS, p. 73.

<sup>3</sup>MR, p. 145.

<sup>4</sup>PCM, p. 130.

<sup>5</sup>MR, p. 144.

<sup>6</sup>RMWC, p. 127.

and specific moral commitments. It is conscious only of sensed qualities such as colors or sounds, or entities such as tables and chairs, or abstract actualities such as numbers or concepts of God.<sup>1</sup>

In the I-Thou relation both the relationship and the related terms are different. Another self is a "Thou" not an "it" precisely because it is not an object passively awaiting the masterful curiosity of the theoretical reason. The "I" here is not the initiator but the recipient of knowledge. The epistemological relation is reversed.

To know a knower is to begin with the activity of the other who knows us or reveals himself to us by his knowing activity. No amount of activity on our part will serve to uncover the hidden self-activity. It must make itself manifest or it cannot be known.<sup>2</sup>

Knowledge of another self is not to be confused with knowledge of the constitution of human bodies or the contents of other minds. Selves reveal themselves in the valuations they make of other selves. Selves know each other only insofar as they value each other and respond to such valuations made by the other. Niebuhr fully endorses both Kierkegaard's and Buber's emphasis on the primacy of the direct, untranscendable response-relation between one self and another, between the I and the Thou.

Selves and not objects are the primary realities. Niebuhr champions the primacy of moral knowledge without depreciating the importance of our ordinary or more specialized scientific knowledge of nature. But in company with all existentialist moralists he viewed with alarm the extent to which in the modern world the scientific knowledge of objects rather than the moral-knowledge of selves is recognized as most real and of greatest value.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>RS, p. 80.

<sup>2</sup>MR, p. 145.

<sup>3</sup>"Science in Conflict with Morality," supplementary essay in RMNC, pp. 127-141.

Selves are epiphenomena in the dominant world view of our society. What alone is acknowledged, accepted as actual, is the object. So far as selves can be made objects--set before the mind as projected, external realities--they have their place. But then they are no longer selves; they are not I's and Thou's but It's.<sup>1</sup>

But in the relation of I to Thou there can be no ignoring the concrete personal concerns of each self. What is known in such relations are the doubts and fears, guilt and anxiety, loves and hates, of particular selves who freely choose to reveal themselves in these ways. Such knowledge is not conveyed by means of propositions. To do so is to remain at the level of theoretical knowing. Moral knowledge does not consist of a specific body of discourse relating to a specialized kind of human activity which can be clearly distinguished from activities of another kind. "Morality is not something that can be institutionalized as science, art, education, medicine, and religion are institutionalized. It pervades all activities."<sup>2</sup>

This distinction between theoretical and moral reasoning may be made clearer by 1) taking account of the notion of "truth" appropriate to each and by 2) noting the role which "imagination" plays in each.

The truth appropriate to theoretical reasoning is different from that which is appropriate to moral reasoning, but it has nothing to do with the distinction between that which is universally true and that which is true for one individual. Rather, a distinction must be observed between "the truth that is the opposite of error or ignorance and the truth which is antithesis to lie or deception."<sup>3</sup> A self which seeks to know objects is liable to error;

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 140. Cf. MR, p. 146.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>3</sup>RMWC, p. 46.

a self which seeks to know selves is liable to deceive and to be deceived. The theoretical knower of objects defines truth as essentially a right relation between ideas, propositions, theories and objective reality or phenomena; and as a right relation among these ideas, propositions and theories themselves.<sup>1</sup> But the man who knows truth about objects may not communicate truly with another person. Indeed it is a commonplace of our ordinary experience, as Socrates observed to his sorrow, that it is precisely the man who really knows the truth in the first sense who can lie or deceive most convincingly. The situation may be reversed. For example, a highly knowledgeable scientist who seeks to communicate some scientific truth to an untrained friend will often find it difficult to avoid either deceiving his friend on the one hand, or misrepresenting the truth of what he knows on the other.<sup>2</sup> These two kinds of truth must be distinguished and both are evident "in a community of persons who value truth not only as a kind of relation between propositions and facts but also as a relation between persons."<sup>3</sup>

In The Meaning of Revelation Niebuhr seeks to demonstrate the importance of the distinction between theoretical and practical reasoning for the understanding of past events. The same historical event may be understood from two distinct points of view. He calls them "external" (scientific) and "internal" (existential-valuational) histories. An external history is any account which is written from the standpoint of a disinterested observer who deliberately divests himself so far as is possible of all valuational and personal attachments to the events he seeks to describe. An internal history is an account written

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 46 and pp. 134-136.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 135.

from the perspective of a person whose life has been affected qualitatively by the events which he describes.<sup>1</sup> For example, the medical report of a doctor describing the treatment of a patient who recovered his vision will differ greatly from that penned by the patient himself. Whereas for the doctor this event is an observed phenomenon, for the blind man it was a lived experience, part of the story of what happened to him as a person.<sup>2</sup> Nothing is gained by asking if one or other of these two histories yields a truer or more accurate account of what happened. Indeed, this question can only arise when it is forgotten that true or false judgments may be made from either perspective.

"There is a descriptive and there is a normative knowledge of history and neither type is reducible to the terms of the other."<sup>3</sup>

The role that imagination plays in both kinds of reasoning also affords insight into important differences between them. Niebuhr seeks to clear the way for his explanation of the role which imagination plays in the acquisition of all knowledge by denying that distinction between reason and imagination that confines the former to theoretical reasoning and the latter to practical reasoning.<sup>4</sup> When this is done it becomes impossible to distinguish between more adequate or less adequate images employed by the practical reason. At the same time the indispensable role of imagination in theoretical reasoning is denied. "Reason and imagination are both necessary in both spheres."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>MR, pp. 59-67.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 67. The nature of the distinction will be treated in greater detail later in connection with Niebuhr's doctrine of revelation.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 94-109. Cf. RS, pp. 79-81, 96, 151-154, 161f; RMWC, pp. 13-15, 139-141.

<sup>5</sup>MR, p. 95.

"Imagination," as Niebuhr employs the term, has reference to that essentially creative process in which the mind orders what is "given" to it. For theoretical reason the "given" consists of the various kinds of sensations mediated by our bodies. Sensations as such are non-intelligible. They must be interpreted, that is, made to fit into an ordered pattern in which each stands in some meaningful relation to the others.

The jostling mob of confused, unintelligible, meaningless, visual and auditory sensations is made to march in order by a mind which approaches and apprehends them in some total image. . . . We do not hear isolated ejaculations, separate and therefore meaningless words but apprehend each sound in a context which we in part supply. . . . We anticipate connections between sensations before they are given and through imagination supply what is lacking in the immediate datum.<sup>1</sup>

Error is possible in all our knowledge of physical things and processes, not because sensations can be other than what they are, but because the mind may employ false or erroneous images in its interpretation of them. Error in our knowledge of nature arises when the images or symbols in the mind are either separated from "constant reference to sensation in which mental expectations are fulfilled or denied,"<sup>2</sup> or when images and symbols are identified with objects so that no criticism of the former is possible. Knowledge of the natural world depends upon a continuing dialectic between sensation and imagination.

The practical mode of knowing also involves a dialectic, but in this context both the "given" and the kind of images employed differ. Here the

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 97. " . . . Reason forms and interprets sense-experience; experience validates or invalidates such experience-filled reasoning," RMNC, p. 13. Cf. RS, p. 82.

"brute data" are not sensations but the "affections of the self."<sup>1</sup> Such affections are doubtless mediated by our bodies but they are not identical with bodily states or with any states of affairs external to our bodies. These "affections" are mediated to us more often through our "social body," the communities in which we participate directly or sympathetically, than through our physical structure. The practical reason does not concern itself with interpreting pleasure and pain, for example, as physical sensations, rather it seeks to understand and interpret joys and sorrows, love and hate, humility and pride as these arise in the life and actions of a community of persons. But these "affections" like "sensations" are not in themselves intelligible; adequate images and patterns are needed so that they may be intelligibly related. The images employed by the practical reason are at once inexpugnably personal and social. The use of impersonal images in the realm of practical reason leads to mythology rather than knowledge just as surely as does the use of personal images by the theoretical reason.<sup>2</sup>

The employment of erroneous or inadequate images by the practical reason is as productive of unfulfilled expectations and error as they are in the sphere of theoretical reason. For example, a person suffering from great anxiety may interpret his fears as part of a great conspiracy directed against him. His images are erroneous and he either accepts the correction afforded by the very different interpretations of his companions or he retreats into the solitary world of private fantasy. The presence of a perverse or evil imagination is apparent, too, in the conflict which exists between various social, racial, political, economic or religious groups. The image of the depraved race may be used by weak or powerful nations seeking to provide for themselves an intelligible

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 97-98.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 98-99, 102-104.

interpretation of their many feelings of anxiety, inadequacy or humiliation. But the erroneous and evil character of such images becomes clear in the conflicts which ensue and in the dissolution and destruction which results for both the despised and the despisers.<sup>1</sup> Error in the employment of such personal images by the practical reason is so prevalent and so productive of evil consequences that the temptation arises to abandon any hope of finding and using adequate images which will provide an intelligible and coherent ordering of "the affections of the self."

When personal images fail an attempt may then be made "to employ in the understanding of personal relations the images which we have learned to use with some success in our external, non-participating knowledge of things."<sup>2</sup> An immediate consequence of this move is to render otiose any appeal to revelation understood as that special occasion which provides the practical reason with adequate images for the progressive ordering of the affections of the self. The apprehension or intuition of such "special occasions" is wholly an affair of the practical reason. The impersonal, quantitative and non-historical concepts of the theoretical reason are therefore quite incommensurate with this notion of revelation. Further explanation of Niebuhr's understanding of the thorny issue of the relation between reason and revelation will concern us later; at this point notice is taken of two objections which he raised against the use of impersonal images in moral reasoning. "The first is that no man in the situation of a participant in life actually succeeds in interpreting and dealing with other human beings on this level; the second is that the impersonal account leaves large areas of our experience unrationalized and uncontrolled."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 99-101.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 102-103.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 104.

According to Niebuhr this first difficulty may be detected in the thought of many philosophers from Plato to the present. Positivism provides a particularly clear-cut example.

Positivists who affirm that terms of praise and blame are meaningless yet tend in times of dispute with those whom they call obscurantist to praise and blame as if there were persons before them and as if there were value in their own view, as if truth made a difference to persons. . . . The participant in life simply cannot escape thinking in terms of persons and of values.<sup>1</sup>

The transition from external knowledge of things and processes to internal personal knowledge of selves is made when motives are evaluated or when decisions or promises are made. But when it is made the self which evaluates, decides or promises is not the self in its role as theoretical knower, but the self in its role as practical moral agent participating in the life of a community of selves who value, when they do not disvalue, each other's words, deeds, or character. The second difficulty may also be seen in the thought of positivist philosophers. The attempt to rule out all talk of "selves" and "values" as meaningless by means of the a priori judgment that only words or sentences which refer to sense-experience (or words or sentences which may be translated into other words or sentences which themselves refer to sense-experience) are meaningful is arbitrary. But quite apart from the dubious character of this criterion, Niebuhr could not understand how it could be thought to succeed in eliminating the need for rationality in morals. "The consequence of declaring any part of human experience and action to be beyond reason is not to eliminate it from existence but to leave it subject to unregulated passion, to uncriticized custom or to the evil imaginations of the heart."<sup>2</sup> The self as moral agent does not and cannot avoid seeking for pattern and meaning in all its relations but in doing so it cannot either adopt

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 105-106.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 107.

those images appropriate to its role as theoretical knower, or dispense with any and all rational images. The choice it faces is not between reason and imagination but between reasoning with the aid of irreducible personal and moral images which are universally good or adequate, and reasoning with the aid of egoistic or evil images.

To confine rationality--that is the search for order, coherence, and lawfulness--to the theoretical knowledge of objects and to deny that a similar activity is carried on by the self as moral agent is an error. Order, coherence and lawfulness are also sought in the realm of personal relations and in the determination of what is good and evil, just and unjust, wise and foolish.<sup>1</sup> To the extent that scientists, philosophers or other thinkers have either denied or neglected the role which reason must play in ordering the affections or values of selves in their relations to other selves, just to that extent Niebuhr judges them to have contributed to the demoralization and depersonalization of modern life. This is the inevitable result of an exclusive preoccupation with impersonal things, powers or forces and the relations between them. The object alone is considered actual and only the truth or falsity of statements about things which are assumed to be objective are considered important.<sup>2</sup> It is not enough, Niebuhr observed, to officially acknowledge that "our Western morality is built on the recognition that nothing is more important, more to be served or honored, apart from God himself, than I's and Thou's,"<sup>3</sup> if we then proceed to limit all rational inquiry into human life to knowledge of ourselves as objects set before

---

<sup>1</sup>"Science in Conflict With Morality?," pp. 138f.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 139.

the theoretical reason for observation, comparison, and subsequent generic description.<sup>1</sup> When this happens those specifically moral questions which a scientist, for example, often raises to himself about the actual value of his work, or about the meaning and justification of his vocation as a scientist become meaningless questions to which no rational answer can be given.<sup>2</sup> The insistent subjective concerns which men raise to themselves about the meaning of their lives; about the worthwhileness or triviality of the causes or values to which they are committed, are moral questions which demand moral answers that can be given, if at all, only by the exercise of practical reasoning. The terms "theoretical" and "practical" denote two necessary and irreducible modes of reasoning.

The preceding exposition leaves no doubt about the fact that Niebuhr drew a very sharp distinction between theoretical and practical reasoning. This is particularly true of his use of it in The Meaning of Revelation. While it is true that he did claim that the relation between them was "very close,"<sup>3</sup> he did not explain how he knew this to be the case or what the nature of the relation is, given the radical character of the distinction he had made. Elsewhere he observed that while philosophers since the time of Aristotle have distinguished between these two sorts of reasoning, most have not thought it possible to unite them systematically in a single theory.<sup>4</sup> In the following passage he seems to suggest that it is sufficient to recognize that these two modes of reasoning are carried on by the one self even though it is impossible to conceptualize how

---

<sup>1</sup>RS, pp. 115-117.

<sup>2</sup>"Science in Conflict With Morality?," pp. 127-129, 138-140.

<sup>3</sup>MR, p. 94. Cf. p. 104.

<sup>4</sup>Particularly "Science in Conflict With Morality?," p. 127.

they are so united.

Only the individual self that both knows and acts provides an unintellectualizable or at least unconceptualizable unity to these various processes [viz. theoretical and practical].<sup>1</sup>

In The Responsible Self, however, he is less confident on this point. He reaffirms his view that the distinction is "useful," "unavoidable" even, but now he wonders if it does not tend "to lead us somewhat astray by dissolving the unity of the self."<sup>2</sup> He is now convinced also that the subjective distinction between theoretical and practical reason is employed in too simplistic a fashion if it has the consequence of obscuring "the practical or ethical elements in our knowing as well as the observing, interpreting elements in our doing."<sup>3</sup> It is doubtful that he could have written this at the time he wrote The Meaning of Revelation.

The clearest example of Niebuhr's analysis of "the practical or ethical elements in our knowing" is contained in "Science in Conflict With Morality?"<sup>4</sup> Scientific inquiry exemplifies man's capacity for theoretical reasoning in its most comprehensive and sophisticated form. The task of the moralist is not to pass judgment on the adequacy of such theoretical reasoning, but to point out the moral character of all scientific inquiry. The moral character referred to has nothing to do with the virtues or vices of scientists nor with any systematic moral philosophy that may have been developed by them.<sup>5</sup> By the morality of

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> RS, p. 82.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 83. Cf. RMWC, p. 75, "Fact and value or theoretical and practical reasoning cannot be so divorced from each other that political, ethical, or religious men can reason without theorizing, observing and being concerned with facts; or that scientific men can develop theory without making decisions or choosing values."

<sup>4</sup> pp. 130-137.

<sup>5</sup> "Science in Conflict With Morality?," pp. 130f.

science Niebuhr means those ethical elements that are actually present, not as accidental features of scientific work, but as essential to it. Science is morally ordered 1) by its commitment to true and universal truth as a cause; 2) by its conscientiousness in self-criticism; and 3) by its faithfulness in truth-telling.<sup>1</sup> Conflicts may arise between the scientist's loyalty to scientific inquiry and his personal interests or his loyalty to a particular political ideology, but this only confirms the fact that these are conflicts between moralities. Conflicts may arise, indeed have arisen, between this morality of science and those moralities that make national survival or some system of political or religious dogma an ultimate cause. Such conflicts do not support any contention that there is an ineradicable conflict between theoretical and practical reasoning in scientific inquiry. They are better understood as clashes between science operating with a commitment to the cause of universal knowledge or truth and the parochial causes of these political or religious "truth-systems."<sup>2</sup>

Niebuhr also claimed that it was important to recognize "the observing, interpreting elements in our doing." Unfortunately, he did not identify these "elements" or attempt any systematic exposition of their character. He did not do so, perhaps, because he believed that as a moral theologian he was fully occupied with the task of analyzing and assessing the function of practical reasoning not only in religion but in other kinds of cultural activity such as politics.<sup>3</sup>

If Niebuhr's description of the theoretical and practical reason is

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 131-136. Cf. RMWC, pp. 86-88.

<sup>2</sup>RMWC, p. 86.

<sup>3</sup>"Science in Conflict With Morality?," p. 130. RMWC, pp. 64-78.

indebted to Kant in some major aspects, it departs quite radically from that philosopher's views at other points, especially with respect to the practical reason. His account of the role of imagination in both kinds of reasoning clearly presupposes an acceptance of the fundamental Kantian distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal object, between objects as they are in themselves and objects as they appear to us. He also agreed with Kant that insofar as we claim to know an object, its character as known by us is partly determined by the peculiar character of our perceptual and conceptual capacities. The extent of his departure from Kant's views may be judged from the following points. His acceptance of the universal truth of historical relativism made it impossible for him to agree with Kant that the categories or images employed in all reasoning are universal, that is, common to all selves.<sup>1</sup> It is well known that Kant sought 1) to distinguish between the a priori and a posteriori elements in the theoretical knowledge of objects and 2) to give a systematic account of the a priori elements in both theoretical and practical or moral knowledge. Niebuhr agreed that these elements must be distinguished but he introduced two very drastic revisions into this Kantian scheme. First, his acceptance of the historical relativity of all human reasoning brought him into direct conflict with Kant's insistence that necessity and universality are the two defining characteristics of apriority. It is surprising then to find Niebuhr referring to such historically relative forms of human reason as a priori.<sup>2</sup>

It [the self] comes to its meetings with the Thou's and It's with an a priori equipment that is the heritage of its personal and social past; . . . The remembered images are the product not, in the first place, of its own past encounters but of a society which

---

<sup>1</sup>MR, p. 9; RS, pp. 80, 96.

<sup>2</sup>RS, pp. 80, 96, 154.

has taught it a language with names and explicit or implicit metaphors and with an implicit logic. With the aid of that language the self has learned to divide up the continuum of its experience into separate entities, to distinguish things and persons, processes in nature and movements in society.<sup>1</sup>

For Kant a priori meant underived from, or independent of, sense experience. If we acquire images in the manner described by Niebuhr then they are clearly not a priori in Kant's sense. Niebuhr could only defend them as a priori in relation to the particular experience of an individual self: Kant, of course, argued that the a priori elements in our knowledge are independent of all experience. Second, it is hardly accurate to call the description Niebuhr has given of the function of the practical reason a revision of the Kantian theory. For Kant the role of the practical reason was severely restricted to the positing of unities behind experience. For Niebuhr practical reason functions in a manner analogous to that of the theoretical reason.<sup>2</sup> It is the reasoning of a self with a personal destiny who seeks and finds meaning within experience. If labels are to be used at all it may be said that critical idealism is replaced by a sort of critical existentialism.

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>2</sup>MR, pp. 95-99. RMWC, p. 13.

CHAPTER V  
FAITH IN GOD AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF  
NATURAL RELIGION AND MORALITY

Introduction

The relational theory of value (Chapter II) and the relational theory of moral agency (Chapter III), each in their own way, demonstrate the intimate relation between philosophical analysis and theological affirmation in Niebuhr's thought. He had little sympathy for those theological moralists who seek to isolate theological ethics from all commerce with traditional moral philosophy in the interest of securing the autonomy of theology.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, he was equally critical of any attempt to deny the legitimacy or possibility of formulating a theistic ethic.<sup>2</sup> In setting forth these two theories primary attention was centered on exposing the broadly philosophical elements involved. Sufficient attention has not yet been given to the theological convictions that Niebuhr held; theological convictions which he believed could best find practical expression in terms of the relational theories he had developed.

At various points in his writings Niebuhr has given brief summary statements of those convictions that formed the essential core of his own personal religious faith and theology.<sup>3</sup> In his retrospective essay, "Reformation:

---

<sup>1</sup>The theological ethics of Karl Barth is an example which Niebuhr criticized. RS, p. 158; VTT, pp. 110f.

<sup>2</sup>RS, p. 42; CC, p. 184.

<sup>3</sup>"Reformation: Continuing Imperative," pp. 248f; KGA, pp. xii-xvi; MR, pp. viii-ix; CC, p. xii.

Continuing Imperative" (1960) he pointed to three convictions that had been and remained fundamental to all his theological thinking since he first adopted them as a young theologian seeking more substantial theological roots than religious liberalism had, in his judgment, been able to provide.<sup>1</sup> Of first importance among them was his conviction of the sovereignty of God. ". . . I came to understand," he declared, "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."<sup>2</sup> The vital tap-root of all Niebuhr's work as a moralist and theologian of culture is his deep awareness of both the transcendence of God (the One beyond all the many) and of the immanent presence and dynamic initiative and action of God the Creator, Judge and Redeemer, within human history and the whole realm of being (the One in all the many). To confess that God is sovereign means that every self is determined in the particularity of its individual historical existence by God, understood as the ground of all contingent being. Beyond this it means that the ground of my being and of all being is trustworthy; is good to and for all that issues from it. Associated with this fundamental certainty were two corollary convictions. The first was his acceptance of the judgment that man apart from the grace of God is lost, sinful, and idolatrous; the second was that forgiveness of sin, trust in God, and loyalty to his cause of universal redemption is a wholly gracious and miraculous gift. He acknowledged that "experience and study" had produced some changes in the theological formulation

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 248f.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 248.

of these convictions but together they remained the essential core of his theology.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr was a self-consciously Protestant theologian (which does not mean that he was polemically anti-Catholic or anti-Thomist). It is not surprising therefore that he well recognized that each of these themes was central to the thought of the Protestant Reformation. He had a lively appreciation for the theology of the Reformers, especially Luther and Calvin.<sup>2</sup> His early study of the history of Christianity in America fostered in him a new and profound awareness of the normative importance of just these doctrines for understanding the Protestant movement in America.<sup>3</sup> Above all else he became convinced "that American Christianity and American culture cannot be understood at all save on the basis of faith in a sovereign, living, loving God."<sup>4</sup> This did not mean that the sociological point of view which he had taken in his previous study, The Social Sources of Denominationalism (1929) was invalidated, but it did mean that that approach could not account for the origin or the effect of those convictions which were independent of culture. That the peculiar institutional form which Christianity had assumed in America was largely the result of the influence of such cultural phenomenon as ethnocentricity, class and sectional loyalties, and economic status was clear enough. This approach could in this way, very well account for the diverse forms which Protestantism in America had assumed, but it could not account for the unity of Christianity as a confessional movement. It could not account for the impact of a movement that for all

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 249. Perhaps the most significant change centered in his development of a more sophisticated and complex understanding of faith.

<sup>2</sup>CE, pp. 235-243 and 267-274 resp. and KGA, pp. 37f, and 38-41 resp. Cf. esp. the "Preface."

<sup>3</sup>The Kingdom of God in America (1937).

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. xvi.

its diversity was united by its members' common trust in and response to "the living reality of God's present rule, not only in human spirits but also in the world of nature and human history."<sup>1</sup>

In his influential study, Christ and Culture (1951), Niebuhr has described five distinct answers or strategies which have been developed in the history of Western Christianity, in response to "the enduring problem" of understanding how Christians should live under the dual authority represented by Christ and culture. The five typical answers fall into two sub-groups. A group of three "median" answers is identified. They occupy a middle ground between two more extreme positions. The first radical view counsels the rejection of all cultural values and achievements on the grounds that they are wholly inimicable to the virtues and commands of Christ.<sup>2</sup> The other extreme position seeks to recognize a fundamental identity between the best human values and achievements and the virtues and teachings of Christ.<sup>3</sup> The first group emphasizes the discontinuity, the second the continuity, between knowledge of the perfection and will of God revealed in Christ and the knowledge of good and evil, right and wrong present in culture. The second group of three "median" answers have at least two features in common, the second of which is important in relation to this discussion of Niebuhr's own basic theological convictions. They agree, against the extreme positions, in maintaining both that there are fundamental differences between these two authorities and that each must be held together in some sort of unity. They differ at the point of understanding how this is

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 40f, and Ch. 2, "Christ Against Culture."

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 41f, and Ch. 3, "The Christ of Culture."

to be achieved.<sup>1</sup> A careful reading of Niebuhr's description of the mediating views of the "synthesist" (best represented by St. Thomas Aquinas), the "dualist" (especially Martin Luther) and the "conversionist" (St. Augustine) reveals the fact that they share precisely those three theological convictions which he himself has affirmed.<sup>2</sup> Translated into the context of "the culture problem" this means first that they were agreed that to affirm the sovereignty of God as Creator, Judge and Redeemer means that the sphere of nature and culture can neither be wholly rejected as the exclusive Christian does (for God not only judges their sinfulness but he has created and redeemed them); nor simply accepted as they are as the culture-Christian tends to do (for God does judge the fallenness of man and all his works). Further, these centrist Christians all believe that man's sinfulness is universal and irradicable by his own efforts. The idea that sin is universal both in the sense that it is true of all men and in the sense that it penetrates the totality of human personality is, for different reasons, rejected by both extreme positions. Unlike the median views they each tend "to posit a realm free from sin; in the one case the holy community [the exclusive Christian], in the other a citadel of righteousness in the high place of the personal spirit [the culture Christian]."<sup>3</sup> Finally, this mediating group affirms both the primacy of God's grace and the need to enter upon cultural activity in gratitude to God and in service to the neighbor. The kingdom of God is both a gift and a task. The two extreme groups tend (again for different reasons) to posit the primacy of law over grace. The

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 41f.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 42f, and Ch. 4, "Christ Above Culture;" Ch. 5, "Christ and Culture in Paradox;" Ch. 6, "Christ the Transformer of Culture."

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 112f, pp. 78f.

exclusive Christian tends to interpret the gospel as a "new law" to be obeyed for the sake of attaining ethical purity while the culture Christian fashions spiritual ideals or categorical imperatives from the gospel to which the angels of his better nature are, with effort, well able to conform.<sup>1</sup>

Given the fact that the theological basis of these three types of Christian social ethics are identical with his own theological convictions, which of them did he himself support? If this question had to be answered solely from a reading of Christ and Culture, only a tentative answer could be given. On the one hand, consistent with his emphasis on historical and theo-centric relativism,<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr argues that no one of these answers can be named the Christian answer. Any attempt to do so would, he believed, 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."<sup>3</sup> A radical monotheist must restrain himself and simply confess "that Christ as living Lord is answering the question in the totality of history and life in a fashion which transcends the wisdom of all his interpreters yet employs their partial insights and their necessary conflicts."<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, in his treatment of the final median position, "Christ the Transformer of Culture," the reader could not fail to note the absence of any criticism of its theological or strategic adequacy comparable with that offered of each of the other four views. When the rest of Niebuhr's work is taken into account however, there can be no doubt that he consistently championed the "conversionist" or "transformist" position. It is, for example, a particularly

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 113, 79f.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Ibid., p. xii.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 232.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 2 (italics added).

important theme in The Meaning of Revelation (1941). There he argued that natural and revealed religion entail "neither mutually exclusive principles," thus dualism is rejected; "nor yet distinct stages in a continuous development," thus the synthesist view is set aside; "but rather a transformation or conversion in which the latter is less the product than the transformer of the previous stage."<sup>1</sup> The following passage is a particularly clear and representative statement of Niebuhr's understanding of the ethics of "conversionism."

. . . Conversion is the very heart of the Christian faith, for it is the change of mind which the reception of the gospel of the Kingdom brings with it. Such conversion is antithetical to substitution. In the Christian life human eros is not supplanted by divine agape but divine agape converts the human eros by directing it in gratitude toward God and toward the neighbor in God. The community of the family is not supplanted by a monastic society but the hearts of fathers and children and husbands and wives are turned to each other in reconciliation because of the divine forgiveness. The gospel restores and converts and turns again; it does not destroy and rebuild by substituting one finite structure of life or thought for another.<sup>2</sup>

Conversionism, in Niebuhr's judgment, has much in common with the dualist position. It is closer to the dualist than to the synthesist view with respect to its understanding of man's sin and God's grace. The conversionist position accredits itself as a "distinct motif" from that of the dualist by its "more positive and hopeful attitude toward culture."<sup>3</sup> This attitude is not a simple human optimism; it arises as a consequence of the conviction that God is now active in all the events of history and culture bringing human life to fulfillment to the glory of God. The ethic of conversionism is nourished by certain theological convictions about creation, the fall of man, and history

---

<sup>1</sup>MR, p. viii, Cf., pp. 116-121, 165-175, 182-191.

<sup>2</sup>"The Hidden Churches and the Churches in Sight," Religion in Life, XV (1946), pp. 115-116.

<sup>3</sup>MR, p. 191.

that taken together, in Niebuhr's view, mark it off as a distinct type of approach to the Christ-culture problem from that of the dualist position with which it otherwise has much in common.

The conversionist places greater emphasis on the present creative and ordering activity of God in the totality of nature and culture than does the dualist, who tends Niebuhr believes, to regard creation as simply a necessary prelude to the supreme deed of atonement. As a result the dualist tends to see the wrath of God as particularly manifest in the physical world and culture at the expense of his creative and ordering activity. For the conversionist the activity of God is at every moment a creative, ordering and redemptive activity.<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr also argues that the dualist (he has Paul and Luther particularly in view) tends to blur the distinction between man's created goodness as a finite being and his fall into sin.<sup>2</sup> The conversionist on the other hand distinguishes sharply between creation and fall; the first is entirely a good work of God, the latter is wholly a moral and personal action of man. All the good gifts of love, aspiration and reason he retains as a fallen creature but in his exercise of each he violates, corrupts and perverts every object and every relationship he engages. These differences have consequences for the attitude shown by the conversionist and the dualist toward culture. For the conversionist

culture is all corrupted order rather than order for corruption, as it is for the dualist. It is perverted good, not evil; or it is evil as perversion, and not badness of being. The problem of culture is therefore the problem of its conversion, not of its replacement by a new creation; though<sup>3</sup> the conversion is so radical that it amounts to a kind of rebirth.

---

<sup>1</sup> CC, pp. 191-193.

<sup>2</sup>Niebuhr was not unaware of the fact that the correctness of this judgment about either Paul or Luther has often been disputed. Cf. CC, pp. 193, n. 2, 166f., 172, n. 14.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 194.

Christian life and conduct is not therefore, on the conversionist's view, to be thought of in complete contrast to cultural life but as involving a continuing transformation of it. Finally, the conversionist agrees with the dualist that this transformation awaits a final fulfillment which lies beyond history, nevertheless he looks more to the present than to the future, as much to man's cultural activity as to the life of the Christian community for the manifestation of God's presence and transforming power. "For the conversionist, history is the story of God's mighty deeds and of man's responses to them."<sup>1</sup> It is precisely this conviction of the direct presence of God to man in every historical event that is the theological foundation of Niebuhr's ethic of responsibility. A radically monotheistic ethic of responsibility affirms: "God is acting in all actions upon you. So respond to all actions upon you as to respond to his action."<sup>2</sup> The conversionist lives in eschatological hope of the divine rather than human possibility that all creation and culture is now being transformed into a kingdom of God in which all the activities of all men will be directed toward and so reflect the love and glory of God.<sup>3</sup>

This brief sketch of Niebuhr's central theological convictions suggests the possibility of identifying two basic principles which structure his theological ethics. The technical term employed by Niebuhr to refer to the first was radical monotheism. This is another way of speaking about and affirming the sovereignty of God, that is, the primacy of his being and value to all contingent being and value. The second is the principle of "transformism" or "conversionism." The somewhat barbarous term "transformism" has reference to that continuous process of metanoia--that is itself a consequence of receiving

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>2</sup>RS, p. 126, cf., pp. 65-67, 165-170.

<sup>3</sup>CC, pp. 195f.

radically monotheistic faith--in which all human thought, valuation and action, both in its individual and social expression, is redirected toward God. These two themes may also be understood as Niebuhr's answer to two questions which must be asked and answered by any theological ethic that warrants serious consideration. First, "How is God known and what may be known of him?" Second, "What are the consequences of this knowledge for understanding and ordering moral experience and action?" The four sections which follow will have as their general purpose to further develop and clarify Niebuhr's answer to these two questions. He addressed himself to both of them (the second only briefly) in a particularly clear and incisive manner in an essay originally entitled, "The Nature and Existence of God: A Protestant View," and later republished under the title, "Faith in Gods and in God."<sup>1</sup> In the following section I will analyse this essay in some detail and give special attention to Niebuhr's understanding of the phenomenon of "faith" in both natural and revealed religion.

#### "Faith in Gods and in God"

The content of this essay is comprised of Niebuhr's answers to a number of carefully formulated questions. Stated more accurately, the answers to each succeeding question together answer his first, and for Niebuhr, most important theological question: "How is faith in God possible?"<sup>2</sup> These questions

---

<sup>1</sup>It was originally delivered as an address at the University of Michigan as one of a series in which a Catholic, a Protestant, a Jewish and an atheistic view of "the problem of God" were presented. Both the title and the sub-title of the article as originally published--"The Nature and Existence of God: A Protestant View," Motive, IV (1943), pp. 13-15, 43-46; and its republished title, "Faith in Gods and in God," supplementary essay in Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, pp. 114-126--provide helpful clues to interpreting his approach to the ultimate theological problem. So far as I can determine there are no alterations or additions to the substance of the "revised edition." All references will be to "Faith in Gods and in God."

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 116.

themselves, and the order in which they are arranged, proceed from certain self-consciously held assumptions which invite careful scrutiny. The exposition will proceed 1) by posing each of these questions, 2) by describing Niebuhr's answers to them, and 3) by exposing some of the implicit or explicit assumptions involved.

Niebuhr begins by arguing that it should be recognized that there is more than one way of raising and formulating important and legitimate questions about the existence and character of God. A philosopher of religion, for example, may begin with a particular definition of the word "God" and then ask "Does a being having this nature exist?" Alternatively, a metaphysician may inquire first into the ultimate nature of reality, into first or final causes, into primal energy and so on, and conclude that the word "God" names this ultimate reality which is the source or ground of both the existence and general characteristics (motion, causality, order, etc.) of our circumambient world. "The Protestant theologian," Niebuhr asserts, raises his question about God in yet another way. He does not approach the problem by formulating such theoretical and speculative questions as "Does God exist?" or "What is the first cause?" Rather he approaches it

as an eminently practical problem, a problem of human existence and destiny, of the meaning of human life in general and the life of self and community in particular . . . [He] has not sought to convince a speculative detached mind of the existence of God, but has begun with actual moral and religious experience, with the practical reasoning of the existing person rather than with the speculative interests of a detached mind.<sup>1</sup>

Given these three methods, it seems natural to ask why any given

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 115-116. Niebuhr's employment of a modified Kantian dichotomy between the pure theoretical and pure practical exercise of human rationality is obvious here. It now becomes clear, too, why Niebuhr originally entitled his essay "The Nature and Existence of God" and not "The Existence and Nature of God."

individual would formulate the problem of God in one of these ways rather than another. Niebuhr's answer is that this is to be explained partly as a consequence of an individual's identification with and training in a particular tradition and partly as a result of "his own personal wrestling with the question of life's meaning."<sup>1</sup> That this is so for Niebuhr is clear from his own testimony; that it would be accepted as true by every inquirer for whom he speaks seems doubtful. For example, is it the case that among those philosophers or theologians who have had a serious theoretical interest in pursuing one or other, or both, of the approaches Niebuhr eschews, that there are none who have done so independent of conscious membership in any single philosophical or religious tradition and without any confessed or discernible "personal wrestling with the question of life's meaning?" Niebuhr implies, if he does not actually assert, that the particular questions which a given thinker raises in the course of his inquiry into theistic belief is determined by particular antecedent sociological and psychological events. This is an assumption some of these philosophers and theologians would find reason to reject. It is, however, an assumption which is compatible with his acceptance of historical or cultural relativism.

Niebuhr is on firmer ground in asserting that Protestant thinkers have generally been united in rejecting the cogency or the need for the traditional arguments for the existence of God, but he seems to go further than this and claim that there is a discernible common method which "the great Protestant thinkers" (Luther, Calvin, Edwards, Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard are named)<sup>2</sup> pursued in their attempts to answer the question, "How is faith in God possible?" Is Niebuhr simply claiming that Protestant theologians have generally posed this as the central theological question or is he also claiming that in seeking to

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 116.

answer if they have employed a commonly understood method? In the following passage he is clearly making both claims.

In some such fashion I conceive Protestant theology at work. It is well aware of other inquirers in the same general field and it profits greatly by counsel and debate with them. Yet it seeks to remain true to its own particular problem and to its own method of inquiry.<sup>1</sup>

On the face of it, this would seem to commit Niebuhr to the difficult position of either 1) interpreting the interminable debates (debates which we have seen he himself entered)<sup>2</sup> between various Protestant theologians over the formulation of an appropriate theological method as intramural debates about the details of a single method, or 2) declaring that those who reject this method do not qualify as "Protestant" theologians. It is instructive to note that both of these judgments are present in Niebuhr's retrospective essay, "Reformation: Continuing Imperative" (1960). The first is well illustrated in the underlined words of the following passage.

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 over-correction 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.<sup>3</sup>

Niebuhr became increasingly critical of the later theology of Karl Barth (the Barth of the Church Dogmatics) precisely because he believed that it had ceased to be a theology of Christian experience and became a theology of Christian doctrine. He had welcomed Barth's earlier work (especially his Römerbrief,

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 115 (italics added).

<sup>2</sup>Supra, pp. 44-50.

<sup>3</sup>"Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 250 (italics added).

first ed. 1919<sup>1</sup>) precisely because it did not forsake the relational and valuational method of Schleiermacher but merely sought to "correct" that tendency towards subjectivism which made man's relation to God (faith) rather than God himself the object of religious knowledge. It is important to recognize that for Niebuhr what was "essential" was not a rejection of the relational-valuational method but only a "correction" of an aberration in the employment of this method.<sup>2</sup> He rejected Barth's later judgment that subjectivism and anthropomorphism were necessary implications of the relational method itself.<sup>3</sup> Niebuhr could only regard Karl Barth's repudiation of the relational-valuational method as a forsaking of the most distinctive and enduring characteristic of Protestant theology and a going back "to the untenable positions against which the Reformation and

---

<sup>1</sup> Barth's Römerbrief (Bern, 1919) was included in a list of books he submitted to Christian Century in response to the query: "What books did most to shape your vocational attitude and your philosophy of life?" "Ex Libris" in Christian Century LXXIX (1962), p. 754.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. VTT, pp. 98, 101-105, 110-113; MR, pp. 23-37.

<sup>3</sup>For documentation of this change in Barth's thinking see the essay by Hans Frei, "Niebuhr's Theological Background," FE, esp. pp. 40-53; Van A. Harvey, The Historian and the Believer (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), pp. 153-159; T. F. Torrance, Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology, 1910-1931 (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1962), pp. 33-198. Professor Torrance identifies three distinct stages in the development of Barth's thought; the first culminating in the first edition of Der Römerbrief (Bern 1919). He argues that this first edition reflects a kind of critical liberalism but then in the second edition (Munich, 1921) the liberal valuational theology of Schleiermacher is criticized and rejected with the assistance of the Kierkegaardian principle of the infinite qualitative difference between God and man. The third stage began approximately with the publication of his study of St. Anselm, Fides Quaerens Intellectum (Ed. by Ian Robertson, London: SCM Press, 1960). Now the Kierkegaardian principle is disavowed (cf. Church Dogmatics, I.1., p. ix) and the focus of his theology becomes the revelation of the triune God in Jesus Christ. This interpretation harmonizes well with Hans Frei's sympathetic assessment of Barth and with his contention that in Niebuhr's "objective relativism" he attempts to unite logically incompatible interests. He wants to affirm the relationalism and ontological agnosticism of Schleiermacher and affirm the ontological independence of God and man and the objectivity, freedom and priority of God in all human knowledge of him. Hans Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," pp. 74-78, 83-87.

the 18th century revival had to protest."<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr is not saying that Barth's mature theology is not a theology about the one God who is. But he is saying 1) that it cannot be assumed that the word "God" has the same referent or meaning for Barth as it has for those Protestant theologians who begin with "actual moral and religious experience." And he is at least implying 2) that in forsaking this method Barth has forfeited the right to be called a distinctively Protestant theologian.

Many postliberals, particularly Karl Barth, . . . seem to me to have gone back to orthodoxy as right teaching, right doctrine, and to faith as fides, as assent; . . . toward the definition of Christian life in terms of right believing, of Christianity as the true religion, and otherwise to the assertion of the primacy of ideas over personal relations. When I think about this I have to say to myself that as important as theological formulations are for me they are not the basis of faith but only one of its expressions and that not the primary one.<sup>2</sup>

If, as Niebuhr believes, the theological method characteristically employed by Protestant theologians is irreducibly relational and valuational, then plainly everything depends upon how this value relation is understood. Accordingly, for Niebuhr the point at which "Protestants begin their analysis of the problem of God is that of practical human faith in deity."<sup>3</sup> In other words, it is necessary to begin with an analysis of natural religion as a universal human phenomenon. Each of the underlined words are important. By the adjectival

---

<sup>1</sup>"Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 250.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>FGG, p. 116 (italics added). Another way of putting this is to say that the first step toward answering the general question "How is faith in God possible?" is to ask and answer the question "What is faith?" or more exactly, "How is the word 'faith' to be understood in this question?" Cf. Hans Frei's judgments, "The primary task of Protestant theology after Schleiermacher has been that of understanding the empirical reality, 'faith,' both internally and by distinction from other ways of knowing. . . . It is one of the most persistent questions among those to which H. Richard Niebuhr has devoted attention," FE, p. 67. Niebuhr's retrospective essay confirms both of these judgments. Cf. "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 249f.

modifiers "practical" and "human" I take Niebuhr to mean 1) that faith is a specific sort of non-theoretical valuation (i.e. it is "practical") and 2) that such valuations are made by man qua man and are neither valuations which men ought to, but may or may not make, nor are they valuations which it is only possible for them to make consequent upon the reception of some extra-human or supernatural power (i.e. it is human). Faith is then a personal kind of valuation, a positive trusting in, reliance on, or counting on something. Niebuhr is not contending that this is a sufficient definition of faith as it is used among Protestants but he does insist that this is the fundamental idea.

To make this clearer Niebuhr distinguishes between the notion's "faith" and "belief." Subjectively, "faith" denotes an active "setting-forth" of the self, a committing of the self to something, whereas "belief" denotes a passive assent of the self to the truth of propositions. Objectively, "faith" is commitment to a power, or being, or agency over against the self, whereas "belief" has as its object true propositions.

Faith . . . always refers primarily to character or power rather than to existence. Existence is implied and necessarily implied; but there is no direct road from assent to the intellectual proposition that something exists to the act of confidence and reliance upon it.<sup>1</sup>

Faith, so understood, is present in every sphere of human knowing and acting as a constitutive element of selfhood. A phenomenological analysis of all our theoretical knowledge of objects in the external world, including other persons, reveals the presence of this faith as the ground of its possibility. In our ordinary knowledge of objects or in the sophisticated knowledge of the natural sciences we are concerned with an impersonal theoretical knowledge of things, and this kind of knowledge depends upon faith, as for example our faith in the

---

<sup>1</sup>FGG, pp. 116, 117.

intelligibility of things, a faith which is maintained even in the face of ignorance and error.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in our personal relations in society we exercise confidence in and reliance on other selves which is independent of "our belief in each other's existence and distinct from our knowledge of each other's character, though such belief and such knowledge do form the background and the foreground of our faith."<sup>2</sup>

Niebuhr does not in this essay make a point to distinguish his use of the term "knowledge" from that of "belief" in the way that he did discriminate between "faith" and "belief." However, he seems in the sentence just cited to use the term "belief" as the psychological correlate of existence-propositions (i.e. sentences which assert that something is or is not) and "knowledge" as the psychological correlate of predicate propositions (i.e. sentences which assert that something has or does not have certain properties). Thus both "belief-states" and "knowledge-states" differ from "faith-states" because the object of each is a proposition of some kind. But "faith-states" are not cognitive states if one limits the meaning of what can count as a cognitive state to the subjective apprehension of the meaning of propositions. This is so because the object of "faith-states" is not a proposition but some being or "value-center" or power upon which the self relies and without which it does not and cannot exist. "Not only the just but also the unjust, insofar as they live, live by faith."<sup>3</sup> Faith is a universal and primitive attitude of selves.

---

<sup>1</sup>Niebuhr analyzes the structure of faith present in the work of the scientific community in RMWC, Ch. 4, "Radical Faith and Western Science," pp. 78-89; "Science in Conflict With Morality?", Supplementary essay in RMWC, pp. 127-141. Cf. RS, p. 118.

<sup>2</sup>FGG, p. 117.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

Earlier Niebuhr was quoted as declaring that "the starting-point at which Protestants begin their analysis of the problem of God is that of practical human faith in deity." Having clarified what he means by "practical human faith" we must now ask what he means by "practical human faith in deity." The term "deity" is a synonym for "god" defined as any object of human faith which is relied on to bestow significance and worth on an individual existence. According to Niebuhr it is simply a psychological fact that no human being lives without a cause, without some object of devotion, some "center of value," something which they recognize as a source of meaning and value. The object of such faith may be ephemeral or even illusory, but the trusting self never regards it as such. Faith is never simply a subjective state, it is always faith in or reliance on some existent as the ground of meaning and value. Faith is intentional in character. "We never merely believe that life is worth living but always think of it as made worth living by something on which we rely. And this being whatever it be is properly termed our god."<sup>1</sup>

We are now in a position to ask and answer a second question put to the original question, "How is faith in God possible?" That question is not now "What is faith?" but "Who is God?" The answer that has been given to the former question requires that we formulate the latter one in some such fashion as this: "Which among the actual objects trusted as gods is God?" Two initial comments are worth making on the significance of this particular question. First, this is not a question which Niebuhr formulated in this way in this essay. However, it is entirely congruous with the logical development of his argument here. In "Value Theory and Theology" he did ask just this question.<sup>2</sup> He has also provided

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>2</sup>"The question about the existence or non-existence of the gods is a false question. The true query of religion is, 'Which among the available

a criterion with which to judge that being which does qualify as God. A necessary if not sufficient condition that any being must satisfy to qualify as God is its ability to provide continuous meaning and value to our lives.<sup>1</sup> Second, it should be noted that the question does not ask whether there is a being which qualifies as God, but only whether any of those beings which actually function as the objects of men's trust do in fact qualify as "God." The former question cannot be entertained as it falls into that class of theoretical questions which Niebuhr has declared alien to the practical and relational method of Protestant theology.

The word "god" means for Niebuhr any object which functions as a center of value for man. Two corollary judgments may be made. First, the natural religious faith of most men is polytheistic for men rely on many different gods.<sup>2</sup> Egoism is the most universal natural religion; not least, Niebuhr observes, among those who profess to believe in the transcendent God of Christianity. "The most common object of devotion on which we depend for our meaning and value is the self itself."<sup>3</sup> However, the fact that the self looks to many other sources outside of itself for the satisfaction of its need for meaning and value is a tacit recognition that the self as a center of value lacks the power to guarantee its own life against the threat of meaninglessness and worthlessness. There are many other objects of adoration and they have various modes of being. Some may

---

realities has the value of deity, or has the potency of deity?' and this question turns into another query, 'Which reality has those characteristics which are the foundation of the value of deity, or which fulfill the human need for God?'" VTT, p. 114.

<sup>1</sup>FGG, p. 122.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 119. Cf. "As a rule men are polytheists, referring now to this and now to that valued being as the source of life's meaning. Sometimes they live for Jesus' God, sometimes for country sometimes for Yale." MR, p. 77.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 120.

be 1) tangible objects; others 2) images, concepts, or essences; others 3) "are movements known only by a kind of empathy or by an intuition that outruns sense;" others 4) have the peculiar and hard-to-define reality of selves or persons."<sup>1</sup> Secondly, it is also true that on this definition of what is entailed in natural faith "there can be no such thing as an actual atheist though there may be many who profess atheism."<sup>2</sup> This is, of course, only another way of saying that religious faith in some god is universal and that men do not and cannot exist as selves without exercising such faith.<sup>3</sup> Faith is an a priori condition of self existence.

The charge has been made by Professor John Godsey that "for the most part," Niebuhr, "refused to take with seriousness any professions of atheism" and that for him, "man's problem is really not atheism but idolatry." Only late in his career did this conviction begin to waver, permitting him "to ask whether modern men have actually become nihilists who no longer even trust their gods."<sup>4</sup> In assessing the accuracy of this charge everything depends upon keeping clearly in mind Niebuhr's careful definition of natural religious faith. It must be

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 117. "The necessity of believing in a god is given with the life of selves. . . .", MR, p. 80.

<sup>4</sup>John D. Godsey, The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970), p. 101. Godsey does not cite any source in support of this statement but he may have had in mind the following statement: "It seems to me that in the world men have become deeply disillusioned about themselves and are becoming disillusioned about their idols--the nations, the spirit of technological civilization and so on. . ." "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 250. However, in lectures penned that same year (1960) he argued that it is precisely in "the negative literature of disillusionment" that the nature of faith is clearly revealed. "When the failure of the gods is described . . . when atheistic existentialism tries to find a center of value in the bare self in its self-making freedom we become conscious of the apparently universal human necessity of faith and of the inescapability of its gods, not as super-natural beings but as value-centers and objects of devotion." RMNC, p. 23 (italics added).

understood that his argument assumes the objective truth of the proposition that faith in some center of value or god is constitutive of the life of selves as such. If the truth of this judgment is rejected, then and only then is it possible (logically) to raise the question of atheism as a problem in the realm of natural religion. If not, the possibility of atheism is precluded by definition. Professor Godsey goes on to ask if in the light of "the death-of-God movement" Niebuhr should be criticized "for failing to face the problem of atheism more squarely and to deal more adequately with the problems involved in the Christian affirmation that 'God is'."<sup>1</sup> By this time it should be clear that from Niebuhr's point of view this request is tantamount to asking him to forsake that way of doing theology which he argues is characteristic of Protestant theology.

The dismissal of atheism, however, only brings to attention the fundamental difficulty which all forms of natural religious faith must face. The problem which polytheism presents assumes a twofold form which may be expressed again in the form of questions. How is it possible for the polytheist to be conscious of himself as one in all his valuations and actions? (The divisiveness of the gods) Do any of the gods qualify as the object of a universal faith? (The disqualification of the gods) We become divided within individually and without socially because our gods "are all finite in time as in space and make finite claims upon us."<sup>2</sup> We rely upon many centers of value but our devotion to some always implies exclusion of others. We attempt to overcome this situation in various ways: through the integration of personality or the acknowledgment of some hierarchy of values, or the devising of some new political order or cultural synthesis. However, the best that can be achieved is some sort of compromise because while each god is finite each "in turn requires an absolute

---

<sup>1</sup>Godsey, p. 101.

<sup>2</sup>FGG, p. 120.

devotion and a denial of the claims of other gods."<sup>1</sup>

It is quite obvious that Niebuhr's account of polytheism is a phenomenological description of one of the forms in which universal religious faith manifests itself and so it is not the sort of description which either an historian or an anthropologist might give of polytheism as practiced in any ancient or contemporary society. I cannot speak from any wide knowledge of the later kinds of studies, but even a cursory acquaintance engenders doubts about the truth of the assertion that the gods in such societies are thought of as making absolute claims which necessarily imply "a denial of the claims of other gods." The very names given to most of the Greek gods, for example, indicate that it was believed that their authority was limited to a specific sphere of human activity. The orthodox Greek pagan does not seem to have believed that it was impossible, in theory at least, to satisfy the proprietary demands of the various gods. Rather, he seems to have been more preoccupied with the problem of determining whether he was ignorant of the existence (and therefore the claims) of a bona fide god. The observations of the Apostle Paul of worship of the gods in Athens, if at all accurate, would certainly support this contention.<sup>2</sup> While it may not be possible to demand that by parity of reasoning the same must hold mutatis mutandis for Niebuhr's phenomenological description, we may well ask why any of the equivalents in the phenomenological pantheon, either such Olympian deities as home, children, country or democracy, or such Chthonian powers as sex, money, or physical strength, must be regarded as requiring exclusive devotion. Niebuhr argues that "we fight for liberty or solidarity, for equality or for order. . . . But none of these gods is universal, and therefore devotion to one always implies

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 121.

<sup>2</sup>Acts 17.

exclusion of another."<sup>1</sup> But is it the case that anyone fights for liberty without concern for solidarity, or for equality without any regard for order? It is true that psychologically at any given moment the attention given to one god will necessarily mean that attention is not being given to another, but Niebuhr has not shown why it is necessary to conclude that the claims of any one finite god logically excludes the claims of any other. Why should any one of the gods, home, country, or democracy as such exercise an exclusive claim and the denial of claims of the others?

Faced with the divisiveness of the gods Niebuhr claims that we respond by dreaming of the possibility that the claims exercised by the gods could be organized in some sort of hierarchy or "a great pantheon in which all the gods will be duly served, each in its proper sphere."<sup>2</sup> But it remains a dream: it is neither a theoretical nor a practical possibility. The recognition of one sort of value, say our country, as an absolute value logically entails the denial of the claims of every other country. If we believe that our country has absolute value, then Niebuhr is right, it does entail the denial that the value of any other country may be regarded as absolute. But the weakness of his phenomenological description of natural religious faith may lie at the point of assuming that while the claims of each of these gods is finite they are also absolute in the sense that they exclude each other. May it not be the case that for many contemporary "pagans" these "beings" are recognized to have only a relative, not an absolute value? Niebuhr assumes without discussion that it is self-evident that each of the phenomenological gods he identifies demands an absolute or exclusive devotion which is incommensurate with its finite ontological status.

---

<sup>1</sup>FGG, p. 121.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

A polytheist cannot then, according to Niebuhr, be one self in all his valuations and actions. The self is continually divided within itself because it relies for meaning and value on many gods whose absolute claims it cannot--logically and not simply practically--satisfy. But there is an even more serious difficulty. "None of these beings on which we rely to give content and meaning to our lives is able to supply continuous meaning and value."<sup>1</sup> Because they are all finite they all pass away into nothingness leaving the self defenceless against the ultimate frustrations of a meaningless and valueless existence. A greater tragedy than the divisiveness of the gods is the evident disqualification of any of our finite gods as objects of a universal faith that can sustain the constitutive need of every self for continuous meaning and value. It is precisely this realization of the death of all its gods and the sober despair with which it contemplates the endlessness of the creative process that the question of God is raised for the self with the most exquisite existential pathos. For Protestant theology the problem of God is only seriously faced and struggled with in the immediacy of this existential situation. It arises in that moment when any self frustrated with the divisiveness of its gods and filled with despair over their slide into non-existence, asks itself the final question about the nature of that reality which remains when all else passes away. The extremity of natural religion becomes the opportunity of revealed religion.

What is it that is responsible for this passing, that dooms our human faith to frustration? We may call it the nature of things, we may call it fate, we may call it reality. But by whatever name we call it, this law of things, this reality, this way things are, is something with which we all must reckon. We may not be able to give a name to it, calling it only the "void" out of which everything comes and to which everything returns, though that is also a name. But it is there--the last shadow and

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 121-122.

vague reality, the secret of existence by virtue of which things come into being, are what they are, and pass away. Against it there is no defense.<sup>1</sup>

This passage marks a critical point in the development of Niebuhr's way of thinking about the relation of God and man. The need to get as clear as possible about what he is claiming is as necessary as it is difficult. He seems to be allowing that there is a sort of natural negative valuational knowledge or awareness of a "vague reality" which is ontologically distinct from and transcendent to all finite reality. I take him to be saying that insofar as any self becomes aware of the failure of all finite gods to sustain its need for continuous meaning and value, so far also it becomes aware of a "vague reality," which may be referred to in various ways, but which is recognized to be both the creator and destroyer of all finite beings and values, including the being and value of that self. If this interpretation is correct then Niebuhr is assuming that in addition to the finite powers, ideal or actual, upon which the self relies for meaning and worth there exists an infinite power which is nothing less than the efficient cause of all that exists. This would seem to be at least the prima facie meaning of references to a "vague reality . . . [that] abides when all else passes . . . [and] is the source of all things and the end of all."<sup>2</sup> However, the question arises as to whether the awareness that all finite objects do in fact cease to exist and so fail to function as centers of value for any self need necessarily entail any awareness of some "supreme reality" which is "responsible" for the passing of these gods. It is, I would argue, one thing to make the judgment that all the beings on which men rely for meaning and value cease to exist and that this is a universal law that has unexceptional application to all beings "finite in space as in time": it is logically a quite different

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

thing to assert that there is some ontologically distinct sort of reality which is the source and end of all such beings. For Niebuhr the word "void" is not a synonym for "nothing," that is, literally the absence of anything, rather it is a "name" which denotes an indeterminate something ("vague reality"). Niebuhr is reluctant to consider the possibility that a greater tragedy than the death of the gods could be the death of or the absence of God. His analysis of natural religion does not take into account the experience of those men who are keenly aware of the relativity and temporality of all their gods but who nevertheless refuse bitterly, resignedly or even joyfully to believe in the existence of any transcendent or transcendental power. He does not, of course, deny that there are those who make this profession but he does deny that such professions are to be interpreted as atheistic in the ordinary sense. They are rather confessions of deep distrust of the goodness of the ground of their being and of all that exists.<sup>1</sup>

There is, Niebuhr declares, another wholly different kind of response which has been given and continues to be given to this "last power." It is a strange and finally inexplicable fact that some have received the great gift of being allowed to put their trust in and to rely for meaning and worth on this source and enemy of all the gods of natural faith. They "have been enabled to call this reality God."<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr concludes this essay by posing three questions

---

<sup>1</sup>RS, p. 140. "The natural mind is enmity to God; or to our natural mind the One intention in all intentions is animosity. . . . We live and move and have our being in a realm that is not nothingness but that is ruled by destructive powers which bring us and all we have to nothing." *Ibid.*, (italics added). Cf. RMWC, p. 24f.

<sup>2</sup>FGG, p. 123. "What is the absurd thing that comes into our moral history as existential selves, but the conviction mediated by a life, a death, and a miracle beyond understanding, that the source and ground and government and end of all things--the power we (in our distrust and disloyalty) call fate and chance--is faithful, utterly trustworthy, utterly loyal to all that issues from it?" CC, p. 254.

about this radically monotheistic faith: 1) "What does it mean to attach faith to this power?" 2) "How does such faith come about?" 3) "What are the consequences of such faith?"<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr believed that Alfred North Whitehead had described succinctly and eloquently the coming of this faith. "Religion," he said "is transition from God the void to God the enemy, and from God the enemy to God the companion."<sup>2</sup> But he also describes it himself in words that Spinoza or even Plotinus might well have written.

All the relative judgments of worth are equalized in the presence of this One who loves all and hates all, but whose love like whose hatred is without emotion, without favoritism. To have hope of this One is to have hope which is eternal. This being cannot pass away.<sup>3</sup>

We notice first that this statement is wholly consistent with Niebuhr's doctrine of objective relativism. Above all else Niebuhr wished to make clear that only a God who was truly sovereign in relation to all mundane being and value had ever been able to, or would ever be able to, inspire human awe or call forth a truly universal trust in "him" and a love of the whole realm of being in "him." To have faith in God is first of all to make an objective affirmation of the omnipresent transcendent greatness and inscrutable mystery of that being upon

---

<sup>1</sup>FGG, p. 123.

<sup>2</sup>Religion in the Making (New York: Meridian Books, 1960, 1926), p. 16. Cited by Niebuhr, FGG, pp. 123-124. It is of some interest to note that Niebuhr did not quote the first oft quoted part of Whitehead's definition: "Religion is what the individual does with his own solitariness. It runs through three stages, if it is evolved to its final satisfaction. It is the transition . . . the companion." There is reason to doubt that he would have accepted it at all without serious qualification. He criticized Kierkegaard roundly for similar assertions. The existential question of faith for Niebuhr "arises in its most passionate form not in our solitariness but in our fellowship." CC, p. 244.

<sup>3</sup>FGG, p. 123.

which we and all else are absolutely dependent for our existence. When Niebuhr says that God's love is "without emotion, without favoritism" he means that the greatness of God consists precisely in that love of all being. It is this fact which distinguishes it from the inevitable partiality, provincialism and selfishness of our natural faith and love. So long as man regards the One who sovereignly elected him into being as the enemy as actively hostile or simply indifferent to all that issues from him, then so long too will man carry on all his activities and make all his evaluations within a context of fear, self-love, and despair. But if a man is enabled to trust in this One as good, then he understands that God is reconciled to him and he to God and he will make those evaluations and decisions which he must make in his common life within a context of faith, hope and love and "in constant anticipations of new unfoldings of worth and meaning."<sup>1</sup>

But how is this transition effected? How does such faith come about? After having stressed the universality of our natural religious enmity toward that last power that dooms all we cherish to nothingness is Niebuhr now saying that all men ought to have the contrary attitude of trust? Why should they? After all has anything happened objectively in our situation that justifies or warrants a change in our natural attitude of distrust? In reply Niebuhr makes an affirmation and a denial. It is, he avers, simply a fact which must be recognized that confessions of "radical faith" in the goodness of being have been and are being made.<sup>2</sup> He recognizes that it may be objected that no subjective (personal or communal) confession that this is so is in itself sufficient justification that objectively it is so. But he is convinced that this objection is not

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 124.

really important. The objector assumes that he is putting forward his objection from a morally and religiously neutral point of view. This assumption is false: there is no such point of view, and this objection is really raised "on the basis of another faith than faith in this God."<sup>1</sup> On the other hand Niebuhr denies that "this faith in the last power is something men ought to have. We say only this, that it is the end of the road of faith, that it is unassailable, and that when men receive it they receive a great gift."<sup>2</sup> These words clearly mark the non-apologetic and consistently confessional character of Niebuhr's theology. "How is such faith possible?" The first thing that must be said is that those who do exercise this trust are conscious that they can only confess that they received it as "a great gift" and that once received "it is unassailable."

It is important once again to notice the form of the question Niebuhr has posed. He does not ask or seek to answer the question "Why should we have such faith?" To answer this question is immediately to launch into the apologetic task of trying to provide a theoretical justification for an event that is wholly non-theoretical in nature. It is just as inappropriate and impossible to provide a theoretical justification for the "faith event" after it has occurred as it is to try to produce faith by means of theoretical reasoning. However this does not mean that this event happens to any self "without the struggle of his reason."<sup>3</sup> Only those who deny the function of practical reasoning will want to deny that it is only by the exercise of our practical reason that we can discover the inadequacy of our gods and be "driven to despair in life's meaning."<sup>4</sup> Nor is this transition effected without spiritual insight and moral struggle.

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

By "spiritual insight" Niebuhr means those essentially spontaneous intuitions whose occurrence cannot be predicted or produced simply by taking thought. By "moral struggle" he has in mind the recognition that the fundamental moral problem is the problem of freedom where freedom is not defined as liberty of choice between alternatives but as the problem of achieving liberation from bondage to self-centered desires. This is, of course, consistent with his rejection of the intellectualist view of man's mind as fundamentally theoretical where the "will" is that faculty or power which actualizes the prior proposals of the intellect. On Niebuhr's activist view the fundamental moral problem is not the intellectual problem of deciding what the good life is or of deciding what the right means of attaining it are. Rather, it is that egocentric predicament in which everything that a man loves or values is loved or valued within the context of his own self-interest rather than for its own sake. The reception of the gift of faith does not occur without that moral struggle which ends in the recognition that the set or direction of the human will is so unyielding in its self-interest that even the acquisition of moral virtues or obedience to moral rules become the occasion for an unworthy pride of virtue.<sup>1</sup>

Radically monotheistic faith is never either received or exercised by any individual apart from a continuous struggle for rational and moral integrity. However for "most men" something else is involved--

the concrete meeting with other men who have received this faith, and the concrete meeting with Jesus Christ. There may be other ways, but this is the usual way for us, that we confront in the event of Jesus Christ the presence of that last power which brings to apparent nothingness the life of the most loyal man. Here we

---

<sup>1</sup>The writings of Tolstoi particularly expressed for Niebuhr the profound rational, moral and spiritual struggle that precedes and accompanies the exercise of radically monotheistic faith. For his reflections on this aspect of Tolstoi see RMWC, pp. 18-21; MR, p. 77.

confront the slayer, and here we become aware that this slayer is the lifegiver. He does not put to shame those who trust in him.<sup>1</sup>

The least satisfactory aspect of this essay judged from the point of view of the larger corpus of Niebuhr's theological work is evident at this point. In these words he does little more than mention that a relationship exists between the reception of monotheistic faith and "the event of Jesus Christ" as witness to and normative for knowledge of God in the Church. In The Meaning of Revelation he made a serious attempt to grapple with the thorny issues involved in the complex question of the relation between the revelation of God and historical events and the relation between past events which are revelatory of God and present religious experience.<sup>2</sup>

In the final paragraphs of this essay Niebuhr addresses himself very briefly to the consequences that may be expected to follow from the lives of those who have received the gift of faith. In company with most twentieth century Protestant theologians Niebuhr finds it necessary to point out that faith cannot be secured as a possession in the form of a creed or a moral code. Creeds and codes are important, but they are derivative expressions of faith and therefore belief in creeds or obedience to moral codes cannot be identified with the exercise of faith itself. The reason for this is twofold. First, as has been made clear earlier, faith for Niebuhr is a practical (non-theoretic) historically mediated supreme valuation apart from which there is no basis for theoretical talk about God or his will for man. Second, faith is irreducibly and singularly a relation between persons. Radical faith in God provides "a basis for all thinking, but . . . it is not itself a thought; it is the reliance

---

<sup>1</sup>FGG, pp. 124-125.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. *Infra* pp. 218-228.

of a person on a person."<sup>1</sup> This faith is properly called "radical" because it goes to the roots of the existence of every self possessed of faith and requires nothing less than the continuous transformation of its intellectual and moral life. Intellectually this means that when any self trusts in God as the center of all being and value it is free to accept all relative beings "at his hand for nurture and for understanding."<sup>2</sup> It frees us intellectually to inquire into any and all subjects of human interest without prejudice or fear. There cannot any longer be areas of inquiry which are either too holy or too dangerous to be the objects of human curiosity, rather "all knowledge becomes reverent and all being open to inquiry."<sup>3</sup>

"The moral consequences of faith in God is the universal love of all being in him."<sup>4</sup> Morally faith in God helps us to understand that on the one hand the value of all finite beings is relative never absolute (as is true of all kinds of polytheism); on the other hand their relativity does not make any finite being valueless. Whatever is, is good. This is not to deny that in a given relationship one particular being may be bad-for rather than good-for another being but it is to deny that that being is as a consequence, rendered worthless. Human ignorance, error, and perversity, are moral realities which must be taken into account in any morality which seeks to come to grips with the actualities of human existence. But they are not, on Niebuhr's view the finally determinative realities. That reality is God himself in relation to whom all that is has existence, and all that is has value or is valued. Or to put it in the symbols of Christian theology--symbols which surprisingly for so self-

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 125-126.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 126.

consciously Protestant a theologian as Niebuhr, are entirely omitted from his essay--human error, ignorance and perversity, are only made possible by the grace of God the Creator and are only made effaceable by the grace of God the Redeemer.<sup>1</sup>

### Summary

In this essay, "Faith in Gods and in God," Niebuhr has provided a succinct account of his understanding of how God is known and a brief indication of the consequences that may be expected to follow for human thought and conduct. He began by declaring that for the Protestant theologian it is not a theoretical, but a practical problem. Following the lead provided by Kant he accepted the neat separation between knowledge of sense and knowledge of value and limited all knowledge of God strictly to the latter. This resulted in the identification of faith with practical reason or with value-knowledge. All knowledge of God must then be a species of value knowledge and it can have nothing at all to do with intellectually formulated beliefs or revealed doctrines about God. God may be an object, but he is not an object of thought. Faith in God is wholly independent of all metaphysical ideas of supernaturally revealed truths about God. God is known in value-experience, or not at all. It is then both impossible and unnecessary to present any proofs for the existence of God. In this way theology is freed from the apologetic difficulty of proving or providing evidence for the truth of the basic theological proposition. It is for this reason that Niebuhr argues that theology must be "confessional," that is, non-apologetic

---

<sup>1</sup>In view of the fact that Niebuhr consistently maintained in his regular Yale lectures on Christian ethics that our response to God is always a response to his activity in all creaturely events as the one sovereign Creator, Judge and Redeemer, it is surprising that so little of this more overtly theological language is to be found in his principal published essays and books.

theology.<sup>1</sup>

After describing his understanding of the subjective attitude of faith Niebuhr turned to a phenomenological description of the various objects of faith. Such objects are properly called "gods" insofar as they are relied on or trusted in by any self for meaning or value. These finite gods cannot however sustain the constitutive need of every self for "continuous meaning and value." They are, like the self, finite beings and they are brought to their end by that same power or reality which is the source and end of all that exists. In the face of this power, the enemy of those beings upon which it has relied for meaning and value, the self is driven to despair of life's meaning. The end of natural religion is the realization that that power which brings all determinate beings into existence is either hostile or indifferent toward the individuality and value of each. But an accurate phenomenological analysis of man's religious situation cannot stop with a description of natural religion. Precisely within this situation there has emerged a radically different form of human faith which can only be seen as a great reversal of our natural faith. Niebuhr does not call this faith "supernatural" but he does say that its "incarnation"<sup>2</sup> in human history and in personal experience is inexplicable, absurd even.

What is the absurd thing that comes into our moral history as existential selves, but the conviction mediated by a life, a death, and a miracle beyond understanding, that the source and ground, the government of and end of all things--the power we (in our distrust and disloyalty) call fate and chance--is faithful, utterly trustworthy, utterly loyal to all that issues from it?<sup>3</sup>

For the Christian the exercise of a radically monotheistic faith is made possible and called forth in him through a complex event (present in the memory of the

---

<sup>1</sup>MR, pp. 38-42.

<sup>2</sup>RMWC, pp. 39-42.

<sup>3</sup>CC, p. 254.

Church and witnessed to in its Scripture and creeds). This event is the "incarnation" in Jesus Christ of radical trust and loyalty to the One he called "Father" and the faithfulness of the Father in raising him from the dead. It is through this "event" (though Christians are in no position to say only through this event) that Christians come to understand that God is reconciled to them and they to God. At the same time they also are given to understand that their alienation from, distrust of, and disloyalty to their neighbors and to all created being is occasioned by that deeper distrust and disloyalty to Being as good, that is, as able and willing to bestow and to maintain the worth of all that issues from it.

There are at least two major issues in the account of how God is known, given by Niebuhr in this essay, that need to be discussed in more detail in relation to the whole corpus of his writings. They may be posed as questions. First, "What role does the constitutive human need to know that life is worth living play in Niebuhr's understanding of how God is known?" Second, "What does it mean to say that God is known by 'revelation' and what significance does Jesus Christ have for Niebuhr's understanding of how God is known?" My purpose will be to analyze Niebuhr's answer to each of these questions and to point out some difficulties which seem to me to be present in the answers he gave.

#### God and the Meaning of Human Existence

It cannot have escaped notice what a large part the notion that man has a constitutive need to know that he has value, to know that his life is worth

living, plays in Niebuhr's explanation of our knowledge of God. He does not, so far as I can discover, put this forward as an empirical generalization about all men based on extensive questioning of other persons. Rather, it is accepted as true on the basis of a phenomenological analysis of human existence. Niebuhr has also emphasized that this need is not simply psychological if this means that it is relative to the passing desires or inclinations of any self, so that it would be possible for a self not to desire or want to be valued. The need to know that life is worth living, that it has value, is constitutive of human existence as such.

As long as a man lives he must believe in something for the sake of which he lives; without belief in something that makes life worth living man cannot exist. . . . The faith that life is worth living and the definite reference of life's meaning to specific beings or values is as inescapable a part of human existence as the activity of reason. It is no less true that man is a believing animal in this sense than that he is a rational animal. Without such faith men might exist, but not as selves.<sup>1</sup>

The psychological fact that at a particular moment an individual did not admit to being conscious of such a need could in no way count as evidence against the truth of this judgment. It should also be clear that Niebuhr is not saying that only certain peculiarly religious or morally sensitive persons concern themselves with searching for the meaning of life, rather he is laying down as an objective truth that the need to know that life is worth living is given with life itself. A phenomenological analysis of human self-existence reveals the presence of this fundamental need of every self to know not merely that its life has meaning, but that it is made meaningful and worthy by some being upon which it relies. In "Value Theory and Theology" Niebuhr specifically describes this

---

<sup>1</sup>MR, pp. 77-78 (*italics added*). Cf. VTT, pp. 113-115; RMWC, p. 16; FGG, pp. 118-119.

need as "religious;" in "Faith in Gods and in God" he argues that it matters little whether we call this need "religious" or not. The essential point is to recognize that "faith that life is worth living, as the reference of life to a source of meaning and value, as the practice of adoration and worship, it is common to all men. For no man lives without living for some purpose, for the glorification of some god, for the advancement of some cause."<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr cannot, and does not, of course, leave the matter here. It may be a point of little consequence whether this need is called religious or merely a human faith, but if it is, it will remain so, only so long as the question of the ontological status of those beings which are the objects of faith is ignored. If I have understood the argument presented in "Faith in Gods and in God" correctly, Niebuhr has argued that this need to know that life is worth living cannot be fully satisfied by any value relation or relations that the self sustains with finite beings. We may discriminate between the ontological status of these beings which function as objects of faith but so long as they are "finite in time as in space" they "are unable to save us from the ultimate frustration of meaningless existence."<sup>2</sup>

There is a very important point in all this which must be examined further. Niebuhr has denied that his approach to the problem of God can in any sense be construed as an argument (including a moral argument) for the existence of God. But it should be recognized, I think, that when he says that no finite object is fully adequate to the requirements of the constitutive human need for meaning and value, then he has, quite independently of any revealed truth, identified a need which could only be fulfilled by some sort of reality other

---

<sup>1</sup>FGG, p. 118 (italics added).    <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 120.

than contingent beings.<sup>1</sup> Whether or in what sense this reality should be called "God" remains an open question. That Niebuhr's argument entails the idea that every self is so constituted that its life has meaning or is worthwhile only in relation to some cosmic reality which bestows upon it transcendent purpose or value, is not open to question. He is saying that if life is to be meaningful or worthwhile it will be so only in relation to some being or center of value which "exists universally or can be the object of a universal faith."<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr cannot be accused of employing the familiar apologetic strategy of claiming that the meaningfulness or the worthwhileness of life depends upon theological beliefs because for him the problem of God is a problem of faith rather than belief. However, something like that tactic does seem to be involved because he is saying that only a trans-finite reality could satisfy the need for meaning and value which is intrinsic to the nature of man.

The important role which this universal anthropological judgment plays in Niebuhr's theology is clearly evident wherever he addressed himself to the problems of religious epistemology.<sup>3</sup> This is especially true of his early programmatic essay, "Value Theory and Theology (1937), and his full dress discussion of how God is known in The Meaning of Revelation, which appeared four years later. Earlier in Chapter II the former essay was discussed for the purpose of

---

<sup>1</sup>The vague locution "some sort of reality" is used deliberately at this point for two reasons. First, because the line of inquiry presently being undertaken does not require any greater specificity. Second, and more importantly, it deliberately avoids specifying the ontological status of this "other" so as not to prejudice a later discussion of Niebuhr's lack of clarity on precisely this point.

<sup>2</sup>FGG, p. 120.

<sup>3</sup>VTT, pp. 110-116; MR, pp. 22-38, 175-191; FGG, pp. 114-126; RMWC, pp. 24-37.

showing Niebuhr's dissatisfaction with the kind of value theory which had been employed in much liberal Protestant theology since Kant. These value theologies shared a common assumption which Niebuhr believed had to be rejected if the absolute priority of the being and value of God over all human or creaturely being and value was to be maintained. They assumed that prior to God's revelation of himself and of man's experience of faith in him, that it was not only possible but necessary for the mind to be in possession of absolute values which are in some way determinative of what could count as knowledge of God. Some declared 1) these values identical with God; others 2) argued that they required the postulate of God; still others 3) believed that values were the sole valid criteria by which experience of God could be distinguished from experience of other kinds of reality.<sup>1</sup>

These difficulties did not lead Niebuhr to advocate the abandonment of value-theory; on the contrary he was critical of other "new tendencies" in theology which did demand that the valuational approach to religious knowledge be given up. "They make revelation their starting point, but by dealing with it as though it were a bolt out of the blue and by refusing to relate it to the value cognitions of men, they fail to give an understanding of the process whereby revelation is received."<sup>2</sup> If theology is to maintain itself as a distinctive discipline it must set forth a religious epistemology, and Niebuhr was convinced that given the present state of philosophical knowledge this could best be accomplished by showing that all knowledge of God is a type of value knowledge or valuation.<sup>3</sup> The following lengthy passage is cited because it shows Niebuhr's

---

<sup>1</sup>VTT, pp. 93-95, 99, 101-103, 108, 110-113.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 110-111. Cf. SSD, pp. 275-278.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 101-112.

complete endorsement of the view that knowledge of God is wholly confined within the limits of practical reason.

The enduring contribution of empirical theology, from Schleiermacher to Macintosh, lies in its insistence on the fact that knowledge of God is available only in religious [faith] relation to him. In emphasizing this point modern theology has not only made explicit an interest which was implicit in the Reformation doctrine of salvation by faith alone, but has developed it in new and important directions. For while the Reformation contended against the fallacy of salvation by works, the new development was a reaction against the fallacies of salvation by belief, as in traditionalism, and of salvation by reason in rationalism. Religious knowledge has been shown to be unique, and this uniqueness has been shown to be due to the fact that it is a type of value knowledge or valuation. . . . The knowledge of God, it has been pointed out, is not equivalent to the knowledge of doctrine or of a First Cause or Designer. And its dissimilarity to theological or metaphysical knowledge is due not only to its immediacy--which may be questioned --but to its character as knowledge of a being having value of a certain sort. Empirical theology has seen that religion is an affair of valuation, analogous to morality and art. For as an action or a character may be known by the psychologist or historian without recognition of its goodness . . . so the being which religion knows to be God may be known by philosophy, history or natural science without knowledge of its deity.

The problem with the value theologies of Schleiermacher, Ritschl and Macintosh-- to mention those which Niebuhr has criticized--was not their relational-valuational method, but their failure to follow it through consistently.<sup>2</sup> Schleiermacher, for example, properly acknowledged that there can be no thinking or speaking about God except from the standpoint of a feeling of absolute dependence upon him. But in Niebuhr's judgment "he did not really take this standpoint in his theology but made the feeling of absolute dependence his object, so directing the attention of faith toward itself rather than toward God."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 112. Cf. ". . . one cannot speak of God and gods at all save as valued beings or as values which cannot be apprehended save by a willing, feeling, responding self." MR, p. 35.

<sup>2</sup>MR, pp. 27-37, VTT, pp. 93-110.

<sup>3</sup>MR, p. 27.

This inversion of theological priorities should not, Niebuhr argued, be construed as an inevitable consequence of the method itself. It occurred because these theologians relinquished a single-minded interest in confessing to their own and to the Christian community's faith in the absolute value of God for a double-minded defense of the absolute value of other entities, such as Western culture, human personality, or moral consciousness and faith in God as the necessary means to the securing of these values.<sup>1</sup> The fatal flaw, which Niebuhr reiterates again and again in "Value Theory and Theology," was the failure to recognize that God alone has absolute value and that consequently there are no absolute values that may be known prior to experience of God which qualify as adequate criteria for distinguishing experience of God from experience of other kinds of beings.

Theology would be much better served by a value-theory that would recognize "the relativity of all values without prejudice to their objectivity."<sup>2</sup> Values are relative because beings or selves possess value not in themselves, but only in relation to the need of another. Values are objective because the values relative to being are not determined by desire or consciousness of need but by the constitution or nature of each being. Values are exclusively a function of the relations between beings where each being either fulfills or fails to fulfill the needs of another being or beings.<sup>3</sup> It is incumbent upon Niebuhr now to show how this relational value theory is more adequate to the requirements of any theology that wishes to maintain the priority and independence

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 27-40, esp. pp. 28, 32, 35f; VTT, pp. 97-103. For Schleiermacher "the object of theology came to be, not God, but man's relation to God, and divine activity was explained, not as a function of the Godhead, but as a function of man's dependence on the Godhead for the purpose of maintaining his values as a person," VTT, p. 98.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

of the being and value of God to all human being and value.

On the basis of this theory, the important religious question is this: "Which reality has those characteristics which are the foundation of the value of deity, or which fulfill the human need for God?"<sup>1</sup> Among the things which this question assumes are 1) the belief that human beings are constituted to need God and 2) that it is possible to identify what that need is. Our previous discussion has prepared us for Niebuhr's answer. It is "the need for that which makes life worth living which bestows meaning on life by revealing itself as the final source of life's being and value."<sup>2</sup>

The task of theology from this point of view lies then in the analysis of those characteristics by virtue of which a being has the value of deity for man, the examination of the reasons for the failure of religions which attach themselves to beings which do not possess these characteristics adequately, and the description of the ultimate being, which as the supremely real and the source of all other being, is alone able by virtue of its character to satisfy the human need for God.<sup>3</sup>

On the one hand Niebuhr affirms that God exists independently of the creatures constituted to need him, on the other hand he denies that it is possible to know his value as God without reference to his relations to his creatures.<sup>4</sup> But if the deity-value of God is defined in terms of human need for him, does this not make the satisfaction of this need the criterion by means of which we are enabled to judge what is or is not God in experience? To ask this question is, of course, to turn Niebuhr's own criticism of earlier value theologies against his own. Is it justified? I argue that it is justified, and that the corrections

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 113. Cf. MR, pp. 188-190. "To say that God and faith belong together is to maintain that no power could be apprehended as God save as its value were made manifest," MR, p. 188.

which Niebuhr introduced are not sufficient to save his own theory from the anthropocentric predicament which he himself has described. Niebuhr thought that he had avoided making human fulfillment a value prior to God's value by disallowing any knowledge of what counted as fulfillment of this need prior to experience of God's revelation of himself. This move does not succeed. It does guarantee that psychologically God's value cannot be known prior to experience of him but this does not ensure that in our experience of him we know that his value is prior to or independent of any other value. Granted, we cannot know what will satisfy human need prior to actual experience of God, but we do know prior to this experience that only that being which is able to satisfy such a need will have the value of deity. If this is so then it must follow 1) that the value of God is known solely in relation to human need, 2) that this need has been identified prior to the experience of God, 3) that the human need to know that life is worthwhile is a value which is known prior to the value of God, 4) that this need is the criterion by which we are able to judge which among the available realities has the value of deity.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr's value theory clearly asserts the logical priority of being over value in the ordo essendi. The first principle of his relational theory is that value is a function of the relation between beings. But he just as firmly

---

<sup>1</sup>Hans Frei has also pressed this point. He asks, "If the perfections of God are known to us by virtue of their fulfillment of 'the human need for God,' then do we not assimilate our knowledge of God to certain prior, independent 'felt needs,' i.e., values, even if they are never hypostatized? When one defines value in terms of relationships between beings and also speaks of a unique valuational religious knowledge, then the experience of religious need or value would (1) imply God as the 'necessary postulate' and (2) 'make values the criteria by means of which the experience of divine reality is distinguished from other experience'." FE, pp. 72-73. The difference between Frei's criticism and mine is mainly one of definiteness. He leaves open the question whether these inferences are correct or not; I argue that they are correct.

denies the priority of being over value in the ordo cognoscendi. There is no knowledge of the ding-an-sich and even when it is knowledge of God which is sought, the relationship between man and God is such that man is not able to know God as he exists in or for himself, nor is he able to know those moral qualities which God has in or for himself. We may know only those values or valuations which actually correspond to and satisfy the human need to know that life has meaning and is worthwhile. "What is revealed in revelation is not a being as such, but rather its deity-value, not that it is, but that it 'loves us,' 'judges us,' that it makes life worth living."<sup>1</sup> In our knowledge of God value takes precedence over being. The "deity-value" apprehended by the believer cannot be known to be identical with the value which God has in himself but is strictly limited to that value which the Being we call God has for us. Or to put it more concisely, the value of God is identical with the value that he has in fulfilling human need. It is precisely this coincidence of the human need to be valued with the presence of that Being that values all beings, human and otherwise, which constitutes the content of God's revelation. If this is so it is not strictly accurate to say that we ever know God, rather what we know is that we are acknowledged by God, valued by him. On this view judgments about God would only be possible as inferences drawn from judgments about God's valuation of the self. This would seem to be what Niebuhr means by the use of the word "reflexively" in the following passage.

Religious experience includes an evaluation on the part of man, but primarily it expresses itself in the judgment, 'This is the being which values me or judges me, by relation to which I have worth or possibility of worth,' while reflexively it issues in the judgment, 'This is the being of supreme intrinsic value, which corresponds to all my deepest needs.'<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>VTT, p. 116. Cf. NR, pp. 152-154.

<sup>2</sup>VTT, p. 115.

It would appear that a theology which attempts to provide an explanation of how we know God exclusively in terms of a relational theory of value must in the end leave us without any knowledge of God that is not dependent in the final analysis upon his relation to us. Niebuhr has stressed the absolute ontological dependence of man upon God, but it is evident that in our knowledge of God his value as God is dependent upon his relation to man.

Some questions might be asked at this point. Why is Niebuhr so sure that he has correctly identified the basic need of man? Even if it is agreed that he has identified a basic human need, why should it be assumed, as Niebuhr does, that only a relationship with God can adequately fulfill this need? Perhaps it cannot be fulfilled in any complete or finally satisfying manner at all as all nihilists would argue. Finally, some Christian theists may ask if it is really possible for man to have any knowledge of his true needs prior to revelation. Niebuhr does say that an immediate consequence of God's revelation of himself is the transformation and transvaluation of all our natural understanding of what God is like,<sup>1</sup> but he does not seem to have considered the possibility that this same revelation may also call into question any prior self-understanding of the true meaning of human existence.

#### God and the Meaning of Revelation

In his account of how God is known in "Faith in Gods and in God," Niebuhr not only tied knowledge of God very closely to the human need to know that life is worth living, but also to the idea of revelation (though the word is not used) in or through Jesus Christ. Revelation is the only way in which God may be known. This is so, Niebuhr believed, not simply because human minds

---

<sup>1</sup>MR, pp. 175-191.

cannot attain knowledge of God by their own power (though that is true) or because the object known in revelation is a "self," or like a self, and not an object of thought (though that too is true), but precisely because as the divine and sovereign Self he is known in an act of self-disclosure, or not at all.<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr has argued that man, quite apart from revelation, may experience an existential encounter with Being as that "last power" which brings to nothing all his gods but if Being is apprehended as God, that is, as good to and for man and all contingent beings, then this is a miraculous gift, it is revelation.<sup>2</sup> He readily confessed that this view of how God is known was deeply rooted in personal religious experience. Speaking of his own basic religious convictions he asserted that faith in the sovereignty of God for him entailed

the understanding that trust in the ground of being is a miraculous gift. How it is possible to rely on God as unconquerably loving

---

<sup>1</sup>MR, pp. 134-147; RMWC, pp. 44-47.

<sup>2</sup>Niebuhr has employed various terms to refer to that ultimate reality upon which all finite being is absolutely dependent. In Radical Monotheism and Western Culture he uses the terms "being itself," "the principle of being," and "Being" interchangeably. Cf. pp. 32, 33 and 38 respectively. In "Faith in Gods and in God" the terms "last being" and "last power" are used synonymously. Cf. p. 123. The term "the power" by itself or combined with modifiers such as "ultimate," "creative," "universal," et. al., is used almost exclusively in The Responsible Self. Cf. pp. 119f, 123-125, 141f, 175-177. Niebuhr in this essay seems to favor this term "power" over "being" perhaps because it connotes the idea of action whereas being does not. Cf. p. 119. Beyond this he may have come to regard the term "being" as too closely associated with an essentialist ontology which he rejected. The term "God" for Niebuhr refers to the unity of ultimate being or power and ultimate goodness. Cf. MR, p. 188. In Radical Monotheism and Western Culture the terms "principle of being" and "principle of value" are used to indicate that God is not to be identified with "being" and "value." A distinction must be marked between the being and value of God and the being and value of all contingent reality. Cf. p. 33. The term "god" for Niebuhr means any object of faith, but radical monotheistic faith is trust in and loyalty to Being as God. That is, that unity of power and goodness upon which all finite beings are absolutely dependent for their being and value. Finally, by far the most frequently used term employed by Niebuhr is the venerable notion of "the One." Apparently Niebuhr did not see any logical difficulties involved in describing God literally by means of these abstract impersonal terms and equally literally with concrete personal terms such as "First Person" and "faithful self." Cf. RMWC, pp. 41-47.

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. . . . So far as I could see and can now see that miracle has been wrought among us by and through Jesus Christ. I do not have the evidence which allows me to say that the miracle of faith in God is worked only by Jesus Christ and that it is never given by men outside the sphere of his working, though I may say that where I note its presence I posit the presence also of something like Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

It must also be recognized that other men have encountered Being as evil rather than good, as an indifferent or malevolent power who is the enemy of all human beings and values. For them the word "God," if it is used at all, means "a power that is jealous of its rights, that is suspicious of its creation, that is as ready to deny it, to condemn it to destruction . . . as to affirm, maintain and bless it."<sup>2</sup> If it is asked why some men apprehend God as evil and others as good, no answer can be given. No objective standard can be found either through reason, experience or revelation that can settle conclusively which of these perceptions of the ultimate character of Being is true and which is false. All that the Christian can do is to confess that through the revelation of God in Christ he has learned to trust in Being as good, that is, as God.<sup>3</sup> Because this is so the person to whom this gift of faith has been given can never say that other men ought to exercise this faith or that they ought to love God.<sup>4</sup> It is a gift of God and to those to whom it is not given it cannot be required. The revelation in Jesus Christ is normative only for the

---

<sup>1</sup>"Reformation: Continuing Imperative," pp. 248f; Cf. CC, pp. 254f.

<sup>2</sup>RS, p. 119. Niebuhr often quoted Bertrand Russell's, A Free Man's Worship, as a confession of such distrust of Being. Cf. CC, p. 115; FGG, p. 122; RS, p. 140.

<sup>3</sup>RMWC, p. 38.

<sup>4</sup>FGG, p. 125; Cf. RS, p. 130f.

Christian community. Christian theology "must ask what revelation means for Christians rather than what it ought to mean for all men, everywhere and at all times. And it can pursue its inquiry only by recalling the story of Christian life and by analyzing what Christians see from their limited point of view in history and faith."<sup>1</sup> There can be no apologetic use of the revelation which Christians have received: the witness of the Christian community must be wholly confessional in word and deed.

Niebuhr advanced three reasons why it is necessary for a theology based upon revelation to be exclusively confessional in form.<sup>2</sup> The first is clearly the most decisive in his own thinking: It is the almost unconquerable tendency of men to cease to rely wholly on the free grace of God and to seek to justify their faith as superior to others. When this is done--and Niebuhr believed that it was the besetting sin of both orthodox and liberal theologies, Protestant and Catholic--faith as a subjective attitude, the Scriptures or theological formulations of faith, the Christian community itself and so on, rather than God himself become the primary object of faith. All apologetic claims for the universal truth of Christian beliefs Niebuhr seems to imply would directly contradict the idea of faith in God as wholly a gift of God. Such apologetic use of revelation depends upon the erroneous idea that revelation means the disclosure of truths about God which can be possessed as universal truths rather than as a personal encounter with God himself.<sup>3</sup>

It is clear, however, that this non-propositional view of revelation, which Niebuhr recognized was not compatible with the creedal formulation of the early church or of Protestantism,<sup>4</sup> is determined by the acceptance of certain

---

<sup>1</sup>MR, p. 42. Cf. pp. 17f, 38-40, 176f.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 38-42.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 41f, 155, 182.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 156-159.

universal truths about the limitations of human rationality, namely, the two epistemological principles discussed in the previous chapter. With respect to the first principle--the distinction between theoretical and practical reason--it is necessary to recognize that all knowledge of God is faith (practical) knowledge. Theoretical knowledge about the nature or will of God expressible in propositional form such as is possible of phenomenal objects within space and time is denied. Knowledge of God is therefore relative in the sense that it is limited to what can be known of God in terms of personal value relations. There is no knowledge of God outside of the relationship of faith in him. Only within the living relation of active faith in God is the character of God revealed.<sup>1</sup>

A second limitation is placed upon our knowledge of God by the recognition of the historical relativity of all human knowledge both from the side of the subject and the object.<sup>2</sup> But Niebuhr did not believe that the acceptance of historical relativism entailed the sort of subjectivism which denies that the object known exists independently of the consciousness of the subject. "It is not apparent that one who knows that his concepts are not universal must also doubt that they are concepts of the universal, or that one who understands how all his experience is historically mediated must believe that nothing is mediated through history.<sup>3</sup> The human mind cannot transcend its particular historical standpoint nor can the Christian believer ever transcend his relative standpoint within the Christian community and declare that his view of the universal (i.e. God) is a universal view (i.e., true for all men everywhere and at all times).

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 22-38.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 18f (italics added).

There is no fixed non-historical standpoint from which God may be known as he is in himself. All metaphysical or moral approaches to the knowledge of God which assume such a non-historical view are in error. For Niebuhr there is one universal God but he is never known except from within a particular historical community.

I cannot think about God's relation to man in the abstract. The historical qualification of my relation to him is inescapable. I cannot presume to think as a Jew or a Mohammedan would think about God, though I can recognize that they are thinking about the same God about whom I think. Nor can I presume to rise above those specific relations to God in which I have been placed so as to think simply and theistically about God. There is no such being, or source of being, surely as a Christian God; but there is a Christian relation to God and I cannot abstract from that, as no Jew, or Mohammedan can abstract from a Jewish or Muslim relation.<sup>1</sup>

In all knowledge of God the object known is one and universal, but the standpoints from which he may be known are many and relative to particular historical situations. This view of religious knowledge is saved from a vicious subjectivism, Niebuhr believed, when it is recognized 1) that the independent reality of the object is not denied and, 2) that it is possible within the historic Christian community for individuals to share in the same revelation of God and for each to subject their thinking and speaking about God to an ongoing

---

<sup>1</sup>RS, pp. 44f. This passage is interesting in two other respects besides its emphatic endorsement of the relativity of all knowledge of God. First, Niebuhr seems to accept the view that the "same God" that Christians know through his revelation in Jesus Christ is known by Jews and Mohammedans through other revelations interior to their own histories. A second point made seems to be inconsistent with this for Niebuhr claims that he knows that "they are thinking about the same God" about whom he is thinking. But on what grounds does he know this if all his knowledge of God is relative to the Christian relation to God? Does this not imply that he is in possession of a more synthetic view (a universal view?) that transcends these particular relations to God and knows them all to be relations to the "same God?" He was a more circumspect relativist on this point in The Meaning of Revelation. "We can speak of revelation only in connection with our own history without affirming or denying its reality in the history of other communities into whose inner life we cannot penetrate without abandoning ourselves or our communities." Ibid., p. 82.

corroboration and correction by their fellow believers, past and present.

Every view of the universal from the finite standpoint of the individual in such a society is subject to the test of experience on the part of companions who look from the same standpoint in the same direction as well as to the test of consistency with the principles and concepts that have grown out of past experience in the same community.<sup>1</sup>

Present personal encounter with God in Christ is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for knowledge of God. Apart from the corroborative witness of fellow-knowers, past and present, the individual believer is at the mercy of either his imagination<sup>2</sup> or the purely "private and mystic assurance which is not subject to the criticism of [the] community."<sup>3</sup>

It must be asked, however, whether a theory of verification which is confined to the community of faith or an historical relativism which only allows for the possibility that something is mediated through history are really sufficient to distinguish "objective relativism" from epistemic subjectivism. If all that "objective relativism" means is that in the face of the historical relativity of all knowledge the objectivity of the object is affirmed by a sheer act of faith, then this is not sufficient to guarantee that within the knowledge relation the mind really possesses positive knowledge of those characteristics which belong to God in distinction from other objects. Failing this, "objective relativism" would indicate that there is an object, but that what is known would be wholly relative to the consciousness of the subject.<sup>4</sup>

The Christian believer is committed then, according to Niebuhr, to

---

<sup>1</sup>MR, pp 20f, cf. pp. 136, 141f; CC, pp. 245f.

<sup>2</sup>CC, p. 245.

<sup>3</sup>MR, p. 141.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 19f.

recognizing that from his limited point of view in history and faith he may only "ask what revelation means for Christians rather than what it ought to mean for all men, everywhere and at all times."<sup>1</sup> But if Christian faith is based on the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and if all knowledge of God is historically apprehended, then, Niebuhr argued, it is necessary to solve two distinct yet related problems. First, how is it possible to understand all past events as in principle wholly explicable in terms of their relations to antecedent events and at the same time believe that in or through some of these events God is revealed?<sup>2</sup> In short, "How can revelation mean both history and God?"<sup>3</sup> Second, how can the revelation of God be a present reality if it is identified with the occurrence of certain past events?<sup>4</sup> Niebuhr attempted to solve both problems in terms of a distinction between two types of history.<sup>5</sup> More precisely defined, it is an epistemological distinction between two ways of knowing the same historical reality. Employing his version of the Kantian distinction between theoretical and practical reason he differentiated between external or observed history and internal or lived history.<sup>6</sup> It is important to recognize that this perspectival view of historical events presupposes and is largely a methodological extension of the objectively relativistic standpoint previously described.

In external history the knower assumes the standpoint of a disinterested observer of events who seeks to understand and describe past happenings in abstraction from all particular value commitments of selves, his own and others. In external history the knower cannot give a disinterested account of the same

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 42, cf. pp. 59f, 63, 74-76; CC, p. x; RS, pp. 95-100.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 54-56.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 56-59.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 59-90.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 59-73, cf. pp. viii, 73, 76.

events because his own life and value commitments as a person have been decisively qualified by these very events.<sup>1</sup> The data of external history are impersonal discrete entities such as ideas, interests, and things: The data of internal history on the other hand are not "elusive atoms of matter or thought but equally elusive selves" and values.<sup>2</sup> The former results in a descriptive knowledge, the latter a normative one.<sup>3</sup>

Each perspective also employs different concepts of value, time and society.<sup>4</sup> For the objective historian the value of an event is determined by the effect it has on subsequent events; for the confessional historian the value of an event is its worth for selves. The former ignores events which have no effect on other events; the latter does not recall events which have no relevance to the value or destiny of selves. In external history time is understood quantitatively as a series of discrete impersonal moments; in internal history time is understood duratively in terms of consciousness. Finally, human society for the external knower is viewed as an aggregate of atomic individuals, an intricate organization made up of various and often conflicting instincts, beliefs, customs, laws, etc.; for the internal knower society is a community of persons who are united by a common memory and common loyalties.

The most important of these concepts for Niebuhr's purposes is undoubtedly the notion of time associated with inner history. It will be helpful to have his full description of it before us.

In internal history . . . our time is our duration. What is past is not gone; it abides in us as our memory; what is future is not non-existent but present in us as our potentiality--Time

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 59-63.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 67-71.

here is organic or it is social, so that past and future associate with each other in the present. Time in our history is not another dimension of the external space world in which we live, but a dimension of our life and of our community's being. We are not in this time but it is in us. . . . Such time is not a number but a living, a stream of consciousness, a flow of feeling, thought and will.<sup>1</sup>

Two points are significant here. First, time is defined in relation to an inner consciousness of events. Second, past events may be recalled through memory and become the content of a present consciousness. The past survives in the present as our memory.<sup>2</sup> It is, as we shall see, precisely the continuity provided by the shared memories within the community of faith that serves to establish the revelatory event as a present reality for successive generations.

Granting for the moment that this distinction is a defensible one, how does it help Niebuhr to solve the two problems posed earlier? "The two-aspect theory allows us to understand how revelation can be in history and yet not be identifiable with miraculous events as visible to an external observer and how events that are revelatory in our history, sources of unconquerable certainty for us, can yet be analyzed in profane fashion by the observer."<sup>3</sup> It is an

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69 (italics added). Niebuhr is directly influenced here by Henri Bergson's notion of time as duration (*duree*), a notion central to the philosophy of Bergson. Niebuhr follows Bergson in distinguishing between 1) time that occurs in natural science, that time thought of as a succession of extended (spatialized) discrete units, and 2) time that we experience directly as "duration," that is, as a directly intuited non-spatial stream of consciousness in which past, present, and future flow into each other. The latter is "real" time. Physical time is an abstraction accomplished by the intellect for wholly practical purposes. Niebuhr gave general acknowledgment to the influence of Bergson in the preface to *The Meaning of Revelation*. Cf. p. x. Bergson's discussion of time is found first and principally in *Essai sur les donnees immediates de la conscience* (1889), translated into English by F. L. Pogson as *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1910).

<sup>2</sup> Niebuhr does not in this passage say as clearly as he should have that it is not past events themselves, surely, that are recalled but some intelligible representations of them.

<sup>3</sup> MR, p. 82.

error which has occasioned much unnecessary conflict with the explanation of events offered by the natural and social sciences when revelation has been located in external rather than internal history.<sup>1</sup> The "two-aspect theory" is diametrically opposed to traditional supernaturalism. According to Niebuhr, the supernaturalist sees certain events in external history as wholly discontinuous with other events and not subject to the same type of explanation which he accepts for the vast majority of other events.<sup>2</sup> This error is compounded by another, namely, the assumption that both of these ontologically different kinds of events can be apprehended by the theoretical reason from some non-historical point of view.<sup>3</sup> On the supernaturalist model there are two different kinds of reality, the one secular, the other sacred, each apprehensible from the same perspective; on the two-aspect theory the same historical reality is apprehended differently from two different points of view.<sup>4</sup> On Niebuhr's view revelation does not refer to an event in the world of objects externally regarded, rather, it refers to an event in the lives of selves in community who recall "the critical point in their own lifetime when they became aware of themselves in a new way as they came to know the self on whom they were dependent."<sup>5</sup> He did not make inner history synonymous with revelation but only with that part of it which involves a relationship with Jesus Christ.

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 difficult argument, we come across a luminous sentence from which we can go forward and backward and so attain some understanding

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 54-56, 74-76.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 75f.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 73-76, 81-84.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 72.

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 of our history.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr realized that the question was bound to arise as to whether it was possible to make out any intelligible relation between these two modes of historical cognition.<sup>2</sup> Given the limitations imposed by his starting point in religious and historical relativity he rightly concluded that he could not without being inconsistent propose some speculative "metaphysical or meta-historical solution to the problem of dualism."<sup>3</sup> It is not possible either to absorb internal history into external history or transcend both perspectives and gain a knowledge of history which would unite them both in a higher synthesis.<sup>4</sup> Nor is it possible to move by way of thought from an external view to an internal view. An objective inquiry into the life of Jesus will never lead to the knowledge of him as the Christ who is Lord. "Only a decision of the self, a leap of faith, a metanoia or revolution of the mind can lead from observation to participation and from observed to lived history."<sup>5</sup> Niebuhr's formulation of a final speculative proposal which he rejected is, I think, highly ambiguous if not meaningless. "It may be thought," he observed, "that the problem of the relation of inner and outer history can be solved by a determination of what the events, visible in

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 81-90.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 83f.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 83; Cf., CC, p. 233.

two aspects really are in themselves. But the idea of events-in-themselves like that of things-in-themselves is an exceedingly difficult one."<sup>1</sup> The knowledge of things-in-themselves is, of course, not just a "difficult one" but given his acceptance of historical relativism it is by definition an impossible one. But the notion "events-in-themselves" seems to me to be logically odd and not at all symmetrical with the notion "things-in-themselves." Why? Because the notion of events-in-themselves presupposes the reification of the concept "event." An "event" in ordinary discourse is not a thing but an exclusively temporal concept which denotes some change which things undergo. It is, of course, open to anyone to stipulate that the word will mean something different in a given context but I understand Niebuhr here to be trading in minted coinage.

In his discussion of the relation between internal and external history Niebuhr concluded that since no theoretical solution to their relation was possible the dualism must be affirmed as a paradox, "another form of the two-world thinking in which Christianity is forever involved."<sup>2</sup> The two-aspect theory of history too, formally considered, involves the same paradoxically related duality that is to be found throughout Christian theology. "In all this," he concluded, "we have only repeated the paradox of Chalcedonian Christology and of the two-world ethics of Christianity."<sup>3</sup> But the paradox in Chalcedonian Christology, as Niebuhr well knew, was ontological, not simply epistemological.<sup>4</sup> The paradox for Niebuhr is not the unity of two ontologically distinct "natures," God and man, in the one "person" Jesus Christ, but the paradoxical unity of two epistemologically distinct modes of apprehending the same historical person Jesus Christ. Just as Niebuhr has consistently refused to pursue metaphysical

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 81; Cf. CC, p. 254.

questions about the aseity of God or the being or value of man in and for himself, so he was also bound to reject the Chalcedonian Christology as an instance of that "exaltation of differences of understanding into differences of being" that raises more problems than it solves.<sup>1</sup> And insofar as this doctrine has been traditionally associated with belief in a virgin birth of Jesus, it conflicts with Niebuhr's strictures against the identification of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ with the occurrence of nature-miracles.<sup>2</sup>

It should be recognized, however, that he does not dispense with miracles entirely. True, it is no longer possible to isolate an event in external history from its causal antecedents and declare it a miraculous work of God; but it is still possible and necessary to understand the revelation of God as a miracle. However, the locus of the miracle is not now external to consciousness but precisely within consciousness itself.<sup>3</sup>

But Niebuhr has not, to my knowledge, explained why nature-miracles of the kind recorded in the Gospels should be rejected if psychological-miracles occurring in "inner history," that is, the consciousness of believers who recall the "Christ-event," are accepted. If, as he asserts, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is a wholly inexplicable "surd" in our apprehension of the meaning of history, (which nevertheless results in the complete transformation of our natural religious distrust of God), then it would seem to be an event which is wholly discontinuous with any preceding or succeeding events.<sup>4</sup> If this

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid. Cf. PCM, p. 112f; RS, p. 60.      <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>3</sup>CC, p. 254; "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," pp. 248f.

<sup>4</sup>"To metaphysical thinking the irrational thing is the incarnation of the infinite, the temporalizing of the absolute. But this is not the absurdity to our existential, subjective, decision-making thought. What is irrational here is the creation of faith in the faithfulness of God by the crucifixion, the betrayal of Jesus Christ, who was utterly loyal to him." CC, p. 254.

is so, it is a miracle. But it may be wondered why the special difficulties which made it impossible for Niebuhr to accept nature-miracles would not also apply to psychological-miracles. Perhaps a case could be made for accepting the latter and rejecting the former, but he did not make it.

Given the total separation between these two modes of historical cognition Niebuhr was understandably concerned with the problem of their relation. Having concluded that there was no "speculative" solution to the dualism, he proposed a "practical solution."<sup>1</sup> The inconsistencies which this "practical solution" to their relation entail have been well canvassed by Professor Van Austin Harvey, so there is no need to treat them further here.<sup>2</sup> But the problem of the relation between them is not to my mind as important as the prior question of the validity of the distinction itself. Niebuhr has argued that these two histories are two irreducibly different perspectives on the same historical reality. But if these two kinds of historical cognition are wholly distinct, and if there is no other perspective than these two, then it is hard to see how Niebuhr knows that the object cognized in each case is the same object. On the one hand he declares that only "God . . . knows it [the event] at the same time and in one act from within as well as from without;" on the other hand, he asserts that though men "are confined to a double and partial knowledge" it is "not knowledge of a double reality."<sup>3</sup> The former assertion, given Niebuhr's relativism, must be regarded as pure postulation; the latter assertion cannot fairly be regarded as anything more than simply an assertion.

---

<sup>1</sup>MR, pp. 84-90.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966, paper edition, 1968), pp. 237-239.

<sup>3</sup>MR, p. 84.

From the point of view of the practicing historian the distinction is, as Professor Harvey has pointed out, too simple.<sup>1</sup> "There are not just two possible perspectives on any given event or constellation of events but a plurality of them."<sup>2</sup> It may well be asked if any historian has succeeded or could succeed in writing history from the point of view of "external history" as Niebuhr has defined it. For example, is it possible to give an account of past events without making value judgments about the character or actions of people, not simply in terms of their effect on subsequent events (external history), but also in terms of their moral worth as measured against either the standards accepted by the historical figures described or those of the historian himself?

It is necessary now to forsake the role of critic and turn again to exposition. Niebuhr has argued that by carefully distinguishing between internal and external history and by declaring revelation to be an event in the internal history of the Christian community he had shown how revelation could mean both historical event and presence of God. A more precise answer to the second problem posed earlier--how can revelation mean both a past event and a present reality--must now be given. The solution here is to be found, Niebuhr believed, in the temporal mediation of the past revelatory event through the "memory" of the community of faith.<sup>3</sup> The "memory" of the community is principally the memory of individual members of the community who personally affirm in the present the past revelatory event.<sup>4</sup> But this is never accomplished apart from the Scriptures

---

<sup>1</sup>The Historian and the Believer, p. 238.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 240.

<sup>3</sup>MR, pp. 59-63, 68-73, 89-93, 125-128.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 124-126.

and sacraments. While Scripture cannot be identified with the memory of the community it is the objective "embodiment" of the witness of that first community which was constituted as a community by its faith in the God revealed in Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> Revelation cannot be sustained as a present reality unless the community continuously refreshes and corrects its memory of the past revelatory event through careful study and interpretation of the Scriptures.<sup>2</sup> The New Testament is a record of the experiences which established the primitive community. While it is not itself revelation, it is an indispensable mediator of revelation insofar as it continuously questions and is questioned by the same historic community "out of which the record came."<sup>3</sup> It is this continuous dialogue within the historic community which constitutes its living tradition.

We know tradition now not only in the form of social rigidities resistant to change but as the dynamic structure of modifiable habit without which men do not live as men. . . . We know tradition as a living social process constantly changing, constantly in need of criticism, but constant also as the continuing memory, value system and habit structure of a society . . . the Church has begun to pay new attention to its tradition. It sees it not as a dead thing once and for all given for its acceptance and rejection, but as living history constantly being renewed, rethought and re-searched for meanings relevant to existing men.<sup>4</sup>

The authority of Scripture and tradition cannot be separated in the continuing life of the community. Scripture embodies "the memory, value system, and habit structure" of the original community; tradition is that continuing "living history constantly being renewed, rethought and re-searched for meanings relevant to existing men." Present revelatory experience then is made possible through the memory of the historic community which recalls the revelation of God in

---

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 89f, 109f, 148; PCM, pp. 44, 87, 119-121; CC, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> CC, p. 13; PCM, pp. 119f.

<sup>3</sup> MR, p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> PCM, p. 88.

Jesus Christ through such "means of grace" as Scripture and sacrament.<sup>1</sup>

The primary purpose of the preceding discussion has been to isolate and analyse the formal epistemological problems which Niebuhr believed were involved in any claim to know that God is revealed in history. He rejected the idea that his attempt to resolve these problems was impelled by an apologetic interest in demonstrating the truth of Christian claims to know God. On the contrary, the problematic relation of revelation and history was occasioned by a new self-knowledge of the relativity of all historical knowledge within the contemporary community of faith. The resolution of these problems must be understood to be nothing more than a necessary clarification of the self-understanding of Christian believers. By means of the "two-aspect theory" of history Niebuhr believed that he had solved the formal problem of the locus of revelation in history. The word "revelation" in the Christian community's language indicates an event in its inner history in which God is known. The determination of the locus of revelation is a necessary yet preliminary step toward the final goal of explicating the content of revelation.

In his description of the revelatory event and the fundamental convictions about God which are mediated through this event, Niebuhr first points out that his description of the believer's existential standpoint and his argument that the revelatory event is apprehended solely from the point of view of practical reason makes it necessary for the revelation of God to be a personal revelation.<sup>2</sup> All knowledge of God for Niebuhr is, as we have seen, practical knowledge and his definition of practical knowledge is restricted to the valuations of selves.

---

<sup>1</sup>MR, pp. 154, 177.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 142-147; RMWC, pp. 42-48.

The most important fact about the whole approach to revelation to which we are committed by the acceptance of our existential situation, of the point of view of faith living in history, is that we must think and speak in terms of persons. In our history we deal with selves not with concepts. Our universals here are not eternal objects ingredient in events but eternal persons active in particular occasions; our axioms in this participating knowledge are not self-evident convictions about the relations of such objects but certainties about fundamental indestructible relations between persons.<sup>1</sup>

The God-man relation is both irreducibly valuational and personal or existential. It is a direct confrontation between the divine and human self. In Niebuhr's understanding of revelation the object known, God, must if he is to be known at all by man, reveal himself as a person. He wishes it to be clearly understood that while this is so, it does not mean that the personhood of God is to be identified with our conceptions of human personhood or even with the person of Jesus.<sup>2</sup> The central certainty given to the Christian community in the revelatory moment is not that Jesus was the greatest of persons or that human selves have infinite value.<sup>3</sup> Such statements may be made but only on the basis of a prior certainty about the infinite self in relation to whom all finite selves have value. Revelation is an I-Thou encounter, but it differs from all I-Thou encounters between finite selves. When we are encountered by the divine self we know ourselves to be known from beginning to end by the "eternal knower" and to be valued by the "universal valuer."<sup>4</sup>

When we say revelation we point to something in the historical event more fundamental and more certain than Jesus or the self. Revelation means God, God who discloses himself to us through our history as our knower, our author, our judge and our only savior.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 147-151.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 153. Cf. p. 88.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 151f.

Revelation means that in our common history the fate which lowers over us as persons in our communities reveals itself to be a person in community with us.<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr believed that this view of revelation entailed the denial of the sort of specific knowledge about the nature or will of God that can be formulated in propositions. "What this means for us cannot be expressed in the impersonal way of creeds or other propositions but only in responsive acts of a personal character. We acknowledge revelation by no third person proposition, such as that there is a God but only in the direct confession of the heart, 'Thou art my God.'<sup>2</sup>

In Radical Monotheism and Western Culture (1960) Niebuhr presents a slightly different view of the revelatory event from that given in The Meaning of Revelation (1941). They are primarily differences of emphasis arising from the fact that in the former he is not exclusively concerned with the meaning of revelation, or with the relation of revelation to history, but with the meaning of faith.<sup>3</sup> He is particularly concerned to describe radically monotheistic faith and to distinguish it from the two primary forms of cultural faith--polytheism and henotheism.<sup>4</sup> He does not forsake the view that God is revealed in historical events but his focus is not now restricted to a Christo-centric interpretation of the meaning of revelation. The crucial chapter in which these matters are discussed is entitled "Radical Faith--Incarnate and Revealed in History."<sup>5</sup> He has given very carefully formulated definitions of what he means by "radical faith" and "incarnation." The word "faith" in the phrase "radical faith"<sup>6</sup> means

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 153f. Cf. pp. 155-159, 172-174, 177, 182; RMWC, p. 42.

<sup>3</sup>RMWC, Ch. I.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., Chs. II and III.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., Ch. III.

both trust (confidence) and loyalty (fidelity) and the definition of "radical faith" is given in terms of the triadic structure of existence which for Niebuhr defines man's being-in-the-world. The self exists at every moment in response-relations with God and other selves and the moral quality of its responses to the actions of others upon it is determined by its interpretation of the character of that power or being upon which it is absolutely dependent.<sup>1</sup> The definition of "radical faith" must encompass this complex relational structure. It is

a form of human faith, that is, of the confidence and fidelity without which men do not live. It may, but need not, be expressed in verbalized beliefs. When the confidence is so put into words the resultant assertion is not that there is a God but that Being is God, or better that the principle of being, the source of all things and the power by which they exist, is good, as good for them and good to them. . . . As loyalty such radical faith is decision for and commitment to the One beyond all the many as head and center of the realm of being; its cause, the universe of being, elicits and requires fidelity.<sup>2</sup>

The term "incarnation" is used by Niebuhr to refer to the embodiment or actual expression of "radical faith" in a total human life. It is "the concrete expression in a total human life of radical trust in the One and of universal loyalty to the realm of being."<sup>3</sup> Radical faith first appeared, albeit "ambiguously," in the life of Israel.<sup>4</sup> It is ambiguously incarnate among the Hebrews because their history is marked by a continuous struggle between radical faith and a social henotheism where Yaweh is worshipped in the interest of the greater glory

---

<sup>1</sup>RS, Ch. 4; RMWC, pp. 32-34, 47f. "The Triad of Faith," pp. 6-12.

<sup>2</sup>RMWC, p. 38.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 40, cf., pp. 32, 39-42.

<sup>4</sup>Mindful of the state of uncertainty in modern historical research into the origins of Hebrew religion Niebuhr does not attempt to fix the date of first emergence of radical monotheism in the history of Israel. He is confident that it had appeared by the time of the great anonymous author of Second Isaiah. Cf., RMWC, pp. 31 and esp. p. 43, n. 3.

and security of the nation. Jesus Christ, Niebuhr avers, embodies this radical faith "to an even greater degree than in Israel. The greatness of his confidence in the Lord of heaven and earth as fatherly in goodness toward all his creatures, the consistency of his loyalty to the realm of being, seem unqualified by distrust or by competing loyalty."<sup>1</sup> His trust in God and fidelity to God as wholly faithful to him and to all creatures was so single-minded, and his fidelity to the whole realm of being was so consistently displayed in his words and deeds, that Christians have felt impelled to refer to him as "son of God."<sup>2</sup>

How, then, does Niebuhr understand the relation between these incarnations of radical faith and revelation? Revelation is an event that is at once a demonstration of loyalty which calls forth confidence in Being as wholly good and a disclosure of a cause which calls forth loyalty to God and to the whole realm of being to which God is loyal.

Though the word is used with other meanings in other contexts, in this context revelation specifies those events in which radical faith was elicited. In relation to faith, revelation does not mean the impartation of certain truths, for propositions do not in themselves establish confidence or challenge loyalty. The event that calls forth faith as confidence is a demonstration of loyalty and the event that calls forth faith as loyalty is some disclosure of a cause.<sup>3</sup>

According to Niebuhr, it is precisely this view of the relation of revelation and faith that is consistently witnessed to in both the Old and New Testament.<sup>4</sup> In the Biblical accounts of the revelation of God which elicited radically

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. Cf. PCM, p. 32; CC, pp. 15-29; RS, pp. 163-167. The possibility that Jesus may either have directly affirmed his own deity or have accepted such ascription from others is not seriously considered by Niebuhr.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. Cf. "The Triad of Faith," pp. 9-12.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 42-44.

monotheistic faith in the experience and actions of Moses, the prophets and Jesus Christ, at least three common themes may be discerned. First, God is being itself, that is, the valuing or redeeming power in the world is ontologically identical with the principle of being itself. Second, Being is God, that is, the principle of being creates, maintains and re-establishes worth. Third, those who trust in God are challenged to choose God's cause as their cause, where God's cause is nothing less than loyalty to the whole realm of being that he creates, maintains and redeems.<sup>1</sup> It is important also to recognize that these revelatory moments in which radical faith was called forth were not peculiarly religious in character, if by "religious" one means private visions or ecstasies, or individual encounters with the holy, or answers to direct appeals for supernatural assistance. Rather, Niebuhr insists that they occurred in the midst of cultural or political crises, and they were fully revelatory of God only insofar as they "were experienced as demonstrations of a presence that was present in every situation."<sup>2</sup>

While in Radical Monotheism and Western Culture Niebuhr does use what Hans Frei has termed the "practical-abstractive"<sup>3</sup> language characteristic of his relational theory of value, it should not be concluded that he at any time conceived of God as an impersonal force or transcendent power or that he thought it possible to speak of God's being apart from his personhood. Niebuhr lays down as "the cornerstone" of his theology of radical monotheism "that the one God who

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 43f.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 44. In The Responsible Self it is this understanding of revelation and faith that is presupposed by Niebuhr when he suggests that the conceptual scheme of responsibility is more congruent with, or better able to give expression to Biblical ethics than either deontology or teleology. RS, pp. 65-67, 165-170.

<sup>3</sup> FE, p. 79.

is Being is an 'I,' or like an 'I,' who is faithful as only selves are faithful."<sup>1</sup> Thus, for Niebuhr, radical faith is established in or is received by the believer when he, as an historically conditioned self, confronts the divine Self, each in their irreducible and untranscendable otherness and their indissoluble relatedness. As we have had occasion to remark earlier, for Niebuhr, the complex interrelation of selves each in their irreducible otherness yet indissoluble relatedness is the fundamental situation in which man exists.

All our experiencing and experimenting, our thinking and communicating goes on within a complex interaction of irreducible "I's" and "Thou's". . . . No matter how much we concentrate on common objects, this is the concentration of subjects who acknowledge the presence of other subjects, of thinkers rather than thoughts, experiencers rather than experienced.<sup>2</sup>

It is then in terms of this primordial existential situation that the revelation of God must be understood. Both in The Meaning of Revelation and Radical Monotheism and Western Culture Niebuhr insists that because this is the case revelation cannot be construed as a relation between the mind and ideas or propositions about God. It refers to that encounter in which Being is disclosed to human selves as a Person wholly unique in his existence and perfections.<sup>3</sup>

What this means for us cannot be expressed in the impersonal way of creeds or other propositions but only in responsive acts of a personal character. We acknowledge revelation by no third person proposition, such as that there is a God, but only in the direct confession of the heart, "Thou art my God." . . . Revelation as the self-disclosure of the infinite person is realized in us only through the faith which is a personal act of commitment, of confidence and trust, not a belief about the nature of things.<sup>4</sup>

To say that God makes himself known as First Person is to say that revelation means less the disclosure of the essence of objective

---

<sup>1</sup>RMWC, p. 45.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>MR, pp. 143, 183-191; RMWC, pp. 45-47.

<sup>4</sup>MR, pp. 153f.

being to minds that the demonstration to selves of, faithful truthful being. What we try to point to with the aid of conceptual terms as principle of being or as the One beyond the many is acknowledged by selves as "Thou."<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr acknowledged the fact that his definition of revelation as "divine self-disclosure" raises many questions.<sup>2</sup> The proposed definition must face, and attempt to resolve, two important closely related issues.

. . . We must ask ourselves whether the revelation of God as person is not so mystic an event that it becomes wholly separate from and irrelevant to our discursive knowledge and to our moral standards. A second question arises in many forms, but perhaps most frequently as the question about the meaning of the word God in this connection. If we say that revelation means divine self-disclosure we seem to infer that we can recognize God in revelation, which implies a previous knowledge of him. . . . Must we not go back of this self-disclosure to some previous knowledge of God, to an original or a general revelation, or to some ideal of God, some value-concept or other demand of reason through which we are enabled to recognize the historical event as a realization of the ideal?<sup>3</sup>

It is clear, from the questions themselves, that he was acutely conscious of the perennial dilemma that has challenged all serious thinking about knowledge of God.<sup>4</sup> How is it possible, in our thinking and speaking about God, to

---

<sup>1</sup>RMWC, pp. 46f (italics added). Given the sharp dualism which Niebuhr has made between theoretical and practical knowledge he cannot, strictly speaking, allow that "revelation means less the disclosure . . ." but must say that "revelation does not result in the disclosure . . ." or some similar decisive negation.

<sup>2</sup>MR, p. 155. RMWC, p. 44. The most perceptive and detailed treatment of the principal difficulties arising out of this aspect of Niebuhr's thought that have come to my attention are to be found in the following essays: Hans Frei's "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," (1957) is still unsurpassed especially on Niebuhr's doctrine of revelation and doctrine of God. FE, pp. 68-87 and 94-104 respectively; John B. Cobb, Living Options in Protestant Theology (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), pp. 296-300. Cobb's treatment covers Radical Monotheism and Western Culture (1960), which appeared after Frei's essay was written.

<sup>3</sup>MR, pp. 155f.

<sup>4</sup>Hans Frei has placed all succeeding interpreters of Niebuhr's thought permanently in his debt. This is especially true of his profound and incisive exposition and critique of Niebuhr's theological method. Cf. "The Theology of

avoid anthropomorphism on the one hand and agnosticism on the other? In the previous section I have argued that Niebuhr's employment of a relational rather than an absolute theory of value was not by itself sufficient to save his own concept of God from the same anthropomorphism that he had argued was the inevitable consequence of all absolute value theologies. In the relational theory of value, the value of any being or self is wholly dependent upon its relations to other beings or selves. Ontologically value depends upon being. But in our knowledge of the infinite being we call "God" we are, according to Niebuhr, wholly confined to a knowledge of the value that is realized in the revelatory moment of direct confrontation with him, where the "deity-value" of being itself exactly corresponds to and satisfies the constitutive human need to know that life is worth living. In The Meaning of Revelation and later writings Niebuhr integrates the notion of value relativity into a more complex approach to religious knowledge which seeks to take account of both the historicity of the revelation of God in Christ and the historical and existential situation of

---

H. Richard Niebuhr," FE, pp. 65-94. Frei argues that Niebuhr's "objective" or "theo-centric relativism," far from resolving the "anthropomorphism-agnosticism" dilemma, or being a viable alternative immune to either horn of the dilemma, actually represents an unstable compromise that falls prey to both. When the relational aspect is stressed by Niebuhr, the content of our knowledge of God becomes anthropomorphic. When he has the objectivity and initiative of God in view he so stresses the uniqueness and untranscendable otherness of God that knowledge of God is emptied of all content. Ibid., pp. 71-75 and 81-87. While Frei does not, and should not have been expected to have developed a theological method that would avoid these difficulties, he does drop hints that it would lie in the direction of a combination of a substance metaphysic, and a realist epistemology coupled with some doctrine of analogical predication. Cf. Ibid., pp. 71f, n. 15, 82f, 102. That this approach would succeed any better than Niebuhr's must remain in doubt. All analogical predication that purports to be informative about the immanent characteristics of deity depends upon the idea that there exists some properties possessed by finite and infinite being that are identical. But it is precisely this ontological assumption that has been rejected by many contemporary philosophers and theologians on both logical and theological grounds.

the believer, the recipient of revelation.<sup>1</sup> While his emphasis on the irreducible selfhood of God and man--evident in writings after "Value Theory and Theology" (1937)--marks a turn toward a more explicit existentialist mode of thought, his definition of revelation as the self-disclosure of being itself as "infinite person,"<sup>2</sup> or "First person,"<sup>3</sup> remains a purely relational one. But the move from a predominant reliance upon "the practical-abstractive" language of value theory to "the practical-concrete" language of historical and social existentialism cannot be allowed to obscure the fact that "both as a valuation-al thinker and as an Existentialist, Niebuhr remains relational in his thought."<sup>4</sup> Both are anti-metaphysical in the sense that they reject any possibility of attaining knowledge of God as he exists in and for himself. All knowledge of God is contingent upon a relationship of confrontation with him in the immediacy of personal experience where the content of revelation is limited to and coincides with the believer's faith, that the power or being which cast him into existence as just this particular self, is itself a Person who knows and values him.<sup>5</sup> If this is the case then even the terms "self" and "person" are relational and it is difficult to see how Niebuhr can justify his belief in the objective personhood of God. Furthermore, here we encounter again a problem which we had occasion to point out in connection with Niebuhr's understanding of man as a "social self."<sup>6</sup> Can the selfhood of man or God be defined solely in terms of its relations. If God is a person, must he not be a singular subject of experience whose existence is ontologically and logically prior to any and all particular relations actual or possible? Indeed it is hard to see how the

---

<sup>1</sup>MR, Chs. I and II; CC, Ch 7; RMWC, pp. 44-48; RS, Chs 2-4.

<sup>2</sup>MR, p. 154.

<sup>3</sup>RMWC, pp. 46-48.

<sup>4</sup>Hans Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," FE, p. 85.

<sup>5</sup>MR, p. 153; RMWC, p. 47; RS, pp. 124-126, 143, 175-178.

<sup>6</sup>Infra, p. 102f.

concept of relativity or relatedness itself could retain any meaning if the entities related are themselves functions of relations.

Niebuhr, as we have seen, clearly recognized the anthropomorphic implications of a consistently relational and valuational approach to knowledge of God. He was confident, however, that anthropomorphism could be avoided if the otherness and uniqueness of the personhood of God over against all finite personhood was also consistently maintained. His acceptance of the existentialist claim that faith arises only in a relationship between two selves commits him to affirming that in the revelatory moment the believer is not related to some ultimate abstract unitary concept or value, but is actually confronted with the divine Self. It is precisely at this point that the "personal encounter" theory itself encounters the other horn of the dilemma, agnosticism. To the extent that Niebuhr emphasized the absolute uniqueness of God's personhood, just to that extent he found it difficult, if not impossible, to specify positively either the perfections or will of God.<sup>1</sup> The revelatory moment does not yield any positive knowledge of the attributes of this unique Self. It is a moment in our inner history when we know ourselves to be known, judged and valued. On this definition of revelation it is clear that the believer receives a new self-understanding of his own worth in a benevolent universe: it is less clear he gains any positive apprehension of the distinctive character of God.<sup>2</sup> But

---

<sup>1</sup>It is as well to note here that important theological and philosophical objections can be raised against Niebuhr's use of the terms "person" or "self" in reference to God. While the doctrine of the Trinity has its own difficulties, the traditional Christian view has always been that the uniqueness and unity of God is to be expressed in three distinguishable, yet inseparable "persons," Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In view of this, it would seem less problematic to affirm that the reality of God must include all distinctively personal perfections. Niebuhr believed that an "objectively relativistic" theology must refrain from making any metaphysical assertions about God as internally related to himself as three hypostases (persona) in one ousia (substantia). The self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ only provides knowledge of the moral and relational attributes of God.

<sup>2</sup>MR, pp. 187-191, pp. 146f.

if this "encounter" does not furnish the believer with any clear knowledge of those qualities which properly belong to the personhood of God, in what sense can he be said to know God at all? Niebuhr had no difficulty maintaining that God is deus absconditus; he had much more difficulty clearly setting forth in what sense he is also deus revelatus. Most theologians have agreed that the being of God is never fully revealed in our knowing of him but Niebuhr would seem to have made God unknowable in any significant sense, such that we can properly speak and communicate with others about what he is or is not like, or what his will for his creatures is or is not. But as Niebuhr himself realized, it is precisely specific knowledge of the nature and will of God that is essential to any theological ethic, especially the conversionist ethic which he espoused. The description he has given of the continuous conversion of all our natural ideas of deity, initiated by the revelation of God, is much more a description of what we are to be converted from, and much less a concrete description of what we are to be converted to.<sup>1</sup>

A critic, sympathetic to this explanation of how God is known may find himself forced to raise questions about the "personal-encounter" model other than those which Niebuhr himself raised. There are to my mind, two problems with this view that are even more troublesome than those Niebuhr addressed himself to. First, there is the question of the legitimacy of the encounter model itself. Theologians who employ this model assume that there does exist a "vital analogy"<sup>2</sup> between ordinary relations between persons and the relation between

---

<sup>1</sup>MR, pp. 175-191.

<sup>2</sup>Ronald W. Hepburn, Christianity and Paradox: Critical Studies in Twentieth Century Theology (London: Watts, 1958), p. 30. Professor Hepburn's essay contains a very careful and damaging critique of the "personal-encounter" model. Cf. Ibid., pp. 24-59.

a person and God. Is this assumption justified or justifiable? Second, there is the problem of the veracity of any claim to have actually encountered God. Granted Niebuhr's description of the revelatory moment, is it possible to distinguish a "real" encounter with God from illusory or self-induced states of consciousness?

With respect to the first problem, it should be recognized, I would argue, that the explanatory power of the "personal-encounter" model is limited to and controlled by the kind of understanding a theologian has of human personal relations. Niebuhr maintains that "selves are known in act or not at all."<sup>1</sup> In order to know another self, the knower is wholly dependent upon the decision of the other to reveal himself. "Loving and hating selves must reveal themselves--penetrate through the mask of eyes and bodies; . . ."<sup>2</sup> To know another is first to know that you are known, valued or disvalued by that self. So, too, God the infinite self is known only through that self-activity which makes the recipient conscious of himself as known and loved by him. Niebuhr does not, however, give sufficient attention to the important role that "the mask of eyes and bodies" play in our ordinary knowledge of other persons. He does not deny that knowledge of another person (in the sense of intimate acquaintance with him) depends upon specific knowledge about that person (in the sense of a complex assortment of information about him). Yet he does not give any evidence of having asked himself whether it is possible or even conceivable that there could be any knowledge of another person at all where behavioral knowledge of his bodily appearance, gesture, speech, and so forth, were wholly absent. But reliance upon such empirical considerations is obviously precluded in any encounter with God. The point here is not to argue against

---

<sup>1</sup>MR, p. 146.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

the validity of the distinction between bodies and minds or to insist that all knowledge of other persons is identical with a knowledge of observed bodily behavior. It is only to ask this question: If, in our ordinary knowledge of other persons we can never have knowledge of their hidden inner life apart from behavioral knowledge, then, is it really possible to maintain that there is any analogy between human relations and divine-human relations? This is not a question about the effectiveness of the analogy but about its legitimacy. It is to ask whether in view of this lack, there can be any analogy at all.

A further difficulty with the "personal-encounter" model arises over the problem of whether it is possible to distinguish "real" encounters from illusory ones. In our ordinary encounters with say, Peter or Mary, we know what it is to be mistaken about their true character or personality. We come to realize--again, not apart from the mediation of some deed or word of theirs--that our previous knowledge of them was to a greater or lesser degree erroneous. We find ourselves saying, "I had no idea Peter was so deceitful," or "I had always thought of Mary as timid, but her spirited defence of Peter. . ." Here, too, it is some bodily manifestation of theirs which was a necessary, if not a sufficient condition, of any correction in our interpretation of them as persons. As Niebuhr himself has observed, "In the face of some emergency a man may act so as to reveal a quality undisclosed before. Through that revelatory moment his friend is enabled to understand past actions which had been obscure and to prophesy the future behavior of the revealer."<sup>1</sup> Just so: yet it is also true of all mundane personal relations that the "act" always involves some sort of observable behavior. But again, the means by which we discover such mistakes in our interpretation of the true character or personality of another

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 129.

is simply not available in any encounter with God; and, in the absence of any other sort of testing procedure there would appear to be no way of distinguishing between a genuine encounter with God and the illusory products of our own emotions or "will to believe."

Now the point here is not to demand that Niebuhr's encounter theory satisfy a criterion of verification that by definition declares illusory any claim to have experience of an existent that cannot be sensed. The problem with the "personal-encounter" model is not that it fails to satisfy the verification principle of radical empiricism, but rather that Niebuhr does not explain how this model can, on its own terms, provide a criterion for distinguishing reality from illusion in religious experience.

#### The Transformation of Natural Religion and Morality

Radical monotheism and transformation or conversion are the two fundamental structural principles in Niebuhr's theology. It is also clear that they are correlative principles. Trust in, and loyalty to being as God is the miraculous gift that Christians have received through Jesus Christ. Transformation or conversion means that as a consequence of having received this radical faith all human thinking and valuing, all the self's roles and relations, are immediately caught up in a continuous process of reformation and redirection toward the One God. Monotheistic faith is both passive and active; it is a passive state of trust in being as good to and for the self and the whole realm of being, it is an active response of commitment or of loyalty to God and to God's cause--the whole realm or commonwealth of contingent beings which he creates and loves. The transformation of human life both individually and socially centrally involves the "incarnation" of this radical faith

intensively and extensively in "all the realms and offices in which self acts."<sup>1</sup> To "incarnate" radical faith in all the self's roles and relations is to become a responsible self.

The radical faith becomes incarnate insofar as every reaction to every event becomes a response in loyalty and confidence to the One who is present in all such events. The First Person encountered in the temple is also the First Person encountered in the political arena, or in the market place, or among the hungry and plague-ridden. No action directed toward human companions or toward other nations or toward animals but is also directed toward the One who is their creator and savior.<sup>2</sup>

By means of these two principles Niebuhr sought to show that the question of faith, that is, the question of our ultimate trust and loyalty is the central issue in ethics. Beyond all the rules that we may devise for guiding social behavior; beyond the question of a natural or a revealed moral law; beyond all discussions of the virtues and vices which form or deform our moral character is the question of "the center of value" in relation to which we define good and evil, right and wrong.<sup>3</sup> In our ordinary moral experience we "move among many relative systems of good and evil and make many specific responses" but the relative evaluations expressed in them "are shaped, guided, and formed by the understanding of good and evil [we] have upon the whole."<sup>4</sup>

One important consequence of the coming of radical faith is the transformation of the human self in all its roles and relations. It is impossible for a self to have moral integrity, that is, to be a truly responsible self, unless and until, all its responses to finite beings are qualified or conditioned by its response to the One faithful and trustworthy God present in all events.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>RMWC, p. 48.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>RS, pp. 123-126; RMWC, pp. 33-37; CV (1960), pp. 110-113.

<sup>4</sup>RS, p. 124.

<sup>5</sup>RS, pp. 121-126, 137-145; RMWC, pp. 47f; MR, p. 78.

To respond to the ultimate action in all responses to finite actions means to seek one integrity of self amidst all the integrities of scientific, political, economic, educational and other cultural activities; it means to be one responding self amidst all the responses of the roles being played, because there is present to the self the One other beyond all the finite systems of nature and society.<sup>1</sup>

The self that lives in ignorance of the fact that the One power upon which it is absolutely dependent is good to the self and all that exists, cannot act as a responsible self, one self in all its responses to the actions of the many upon it. Niebuhr does not deny that a partial unity can be attained in our social roles. Man has been highly successful in interpreting the many actions upon him as systems which display certain constancies in their actions toward the self; but they remain a multiplicity of systems.<sup>2</sup> Over against these manifold agencies the self remains manifold.

In my responsiveness and responsibility to the many I am irresponsible to the One beyond the many; I am irresponsible as a self, however responsible the natural, the political, the domestic, the biological complexes in me may be in relation to the system of nature, or to the closed societies of nation, church, family or profession, or to the closed society of life itself.<sup>3</sup>

For Niebuhr, the unity of the self as a moral being is possible only in relation to a unity that is beyond all finite beings and finite systems of value.<sup>4</sup> To attain unity as one self responding to the one God present in all events is to have attained salvation.

It is necessary to tread carefully here because Niebuhr is not saying that God is present only to that self who has radical faith. God is present to every self he has created in two ways. First, he is present as that power upon which the self is absolutely dependent as just this contingent self.

---

<sup>1</sup>RS, p. 123 (italics added).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 137f.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 122.

Second, he is present to each self in all the actions of finite beings upon it. In theological language we must say that each self is at every moment related to God as the Creator and Sustainer of all that exists. Man the sinner, the worshipper of false gods, may recognize in the failure of his gods one action in all the actions upon him and his response of distrust defines his sin. The consequence of his doing so--and this is a crucial point in Niebuhr's ethics--is that he must trust in beings whose power and value are less than universal: He must do so because it is not possible to exist as a self without trust in and loyalty to some being (or beings) as the source of life's value. As soon as this turn is made man inevitably divides the one realm of being, all of whom are valued by God, "into the good and the evil, into friends who will assist us to maintain ourselves awhile and foes intent on our reduction to beings of no significance or to nothingness."<sup>1</sup> All the selfishness and pride manifested in our personal relations with others and the indifference, hatred and outright hostility, manifested in the relations between communities, nations and not least, religions, have their root in this ultimate distrust of being as good and in disloyalty to the cause, the whole realm of being, to which God is loyal.

The problem of man's sinfulness must be understood as a fundamental perversion of his own being which is occasioned by his ultimate trust in finite beings.<sup>2</sup> Radical monotheistic faith affirms that whatever is, is good because

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 140. Cf. RMWC, p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> In his essay, "Man the Sinner," Journal of Religion XV (1935), 272-280, Niebuhr has presented a concise and incisive account of his understanding of human sinfulness. The doctrine of sin is an important element in Niebuhr's thought but it is always subordinate to and is only intelligible in terms of the sovereignty of God and man's dependence upon him. "Evangelical ethics is God-centered, not sin-centered. When our fundamental orientation in life is that of persons who live vis à vis our own sinful selves rather than vis à vis God, the spirit of Evangelical ethics takes flight no less surely than when we live in the contemplation of our own righteousness." "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," p. 222.

God made it and sustains it, but this does not mean that whatever is, is right.<sup>1</sup> Throughout Niebuhr's writings there is a remarkable consistency with respect to his doctrine of sin. Sin, for Niebuhr, is first and foremost distrust in God and disloyalty to him and to the whole realm of being which he has created.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand sin is the absence of right loyalty, the failure to worship the one true God who is "the only trustworthy and wholly lovable reality;" on the other hand it is false loyalty, loyalty to something other than God. Loyalty to a false god at once entails rebellion against God.<sup>3</sup> Even loyalty to such "henotheisms"<sup>4</sup> as humanism, naturalism, or vitalism, are false centers of value because "each excludes some realm of being from the sphere of value; each is claimed by a cause less inclusive than the realm of being in its wholeness."<sup>5</sup>

This general understanding of sin afforded Niebuhr a basis from which to explore its consequences in the individual and social experience of man. In The Meaning of Revelation Niebuhr portrays the natural mind of man as controlled in its self-understanding and in its interpretation of its relationship with others, by false images, "the evil imaginations of the heart."<sup>6</sup> We recall that

---

<sup>1</sup> RMHC, p. 38; RS, p. 125.

<sup>2</sup> "Man the Sinner," pp. 276-278. Cf. "The Triad of Faith," p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 276f.

<sup>4</sup> In Radical Monotheism and Western Culture Niebuhr distinguishes "henotheism" from "polytheism" as two forms of idolatry or natural religious forms of faith. ". . . Monotheism, as value dependence and as loyalty to One beyond all the many is in constant conflict among us with . . . a pluralism which has many objects of devotion [polytheism] and a social faith that has one object, which is, however, only one among the many [henotheism]." Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> MR, pp. 99-102, 113, 122-124.

for Niebuhr both the theoretical and the practical reason employ images in the necessary task of interpreting the data of experience. The practical reason deals with the meanings and values which arise in personal relationships. Its images are therefore exclusively personal. The important question for either kind of reasoning is not whether it will use images or not, but whether it employs true or false images. The practical reason apart from revelation employs false images whose evil character is clearly seen in the destructive consequences which ensue for the self and its communities. Examples of evil images are "those feelings of superiority or inferiority which blight the lives of men."<sup>1</sup> Such stereotyped images as capitalists, communists, foreigner, the depraved race, are also employed by men to interpret their social discontent.<sup>1</sup> The evil image which is used above all others is egotism.<sup>2</sup> Egotism in the imagination is defined as "the tendency of the person to impute to all other selves the same interest in itself which it feels."<sup>3</sup> This image makes it impossible for selves as individuals or groups to understand the sorrows, much less forgive the sins of other selves. Egotism results in a moral solipsism.

These images of an animistic and self-centered world . . . are unable to make sense out of our history and our fate. . . . Evil and selfhood are left mysteries. Solipsism in thought and action or irrational pluralism in theory and practice are the consequences. The impoverishment and alienation of the self, as well as the destruction of others, issues from the reasoning of the heart that uses evil imaginations.<sup>4</sup>

The inhumanity of man to man, his exploitation of animals and the natural world, his abuse of his own body, are some of the moral consequences that result from the use of evil images in the interpretation of moral experience.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 101f; Cf. RMNC, pp. 28f; FGG, p. 119.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>5</sup>"Man the Sinner," p. 279.

A further consequence of sin is the impotence of man to save himself from his disloyalty and rebellion. It is important to notice that for Niebuhr "moral evils" are a consequence of sin and not strictly speaking a part of the definition of sin itself. He rejects as "moralism" the view that sin "means that men occasionally become disloyal to God or that their disloyalty is real only insofar as they consciously choose to be disloyal; it means rather that those to whom God is wholly loyal and who are by nature wholly dependent upon him are in active rebellion against him."<sup>1</sup> The idea that men are blameworthy for this disloyalty only in those cases where they are "consciously and willingly disloyal" is rejected on two counts: First, because Christianity is less concerned with "assessing the blame" and more concerned with "the fact and the cure;" second, because this "idea" entails a "dubious doctrine of freedom. The starting-point of the doctrine of sin is not man's freedom but man's dependence; freedom accounts for the fact that man can be and is disloyal, not for the fact that he ought to be loyal."<sup>2</sup> To say that "the starting-point of the doctrine of sin is not man's freedom but his dependence" means, for Niebuhr, that the "will," that is man as a self, is always committed either to God or to some false god.

Objectively, this means that God or a false god is a "center of value" and, as such, it is "the standard of morality, presupposed by morality."<sup>3</sup> All moral judgments are objectively relativistic, that is, the moral concepts which are employed in them are neither absolute nor psychologically relative. Moral terms like "good" and "evil," "right" and "wrong" take on meaning only within a value system where the "chief good" or "center of value" is not

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 277.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 274.

itself a moral value but is "the standard of 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.<sup>1</sup>

Subjectively, this means that man's will is never uncommitted to some god or value-center. More crucially, Niebuhr asserts, that when the will is committed to a false god it is impossible for man to transfer his trust and loyalty to God by exercising his will since it is precisely his will which is committed to the false god.

Moralism which makes the human free will the source of all good and evil cannot understand this impotence. Its savior is the will; every problem is solved by an appeal to the will. But there is no such thing as a free will in this sense. The will is always committed or it is no will at all. It is either committed to God or to one of the gods.<sup>2</sup>

Every willed action, therefore, is simply another manifestation of this loyalty to false gods and a further evidence of disloyalty to God. This doctrine of sin is, Niebuhr believed, fully consonant with his doctrine of the freedom and grace of God because, if man is ever to know and love the One beyond all the many finite gods, it will be possible only because God gives him the freedom to trust and to love him. Niebuhr did not hesitate to follow Luther and Calvin and especially Jonathan Edwards in embracing the doctrine of "divine determinism."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 275.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 279.

<sup>3</sup>KGA, p. 175. "Faith, the root-virtue whence all actions draw their goodness, is for Luther completely the gift of God. It is not something under man's control so that he can will to trust as perhaps he can will to believe a proposition about God," CE, p. 241. For similar views attributed to Calvin and Edwards, cf. CE, pp. 270f and pp. 387f, respectively.

True to his whole approach to theology Niebuhr deals with sin in terms of man's value experience and its interpretation by the practical reason. Thus, he does not raise or discuss the problem of evil as a theoretical question about how it is possible to reconcile belief in a sovereign and good God who creates a universe that is good, with belief in the reality of evil. He would doubtless have considered any demand that he ought to have done so as equivalent to the demand that he provide arguments for the existence of God. Both the problem of God and the problem of evil are practical problems, problems which may be resolved not by argument but only in personal experience of revelation and faith. They are problems of faith, not of belief, as he understood these terms.

One of the three basic theological principles informing Niebuhr's ethics is the fall of man from created goodness, and his subsequent bondage to false gods and evil imaginations of the heart that manifest themselves in perverse and corrupt actions. His every action is now motivated by self-interest and all other beings are judged good or evil insofar as they serve to fulfill or frustrate man's perceived needs or desires. Though free from external compulsion man is not free not to love himself. This is not to deny that he cannot be more or less "enlightened" insofar as he recognizes the relative value which other beings have for others than the self, or yet his own relative value-for others. But such relative value is always ultimately measured in terms of his own self-interest. Egotism is the ruling image in the heart of man the sinner, and he is incapable by his own efforts to free himself from bondage to his own self-interest. But it is one measure of the sovereign greatness and love of God that he is faithful and loyal to man the disloyal and discloses himself to man as the one who values and loves him for his own sake.

To say that God makes himself known as First Person is to say that revelation means . . . the demonstration to selves of faithful, truthful being. . . . God is steadfast self, keeping his word, "faithful in all his doings and just in all his ways." This principle of person-like integrity is fundamental in a revelation that is an event which elicits the confidence of selves to their ultimate environment and calls upon them as free selves to decide for the universal cause.<sup>1</sup>

Through revelation man is freed from bondage to himself and from trust in and loyalty to false gods.

Theocentric ethics is at once an ethic of freedom. "Where faith in God is present the self is free from concern for itself. It has not achieved freedom from self concern, but has been set free by God through the gift of faith in him. It is able to accept itself as the forgiven self. . ." <sup>2</sup> This freedom from bondage to self is inseparable from a freedom from reliance on cultural values, those social gods upon whom selves rely to give meaning and value to their individual and social existence.<sup>3</sup> Trust in God as the only absolute center of value frees man to see all cultural values and laws as having only a relative claim upon him. With the gift of faith in God the possibility of freedom from these kinds of bondage arises as a promise and is made actual in those moments in which, with repentance, true faith in God is exercised.

This freedom is not only freedom from but freedom to. The self is set free to respond with imaginativeness and creativity in every personal and social situation. Niebuhr indicated that he believed this aspect of Christian ethics had not been analyzed adequately and it is clear that he saw his own

---

<sup>1</sup>RMWC, pp. 46-47.

<sup>2</sup>"Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," p. 224.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 225f.

work as an attempt to supply this lack building on the foundation laid in Scripture and tradition.<sup>1</sup>

In The Meaning of Revelation Niebuhr has described the way in which the image of God as faithful self, insofar as it replaces the evil imaginations of the heart, enables the self to interpret all the events of the past, present, and future as events in which the creative, sustaining, and redeeming activity of God in Christ is always present.<sup>2</sup> Revelation is that event in which the self is given a new image by means of which it is enabled progressively to reinterpret all the events of its individual and social existence as related in a meaningful universe. Revelation initiates a process in which our self-understanding is transformed and all its actions as a moral agent are unified by being redirected toward that absolute unity of power and goodness, God. "Whatever else revelation means it does mean an event in our history which brings rationality and wholeness into the confused joys and sorrows of personal existence and allows us to discern order in the brawl of communal histories."<sup>3</sup> The revelatory event makes all past events meaningful by first helping the self to understand the events of its own remembered past. Not only so, but it is enabled to remember and acknowledge follies and sins which it had repressed and tried to forget as its own, and to accept forgiveness for them. Beyond this again, it enables the self to appropriate as its own the past of all human communities.

To remember all that is in our past and so in our present is to achieve unity as a self. To remember the human past as our own

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp 226f. Niebuhr acknowledged three sources as particularly important in informing his own understanding of faith in God and its consequences for human freedom. They were Paul's Epistle to the Romans, Luther's, Treatise on Christian Liberty and Jonathan Edward's, The Nature of True Virtue.

<sup>2</sup> MR, pp. 109-132.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 109; Cf. RMWC, pp. 47f; RS, pp. 125f.

past is to achieve community with mankind. Such conversion of the memory is an important, indispensable part of the soul's conversion.<sup>1</sup>

The "past" Niebuhr refers to here is, of course, that enduring past of selves and their communities (internal history) that is known to practical reason and not the serial past of events (external history) known to theoretical reason.<sup>2</sup> The "conversion of the memory" is not therefore a single event but, "because the past is infinite and because sin enters anew in repeated efforts to separate ourselves from God and our fellow-men through the separation of our past from them" it is a continuing process of being converted.<sup>3</sup> In traditional theological language it is sanctification.

The continuing conversion of the individual believer has its social counterpart in the necessary and continuing reformation and reunion of the Church.<sup>4</sup> "Our Christian churches are like ourselves, just human entities on which God has taken mercy and which he is converting to himself."<sup>5</sup> Niebuhr had never believed that the reunion of the churches depended upon achieving uniformity of doctrines and liturgies, or of politics or codes of ethics; just as he had never believed that their differences on these matters were the crucial factors dividing them.<sup>6</sup> In his earlier writings he had argued for the independence of the Church and protested against idolatrous attachment of the

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 59-73.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 118. "The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight," Religion in Life, XV (1946), pp. 116f.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 118-120.

<sup>5</sup>"The Hidden Churches and the Churches in Sight," p. 117.

<sup>6</sup>SSD, Chapter 1. "What Holds Churches Together?", The Christian Century, XLIII (1926), pp. 346-348.

churches to cultural values and ideologies.<sup>1</sup> In his later work he still believed that idolatry was the besetting sin but that the idols were now within the Church itself.<sup>2</sup> "If my Protestantism led me in the past to protest against the spirit of capitalism and of nationalism, of communism and technological civilization, it now leads me to protest against the deification of Scriptures and of the church."<sup>3</sup> Among the many factors which Niebuhr analysed as responsible for divisiveness and fragmentation within the Christian Church, none was more insidious than the self-righteous and defensive attitude displayed by the various traditions within the Church in holding defensively and unrepentantly to an image of itself as the true church.<sup>4</sup> He did not deny that differences of doctrine, forms of worship, liturgies and so on were important, but agreement on these matters would not, he believed, result in a truly united Church unless this self-centered and evil image was forsaken. The conversion of the Church, as of the individual Christian, depends upon each party in the Church re-interpreting its past through the image of God-in-Christ and appropriating the internal history of other groups as part of their own history.<sup>5</sup>

Ultimately Niebuhr believed that if all the people of the world were to become one people--what he in earlier writings referred to as "the synthesis

---

<sup>1</sup>"Toward the Independence of the Church," The Church Against the World (Chicago and New York: Willett, Clark and Co., 1935), pp. 123-139. "The Irreligion of Communist and Capitalist," Christian Century, XLVII (1930), pp. 1306-1307. "The Christian Evangel and Social Culture," Religion in Life, VIII (1939), pp. 44-48.

<sup>2</sup>RMWC, pp. 56-60; PCM, pp. 29f, 39-47.

<sup>3</sup>"Reformation: Continuing Imperative," p. 250.

<sup>4</sup>"The Disorder of Man in the Church of God," in Man's Disorder and God's Design; Vol. I: The Universal Church in God's Design (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949), p. 83.

<sup>5</sup>MR, p. 119.

of culture"<sup>1</sup>--it could only come about through this same process of reinterpretation and appropriation of each group's past, through the adequate image of the God who creates and values them all as one commonwealth.<sup>2</sup>

The revelatory moment in which an image is given, which makes it possible for the practical reason to bring intelligibility and unity into the past history of selves, also makes the present actions and responses of selves intelligible.<sup>3</sup> The evil images with which we sought to justify the goodness of our past actions, and to ignore or condemn the past actions of others, also causes us to misinterpret our own present actions and the actions of others upon us. Our interpretation of present actions are made in relation to some image we have made of ourselves rather than the larger image given in revelation.<sup>4</sup> A particularly important image for the interpreting of present deeds done and suffered is the passion of Christ. Through this image we are able to discern "the evidence of a pattern in which, by great travail of men and God, a work of redemption goes on which is like the work of Christ."<sup>5</sup> The lack of any clear doctrine of atonement in Niebuhr's theology makes it difficult to know, with any precision, what this analogy entails. He specifically rejected all theories "that operate with the symbolism of laws and courts" but he did not develop any clear alternative.<sup>6</sup> This omission, is, I think, part of or a consequence of his

---

<sup>1</sup>SSD, pp. 266, 280.

<sup>2</sup>MR, pp. 120f.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 121-130.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 124f. When it is remembered that this essay was published in 1941 it is not surprising that Niebuhr regarded the problem of war as providing a supreme test for a theology committed to a radically monotheistic interpretation of all events.

<sup>6</sup>RS, p. 131.

failure to sustain any consistent Christology.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, revelation also illuminates the future because he who is present to us in the revelatory moment is the Lord of life and death. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus we understand that our history and the history of all men has a telos, "the resurrection of a new and other self, or a new community, a reborn remnant."<sup>2</sup> But it is not a possibility inherent in us, nor does it come other than through judgment and death.

It should be pointed out here, too, that while Niebuhr often refers to the resurrection of Christ, he did not present any very clear account of how he understood this "event." Given his general rejection of supernaturalism and nature-miracles he doubtless would have viewed any belief in bodily resurrection as part of the primitive mythology of supernaturalism. "The resurrection is not," he declared, "manifest to us in physical signs but in his continuing Lordship."<sup>3</sup> Of the resurrection of Jesus Christ "we may know no more than that he lives and is powerful over us and among us."<sup>4</sup> To any inquiry about the ontological status of the object of the pronoun "he," Niebuhr doubtless would have replied that such questions cannot arise in a theology that properly confines itself to what can be known about God or Christ within the limits of value experience.

We have been following Niebuhr's account of the transformation of human

---

<sup>1</sup>In Christ and Culture in the section entitled, "Toward a Definition of Christ," Niebuhr made a very promising start toward a Christology approached through a careful study of the virtues of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. Unfortunately, he did not develop this view further in subsequent writings but reverted back to that exclusive emphasis on the work rather than the person and work of Christ which is characteristic of his view in The Meaning of Revelation.

<sup>2</sup>MR, p. 131.

<sup>3</sup>RS, p. 177.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 143.

life and conduct (individually and communally), that is made possible through the revelation of God-in-Christ and the establishment within human experience of a radically monotheistic faith. Revelation, Niebuhr has argued, provides the self as practical reasoner with an image by means of which it is enabled progressively to discern in the past (what we are), the present (what we do) and the future (our potentiality) the presence of the one God present in all events.<sup>1</sup> Only in relation to this one faithful and redeeming self present in all events is it possible for the self to become one self, that is, become a truly moral self. Moral conduct as we have seen earlier is not, for Niebuhr, a matter of the conformity of the self to moral rules (though it may know all the rules) but it is a matter of radical faith in the one God becoming incarnate in all the self's roles and relations.

The radical faith becomes incarnate insofar as every reaction to every event becomes a response in loyalty and confidence to One who is present in all such events. . . . The consistent ethics of radical faith is not constituted by the attachment of certain ethical rules to religious beliefs but by the requirement and the empowerment to consistent action in all realms and offices in which the self acts.<sup>2</sup>

Niebuhr was not ignorant of the fact that even in Protestant creeds and theology "revelation" had meant something more than the self-disclosure of the One creating, judging and redeeming God in all natural and historical events. He recognized that "Protestant confessions of faith refer . . . to truths and moral laws which along with God himself are the content of revelation."<sup>3</sup> For Niebuhr, revelation refers to the latter only. Just as he believed that Kantian and subsequent neo-Kantian critiques of the limits of human rationality had made

---

<sup>1</sup>MR, p. 130. Cf. RS, pp. 125f.      <sup>2</sup>RMWC, p. 48.

<sup>3</sup>MR, p. 156.

it necessary to forsake any hope of theoretical knowledge about the nature of God being mediated through revelation (but not the forsaking of some notion of revelation), so he also believed that the criticism levelled by idealist philosophers (again especially Kant), on the one hand, and various social scientists on the other, made it necessary to forsake any idea of specific moral laws or rules about the will of God being given in revelation.<sup>1</sup> The standard creeds are mistaken: "We recognize that they [moral laws] were written on our hearts apart from revelation and on our statute books without the aid of Scriptures."<sup>2</sup> Having separated all knowledge of moral laws and values from the content of revelation, Niebuhr was left with the problem of explaining what sort of relation did exist between cultural laws and values and the revelation of God. His answer to this problem, too, is worked out in terms of the principle of "transformism."

The revelation of God not only effects a transformation in man's understanding of his personal and social history, it also transforms his understanding of the moral law. "The first change which the moral law undergoes with the aid of revelation of God's person is in its imperativeness."<sup>3</sup> While the laws which we give ourselves or which are proposed to us by others may be evaded in various ways through the revelation of God, we recognize the moral law as the demand of

---

<sup>1</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 160-163. Niebuhr recognizes that such critics not only differ, but give contradictory accounts of the origin of moral laws, but he asserts that "it is not the task of confessional theology to try to reconcile the differences." Though as an "objective relativist" he ventures the opinion that such inquirers "are looking on the same process from divergent points of view and that strife is due to the confusion of views of the universal with universal views . . ." *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 165 (*italics added*). Cf. "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," p. 226.

one from whom it is not possible to escape. We also begin to see 1) that our transgressions against the laws our conscience acknowledges, or that our society justly imposes upon us, are also transgressions against God himself: and 2) that "the imperative behind the law is the imperative of the faithful, earnest, never-resting, eternal self."<sup>1</sup> A second change in the moral law is the recognition that its application is universalized and intensified. "If a man responds to the demands of a universal God then the neighbors for whom he is responsible are not only the members of the nation to which he belongs but the members of the total society over which God presides."<sup>2</sup> And this total society is not restricted to rational beings but includes the living and the non-living over which man exercises a relative and often violent lordship. What does Niebuhr mean when he claims that the revelation of God makes the application of the moral law more intensive? It is intensified in the sense that before God we recognize that we have always employed the law in the service of self and so have corrupted it.<sup>3</sup>

No matter what standard of measurement we employed . . . we used these laws and measures as interested men, who served a creature rather than the creator. If we used pleasure as our standard for measuring the good, it was our pleasure or my pleasure which was preferred. If it was perfection then it was our perfection; if prudence was employed it was always prudence in the service of a larger or smaller self, . . . It is always an interested morality, a wishful and idolatrous and corrupted one which we employ apart from God.<sup>4</sup>

When the law we claim to live by thwarts our desires, we correct it and deceive ourselves into believing that no transgression has occurred. The same revelation in which we receive the assurance that we are eternally loved and valued by

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 165f.

<sup>2</sup> "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," p. 116; Cf. MR, p. 167.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 168-170.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 168f.

God also condemns us for corrupting all our moral laws and values. The third and "greatest change" is "the conversion of the imperative into an indicative and of the law whose content is love into a free love of God and man . . ." <sup>1</sup> This is Niebuhr's way of expressing the primacy of gospel over law.

It was Paul especially, among the New Testament writers, who understood most clearly that the gospel of the reconciliation of all men to God accomplished by the life, death and resurrection of Christ meant that God's primary relation to man is one of grace rather than law, and that the imperative moral law (understood as code of conduct) can never by itself make any man "good at the core." <sup>2</sup> The root-virtue from which all actions draw their goodness is faith, which was for Paul, as it was for Niebuhr, wholly a gift of God. Because the Christian life is initiated by the unmerited grace of God, Christian conduct cannot be understood at its profoundest level as obedience to moral imperatives but as freedom to love God and neighbor for their own sakes. When the will of God is given expression in the form of injunctions that men ought or ought not to perform, consequences follow which only serve to further define man's inability to love anything but himself. If such moral injunctions do not goad man's self-will and tempt him to further transgression of the law, then they intensify his consciousness of guilt and fear of death so that he becomes self-absorbed and burdened with despair. In either case the very imperative form of the law itself "presupposes the presence in man of a desire contrary to the intention of the law." <sup>3</sup> Only when confidence in God as the One who delivers from all evil is received is man released from concern about

---

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 170f.

<sup>2</sup>CE, p. 41, cf. pp. 36-45.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

himself to respond with joyful, grateful, reverent and loyal love to God,<sup>1</sup> and to the neighbor toward whom God has shown the same compassion.

The transformation of ethics effected by the revelation of God-in-Christ does not mean for Niebuhr, then, that the moral rules and virtues common to a given culture are replaced or supplemented by a new and wholly different morality.<sup>2</sup> It means neither the "republication" of an "original edition" of the moral law in "definitive form," nor is it the impartation of moral imperatives otherwise unknown, rather, it means "the beginning of a revolutionary understanding and application of the moral law rather than the giving of a new law."<sup>3</sup> The coming of radically monotheistic faith does mean that our ordinary cultural morality begins to undergo a transformation, for it no longer functions as an elaborate mechanism for maintaining our own existence and value at the expense of the existence and value of other persons and things. Radical faith in God frees man from such anxious self concern to be a responsible self.

---

<sup>1</sup>"What then is love? . . . By love we mean at least these attitudes and actions: rejoicing in the presence of the beloved, gratitude, reverence and loyalty toward him." PCM, pp. 34f.

<sup>2</sup>MR, pp. 159-172.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 172.

## CONCLUSION

An attempt will now be made to provide a brief concluding assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of H. Richard Niebuhr's theological ethics. It may also prove helpful to suggest some further lines of inquiry that might be made into Niebuhr's own work or that appear to me to hold promise for advancing the discipline of theological ethics.

The theological ethics of H. Richard Niebuhr exhibits three major strengths that stand in marked contrast to most scholarship in Christian ethics in the United States in the period 1930-1960. First, his attempts at clarifying basic theological and philosophical issues in Christian ethics were not developed out of an immediate concern with finding practical solutions to urgent social and moral problems, but rather they were directed toward the development of a comprehensive theory of Christian moral experience and action. The predominant concern of most American writers on Christian ethics in this period was to provide counsel and guidance on the moral conduct of individuals and the public policy of institutions.<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr did not discount the importance of such concerns but in his own work he gave very little attention to them. If, as I have contended, it is a weakness of his ethical theory that it does not provide general normative principles for the guidance of human behavior, this is partly a result of his belief that their rejection is necessarily entailed by a radically monotheistic ethic, partly a consequence of his understanding of the limitations

---

<sup>1</sup>Cf. James M. Gustafson, "Christian Ethics," in *Religion*, edited by Paul Ramsey (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), p. 287.

imposed on human thought by an historically relative point of view, and partly too, a consequence of centering almost exclusive attention upon the intentional quality of individual moral decisions.

Professor James M. Gustafson, Niebuhr's successor at Yale, has asserted that in this period American scholars "have done little work in the history of Christian ethics; they have done less on the relation of ethical thought to biblical scholarship; only a few scholars have moved with ease between systematic theology and ethics, and too little work has been done on the relation of theological ethics to philosophical ethics."<sup>1</sup> A further measure of the breadth and strength of Niebuhr's theological ethics is gained when his work is compared with this bill of particulars. Only in the second area, the relation of ethical thought to biblical scholarship, is his contribution negligible. He was certainly one among the "few scholars" who "moved with ease between systematic theology and ethics," though this is more obviously true of his work on the history of Christian ethics<sup>2</sup> than it is of his attempt at providing a theological foundation for a Christian ethic,<sup>3</sup> or of his theory of human nature and action.<sup>4</sup> It is with respect to the two remaining areas that his contribution to religious ethics stands in greatest contrast to that of most of his peers in America. It is important also to recognize that it was precisely these two areas that were the predominant concerns of the ethical reflection typical of the academic tradition in nineteenth-century Protestant theology that had influenced so

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Particularly The Kingdom of God in America and Christ and Culture.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. The Meaning of Revelation and Radical Monotheism and Western Culture.

<sup>4</sup> The Responsible Self and Christ and Culture, Chapter 7.

deeply the method and direction of Niebuhr's thought.<sup>1</sup>

His sociological and historical studies of the beliefs, teachings and actions of Christians are certainly the best produced by a Christian moralist in these decades in America.<sup>2</sup> The keen perceptiveness he showed in recognizing, describing and respecting "the multiformity and individuality of men and movements in Christian history" was complemented by an equally keen and constant vision of the divine "context in which all these relativities of history make sense."<sup>3</sup>

With regard to the problem of the relation of theological to philosophical ethics, Niebuhr was almost alone among prominent Protestant theological moralists in recognizing the important gains to be realized by them as a result of giving careful and sympathetic attention to the work of moral philosophers of whatever school. If it is a true judgment that in this period "nowhere is the extent of the gulf between philosophy and theology more noticeable than in the field of morals,"<sup>4</sup> then Niebuhr stands out as one Christian moralist who consistently endeavored to bridge this "gulf." Absent from Niebuhr's writings, too, is the sort of antipathy toward the thought of non-theistic moral philosophy that characterizes the ethical writings of younger contemporaries in America

---

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Frei, FE, pp. 16-40. Especially is this true of Ernst Troeltsch's work. The Social Sources of Denominationalism (1929) was directly inspired by, among others, Troeltsch and Harnack, who were, of course, two of the most outstanding late nineteenth century representatives of this tradition. Cf. SSD, pp. vii, 8, 17.

<sup>2</sup>The Social Sources of Denominationalism (1929), The Kingdom of God in America (1937), Christ and Culture (1951), "The Protestant Movement and Democracy in the United States" (1961).

<sup>3</sup>CC, p. xii.

<sup>4</sup>A. P. F. Sell, "Christian Ethics and Moral Philosophy: Some Reflections on the Contemporary Situation," Scottish Journal of Theology, Vol. 16 (December 1963), p. 337.

like Paul Lehman<sup>1</sup> or Paul Ramsey.<sup>2</sup> Whatever the specific weaknesses of his own moral theory may be judged to contain, his catholic attitude toward all kinds of moral inquiry served to counteract an all too prevalent tendency toward cultural isolationism in Christian ethics.

While this assessment is true in a general way, a more accurate and discriminating evaluation of his own contribution in this area may be arrived at by comparing the scope, method and emphasis of his work with that of the dominant contemporary Anglo-American tradition in moral philosophy. Most contemporary moral philosophers have not concerned themselves primarily with normative ethics, i.e., with seeking judgments about what is right or wrong, good or bad, but with meta-ethics, i.e., with analyzing the meaning of moral concepts and judgments and with the logic of their justification.<sup>3</sup> While the style and method of Niebuhr's ethics was much more strongly influenced by thinkers commonly called "existentialists" or "phenomenologists," he, too, concentrated greater attention upon meta-ethical than upon normative ethics. He demonstrated, especially in his later work, his awareness of the need for analyzing the meaning of key concepts in Christian ethical discourse. His inquiries into the meaning of the concepts "faith"<sup>4</sup> and "love,"<sup>5</sup> to take two examples, are reportive, that is, they are descriptions of what these terms ordinarily mean, or of how they are commonly used in religious discourse. On the other hand, his

---

<sup>1</sup>Ethics in a Christian Context (London: SCM Press, 1963).

<sup>2</sup>This is true only of Ramsey's early work, Basic Christian Ethics (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950) and not of later works such as Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967).

<sup>3</sup>Frankena, "Moral Philosophy," op. cit., p. 347.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. "On the Nature of Faith" in Religious Experience and Truth, Sidney Hook, editor (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), pp. 93-102.

<sup>5</sup>PCM, pp. 34-39.

definition of "responsibility" is less reportive than it is reformative, that is, it is a proposal about what the term should mean, or better, about how it ought to be employed in view of his theory of the self as fundamentally a responsive being. While it is true, as we have seen, that Niebuhr's chief interest was to provide a phenomenological analysis of "faith," "love" or "responsibility" as relational moral categories, he also recognized the importance of first getting clear about the meaning of such terms as they are employed in our ordinary moral discourse.<sup>1</sup> This procedure is clearly stated in the first paragraph of his essay "On the Nature of Faith:" ". . . It is necessary to begin any inquiry into 'faith' with an effort at semantic clarification and then proceed if possible, toward phenomenological analysis. . ."<sup>2</sup> While Niebuhr's work in this area was limited, its significance lies in the fact that it does mark out a direction in which much more work needs to be done by Christian moralists. A detailed examination of the meaning and logical status of other Christian ethical concepts must be carried out if theological ethics is to attain the greatest possible clarity and precision.<sup>3</sup>

The critical analysis of the relational theory of moral value and action (presented in Chapters II and III) has pointed up a difficulty which is, in my judgment, the chief weakness in Niebuhr's ethical theory. It will be helpful to focus the problem again in the form of two questions. First, is it possible, or how far is it possible, for a relational theory of this kind to include criteria for determining how moral agents are to know what sort of

---

<sup>1</sup>"On the Nature of Faith," PCM, pp. 34-39; RS, pp. 27f.

<sup>2</sup>"On the Nature of Faith," op. cit., p. 93.

<sup>3</sup>The analysis of religious language provided by the Bishop of Durham, Ian T. Ramsey, needs to be continued by theological moralists.

values are morally good or bad, or what sort of actions are morally right or wrong, or (to use Niebuhr's basic moral categories) morally "fitting" or "unfitting?" Secondly, what is the place or function, if any, of general moral rules in this relational theory of theological ethics?

At some points in his writings Niebuhr seems to embrace the view that response to the presence of God in all events precludes any judgments upon not only the absolute, but also the relative moral rightness or wrongness of human actions, or the moral goodness or badness of the moral agent, his character, motives and so forth.<sup>1</sup> Such an extreme position would entail the abandonment of all normative ethical theories and their elimination from the scope of theological ethics. However, it may be fairer to his general intentions to conclude that he does have a normative theory which may be called "act-responsibilism."<sup>2</sup> On this view the agent does and must make moral judgments. As an "act-responsibilist" he will not do so using the traditional categories of right and wrong, good and bad, but the categories of "fitting" and "unfitting."<sup>3</sup> With respect to the role of general rules in his ethics, he will maintain that

---

<sup>1</sup> Supra., pp. 57-71.

<sup>2</sup> The distinction between "act" and "rule" theories in normative ethics is widely observed among contemporary Anglo-American moral philosophers. William Frankena in his brilliant review of teleological and deontological theories allows that the "ethics of love" (agapism) may represent or require a third type of normative theory, but that if it does, it will nevertheless find it necessary to distinguish between "act" and "rule" versions of that theory. Cf. Ethics (1963), pp. 42-45. If it is possible to set forth a Christian ethic centering upon a basic concept other than "love" then it would allow for the possibility of discussing Niebuhr's ethics in terms of "act responsibilism" or "rule responsibilism." The only possible justification for the multiplication of such barbarous technical terms would be to help the theorist to distinguish clearly between each theory. With respect to basic theological concepts, it is clear that "faith" understood as trust and loyalty has a more prominent place than "love" in the theological language employed by Niebuhr.

<sup>3</sup> RS, pp. 60f.

all judgments about what is "fitting" or "unfitting" are always particular ones like "in situation X, Y is the fitting action for Z to do" rather than general ones like "in every situation that is similar to X, Y is the 'fitting' response for all human moral agents."

It is possible and desirable to distinguish further between a more and a less severe stricture that may be placed on the employment of general rules by "act" theorists, whether deontologists, teleologists, or responsibilists. The more severe position maintains that each moral agent can and must decide for himself in each situation what is the "fitting" thing to do without appeal to any rules. A less severe view would allow that general rules are helpful in determining what should be done in this or a later situation, but "act-responsibilism" cannot allow any general rule to determine by itself what the fitting response is in a given situation.

Evidence may be adduced from Niebuhr's writings to support both of these positions. But it is clear that if general rules play any role at all in his ethics they do so only in this latter sense. In the final analysis it should be recognized that not only did he not concern himself with the role of general rules for guiding human conduct, but that he did not give enough attention to the problem of how anyone would know what sort of act would qualify as a morally fitting as opposed to a morally unfitting act. He does not do so because of his belief that the theoretical task of clarifying the meaning of radically monotheistic faith, and the practical task of actually possessing it is not simply a necessary condition, but is in fact the sufficient condition of a radically monotheistic ethic. How did this come about especially in view of the fact that in his very earliest essays he argued that a theological ethic must provide moral principles for the guidance of human

conduct?<sup>1</sup> My suggestion is that the relational, valuation and existential "encounter" view of divine revelation and human faith which he adopted in place of a strictly valuational approach characteristic of much nineteenth century liberal theology made it much more difficult, if not actually impossible, for him to show what connection there could be between knowledge of God and the making of moral judgments about the rightness or wrongness of our own or others' actions.

If it is true, as I have argued, that Niebuhr is an "act" rather than a "rule" theorist, this does not mean that his ethical theory is without an ultimate normative principle. Moral actions necessarily entail judgments (or an "interpretation" in Niebuhr's sense of that word) about what is right or wrong, good or bad, "fitting" or "unfitting." A process of moral evaluation is involved which necessarily makes reference to matters other than the facts or events involved in the situation. The actor must decide what he ought to do, not solely on the basis of what is in fact occurring, but on the basis of some ultimate moral commitment(s), principle(s) or value(s). For example, an act-utilitarian decides that he ought to do X in situation Y because X alone will or (insofar as he is able to judge) is most likely to maximize the greatest happiness for the greatest number of persons. An act-agapist will ask himself what self-denying love requires in situation Y. In act-responsibilism a moral agent decides to do X in situation Y because X is a fitting response to God interpreted as the center of being and value; as the power present in every situation upon whom all finite beings are absolutely dependent for their existence and worth. The ethic of responsibility is a principled ethic if the word "principle" may include reference to a commitment

---

<sup>1</sup>Supra., p. 59.

to God as a transcendent normative point of reference.

If the interpretation of Niebuhr's theological ethics given in previous chapters has been a fair and accurate one, then the major difficulty with his theory is not that he does not propose an ultimate normative principle (radical monotheism) in relation to which everything that is, is good, and in relation to which all moral actions are to be judged fitting or unfitting, but rather that he has failed to give a sufficiently clear and adequate answer to two questions that are fundamental to any ethical theory that 1) derives its normativeness from knowledge of God and that 2) claims that moral conduct can and should be guided by such knowledge. First, how is the moral agent given to know, or how does he come to know, what the character and purpose of God is? Second, assuming that he has this knowledge and assuming further that he ought to act in conformity to it, how is the moral agent to determine and be justified in his determination that action A rather than action B is, in situation Y, a fitting response to God?<sup>1</sup>

The answer Niebuhr has given to the first question lacks clarity primarily at the point of the language he used to describe God. He attempted to combine the concept of God as "faithful self" or "First Person" with notions such as "Being itself," the "last" or "ultimate power," "the principle of being and value," and the "One."<sup>2</sup> The former predicates are particular and

---

<sup>1</sup>Niebuhr has summarized his ethic of responsibility in a succinct formula: "God is acting in all actions upon you. So respond to all actions upon you as to respond to his action," RS, p. 126. Two features of this formula are worth noting in relation to this second question. First, the second sentence is not only in the imperative mood, but also assumes that the moral agent ought to "respond to all actions . . . his action." Second, the formula does not provide any criterion by means of which a moral agent might determine what response or responses out of all possible responses would be a fitting rather than an unfitting response to the action of God.

<sup>2</sup>Supra, p. 212, n. 3.

concrete, the latter are universal and abstract. The possibility of predicating both sorts of locutions of God is an attractive one, but Niebuhr did not provide any explanation for his use of these seemingly incompatible concepts.

In this context, too, it is appropriate to ask why Niebuhr did not give attention to the logical relationship between these concepts and such traditional theological predicates as "Creator," "Judge," "Father," or "Redeemer." His failure to do so (and his sparing use of the latter) is surprising, especially in view of his emphasis on the personal character of the revelation of God in the history of Israel and in Jesus Christ. Further exploration of the logical status of the concepts Niebuhr used to speak of God needs to be undertaken. Such an investigation would have its own intrinsic value and may also throw light on a further difficulty in his doctrine of God. It may help to resolve the question of how far his laudable desire to preserve the unity and radical sovereignty of God moved him in the direction of a monism that is logically incompatible with the distinctness and inseparability of the three "persons," Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

To make the judgment that Niebuhr's answer to this first question is inadequate is not to say that the main themes that he developed in his attempt to provide an answer are unimportant. The contrary is true. The emphasis he placed upon the unity and sovereignty of God as Creator, Judge and Redeemer in all his relations to the human and natural world in opposition to every idolatrous exaltation of this or that finite being, power or value, is of first importance for any theistic ethic. His stress upon the interdependence of every existent and the absolute dependence of each upon God for their existence and value makes it impossible to confuse creatureliness with sinfulness, or for any one being to treat any other as without value. Finally, his phenomenological description of man as primarily a responsive being who must

and does either respond to Being itself and to the whole realm of dependent beings with trust and loyalty, or with distrust and disloyalty, focuses a proper attention upon the social, historical and existential dimension of human life.

The inadequacy of Niebuhr's understanding of knowledge of God is a consequence of his interpretation of revelation and faith in exclusively interpersonal and valuational terms. Reasons were given earlier for questioning the adequacy of the "personal encounter" model of revelation.<sup>1</sup> His interpretation of knowledge of God not only distinguishes sharply between belief in God (interpersonal trust and loyalty) and beliefs about God (statements about the sort of being God is), but it wholly excludes the latter. The strength of Niebuhr's account of religious faith is his probing and sophisticated analysis of interpersonal trust and loyalty; its weakness is his failure to do justice to the intellectual content of faith in God. Is it possible to have personal trust in and loyalty to God in the absence of any beliefs about him? More seriously yet, is it possible to maintain a distinctively theistic ethic and at the same time to deny that this distinctiveness depends upon the truth of any beliefs about the existence and nature of God?

It is one measure of the continuity of the religious epistemology of H. Richard Niebuhr with that of the great nineteenth century German liberal theological tradition that "faith" was taken by him to specify essentially, if not exclusively, a particular sort of value-judgment. It is this view of faith, and the logically prior commitment to the correctness of a dualistic neo-Kantian understanding of the function of "reason" that must be challenged

---

<sup>1</sup>Supra, pp. 239-242.

and thought through more thoroughly and comprehensively than has been attempted here. This task is a necessary condition for the construction of a more adequate theological ethic.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Books and Brochures by H. Richard Niebuhr

- Christ and Culture. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951; New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1956.
- Christian Ethics: Sources of the Living Tradition. Edited and with introductions by Waldo Beach and H. Richard Niebuhr. New York: Ronald Press Company, 1955.
- Ernst Troeltsch's Philosophy of Religion. Yale University doctoral dissertation, 1924. (Available on University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan.)
- Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic. New York: International Missionary Council, 1929. Address given at a Conference of Theological Seminaries meeting at Drew Theological Seminary, Madison, New Jersey, November 29-December 1, 1929, on Theological Education and the World Mission of Christianity.
- Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, with supplementary essays. London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1961. (First published in New York: Harper, 1960. Revised and expanded form of the Montgomery Lectures on Contemporary Civilization given at the University of Nebraska in 1957.)
- The Church Against the World. H. Richard Niebuhr, Wilhelm Pauck and Francis P. Miller, eds. H. Richard Niebuhr, "Toward the Independence of the Church," pp. 123-156. Chicago, New York: Willett, Clark and Company, 1935.
- The Kingdom of God in America. Chicago and New York: Willett Clark and Company, 1937. (Reprinted with new preface, Hamden, Connecticut: The Shoe String Press, 1956; New York: Harper Torchbooks, TB49, 1959.)
- The Meaning of Revelation. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941. Contains, with some additions and revisions, the Nathaniel W. Taylor Lectures given in the Divinity School at Yale University in April, 1940.
- The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry, reflections on the aims of theological education, in collaboration with Daniel Day Williams and James M. Gustafson. New York: Harper, 1956.
- The Religious Situation, by Paul Tillich. Translated with Preface by H. Richard Niebuhr. New York: Meridian Books, 1956. (First published in New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1932.)

The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy, with an introduction by James M. Gustafson. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1963.

The Social Sources of Denominationalism. New York: Meridian Books, 1957.  
(First published in New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1929.)

Essays, Articles and Reviews by H. Richard Niebuhr

"An Aspect of the Idea of God in Recent Thought," Theological Magazine of the Evangelical Synod of North America, XLVIII (1920), 39-44.

"An Attempt at a Theological Analysis of Missionary Motivation," New York (City) Missionary Research Library. Occasional Bulletin. New York, XIV (1963), 1-6.

Brunner, Emil. Justice and the Social Order. A review by H. Richard Niebuhr in Theology Today, III, No. 4 (1947), 558-560.

\_\_\_\_\_. The Misunderstanding of the Church. A review by H. Richard Niebuhr in Westminster Bookman, XII, No. 2, 11-13.

"Can German and American Christians Understand Each Other?," Christian Century, XLVII (1930), 914-916.

"Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," The Heritage of the Reformation: Essays Commemorating the Centennial of Eden Theological Seminary. Edited by E. J. F. Arndt. New York: Richard R. Smith, 1950, 211-229.

"Ex Libris," Christian Century, LXXIX (1962), 754. A Booklist submitted by H. Richard Niebuhr in response to the query, "What books did most to shape your vocational attitude and your philosophy of life?"

"Faith in Gods and in God," a supplementary essay in Radical Monotheism and Western Culture. London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1961.

"Faith, Works, and Social Salvation," in Religion in Life, I (1932), 426-430.

"Introduction," to The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches, by Ernst Troeltsch. New York: Harper Torchbooks: The Cloister Library, TB71, 1960, 7-12.

"Is God in the War?," Christian Century, LIX (1942), 953-955.

"Man the Sinner," Journal of Religion, XV (1935), 272-280.

"Nationalism, Socialism and Christianity," in World Tomorrow, XVI (1933), 469-470.

- "On the Nature of Faith," Religious Experience and Truth: A Symposium. Edited by Sidney Hook. New York: New York University Press, 1961, 93-102.
- "Reformation: Continuing Imperative," Christian Century, LXXVII (1960), 248-251.
- "Religion and Ethics," World Tomorrow, XIII (1930), 443-446.
- "Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century," Religious Realism. Edited by D. C. Macintosh. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1931, 413-428.
- "Sören Kierkegaard," Christianity and the Existentialists. Edited by Carl Donald Michalson. New York: Scribner, 1956, 23-42.
- "The Center of Value," Moral Principles of Action: Man's Ethical Imperative. Edited by R. N. Anshen. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952, 162-175. Also in Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, with supplementary essays. London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1961.
- "The Christian Church and the World's Crisis," Christianity and Society, VI (1941), 11-17.
- "The Christian Evangel and Social Culture, in Religion in Life, VIII (1939), 44-49.
- "The Disorder of Man in the Church of God," Man's Disorder and God's Design; Vol. I: The Universal Church in God's Design. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949, 78-88.
- "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," Theology Today, III (1946), 371-384.
- "The Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience," Journal of Philosophy, XLII (1945), 352-359.
- "The Gift of the Catholic Vision," Theology Today, IV (1948), 507-521.
- "The Grace of Doing Nothing," Christian Century, XLIX (1932), 378-380.
- "The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight," in Religion in Life, XV (1945-46), 106-117.
- "The Idea of Covenant and American Democracy," Church History, XXIII (1954), 126-135.
- "The Irreligion of Communist and Capitalist," in Christian Century, XLVII (1930), 1306-1307.
- "The Nature and Existence of God: A Protestant's View," Motive, IV (1943), 13-15, 43-46.
- "The Norm of the Church," Journal of Religious Thought, IV (1946-47), 5-15.

- "The Protestant Movement and Democracy in the United States," Religion in American Life, Vol. I: The Shaping of American Religion. Edited by James Ward Smith and A. Leland Jamison. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961, 20-71.
- "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," The Gospel, the Church and the World. Edited by K. S. Latourette. New York, London: Harper and Brothers, 1946, 111-133.
- "The Triad of Faith," Andover Newton Bulletin, XLVII (1954), 3-12. The Stephen Greene Lecture, 1954.
- "Theology and Psychology: A Sterile Union," Christian Century, XLIV (1927), 47-48.
- "Theology--Not Queen But Servant," Journal of Religion, XXXV (1955), 1-5.
- Tillich, Paul. Systematic Theology, Vol. I. A review by H. Richard Niebuhr in Union Seminary Quarterly Review, VII, No. 1, 45-49; and in Theology, LVI, No. 396 (1953), 225-228.
- "Toward the Emancipation of the Church," Christendom, I (1935-36), 133-145.
- "Towards a New Otherworldliness," Theology Today, I (1944), 78-87.
- "Utilitarian Christianity," Christianity and Crisis, VI (1946), 3-5.
- "Value Theory and Theology," The Nature of Religious Experience: Essays in Honor of Douglas Clyde Macintosh. Ed. Com.: J. S. Bixler, R. L. Calhoun, H. R. Niebuhr. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1937, 93-116.
- "War as Crucifixion," Christian Century, LX (1943), 513-515.
- "War as the Judgment of God," Christian Century, LIX (1942), 630-633.
- "What Holds Churches Together?" in Christian Century, XLIII (1926), 346-348.

Books Partially or Wholly on the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr

- Cobb, John B., Jr. Living Options in Protestant Theology, A Survey of Methods. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962, pp. 284-311.
- Godsey, John D. The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr. Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott, Co., 1970.
- Hamilton, Kenneth. Revolt Against Heaven: An Inquiry Into Anti-Supernaturalism. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965.
- Harvey, Van A. The Historian and the Believer. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1966; London: SCM Press, 1967.

Hoedemaker, Libertus A. Faith in Total Life: Style and Direction of H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology. Croningen: Druk V. R. B., 1966.

\_\_\_\_\_. The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr. Foreword by James M. Gustafson. Philadelphia and Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1970.

Macquarrie, John. Twentieth-Century Religious Thought: The Frontiers of Philosophy and Theology, 1900-1960. New York: Harper and Row, 1963. Especially pp. 344-348.

Ramsey, Paul. Nine Modern Moralists. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1962. A Spectrum Book, S-36. Especially pp. 149-179.

Thelan, Mary Frances. Man As Sinner in Contemporary American Realistic Theology. New York: King's Crown Press, 1946. Especially pp. 148-163.

Welch, Claude. In This Name: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Contemporary Theology. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952. Especially pp. 227-228.

Williams, Daniel Day. What Present-Day Theologians Are Thinking. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952. Especially pp. 50, 64, 103.

Essays, Articles and Reviews on the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr

Ahlstrom, Sidney. "H. Richard Niebuhr's Place in American Thought," Christianity and Crisis, XXIII (1963), 213-217.

Allen, Joseph L. "A Decisive Influence on Protestant Ethics," Christianity and Crisis, XXIII (1963), 217-219.

Beach, Waldo. "A Theological Analysis of Race Relations," Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr, edited by Paul Ramsay. New York: Harper and Row, 1957, paper edition, 1965, 205-224.

Beker, E. J. "The Sovereignty of God in the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr," Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift, XV (December 1960), No. 2, 108-130.

Buri, Fritz. "H. Richard Niebuhr and the Reality of Faith," Religion in Life, XXXVII (Spring 1968), 99-111.

Cauthen, Kenneth. "An Introduction to the Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," Canadian Journal of Theology, X (1964), No. 1, 4-14.

Dawson, Christopher. A Review of Christ and Culture, in Religion in Life, XXI (1952), No. 2, 298-301.

Demant, V. A. A Review of Christ and Culture in Journal of Theological Studies, n.s., IV (1953, Pt. 1, 153-154.

Frei, Hans W. "Niebuhr's Theological Background," Faith and Ethics; The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr, edited by Paul Ramsey. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1957.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," Faith and Ethics; The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr, edited by Paul Ramsey. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1957.

Gustafson, James M. "Christian Ethics," Religion. Edited by Paul Ramsey. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Christian Ethics and Social Policy," Faith and Ethics; The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr, edited by Paul Ramsey. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1957, 119-139.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Introduction," to The Responsible Self by H. Richard Niebuhr. New York: Harper and Row, 1963.

Hamilton, K. M. "Trinitarianism Disregarded: The Theological Orientation of H. Richard Niebuhr and Cyril C. Richardson," Encounter, XXIII (1962), 343-352.

Haroutunian, Joseph. A Review of Christ and Culture in Interpretation (1952), No. 6, 113-115.

\_\_\_\_\_. A Review of The Kingdom of God in America, in Journal of Religion, XVIII (1938), No. 3, 337-339.

Hartt, Julian. "Theology of Culture," Review of Metaphysics, VI (1953), 501-509.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Situation of the Believer," Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr, edited by Paul Ramsey. New York: Harper and Row, 1957, paper edition, 1965, 225-233.

Kleiver, Lonnie D. "The Christology of H. Richard Niebuhr," The Journal of Religion, Vol. 50 (January 1970), 33-57.

Kuhn, Helmut. "Conscience and Society," Journal of Religion, XXVI (1946), 203-214. A Criticism of "The Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience."

Macintosh, D. C. "Theology, Valuational or Existential?," Review of Religion, VI (1939), 23-44.

Morris, Raymond P., compiler. "A Bibliography of H. Richard Niebuhr's Writings," Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr, edited by Paul Ramsey. New York: Harper and Row, 1957, revised 1964.

Nelson, James B. "The Moral Significance of the Church in Contemporary Protestant Contextual Ethics," Journal of Ecumenical Studies, 4:1 (Winter 1967), 66-91.

- Phibbs, R. C. "Introductory Summary of the Basic Elements in the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr," Brethren Life and Thought, V (1960), 38-55.
- Pope, Liston. "H. Richard Niebuhr: A Personal Appreciation," Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr, edited by Paul Ramsey. New York: Harper and Row, 1957, paper edition, 1965, 7f.
- Ramsey, Paul. "The Transformation of Ethics," Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr, edited by Paul Ramsey. New York: Harper and Row, 1957, paper edition 1965, 140-172.
- Schrader, George. "Value and Valuation," Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr, edited by Paul Ramsey. New York: Harper and Row, 1957, paper edition, 1965, 173-204.
- Shiner, Larry. "Toward a Theology of Secularization," The Journal of Religion, XLV (October 1965), 279-295.
- Thomas, George F. A Review of The Meaning of Revelation, in Journal of Religion, XXI (1941), No. 4, 455-460.
- Tillich, Paul. "Existential Thinking in American Theology," in Religion in Life, X (1941), 452-455.
- West, Charles C. Review of The Responsible Self, in Theology Today, XXI (1964), 519-522.
- Williams, Daniel Day. "A Personal and Theological Memoir," Christianity and Crisis, XXIII (November 25, 1963), 209-213.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Tradition and Experience in American Theology," Religion in American Life, Vol. I: The Shaping of American Religion. Edited by James Ward Smith and A. Leland Jamison. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961, 468-471.
- Willis, Robert E. "The Concept of Responsibility in the Ethics of Karl Barth and H. Richard Niebuhr," Scottish Journal of Theology, Vol. 23 (August 1970), 279-290.
- Winter, Gibson R. A Review of The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy, in The Journal of Religion, XLV (April 1964), 157-158.
- Zuurdeeg, Willem F. A Review of Radical Monotheism and Western Culture, in Downside, LXXX (April, 1962), 192.

GENERAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics. Translated with introduction and notes by Martin Ostwald. Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1962.
- Baillie, John. Our Knowledge of God. London: Oxford University Press, 1939.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought. New York: University Press, 1956.
- Bergson, Henri Louis. Matter and Memory. Translated by Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer. London: Swan Sonnenschein and Co., Ltd. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1911.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Two Sources of Morality and Religion. Translated by R. Ashley Audra and Claudesley Brereton. London: Macmillan and Co., 1935.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness. Translated by T. L. Pogson, M.A. London: Swan Sonnenschein and Co., Ltd.; New York: The Macmillan Co., 1910.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. Ethics. Edited by Eberhard Bethge. London: SCM Press, 1955.
- Braithwaite, R. B. Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy. Edited by Ian T. Ramsey. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966.
- Brunner, Emil. The Divine Imperative, A Study in Christian Ethics. Translated by Olive Wyon. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1947.
- Buber, Martin. I and Thou. Second edition. Translated by Ronald Gregor Smith. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958.
- Butler, Joseph. Works. Edited by W. E. Gladstone. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896.
- Calhoun, Robert Lowry. God and the Common Life. Hamden, Connecticut: The Shoe String Press, 1954. (First published in New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935.)
- Casserley, J. V. Longmead. Morals and Man in the Social Sciences. London: Longmans Green and Co., 1951.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Christian in Philosophy. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, n.d.

- Cassirer, Ernst. An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944.
- 
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. 3 Volumes. Translated by Ralph Manheim. Preface and Introduction by Charles W. Hendel. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953-1959.
- Cauthen, Kenneth. The Impact of American Religious Liberalism. New York: Harper and Row, 1962.
- Cotton, James Harry. Royce on the Human Self. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1954.
- Cunningham, Robert L. (ed.). Situationism and the New Morality. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970.
- Dewey, John. Reconstruction in Philosophy. Boston: The Beacon Press, 1948. Enlarged edition.
- Dilthey, Wilhelm. Pattern and Meaning in History: Thoughts on History and Society. Edited with introduction by H. P. Rickman. New York: Harper Torchbook, 1961.
- Edwards, Jonathan. The Nature of True Virtue. Foreword by William K. Frankena. Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1960.
- Elwood, Douglas J. The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards. New York: Columbia University Press, 1960.
- Emmet, Dorothy. The Nature of Metaphysical Thinking. London: Macmillan and Company, Ltd., 1945.
- Flew, Anthony and Alasdair Macintyre (eds.). New Essays in Philosophical Theology. London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1955.
- Fuss, Peter. The Moral Philosophy of Josiah Royce. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965.
- Gardner, E. Clinton. Biblical Faith and Social Ethics. New York: Harper and Row, 1960.
- Gollwitzer, Helmut. The Existence of God: As Confessed by Faith. Translated by James W. Leitch. London: SCM Press, 1965.
- Gustafson, James M. Christian Ethics and the Community. Philadelphia: A Pilgrim Press Book, 1971.
- 
- \_\_\_\_\_. Treasure in Earthen Vessels: The Church as a Human Community. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961.

- Hamburg, Carl H. Symbol and Reality: Studies in the Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1956.
- Hamilton, Kenneth. Revolt Against Heaven, An Inquiry Into Antisupernaturalism. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965.
- Hare, R. M. Freedom and Reason. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1963.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Language of Morals. Oxford University Press, 1952; Oxford Paperback, 1964.
- Harvey, Van A. The Historian and the Believer. London: SCM Press, 1967; New York: The Macmillan Co., 1969.
- Hepburn, Ronald W. Christianity and Paradox. New York: Pegasus, 1966 [1958].
- Hick, John. Faith and Knowledge. Second edition. New York: Cornell University Press, 1966.
- Hook, Sidney (ed.). Religious Experience and Truth: A Symposium. New York: New York University Press, 1961.
- Hospers, John. Human Conduct: An Introduction to the Problems of Ethics. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1961.
- Kant, Immanuel. Critique of Practical Reason and Other Works on the Theory of Ethics. Translated by Thomas Kingsmill Abbott. Third edition, revised and enlarged. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1883.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Lectures in Ethics. Translated by Louis Infield. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1963.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone. Translated with introduction and notes by Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson. Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Co., 1934.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Critique of Pure Reason. Edited and translated by N. Kemp Smith. London: Macmillan, 1934.
- Kaufmann, Gordon D. Relativism, Knowledge and Faith. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Context of Decision. New York: Abingdon Press, 1961.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. Philosophical Fragments. Translated from the Danish with introduction and notes by David F. Swenson. London: Oxford University Press; New York: American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1936.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Concluding Unscientific Postscript. Translated from the Danish by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press; London: Oxford University Press, 1941.

- Lehmann, Paul L. Ethics in a Christian Context. London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1963.
- Lewis, H. D. Morals and the New Theology. London. Gollanz, 1947.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Morals and Revelation. London: Allen and Unwin, 1951.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Our Experience of God. London: Allen and Unwin, 1959.
- Macintosh, Douglas Clyde. Theology as an Empirical Science. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Problem of Religious Knowledge. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1940.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Reasonableness of Christianity. New York: The Scribner Press, 1925.
- Macintosh, H. R. Types of Modern Theology. London and Glasgow: Collins, 1937.
- Macintyre, Alasdair. A Short History of Ethics. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967.
- Macmurray, John. Persons in Relation. The Gifford Lectures delivered in the University of Glasgow in 1954. London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1961.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Self as Agent. The Gifford Lectures delivered in the University of Glasgow in 1953. London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1957.
- Mead, Frank A. Handbook of Denominations in the United States. Second revised edition. New York: Abingdon, 1961.
- Mead, George H. Mind, Self and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist. Edited with introduction by Charles W. Morris. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1934.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Philosophy of the Present. Edited by A. E. Murphy. Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 1932.
- Miller, Alexander. Man in the Mirror: Studies in the Christian Understanding of Selfhood. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1958.
- Miller, Perry. Jonathan Edwards. Cleveland, Ohio: World Publishing Co., 1949.
- Moore, George E. Principia Ethica. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965 [1903].
- Mount, Eric, Jr. Conscience and Responsibility. Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1969.
- Nichols, William. The Pelican Guide to Modern Theology, Vol I: Systematic and Philosophical Theology. Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1969.

- Niebuhr, Reinhold. Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Self and the Dramas of History. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955.
- Niebuhr, Richard R. Resurrection and Historical Reason: A Study of Theological Method. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Schleiermacher on Christ and Religion. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964.
- Ogletree, Thomas W. Christian Faith and History: A Critical Comparison of Ernst Troeltsch and Karl Barth. New York: Abingdon Press, 1965.
- Outka, Gene H. and Paul Ramsey (eds.). Norm and Context in Christian Ethics. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968.
- Pepper, Stephen C. Concept and Quality, A World Hypothesis. The Paul Carus Lectures, Series 13, 1961. LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, Publishing Co., 1967.
- \_\_\_\_\_. World Hypotheses: A Study in Evidence. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1961.
- Pfuetze, Paul E. Self, Society, Existence: Human Nature and Dialogue in the Thought of George Herbert Mead and Martin Buber. Forward by H. Richard Niebuhr. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954.
- Ramsey, Ian T. (ed.). Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1966.
- Ramsey, Paul. Basic Christian Ethics. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics. Scottish Journal of Theology Occasional Papers No. 11, 1965.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (ed). Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr. New York: Harper and Row, Publ., Inc., Harper Torchbooks, 1965. [First published in New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957.]
- Robinson, N. H. G. Christ and Conscience. London: James Nisbet and Co., Ltd., 1956.
- Royce, Josiah. The Philosophy of Loyalty. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1908.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Problem of Christianity, Vols. I and II. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Spirit of Modern Philosophy. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1892.

- Schleiermacher, Friederich. The Christian Faith. Translation of the Second German edition by H. R. Macintosh and J. S. Stewart. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928. Paper edition, New York: Harper and Row, 1963.
- Schlick, Moritz. Problems of Ethics. Translated by David Ripun from the original German edition, Fragen der Ethik, Vienna, 1930. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1939; Paper edition, New York: Dover Publications, 1962.
- Schlipp, Paul Arthur (ed.). The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer: Library of Living Philosophers, Vol. VI. Evanston, Illinois: The Library of Living Philosophers, Inc., 1949.
- Schneider, C. E. The German Church on the American Frontier. St. Louis: Eden Publishing House, 1939.
- Schneider, Herbert W. A History of American Philosophy. Second edition. New York: Columbia University Press, 1962.
- Schneider, Louis (ed.). Religion, Culture and Society. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1964.
- Smith, Adam. The Theory of Moral Sentiments in British Moralists, Selections from Writers Principally of the Eighteenth Century, Vol. I. Edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge. London: Oxford University Press, 1897.
- Smith, John E. Royce's Social Infinite: The Community of Interpretation. New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1950.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Spirit of American Philosophy. New York: Oxford University Press, 1963; paper edition, 1966.
- Strauss, Anselm (ed.). The Social Psychology of George Herbert Mead. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1956.
- Strawson, P. F. Individuals. London: Methuen, 1961; paper edition, 1964.
- Taylor, Richard. Metaphysics. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1963.
- Temple, William. Nature, Man and God. Gifford Lectures 1932-1934. London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1934; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1960.
- Thomas, George F. Christian Ethics and Moral Philosophy. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955.
- Tillich, Paul. Dynamics of Faith. New York: Harper and Brothers, Torchbook, 1957.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Systematic Theology, Vol. I. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951; London: James Nisbet & Co., Ltd., 1951.

Tillich, Paul. The Religious Situation. Translated with Preface by H. Richard Niebuhr. New York: Meridian Books, 1956 [First published by Henry Holt and Co., Inc., 1932.]

Torrance, T. F. Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology, 1910-1931. London: SCM Press Ltd., 1962.

Troeltsch, Ernst. Protestantism and Progress: A Historical Study of the Relation of Protestantism to the Modern World. Translated by W. Montgomery. New York and London, 1912.

\_\_\_\_\_. The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches, Vols. I and II. Translated by Olive Wyon. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1931.

Warnock, Mary. Ethics Since 1900. London: Oxford University Press, 1960.

\_\_\_\_\_. Existentialist Ethics. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967.

Whitehead, Alfred North. Religion in the Making. New York: Meridian Books, 1960.

Wild, John. Human Freedom and the Social Order: An Essay in Christian Philosophy. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1959.

Woods, G. F. A Defense of Theological Ethics. Hulsean Lectures, 1964. Cambridge: At the University Press, 1966.

Yinger, John Milton (ed.). Religion, Society and the Individual. New York: Macmillan, 1957.

#### Essays and Articles in Books and Periodicals

Berthold, Fred. "Objectivity and Personal Encounter," The Journal of Religion, XLV (January 1965), 39-45.

Buss, Martin J. "Self-Theory and Theology," The Journal of Religion, XLV (January 1965), 46-53.

Cole, J. Preston. "The Function of Choice in Human Existence," The Journal of Religion, XIV (July 1965), 196-210.

Frankena, William K. "Ethical Theory," Philosophy: A Volume in the Series, Humanistic Scholarship in America: The Princeton Studies. Richard Schlatter, general editor. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964.

Gardner, Clinton. "The Role of Law and Moral Principles in Christian Ethics," Religion in Life, 23 (1959), 236-247.

- Galloway, A. D. "Fact and Value in Theological Ethics," Religious Studies, Vol. 5 (December 1969), 172-178.
- Gustafson, James M. "Christian Ethics," Religion, Paul Ramsey (ed.); A volume in the series, Humanistic Scholarship in America: The Princeton Studies. Richard Schlatter, general editor. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1965.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Context Versus Principles: A Misplaced Debate in Christian Ethics," The Harvard Theological Review, 58, 2 (April 1965), 171-202.
- Halverson, William H. "Freedom and the Self," The Journal of Religion, XLIII (April 1963), 139-150.
- Hamilton, Kenneth. "Schleiermacher and Relational Theology," The Journal of Religion, XLIV (January 1964), 29-39.
- Hartman, Robert S. "Cassirer's Philosophy of Symbolic Forms," The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer. Edited by Paul S. Schillp. Evanston, Illinois: The Library of Living Philosophers, Inc., 1949, Vol. VI.
- Hendel, Charles W. "Introduction," The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Vol. I. 1-65.
- Hick, John. "Belief 'In' and Belief 'That'," Religious Studies, 2 (1966), 5-27.
- Körner, S. "Ernst Cassirer," The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Vol. 2. Edited by Paul Edwards. New York and London: Collier-Macmillan, 1963.
- Lehman, Paul L. "The Foundation and Pattern of Christian Behavior," Christian Faith and Social Action. Edited by John Hutchison. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953.
- Lewis, H. D. "Mysticism," London Quarterly and Holborn Review (July 1964), 190-197.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Revelation Without Content: A Critique of K. Heim and M. Buber," Hibbert Journal, XLVII (July 1950), 379-382.
- Little, H. Ganse, Jr. "Ernst Troeltsch and the Scope of Historicism," The Journal of Religion, XLVI (1966), 343-364.
- Macintosh, Douglas Clyde. "Experimental Realism in Religion," Religious Realism. New York: Macmillan Company, 1931.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Religious Realism in the Twentieth Century," Religious Realism. New York: Macmillan Co., 1931.
- McIntyre, John. "Analogy," Scottish Journal of Theology, XII (1964), 1-20.

- Niebuhr, Reinhold. "Intellectual Biography," Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought. Edited by Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956.
- Nichols, J. H. "The History of Christianity," Religion. Paul Ramsey (ed.). A volume in the series, Humanistic Scholarship in America: The Princeton Studies. Richard Schlatter, general editor. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1965.
- Reynold, Charles. "A Proposal for Understanding the Place of Reason in Christian Ethics," The Journal of Religion, Vol. 50 (April 1970), 155-168.
- Robinson, N. H. G. "Faith and Truth," Scottish Journal of Theology, 19 (June 1966), 144-159.
- Russell, S. H. "In Search of Foundations for Christian Ethics," Scottish Journal of Theology, Vol. 23 (May 1970), 157-165.
- Schneider, C. E. "The Genius of the Reformed Church in the United States: A Genetic Appraisal of Her Union With the Evangelical Synod of North America," The Journal of Religion, XV (1935), 26-41.
- Sell, A. P. F. "Christian Ethics and Moral Philosophy: Some Reflections on the Contemporary Situation," Scottish Journal of Theology, Vol. 16 (December 1963), 337-351.
- Smith, John E. "In What Sense Can We Speak of Experiencing God?," The Journal of Religion, Vol. 50 (July 1970), 229-244.
- Stevenson, W. Taylor. "I-Thou and I-It: An Attempted Clarification of Their Relationship," The Journal of Religion, Vol. XLIII (July 1963), 193-209.
- Troeltsch, Ernst. "Meine Bucher," Gesammelte Schriften, IV. Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1925.
- Ward, Keith. "Christian Ethics and the Being of God," Scottish Journal of Theology, Vol. 22 (March 1969), 78-89.
- Woods, George. "Situation Ethics," Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy. Edited by Ian T. Ramsey. London: SCM Press, 1966.
- Zeigler, Leslie. "Personal Existence: A Study of Buber and Kierkegaard," The Journal of Religion, XL (April 1960), 80-94.